

The Northern Review



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Exploring human experience in the North

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Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin: Perspectives from Northern Saskatchewan

INDG 410/810 Open Textbook, University of Saskatchewan

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Editorial: Number 53

Ken Coates

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This collection of essays is a wonderful addition to the scholarly understanding of the Canadian North. The papers, written by University of Saskatchewan graduate students and their Indigenous Studies professor, Dr. Bonita Beatty, draw on Indigenous concepts and values to describe First Nations and Métis involvement in the modern economy. The result is a provocative and informative look at the persistence of Indigenous culture in the twenty-first century and the ongoing efforts by Indigenous Peoples to combine culture, economic activities, and commercial realities.

The collection focuses on the Indigenous Peoples of Northern Saskatchewan. This area, covering the northern half of the province, has a population roughly equal to that of the Yukon, but lacks the high level of Government of Canada funding and the political autonomy enjoyed by the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. The Northern Administration District is resource rich, particularly in uranium. Cameco and Orano Canada operate several of the world's richest uranium deposits, with strong connections to First Nations and Métis communities whose collaborations with the resource companies are among the most extensive and sustained in the country, if not the world.

The Canadian Shield dominates and defines Northern Saskatchewan. The region is bisected by the Churchill River and its many tributaries. There are, quite literally, thousands of lakes. The Indigenous communities are widely scattered and almost all have populations fewer than 1,500 people. Some are accessible only by boat or air. Several forest fires have caused severe damage in recent decades, forcing mass evacuations from the region and necessitating considerable rebuilding. The northern highway system is poorly developed, with many of the roads unpaved. Infrastructure developments, in terms of water, Internet, electricity, energy supplies, fire protection, and housing, are often seriously deficient. Indigenous language use is much stronger than in many parts of Saskatchewan and southern Canada, and hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering activities remain robust and an invaluable part of the local economy and food supply.

Indigenous governments in the area are faced with a wide variety of socio-cultural and economic challenges, but they are exercising considerable autonomy in the management of educational and health institutions, have strong relations with resource companies, and have created several highly successful Indigenous economic development corporations. The non-Indigenous population in the region remains highly mobile, and the short time that many non-Indigenous doctors, nurses, and teachers stay in the region remains a challenge. Perhaps most importantly, the Government of Saskatchewan is disengaged from the northern communities, and community authorities struggle to get attention, despite some serious community-level problems that have been exacerbated by the opioid crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The graduate students whose work appears here participated in the Master of Northern Governance and Master of Governance and Entrepreneurship in Northern Indigenous Regions programs, the latter offered together with the University of Tromsø in Norway. Both programs are excellent examples of the efforts by the University of Saskatchewan and committed faculty members like Dr. Beatty to develop professional and academic expertise in northern affairs. Their work is part of the ongoing effort by the communities of Northern Saskatchewan to document their historical and current realities, knowledge, and ways of life, and to provide a literary foundation for further education on and for the Indigenous Peoples of the Provincial North. By so doing, this collection is a wonderful example of the contributions that the *Northern Review* continues to make to the understanding of the North.

Ken Coates

Editorial. Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin: Perspectives from Northern Saskatchewan

Bonita Beatty

Guest Editor, *The Northern Review* 53

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This textbook explores the northern Cree concept of *mitho-pimachesowin* (making a good living, or way of life), utilizing it as a framework to better understand self-determination and its emphasis on land-based livelihood and the Indigenous way of life. The longevity of the term *pimachesowin* (Woods Cree; variant spellings include *pimacihowin* and *pimâcihisowin*) speaks to its significance, complexity, and functionality. Like an ancient tree with long roots, the term itself has many elements and is unique to people and where they live. Most Indigenous Peoples have their own equivalent concept. In this special collection, northern Indigenous scholars (Saskatchewan, Eastern Siberia) share and unpack some key elements of *mitho-pimachesowin* through their own thoughts, languages, stories, values, and experiences growing up in the North. All are professionals and graduates from the former Master of Northern Governance and Development program (MNGD) at the University of Saskatchewan. This collective scholarship blended with personal experiential knowledge of northerners makes an important contribution to the broader literature in Indigenous Knowledge, northern ways of life, and self-determination. The work here acknowledges that while it is very important to learn about things in classrooms, scholarship is also about learning through experience; if first-hand experience is not possible, then listening and learning from those who have experiential knowledge can be just as valuable.

The threads throughout the articles refer to the continuing significance of Indigenous land and its resources, the resilience of the northern traditional economy, family, kinship (*wahkootowin*, *wahkohtowin*), health and well-being, language, and traditional values. Pimachesowin is more than making a living. It also holistically embeds a spiritual, historical, economic, social, and cultural context about a way of life and identity in a particular region. It has distinct language-based concepts and local Traditional Knowledges that are passed down in families through stories and oral histories.

Growing up as Indigenous Peoples in the North has gifted some unique perspectives for the authors in this textbook. Blake Charles from Stanley Mission (Kisechiwanohk), explains the importance of both storytelling and stories in reinforcing the Cree world view and ways of knowing and being. From Northeastern Siberia, Mariia Iakovleva introduces us to the Sakha (Yakut) version of *pimachesowin*, *Aiyy Yorege*, making a good life, through the epic tale of *Olonkho* with its foundational concepts for self-determination. Debra Ross, growing up Métis near Green Lake in northwestern Saskatchewan, shares some Métis perspectives of *miyo-pimatisiwin* (living a good life) through her father's stories, and by discussing how this concept's related constituent elements influenced the Métis way of life on the land and the community. The reflections by Josephine McKay from Amisk Osakahikan (Beaver Lake) shed light on modern education and childhood lessons learned from her respected grandfather (*nimosom*), including the phrase "not first time smart," which refers to the values of listening and being mindful. Métis scholar Arlene Hansen from Beauval in northwestern Saskatchewan, writes about celebrating the path of teaching *abkamimohwin* (resilience) in youth education in northern schools by working in partnership with Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Rosalie Tsannie-Burseth, a noted Dene educator from the Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation, introduces Thanadelthur, the Dene heroine legend in Dene oral history and in fur trade journals, and her significance to the northern Dene people. Another educator, Gregory Seib from Deschambault Lake, discusses the importance of a blended economy training approach for Indigenous youth so they can fully participate in the economy and ensure they have skills for *mitho-pimachesowin*, a good livelihood and way of life. Continuing an innovative thread, John Desjarlais from Cumberland House, explores the concept of Indigenengineering, engineering through Indigenous Knowledge and *mino-pimachisowin*. He suggests that related Indigenous Knowledge concepts like *wahkohtowin* (relatedness) and *tapwewin* (speaking truth) can help shape and indigenize the engineering profession for mutual benefit, including opening access for Indigenous people and advancing the field of engineering.

In conclusion, it is so important to understand and pay attention to Indigenous concepts like *mitho-pimachesowin*, not only due to the pressing need for language preservation and restoration, but also to privilege the voices of those making a living on the land and protecting it for future generations. On a broader level, it can also help inform the development of more culturally responsive approaches to the many contemporary issues facing Indigenous self-determination. Many thanks for these wonderful contributions by the northern scholars of both land and university education. Kwayask teniki (many thanks) to Deanna McLeod for her persistent hard work, to Stan Yu and Ken Coates for their support, to all the referees, and to the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching & Learning (USask) for their funding contribution toward this publication.

Bonita Beatty

Exploring the Concept of Mitho Pimachesowin

Unpacking Pimachesowin as a Framing Concept for Indigenous Self-Determination

Eypachitayak Pimachesowin ta Othastamasoyak Nehithaw tipethimisowin

Bonita Beatty

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Abstract: *Pimachesowin*, the northern Cree term for making your own livelihood or charting your own way of life, is a rich, compact, and difficult term to unpack because it entails all aspects of life and its complex integrated processes (other Indigenous languages have their own equivalent terms). The concept's resilience is sustained by its very complexity and fluidity to change. While Indigenous languages are stronger in the more remote communities, all Indigenous communities are struggling to protect their languages, and essentially their ways of life, against the many external marginalizing influences. This article suggests that *pimachesowin* (variant spellings include *pimâcihisowin*, *pimâcihowin*, *pimachihowin*, *pimachisowin*) with its key elements, can serve as an effective conceptual framework for Indigenous self-determination and, as such, can help inform the development of more culturally responsive approaches to the many issues facing Indigenous self-determination. The key elements include land and resources, spirituality, autonomy (self-rule), livelihood knowledge and skills, hard work ethic, kinship bonds and networks, and cultural values (respect, responsibility, sharing, and resilience). These elements reflect findings of many studies that suggest that, despite numerous challenges, Indigenous Peoples still remain connected to land, livelihood, families and kinship, language, community, spirituality, and cultural values. 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*.

Introduction

This article suggests that the Cree term *pimachesowin*¹ (making a living, way of life) makes for a robust framework for better understanding Indigenous self-determination, with its holistic emphasis on land and the Indigenous way of life. The article further suggests that language and stories are valuable conduits through which to unpack Indigenous concepts like *pimachesowin*. The concept is peripherally explored here, for brevity's sake, through a discussion of some of its more visible elements emerging from studies, stories, and explanations by Elders and community Knowledge Holders. These elements include land and resources, spirituality, autonomy (self-rule), livelihood knowledge and skills, hard work ethic, kinship bonds and networks (*wahkootowin*)², and cultural values (respect, responsibility, sharing, and resilience). Each of these elements are concepts themselves, with their own sub-elements that can be further studied. The layout of the article here begins with an introduction, followed by a contextual background, and then a discussion of key elements and related examples; it ends with a few concluding comments.

