
EDUCATION NEWS

Where History is Shared and Stories Continue

Kunoopeam Netompaûog, Welcome Friends!



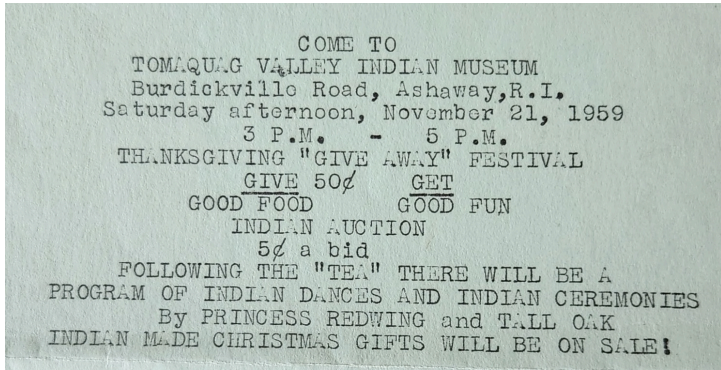
Hello Readers! We have come to our 13th moon of this 2023 year. To the Narragansett and other Indigenous Tribal Nations this would not be the last moon of the year as our new year begins in the spring. However, in keeping with the calendar standards used now, we conclude our 2023 year with the Moon of Darkness, the first of the winter moons. It is also the time when we thank Creator for all the gifts we've received through the harvest seasons which have been prepared and stored for the cold winds and snows to come. It is a time when we transition from predominantly outdoor activities to indoor. This is a time to mend fishing nets, baskets, and other items that will be needed in the new year (Spring). A time to gather close to the fires burning within our neés quttow (two-fire homes), and review lessons learned from the previous moons with our youngsters. It is a good time for stories to be shared such as hunting stories from the recent moon! And a time to look forward to ice fishing, winter games such as snow snake, and tracking smaller game. It is time for NIKOMMO!

FROM TOMAQUAG'S EDUCATION DEPARTMENT...

Nikommo is a giveaway celebration, a ceremony that gives thanks for all the blessings you have by giving away as much as you can to others, "giving till it hurts" as Tomaquag's Director Lorén Spears has expressed this tradition. This tradition could be celebrated at any time of year. Colonization and christianity affected the way in which these traditions and ceremonies were kept among the Narragansett and other Indigenous nations. In his Key to the Language, Roger Williams wrote, "There are no beggars amongst them, no fatherless children unprovided for." This is what he observed upon his arrival to Narragansett territory in 1936. But in just 40 years following his arrival along with many other colonial settlers, many changes occurred and have continued throughout the generations following.

Click here to [Contact](#) the education department with any questions.

In August, 1959 Tomaquag Museum opened its doors to the public and held its first Nikommo as an event under the directorship of Eva Butler, a non-Indigenous woman. Here is an advertisement of that first event. Notice terms such as “festival,” “Indian,” and “Christmas.” These are examples of the influence of the contemporary times in which they lived. Red Wing (Ella Glasko), Narragansett/Wampanoag elder and the museum’s assistant director, and Tall Oak (Everett Weeden), Narragansett/Pequot, shared their invaluable knowledge of Indigenous peoples honoring of Nikommo traditions.



First Nikommo advertisement of Tomaquag Museum (Tomaquag archives)

Among more recent generations, Nikommo is a blend of the traditions of the past and more contemporary practices. In 1981 then under the directorship of Dawn Dove, Nikommo at Tomaquag Museum was held to honor the traditions of the past as well as meet the needs of the current time. It continues to this day under the leadership of Lorén Spears, Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum (Dawn’s daughter). A yearly event, held on the first Saturday of December, is hosted by Tomaquag Museum with a variety of programming that includes vending by Indigenous artists, and traditional storytelling. Gifts donated by the general public are collected to be “given away” to families in need during this season. In this way we continue in the spirit of Nikommo.

Nikommo is honored among Indigenous communities in this region as well. When asked to share their Nikommo traditions past and present with me, I found that they are very similar to those celebrated at Tomaquag Museum. Here are a few of their responses.

