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The Mohegan Way:  
Thriving in this Modern World

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Summary: While running the Mohegan Sun casino has caused the Mohegan Tribe to lose bits of sovereignty, this is insignificant to the benefits provided to the Mohegans, the local communities surrounding the casino, and the State of Connecticut. In fact if the casino had not been built, it is very likely that the Mohegan tribe would only be a small remnant of what it is today without its federal recognition and with its members dispersed and isolated.

## **I. Background**

According to the Mohegan's oral history, their narrative begins at creation, when the earth and all its inhabitants were created by the Great Spirit. The Wolf Clan was one of the earliest tribes to settle in upstate New York, and then a group of them migrated to lower Connecticut. The seventeenth century was a critical time period for the Native Americans in the region. Rapidly expanding European colonies created competition for resources, and foreign diseases brought in by the colonialists ravaged the Pequot Tribe (“Mohegan Indians”). At the time of European contact the Pequots and Mohegans were one tribe. The Pequot leader disliked the Europeans and wanted to distance the tribe from them, while the Mohegans wanted to establish a close relationship with the settlers. As a result, they broke off from the main tribe and established the Mohegan Tribe along the Thames River in Connecticut. The Mohegans even helped the Europeans to defeat the Pequot in the ensuing Pequot War (“Mohegan Tribe”). During the following years, the Mohegans survived off the land through hunting and cultivating corn, squash, beans, fruits, and nuts. However, as it became harder to survive off the land due to the colonist’s encroachment, they survived by selling a majority of their land to the British (“Mohegan Indians”). By 1790, the Mohegan Tribe consisted of a mere 2300 acres and 200 members living in eastern Connecticut. However, in 1861 the state of Connecticut seized the majority of the remaining unoccupied land, and the Mohegans no longer owned any of their ancestral land. This marked a drastic loss of Mohegan culture, and the tribe quickly began to disappear. In 1904 the last fluent speaker of the Mohegan language died, and in the 1910 census there were only 22 listed Mohegans living in Eastern Connecticut (“Mohegan History”).

During the 1970s, the tribe began to rebuild. However, as a landless people with few members, they were not federally recognized. If not for the help of foreign investors, the tribe

could have eventually disappeared completely as members continued to be forced to integrate into western society. 1992 marked the beginning of the development of the Mohegan Sun casino when Slavic Suites Inc., LMW Investments of Connecticut, and RHJ Development proposed the idea of developing a casino with the Mohegans. These three investment corporations formed Trading Cove Associates. This conglomerate provided the Mohegan Tribe with the attorneys, advisers, and financial support necessary to gain federal recognition as a sovereign state as well as gain back some of their land. Finally, in March of 1995, the Mohegans gained federal recognition, and on October 12, 1996 the Mohegan Sun resort and casino opened in Uncasville, Connecticut along the Thames River. By 2000 the Trading Cove Associates had given complete control of the Mohegan Sun over to the tribe, and by 2014 all gross revenue will belong to the tribe (“History of Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority”). While the establishment of the casino is a turning point in the tribe's history, it did come at a cost to their sovereignty.

In order to discuss the idea of the waived sovereignty of the tribe, it is quintessential to begin with the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, a federal law that passed in 1988 that laid down the jurisdictional framework for the regulation of tribal casinos. It places different forms of gambling into three separate classes, each with varying degrees of regulation. In order for a tribe to conduct class II gaming, the particular class II game must be allowed in their state. The state and the tribe must negotiate a compact allowing the particular class II games and establish means of regulating it, and the tribe must adopt a gaming ordinance that the Chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission has approved. The IGRA's purpose is to provide tribes with a foundation from which to be able to begin gaming, help tribes become self-sufficient, promote tribes economic development, promote the development of strong tribal governments, provide a basis to shield them from organized crime, and make sure the gaming operations are honest and

fair to everyone. The IGRA also promotes growth of the tribe's infrastructure and economic wellbeing as well as that of local communities near the tribe and casino. It established strict rules by which Native American tribes were allowed to allocate their funds. Enacted in 1988, this federal law mandates that casino funds can only be employed in one of the five following ways: to promote economic development in the tribe, to fund tribal government programs and operations as well as local government agencies, to provide for the general welfare of its members, to fund local government agencies, or to donate to charitable organizations. Thus, the casino's net revenues can only go towards benefiting tribal and local communities and charitable organizations. Casinos have a variety of ways they can impact the tribal and local community such as providing jobs, investing in community organizations and infrastructure, increasing tourism, increased city and state funds due to taxes on casino revenue, etc.

