

Exploring the Concept of Mitho Pimachesowin

Oral Traditions of the Woodland Cree (*Nihithawak*)  
in Northern Saskatchewan: Cultural Identity, Ways of  
Knowing, Language Revitalization, and Connections  
to the Land

Nehithāwi – Kiskethihtamiwin: Kayās Āchimowina  
Ekwa Āchithohkewina. Nihithowewin,  
Nihithawihtāwin Mena Mithopimāchihowin

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to introduce the significance of Oral Tradition among the Woodland Cree, *Nihithawak*, in Northern Saskatchewan. Storytelling and stories reinforce Cree world view, culture, language, knowledge, values, and sustainable ways of knowing and being. In contemporary times, Cree storytelling methodology is one of the main ways of passing on cultural teachings within families, communities, and schools. At one point in history, there was a deliberate attempt to destroy Cree culture and languages in Canada through colonization and the residential school system. There is now a resurgence to strengthen and restore Cree Oral Traditions through language revitalization efforts. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

**Abstract:** Keyāpich kayāsi – kiskethihtamiwin ihtakwan nihithowewinihk mena kisteyithitākwan. Itinowak okiskethetamowiniwāw kekakwe nisowanāchihtānowithiw kiskinwahamātowikamikohk. Māka kāwi mena ati pasikomakan oma nihithowewin machika mena nihithawi-kiskethihtamiwin.

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## Introduction

Storytelling and stories are a part of many cultures around the world. In this article, I share the significance of Woodland Cree *Nibithawak* Oral Traditions and teachings among Indigenous<sup>1</sup> Peoples who occupy Northern Saskatchewan, Canada. It is important to understand there are different types of storytellers and there are also different types of stories. Brightman (2007) has written about *Āachihokīwina* (acaohkiwina), “traditional Cree origin stories,” and *Āachimowina* (acimowina), “contemporary stories,” among the Woodland Cree. It is always problematic to translate Cree stories into the English language. So much is lost in the process.

As an educator and person of Cree heritage, I believe it is time to share our stories in our own ways and through multiple communication mediums. My intent is to draw attention to the value of Cree storytelling methodology and to the stories that reinforce Cree cultural identity, world view, ways of knowing, and connectedness to the land and natural world. In this article, I cite sources where I can and use Cree language terms throughout.

I am a member of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band located in Northern Saskatchewan on Treaty 6 Territory, and I come from a long line of traditional land users who occupy the region. We have a vibrant history that can be traced back to pre-contact times. I speak the Woodland Cree language and I have been an educator for many years. Storytelling and stories have always been a big part of my life. Indigenous orality has shaped my world view (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). I am privileged to have grown up at a time of great social change in our region. When I was born in 1965, the fur trade era was still in full swing. Families still lived on the land as they had for thousands of years. However, the semi-nomadic life was changing as people began to live in community settlements. Colonization had been in existence for about four centuries and residential schools had been set up to assimilate Indigenous people into the likeness of European settlers. It was not until the 1970s when First Nations across Canada began asserting their rights to control their education systems; and thus began a sweeping movement to restore Indigenous cultural life ways and languages in schools and places of higher learning.

The treaties that were signed in the 1800s in Canada were about living side by side with the newcomers. However, instead of an “Implementation Act,” as was passed in 2002,<sup>2</sup> the Indian Act was passed in 1876 to serve the imperialist and capitalist interests of European colonizers, which resulted in a massive systematic destruction of Indigenous cultures, languages, knowledge systems, ceremonies, and the traditional values that guide thinking and ways of being. Missionaries erected

churches in First Nations communities and some were adjacent to traditional ceremonial sites. The Anglican Church at Stanley Mission (80 km northeast of La Ronge) is a perfect example. Waiser (2016) explains that the “English priest [was sent] to oversee the establishment of a permanent mission. With Settee’s help in 1851, Hunt chose a favorite Cree gathering place on the north shore side of the Churchill River, known as *āmachiwispimowinibk* (shooting arrows uphill place)” (p. 372). This location was a gathering place that had been utilized for traditional spiritual ceremonies before a church was built there.