Indigenous³ concepts and values of self-determination are embedded in the language. In Woodland Cree, the term *pimachesowin* refers to making a living, a livelihood, or way of life. The meaning, spelling, and pronunciation can vary somewhat depending on its use and place. In northern Saskatchewan, it normally refers to those making a living on the land, in whole or in part, such as from commercial fishing or trapping. The online Plains Cree dictionary spells it as *pimâchisowin*, and defines it as “a vocation, that from which one makes a living” (Miyo Wahkohtowin Education Authority, n.d.). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) describe a similar variant *pimacihowin*, “the ability to make a living” (p. 43), and another online Cree dictionary, *itwêwina*, also implies travel, a journey, living, way of life, livelihood and culture (Alberta Language Technology Lab et al., 2022). The key point is that the meanings are similar. It is a comprehensive concept with deeper contextual meanings reflective of time and place. It refers to life processes consisting of many different but related elements. It is about a way of life and has been described as “the central philosophical guide to daily living” (Goulet, 2008, p. 14). It is important to understand Indigenous concepts like *pimachesowin*, not only due to the pressing need for language preservation and restoration, but also to privilege the voices of those making a living on the land, and to help inform the development of more culturally responsive approaches to the many contemporary issues facing Indigenous self-determination.

The term *pimachesowin* can be both an action word, a verb (making a living), or noun (livelihood, way of life), but its reference to a dynamic process makes it

akin to a journey. The root word is *pimatisiwin* or “life.” *Pimachesowin* is part of the journey of *pimatisiwin*. It is not just about making a living (in the sense of a job), but rather a way of life imbued with culture, spirituality, homeland, and family identity, all of which remain relevant to this day (Beatty et al., 2013).

As a Woodland Cree speaker from northeastern Saskatchewan, I heard the word *pimachesowin* in normal day-to-day conversations while growing up, but especially in formal conversations about trapping, fishing, hunting, and other activities related to work and the land-based way of life. There was a confidence and humility that went with the word—“to make your own way of life, to make your own living, to steer your own way, and to be able to take care of yourself and your family.”⁴ My parents and *nokum* (grandmother) often used it, as well as my aunts and uncles—it seemed everyone used the term. The word was obviously an important concept in our area that gave meaning and purpose to *pimatisiwin* (life). Little did I know that all of that was for the sake of the children and grandchildren, feeding and looking after them.

The term *pimachesowin*, in all its dialect variants, is not limited to certain geographical regions, neither is it frozen in time. It is widely applicable. I often heard the term *pimacihowin* (the ability to make a living) in the context of education during my Cree linguistic classes with the late Dr. Ahab Spence at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations University of Canada). Other variations can be found across the country. In the James Bay region, the Cree way of life is described as *Iiyiyiu pimaatisiwin* (Radu et al., 2014, p. 94) or *pimaatisiwin* (Junker et al., 2018). The Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) use *Biimaadiziwin* (way of living) (Bell, 2016, p. 7). It is an old term. *Pimacihowin* is also found in understandings of First Nations Elders relating to the treaties of Canada (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43), a significant reference that conceptually appears to form a key aspect of the treaty-state relationship. Due to the holistic nature of the word, the dialect variations are used interchangeably throughout this article in the discussions of the concept and key elements.

Background and Concepts

What is self-determination? It can be broadly conceptualized as a collective Indigenous right where Indigenous Peoples are able to determine their own lives and futures. It speaks to having control over lands, resources, and self-rule. Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) clearly states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to self-determination, which means they have the right to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UNDRIP, 2007). The UNDRIP concept of Indigenous self-determination captures the spirit of the treaties. Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) noted that

the perceptions that Saskatchewan Elders held about the treaties focused on issues of the survival and well-being of their children, grandchildren, and future generations, and the need to protect their connectivity to traditional lands and territories—something they saw crucial to the treaty relationship (p. 43). This speaks to ongoing movement toward self-determination, although Canada's federal and provincial governments still have far to go in fulfilling Aboriginal and treaty rights. A 2014 report by James Anaya, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while acknowledging some positive steps, called on Canada to make more concerted efforts to partner with Indigenous Peoples to work out solutions for addressing the daunting “crisis proportion” issues facing Aboriginal communities, such as poverty, poor living conditions, disparities in health and wellness, abuse of vulnerable women and girls, and the failures to address outstanding treaty and Aboriginal land claims (UN Human Rights Council, 2014, p. 1, 6,).

What are concepts? Concepts are ideas generally framed in words or expressions that can hold meaning for people within a certain context or environment (place, time, scope). Concepts help us see the big picture (the high view) and its constituent parts as a means of knowledge translation or helping to describe something complex. Without getting into philosophical rabbit holes, Burge's (1993) definition of concepts is useful here. He suggests that “concepts are commonly expressed in language. They constitute meanings of the speaker's words” (p. 311). Appreciating that link and exploring Indigenous terms in their context can therefore better inform a broader understanding of Indigenous self-determination. Indigenous world views, while distinct to themselves, all share a holistic concept that all life is interrelated. Pimachesowin (making a livelihood, or way of life) is an example.

I have observed such similarities for many years while teaching students from various regions of the Circumpolar North. The Dene refer to *Ėghēna*, broadly describing “to live” and “to create a good life.” Students from northeastern Siberia noted equivalent concepts in the Yakut (Sakha) language. The concept of pimachesowin is not unique to Northern Saskatchewan—indeed, it was identified as pimacihowin in the treaties of Canada (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). The Anishinaabe refer to *mino-bimaadziwin* as living a good life (Bell, 2016). A growing number of scholars are also using variations of the Indigenous or Aboriginal way of life concept for contextualizing their work. Settee (2017) refers to pimatisiwin life components as Indigenous Knowledge systems and their importance to higher education. Landry, Asselin, and Lévesque (2019) still see a strong link between *mino-pimatisiwin* (comprehensive health) and land in Indigenous urban life in eastern Canada. In all cases, land, family, kinship (wahkootowin), well-being, and traditional values are foundational.

Indigenous languages, with their inherent concepts like pimachesowin, have likewise been marginalized by years of linguistic colonialism by the Canadian state through institutionalization (residential schools, schools in general) and the evolving variations of the Official Languages Act privileging English and French. Other “daunting” challenges include impacts (both positive and negative) from outside influences such as rapid mechanization, transportation, and digital technologies, which all cumulatively impact human societies faster with each generation. There is no waiting around for small and remote communities to catch up. Thankfully, Indigenous languages in Canada have persevered to various extents, but there is real concern that most are at risk. The pressing advocacy for language revitalization is calling for more structural and systemic interventions such as the 2019 federal Indigenous Languages Act, appropriate investments, and culturally appropriate Aboriginal language education programs (TRC, 2015; Assembly of First Nations, 2019).

According to the 2021 Canadian Census, 243,000 people in Canada could conduct a conversation in an Indigenous language, and 189,000 reported their mother tongue was an Indigenous language (Statistics Canada, 2022). There are over seventy Aboriginal languages in Canada, grouped into twelve language families (Statistics Canada, 2017). The Algonquian language family is the most robust and dispersed across the country, with over 175,825 reporting their language belongs to it, namely Cree (largest), Ojibwe (Anishinaabe), Innu/Montagnais, and Oji-Cree (Statistics Canada, 2017). Saskatchewan's Indigenous languages are also fairly strong. There are over seventy-four First Nations communities with the Dene, Woodland Cree, and Swampy Cree to the north and the Plains Cree, Saulteaux, and Nakota/Dakota/Lakota in central and southern Saskatchewan. The Métis reside throughout the province and speak regional variations of Michif, including blends of Cree and French. The Cree language with its five main dialects spread across Canada, also appears most prevalent in Saskatchewan (Ratt, 2016; Napoleon, 2014), along with Dene, which belongs to the Athapaskan language family (Statistics Canada, 2017). The persistent richness of the Indigenous languages in Canada is still evident and they remain excellent sources for a better understanding of Indigenous world views and the values and concepts inherent in the land and way of life.

Unpacking Pimachesowin into Key Elements

Pimachesowin, the northern Cree term for making your own livelihood or your own way of life, is a rich, compact, and difficult term to unpack because it is conceptually rooted in life processes and a world view of self-sufficiency, with its requisite spiritual and material elements. The concept's resilience is sustained by its very complexity and fluidity to change, although it is also always vulnerable

(Beatty et al., 2012). It may seem theoretical but it is by and large immensely practical in the sense of economic and political self-sufficiency. Macdougall, in her seminal study of Métis culture in Sakitawak (Île-à-la-Crosse), Northwestern Saskatchewan, during the 1800s, noted a British fur trader's observation of the people's northern identity that was evident at that time: "notwithstanding the hardships the Natives sometimes suffer, they are strongly attached to the country of rivers, lakes and forests" (Macdougall, 2010, p. 26). That attachment still remains. A 2012 study on northern Aboriginal political culture in Northern Saskatchewan suggested that the northern way of life remains strongly connected to the land, the families, the language, the community, the stories, and the traditional cultural values (Beatty et al., 2012; Beatty et al., 2013).

