

# The Symbolic and Reciprocal Relationship between a Native American Community and their Land

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The moment I enrolled in this module and became aware of the Ethnographic Encounters project, I was certain of my focus. I grew up in a region of Southern Ontario, Canada, that has a 500-year history of settlements and resettlements between the First Nation of Mississaugas, the United Empire Loyalists and the current First Nation of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. While I live only moments away from the geographical division establishing the territory of the Reservation, I knew very little beyond the basic history outlined above. It was something that had surrounded me my entire life, yet simultaneously something I had never attempted to analyse, nor truly understand. With this, I was motivated to learn about the social, cultural and political relations that defined the relationship between the Mohawks and their land.

Initially, I believed that it would be exceptionally difficult to approach my ethnography in the most traditional sense of Malinowskian participant observation. How could I observe a relationship between a group of people and the land they inhabit? The reservation and the peoples who inhabit it, had mixed and merged with other surrounding communities to the extent that much of their everyday life, including their public interaction with land, was reflective of that of their non-Native neighbours. What was I to observe that was truly unique to this community and their land? This led me to wrongly believe that the best

approach to my topic was to rely almost exclusively on interviews to establish and dissect the nuanced differences in the Mohawk approach to human-land relations. This directed my ethnography into the subfields of environmental anthropology and political anthropology.

I began my study with a series of questions, which made evident my initial desire to learn as much as possible about the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte and their relationship with their land. With this, however, it made evident my reliance on the lens of political anthropology.

- How and why has the Mohawk understanding of, and approach to, land ownership changed since the time of their original settlement on the Bay of Quinte?
- Does the tribe's settlement through the purchase of its Bay of Quinte territory contradict Native understandings of land ownership?
- How have territorial losses and gains, as well as unsettled land disputes, affected the tribe's approach to their relationship with their land?
- Would disputes regarding the ownership of native territory originate from the idea that the Mohawk, or generally Iroquois people are better stewards of the land; that losing the land means losing or risking much of their culture and history; or other reasons?

All of these questions, and several others that I had also used to converse with members of the Mohawk reservation, possessed an evident flaw: each provided little opportunity to acquire information beyond historical facts and common knowledge. While these questions were valuable for providing a historical foundation for my project, I did not believe

this type of research was sufficient for a true ethnography.

Early on in my fieldwork, I was able to attend an Aboriginal Awareness course at a local college. This experience provided the opportunity to purely listen to a panel of Mohawk community Elders and Paul Latchford, the college coordinator of Aboriginal Services, who quickly became my gatekeeper into this community. Through their speaking, their conversations with other individuals in attendance, and in their responses to my own questions, a strong common narrative emerged. This narrative emphasised the notion that the primary relationship found in this research is not strictly a relationship between a people and their land, but instead a relationship between a people and the symbolic representations manifested by their land. Representations which demonstrate the history, traditions, values and overall culture of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, a culture which emphasizes the significance of reciprocity. In reviewing all research and interviews, this notion became the foundation of both my Ethnographic Encounter and my personal understanding of Mohawk culture.

### **Part One: Establishing Legal Status and Changing the Focus**

While my approach to collecting data did change considerably throughout my project, this does not discredit the value of my early research. My initial approach prioritised the social, cultural and political differences of the Mohawk tribe, in relation to surrounding non-Natives, with primary reference to their desire to maintain their geographical territory. Paul Latchford, using his access to historical literature and pre-existing treaties, as well as his knowledge of the legal rights afforded to Aboriginal Canadians, was able to provide information necessary for this social, legal

and political foundation.

As previously noted, the territory that is now defined as that of the Mohawk people has undergone resettlements at various critical points in Canadian history. Before French and British colonialism in the 17th- and 18th-century respectively, the region of Tyendinaga, as well as the majority of its surrounding region, was inhabited by the Mississaugas. Following the Seven Years' War when the British officially took control of Upper Canada (present-day Southern Ontario), displacement began to occur. This culminated with the end of the American Revolution when the British granted various regions of Upper Canada to the United Empire Loyalists and the Mohawks, both of whom were forced to cede their land in what became the United States of America. These Loyalists continue to inhabit the surrounding regions of Deseronto, Belleville and Loyalist Township. The territory of Tyendinaga, however, was selected by Mohawk leaders Joseph Brant and John Deseronto due to its significance in the original Five Nations history. The region had once been controlled by the Iroquois Confederacy and the Bay of Quinte, upon which the Reservation borders, is known as the birthplace of Tekanawita, "the Peacemaker that brought the original Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy under a constitution of peace in the 12th century" (Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte n.d.). While this historical summary does not add substance to any ethnography, it retains its importance as it is these facts that both determined the Mohawk tribe's current location and established the foundation of legal, political and social relations with non-Native Canadians.