In order to truly understand the effect of the casino on the Mohegan Tribe, this paper utilizes a triangulation research method as well as employing both primary and secondary sources. Using a content analysis of the tribal and casino websites and social media, I will attempt to unveil the relationship between the Mohegan Tribe and their casino as well as how this relationship effects the tribal culture. In order to see the extent of the waived sovereignty that the Mohegan have given up in order to run a casino, I will analyze state and federal mandates about gaming, licensing, compacts, taxation, and accounting. And finally, in order to get a grip on the economic impacts of the casino on the tribe and the surrounding community, I have researched economic case studies and articles as well as conducted primary research via an email questionnaire to the tribal council.

## **II. Findings**

### **A. Culture**

A lot of information can be discovered by analyzing social media, in this case the relationship between the casino and the tribe. The Mohegan Tribe has no social media besides a website. This website is full of their culture, heritage, government, tribal issues that have happened over the years, section on famous Mohegans throughout history, and pages on outreach and cultural restoration projects the tribe is involved in. These include an entire page on the tribe's dedication to educating America on tribal history and issues by sending representatives across the United States to give free seminars, lectures, and classes. The website stresses the importance of the tribe's restoration projects and monuments which include the following: the Mohegan Church restoration, the Dolbeare Burial Ground and the Ashbow Burial Ground restoration, the Mohegan language restoration project, the restoration and expansion of their wigwam festival, and the Pipe Carrier Ernest Gilman Memorial. They also have an entire page dedicated to telling the tribe's positive impact on the environment and surrounding community. It also mentions several charitable contributions such as their ten million dollars donation to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Under the government tab there is a secondary tab for tribal enterprises, and this tab links you to a page dedicated to talking about the Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino. This page emphasizes just how much effort the tribe placed on making sure that it followed every federal law and regulation required to establish the casino. There is also a press room which contains an archive of the tribes past newsletters as well as a cultural outlet page that invites members of the public to take part in certain tribal activities such as the wigwam festival, the welcoming ceremony, and cultural classes.

Unlike the tribe that only has a website, the Mohegan Sun has a multiple form of social media. Their Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube channel seem to be their dominant and most popular forms of social media. All of these forms are used effectively to advertise the casino, events, and specials. None of their posts mention their Indian heritage, and all of them seem comparable to those of any commercial casino. Common elements are upcoming performing artist, parties, special events, and pictures/stories of the day's big winners. In fact, the website seems to have absolutely no Native American influence but instead is set up to appeal to their customers. There are only two minute mentions of the casino's association to the tribe. The first is on their about us page, where it briefly mentions that it is run by the Mohegan Tribe. The second is a small link to the tribe's website at the bottom right-hand corner of the page.

The casino has no direct references to the Mohegan Tribe; however, it does via the architecture and interior decoration of the building. While the casino has all the lights, whistles, feel, and luxury of a modern Vegas casino, that does not imply it neglects its Native American heritage. It incorporates a lot of natural materials such as wood in order to show off the natural beauty of the earth. Everything from the artwork on the walls to the designs on the carpet and floor panels represent the tribe's history and beliefs. Interestingly enough there is even a booklet for sale in the gift shop that explains the meanings of all the Native American elements in the casino (Burton). More significantly, there are two major features in the casino that display its heritage. The Wombi Rock is a thirty foot tall crystal mountain located under a large fiber optic planetarium which serves to honor the earth and the universe as well as remind visitors of the wonders of creation. The second is a fifty-five foot tall indoor waterfall named Taughannick Falls, which represents a treacherous point during the Mohegan's migration (Uriarte, Biggs).

The Mohegan Tribe's cultural expression is not limited to just their casino. They also displays their culture via the Tantaquidgeon Museum, which they were able to reopen and renovate thanks to casino funds. This museum serves as a place for Mohegans to reconnect to their roots and history via the vast collection of artifacts in the museum as well as to share these connections with interested outsiders (Uriarte, Briggs).

