
Gregory O. Gagnon, Culture and Customs of the Sioux Indians.

Christina Dokou



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10843>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10843

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Christina Dokou, "Gregory O. Gagnon, Culture and Customs of the Sioux Indians.", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 1, Online since 22 June 2015, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10843> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.10843>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Gregory O. Gagnon, Culture and Customs of the Sioux Indians.

Christina Dokou

REFERENCES

Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8032-4454-2.

Gagnon's book reflects his long experience as a professor and college administrator, meaning that it is a textbook case of a college textbook for an introductory course in Native American Studies. Framed between an extensive introductory chronological chart and a final set of tables of facts and figures, followed by a glossary of Sioux terms and a brief though informative annotated bibliography, the book's contents are clearly divided into education-oriented units comprising a pretty comprehensive portrait of the *Oyate*, "the People," or, as they became known, the Sioux. The purpose of this book, according to the author, is to convey such a portrait systematically by meeting four major challenges: first, translating adequately the language of what Spivak would call "the subaltern" into a discourse that will reveal without misrepresenting; secondly, "conveying a sense of the constancy of cultural change and diversity that characterizes the Sioux over the 700 years of their existence" (viii), something that would combat white stereotyping and massing; thirdly, paying homage to the "intensely spiritual" element in Sioux life in the face of a

mostly skeptical 21st-century audience; and fourthly, tracing the changes brought about by the “pragmatic adaptability” that “was also a continuing characteristic of Sioux societies” (viii) without giving the wrong impression that such flexibility meant the mutation of traditional Sioux culture beyond recognition.

In the introductory chapter, a handy summation of Sioux history and culture from “the Misty Past” to contemporaneity sets the main points of concern: the Sioux relation with its neighbors and white settlers through time and the particularities of the Sioux culture in its continuity and evolution. In classic lecture-style fashion, divided into brief, easy-to-read units containing many helpful summarizing lists, Gagnon introduces the three linguistic branches of the Siouan-speaking people, Lakota, Dakota and Nakota, showing how they came to be differentiated and located in specific areas of what is now USA and Canada; links them to their respective *tiyospaye* (the book’s preferred term to the inadequate “tribe”); offers a brief sketch of their political and civic structures centering around “The Seven Council Fires”; and does not fail to warn the presumed novice reader about the abundance of stereotypes concerning Native Americans in general and the Sioux in particular that s/he should carefully avoid in their reading.

The following two chapters, “Early Sioux History” and “Modern Sioux History,” Gagnon uses his skills as a history professor to offer a detailed account of historical events pertaining to the formation of the Sioux nation, from vague prehistory, encounters with other tribes (especially the long war with the Chippewa) and catastrophic clashes and treaties with the white settlers, to recent events such as the Trail of Broken Treaties and the second Wounded Knee in the 70s, as well as more recent developments in Native self-determination and the re-establishment of Native culture, politics and economy. Through this recounting—sometimes too neatly cause-and-effect ordered—Gagnon makes clear his thesis that, for the Natives, life in the reservations was tantamount to life in the colonies elsewhere (47), with all the physical and identity problems such an unequal relationship would entail: thus the Sioux are here entered into the classes of the globally dispossessed and seen from a post-colonialist perspective that would interest more than the aficionado of Native American Studies. Chapter Four deals with “Sioux Religion,” offering a number of readings

of relevant myths of cosmogony and charter function, while Chapter 5 deals with “Government and Economy,” the way the various *tiyospaye* are coordinated through their peace and war leaders and the Council of the Seven Fires, but also the ways that white governmental impositions and meddling often intervened disastrously on that decentralized model. The last three chapters, “Traditional Sioux Society,” “Sioux Customs” and “The Sioux and Contemporary Issues” reinforce points made in previous chapters about cultural matters, and also add further points about social structures and values: the first two of these chapters deal mostly with pre-reservation or even pre-settler traditions that changed little over time, such as class, gender and race ideas, kinship, arts and past-times, ceremonies, medical beliefs, and even recipes! The final chapter turns its attention to contemporary changes, post-reservation and, in fact, post-restoration (i.e., after the 1970s), at a time where Native Americans, having negotiated a new status of a nation-within-a-nation with the U.S. and Canada governments, are adapting to global economic realities with the establishment of casinos as main funding sources (70) for the reawakening of Native traditions and identity pride.

AUTHOR

CHRISTINA DOKOU

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens