According to the mythology of the Wampanoag and Narragansett, the first Indians to populate coastal New England found a gentle giant who had been living there with his wife and children. This giant protected the Indians from large predatory birds and helped them in other ways until the Europeans arrived to settle, whereupon he withdrew, leaving only indirect evidence of his presence, such as coastal fogs, which are believed to be smoke from his pipe. After many years of being out of sight, he has reappeared in the woods around the Wampanoag community of Mashpee, Massachusetts, where he has been seen and heard in recent years. His reappearance comes at a time when the Mashpee have been asserting themselves politically and legally (see Hutchins 1979: 171-184), suggesting that the giant’s physical presence is linked to the social presence of his people.

Roger Williams (1936:vii) wrote in his introduction to A Key Into the Language of America...that the Narragansett and their neighbours “...have many strange Relations of one Wetucks, a man that wrought great Miracles amongst them, and walking upon the waters, etc. with some kind of broken Resemblance to the Sonne of God.” Unfortunately, Williams never wrote anything further about these many strange relations that he had heard regarding Wetucks. The next reference to Wetucks was written by Ezra Stiles, who noted in 1761 that “Weetuck’s name was called Maushump by the Long I. Indians” (Dexter 1916: 157). Stiles’ comment suggests that Williams’ Wetucks and Moshup (the legendary giant known to the Wampanoag of Cape Cod and the islands) were probably the same figure.

The next recorded mention of Indian folklore from the southern New England region was written by John, son of Wait Winthrop, in 1702 (Ricketson 1858: 353), regarding what is probably a Moshup or Wetucks tale from the Elizabeth Islands:

The natives of Elizabeth Island say that the Devell was making a stone Bridge over from the main to Nanamesset Island, and while he was rowling the stones and placing of them under water a crab caught him by the fingers, with which he snatched up his hand and flung it towards Nantucket, and the Crabs breed there even since.
In this fragment can be seen a folk explanation for the origin of a certain rock formation and for the local origin of an animal species.

The earliest extensive version of the Moshup tale was told by Thomas Cooper of the Wampanoag community of Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard to Benjamin Basset (1806: 139-140), an Englishman of Chilmark, who wrote it down around 1792 or perhaps a little earlier:

The first Indian who came to the Vineyard, was brought thither with his dog on a cake of ice. When he came to Gay Head, he found a very large man, whose name was Moshup. He had a wife and five children, four sons and one daughter; and lived in the Den. He used to catch whales, and then pluck up trees, and make a fire, and roast them. The coals of the trees, and the bones of the whales, are now to be seen. After he was tired of staying here, he told his children to go and play ball on a beach that joined Noman's Land to Gay Head. He then made a mark with his toe across the beach at each end, and so deep, that the water followed, and cut away the beach; so that his children were in fear of drowning. They took their sister up, and held her out of the water. He told them to act as if they were going to kill whales; and they were all turned into killers, (a fish so called.) The sister was dressed in large stripes. He gave them a strict charge always to be kind to her. His wife mourned the loss of her children so exceedingly, that he threw her away. She fell upon Seconet, near the rocks, where she lived some time, exacting contribution of all who passed by water. After a while she was changed into a stone. The entire shape remained for many years. But after the English came, some of them broke off the arms, head, etc. but the most of the body remains to this day. Moshup went away nobody knows whither. He had no conversation with the Indians, but was kind to them, by sending whales, etc. ashore to them to eat. But after they grew thick around him he left them.

Again in this tale we see elements of a culture hero who created various natural species (in this case killer whales), who was responsible for the origin of coastal rock formations, and who also felt uneasy with newcomers from whom he retreated.

Another early version of the tale, and the last one to be presented here, was recorded late in the 18th century by Timothy Alden (1789:56-57), an English inhabitant of Yarmouth on Cape Cod. It is probably from the Mashpee and accounts for the discovery of Nantucket and the origin of fog:

In former times, a great many moons ago, a bird, extraordinary for its size, used often to visit the south shore of Cape Cod, and carry from thence to the southward, a vast number of small children.

Maushop, who was an Indian giant, as fame reports, resided in these parts. Enraged at the havoc among the children, he, on a certain time, waded into the sea in pursuit of the bird, till he had crossed the sound and reached Nantucket. Before Maushop forded the sound, the island was unknown to the aborigines of America.

Tradition says, that Maushop found the bones of the children in a heap under a large tree. He then wishing to smoke a pipe, ransacked the island for tobacco;
but, finding none, filled his pipe with poke, a weed which the Indians sometimes used as its substitute. Ever since the above memorable event, fogs have been frequent at Nantucket and on the Cape. In allusion to this tradition, when the aborigines observed a fog rising, they would say, "There comes old Maushop's smoke."

Dozens of Moshup tales were recorded in published and manuscript sources between the end of the 18th century and the present, most of which derive from the Wampanoag area of southeastern Massachusetts—Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Substantial evidence indicates that the stories may also have existed on eastern Long Island, but the sources for this area are not as rich, and the Long Island accounts are outside of the scope of this paper. Most of the Wampanoag tales were written down by English men and women who learned them from Indians, but a considerable number were collected by two Indian folklorists, Mary Vanderhoop, who published a series of Gay Head stories in *The New Bedford Evening Standard* in 1904, and Gladys Tantaquidgeon, a Mohegan and a student of Frank Speck, who did field research in Gay Head in the late 1920's (Tantaquidgeon 1930: 1-26). All are written in English. The author has done enough field research in the Mashpee and Gay Head communities recently to determine that these stories and many others of pre-European origin are still remembered and talked about by the modern descendants of the Wampanoag. The other stories concern Moshup's wife Squant or Squannit, and the activities of little people known as Puckwudgies. It seems possible that the Moshup and related tales of the Wampanoag are the oldest continuously recorded body of living Indian legends known anywhere in North America.

The name Moshup would seem to be derived from the Proto-Algonquian term meaning 'big man' or 'giant.' According to David Pentland (1980), a phonetically more accurate spelling would be Mushomp or Mushump. This spelling closely resembles the Maushump attested by Stiles for Long Island. The derivation and meaning of Wetucks is much less clear. The two most obvious possibilities are that it is the same word etymologically as the Ojibwa Windigo, meaning 'cannibal monster', or that it is a kinship term; for example, it resembles the Narragansett Wéticks, meaning 'a sister', and Wàtoncks, meaning 'a cousin' (Williams 1936: 29). The meaning of Squant or Squannit is more apparent and appears to be the same as the Narragansett Squauanit, 'The Womans God' (Williams 1936:124). I would be grateful for any suggestions regarding the derivation and meaning of these terms as well as of the little people known to the Wampanoag of Mashpee as Puckwudgies.
Despite their impressive historical pedigree, the Moshup tales have been overlooked by all scholars of eastern Algonquian folklore. Daniel Brinton, in his chapter on “The Hero-Gods of the Algonkins and Iroquois” in American Hero Myths, published in 1882, makes no mention of Moshup or Wetucks. Roland B. Dixon, in his “The Mythology of the Central and Eastern Algonkins” in The Journal of American Folklore, 1909, left southern New England out of his survey. The major analysis of northeastern American Indian mythology, Margaret Fisher’s “The Mythology of the Northern and Northeastern Algonkians...” published in 1946, also overlooks Moshup and the southern New England region. Similarly, Regina Flannery in her “Algonquian Indian Folklore”, published in 1947, does not refer to these tales. The first and only scholarly discussion of the retiring giant is the article by the anthropologist Richard Scaglion entitled “The Moshup Tale”, which appeared in The Dukes County Intelligencer in 1974. Scaglion’s piece is a chronological survey of a number of published and manuscript texts from the Gay Head community in which he draws attention to several changes in the legend over time. This rich and well-documented body of raw material on Indian folklore and world-view is essentially unknown to Algonquian scholars and has yet to be brought together as a whole and analysed.

I will conclude with three observations regarding the function and meaning of this cycle of stories. First, the Moshup tales are a way of talking about the natural environment. They enliven the landscape by providing an explanation in myth of the origin of geological formations (such as the colours and fossils in the Gay Head cliffs, and the various islands and offshore rock formations), for the origin of animal species (such as killer whales), the fog (believed to be the smoke from Moshup’s pipe), and other features of the New England coastal environment.

Second, the stories are also a way for the Indians of this region to talk about themselves. That is, Moshup’s fortune can be seen to parallel the fortune of the Indian communities where he is known. At first, he ruled the land and sea unchallenged, then withdrew to the point of being invisible, and now he is returning, but in much diminished form. An interview with a Mashpee woman in the summer of 1981 helps make this point. This woman heard what sounded like the giant’s breathing and powerful footsteps while she was camping in the woods, and on several occasions tried but could not see what
was there. Once, however, she hid in a hole beneath a fallen tree-trunk and waited. First she heard the footsteps and then was surprised to see that the sounds were being made by a tiny green bird that was walking slowly in a circle. This bird she said was Moshup telling her and the Indian people that their medicine need not be weak just because they were a little tribe and small in numbers. It is significant that this first sighting of Moshup in some 300 years occurred among the Mashpee, who in recent years have taken deliberate legal steps to regain property which had passed from tribal hands and to obtain recognition as an organized tribal community. Here Moshup has crossed the line from memory culture to a living presence.

The third point is that these stories are the primary and most coherent survival of pre-European Wampanoag culture. Whereas language, kinship organization, and subsistence patterns have all disappeared, these legends have been an important part of Indian identity in this region throughout the historic period. Of course they have changed through time, as all oral tradition changes, but the fact remains that the roots have remained alive.

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