There is no one way of perfectly describing and defining pimachesowin. Everyone has their way; but here, the concept of pimachesowin is northern and can be visualized like a living tree with its branches comprising elements that are interconnected and rooted to place and environment, yet always changing with time. Here, the discussion will be limited to the low-hanging branches or the more visible elements of the pimachesowin way of life in the North. Key sources for learning about the concept of pimachesowin come from the experiential knowledge of traditional land experts and Elders⁵ through their stories, experiences, and lessons learned. Most have strong leadership skills honed from years of struggles in making a living and protecting their lands from outside interests (Beatty et al., 2012). Their stories are valuable conduits for teaching concepts about their way of life. Elders and community people are also sometimes referred to as Traditional Knowledge Holders by researchers in various studies, and while that is positive, they are obviously more than that. Elders are respected family members with extensive kinship (wahkootowin) networks, and with knowledge and expertise earned through life experiences. The phrase "way of life" is commonly used to describe pimachesowin, but it is not easy to define properly because it is about process. In the North, Indigenous ways of life are often described in terms associated with working on the land. Fortunately, Indigenous scholars and others are creating more partnerships with communities thus privileging their knowledge and producing good translation work with Elders and community people.

Acimowina (stories told) can often contain a blend of all the pimachesowin elements in one story. In that sense, they are more than stories. For example, land, self-sufficiency, hard work, kinship (wahkootowin), responsibility, and resilience are all illustrated in the stories of Elders in a 1987 publication of the Northwest Territories (NWT) Fort Resolution Education Authority study. One Elder described their way of life in this way:

JG. We used to travel all over the bush with my dad. My mom and I stayed home when my dad went out to hunt, fish or trap. My dad used to kill a lot of moose, so we used to have meat all the time. We lived good with meat in those days. (Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 4)

Here we get a picture. The geographical location was in remote, far northern Canada. The family household was self-sufficient through the bush skills and hard work of the parents or care providers. The social and economic foundation reflected a common northern blended economy, consisting of land-based subsistence activities (hunting), local industry income (fishing, trapping), and community "home" supports. It was obviously a tough life with its vulnerabilities but, from a child's perspective in this example, it was a good, safe life.

Most Indigenous stories share common themes such as the concepts of the land and environment shaping cultures, languages, and ways of life of Indigenous Peoples over generations. One of the challenges with acimowina research is that it is never easy, even for fluent speakers, to do proper knowledge translation of Indigenous terms and phrases. Much time and care are needed to avoid potential misinterpretations and wrong conclusions, yet once the translation is done, we find that the stories remain relevant. Some studies that have done this include the following (and there are many more):

- *An oral history of the Fort Resolution Elders. That's the way we lived* (Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987)
- *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our dream is that our peoples will one day be clearly recognized as nations* (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000)
- *One of the family: Métis culture in nineteenth-century Northwestern Saskatchewan* (Macdougall, 2010).

A discussion of these examples below shows some common threads or elements relevant to self-determination or pimachesowin—making a living, a way of life. These include, among others, land and resources, spirituality, autonomy (self-rule), livelihood knowledge and skills, hard work ethic, kinship bonds and network (wahkootowin), and cultural values (respect, responsibility, sharing, and resilience). It is also always important to get an understanding of the geography and background of where people are from in order to better appreciate their world views, as the following studies attest.

That's the Way We Lived: An Oral History of the Fort Resolution Elders

A brief history of the region helps set some context for the Northwest Territories Fort Resolution Education Authority study, *That's the Way We Lived: An Oral History of the Fort Resolution Elders* (Fort Resolution Education Authority [FRE], 1987). Colonialism came to the Great Slave Lake region by way of the fur trade that was largely dominated by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), especially after its 1821 merger with the Northwest Company. Fort Resolution was its main post on the lake and it is now the oldest continuously occupied settlement in the Northwest Territories (Canada's Historic Places, n.d.). The region has diverse Indigenous languages. The Northwest Territories government recognizes eleven official languages in the territory, including five Dene (Athabaskan), three Inuit, one Cree, and two Indo-European (English, French) (GNWT, 2021).

The oral history project undertaken by the Fort Resolution Education Authority interviewed seventeen Dene Elders living in Fort Resolution. The findings were translated in a book describing the "way of life" of the northern Dene in the Great Slave Lake region of the Northwest Territories (Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987). A map (traditional lands) and genealogy (family trees) were used to depict historical family networks and kinship systems. Personal stories, mostly in Dene, recorded the memories and thoughts of the Elders explaining their kinship connections and traditional ways of life that included hunting, trapping, and fishing. It was a way of life that took team effort and most people had large extended families. The stories gathered in the study contain some important thematic concepts of the traditional way of life, as the following quotes illustrate:

I was born on April 21st, 1917, in Rat River. My grandfather raised me. (JJ quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 4)

In the old days, we had to travel to find food all the time. (MLK quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 5)

In the old days, the young people were taught by the old people. The old people would show them how to set traps, make a fire, boil tea and all that. The old person would sit there and let the kid do it. That's the way the kids used to learn. While they were out in the bush, they would teach kids about directions as well. That is how I learned to travel. I travelled a lot with the old people. If I go out on the lake and a storm comes up, I know what to do. (HB quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 9)

In the old days when they built a house, there was a man with an axe at every corner. (VB quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 9)

It wasn't easy to make your living before. You had to do a lot of work to make a living. After I was old enough to work, I worked all the time and I worked hard. (JG quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority 1987, p. 10)

We trapped all winter and when summer came, we fished. That's how we made our living ... The people used to look after each other and look after each other good We never rested. We always had something to do – traveling, hunting, trapping – we had work to do all the time. We had to fix our fish nets too. After all the work was done, the people would gather together in the evening and the older people would tell stories. We used to listen real good to those older people telling stories. That's what we would do for fun. (NY quoted in Fort Resolution Education Authority, 1987, p. 11)

The Fort Resolution Education Authority study of Elder acimowina (stories) proved invaluable not only as ethnohistory for the families and community, but it later helped inform the traditional land use and environmental impact assessments that First Nations needed in order to negotiate with governments and industry over mining and hydropower development projects on their lands. For example, the Fort Resolution study was referenced in a 2013 report to the British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority (BC Hydro) relating to a clean hydro energy project in the Fort Resolution area (Big Sky Consulting, 2013). Furthermore, Indigenous land claims and resources agreements are still being settled in the region with many continuing concerns over the sustainability of the Dene way of life and livelihood. The Akaitcho Dene First Nations, for example, resilient through many years of negotiations with federal and territorial governments, are finally working towards an agreement in principle, although they have been delayed by many things including COVID-19 (Brockman, 2020). Protecting their lands and way of life priorities dominate their agenda. This was echoed in the Deninu K'ue First Nation Traditional Land Use Baseline and Assessment Amendment Report where it was concluded that hunting, trapping, and fishing activities on the land still provided for the essential social and economic needs of the Dene families and, as such, successfully demonstrated their continued use of their traditional lands (Big Sky Consulting, 2013, p. 136).

Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream is that our Peoples Will One Day be Clearly Recognized as Nations

The *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan* book (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000) is an excellent source of information for better understanding pimacihowin as an integral concept of self-determination and life (pimatisiwin). The authors conducted a study across Saskatchewan, gathering the ideas, perspectives, and understandings of First Nations Elders on treaties. The study was supported by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN)⁶ and the governments of Canada and Saskatchewan, along with the Office of the Treaty Commissioner. Cardinal and Hildebrandt held extensive forums in all the languages across the province with translators working with the Cree, Saulteaux, Dene, and Assiniboine Elders. The book privileged the voices of the Elders thereby ensuring the knowledge remains relevant. The Elders were actively engaged to ensure that the First Nations concepts were properly interpreted (p. ix) and understood in the context of their spiritual foundations, traditions, and laws (p. 1). The authors noted that knowledge translation was often complex and complicated (p. ix), thus an attribute to be respected in research.

Land and pimacihowin were seen as fundamental elements of life (pimatisiwin) with all its spiritual and material elements. Essentially, Elders wanted to ensure a good future for their children and grandchildren and treaties were seen as a fundamental means for that. They also wanted First Nations people to re-assert their connections to their traditional lands and territories (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43). The authors suggest that the concept of pimacihowin—way of life, making a living, livelihood—is a treaty right. Pimacihowin is connected to land and is in itself a fundamental element of pimatisiwin (life), a concept containing physical, spiritual, and economic elements. Land is a source of life and well-being. This world view of connectedness in all things is seen as one of the guarantees in the treaties. The concept of pimacihowin also has structure and a system of rules. According to Cardinal and Hildebrandt:

when treaty Elders use the word “pimacihowin,” they are describing a holistic concept that includes a spiritual as well as physical dimension. It is an integral component of traditional First Nations doctrines, laws, principles, values and teachings regarding the sources of life, the responsibilities associated with them, including those elements seen as necessary for enhancing the spiritual components of life and those associated with making a living. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43)

The concept of pimacihowin was contextualized further by the Elders, and a few sample quotes below illustrate the importance of its spiritual and material aspects, and its connection to land, which the Elders believed were inalienable treaty rights.