While the casino and the tribe do have more of a business relationship on their social media, the tribe does in fact use the casino as a means to portray its story. Some of the casino funds run their museum and ten million dollars of it was donated by the tribe to the Smithsonian's National museum of the Native American in order to fund the development of future exhibits that help portray their story. While running a casino and the resulting revenue has enabled the tribe to do this, it has come at the cost of federal and state regulation.

## **B. Policy**

As mentioned before, the IGRA is the main federal regulation on the Mohegan tribe. The IGRA requires the tribe to use a large portion of the casinos net revenues "to fund essential tribal services such as education, law enforcement, tribal courts, economic development, and improvements in infrastructure" (Harvey). Also, since the Mohegans have set up per-capita payments for its tribal members, the IGRA also required that the tribe publish a document detailing their allocation of funds. For the Mohegans this entails a ten page document that thoroughly details how the tribe's funds will be allocated according to the strict guidelines set up by the IGRA (Harvey). The federal government does require the casino employees to pay income tax, and the annual per-capita payments to the tribal members are also subjected to federal income tax ("A Partnership Marked by Success").

The IGRA requires the state and casino to form a compact in order for class II gaming to be allowed. The Mohegan-Connecticut Compact is basically a large list of regulations that the state is imposing on the Mohegan Sun. It contains a list of allowed class II and III games. It stipulates that only people twenty-one years and older can gamble in the casino. The tribe must waive sovereignty to personal injury suits, and all employees must be licensed by the Connecticut Gambling Agency and the state must have access to all of these records. Finally, among many more things it gives state officers equal authority in the reservation as tribal officers. The state also mandates the Mohegan Tribe fund and operate a gambling addiction hotline, host a page on their website dedicated to diagnosing gambling addiction, as well as printing gambling warnings or receipts throughout the gaming parts of the casino. The compact also established a 25% tax on the casinos slot machine revenues (“Mohegan-Connecticut Compact”). It is evident that these regulations are in fact infringing on the rights of a “sovereign” nation. However, along with these regulation comes a lot of economic benefit to the tribe.

### **C. Economics**

One of the first major impacts of the casino on the Mohegan community can be seen in retrospect of the tribe's history. As mentioned before, the Mohegan tribe began to petition for Federal recognition in 1978; however, their petition was rejected in 1989. The tribe was finally able to gain federal recognition in 1994 with the financial support, advising, and attorneys of a foreign investment firm known as Trading Cove Associates under the stipulation that they open a casino.

In terms of assets, the Mohegans have invested solely in their casino, slowly building up the Mohegan Sun’s amenities and expanding its gaming floor. Over the past 7 years, they have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in order to make their casino a world class destination.

As a result of constant expansion and investment, the Mohegan Sun currently contains three separate casinos, a sports arena, two theaters, huge convention rooms, luxury retail shopping, a four star hotel, 39 dining options, a luxury spa, and an eighteen-hole golf course (Burton and mohegansun.com). Not only do all of these bring the tribe more revenue, but they also attract more visitors who as a result bring more money to the casino. By 2009, the casino was grossing in excess of 1.82 billion dollars. As a result of this great success, the tribe has gained contracts to run casinos in other states on non-tribal land. So far, they have announced that they plan to take over the Concord Resort in Catskills, New York and develop a new casino, takeover the management of the Resorts Casino Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey (tribal response).

Since the opening of the casino in 1996, the casinos revenues have gone a long way in improving the Mohegan community as well as the lives of its members. It has funded construction and operation of the Mohegan fire and police departments as well as the tribal government and its buildings. It funds the Mohegan Boards of Education which provides scholarships for tribal youths as well as provide them the opportunity to go to DC for the Native American Youth Summit. The casino revenues also fund the Mohegan Tribal Housing Authority, which offers tribal members rental assistance, home loans, and in some cases free housing. Quintessential to sustainability, it funds the tribal Utility Authority and the Land Preservation and Planning Committee which manage and develop the reservations infrastructure and land including the water and power grids in order to keep pace with the rapid growth of the local area. This money has also established medical clinics as well as the Tribal Health and Human services Department which provides health care, day care, and even fuel and energy assistance to tribal members (<http://www.mohegan.nsn.us>). As a result of the casinos success, the tribe is able to give out an annual net percentage based per-capita payment to each of its members which was

just under \$30,000 in 2009. Along with the vast amount of casino and community jobs available, the tribal members are able to live with a rather large financial safety net and a relatively high job security (King, Padua).

