

3-2000

## **Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village**

Veta Smith Tucker  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/aaa\\_articles](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/aaa_articles)

---

### **ScholarWorks Citation**

Smith Tucker, Veta, "Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village" (2000).  
*Peer Reviewed Articles*. 1.  
[https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/aaa\\_articles/1](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/aaa_articles/1)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the African/African-American at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peer Reviewed Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# PURLOINED IDENTITY

## The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village

VETA SMITH TUCKER  
*Grand Valley State University*

**In 1692 in the village of Salem,** Massachusetts and its environs between the months of March and October, more than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft and arrested. Of the convicted, 19 were hanged, 1 was pressed to death under a plank overlaid with heavy stones, and 4 died in prison waiting to be sentenced. The catalyst for the panic in Massachusetts Bay Colony was Tituba Indian, a slave woman. Considering the primary role Tituba played in these events, official histories pay little attention to her. Indeed, the story of Tituba's life is not recorded in histories of the Salem witch trials. Those who assumed the authority to record these events found it completely acceptable to omit the biography of Tituba, Salem's first witness and confessor.

The judicial record describes Tituba as "a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing 'hoodoo.'" From a modern standpoint, this description invites intense interrogation, but it prompted no further elaboration from 17th-century Puritan minds. By contrast, however, judicial records provide detailed documentation of Tituba's bizarre testimony of night rides on a pole to and from Boston to participate in satanic ceremonies. Beyond her testimony, however, there is only silence, and if, as Breslaw (1996, p. 132) writes, "the magistrates interpreted the details of [Tituba's] confession as proof that the diabolic presence had invaded their community," why were the motives of the principal witness unexamined? This omission reveals a great deal about Tituba's Puritan accusers. Puritan authorities banished Tituba from them and from conscious-



ness because her presence stirred their deepest fear: alienation from God. They avoided Tituba because she embodied their racialized religious fear. God's condemnation was visible in the color of her skin. Unlike other accused (White) witches, who upon confession could be regenerated and reintegrated into the community, Tituba wore the dark skin of reprobation. For her, reintegration into the community was unthinkable.

### HISTORY'S DISMISSAL

Authorities needed to banish Tituba from their community, but they were unable to erase Tituba from history. The attempted erasure left unraveling threads in Salem's story, and these open ends still summon the curious reader today. Contemporary historians and novelists are following the unraveling threads back to Salem in search of clues left behind by the Puritan magistrates, Tituba's accusers, and Tituba herself.

Tituba's master, Rev. Samuel Parris, understandably wanted to distance himself from any suspicion. Tituba testified that the Devil appeared to her as a tall, white-haired man from Boston, wearing black. Tituba's description implicated a clergyman, and Rev. Parris was, after all, responsible for bringing Tituba to Salem Village. He, if anyone, should have known the potential evil a slave of African and Indian origins might possess. Parris had to remove himself from Tituba's diabolical influence. He did so by refusing to pay her jail fees. After 13 months in jail, an unnamed person came forward, paid £7 for Tituba's release, and removed her from the site of the tragedy forever.

Four years later, when one of the judges, 12 jurors, and many of the accusers publicly repented for their mistakes, Tituba was not present to receive redress. In 1704, the Massachusetts General Court reversed the bill of attainder that had permitted the seizure of property from the families of the convicted witches, but no one came forward representing Tituba's family, and in 1711, the legislature ordered that restitution be paid to all who had suffered in their

estates (Watson, 1992, p. 129). As a slave, Tituba had no estate to be restored. To others without estates, the cost of imprisonment was reimbursed, but neither Tituba's nor her new owner's name appears on the list of those who were compensated for the cost of incarceration.

These glaring absences have had a curious effect. Rather than extinguishing Tituba from history, they have given her a permanent though tarnished historical presence that has survived for three centuries. Tituba is remembered today as a confessed witch who cast spells on those innocent Salem girls. The Salem judges, who relentlessly pursued those whom Tituba implicated in her testimony, did not know what to do with her. Due to her confession, they were unable to put her to death, and due to their presumption of her irreversible degeneracy, they were unable to tolerate her presence in the Village. However, Tituba still occupies a place at the center of our memory of the Salem trials. Mention of her name still prompts anxious speculation about the motives of everyone involved in the proceedings. What did Tituba's accusers and interrogators see when gazing on her that seemed too obvious to document in their verbal and written testimony? Why were the judges and jury so willing to believe Tituba's fantastic testimony? What composite image of Tituba emerges from contemporary readings of historical records?