We were able to look after ourselves through the use of these gifts that God gave us, our ability to feed ourselves and look after our children. We were proud of ourselves because we took care of ourselves, we had the animals to hunt, we had the food God put on the land, the berries and the medicines that we carried out and that we go out and gather. (Elder Dolly Neapetung, quoted in Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, pp. 43, 44)

What we do know is there's two important things: lands and resources and we knew that we knew what the land meant to us, we knew what the wildlife meant to us ... our land, our way of life, would always be protected, would always be there, is what I have for information from my mother. (Elder Bart Dzeylion, quoted in Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 44)

The treaties, they are not finished yet. They are not finished, like the 1930 transfer agreement that should never take place, because we only gave a tip of a plough at this country ... (Elder Gordon Oakes, Treaty 4, quoted in Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 63)

Like Gordon [Oakes] said, the depth of a plough. That was the only part that they let them use. Other than that, below the depth of a plough was supposed to be negotiated after like he said, but it never was ... we did not give up the land, we did not sell the land. (Elder Jimmy Myo Treaty 6, quoted in Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 63)

Pimacihowin is both a personal and collective “we” concept. Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) mention many teachings, *kakesikhkemowina*, on codes of personal behaviour⁷ in pimacihowin (p. 45), including respect and self-sufficiency, *tipiyawewisowin* (p. 44). The fulfilment of the pimacihowin arrangements in the treaties (land and resources) were seen as vital for maintaining connection to the land, ensuring a way of life for the future, and reconciliation of the treaty relationship with Canada (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43–46). According to the authors, the good “way of life” envisioned by the treaties was through economic self-sufficiency so First Nations people could continue to have the ability to make a living on their lands with their families, freely and independently (p. 61).

One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan

Another book that privileges the Indigenous voice and world view is *One of the Family: Métis Culture in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern Saskatchewan*, based on Brenda Macdougall's genealogical study of Métis family systems, culture, and relationships in nineteenth-century northwestern Saskatchewan (Macdougall, 2010). The Cree concept of *wahkootowin* (family, relatedness) is foundational to the Métis perspective and it was used as a framework to guide the genealogical study, with a focus on the community of Sakitawak (Ile-a-la Crosse) (p. 7, 8). Indigenous world views are embedded in languages, and in this case Cree was dominant in the area. Macdougall noted the term could not be found in the historical documents because it was rooted in an Indigenous world view that came from "ceremonies, prayer and daily conversation" (p. xii), something she learned from Métis Elders.

Wahkootowin was used to better understand behaviours in their environmental contexts. The term is fundamentally about Cree family systems, spirituality, relationships, and life on the land, which for most northern Indigenous people was always challenged by many factors, including the fur trade, churches, and their impacts. Nonetheless, the Aboriginal people of the area (Métis, Dene, Cree) still had autonomy and, as the author notes, were able to go about their daily lives (Macdougall, 2010, p. xii). The genealogical study acknowledges an extensive network of relatedness and cultural similarities among the Aboriginal families (p. 71), including inter-family adoptions (p. 82). *Wahkootowin* in action was understood to be a flexible and inclusive family system. According to Macdougall (2010), *wahkootowin* in the region was "an inclusive, holistic philosophy, predicated upon real stricture – being a good relative, which required adherence to the values, protocols, and behaviours expected of family members" (p. 83). The holistic nature of *Wahkootowin* is also described as a reference, not only to family systems but also to the spiritual relatedness to the Creator God and all living things. And while Catholicism played a dominant role in Métis life, Macdougall suggests that the understanding of *Wahkootowin* had "a basic compatibility between many of the Indian and Catholic religious concepts" (2010, p. 136). She describes *wahkootowin* as "part of a religious system that drew the land, creatures and people together as spiritual relatives with all creation and, therefore, included spirit beings as part of the extended family" (2010, p. 132).

It is also evident in Macdougall's study that the values of *wahkootowin* (relatedness) continue to influence the Indigenous people of northwestern Saskatchewan. A quote by a Dene Elder illustrates this resilient strength:

I speak Cree too, that's where I learned it, in Clear Lake. I'm a Dene but we all live together. Nowadays they say Half-breed, Treaty and non-Treaties. In Clear Lake, we all live together and there was no such thing. We were like one family. If they shot a moose, everybody got a piece of the meat, they don't take it to their homes and put it away like we do now and dump it in the deep freeze. And they don't feed nobody. In those days everybody shared, everybody had a piece of meat out of that moose. There was no such thing as Treaty or non-Treaty them days. (Macdougall, 2010, p. 247)

The complexity of the genealogical work, going through archives and myriad other sources, gives credence to the continuing value of the study. It helps provide a deeper understanding the historical Métis way of life, family, and *wahkootowin* culture and networks that existed then and still do in the Sakitawak region. It also shows that the concept of *wahkootowin* continues to prevail notwithstanding the many changes resulting from outside challenges. Today, the resilient Métis way of life is evidenced by the continuing developments in Sakitawak. The village's website points to an extensive history in the fur trade with its claim as the second oldest community in Saskatchewan (1778) next to Cumberland House, another former fur trading post. After the 1821 merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company, Ile-a-la Crosse became the base of the HBC due to its strategic location, as reflected in its Cree name Sakitawak, "where the rivers meet." Among some of its notable historical details, it is also the birthplace of Louis Riel Sr., father of the famed Métis leader Louis Riel (The Northern Village of Ile-a-La Crosse, 2020).

Concluding Comments

The above are good examples of studies, stories, and lessons derived from language and ways of life on the land. They illustrate many of the common threads of world views shared by Indigenous Peoples relevant to *pimatsiwin* (life). The key concepts of *pimachesowin* (making a living, a way of life), for example, are well illustrated in the Elders' stories. *Pimachesowin* in action consists of the related holistic concepts of land and resources, spirituality, autonomy (self-sufficiency), livelihood knowledge and skills, hard work ethic, kinship bonds and networks (*wahkootowin*), and cultural values (respect, responsibility, sharing, and resilience).

The *wahkootowin* concept in Cardinal and Hildebrandt's study encapsulates what the Elders understood to be the nature of the treaty relationship with Canada, with its codes of conduct for guiding that relationship (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 34). The concept was no less significant for the Métis way of life on their

lands in the Sakitawak study, where wahkootowin values shaped Métis family systems and their relations with each other, and with others (Macdougall, 2010). The Fort Resolution Education Authority study (1987) likewise displays similar wahkootowin values in Dene family social structures and ways of life through the stories told by the Elders about their history, such as Elders teaching children the skills of the land and values promoting sharing and people helping each other.

In conclusion, pimachesowin is a concept that essentially refers to a holistic self-sustaining life process and strategic focus that is both spiritual and bluntly practical. The framework detail is in the concept's elements that were peripherally explored here. It is all about both self and collective autonomy and the wherewithal to steer life in a good way, which essentially comprises Indigenous self-determination. One element that is often not considered is the sacrifice and hardships faced by Indigenous people in pimachesowin or making a living for their families. Some of the Elders in the studies mentioned that making a living was hard (Fort Resolution Educational Authority, 1987); nonetheless, being out on the land and being supported by family and others (wahkootowin) made it worthwhile.

I recall my own late grandmother often teased us with the term, *ayiman* (it is hard), and it was used in the context of persuading us children to wake up to go to school, since some of us would stay with her when our parents went to the trapline in the spring. It was her way of telling us she understood it was hard to get up to go to school (but too bad). It was a teasing remark, but it still reminds us today to have faith and not to quit when things get tough—a resilience necessary for pimachesowin. We never forgot her nor her lessons in later life, and it is undoubtedly the same for many others with their family Elders. The respected late Senator Allan Bird from the Montreal Lake First Nation said it best in Cardinal and Hildebrandt's study of Elders' treaty perspectives: "we are here for a very important reason; it is for our grandchildren so that they may have a good future" (p. 71).

Notes

1. Note that the spelling of pimachesowin is used here to simply illustrate the "ch" sound in English. In Cree Standard Roman Orthography (SRO), the spelling is pimacesowin or pimacihisowin where "c" represents the "ch" sound. As well, "e" is used rather than "i" to denote the long "e" sound used in the North.
2. Variant spellings include wāhkōhtowin and wahkohtowin.
3. Indigenous and Aboriginal are used interchangeably here in the Canadian context. The term Indigenous adopts an international reference often used by scholars and governments. The term Aboriginal is defined in the Canadian Constitution Act, 1982, s. 35(2) and specifically refers to "the Indian, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada."

4. From the author's personal memories.
5. The term "Elders" is broadly used in this article in the context of greater age and experience. The term is also used in other contexts such as having special skills and roles in traditional ceremonies.
6. FSIN is now called the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations.
7. A list of the behavioural codes of conduct are listed as examples in Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2007, p. 45).

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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

Blake Charles

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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.

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 Indigenous¹ 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 *Āachithokiwina* (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 2002,² 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 geneology 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 *pimāchihisowin* (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 Tompison 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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Exploring the Concept of Mitho Pimachesowin

Pimachesowin for the Sakha (Yakut) People of Northeastern Siberia

Кри норуот Пимачисуин өйдөбүлэ Сибиир хотугулуу-илин Саха норуотугар

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Abstract: This article provides a case study of the Sakha (Yakut), an Indigenous People in Northeastern Siberia, Russia, and their concept of *Aiyy Yorege*, which shares a similar meaning as *pimachesowin* (making a good life), a Cree word. The Sakha (Yakut) concept is reflected in the fundamental epic tale known as *Olonkho*, which constitutes the framework for the belief, culture, traditional knowledge, laws, and language of the Sakha (Yakut) People. The article introduces the main ideas of the tale and its narrative whereby people find the basis for their self-determination. Furthermore, this article elucidates the political events of the Soviet period and the ways it impacted the Sakha (Yakut) People with their traditional culture silenced under the policy of unification, and how this was followed by a period of resurgence in the late twentieth century after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout the article, parallels are drawn between the Sakha (Yakut) and the Cree People in Northern Saskatchewan, specifically in relation to the aspiration of sustaining a good way of living. 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*.

Introduction

It is becoming an increasingly shared knowledge that Indigenous Peoples of the Circumpolar North share common beliefs, practices, and knowledge (Settee, 2013). This article contributes to that understanding through providing a case study that compares Indigenous Peoples in Northern Saskatchewan with those in Northeastern Russia, identifying common traits in their cultures, beliefs, and ways of living. Specifically, a concept similar to the Cree concept of *pimachesowin* (making a good living) can be found in the Sakha (Yakut) culture and its representation in oral traditions, particularly in the people's masterpiece—the body of knowledge and cosmology of the Sakha (Yakut) People that is embodied in the epic tale *Olonkho*.¹

Olonkho is inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as one of the oldest epic arts, compiling the constituents of belief, culture, traditional knowledge, laws, and language of the Sakha (Yakut) People. *Olonkho* represents, “the way of life of a small nation struggling for survival at times of political unrest and under difficult climatic and geographical conditions” (UNESCO, 2008, p. 1). The fundamental framework that came out of *Olonkho* is *Aiyy Yorege*, an approach for a sustainable way of living and for establishing the fundamentals of life. This article first provides an overview of the Cree concept of *pimachesowin*. Second, it provides the background for understanding the assimilation processes of the Sakha (Yakut) People in the late Soviet period. Then the article investigates the resurgence of the Sakha (Yakut) culture and the role of *Olonkho* and *Aiyy Yorege* in it during the late 1990s. The last section reveals similarities in the cultural approaches of the Sakha (Yakut) and Cree Peoples, and emphasizes their meanings for the self-determination of both Peoples.

Overview of the Cree Concept of *Pimachesowin*

Settee (2013) discusses that Indigenous knowledge systems include traditional forms of knowledge, passed from one generation to another, with ways of knowing, relationships, codes of conduct, and daily living, which have helped to sustain Indigenous communities for millennia. This knowledge is embedded in the Cree People's concept of *pimachesowin*, an ability to make a good living (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). Similar to Cree, Anishinaabe Peoples in North America have the concept of *bimaadiziwin*, or the Good Life, described as “a long and healthy life” (Gross, 2002, p. 15). Gross (2002) argues that the concept was revitalized as a means to rebuild Indigenous communities today, where people live with what

he terms the post-apocalypse stress syndrome (PASS). He refers to colonization as the apocalypse, i.e., the collapse of the existing world of Indigenous Peoples.

The concept of “making a good living” is especially relevant today in the context of the threat of environmental and technological disasters. The main cause of climate change is human activities, including resource extraction operations that are prominent in the North and disproportionately affect Indigenous Peoples living there (IPCC, n.d.). Shorter winter periods affect the ice cover, and, as a result, the mobility of animals and the opportunity for Indigenous people to hunt and sustain traditional lifestyles, which is an inextricable part of their lives. In this context, understanding the life concepts of different Indigenous Peoples is of critical importance and is fundamental for decolonization.

The Sakha (Yakut) People of Northeastern Siberia

Preserving their traditional cultures has been a priority for Indigenous Peoples and ethnic minorities in Siberia. The Sakha (Yakut) People are an ethnic group, located in Northeastern Siberia, Russia, who I am a part of. The Sakha (Yakut) People comprise the majority of the population in the federal state of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). This means that the Sakha (Yakut) People possess a separate administrative entity, a distinctive culture and language, and a right to self-determination that can be practised within the Republic. The lands are abundant with natural resources. However, in comparison with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the Sakha (Yakut) People have rather nominal rights, with no signed treaties, an absence of formal land rights, and no revenue shares from resource extraction. The state was created in April 1922 as the result of the Sakha (Yakut) activists' struggle for independence and state autonomy.

There is a distinction between international and Russian definitions of “Indigenous.” By granting the right for a separate administrative entity, the Soviet government also disenfranchised the Sakha (Yakut) People on “Indigenoussness,” setting a mere demographic criterion of 50,000 representatives to be officially considered “Indigenous” or “Small-numbered” Peoples. With a population of approximately 450,000, the Sakha (Yakut) People do not fit in this category; therefore, they have no Indigenous rights and benefits. This similarly applies to any Indigenous People in Russia with a population of more than 50,000. However, this definition is contrary to international law, in particular the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples' Convention, which both set the criteria for “Indigenous” based on the origin, history, and traditional lifestyle of a People and whether they have undergone a colonization process, regardless of the number of individuals.

The cosmological origin of the Sakha (Yakut) People is described in the myths of the Olonkho epic tale. The plots of the myths are unravelled in a three-dimensional world in which the upper world deities struggle with the lower world creatures, with the main idea of keeping stability for human life in the middle world. One of the theories of the Sakha (Yakut) People origin is that they came from in the Asian steppes where, as the result of interior battles, they travelled north to the basins of the Lena River to find pastoral lands for living. However, most researchers agree with the theory that the Sakha (Yakut) People's origin is based on the mixture of Turkic-Mongolian and Tungus-Manchurian tribes with local Paleasian tribes, most likely Ugro-Samoyedic (Gogolev, 1992). Thus, the Sakha (Yakut) People possibly have a mixed ancestry of Asian and European.

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Olonkho

Olonkho is the people's heroic epic tale that contains elements of folklore, rites, customs, and ceremonies. The Sakha (Yakut) People refer to Olonkho as the most ancient work, created since time immemorial, representing occurrences and ways of life of the people in broad artistic generalizations. Olonkho represents formation, development, and preservation of the people and their culture. The main ideas and images of Olonkho express the deepest life interests and expectations of people. It declares the Sakha (Yakut) self-identification as a nation but, most importantly, Olonkho provides the basis of the Sakha (Yakut) People's origin, which is transmitted into the resilience, perseverance, and adaptability of the people today.

The Sakha (Yakut) People have a holistic world view and origin story. The Sakha (Yakut) researcher Novikov (1995) explains,

The Sakha people, because of its small number, do not own messianic consciousness. Besides, the Sakha (Yakut) people did not have statehood. Their worldview is rather opposite. It reflects the idea of *panpsychism*—unity of nature and spirit. It means that, in the Sakha (Yakut) religion, there is no distinction and opposition between physical and spiritual. (p. 15)

In the Sakha (Yakut) history, mythology is a representation of the traditional Indigenous world view, including wisdom, moral values, ethics, and principles (Ergis, 1974). The world view presumably originated from the belief system of Tengrism, also called Zoroastrianism, with the main idea being a person's free choice to think good thoughts, tell good words, and make good deeds. Thus, the Sakha (Yakut) People worship *Tangara* (literally, the sky) that has a derived meaning of God in the system of *aiyy*, deities of the traditional beliefs, where he is

the highest in ranking. *Aiyy Tangara* means “God” or “Creator.” He is depicted as an elderly man and as the main deity in the hierarchy of heavenly arbiters, rulers of the three worlds' residents' fates (Baisheva et al., 2017). The Sakha (Yakut) belief model is represented with three worlds in the form of the mythological tree called *Aal Luuk Mas*: upper (the residence of good deities); middle (people's place of living); and lower (the residence of evil beings).² These “worlds” are the layers of the tree, located on the crown, in the trunk, and in the roots inhabited by supernatural beings, such as *itchi* (nature spirit masters), *aiyy* (celestial deities), and *abaahy* (evil beings), respectively. In this model, humans are residents of the middle world, which occurs as the outcome of the resistance between the upper and lower worlds.

Thousands of verses, with a variety of heroes and plots, comprise Olonkho. One of the principal characters who is believed to be a predecessor for the Sakha (Yakut) People is *Er Sogotokh*—literally “the man without any relatives,” sent off to the middle world—the protogenic hero and ancestor of the Sakha (Yakut) People. He is believed to be the first person on Earth, the son of the higher *aiyy* settled by the supreme deities in the middle world to populate the country, who meets resistance from the evil beings *abaahy* and has to fight to preserve peace and unity of his people. His father is *Aar Toion* (or also known as *Aiyy Tangara*, the Creator) and his mother is *Kubei Khotun*. In the folklore, *Aar Toion* is the constant epithet of the word Father and *Kubei Khotun* of the word Mother. According to Kulakovskiy (1979), *Aar Toion* is “the creator of the universe and of all humans, the head of the heavens and of the remaining gods” (p. 17). The overall idea of all the Olonkho plots revolve around the resistance of good and evil and the triumph of good over evil, where the main hero is sent from heaven for the main battle on the land. The battle ends with the main hero's win and a celebration in his name. This includes a summer solstice celebration called *Yhyakh*, and a marriage of the main hero to the daughter of the other deity.

Olonkho is more than simple mythology; it represents a higher level of aesthetic relation to reality and development of intangible culture. People worshiping nature created fantastic images of deities and spirits to whom they appealed with prayer and entreaty. The ancient Sakha People treated spirit masters with respect and reverence, and they held ceremonies for them. This mythological world view required people to perform certain rites. Thus, interconnected myth and rite became a basis for development of a special kind of poetic art—rite poetry. In the Sakha (Yakut) language, rite is called *sier duom*, where custom is *sier* and ceremony is *duom*; blessings or prayers performed at the ceremony are called *algys* (from the verb *algaa*—to bless, conjure, praise). With the help of *algys*, a person can be saved from negativity or can make their prayers be heard. According to the traditional world view, everything must be enlightened with *algys* words

assisting *sier duom* with special sacrifices of food and milk (Ergis, 1974). Being an independent genre of intangible cultural works of the Sakha (Yakut) People, Olonkho includes elements of other types of folklore. There are a number of story themes and images similar to characters of historical legends and songs. All these elements are organically included in Olonkho.

