

Malian's Song – *Abenaki Language Glossary*

By Marge Bruchac

The Name *Wôbanakiak* or *Abenaki*

The tribal name *Abenaki* is adapted from the original *Wôbanakiak*, a noun that combines the morphemes for dawn or white light (*wôban*), and land (*-aki*) with an animate plural ending to indicate the people who dwell in that place (*-ak*). During the 1700s, English, French, and Dutch attempts to pronounce *Wôbanakiak* or *Wôbanaki* resulted in many different spellings - *Abnaki*, *Abanaki*, *Abenaki*, *Banakee*, *Wabanaki*, etc. - that appear in colonial records. The most common modern pronunciations of *Abenaki* are the following:

- 1) *Abenaki* (stress the first syllable, and pronounce “a” as in “lab” and “e” as in “end”)
- 2) *Abénaquis* (stress the second syllable, and pronounce “a” as in “ah” and “e” as in “end”)
- 3) *Abnaki* (stress the first syllable, and pronounce “a” as in “lab”)
- 4) *Abanaki* (stress the first and third syllables, and pronounce “a” as in “lah”)

Alnôbaôdwa – Speaking Western *Abenaki*

During the 1700s, the Native population at Odanak (Saint Francis) was mixed, with Native people who originally came from Cowass, Missisquoi, Pennacook, Pequawket, Pocumtuck, Sokoki, Woronoco, and elsewhere. Many of the words and family names in the Western *Abenaki* language today are directly traceable to these older *Abenaki* communities and other dialects.

Native *Abenaki* speakers could easily understand each other when speaking face to face, since specific pronunciations, gestures, and context gave meaning to the words, and dialects identified where the speaker came from. A fluent speaker could form compound words and phrases that would clearly indicate the speaker's intent, the relationship of the speaker to the audience, the time of the events being spoken of, and the importance of this information. There were, however, distinct differences between the “Western *Abenaki*” languages (spoken in New Hampshire, Vermont, parts of northern Massachusetts, southeastern Canada, and upstate northeastern New York) and the “Eastern *Abenaki*” languages of Malecite, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot (spoken in Maine and the Maritimes). These languages are all part of a larger language family called “Algonquian,” that includes all of the Native people of New England, the Great Lakes, and most of Canada.

The following is a *very* simple introduction to a very sophisticated language. Here are just a few tips on pronouncing the Western *Abenaki* language for English speakers:

Vowels:

- the letter “a” sounds like “ah” (as in pa)
- the letter “e” sounds like “eh” (as in set)

- the letter “i” sounds like “ih” (as in sit)
- when the letter “i” is preceded by the letter “a” it sounds like “eye” (as in mine)
- when the letter “i” is preceded by a consonant it sounds like “ee” (as in see)
- when the letter “i” is followed by the letter “a” or “o” it sounds like “ee” (as in see)
- the letter “o” sounds like “oh” (as in no)
- the letter “o” with an accent - “ô” (which can also be spelled “8”) - is a unique Abenaki sound, a nasalized “ohn” made by pursing one’s lips and forcing the sound through the nasal cavity
- the letter combination “ou” sounds like “ow”
- when the letter “u” begins a word, it sounds like “u” (as in you)
- when the letter “u” is preceded by the letters i, g, or k, it sounds like “u” (as in you)
- when the letter “u” is preceded by any other letter, it sounds like “eh” (as in net)

Consonants:

All consonants in a word must be sounded; there are no silent letters.

- as the first letter in a word, “b” is sounded like the letter b
- as the final letter in a word, “b” is sounded like the letter p
- as the first letter in a word, “c” is sounded like “ts”
- as the first letter in a word, “d” is sounded like the letter d
- as the final letter in a word, “d” is sounded like the letter t
- the letter “g” is sounded like a hard letter g
- the letter “j” is sounded as a hard “ch” (as in watch)
- the letter “w” is sounded with a breath of air as “wh”
- the letter combination “ch” is sounded as a soft “ch”
- the letter combination “dz” (which can also be spelled “tsi”) is pronounced “tsee”
- any double consonants are sounded slightly longer

Please note that it can sometimes be difficult to read the written Abenaki language today, since different linguists may choose to spell the same words in entirely different ways. For example, one writer may use the letter “b” where another uses “p” for the same sound, or “d” for “t”.

