

Abenaki Symbols and Motifs at Odanak

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Traditional Abenaki culture is rich with iconographic symbols and artistic motifs that have shaped the way in which we study the traditions of the Abenaki community at Odanak, a site dedicated to the preservation of the history, culture, and art of the Western Abenaki people. Odanak, meaning “coming home” in traditional Abenaki languageⁱ, is home to the Musée des Abénakis and the largest Abenaki population in Quebec. The Abenaki people at Odanak are not only working to make great strides in the recovery of education in their community, but are also working to preserve their language, cultural history, and artistic practices. Traditional symbols and motifs are a major component of the Abenaki community at Odanak, making it possible for Abenaki culture to be preserved and passed on from generation to generation.

When considering traditional Abenaki imagery and artistic motifs, the most dominant iconography seems to come from nature, perhaps paying homage to their early religious beliefs. Before the Catholic missionaries began recruiting Abenaki converts in the 17th century, the Abenaki people of Quebec practiced Shamanism, a religion comprised of beliefs and practices regarding communication with the natural world. Strange occurrences involving animals were customarily interpreted as being the acts of these Shamans. Similarly, several Abenaki men and women believed they had their own Shamanistic powers that allowed them to leave their bodies and enter the realm of the supernatural in an animal form. These animal forms are referenced in much of their artwork, ranging from animal representations in bark carving to modern day needlepoint renditions of their family clan symbols: the eagle, beaver, turtle, bear, and sturgeon.

A commonly represented Shaman in traditional Abenaki religion is the legendary Wind Eagleⁱⁱ, representing spirituality, ceremony, and balance, and is featured as one of the main images on the official Odanak flag (Image 1), a source of pride for the Abenaki community at Odanak. Similarly, the turtle, representing wisdom and the passage of time (as the division in a turtles shell is representative of each monthⁱⁱⁱ) is situated in the top corner of the Odanak flag. In the opposite corner is the bear, a prominent First Nations symbol, representing courage and self-defence in the face of an adversary. The maple leaf, an iconic Canadian image, is thought to represent national identity and Canadian pride. However, according to Luc Baronian^{iv}, a professor of linguistics at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, “It is worth noting that the maple leaves, green, as they usually are in Québec heraldry and vexillology, might have a connection with the oral tradition according to which it was the Abénakis, one of the main and first allies of the French, who taught French-Canadians the art of making maple syrup from the sugar maple” (Baronian, 2005). The maple leaf, perhaps paying homage to their original Canadian friends, the French, remains a commonly used symbol at Odanak, representative of their past, present, and future.

The Abenaki wampum belt (Image 2) is another source of traditional Abenaki imagery that showcases intricate beading designs, one of the earliest

preserved Abenaki artistic tradition. Abenaki wampum belts were generally crafted of white and purple shell beads, also traded as currency, but valued more in an artistic medium. The most common wampum bead designs are comprised of floral and geometric arrangements, as well as the double-curve motif (Image 3), a very common form of ornamentation in both wampum beadwork and garment decoration in the Odanak community. Although the exact symbolic meaning of this double-curve motif is no longer known, scholars speculate the design represents balance, community, and alliance, as well as representing nature and the cycle of life and death. In this traditional Abenaki wampum from the Abenaki Tribal Museum in Vermont, the belt symbolizes a marriage, representing two houses and two people coming together in unity. Wampum belts like this make up some of the most valuable collection of artefacts in the Abenaki community, giving us rare insight into the historical traditions and stories of the Abenaki culture.

Another tradition that showcases Abenaki imagery is basket weaving, a popular craft practice among the Abenaki community at Odanak. Traditionally, the Abenaki peoples created baskets for each activity, ranging from cooking baskets made of birch for safety over an open flame, to ornamental baskets with decorative lids made of woven sweet grass. This basket, the Ash Basket (Image 5), is handmade by a member of today's Odanak community who is continuing to preserve the Abenaki basket weaving tradition. The Ash Basket comprises of a blend of several different designs including a bold floral pattern, the double-curve motif along the rim, and a textured geometric pattern across the sides. This triangle pattern, much like the one seen on the Abenaki wampum belts, is thought to represent unity and balance. This basket, much like traditional Abenaki artefacts, uses no color or dyed thread, keeping it organic and natural.

After having the opportunity to visit Odanak and being able to listen to the Abenaki elders, it became evident that very little is known about traditional Abenaki imagery and symbols among community members and scholars alike. Due to their heavy reliance on oral history, much was lost during a time that cultural preservation was perhaps more necessary than ever. Although there are some definite factors that contribute to the modification, and eventual dissolution, of the Abenaki cultural imagery and traditions (including the influence of early Catholic Missionaries and French settlers) there is still an effort being made to educate the modern Abenaki community in hopes of preserving a culture rich with unique imagery and artistic motifs. Until then, it is the modern Odanak flag, traditional wampum belts, and Abenaki baskets that all showcase examples of Abenaki motifs and iconography that have come to represent the Abenaki community at Odanak as a place of both tradition and progress.

Image 1



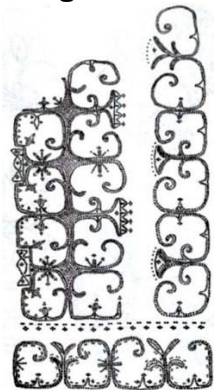
Hurtado, Jorhge. Odanak First Nation (Canada). CRW Flags, 2006.
http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ca_odank.html

Image 2



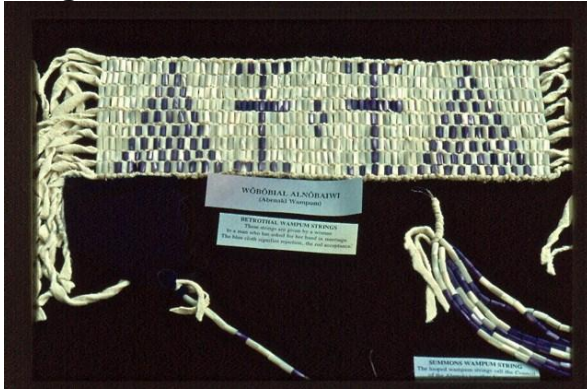
Abenaki Wampum. Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2010.
<http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/exhibitions/aborig/storytel/aben1eng.shtml>

Image 3



Sageflower Pennington, Lynne. The Beading Series- The Double Curve and Huichol Techniques.
Canku Ota, 2001.
http://www.turtletrack.org/Issues01/Co06162001/CO_06162001_Beading.htm

Image 4



Wampum belt. Abenaki Tribal Museum and the Wôbanakik Heritage Center. 2010.
<http://www.morningstarstudio9.com/wisemancollection.htm>

Image 5



Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The Abenakis. 2007.
http://web.archive.org/web/20080331155016/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/qc/aqc/art/abenakis_e.html

Notes

- i Struggle and Survival. Abenaki Language Preservation, 2010. Accessed 09 Jan 11: <http://www.abenakilanguage.org/>
- ii Gluscabi and the Wind Eagle. First People- The Legends. Accessed 09 Jan 11: <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/GluscabiandtheWindEagle-Abenaki.html>
- iii Baronian, Luc. Odanak First Nation. 2005. Par 1, line 5. Accessed 09 Jan 11: http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ca_odank.html
- iv Baronian, Luc. Odanak First Nation. 2005. Accessed 09 Jan 11: http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ca_odank.html