The Sakha (Yakut) “Pimachesowin”: A Way of Resilience?

Similar to the long-lasting attempts to assimilate Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Russia’s federal authorities, driven by the ideology of a unified nation, suppressed the traditional culture of the Sakha (Yakut) People. Specifically, a policy that was extremely critical with respect to the spiritual culture became the main challenge for the Sakha (Yakut) People during Soviet rule. Under the ideology of the “struggle against religion and its vestiges,” new Soviet campaigns with politicized ideological ideas took place all over the country, in which the Sakha (Yakut) traditional ceremonial culture underwent significant transformation and lost the basic connectedness to the belief model. The ceremonies and holidays lost their original contents and true meaning. This period was characterized by the neglect of culture and a tense relationship between the Sakha (Yakut) People and the Russian people in Yakutia. The situation was slightly different for people living in rural communities, where the pressure had less impact on the lifestyles of those keeping their traditional roots. In urban communities, however, the communist ideology of the equity of all nations and races became prevalent.

The Soviet system was based on the idea of nation-building, united with the ideology of centralization and a vertical system of power. Consequently, it accepted the ethnic diversity as part of nation-building yet propagated a unified ideology of one nation, Soviet people. This has allowed the Sakha (Yakut) and other ethnicities with a predominant population in one territory to form a sovereign federal entity, based predominately on their territorial division. A critical movement towards recognizing the culture and language began since the end of the twentieth century. In general, a declaration of the national revitalization of the languages’ program and territorial independence raised national and ethical awareness and seeded the predeterminants for language and culture revitalization (Sleptsov & Vailyeva, 2000). President Mikhail Nikolaev, the first president of the Sakha Republic, became a role model who accelerated the enshrinement of the language policy in the Law on Languages of the Sakha Republic in October 1992 (*Law on languages in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)*, 1992). This law occurred as a consequence of an earlier enacted constitution of the Sakha Republic, which guaranteed the independence of the people in the territory in accordance with federal legislation.

All these movements in legislature facilitated the process of revitalization of the written art work, including the most prominent, the Olonkho epic. The physical representation of Olonkho as the phenomenon of the Sakha (Yakut) People’s self-determination through culture became the embodiment of the national holiday Yhyakh as a ceremonial national holiday. In Olonkho, Yhyakh plays the role of celebration of the universe. It can be arranged both in the sky and on the Earth. It is believed that the Supreme Universe Founder *Urung Aar Toion* (the Father) married the daughter of *aiyy* living in the upper world (the Mother), and arranged a big wedding in the form of Yhyakh. In one of the Olonkho tales, *Kuruubai Haannaah Kulun Kullustuur* is described as a heavenly feast. The ritual details of the celebration were important, including the specific elements used—in the middle of a wide glade, the sacred pole named *serge* was raised. Around the pole were placed twelve *tuhulge* (a designated area bounded by wooden poles and ropes made of horse hair, a sacred square where rituals and celebrations take place) and young birches were planted. Numerous families of *aiyy* tribes gathered together, and the strongest men competed in different sports activities, including wrestling and jumping. In honour of the supreme deities, songs were devoted, and spells are improvised. The visitors were treated with the traditional wooden goblets called *choron*, filled with fat foamy *kumys* (fermented mare’s milk). Epic Yhyakh proceeded for seven days. Horse racing and other kinds of competitions were arranged. In general, any Olonkho story plot’s climax is the description of a traditional celebration of Yhyakh, which symbolizes the beginning of a happy life for all the Sakha (Yakut) People (Utkin, 1998).

Despite a long, difficult history and repeated foreign influences, the Sakha (Yakut) holiday Yhyakh has kept the ritually ceremonial form, with round dances, *kumys* drinking, and horse racing competitions, which later became core practices of Yhyakh (see Figure 1). Today, the summer celebration of Yhyakh is a national self-expression of the spirit and creativity of the people and their aesthetic and ethnic ideals. The holiday brings out the values of family and connection of all people as a unity, which implies that people from one nation are one family. This is emphasized with ceremonial round dances, where people dance in circles and sing along together repeating and echoing a lead singer. Among other traditions of Yhyakh are the ceremony of “feeding” the spirits, praying to the supernatural beings, and singing gratitude songs to the patrons of horses and horned cattle that are the traditional companions of the Sakha (Yakut) People. All of these provide a sense of common belief that strengthens the self-identification of people as a nation.



Figure 1a. The round dance at the Yhyakh celebration. Source <http://yakutia.com/tourism/835/>



Figure 1b. Inside the circle during the round dance at the Yhyakh celebration. Photo Author, 2015

For me personally, the first realization of being a carrier of a different yet unique ancestry and culture came during my first Yhyakh in 1996, where a number of people gathered together in a circle and sang a traditional song in the Sakha (Yakut) language. That made a strong impression on me as a child when I understood I have a bigger family, i.e., members with the same ideas, beliefs, and world view. I grew up in an urban environment, but the traditional way of life has always been present in my life. It is only the realization that came to me later. Since childhood, we would go out to the land to do any kind of activities. For the Sakha (Yakut) People, there are essentially “two seasons”—preparation for winter and winter itself. This is conditioned by the extreme climate conditions, where winter is nine months long with an average temperature of -40°C and summer is simply too short. Once it begins to warm up outside, my family and I go out on the land because there is always something to do. In May, we start picking herbs and plants; from June to August, it is hay harvesting, and berry and mushroom picking; in September, people harvest farm products and butcher cattle.

Every summer, I spent time at my grandparents’ off-grid country house in a reserved area that is relatively close, yet quite secluded from the urban area. There was no power and no heat; they had cows and horses to sustain their lives. Dairy and farm products were the substantial source of their diet. My grandparents played a significant role in me becoming a carrier of the traditional knowledge and culture. My grandfather was always teaching me not to be idle. For him and his ancestors, constant physical labour was a lifestyle. It helped them to maintain their spiritual and mental stability in difficult life conditions. He always lived according to the rules of nature, where the main rules were to respect nature, not to waste anything, and be modest. For instance, as children, we would want to play outside in open land, but grandfather would forbid us to talk loudly or scream, especially in the evening; he used to say that we would disturb the spirits of the land. We were not supposed to go out to the forest in the evening either, as *abaahy*, the evil spirits, would be out hunting for food. In response, my grandmother was always teaching us to feed the good spirits of fire and nature called *itchi*, i.e., the protectors of human beings and land. One of the rituals if you’re going to travel was to place the fried bread *alaadi* on the side of the road; or before starting an open fire you’re supposed to provide food for the fire to befriend the spirits and receive their blessings. People believe that everything has its spirits, and everyone needs to communicate with them.

Language was, and continues to be, one of the main prerequisites for maintaining the traditional lifestyle. I was taught the native Sakha (Yakut) language since I was born; it is my first and native language. The connection of language and culture is inseparable. My grandparents, mother and father, and all my relatives speak Sakha (Yakut) language. This is partly due to the fact that they

were raised in the villages, where the language bond continues to be strong. I believe that speaking the language provides you with a thread to deeper understanding of the culture, epic tales, and nature. The ideology of the three worlds and the spirits continue to be present in our everyday life up until today.

Parallels to Cree Culture

The traditional celebration Yhyakh, along with the wider traditional belief and mythology, outlines the ancient traditions of mutual help, which is part of ayii yorege, the sacred teachings, which also represents mercy as a national trait of the Sakha (Yakut) People (Novikov, 1995), and correlates with notions of northern solidarity and tolerance developed by Indigenous scholars (Robbek, 1996). This bears similarities with the Cree term of relationship values *wâhkôhtowin*. Settee (2013) writes “Our symbol of the circle reflects the equality of all people and their capability to care for, nurture, protect, and heal the people and the land” (p. 12). In addition, according to Macdougall (2006), the adoption of *wâhkôhtowin* permits an interpretation of socio-cultural and economic activity as part of a larger cultural world view: “a set of values encompassed by an overarching world view based on familial—especially inter-familial—connectedness, *wahkootowin* established appropriate social behaviours that, in turn, affected economic decisions” (p. 434).

In fact, there are a number of similarities between the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) culture. Similar to Cree, there is one Creator. In Cree, it is *wiyôhtâwimâw* (the Father/Creator). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) emphasize,

the relationship between the Creator and First Nations peoples is understood to be like that which exists between the various members of a family and is thus governed by laws of *wâhkôhtowin*, laws detailing the duties and responsibilities which take effect for each member of the family unit. (p. 18)

Thus, we can see that the concepts of Creator and kinship are closely interconnected. Particularly, the concept of family is a conceptual framework through which relations between nations and peoples are represented where, “the Creator created different peoples and placed them on different lands all around the world” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 19). It follows that there is an interconnection between the Creator and land because people do not own the land, but the Father/Creator does.

The same idea of spirits is found in the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) culture in which the First Nations rely on the spiritual strength represented by the Creator’s children—the spirit community that surrounds them, such as those of the eagle,

the buffalo, the wind, the thunder, and the trees. Despite different backgrounds, the Cree ceremonies provide similar purposes. Sweetgrass, fire, the pipe, and tobacco serve as the primary connection between peoples and their Creator and His Creation. Spiritual traditions help to connect or become the medium for people to communicate with and relate to the Creator and His Creation, and for the connectedness of people to Mother Earth and her forces.