### TITUBA'S DUAL RACIAL IDENTITIES

First of all, Salem Villagers, learned judges, and bystanders perceived Tituba to be Indian. The clergy and judges made many explicit references to her as Indian. In trial records of March 1, 1692, written by clerk Ezekeiel Cheever, she is identified as "Tituba, an Indian woman"; in Joseph Putnam's personal record of her testimony, Putnam represented her as "Titiba the indyen woman" (Hoffer, 1996, p. 205). It is just as certain, however, that those who encountered her also considered her African because the magistrates also recorded what was commonly known in the Village—that is, that Tituba came from Barbados, another British colony that supplied African slaves to the North American colonies.

What has been so perplexing to modern readers—most of whom are conditioned by the modern preoccupation of classifying individuals into exclusive racial categories—is that Puritan witnesses were not bewildered by what they perceived to be dual Indian and African components of Tituba’s identity. Most Puritan witnesses matter-of-factly articulated their perception of Tituba’s composite identity, unlike eyewitnesses today, who do not tolerate racial ambiguity and routinely assign individuals to a single racial group. Only one eyewitness, the famed Cotton Mather, thought the testimony describing Tituba’s racial identity worthy of note. Mather wrote that Tituba underwent a metamorphosis in the testimony of accusers from African to Indian, just like the Devil, who was reported first as a Black man and later tawny [or Indian] in testimony given by the same witnesses (Hoffer, 1996). Evidently, the 17th-century Puritans blended the categories Indian, African, and slave. McWilliams (1996) explains the origins of the blended racial categories.

In seventeenth century Massachusetts, such discriminations among unregenerate peoples of color were considered unnecessary, especially for slaves. By 1692 (exactly two centuries after first contact), Columbus’ misnaming had yielded a catchall term variously applied to the Guanahani, the Caribbe, the Aztecs, and West Indies Africans, as well as to the Iroquois and the Abnaki. (p. 586)

Apparently, colonial references to Tituba as Indian do not imply racial exclusivity. Colonial references incorporate dual identities. Furthermore, the court officials made an explicit reference to Africa in their statement that Tituba was “a slave originating from the West Indies and probably practicing ‘hoodoo.’” *Hoodoo* is a vernacular term for the maleficent practice of voodoo, which is itself a form of occult practice imported into the Americas by West Africans. If the magistrates perceived Tituba as Indian and perceived Indian as an exclusive racial category, would they attribute her magic to Africa? Logic would require that her magic be derived from and attributed to Indian occult practices. However, modern scholars, attempting to invent an exclusive (Indian) racial identity for Tituba, evade this explicit reference to African occult practice

and repudiate those who take it into account. To describe Tituba's racial identity, 19th-century writers foreground references to African attributes, whereas modern scholars foreground references to Tituba's Indian attributes. However, 17th-century eyewitnesses made little distinction between the two. Indeed, it is unlikely that the Puritans of Salem Village would need to deemphasize Tituba's African origins and foreground her Indian attributes as do contemporary readers. Seventeenth-century Puritans did not perceive African and Indian as thoroughly contrasting racial identities.

There are numerous references in Puritan discourse to Indians or tawnies literally blackened by their association with the Devil (McWilliams, 1996). The salient characteristic in the Puritan mind, shared by both Indians and Africans, was their degeneracy due to their alien culture, pagan rituals, and corrupted skin color. Therefore, being perceived as both African and Indian served not to diminish but to intensify the satanic stigma attached to Tituba and to heighten fears and fantasies Puritans projected on her.

### CONTEMPORARY RECONSTRUCTIONS

Contemporary feminist scholar Alison Rowlands dismisses Tituba's African identity as mythology. In a 1998 review, Rowlands privileges Breslaw's (1996) representation of Tituba as an Arawak Indian imported from South America. Rowlands credits Breslaw with constructing a plausible alternative origin for Tituba.

[Breslaw's Tituba] offers a rereading of the confession narrative of the slave-woman who was one of the first three "witches" to be accused in Salem . . . plausibly reconstruct[ing] Tituba's life story in the first part of the book, debunking the myth that she was African, or a voodoo priestess. (p. 298)

In 1974, Hansen (1974) traced the metamorphosis of Tituba's ethnic origins back to one source, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's narrative poem "Giles Cory of Salem Farms" (1868). Longfellow's Tituba is half-Indian with an Indian mother and a fierce Black Obeah man as her father (Hansen, 1974). Hansen contests Longfel-

low's representation and argues instead that Tituba was "a Carib Indian woman whose race, over the years had been changed from Indian to half-Indian to half-Negro to Negro. There is no evidence to support these changes" (1974, p. 3). Hansen found no traces of ambiguity in the 17th-century records. Interestingly, Hansen does not mention Cotton Mather's observation that Tituba's racial classification shifted from African to Indian in the testimony of some eyewitnesses (Hoffer, 1996).