There are several different ways to spell Abenaki words, based on the many different orthographies (spelling systems) that try to convey the sound of the spoken language. There is not one spelling system that everyone agrees on – the sound is the most important thing. For proper pronunciation, it is best to listen to Native-born Western Abenaki speakers.

The following are some select Western Abenaki names, words and phrases that refer specifically to the people, objects, places, and events recounted in *Malian’s Song*. These particular words and phrases come from Gordon Day’s fieldnotes about Elvine Obomsawin’s story and several other printed sources listed in the bibliography that follows.

Glossary and pronunciation: Abenaki names and words used in *Malian's Song*

akwi	ahk-wee	stop; do not
Alsigontekw	ahl-sih-gon-tek-wh	river of many shells
anakwika	ah-nahk-wee-kah	trees are growing up
awanagiak	ah-wah-nah-gee-ahk	strangers
bemômahla	beh-mohn-mah-lah	run
Cowass	coh-wahs	pine-tree place
idam	ee-dahm	he said
madahôdo	mah-dah-hohn-doh	bad spirit
Malian	mah-lee-ahn	personal name (Marian in French)
Maliazonis	mah-lee-ah-zoh-nees	personal names (Marie Jeanne in French)
Msadoques	mh-sah-doh-kees	personal name
namassaak.	nah-mahs-sahk	fish
Nanibôsad	nah-nee-boh-sahd	the night walker
nda	un-dah	no
nemikwaldamnana	neh-mik-wahl-dahm-nah-nah	we remember
nôbamiskw	nohn-bah-meesk-wh	old beaver
ndodana	un-doh-dah-nah	in our town
Nokomis	noh-koh-meess	grandmother
nziwaldam	un-zee-wahl-dahm	I am lonesome
Obomsawin	oh-bohm-sah-ween	one who leads or guides
oziwaldam	oh-zee-wahl-dahm	very lonesome
pita	pih-tah	she is
Sibosek	see-boh-sehk	little river
Simôn	see-mohn	personal name (Simon in English)
skamôn	skah-mohn	corn
tômô	tohn-mohn	not any; none
widôba	wee-dohn-bah	her friends
wlioni	wh-lee-oh-nee	thank you

wôbi	wohn-bee	white
yokeag	yoh-keg	ground corn (New England dialect)

Glossary and pronunciation: Samadagwis’ words in *Malian’s Song*

NOTE: In the story told in *Malian’s Song*, a young Abenaki girl named Maliazonis is warned by a Stockbridge Mohican man who is a scout for Robert Rogers. According to Abenaki family traditions, this man did not speak Abenaki very well. Even though the words that he speaks in *Malian’s Song* are not correct Abenaki, they would still have been understandable to an Abenaki speaker. Samadagwis’ words are listed below, alongside the correct word in Abenaki:

Samadagwis’ word	Pronunciation	Abenaki word	Pronunciation
akwi [in English, this means “stop”, or “do not”]	ahk-wee	akwi	ahk-wee
sagez [in English, this means, “to be afraid”]	sah-gaze	sagezo	sah-geh-zo
ndapsizak [in English, this means “my little friend”]	ni-dahp-see-zahk	nidôbasizek	nee-doh-bah-see-zek
kwawimleba [in English, this means “you are being warned”]	k-wah-weem-le-bah	k’wawidokawa	k-wah-wee-doh-kah-wah

