

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Sovereignty and Symbol: Indian-White Conflict at Ganienkeh. By Gail H. Landsman.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/70h271j0>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 12(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Sutton, Imre

**Publication Date**

1988

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

In December, 1870, Poole left the Lakotas, not without sympathy or respect for them. He also took with him the realization that the native people would fight to save their customs.

Despite the agent's poor understanding of Lakota culture, and the undercurrents of racism and paternalism, *Among the Sioux of Dakota* offers valuable examples of the problems facing the corps of inexperienced men who were sent out to Indian people battling the first shock waves of forced social change. Very few Indian agents preserved their experiences for posterity; thus, Poole's memoir is exceptional for that reason alone. Furthermore, it is the only book source for writing the history of the Whetstone Agency. Finally, the reader may find interesting comparisons and contrasts in James McLaughlin's *My Friend the Indian* (1910), and *McGilycuddy, Agent: A Biography of Dr. Valentine T. McGilycuddy* (1941) by Julia B. McGilycuddy.

Catherine Price  
University of Oklahoma

**Sovereignty and Symbol: Indian-White Conflict at Ganienkeh.**  
By Gail H. Landsman. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988. 239 pp., maps, illus. \$19.95 Cloth.

In 1977, near the Canadian border in upper New York State, a faction of the Mohawk Indian Nation and a party of officials headed by the state of New York negotiated a settlement that established the Turtle Island Trust. Thus ended a long period of conflict and mediation leading to the creation of a small reserve known as Ganienkeh. The story of Ganienkeh deals with land and the territorial heritage of the Mohawks who claim much of upper New York and adjacent Vermont. The specifics of Ganienkeh may be new, but the genre of events leading to it has been repeated in other confrontations over land among the Iroquois and other native Americans. One needs only recall Wounded Knee and Alcatraz.

Ganienkeh is the story of land restoration, but as anthropologist Landsman points out (page 72), "The struggle for land at Ganienkeh is both a return to the past and a promise of a future as the Mohawk Nation. Past and future, sovereignty and land,

are thus all inextricably linked, and their intertwined meanings provide a basis for Mohawk action in the dispute." It is not Landsman's chosen task to write a history of the establishment of Ganienkeh; readers are directed to other studies. Instead, she focuses her attention on the symbols of that dispute and thus explores the methodology of symbolic anthropology. Of course, a certain amount of factual data has been reported—in fact, in a chronology of the dispute and mediation—, but the discussion really deals with the interpretive frameworks of two basic groups—protagonists and antagonists, that is, Indians and non-Indians in upper New York State.

This volume contributes to the literature on several fronts—its focused curiosity on symbols adds to a small but significant body of writings, especially those that have advanced the theories of Victor Turner and others; the discussion of mediation also contributed to another corpus of scholarship where mediation has sought to resolve conflicts between tribes and non-Indians as over land and water rights, treaty rights and access to sacred sites. Moreover, the volume contributes importantly to the resurgence of writings on the Iroquois. Finally, this study belongs to a now growing literature on Indian land claims. In format, it is straightforward. Using a chronological approach to the dispute, Landsman focuses on the set of events and the interpretive and media frameworks of that dispute and ultimately evaluates the relationship between symbols and political mobilization in the conflict. There are useful appendices—the Ganienkeh Manifesto, a joint statement by then Secretary of State (New York) Cuomo and Mohawk leader Kakwirakeron, and the Turtle Island Trust agreement. Additionally, the volume contains two maps and the spirited political cartoons of Mohawk artist Karoniaktajeh (Louis Hall).

As instruments of expression, communication, knowledge or control, symbols, according to anthropologists and others working in this arena, are said to make it possible to abstract from reality with some end in view. The quest is for core symbols of a culture or ethnicity. In the Indian field, we may speak of treaties, "Civilized Indians," or public ceremonies; land, of course, is a fairly universal core symbol. To the Mohawk, the meanings of land, future generations, traditional government, according to Landsman, "are not representations of any one meaning at

different levels of inclusiveness, nor are they different, or unrelated meanings that happen to appear together during the dispute . . . they bear relationship to each other as components of the interpretive framework of sovereignty. . . . The symbols used to represent the meanings (shooting incidents, treaties) may or may not change through time. . . , but the interpretive framework remains the same" (page 43). At the same time, another set of symbols can be identified for the white community; here it has been the upstate-downstate division of politics in New York and the public symbols of the whites derive meaning in terms of that division. Whites contend, for example, that the Ganienkeh Mohawks were not "really Indians," and they rejected a state-supported "double-standard of justice." Through various symbols and the attention the media gave certain events surrounding these symbols—such as the incidental but regrettable shooting of a child—Landsman is able to portray the view and position taken by both sides before, during and subsequent to mediation. In fact, toward the end of the volume she has expectations that other scholars will find the approach useful in field research on disputes. As she argues (page 186), "If we look to resolve a dispute through our understanding of only one set of participants, we may run the risk of leaving untouched the fundamental motivating factors of the dispute." I would note too that studies of so-called "Third Parties" in litigation over former Indian lands demonstrate how weakly perceived the positions on both sides are, especially of a contemporary title holder to land acquired through a long title chain and for whom the current controversy is not of their doing.

Underlying her motives for developing the book, Landsman contends that symbols serve in political struggles, but we rarely understand "the process by which symbols actually effect results. . . ." (page 107). We describe ideological systems, draw parallels to provide explanations, but "by tracing the actual links between symbol use and mobilization in the Ganienkeh dispute, however, we can examine the process of the political use of symbols, and can eliminate some of the vagueness of which symbolic anthropology has so often been accused" (page 107). While I am not qualified to adjudge the success of her treatment of symbols, I can evaluate the quality of the research and the long task of interviewing at least two factions at two different sites where the

dispute was enacted. Landsman carefully articulates, for example, a classification for several events, such as breach, crisis, redressive, etc., and also provides specific incidents that relate to symbols—e.g., the takeover at Moss Lake, the shooting incidents, the barricade of Stark Road (to demonstrate sovereignty), etc. She then analyzes these phases from both viewpoints. It was apparent throughout that white opposition had been strong; local residents had felt disenfranchised, for their views did little to influence state negotiations.

Landsman reviews her methodology critically as part of her conclusions. She found that Mohawk 'actors' were neither carrying out the norms of the white society nor merely enacting traditional norms. "Rather Mohawk and white actors alike consciously manipulated symbols in the media they controlled, often changing both symbols and meanings for their own purposes. These purposes . . . were constrained by a consistent framework. . . ." (pages 178-79). She reminds us too that the history of Iroquois political activism is long and Ganieneh is but a phase, yet Ganieneh represents a symbol not just of land but of sovereignty. In this context, her findings have wide application in the struggle, for example, to gain some land restoration within aboriginal territory, especially incident to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. Despite the grant of land to these Mohawk people, the underlying issue of sovereignty, however, remains unresolved. While the Turtle Island Trust is both symbolic and legal, the Indians by assenting to it never disclaimed sovereignty over much of New York nor did the state and federal governments officially acknowledge a tribal claim to such area.

*Imre Sutton*

California State University, Fullerton

**Historical Dictionary of North American Archaeology.** Edited by Edward B. Jelks and Juliet C. Jelks. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1988. 736pp. \$95.00

Unless you are a lexicologist, a request such as, "Would you review a dictionary for us?" is not likely to generate a positive