The Mohegan Sun has had a large impact on the local community. In response to my asking them for specific examples detailing their impact on the local community, I received a long, thorough response. According to this email, the Mohegan Sun currently employs around 10,000 non-native employees. The casino pays thirty percent higher wages than the industry standard and is one of the largest employers in Connecticut. It has also indirectly created 24,000 jobs in Connecticut as a result of its activities (tribal response). In fact due to the Mohegan's compact with the state of Connecticut, monthly, it gives twenty-five percent of its slot machine revenues to the state (“A Partnership Marked by Success” and tribal response). According to the tribe, since their opening, the casino has given approximately \$2.5 billion in slot revenue to the state, \$4 billion in wages and benefits to employees, and given over \$18 million to local charitable organizations (tribal response). As a result as the boost to the local economy, the town of Montville boasts on its website of its excellent education system, booming local business, and the fact that its strong relationship with the Mohegan Tribe: “Our closest and most prominent neighbor is the Mohegan Tribal Reservation and its renowned resort casino. A strong relationship with the Mohegan Tribe benefits both of our growing communities” ([www.townofmontville.org](http://www.townofmontville.org)). While the tribe has had a large impact on the local community as dictated by the IGRA, it has also done further good to the community via charitable donations.

The Mohegan Tribe emphasizes its charitable donations on local child programs. It has given funds to local high schools to make physical improvements, upgrades, and buy new school

buses. The tribe sponsors multiple youth programs and also made a sizable donation to the Lawrence and Memorial Hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care unit (tribal response).

The Mohegan Tribe not only donates to local community organizations and programs but also to other non-local organizations. It has donated over ten million dollars to the Smithsonian's National Museum of the Native American Indian. Also, due to the tribe's great success, they have been able to donate seventy-five percent of their Tribal Priority Allocation funds they receives from the Bureau of Indian affairs to Indian tribes across the nation (tribal response and [www.mohegan.nsn.us](http://www.mohegan.nsn.us)).

### **III. Conclusion**

The federal government regulations through the IGRA and the state government regulations through the compacts have all infringed upon the Mohegan's sovereignty. As a sovereign nation, they should not have to pay taxes, be regulated, or have to jump through hoops in order to run and operate a casino. However, in order to carry out gambling and more importantly gain the funds to re-establish their tribe and reinvigorate their culture, the Mohegans were willing to compromise part of their sovereignty. On their website the Mohegans say it best themselves, "As a sovereign nation, the Mohegan Tribe independently determines its own fate and governs its own people and affairs. . . . Over the years, the United States and Connecticut governments have also defined their relationships to the Mohegan Tribal Nation. While these definitions do not change the fundamental independence of the Tribe, they have become part of the provisions that other political entities use as the basis for their interactions with us."

The Mohegans made the most out of their losses in sovereignty by building one of the largest and most profitable Native American casinos in the United States. In fact, they have been so successful that they even have plans to take over three more casinos in the near future. By

taking an aggressive business model and investing hundreds of millions diversifying their assets into a large resort destination, they have not only economically bolstered the tribe but also the local communities around the casino as well.

While it is true that the casino has helped improve the lives of many people and help establish a sustainable community, it is also true that it has done much more. The Mohegan Sun Resort and Casino has saved the Mohegan Tribe from quite possibly disappearing from the face of the earth. With no more native speakers, the inability to attain federal recognition as a tribe, and no ancestral land; the tribe was slowly disbanding as members continued to die and/or move away. The casino gave the tribe the resources to fight for Federal recognition, to fight for portions of their land and establish a reservation, and to establish a self-governing sovereign nation. It is evident from the tribe's history that not only is sovereignty a major desire of the tribe but also that the casino is the largest effector in increasing the tribe's sovereignty. The casino's money has also allowed the tribe to reclaim its lost culture, landmarks, and language, and educate the world about environmental and Native American issues. Evidenced by the tribe's website, the Mohegan Tribe is proud of its casino and what it has enabled them to become. The casino revenues go directly into the tribe to restore, revitalize, and expand its culture, reestablish and expand the Mohegan community, and to develop and bolster the local community. Future scholars might study how the communication between the tribe and the casino changes over the years on their websites as well as the casinos aesthetic connection to the tribe in the future.

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