Larry Spotted Crow Mann shared that among the Nipmuc, Nikommo is considered a special and sacred time of year with ceremonies, storytelling, feasting, games, drumming/dancing and giveaways. All the families come together and

Participation invited in Nekomo Festival

Christmas isn't the only American holiday that awakens the spirit of giving. American Indians have traditionally conducted "giveaway" ceremonies, and one is being revived this Saturday afternoon in the village of Arcadia.

The public is being welcomed to participate in the first Nekomo Festival, which will be held at 2 p.m. at the Doverest Pavilion on Summit Road in Exeter, sponsored by the adjoining Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum.

People will pay no admission fee for the event, which will involve a traditional round dance and chanting, instead they are expected to bring a gift for poor Native Americans throughout the state.

"The Nekomo Festival is a traditional ceremony in which the people danced for the privilege of putting a gift in the circle for the less fortunate of the tribe," explained Princess Red Wing, oral historian of the Narragansett tribe.

Princess Red Wing gives talks at the museum and travels widely as a lecturer, speaking about the traditions and history of the American Indians and recounting their legends. She spent three days last week in Dallas, telling the familiar story of Squanto and the Pilgrim's first Thanksgiving, before an international assembly of religious representatives. She is widely known for her talks to school children.

"As I tell my children — the non-Indians — they have the spirit of giving they call Santa Claus," she said, "and across the water they say Kris Kringle or St. Nicholas, but here they called him Nekomo."

The giveaway ceremony was always in "the moon of darkness," in the winter, she said. "They figured that Nekomo brought them the fir trees when they were white with snow, showed the hunters where they could find game, showed the fishermen where they could find fish under the ice and so forth."

The numerous Indian nations, even those distinct in language group and lifestyles, nearly all had the giveaway tradition in common, she pointed out.

Giveaways of one's most precious possessions were an important part of the Sun Dance ceremonies of the various Plains Indians. Northwestern Indians, up the coast to Alaska, held "potlaches," from a word meaning "to give away." Held on occasions as varied as a marriage or the return of ransomed warriors, the ceremonies involved strictly ranking the guests with correspondingly important gifts. Horses, blankets, ornaments, even honorary names purchased by the hosts were given out — the more given, the more prestige.

The greedy, ironically, could also heartily participate, for though they might spend years amassing wealth they would relinquish in one afternoon, those they gave to were expected to return the honor with an even more valuable gift at a later potlatch.

It is with a more sincere attitude that the Saturday ceremony will be conducted.

"With most Indian tribes across the United States, the best thing that you can do is to give away something that's very special to you. And the Nekomo Festival is a time when we do that, although it is not the only time that it happens," said Paula Jennings, a Narragansett and director of the Rhode Island Commission for Indian Affairs, which is also involved with the festival.

"We may have a giveaway at the birth of a child — when something good has happened to you, to share that experience."

An official Nekomo Festival hasn't been held for years, she said. "This is the first time I don't know how many years that we've opened this up to the public. We're asking people to come and share their hearts with us."

She said that Indians tend to be "invisible" to most people, who think of them mainly when they see them in colorful regalia during parades and similar events. "We're not thought of the rest of the year. And many of our people are in need, whether it's clothing, toys or whatever — we're asking for whatever anyone wants to give from their heart."

It doesn't have to be much, she said. A craft you've made. A can of corn. A warm hat or mittens. Winter clothing.



PRINCESS REDWING, oral historian of the Narragansett tribe and noted speaker on Native American history, will talk about the Indian giveaway ceremonies at the Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum's First Annual Nekomo Festival Saturday afternoon in Arcadia. (Photo by Kay Clifton)

A newspaper article of 1981 describing history and plans for Nikommo continuation to be held Dec. 5, 1981. (Tomaquag archives)

share. He shared that Nikommo is usually associated with the Winter Solstice (Feast of Dreams) and Star stories of the night. “This was likely the most sacred time of year because it was a time where the spirit world and this world was closest. Communication with the ancestors during this time was easier obtained.” “Nowadays,” he said, “they are able to take a day or two to honor Nikommo, but in days of old it would be from the new moon until full moon. There would be celebrations and ceremonies each night as the darkest night arrives. And then the welcoming of the new Sun.”