Residential schools began opening up across the country in the early to mid-nineteenth century and they were in operation for 150 years (Michell, 2015a; TRC, 2012, 2015). There were eighteen institutions in Saskatchewan alone that separated several generations of children from their families, communities, Nations, and Traditional Territories. Elders, cultural Knowledge Keepers, and traditional stories were not part of the school curriculum and children were punished for speaking their languages. Indigenous people were forced to convert to Christianity. Spiritual ceremonies were banned for several decades. Physical, psychological, and sexual abuse ran rampant. The impacts are multi-layered, beginning at the individual, and including the family, community, and societal levels. They are also multi-dimensional, severing the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of survivors. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC; www.trc.ca), on the history and impacts of residential schools, is about healing and restoring balance. More importantly, it is about restoring Indigenous world views, which reinforce connectedness, interdependence, and relationality with the land and natural world.

The Woodland Cree have always had their own ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogical practices that frame a complex knowledge system consisting of different strands and ways of knowing (Michell, 2005). The articulation of these larger frameworks are critical to authentic teaching and learning that go beyond surface understandings and toward a deeper level of Cree philosophical underpinnings. Curriculum theories have evolved in mainstream education opening doorways toward the development and implementation of Indigenous content in schools. For example, teacher education programs and universities rely on Elder and community involvement, and more and more Indigenous individuals are entering master’s and doctoral programs resulting in groundbreaking research and Indigenous-based materials and resources. While there are different ways of passing on knowledge, storytelling and stories remain central to the revitalization of Woodland Cree culture and the preservation of languages that are rooted in the northern landscape.

In modern society, we are continually socialized into thinking that Western science is the only legitimate way to seek answers in our quest for knowledge and

to explain events that we experience. However, this linear approach misinterprets, omits, or avoids the relationships that invariably exist, the rationale being that the variables are messy, unnecessary, or too complicated. On the other hand, Indigenous Knowledge incorporates variables, along with experiences and relationships, by including the language, senses, and customs in storytelling, which helps us to understand mysteries and to learn how to demystify questions by synthesizing how all things—animate and inanimate—are interconnected. Knowledge becomes more meaningful and significant because there is a direct relationship resonating from each experience. The Oral Tradition, in this sense, is practical, viable, and dynamic because it directly correlates to one's own experiences (King, 2013).

Many scientists are becoming more receptive to learning about and utilizing Indigenous Knowledge. Traditional Ecological Knowledge complements Western science. Some scientists, such as Knudtson and Suzuki (1992), argue there is a rich knowledge base among Indigenous Peoples that remains untapped. This wisdom is rooted within the rhythms of the planet and universe. Knudtson and Suzuki provide the following perspective:

Traditional native knowledge about the natural world tends to view all—or at least vast regions—of nature, often including the earth itself, as inherently holy rather than profane, savage, wild, or wasteland. The landscape itself, or certain regions of it, is seen as sacred and quivering with life. It is inscribed with meaning regarding the origins and unity of all life rather than seen as mere property to be partitioned legally into commercial real estate holdings. (1992, p. 13)

Indigenous thought is imbued with a deep sense of reverence for nature. It does not operate from an impulse to exercise human dominion over nature. In the Woodland Cree belief system, the spirit of *Opimāchihiwew* (Creator of all things), filters throughout the natural world rather than being concentrated in a single, monotheistic supreme god. Indigenous wisdom assigns human beings enormous responsibility for sustaining harmonious relations within the whole natural world rather than granting them unbridled licence to follow personal or economic whim.

