

Understanding Sovereignty from a Myaamia cultural perspective and its relationship to tribal economic development

*Daryl Baldwin
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According to Cheyenne/Arapaho attorney Robert J. Little, “sovereignty in its simplest form means governmental powers over people and land”. There may be a legal basis for this statement, but it is somewhat unfortunate that the concept of sovereignty gets situated primarily within a legal tribal framework seen as the work of elected governments, the laws they create, and the businesses they conduct or support.

Three years ago I had the opportunity to ask a Potawatomi elder what sovereignty meant to him. This person was a native speaker and Potawatomi was his first language. When I asked what sovereignty meant to him he replied: “It’s who I am. I am sovereign”. This response took me by surprise since it didn’t reflect the legal definition I was more familiar with. I eventually interpreted his comment as meaning ‘the right to be who I am’, which reflects a notion of self-sovereignty.

I became intrigued as to why, when posed the question of defining sovereignty, he quickly responded from a self-sovereign perspective and did not consider the more common definition of self-governance that is associated with tribal sovereignty.

His response led me to realize that the notion of tribal sovereignty, generally defined as “governmental powers over people and land”, is a reflection of American ideas of ownership and power. These cultural qualities do not translate well to notions of ownership and power in the Myaamia community. Here lies the struggle in understanding how a concept like sovereignty can be interpreted from a Myaamia cultural perspective.

How does this translate to economic development? I will do my best to outline my own personal understanding for the basis of further discussion. First, I think we have to acknowledge a distinct difference between Myaamia culture and American culture for the purpose of this discussion.

America has a strong doctrine for individual rights designed to protect its citizens from potential inequalities that can emerge through governmental and/or social power. In traditional Myaamia society, chiefs never had the power to create inequalities; they could only influence village decision-making. Therefore, individual rights within a Myaamia social structure were basic human rights that were never threatened by the power of leadership. Leadership only existed at the will of the people and was based on community service, which required humility and non-controlling behaviors. In other words, the potential for governmental abuse over people was not possible in Myaamia villages by the very nature of leadership.

These differences in power organization come into conflict when the Myaamia were forced to exist under an American-imposed form of tribal sovereignty, which attempts to create a larger social power structure over the people and the lands they dwell on. When the U.S. government imposed constitutions upon tribes through the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), it forced tribes to organize and create new group laws based on conformity through government and legal channels. When an American citizen does not conform to the laws of the state or nation that person is often punished into submission. This same kind of enforcement is beginning to emerge in the Myaamia community and it conflicts with traditional notions of self-sovereignty.

Order within the Myaamia community was historically maintained through group ethics that were not directly enforced but instead suggested through stories, elder input, and the ability of the individual to solve his/her own issues in response to communal responsibility. Myaamia motivations for life and living are to seek knowledge aiding in the lifelong quest to understand 'how to be' in an ever changing world. If a person could not live within the group's ethics then that person was banned from the community. This was the worst possible form of overt punishment.

Individuals could settle their own disputes unless the violation affected the entire group and required group input. If individuals were not in agreement with their own communal ethics or beliefs, they were free to move to another village where they were more accepted. There was no need for 'group sovereignty' like what exists today and there were no "governmental powers over people and land." Leaders did not control their people and the people did not control the land. Leadership roles were primarily oratory vehicles for communicating group feelings and thoughts to others and preserving group knowledge.

In Myaamia the notion of 'work' was historically tied to the activities of harvesting and games-of-chance. These were the primary ways in which a village obtained what they needed on a daily basis. Every functioning nation feeds itself. This is why our modern words *miihkimoni* 'work' and *miihkintiikaani* 'a casino' are formed from the basic root *miihkim*- 'harvest' and *miihkintii*- 'play a game-of-chance'. I do not believe that our ancestors would have tied their identity just to berry picking or playing moccasin game, and so today we do not draw our identity from the businesses we are engaged in. These businesses are how we feed and care for ourselves. We may express culture through our businesses but the businesses themselves are not 'who we are'. This creates a difficult situation for our tribal leaders because for the most part they are elected to conduct the business of the day and to protect our group sovereignty, neither of which is wholly of our design. So their individual identity as Myaamia must be consciously maintained in addition to the daily business that consumes most of their time.

The Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, as a legal entity, is the organizational outcome of these historic changes in the way we live. This legal framework, called a tribe, is

also a foreign concept and is reflected in the reality that we have no word for tribe in our language. The danger in this transformation from a communally-based self-sovereign people to a modern sovereign tribal government with citizenship rolls and enforced laws is that tribal members now have a means to draw their ethnicity from the 'tribal entity' and no longer need their cultural heritage to be considered legally Myaamia. This transition has been shown to happen more quickly when a tribal community loses its role in youth education as a response to cultural and linguistic oppression and completely buys into tribal sovereignty as the 'law of the land and people'. Without a means to transfer cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, tribal members soon lose cultural fluency and begin to replace their ethnicity with either an inter-tribal culture construct (pow-wows, stomp dances and gourd dances) or to identify themselves as Myaamia based on enrollment and kinship ties to ancestors to whom the younger generation no longer see themselves as culturally connected.

So what is sovereignty? Well, it depends on which culture is defining it. As Myaamia people we have to respond to an American form of sovereignty because we are heavily influenced by it, and our modern economy depends on our ability to work with it. But if we lose the ability to understand the difference, we stand to lose the knowledge of maintaining our traditional notion of self-sovereignty and the cultural benefits derived from it. The balance between that which is imposed upon us and that which we identify with as uniquely ours is the challenge of our community and tribal leaders today. The solution is to know the difference for the sake of making good decisions, rather than choosing one form of sovereignty over another. Both exist and both are real to us, but how we use them is a matter of knowing the difference and the appropriate use as we build community infrastructure that can survive in the twentyfirst century.

It stands to reason that we don't have a word for tribal sovereignty in our language, but we can clearly express self-sovereignty: Charles Trowbridge witnessed this in 1824 when he heard two Miami men repeating to each other *iišinaakosiaani iišinaakosiaani* 'I am who I am'. I'll bet there is a similar expression in Potawatomi.