All representations of Tituba that Hansen found subsequent to Longfellow's embodied Tituba as half-Indian and half-Negro or entirely Negro (Hansen, 1974). Hansen (1974) credits Arthur Miller with blackening Tituba beyond recognition in his 1953 drama, *The Crucible*. Petry (1964), whom Hansen also does not mention, created the last entirely African Tituba in her historical novel, *Tituba of Salem Village*. Most contemporary writers represent Tituba as Indian. The exclusive Indian reconstructions are a consequence of Hansen's rescuing Tituba from what he asserts are dramatists' racist delusions.

Hansen (1974) charges dramatists and historians alike from Longfellow to Miller of conscious or unconscious racism because they preferred Negro to Indian where witches and witchcraft were concerned (1974): "It is surely significant that the racial metamorphosis occasioned by this prejudice began between the Civil War and the First World War, a period when ethnic hatreds in this country were at their most intense" (p. 12). Hansen is convinced that the Tituba of the trial documents and the Tituba of *The Crucible* are misconceived reversals that owe their existence to racism. Most scholars and readers since 1974 have aligned themselves with Hansen, retreating, perhaps, from Hansen's charge of racism.

In a 1994 article in the *Journal of Black Studies*, McMillan names three Blacks accused in the Salem trials, but Tituba is not one of those named. In the same article, however, McMillan provides demographic details that cast doubt on the racial scheme he employs to exclude Tituba from the other African slaves in the Salem trials.

Most enslaved Africans in New England originated in Barbados and other English colonies in the Caribbean. The strong desire for

Africans, and not for indigenous (but potentially dangerous) Native Americans, is well illustrated in the colonial record:

Adult male Native Americans captured in warfare would be sold to Caribbean plantations in return for Blacks or Caribbeans. It was much simpler to control Africans and Caribbeans than knowledgeable local, native peoples. (McMillan, p. 101)

McMillan's (1996) demographic description suggests that New England colonists preferred Africans to Indians as slaves, and it also indicates that two distinct peoples inhabited Barbados: Africans and Caribs, also called Carib Indians. Hoffer (1996) states that in the 17th century, "Barbados was deserted, its Carib inhabitants dead and gone, when the English arrived" (p. 207). Furthermore, Hoffer explains that from 1668 to 1678, a treaty declared that Indian slaves were not to be imported into Barbados. Those who might have been imported illegally were men captured in war from neighboring islands: "By 1684 there were an estimated 72 Caribs on the island" (Hoffer, 1996, p. 207). Therefore, according to Hoffer (1996), an imported Amerindian child's presence in Barbados is considered highly unlikely (and the young adult Tituba of Salem Village would have to have been a child in Barbados in the 1680s). Nevertheless, plausible scenarios built around the unlikely possibility of an imported Indian girl have been constructed by contemporary scholars trying to substantiate an exclusive Indian identity for Tituba.

For example, Breslaw (1996) argues that Tituba was an Arawak Indian captured by an English adventurer sailing along the northern coast of South America in search of Indians to sell in Barbados due to the declining availability of English bondservants. Another theory posits that Tituba might have been a Native (North American) Indian prisoner of war, sold into slavery in Barbados after the defeat of the Wampanoags and Nipmucks at the end of King Philip's War (McWilliams, 1996).

French Caribbean novelist Maryse Conde (1992) dispenses with the Indian importation schemes. Conde, like Longfellow, invents a mulatto identity for Tituba. Conde's Tituba is the child of an enslaved African woman and an Englishman. A mulatto identity is

extremely plausible due to the common practice of sexual liaisons between slave owners and their slaves under the slave regimes, and due to the tendency for members of all racial groups relegated to subaltern social status to fraternize and cohabit. Although a dual identity was indicated by testimony as well as fictive accounts, a dual racial identity was ruled out by Hansen and his disciples. The only way Hansen could save Tituba from Longfellow's and Miller's putative, primitive, racist portrayals was to rob her of all African identity. She could not retain both her acculturation and her Africanness; therefore, Hansen stripped Tituba of her African heritage.

#### UNCONSCIOUS RACIST MYTHOLOGY

The fusion of African and Indian identity that occupied the early colonial mind and congealed in their perception of Tituba may have been based on empirical (visual) evidence that eyewitnesses considered obvious and, therefore, unnecessary to record. However, in the absence of incontestable evidence indicating a precise racial identity for Tituba, contemporary readers rely on today's racial categories and import 20th-century notions of racial exclusivity into their racial reconstructions of Tituba. Operating within contemporary racial myths, contemporary scholars—Hansen included—presume African and Indian identities to be and to have always been exclusive, uncrossable boundaries. Furthermore, contemporary scholars seem to be unaware that the myth of racial exclusivity enabled by a corollary racial myth, the myth of racial purity, lies at the unexamined core of contemporary scholars' insistence that as Indian, Tituba could not also have been African. Wedded to the modern myths of racial purity and exclusivity, contemporary scholars continue to privilege one ethnic identity for Tituba over the other.

#### NEW EVIDENCE

Hoffer's (1996) study of the Salem trials offers compelling new evidence supporting Tituba's African identity. The new evidence

does nothing, however, to disturb the latent racial myths that covertly influence scholarly efforts to erase Tituba's African identity.

According to Hoffer (1996), "first generation . . . Africans often kept their names if they were not too difficult to pronounce" (p. 209). *Tituba* is a name that comes from Yoruba, a still-prominent ethnic group found today in Nigeria (Hoffer, 1996). In Yoruba, *Titi* means endless or never ending. It is a common part of female names. *Tituba* is also a [Yoruba] verb root that means to atone or to apologize (Hoffer, 1996). Hoffer (1996) further explains that Yoruba names are always sentences that serve many functions.

Today, the Yoruba have complex naming systems and ceremonies. The child has many names. . . . The secret name describes the soul of the child and predicts the child's life course and personal character. However, the precise meaning of Tituba's name cannot be recovered from European language because Yoruba is an inflected language, a tonal language, and we do not know whether the *ti* was high, middle, or low in tone. Nevertheless, the name speaks volumes, for it pulls the [Salem] story toward the African shore of the Atlantic world. (p. 3)

This new linguistic evidence might put all doubts to rest about Tituba's African identity if the myths of racial purity and exclusivity were not still exerting an unconscious influence. Hoffer is still bewildered by the judicial records, which stated unequivocally that Candy, also accused of witchcraft, was "a negro woman" (Hoffer, 1996, p. 210). Hoffer cannot understand why Candy's African origins made her "negro," but Tituba's African origins did not earn her the same attribution. Hoffer (1996) settles on a resolution based on social practice but not on the social practices that resulted in mixed racial identities.

Tituba became Indian because her husband was Indian John. His identity became hers, just as women took their husband's names and their husbands took married women's property. There were a number of such intermarriages in the 18th century in which racial identity shifted from African to Indian. (p. 210)

Hoffer is thoroughly persuaded that Tituba was completely African, and he rejects the possibility of a biracial or multiracial Tituba. Given the circumstances of the time—the frequent opportunities for cross-racial encounters occasioned by cross-Atlantic colonization, the incomplete legal codification of racial segregation, especially among servants of all racial backgrounds—it seems timid not to conclude that Tituba embodied a mixture of African and Indian ancestry. It would seem only reasonable to conclude that Tituba was both Indian and African (and perhaps European as well). The precise proportions of Tituba's Indian or African (or European) ancestry, however, remain indeterminate. Rather than insist upon an exclusive single racial identity for Tituba, it seems more sensible to accept the fused racial identity that her 17th-century observers attributed to her.

Unfortunately, what was a comfortable practical conclusion for our Puritan predecessors remains an unsettling enigma for today's scholars, whose thinking is conditioned by modern racial mythologies. This suggests that contemporary thinkers, laboring to extinguish Tituba's dual identities, are as deceived by their own racial fictions as were the dogmatic denizens of 17th-century Salem Village.

## REFERENCES

- Breslaw, E. (1996). *Tituba, reluctant witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan fantasies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Conde, M. (1992). *I, Tituba, Black witch of Salem*. New York: Ballantine.
- Hansen, C. (1974). The metamorphosis of Tituba, or why American intellectuals can't tell an Indian witch from a Negro. *The New England Quarterly*, XLVII(1), 3-12.
- Hoffer, P. C. (1996). *The devil's disciples: Makers of the Salem witchcraft trials*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McMillan, T. (1994). Black magic: Witchcraft, race, and resistance in colonial New England. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25, 99-117.
- McWilliams, J. (1996). Indian John and the northern tawnies. *The New England Quarterly*, 69(4), 580-604.
- Petry, A. (1964). *Tituba of Salem Village*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Rowlands, A. (1998). Telling witchcraft stories: New perspectives on witchcraft and witches in the early modern period. *Gender and History*, 10(2), 294-302.

Watson, B. (1992). Salem's dark hour: Did the devil make them do it? *Smithsonian*, 23, 116-131.

*Veta Smith Tucker teaches African American literature, English, and women's studies at Grand Valley State University. Her research interests focus on recovering and reclaiming past and contemporary Black women of the African diaspora.*