Cree Elders state we must go back to the land in order to heal, recover, and mend our Cree world view and life ways. While we may never go back to living in teepees, there are hidden teachings in traditional Cree origin stories, which are linked to sustainable thinking and being and that are beneficial to all humans regardless of culture and race. Land-based education is critical and essential in schools and places of higher learning (Wilson & Wilson, 2010; Tuck et al., 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014; Michell, 2018). We are the land and the land is part of who we are. There is no separation. Prior to colonization, traditional child rearing

was land-based. In many northern and rural communities it is still practised in a healthy environment. Further, the Elders, specifically grandparents, had a significant role in child rearing and interaction with the child's development into adulthood: "Spirit is the foundation from which all other developmental areas (spiritual, mental, emotional and physical realms) stemmed, providing the child's cultural identity" (Simard & Blight cited in Muir & Bohr, 2014). For example, there is a focus on the whole child in which activities are designed for mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical development. Community consciousness is extended to the natural world. Students change when they have an opportunity to connect with the northern landscape. They are more observant, respectful, and humble once they realize their connectedness to the land. Cree "story work" allows them to think deeply and critically while learning relational ways of being.

Land-based education has always been a big part of my socialization experiences. As educators we must look to the past and bring back Cree teachings in new ways including the use of technology. I was raised on the land in Northern Saskatchewan in the Missinipi (Churchill River) watershed area. Missinipi is not a river. Missinipi is a chain of lakes connected by rivers and rapids—it is a watershed of sorts. We made our living on the land. Our land-based education and curriculum is linked to the rhythm of the seasons. We do certain things at certain times of the year. According to our Cree cultural teachings, we respect all the gifts from the natural world. We view the world as an interdependent sea of creation infused with spirit energies. Knowledge comes from different sources including animals and plants, and also from the spiritual realm through ceremonies, prayer, and dreams. To the northern Cree, everything is alive. For example, we view the rock as animate. At the beginning of time, there was nothing but rock and contained in that rock were the ingredients for all "life" as we understand it from a human perspective. Sacred stories retrieve the evolution of all life forms; the interconnectedness in all things; mysteries; and our responsibility as humans to learn, respect, protect, and teach all that sustains us. We are taught to be humble in our thinking. We are dependent on the natural world that sustains us. There is a greater force far beyond our capacity to explain all or completely understand. Elders say that we cannot learn all there is to know about Cree cultural life ways in one lifetime.

There are many modes of transmitting Cree Knowledge. Some aspects are private and cannot be openly shared in public. For example, spiritual knowledge is only shared by specialized teachers who are gifted with this responsibility of keeping sacred knowledge. This knowledge comes from *powāmowin* or dreaming through the vision quest ceremony. Long ago, young people, under the guidance of spiritual teachers, were taken into isolated areas, usually along river systems, to fast and pray. Out of this sacred experience they were guided through their

order of dreams—powāmowin—and their responsibilities to share knowledge through stories. The vision quest ceremony was used as a rite of passage into the world of mystery, wisdom, and adulthood. Knowledge, songs, dances, and cultural teachings from powāmowin are communicated and received from the spiritual realm. Powāmowin can be negative or positive and if it is misused or abused, the consequences are destructive. This sacred knowledge is treated with great respect. Only those with special qualities and interest took on the role as Knowledge Keepers who became healers, teachers, historians, warriors, and shamans. There are many vision quest sites along the Churchill River, which are marked by pictographs on rocks that signify stories from ancient times.

### Indigenous Storytelling

Indigenous storytelling is a methodology. Storytellers are vital to the transmission of Cree Knowledge through language, orality, and cultural expression. The importance of keeping the knowledge accurate is a required oratory skill of the storyteller. However, since the importance of the Oral Tradition has been diminished, many of those storytelling roles need to be more appreciated and carried out to ensure the importance of Indigenous Knowledge in stories. Storytellers have special qualities that bring their stories to life and make their lessons meaningful. They are able to keep Indigenous Knowledge intact in their delivery while teaching and entertaining. The world view lived according to a strict code based on kinships, which were a culmination of traditional Indigenous Knowledge passed down from generation to generation. For example, it was critical for one to know their kinships—“A clan’s genealogy was essential for determining the procreation of healthy offspring and thereby ensuring their survival” (Knight, 1988). However, Indigenous Knowledge on kinship has been eroded because of the impacts of colonialism and residential schools. Indigenous Peoples were displaced from their Traditional Territories and forced to relocate onto reserves. Families were fragmented based on conversion to Christianity. Traditional Cree names were replaced with English names. It is important for the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples to teach *wāhkôhtowin* (kinship systems), as contained in the stories of oral histories among Indigenous Peoples.