Paul Latchford took these historical facts and was then able to relay information about the implications of these events as it relates to individuals of today's Mohawk Territory. When asked about the relationship

between legal ownership and Iroquois understandings that “in no event is land for sale” (McNellis 2010: 21), a relationship I believed to be rife with conflict, Paul clarified the issue. He explained that the concept of land ownership does not extend to Native Peoples, as they are “wards of the country” and therefore “we do not have title to our lands.” The deed that is often discussed, which transferred the territory of Tyendinaga to the Mohawk people, is not really a deed for land ownership, but instead a “Certificate of Possession of our land.”

While the difference between the two may appear to outsiders as largely based in semantics, the difference for the Mohawk people, and other Native communities throughout Canada, has a tremendous impact on both individual opportunity and perception of land. The Government of Canada, with reference to the 1876 Indian Act, further summarises this legal dynamic, explaining that as individual allotments and Certificates of Possession may be granted by a Band Council and the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, “the legal title to the land remains with the Crown” (Government of Canada 2013). In essence, the land that is respected by the majority of Canadians as being Native territory is ultimately controlled by the Canadian Government. Paul Latchford explained the most identifiable impact of such a legal arrangement, stating that without rights for outright land ownership, “people on reserve cannot go to the bank as they have no title to their lands,” meaning that opportunities for home-based loans are extremely limited.

This made me consider Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory from a new perspective, recognising the current status of the reservation as akin to a physical liminality. Individual and small group liminality relies both on the role of ritual and the awareness that the “liminal state is always

clearly defined, temporally and spatially: there is a way into liminality and there is a way out of it” (Thomassen 2009: 21). Comparatively, the liminality of an entire society, which applies directly to the Tyendinaga Mohawk community since the time of their resettlement, is unique in that “the future is inherently unknown” (Thomassen 2009: 22). Neither I, nor any individual connected to the Mohawk community, could determine the exact outcome of this liminality. Instead, I began to prioritise research into the individual and social effects of such a liminality, as they have manifested in the Mohawk storytelling and ceremonial action.

## **Part Two: Recognizing the Physical and Spiritual**

On the morning of the 11th of March, 2017 I walked out the front door of my home to find that it was -18°C. The roads were covered in ice and the salt and sand trucks had yet to make their rounds, meaning I arrived late to my first session of the Aboriginal Awareness at the local college. I was embarrassed, entering the room, rearranging chairs, rustling layers of outerwear and preparing my notebook and pen. My attempted silence could not match the attentiveness of the classroom, which was arranged in a semi-circle, each attendee watching with keen interest the ritual of smudging that was taking place. A young Mohawk man with his eyes closed stood before a female Elder who recited a Mohawk prayer and allowed the smoke from the burning herbs to envelop his face. The Elder, Katsitsiase or Betty Maracle, then joined another Elder, Anataras or Alan Brant and began the weekly class.

On this day, the group discussion began with a reflection upon what is commonly known as the Thanksgiving Address, or Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén, meaning “Words Before All Else.” The address

begins nearly every line with the Mohawk phrase “teieithinonhweraton ne,” meaning “we offer our thanks to,” following it with various physical elements of nature. “Kahnkaronnon,” meaning “the waters of all the rivers, lakes and streams,” “kentsonshon:’a,” “ohtehra’shon:’a,” “kontiriio,” and “kaie:re nikawara:ke,” meaning the lives of fish, roots and wild animals and “the four winds that accompany them.” These are just some of the references made within the address, which individually speak to the respect offered to each element of nature. Cumulatively, however, and when delivered as a group address, the message demonstrates a commitment to nature that is deeply-rooted and inherent in Mohawk culture.

While this address was the end of the structured elements of the class, the discussion of nature and human-land relations did not end there. These topics were not explicitly discussed, yet they were nevertheless the foundation upon which all questions, answers and the weekly discussions were structured. A primary point of discussion for the class emerged in the subject of sweat lodges. Attendees from the Tyendinaga reservation or other nearby Native communities already knew of the cultural and individual significance of these sweat lodges. Many others including myself, however, only possessed a basic understanding of the lodges’ physical qualities, that small groups enter a domed hut where they remain for hours and endure the heat created by steaming water on hot rocks. We soon realized the inadequacies of such a definition, as Anataras, an Elder who has completed hundreds of sweats, explained the social and spiritual qualities of the ceremony.