Glossary – Select Abenaki place names, personal names, and family names

Alsigontekw	river of many shells (St. Francis River)
Azon	personal name (Jeanne in English)
Bitawbakw	waters in-between (Lake Champlain)
Cowass	pine-tree place (upper Connecticut River, eastern Vermont)
Iglismôn	Englishman
Kebek	obstructed current (now Quebec in French)
Kwinitekw	long tidal river (Connecticut River)
Magwak	man-eater (Abenaki term for Mohawk or Iroquois)
Mali	personal name (Marie in French, Mary in English)
Malian	personal name (Marian in French, Mary Ann in English)
Maliazonis	personal name (Mary Jeanne in French, Mary Jean in English)
Malgelit	personal name (Marguerite in French, Margaret in English)
Missisquoi or Mazipskoik	place of the flint (northwestern Vermont around Swanton)
Msadoques	big river person (family name)
Obomsawin	fire-tender (family name)
Odanak	the dwelling place (St. Francis)
Pastoni	American man (based on the English word “Boston”)
Pennacook	place of ground-nuts (central New Hampshire)
Pequawket	broken, cleared land (eastern New Hampshire into Maine)
Plachmon	Frenchman
Pocumtuck	swift, sandy river (around Deerfield, Massachusetts)
Samadagwis	personal name (one of Rogers’ Stockbridge Mohican scouts)
Sibosek	little river in a ravine
Simôn	personal name (Simon in English)
Sokoki	southern place (northern Massachusetts, southern Vermont)
Winooski	onion-river place (northwestern Vermont around Burlington)
Wôbanakiak	dawn-land people, Abenaki Indians
Wôbi Madahôdo	white bad spirit, “White Devil” (Abenaki name for Robert Rogers)
Woronoco	winding river (Westfield, Massachusetts)

Glossary – Abenaki months and seasons

In the region between southern New England and southern Canada, there are four distinct seasons of the year: winter, spring, summer, and autumn, each lasting approximately 91 days.

The Western Abenaki names for the seasons are:

Pebon	winter season
Sigwan	spring season
Niben	summer season
Tagwôgo	autumn season

For generations, Native people measured the year by a lunar cycle of 13 full moons, visible every 28 days, over the course of the 365 days that make up a year. In Abenaki, the word “kesos” or “kisos,” which also means “sun,” is used to refer to the full moon only when it looks like a fully round orb. The names of the full moons varied from tribe to tribe, and from region to region, since each full moon was known by whichever natural resources were most abundant at that time. By 1759, the Abenaki people at Odanak had adopted the English and French calendar system, using 12 months (instead of 13 moons) to measure the year. The names they used for each month reflected the activities that were most important during that time.

Alamikos	new year’s greeting month (January)
Piaôdagos	boughs-shedding month (February)
Mozokas	moose-hunting month (March)
Sogalikas	maple sugar-making month (April)
Kikas	planting month (May)
Nokkahigas	hoeing month (June)
Temaskikos	hay-making month (July)
Temezôwas	harvesting month (August)
Skamonkas	Indian corn-reaping month (September)
Benibagos or Penibagos	leaf-falling month (October)
Mzatanos	ice-forming month (November)
Pebonkas	winter month (December)

Glossary – Select Abenaki terms for relatives

alôgomômek	a relative
awissisak	children
awissisimek	your children
môdzakwnegwak	she that raised us
mziwi	everybody, all our relatives
nadôgwsis	my female cousin, daughter of mother's brother or father's sister
nadôgwseskua	my male cousin, son of mother's brother or father's sister
ndaawôsizemòwò	their children
nigawes	my mother
nigawesega	my late mother
nigawesenogak	our late mothers
nidokan	my older brother
nijia	my brother
nijia	my male cousin, son of mother's sister or father's brother
niswiak	my spouse (married partner, wife, husband)
niswiidiji	his or her spouse
nitsakaso	my sister
nitsakaso	my female cousin, daughter of mother's sister or father's brother
n'mahom	my grandfather
nmessis	my older sister
nmitôgwes	my father
nmitôgwesega	my late father
nmitôgwsenogak	our late fathers
nokemesis	my mother's sister (aunt)
nokomes	my grandmother
noses	my grandchild (granddaughter or grandson)
odawôsozmôwô	their children
okemessa	his or her grandmother