Among the Aquinnah Wampanoag, the Indigenous peoples of Aquinnah (often called Gay Head) on Martha’s Vineyard island, NaDaizja Bolling, Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal citizen and the Director of the Aquinnah Cultural Center, shared that Nikommo would likely have been honored in similar ways. However, with the onslaught of colonization and its ever revealed effects, the details of Nikommo, including the name in the Wampanoag language, are mostly unknown to the current elders and community citizens, highlighting an opportunity for their community to explore celebrations like Nikommo more deeply.

Silvermoon Mars LaRose, assistant director of the Tomaquag Museum, recalls her memories of Nikommo as a child in the Narragansett Tribe. The celebration was held in the long house, an underground building on the reservation. Children made ornaments to gift to the elders of the tribe. The elders gifted back goodie bags of nuts, fruit, and candies to the children. The Tribe gave gifts to tribal children, prettily wrapped to be opened right away (if your parents would allow) or to bring home and place beneath the tree in anticipation of Christmas Day. The gathering would include a feast prepared potluck style, a delicious opportunity to try other family’s favorite dishes. Games, music, and social dance would round out the festivities. This is a treasured memory for many in the Narragansett community.

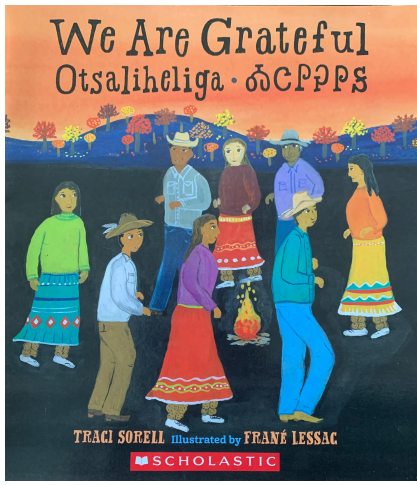
No matter your background, where you live, or what community you are a part of, the give away spirit of Nikommo is and should always be a tradition amongst us all. The gift of giving should never cease to exist for giving is the greatest gift and there is no specific time of year that this gift should be shared.



Wunne Nikommo, Aquéne kah wunnánmónat happy giving, peace and blessings!

~Chrystal Mars Baker for December 2023

FOR THE CHILDREN:



It's the winter solstice and the "moon of darkness," one of the many names for this full moon as well as another opportunity to be thankful and grateful for all Creator's blessings. In this month's book, "We Are Grateful" by Indigenous author Traci Sorell, you will read how the Cherokee people express their gratitude for where they've come from, being mindful of the world they are in, and the importance of the health and well being of their community. You'll see all of this expressed with each seasonal change as you see families living in balance with the world around them. Traci Sorell, the author, is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation whose history began in the Eastern part of the United States but were removed in the Trail of Tears to what is Oklahoma now.

As you read this book, think about what you are grateful for. Is it something? Or someone? Whatever you decide, express your gratitude by creating a gratitude chain. Here's what you need: construction paper of all colors, scissors, tape, and colored pencils or crayons (whatever you want to write with).

Instructions: Fold the construction paper along the long edge in half, then half again then half again and cut along each fold. These will be your chains. On each chain, write something about what or who you are grateful for. When you're finished, fold one strip in a circle until one end touches the other and tape the ends together. Fold the next strip by looping it through the center of the first strip (already in a circle) and tape the end of the second strip. Continue until you have used all the strips you wrote on. You can add to your chain as you think of things or people you are thankful for each and every day! Here's a google slides [link](#) for visual instructions!

RESOURCES:

At Tomaquag we are continuously doing the work of educating new generations of children as well as the general public about the lives, traditions and life changes of the Indigenous peoples of Rhode Island and neighboring communities. Follow us on our website at tomaquagmuseum.org, [Youtube](#) and [Facebook](#). Check out these resources!

To listen to a reading of We Are Grateful visit this [link](#):

To support Indigenous authors and purchase your own copy of We Are Grateful visit this [link](#): or this [link](#)

To hear the author share about the writing of her book visit this [link](#):

To read a review of the book from Indigenous teachers visit this [link](#):

If you are a teacher and are looking for a resource to use in your classroom, check out this [curriculum](#) using this book.

Click here to [Contact](#) the education department with any questions.