When entering the lodge, every participant immediately becomes “equal, valued and respected,” as they “push themselves past comfort.” While sweats are often segregated

by gender based on tradition, the social divisions created by such concepts as age and social status are abandoned in favour of absolute support for one’s peers. The sweat lodge itself and its ceremonies represent one of the most apparent connections between the Mohawk People and their land. Their land provides them with the resources necessary for the sweat: saplings and animal skins creating the dome structure; timber producing the fire; water to create the steam and hydrate the participants; and the large rocks that are physically and symbolically central to the entire process. Anataras and Katsitsiase spoke most of the significance of these rocks, emphasizing their roles as grandfathers in this ceremony and in all other aspects of Mohawk culture. They acknowledge these rocks as both “teachers and guards” before summarizing their cultural significance. “Before people, these rocks were the original of the creator, without their existence we forget why we are here and all of the ways that we are connected.”

Spiritually, the sweats provide an opportunity to “take one’s pain and turn it around to give them a good heart and mind, to nurture other people through love.” The various rounds of the sweat, measured by time and cycles of steam and identified by such terms as “thanksgiving,” “healing,” and “warrior,” exemplifying the extent of cleansing undertaken by the participants. If at any point in the sweat it becomes difficult to breathe, participants are advised to lay down on the ground, or on “Mother” as it is described by Katsitsiase. This use of language, which is generally explained by Mohawks as being vital in “understanding who we are,” demonstrates another representation found in nature, this time of a nurturer. Both Katsitsiase and Anataras, however, emphasised this vitality of language when questioned by participants about the significance of ascribing words of symbolic meaning to physical forms.

This spiritual purpose also connects with the representations found in the physical elements of the sweat lodge. The sweat encourages its participants to exceed their individual limits and rid themselves of physical, mental and emotional negativities. This creates a void within the participant and a feeling of emptiness that creates an individual desire to “reach back to the grandfather to bring back something that used to be part of them.” This “something” includes the act of remembering, while also extending to acknowledgement of the suffering endured by one’s ancestors. Anataras explains that it is at this point that individuals become most spiritually dependent on nature and the cultural representations it holds. These individuals must instead “look for positives to fill that emptiness and will themselves to change.”

Each of the aforementioned encounters with nature represent the connection between humans and their land, the connection between humans and their ancestors and the connection between humans and their inner thoughts of remembrance and acknowledgement.

### **Conclusion**

It is only in reflecting upon the information acquired in this Aboriginal Awareness class that I became aware of the true value of the historical and legal research that I had already completed and that I had begun to think was irrelevant to my ethnography. I had wrongly believed that the human-land relationship that I had intended to study was presently based in political discourse. The words of the Mohawk Elders, however, provided the realisation that this relationship was primarily based in history and tradition through the means of storytelling and ceremonial action. Such storytelling and ceremony simultaneously demonstrated in the delivery of the Thanksgiving Address and reflections upon

conducting a sweat. The relationship the Mohawk People sought to protect was not founded first in good agricultural practices, ethical actions to prevent pollution, or any other physical demonstration of protection of the quality of their land, nor was it about preserving the quantity of their land. While the aforementioned actions would naturally occur, the relationship they exemplified prioritised above all else a foundation of pure respect for their land. Storytelling and ceremonial action, as already noted, communicated this priority and foundation of respect.

Through my encounter with Tyendinaga Mohawk Elders and other members of the community, I recognised that respect for the Mohawk People best manifests itself through the notion of reciprocity. This is intrinsic to the concept of stewardship, a term that had dominated the planning and research for my ethnography. The concept of stewardship, however, developed considerably throughout this entire process. To begin, I had limited myself to the common definition of the term, “the conducting, supervising, or managing of something” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). The greatest development in my ethnography occurred when I realised the limits and inadequacies of this definition. Stewardship for the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte is not solely their actions to preserve the quality of their territory. Conversely, it is the physical and emotional power provided by their land, through such ceremonies as sweats and storytelling, that allows the Mohawks to continue to preserve their territory. Reciprocity encompasses the entirety of the relationship between the Mohawks and their land, and it is the symbolic representations manifested by this land through which the relationship is continually encouraged and maintained.

This reciprocal dynamic between humans and nature is not unique to Mohawks

or other Native communities, as most individuals commonly demonstrate consideration for their environment. Instead, the unique quality is in how the value of reciprocity is preserved with each additional generation. In much of the developed world, where agricultural work is increasingly uncommon, an individual's greatest reminder of their reciprocal relationship with nature emerges in advertising and direct education. One must only look to elementary and secondary school walls and classrooms to see recycling posters or attend science classes discussing environmental footprints. This type of education is seemingly void of cultural significance, instead relying on the notion that individuals must think of future consequences when considering their interactions with the environment. The Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte understand and support this emphasis on forward thinking, yet the community also recognises the past in their considerations. For them, nature represents remnants of their ancestors, whose spirit and wisdom must be treasured. Thus, preserving their environment extends to a preservation of their culture.

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