Glossary – Select Abenaki words and phrases

aiamihawigamigw	house of prayer, church
abazenoda	basket
abaziak	trees
abonek	on the bed
adalgadimek	dancing place
adebôlagw	a rifle
adio	goodbye
agema ahlômek	he told
agema	he or she
agômek	on the other side
ahaiagwa	when we lived
akwi sagezo	do not be afraid
alakwssak	stars
alemos	dog
alôdokaogowak	she that tells us
alosada	let us go
alnôbak	Abenaki people
alnôbaôdwa	to speak Abenaki
amkuôn	spoon
anakwika	trees are growing up
askwa	still
asolkwônsis	a small hat or cap
awanagia	who are you
awanagiak	strangers
awanii	someone
awanocewiwigwôm	French-style wooden house
awasiwi	beyond
awazonal	firewood
awighigan	a book
awôsis	child

awôsizwit	she was young
bakwasataizatal	dried blueberries
bamegizegak	today
bemômahla	run
gawi	to sleep
gedakinna	our homeland
gejokôn	doll
iglismôniwi	to speak in the English style
jimeli	brick or stone fireplace (based on the English word “chimney”)
kagwesa	what
kagwi lla	what is the matter
kalozimuk	to speak
kawakeniga	to harvest or gather by pulling or picking
kikawôgan	to cultivate and harvest a field by digging and cutting
kina	look
kiptôômek	he was shot down
kita	listen
kizos	the sun
koaikok	at the pines
kôkanilinto	calmly singing
kôtlizidiidep	they were hiding
kôtlôôdit	they hide
kowawtamenô	you understand
kpiwsi	in the little woods
ktsi psakaigan	big ravine
ktsi wigwôm	big house
kwai kwai	greetings
kwalaskonigan	cornhusk
kwatiz	small container or pot
kwidôbawô nia	I am your friend
kwilawatôzik	to search

kwutguabizon	a belt
labizowan	petticoat, skirt
leguasowôgan	a dream
linto	to sing
lintowôgan	song
lômpskahigan	any decorated leather or cloth, fancy clothing
madahôdo	a bad spirit
mahlakws	ash tree
maji	bad
makezenal	my shoes (moccasins)
malisjômuk	to weep
maksa	a blanket
manazaawimuk	to save
maskwa	birch bark
maskwamozi	birch tree
menahan	island
migakamuk	to fight
miji or mitzi	to eat
mijowôgan	provisions
mizôwimôniinôkwkil	jewelry
mkezenal	shoes, moccasins
môdzoldimek	leaving
môjimuk	to go away
môni	silver (based on the English word “money” and French “monnaie”)
msali nthlôk	many were killed
nadawaha	a scout or spy
nadialin	to be hunting
namaskan	to be fishing
namassak	fish
namiogwzo	he is seen
nanibôsad	night-walker (moon)

naodzi	some
nda	no or none
ndakinna	my homeland
ndodonna	in our town
negôni gamigw	an old house
nemikwaldamnana	we remember
ni aodimek	at the time of the fight
nidoba	my friend
nidobaskwa	my female friend
nikskwasisak	young girls
nita	at once
n'namihôb	I saw
n'wajônônnôb	we had
nodahlôt	she is left behind
nodamagwôgan	fish spear
nônegôni	very old
nônegwetsi	alone
ntodziwi	at that time
nziwaldam	I am lonesome
ôbamiskw	old beaver
odagimônô	they counted them
odasolkwôn	his hat
odebestawônô	they listen to
ododanak	in their village
odoka	to be speaking
odzanego	he stopped her
odzeksemenô	they burned it
odzizawôbin	she was looking out
o'gemak	snow shoes
olinamiôn	well-seen
olitonô	they made a song

olômawalmoônôp	they did not believe her
onamiôwi	she could not see him
onkawôdokaogowak	she who passed the story on to us
onôdzi	they went
ôtalinto	she was singing
o'wdesis	a path
oziwaldam	she is lonesome
paakuinôgwzian	greetings, you appear new to me
pamgisgak	today
paskhigan	an exploding implement (gun)
patlihôz	priest
pezgelôgwihla	it is dark
pezgiwi	in the dark
pilewakak	strangers
pita	very
pitigat	go in
pkagôt sibo	he crossed the river
podawazwigamigok	council house
pmekhadimek	people dancing
psakwlata	shining
saagad	how sad
sagezo	to be afraid
saksahon	earring
sanôba	the man
senomozi	maple tree
sibos	a brook or stream
sibosis	a little brook
siziwan	a dance rattle
skamôn	corn
skamônal	corn (plural)
sogal	sugar (based on the English word "sugar")