There is another parallel in the Cree culture where stories have important value for understanding Indigenous Knowledge. Settee (2013) emphasizes that “stories have taught Indigenous Peoples how to conduct themselves in a good way for the good of the community” (p. 3). The Elders tell stories of the Cree People’s creation, including the stories about the great flood as the consequence of people’s misbehaviour and abuse of ways of life, which leads to Grandfather Spirit in one way or another. Stories teach us to live in accordance with the Traditional Knowledge in the modern world. *Wîsahkêcâhk*, a Cree culture hero, created men and women with the help of the Creator, and some stories include the help of animals, such as otter, beaver, and muskrat. This is similar to *Olonkho*, where animals are an inseparable part of every story, including a horse being the sacred animal and one of the deities of the upper world. We can see that *Olonkho* is also a representation of knowledge transfer through generations.

Conclusion

The study of the interconnection of beliefs and mythology of the Sakha (Yakut) and the Cree People emphasizes the mutual foundation of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge. Both the Cree and Sakha (Yakut) People have one Creator who populated the land with the help of humans. People and nature with spirits are inseparable concepts; there is no division between the universe of humans and the universe of animals or spirits. They and people themselves are interconnected, which is described by the concepts *wâhkôhtowin* in Cree and *ayii yorege* in the Sakha (Yakut) culture. Stories in both languages have a special place in the explanation of the world and origin of people.

However, for the Sakha (Yakut) People, these have an embodiment in one epic tale that is *Olonkho*, the main source of the people’s world view, which is strongly interconnected with mythology and belief of the Sakha (Yakut) People. In general, the epic tale explains the origin of the Sakha (Yakut) People and represents the idea of a man overcoming impediments and preserving his identity, language, and culture through belief. *Olonkho* strengthens belief in humans, and our power and our capacity to overcome everything. The principal idea of *Olonkho* is the establishment of a sustainable life and eradication of the evil in the universe, implying the idea of a fight for social justice for Indigenous Peoples. The content could be described, interpreted, and integrated in various ways but nevertheless it

represents a social and historical phenomenon. Olonkho is archaic but remains an actual way of thinking and being. It provides an understanding of collectivity as the prerequisite of social integration. Mythology and belief are collective memory, which preserves ancient spiritual experience. Mythology and belief provide an understanding of the sense of origin, which establishes and strengthens the Sakha (Yakut) *pimachesowin*, the way of making a good life.

Notes

1. This article contains ideas, views and opinions of the author that might be different from others.
2. Illustrations of the Upper World, Middle World *Yhyakh*, and Lower World, from Olonkho Worlds and the World Tree (1979) *Aal Luuk Mas*, from a series The Sakha (Yakut) Heroic Epos Olonkho, by Timofei A. Stepanov, can be found here https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/_awHKUGwuhiliQQ and at the National Art Museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) <http://www.sakhamuseum.ru/>

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Acknowledgements

To my grandparents.

Author

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Exploring the Concept of Mitho Pimachesowin

Northwest Saskatchewan Métis Perspectives of Miyo-Pimatisiwin

Kiwetinohk Saskatchewan Otipemisiwak Kayisi Wapahtakwaw Miyo Pimatisiwin

Debra Ross

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis Nation

Abstract: This article looks at the concept of *miyo-pimatiswin* (a good life) as it relates to the Northwest Métis culture's views, values, and way of life. The concept shows that *miyo-pimatisiwin* (in Plains "y" dialect, *miyo* is "good") encompasses the four elements of the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical ways of living one's life on the land and in community. These four elements are nurtured through prayer and a shared community contribution of wealth that fosters the spiritual aspect, which, in turn, contributes to good emotional and mental health. This has often happened through the use of oral storytelling and oral history, which reveal important life lessons such as empathy and compassion, as well as humour. These conveyed lessons contribute to the physical aspects of self, and encourage a strong work ethic. Oral stories have been an important tradition, including teaching, listening, and striving towards keeping the elements in balance. The research for this article is based on the literature, my own background, and stories or lessons passed on by my own father, Dan Ross, and how he lived the concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin*. I conclude by arguing that the traditional concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* (a good life) is essential for Métis people in present day, as it was throughout Métis history. Working as a community in modern-day life, we can collectively and collaboratively continue to work towards self-determination and a healthy self-governance system, as well as a Métis Nation Constitution that promotes *miyo-pimatiswin*. 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*.

This article explores the meaning of the concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* (a good life) as it relates to Métis culture, views, and values in northwestern Saskatchewan.¹ My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents lived and modelled *miyo-pimatisiwin*. This way of life was shown by example; it is lived experience, which gave me my understanding. My interpretation is that *miyo-pimatisiwin* requires me to have the knowledge and understanding to live and model the concept.

The concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* encompasses the four elements of the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical ways of living one's life on the land, and in community. According to Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000), "when treaty Elders use the word 'Pimacihowin' they are describing a holistic concept that includes a spiritual as well as a physical dimension" (p. 43). The concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* is a cultural value that incorporates all aspects of a way of life—it contributes to self-determination and is an important concept for many Métis, Cree, and other people who share this common language, to understand and embrace as a way of life and being. And, despite living in the modern landscape, whether rural or urban, this concept can be significant for the retention of cultural values and living a good life today. *Miyo-pimatisiwin* is a world view that is important for understanding a way of life—living a good life. It also encompasses the concept of *wakohtohwin* (all my relations). These Métis concepts were lived by my Elders and have contributed to my identity and way of being.

The research for this article is based on the literature, my own background, and the stories and lessons passed on by my father, Dan Ross, and how he lived the concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin*. I begin by providing a short historical background of Green Lake and the Métis of the area. Second, I discuss the literature context of *miyo-pimatisiwin* and some of its key elements. Third, I discuss and share some of the oral stories from my own background and their influence in my life, and their continuing significance today. I conclude by arguing that the traditional concept of *miyo-pimatisiwin* (a good life) is essential for Métis people in the present day, as it has been throughout Métis history.

Background

Green Lake, Saskatchewan, is a small Métis community situated in northwest Saskatchewan about three hours north of Saskatoon. The Green Lake Métis settlement has a long history with the fur trade with both the North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company. Green Lake is "one of the oldest communities in Saskatchewan with the North West Company first establishing a post in 1782, and the Hudson's Bay Company opening a competing post in 1799. The fur trade

industry has had a prominent history in this area continuing up to the 1970's when the Hudson's Bay Company post closed" (Northern Municipal Services, n.d.).

The fur trade in Green Lake was significant to the Métis community for their livelihood and the ability to build capacity and progress for *miyo-pimatisiwin*. Thornton (1997) writes that the "Métis people originally settled in Green Lake because of the pattern of development of the fur trade. Green Lake was a major nexus on the fur trade transportation system, which encouraged Métis settlement and community development" (p. 1). The people in Green Lake are predominately Métis who endeavour to remain community minded people: "Métis history is steeped in values—like giving back to the community, helping each other, and advocating for Métis culture" (Sciarpelletti, 2021).

I grew up in Green Lake. My parents had nine children of which I am the eldest. Along with the role of being the oldest came added responsibility. For example, it was expected that I help my mother take care of my younger siblings and do chores such as housework, laundry, gardening, and so forth. This work ethic was inherently acknowledged; it was a way of life. Therefore, everyone pitched in and pulled their weight, which helped us all live *miyo-pimatisiwin* (a good life). In addition, we were taught to respect our Old People/Elders, the land, and animals, and to be kind to people, to share, and have faith. In her work, Settee notes that, "for Indigenous peoples, land, food, and health are key components of *Pimatisiwin*" (Settee, 2007, p. 5). We were also guided to attend to our spirituality; I recall we went to church every Sunday with our parents.

Elements of Miyo-Pimatiswin (A Good Life)

There are four elements of *miyo-pimatisiwin*, which have been practised in order to live a good life—it is important to balance the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical components of being a well-adjusted human being. Lavallée (2007) writes that "an individual's health and wellness is based on maintaining balance between the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual realms" (p. 128). These four elements are nurtured through prayer and a shared community contribution of wealth that fosters the spiritual aspect, which in turn contributes to good emotional and mental health. This has often happened through the use of storytelling and oral history, which reveal important life lessons such as empathy and compassion, as well as humour. These lessons contribute to the physical aspects of self and encourage a strong work ethic. Oral stories are an important tradition, including teaching, listening, and striving towards keeping these elements in balance.

Moreover, I remember this was expected of all of us—to sustain a good life. Also, the importance of humour, laughter, sharing/connection, and spiritual lessons were encouraged and practised. Accordingly, this was viewed as a significant

aspect of maintaining good physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and an essential part of living miyo-pimatisiwin.

Humour and Laughter

One of the aspects of miyo-pimatisiwin is humour. Peat emphasizes that “humour has been, and is such a significant aspect of Aboriginal cultures that there are numerous stories based upon the antics of various clowns and tricksters” (as cited in Hart, 2002, p. 57). I grew up hearing many stories of Wisakejak. There was humour and laughter integrated in the stories, but there were also lessons revealed in the oral stories about the heroes/tricksters. For example, Macdougall (2010) states “... the cultural belief was Wisakejak [is] an important spirit being and cultural figure” (p. 35).

These memories and lessons learned while growing up in my Métis community and living miyo-pimatisiwin contributes to who I am today. The stories, connection, humour, and laughter made life happier and much more pleasant.

The laughter of my parents, relatives, and extended family as they visited with each other was a source of comfort, and presented a safe feeling and a sense of belonging. They were always so full of life, even though they faced many hardships raising their families. For many people the ability to make a good living in the northern environment could prove to be harsh at times, as Macdougall (2010) comments, “it was a region where food shortages, harsh climatic conditions ... tested the resolve of the population to build their lives” (p. 25).