Community involvement in First Nations schools is essential. In traditional times, it was the extended family members who were the teachers. Uncles, aunts, and grandparents would take the responsibility for teaching their nephews, nieces, and grandchildren. In this way, the young would receive the best education possible because the extended family could devote more time than the parents could to teach Indigenous Knowledge. It was common for grandparents to teach their grandchildren for they had the patience and skill. Elders are the most important

human resource in the community from whom community members gain an understanding of Indigenous Knowledge (Beatty, 2006). Much of the knowledge on *wāhkôhtowin* was kept among the Elders. Cree Elders are considered the carriers of Cree culture, knowledge, language, and traditional values. They have a vast collective memory. The Elders have passed on their wisdom in many forms; among them, were the storytellers, the shamans, and the medicine people. When you lose an Elder, it is like losing a library of knowledge (Wheeler, 2018). There is a growing interest in reviving, reclaiming, and sharing traditional Cree stories linking to contemporary realities.

### Āchithokiwina: Traditional Cree Stories

Traditional Cree stories contain cultural teachings, morals, values, and lessons that are common among First Nations Peoples. Āchithokiwina (traditional sacred stories) were retold over and over again in order to instill key Traditional Knowledge as an individual grows, adapts to experiences, and gains perspectives about life and learning. Lutz explains the timeless importance of stories: “Whether they were told ten, twenty or forty thousand years ago, they still have application. However, some of these stories have to be redone in modern terms. These stories have lessons. Even though the circumstances change, the lessons still remain the same” (Lutz, 1991). Āchithokiwina are designed in such a way because learning never stops and knowledge has to adapt to change. Much of this knowledge is stored and safeguarded in memory, contained in stories that are eventually passed on from generation to generation. These stories reinforce the cultural identity of Cree people. They link the past, present, and future. Cree origin stories are a part of the spiritual history within Indigenous cultures.

Woodland Cree people share stories to record events, history, and other valuable knowledge. This knowledge base was, and continues to be, experienced in language, told in story, sung in a song, or written in pictographs and other recorded symbols in artistic creations. The Cree People in Northern Saskatchewan have a highly developed Oral Tradition that has been a mode of transferring knowledge as part of their education system. Many of the stories were told throughout our early years so we would commit them to memory as much as possible. The intent was for the listener to apply the knowledge contained in the stories for practical use.

Āchithokiwina contain complex teachings. For example, the story of the rolling head describes the types of trees, typical of the boreal forest, that grow near water and are useful for finding directions or habitat for plants and animals for harvest. The story of *Chichipischikwān* (the Rolling Head), also known as *Ayās*, contains Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)—the beginning of

Wesahkechak and his adventures as he represents human shortcomings and evolution that reinforce the Cree world view of connectedness. The story of Ayās teaches the importance of balance, harmony, and the interdependence of all things that exist on Earth and our universe. The story of Ayās is found in the constellation of the Big Dipper or the remnants of Chichipischikwān. This story tells of the cataclysm that occurred at the beginning of Wesahkechak's time, or the time before humans inhabited Earth.

