An Introduction to Tribal Sovereignty in the Hudson Valley

Mohican Allyship Committee, Town of Copake, NY

We live in a place with deep Indigenous history. The hills, waterways, and valleys of Columbia County sit within the ancestral homeland of the Mohican people—known today as the **Stockbridge-Munsee Community, Band of Mohican Indians,** a federally recognized tribal nation now based in Wisconsin. Their Mohican and Lenape homeland jurisdiction—encompassing the entire Hudson River Valley of New York (Lake Champlain to Manhattan) and east to the Connecticut River Valley—and their connection to this land stretches back thousands of years. As interest in Indigenous history grows in our area, a few foundational concepts can help us be thoughtful participants in conversations that genuinely matter to Indigenous communities.

What Is Tribal Sovereignty?

Tribal sovereignty is the inherent authority of a tribal nation to govern itself, determine its citizenship, and speak for its own history and cultural heritage. Federal recognition—the U.S. government's formal acknowledgment that a tribe exists as a political entity—requires demonstrated continuous political community, governance, and accountability stretching from historical times to the present. That continuity standard matters because without it, any group could incorporate tomorrow, adopt a tribal name, and begin claiming authority over another people's heritage, remains, and sacred sites. Continuous political community is what ensures that when ancestral remains are unearthed during a construction project, or when an institution wants to return artifacts, or when someone offers "land back," authority is given to the people who have governed and cared for that community across generations—not by whoever organized most recently or happens to be nearest. It's the difference between returning a family heirloom to the actual family and handing it to the first person from the neighborhood who shows up at the door.

It also means displacement cannot become its own justification. If physical presence and recent organization were enough to claim authority, then the very act of removing a people from their homeland would eventually transfer their sovereignty to whoever filled the vacuum. **The Mohican people's authority over their heritage survived their forceful removal, just as the people themselves survived it**.

In practice, a federally recognized tribe has legal standing to consult on historic preservation, protect burial sites, and participate in government-to-government relationships. The Stockbridge-Munsee Community's jurisdiction (which includes Mohican and Lenape homelands) extends across six states—from Lake Champlain to Manhattan, east to the Connecticut River Valley, and into portions of Vermont, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. **They are the only entity with the legal and ethical authority to consult on Indigenous heritage in our region, to accept the transfer of Indigenous artifacts, or to receive "land back" on behalf of the original people of this land**.

A Tribe Claims You — You Don't Claim a Tribe

One of the most important principles in Indigenous identity may feel unfamiliar to those of us raised in a culture that celebrates self-identification: a tribe claims its people; an individual does not claim a tribe. **Indigenous identity is a political and kinship relationship, maintained through generations of community connection and recognized governance.** Tribal citizenship is determined by each tribe according to its own criteria. No amount of personal research, family legend, DNA testing, or spiritual affinity can substitute for that relationship. Just as you cannot declare yourself a citizen of France without France's recognition, you cannot declare yourself a member of a tribal nation without that nation's acknowledgment.

To be clear, everyone has the right to explore their own ancestry and tell their own family story. But there is a line between telling your story and telling someone else's — and that line is crossed when an individual or organization — whatever its own identity claims — begins functioning as the Indigenous authority within another tribe's jurisdiction: telling the history of that tribe's homeland to local institutions, advising on cultural sites, accepting custody of artifacts or land that fall within a federally recognized tribe's ancestral territory, or becoming the default Indigenous voice in a region where a

sovereign tribal government holds legal authority. None of these activities require explicitly claiming to represent the tribe being displaced — the displacement and erasure happens through the activity itself.

The Visibility Challenge

Native peoples are among the most underrepresented populations in the United States. The Reclaiming Native Truth project—the largest public opinion research initiative ever conducted by and for Native peoples—found that most Americans have never personally interacted with a Native American person, and that forty percent did not believe Native people still exist. Crystal Echo Hawk (Pawnee), who led the research, concluded that invisibility and erasure represent the modern form of bias against Native people.

This invisibility is especially acute in places like ours. The Stockbridge-Munsee Community is headquartered in Wisconsin—about a thousand miles from the Hudson Valley homeland their ancestors were forced to leave through centuries of colonial dispossession. That distance means most **residents here will never encounter the Tribe's perspective on local history unless they actively seek it out**. There is no Tribal office down the road, no enrolled citizens at Town meetings, no sovereign voice correcting the record in real time. In a society where most people have never met a Native person, almost any claim to Indigeneity goes unchallenged.

Compare this with any European heritage. If someone in our community gets a detail wrong about German or Irish history, the sheer density of available perspectives—millions of people, living nations, robust media—provides a natural corrective. Indigenous peoples do not have that luxury. In our region, most people will encounter at most a single Indigenous perspective on local history. If that perspective differs from the Stockbridge-Munsee Community—the only tribal government with legitimate authority over the Native heritage of this place—there may be no readily available counterpoint. **The first voice people hear can easily become the only voice they hear**.

This is not anyone's fault—it is a structural condition created by centuries of displacement. But it means **our community has a particular responsibility to actively seek out and amplify the less visible, but only legitimate authority of Indigenous heritage in this place and the entire Hudson Valley: the Stockbridge-Munsee Community**. They have been actively closing the distance between themselves and their homelands: establishing a Tribal Historic Preservation Office that monitors projects across their ancestral territory, partnering with Williams College, contributing to exhibits like Mohican Miles, collaborating with the National Park Service, and maintaining engagement with sites like Papscanee Island and Monument Mountain. These efforts operate through formal sovereign channels—and they deserve our attention.

What Can Residents Do?

Go to the source. The Stockbridge-Munsee Community's website (mohican.com) has extensive historical information, and its Tribal Liaison, Sherry White, welcomes respectful inquiries.

Be curious about credentials. When someone speaks as a representative of an Indigenous people, it's reasonable to ask: which tribal nation recognizes them? Are they enrolled? These aren't rude questions—they're respectful ones.

Learn to distinguish between types of organizations. A federally recognized tribe is a sovereign government. A nonprofit or cultural group—no matter what it calls itself—is not. Vocabulary is a clue: legitimate community organizations use terms like "center" or "collective." Groups that adopt governmental language like "tribe" or "nation" without recognition may be overstepping.

Extend compassion in all directions. People who explore possible Indigenous ancestry are often driven by a genuine longing for connection to place and history. That impulse deserves respect. The work is to channel it in ways that strengthen—rather than undermine—the sovereignty of the people whose history draws us in.

Living in a place shaped by Indigenous history is a privilege that comes with responsibility—not the burden of guilt, but the invitation of awareness. The Mohican people's story is woven into every ridge and river of this landscape. Honoring that story well begins with recognizing who has the right to tell it.

To learn more: mohican.com • illuminative.org • rnt.firstnations.org • bia.gov • pretendians.com