

Another important change was the acceptance of Christianity. The Shinnecock, who had always been a deeply religious people, embraced the new beliefs and made the church a central part of their community. Although the most famous Indian preacher on Long Island was Samson Occum, a Mohegan who lived at Montauk in the eighteenth century, it was native Shinnecoeks such as Rev. Peter John and Rev. Paul Cuffee who brought word to their own people. Rev. Cuffee had the insight to adapt some of the ancient rituals to the new religion. He proclaimed that the annual June celebration of the green corn harvest, when all the Shinnecock and Poosepatuck families met to honor the harvest spirits with a feast, would now be "June Meeting" and the week-end ceremonies would end with church services on Sunday in honor of the Christian deity.

This tradition of incorporating ancient rituals into Christian services continues today under the ministry of Rev. Michael Smith, a Shinnecock Indian who earned his M.A. in Theology at Princeton University. Reverend Smith includes the observance of aboriginal customs, where appropriate, in funeral and wedding ceremonies. In some funerals, for example, Indians in traditional dress honor the deceased with drums and chants, and place sacred objects in the grave. Funerals are generally followed by a meal, which is shared with all of the mourners. This custom has been documented in the archaeological excavations of burial sites on eastern Long Island dating back over 3,000 years. Reverend Smith also emphasizes the common communal sharing rituals in both Christianity and traditional Indian religion during his regular Sunday services.

THE SHINNECOCK PEOPLE: An Introduction

by John Strong

In: A SHINNECOCK PORTRAIT

Photographs © 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987 by Toba Tucker
Text © 1987 Guild Hall of East Hampton, Inc. *p 4*
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number 87-080697
ISBN 0-933793-07-3