

# The Indians' Hidden World



# The Memory of All Ancient Customs

NATIVE AMERICAN DIPLOMACY IN  
THE COLONIAL HUDSON VALLEY

Tom Arne Midtrød

In 1762 the Wappinger spokesman Daniel Nimham gave an account to colonial officials of his people's historical connections to other Hudson River Indians. With this brief testimony, Tom Midtrød writes, Nimham "provided a glimpse into a world of Native interactions and relationships" (xii). This statement nicely encapsulates *The Memory of All Ancient Customs*, for the purpose of Midtrød's book is to provide a window into the mostly hidden world of intra-Indian interactions in the early Hudson Valley. Therein lies the great strength—and some might argue the Achilles' heel—of Midtrød's work.

The book's contribution is not that it places Native Americans at center stage, since many recent works have established this trend, but that it highlights inter-Indian diplomacy and other forms of interaction *between* Native peoples. This framework cuts against the vast majority of scholarship that primarily explores relationships between Indians and Europeans. And while some historians have explored inter-Indian exchange, Midtrød is one of the few to center his narrative entirely around such issues. As he rightly notes in the preface, Native connections to the outside world were "far too complicated to be described simply as a binary juxtaposition of Natives and newcomers" (xiii).

Midtrød begins his reconstruction of the "now lost world" of Native political relationships, kinship connections, and other networks of exchange with a well-conceived preface that succinctly outlines the book's argument, structure, and evidentiary base (xii). The introduction that follows outlines the social and political structures of Hudson River peoples during the seventeenth century. The region was largely dominated by Munsee and Mahican speakers, and included such groups as the Esopus, Mahican, Wappinger, and Schaghticoke peoples. Also included in this study are the inhabitants of Long Island and their diverse connections to Hudson River peoples. Midtrød notes that the Valley consisted of numerous distinct polities heavily grounded in localism, but this did not lead to hostility and warfare. Cooperation instead was the hallmark of relations between peoples who maintained strong actual and fictive kinship ties with one another. He argues that, despite the upheaval caused by colonization in the early years of contact, which included substantial demographic decline, Native political structures showed considerable stability and continuity (19).



Tom Arne Midtrød, *The Memory of All Ancient Customs: Native American Diplomacy in the Colonial Hudson Valley*. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2012. 328 pp., \$35.00.

The book's narrative then begins in earnest as Midtrød turns to how Native peoples confronted Dutch and later English colonists. Three themes predominate throughout the subsequent chapters: the interconnectedness of Hudson Valley Indians, based largely on ties of friendship and kinship; change and continuity in Native polities and patterns of diplomacy; and resistance to colonization. The early Dutch colonizers paid little attention to Native cultures, which meant they were largely ignorant of the Hudson Valley's political landscape. The Indians' attempts to integrate a Dutch populace that was unwilling to adapt

to Native customs resulted in recurring hostility and violence. Hudson Valley peoples often cooperated with one another in both war and peace, but the balance of power nonetheless shifted in favor of the Dutch near midcentury. Although Hudson Valley peoples recognized the new reality of European power, they maintained independent political organizations, treated with the Dutch as equal partners, and prevented the imposition of Dutch sovereignty (78-79).

With the English takeover of New Netherland in 1664, the Natives acknowledged their dependence on the provincial government. But the Indians did not see this as outright submission, Midtrød argues, as they entered into covenants as free peoples and "the ties that bound them were bonds between equals" (81). Eventually, however, Hudson Valley Indians abandoned their claims of equality and acknowledged the superiority of the New York government (but not the general colonial population). This had little effect on the patterns of diplomacy that existed between Indian peoples. The English largely remained outside of Native intergroup relations, preferring instead to partake in "bilateral relationships" with individual groups rather than establish themselves at the head of a broader Indian alliance system (94). As a result, "Indian intergroup relations formed a sphere of interaction independent of the Europeans" (98).

As the eighteenth century progressed, relations with more powerful Native groups, especially the Six Nations, increasingly occupied the attention of Hudson Valley Indians. The English and Iroquois mutually reinforced one another's power over neighboring peoples and their lands, although Midtrød points out that local circumstances shaped the nature of this influence. Caught in a world filled with imperial conflict and massive land encroachment, many Hudson Valley peoples migrated to other regions, resulting in the expatriates creating "networks of communication between their homeland and distant locales" (151). These patterns continued throughout the American Revolution, but the ensuing turmoil destroyed older political and social structures as functioning Native political groups disappeared from the Hudson Valley.

The question remains, however: to what extent is Midtrød's book only a "glimpse" into the Indians' hidden world? This is no fault of Midtrød's scholarship, which is impressive on many levels, but rather an inherent limitation of the selected subject matter and accompanying sources. The study of intra-Indian interactions would be a difficult task even if the evidence were abundant, but the sources, particularly for the early years of European contact, poorly document some of the issues that Midtrød explores. Europeans "were only dimly aware" of Native diplomatic networks, Midtrød writes, and "largely ignorant of how these groups interacted and related to one another" (xii, 42). Compounding the problem is the fact that this hidden Indian world is only recovered from the records of a foreign people who not only remained "at the periphery...of this inter-Indian landscape," but who also appeared "rarely interested in Native intergroup relations" (xiii, xv). Using European sources to write about Indian peoples is not a new challenge for scholars working on such issues, but the evidentiary material in this case at times hinders

Midtrød's attempt to unravel the vast and complicated social, political, and diplomatic world of Hudson River Indians.

Midtrød, of course, is aware of this "formidable obstacle" (xv). He accordingly employs varying strategies to overcome the above limitations. First, the book reflects exhaustive research, with extensive footnotes and nearly twenty pages of bibliographic citations. Midtrød also shows his skill in evaluating the evidence at hand. His careful reading of the sources means that he rarely takes European observations at face value, unless corroborated by additional testimony. When doubt exists, Midtrød is more than willing to alert the reader to this, and then offer plausible insights into the patterns of Native diplomatic networks. He also bases his understanding of these networks on the premise that Indians dealt with the newcomers as they would any other group of people. This encourages him to see the diplomatic patterns found among Indians and Europeans—the ones found most often in European sources—as reflective of practices at work in intra-Indian affairs (xv).

Tom Midtrød has not only provided a much-needed account of Hudson River peoples, but he reminds us that intra-Indian relationships remained a central feature of Native life long after the arrival of Europeans. While the interactions and exchanges of Native and newcomer will most likely continue to dominate the field, scholars should take note of Midtrød's contribution and pay closer attention to the myriad relationships that existed among Indian peoples.

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