After the stories of Ayās (Chichipischikwān), begin the adventures of Wesahkechak, as told in countless stories among the Woodland Cree. After Chichipischikwān, Wesahkechak begins his adventure on Earth, before humans. Wesahkechak was given powers to transform matter into something else—however, Wesahkechak is not the Creator. The Creator gave Wesahkechak powers to use for the benefit of all the planets and universe. Wesahkechak represents humans as they are, the most dependent and unnecessary on the planet Earth. This “being” is known as the trickster/transformer within the oral stories of other Indigenous Peoples in North America. Wesahkechak makes mistakes so we don't have to as human beings. The stories teach us to embrace flux, change, and transformation. Nothing ever remains the same. Tricksters are humorous characters. Wesahkechak stories, for example, represent human weaknesses. However, Wesahkechak could also perform incredible feats. He was able to communicate with animals that share our northern existence. He was referred to as *Nistese* (elder brother) for he was bestowed powers to recreate the Earth and universe; however, he did not have powers to create from nothing. Stories about Wesahkechak teach about the interdependence of all life on Earth.

So as I get older I retrieve some of these sacred stories and reflect on the teachings. It would be similar to reading a book over again and finding new and important information or application. From a spiritual perspective one realizes that humans are insignificant and probably do not matter much in the grand scheme of the universe; however, humans do have a role to ensure that there is harmony in all things interconnected. There is a responsibility to not disturb that natural way of the Earth to the point of negative impacts.

Ancient stories are similar to myths combined with factual information, as explained in the following quote:

The word myth sometimes has a debased meaning nowadays—as a synonym for lies and fairytale stories—but this is not the definition I intend. Most history, when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest value and aspirations. Myth creates and reinforces archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are maps by which cultures navigate through time. (Wright, 1991)

Āchithokīwina such as Wesahkechak stories, are not merely myths and legends. They have contemporary relevance and validity. There are specific attributes of *pimāchibisowin* (self-reliance) and *mitho-pimāchisowin* (living in a respectful way), which are lessons in many of the sacred stories. These stories have subliminal cultural teachings and complex perspectives of the world and how all things co-exist in it. The stories may reinforce sustainable practices and uses of resources, and a religious respect for all animate and inanimate things. For example, there are teachings linked to living in harmony with the environment in which the human is the most dependent, because we require plants, animals, and so on in order to live. On the other hand, human beings are the most unnecessary to life on Earth. There is a concerted effort to maintain harmony that is expounded in the messages in many of the stories, to not abuse or overuse natural resources that are necessary for human existence. There is a spiritual respect for animals and plants that we depend on for survival. Our traditional teachers show us how to conduct ourselves on the land, including how we harvest resources being mindful that all life is interdependent.

Cree thought and life ways have been profoundly influenced by centuries of colonization. However, there is now resurgence and movement to protect and revitalize Indigenous Knowledge and languages in Canada. As Poelzer and Coates (2015) observe, “many Aboriginal communities are again sending young people out onto the land with elders so that they can learn more about traditional values and the spiritual dimensions of their world” (p. 137).

## The Importance of Indigenous Languages

An Indigenous language is the glue that holds culture together. Cree orality and fluency must be part of school curriculum. Assimilation attempts have resulted in fewer opportunities for Oral Traditions to survive. The written word and text have dominated teaching and learning since contact times. Consequently, many Cree stories and storytellers have fallen by the wayside, leaving Indigenous principles hidden, lost, or devalued. Moreover, modern societies have adopted the idea that youthfulness is more valued than an Elder's wisdom and knowledge, creating a disconnection between Elders and the youth. Furthermore, the lack of Indigenous language proficiency among the younger generations has created a greater gap in acquiring Indigenous Knowledge from the Elders. There are many factors that can be linked to this gap: residential schools, foster care, colonization, poverty, and reserve systems.