sôkhipozit kisos	at sunrise
spozidoki	wake up early in the morning
tabat	be quiet
tagwôgwiwi	during the autumn
tawipodi	table
tawzôganek	the window
tawszôganek	on the window sill
tebinawônô	to see about
tmakwaawa	beaver pelt
tokima	to awaken
tokop	awake
todziwi	at that time
tômô	not any; none
wagin	wagon (based on the English word “wagon”)
wagitôzik	to break or damage
waniadôzik	to lose
wanialôbenop	we lost her
wawaldamôwen	she or he does not know
wawôdokawa	to be warned
wawôdokawômek	she had been warned
wawôdokawôn	she warned
wdupkuanal	hair of the head
wednôn	he took her away
widôba	his or her friend
wigwam or wigwôm	a dwelling place, house
wijokadimuk	to help each other
wiwizô	suddenly
wiwzômôdzin	quickly he left
wli	good; gentle (also spelled oli)
wlibomkanni	travel well
wligo	it is good

wli nanawalmezi	go in good health
wlioni	thank you
wlôgwiwi	during the evening
wôhôbaks	shirt
w'paskhigan	his gun
wskidakuam	tree sap
wskinôkskwa	their young girl
wzômi	because
yokeag	ground corn for corn porridge (in southern Algonkian dialect)

Bibliography – Sources for the Western Abenaki Language

The Western Abenaki language was first recorded in print during the early 1700s by Jesuit missionaries. Abenaki tribal members have been publishing their own dictionaries and grammars for generations; Peter Paul Wzokhilain published the first written Abenaki grammar in 1832. Some linguists believe that the Abenaki language is dying or extinct, but there more Abenaki speakers today than there were a generation ago, thanks to the efforts of elders like Cecile Wawanolet, her son Eli Joubert, and others who have conducted language classes for Abenaki people at Odanak and Missisquoi. A few print sources are listed below.

Joseph Aubery and Stephen Laurent. 1995 [1700s]. Father Aubery's French Abenaki Dictionary. Portland, ME: Chisholm Brothers.

Jeanne Brink and Gordon M. Day. 1990. Alnobaodwa: A Western Abenaki Language Guide (book and audio tape). Swanton, VT: Franklin Northwest Supervisory Union and Title V Indian Education Office.

Gordon M. Day. 1967. "An Agawam Fragment," International Journal of American Linguistics 33 (3):244-247.

Gordon M. Day. 1975. The Mots Loups of Father Mathevet. Publications in Ethnology No. 8. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: National Museum of Man.

Gordon M. Day. 1980. "Abenaki Place Names in the Champlain Valley," International Journal of American Linguistics, 47 (2):143-171, 1981.

Gordon M. Day. 1994. Western Abenaki Dictionary. Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 128. Hull, Quebec, Canada: Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Joseph Laurent. 1884. New Familiar Abenakis & English Dialogues. Quebec, Canada: Leger Brousseau. An electronic version is available through Early Canadiana Online at: <<http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/mtq?id=a6450175ac&doc=08895>>

Stephen Laurent. 1956. "The Abenakis: Aborigines of Vermont - Part 1," Vermont History, new series XXIII (4):286 – 295.

Stephen Laurent. 1956. "The Abenakis: Aborigines of Vermont - Part 2," Vermont History, new series XXIV (1):3 – 11.

Henry Lorne Masta. 1932. Abenaki Indian Legends, Grammar and Place Names. Victoriaville, Quebec, Canada: La Voix des Bois-Francs.

Father Sebastan Rasles. 1833 [1691]. "A Dictionary of the Abnaki Language in North America," with notes by John Pickering. Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, new series I:370-571.