Since many Indigenous Peoples did not utilize a writing system to any great extent, they stored knowledge embedded in their languages. It is necessary that Cree storytellers are proficient in their Indigenous language to retain the elements of Indigenous Knowledge contained in the stories of Wesahkechak. Stories often tell about a cultural group's history, and the "historical accounts in narrative form, interwoven with the significant events, personalities, and notable places, such as the ancestral homeland and sacred pilgrimage sites" (Knight, 1988, p. 88). Stories are about historical events that are authentic. However, the ways the stories are told are intrinsic to a culture (Colorado, 1988). It is often the case that, through the translation, many stories lose some of their significance; hence, one has to be knowledgeable in the subtleties of the Indigenous language for the translation to be accurate. When a Cree storyteller presents Traditional Knowledge, it is not only for the purposes of entertainment; the lessons have to be identified throughout the story. When stories are retold, they could be related to real life situations, but more importantly to imprint on the listener so that they will be able to utilize the knowledge when life situations call for it. For example, in most Wesahkechak stories, the character encounters animals and plants that live in certain habitats. The stories always contain specific knowledge about ecological knowledge, such as direction, waterways, animal behaviour, and medicines. Ancient stories contain Indigenous Knowledge about origins, moral dilemmas, values, myths, and beliefs. Some of the stories are humorous and some are serious, yet they provide much knowledge and wisdom. In short, Indigenous stories can provide an important source of knowledge for practical, ethical, and moral issues.

Storytellers such as Tompson Highway are able to express the surface, where everybody understands the stories, and also share the subsurface, which has two or three other meanings. Take, for example, the mythological figure *Wihtiko* (cannibal) in traditional stories. The term *Wihtiko* has many meanings, depending

on the context of the conversation. For example, *Wihtiko* could represent mental illness, "bad medicine," or evil intentions, and more commonly the taboo of cannibalism. Stories transcend conceptions of time. Cree language words and terms are linked to the natural world, which is very descriptive. Cree writers who write in the English language tend to be descriptive as well. Highway's ability to be so descriptive that readers of his stories immediately conjure up vivid imagery, is because he tells them in his Cree language first. The description of *Wihtiko* and what it represents is common among the Woodland Cree and Highway represents the menace well in his book, *The Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Highway, 1998).

Cree storytelling methodology must be further articulated as a mode for sharing Cree wisdom. Cree learners must be immersed in the language and culture so there is minimal loss of Traditional Knowledge. Cree orality is central to teaching and learning within the context of land and the natural world. Respect must be given to cultural customs and protocols that are linked to places of origin. There is a need for balance between Oral Traditions and the written word. *Wesahkechak* stories are best shared orally with all the body nuances, facial expressions, tone of voice, and hand gestures. Cree stories are best learned on the land with knowledgeable Elders engaging in practical day-to-day activities. By being connected to the land, there is an awareness of how one's activities affect the environment.

## Conclusion

In this article, I shared and conveyed my growing knowledge base around the importance of Cree stories and storytelling as a way to reinforce Cree cultural life ways in an era of reconciliation. The use of Indigenous languages was once forbidden in residential schools. Indigenous stories and storytellers were not part of the curriculum. Those times are over and should never have happened. Much has been written about Indigenous stories (Michell, 2015b). However, Woodland Cree written discourse on stories is limited from my area in Northern Saskatchewan. It is important to reclaim our stories, share them in our own ways, and pass them on to the next generation of storytellers. In this article, I argue these stories contain complex Cree knowledge concepts that can only be expressed using the Cree language in order to be fully appreciated. These stories are relevant in the present and must be interpreted based on our Cree world view and cultural context. While there are possibilities of losing aspects of Indigenous Knowledge during the translation from Cree to English, there is beauty in being able to share these stories in cross-cultural settings so that our relatives from other parts of the world know who we are and how closely intertwined we are with the natural world. It is important to share our knowledge about how to embrace and take care of our planet.

## Notes

1. I use the term “Indigenous” to refer to the original peoples of Canada (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis). For the purposes of this article, I use the term Woodlands Cree to refer to Indigenous Peoples from Northern Saskatchewan.
2. The purpose of the *Claim Settlements (Alberta and Saskatchewan) Implementation Act* (S.C. 2002, c. 3) was to “facilitate the implementation of those provisions of first nations’ claim settlements in the Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan that relate to the creation of reserves or the addition of land to existing reserves, and to make related amendments to the Manitoba Claim Settlements Implementation Act and the Saskatchewan Treaty Land Entitlement Act” (<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-31.7/index.html>).

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