However, these adversities did not interfere with their humorous ways of being and living miyo-pimatisiwin; they were happy. Furthermore, they were supportive of each other and always willing to help others in any way they could. There was always a sharing of food, stories, and laughter. And, because most everyone had large families, there was a sense of relatedness and belonging.

Spirituality and Community

The spiritual faith I witnessed and experienced with the community of people who went to church every Sunday was an essential part of life; it seemed the whole community would be there. The faith, values, beliefs, and prayers were a fundamental part of the community. For example, there were always activities going on in church, including bake sales, bingos, and goods such as handmade moccasins and mittens. People would volunteer and contribute their time, visit with each other, and share their stories. Settee states the “one value that is common to all Indigenous Peoples is the value of working for the betterment of the community” (p. 13). The sense of a strong spiritual, faithful, and shared community contributed to living miyo-pimatisiwin; “the Metis of the northwest

internalized and adapted their Christian ideas to an existing spiritual worldview centred on familial relationships” (Macdougall, 2010, p.131).

Oral Teachings and Lessons

A more enriched understanding of miyo-pimatisiwin in practice is further illustrated by a personal interview with my father, Dan Ross. I questioned him about the Métis way of life in his day, and in my Mushum’s and Kookum’s time. What was it like? How did they survive off the land? What was the importance of miyo-pimatisiwin in their lives? Did it contribute to enhanced self-determination?

Dan Ross, my father, requested that I take him to see his sister, who was not in good health, on September 21, 2012 (Ross, 2012). She had moved into a nursing home in Spiritwood, Saskatchewan, in the north-central parkland, about two hours from Green Lake (Tourism Saskatchewan, n.d.). I was busy and considered not going at this time, but I realized it was my responsibility and the respectful thing to do for both my Old People/Elders. I made the decision to respect his request.

On the drive to Spiritwood, my dad shared his view of miyo-pimatisiwin through oral storytelling. He told me how it was in the time of his grandfather—my Great-Grandfather Placid Morin. He recalled his time spent with his grandfather as a child, and later as a young man and adult living his life—the good life, the life they called miyo-pimatisiwin. Ross stated, “It was a good life where respect for all things was done ... land, animals ... and sharing, and helping others was important ... it was a way of life that was practised, that’s the way it was” (Ross, 2012). He continued, “nothing was ever wasted and nobody took more than what was needed” (Ross, 2012). Similarly, Vizina (2010) states that “Métis perspectives of the environment extend beyond the content of sciences such as biology, chemistry, physics or geology into values and spiritual beliefs resulting in a unique Métis holistic worldview” (Vizina, 2010, pp. 12–15).

I understood from my dad’s shared words of wisdom that the world view was taken seriously, and they revealed that the sustainability of land and animals was paramount, and that sharing one’s wealth was part of giving back to ensure all people in the community also lived a good life.

This form of oral history related through storytelling has “taught Indigenous peoples how to conduct themselves in a good way for the good of the community” (Settee, 2007, p. 5). It was a way of sharing knowledge and teaching traditional values. Therefore, in this traditional way, I was learning more about my history and the concept of miyo-pimatisiwin (the good life) they practised and modelled for each generation.

The significance of fulfilling my dad's request to visit my aunt, his sister, was apparent to me. This was an important value that showed respect, and it was a reciprocal interaction. I also realized that I had also put into practice miyo-pimatisiwin by choosing to respect and honour my dad's request, and listen to his oral story of my history. And, as is the way with my Old People/Elders, they choose the time and place to share their knowledge and history. It became clear to me that my decision to take my dad to visit his sister was reciprocal and it gave us time with no distractions. It was a good environment for him to talk and share, and also for me to hear him; I understood it was reciprocity in action and important knowledge about miyo-pimatisiwin, the good life of living, with my core values and culture.

My Father's Shared World View

As we drove down the highway, my dad continued talking about our family history and I appreciated his knowledge and his sharing stories with me. For example, Ross (2012) told me that they would "travel from Meadow Lake with a team of horses to go visit relatives in Muskeg Lake; Kookum (Margaret Morin/Laliberte) had relations there. They carried with them the essentials, flour, sugar, tea, and potatoes; when it was time to eat, they would stop, shoot grouse, duck, rabbit, or fish and that would be their meal" (Ross, 2012).

What is more, Ross stated, "they had relatives all along the way, and would stop in to visit; they were welcomed, people were happy to see each other." And, "when they arrived at their relatives', food was shared. ... nobody went hungry, food was plentiful, that's the way it was." My dad paused for a while and I waited. He then said, "the old ways were good ways, people cared about each other, it was a good life" (Ross, 2012).

As Macdougall (2010) observes, "their worldview was, and is, rooted in family and relationships begun on the land, where the marriage of individuals spread outward to encompass all their relatives" (p. 9). Thus, the strong family connections and knowledge of the land made it achievable to live miyo-pimatisiwin (a good life). By hearing my dad's (Dan Ross's) communicated view of family history, my memory is triggered and I recall much of this way of life.

Hunting, Farming, Ranching: Sharing the Good Life

As we continued on our drive, Ross (2012) told me that "When someone killed a moose, or deer, they shared it, nothing went to waste, they used it all, the fat to make lard, the hide to make coats, and moccasins; they had big gardens, people shared/traded stuff." He also said: "the same thing when they hunted, farmed, ranched, they shared and helped each other out." And, "When they butchered livestock, they shared" (Ross, 2012).

Morisset and Pelletier (1987) also quote Ted Trindell that when hunting, "... everybody went and got the meat together, they shared it" (p. 70). Ross continued that, "people would go blueberry, raspberry, strawberry, cranberry picking, and then they would can the berries, they had cellars, so they stocked up" (Ross, 2012). According to Ross, "they ate well; they did not consider themselves poor." He resumed his storytelling and indicated that even though they may have been viewed by mainstream society as living in poverty, "in terms of money, that was true, we didn't have a lot of money." "But," he added, "they had a good life; they had miyo-pimatisiwin ... It was a good life (Ross, 2012)."

According to Trindell, "The white man's way, you get the money, you accumulate the money, but you spend it buying grub ... It's the same thing, only different ways" (Morisset & Pelletier, 1987, p. 104). The people lived off the land and had great respect and connection for the land they called home. Likewise, Settee (2007) states, "Indigenous people worldwide share common beliefs, practices, and similarities of knowledge ..." (p. 5). My dad further stated, "you can't eat money, it doesn't always give a good life, maybe sometimes an easier life today, not always a good life" (Ross, 2012).

My Mushum, Great-Grandfather

The drive to Spiritwood was flying by as my dad continued to share his stories of my ancestors and the old ways of life. Ross communicated that my great-grandfather (Mushum) Placid Morin worked in many different positions in his lifetime (Ross, 2012). My dad told me that "he had the contract to build the telegraph line to Buffalo Narrows." Wuorinen (1985) also writes that "Placid Morin, from Green Lake, constructed the line from Fort Black to Buffalo Narrows." My dad told me that Placid Morin, my grandfather, was also "a rancher/farmer, freighter, logger, trapper, fisherman, and hunter" (Ross, 2012). He further stated that, "In addition to my Mushum's skills and contracts, he was able to give jobs to his people" (Ross, 2012). Thus, in my view, this skill and capability to enable jobs for his people created the capacity to continue living miyo-pimatisiwin collectively. Therefore, it was "at these geographic locations and moments, that Métis communities were established and thrived in an environment that needed their labour" (Macdougall, 2010, p. 50). And so, it appears to me, that within my great-grandfather's world view, it was important to share miyo-pimatisiwin. As my dad emphasized to me, "Mushum lived off the land, shared what he had" (Ross, 2012).

Consequently, it was apparent to me throughout the drive and listening to my father tell the story and history that community was an important part of who they were and the life they lived, where “family is the central theme, with land and language taking strong supportive roles” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 15). My father, Dan Ross (2012), continued his story about my great-grandfather as we drove down the highway: “Mushum was the Community Witcher, he witched [looked] for water; when he found the water, people came to help dig the well, it became the community well, it was shared” (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Author's Great-Grandfather Placid Morin “witching” for water using a divining rod, Green Lake, Saskatchewan, October 1955. Reprinted here with permission of the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, images 55-314-02 and 55-314-07.

My dad added, “Mushum worked hard, but he liked his life” (Ross, 2012). As I recalled memories of my Mushum, I could agree that he did appear content with his life. I continued to actively listen and hear these stories and the rich history. This brought the realization of the strong sense of community and collaboration they had; and how it contributed to the good life (miyo-pimatisiwin). It was “an Indigenous world view that created family among strangers” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 50). And by creating this network of collaboration “the Métis forged their own society, formatted a world view and established a unique cultural identity in the northwest” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 71).

This trip to visit my aunt was enhancing my knowledge of the traditional Métis community of northwest Saskatchewan who lived miyo-pimatisiwin. This knowledge was shared with me by my father, an Elder, through traditional oral history—storytelling was the practice and way of teaching and passing knowledge. Therefore, the oral history supports and enhances my understanding of where I come from, my values, and how my world view plays out in my life.

I spent a lot of time with my Mushum. For example, a way I would spend time with him was playing cards (cribbage in particular) and throughout the card game he would tell me stories about his life and he would explain his perspective regarding the Cree Bible to me; I would listen to all his stories. (At times, I can still see and hear him reading his Bible.) I never found this time with him boring and, I realize, I really did enjoy those times and the Traditional Knowledge I learned from my Mushum. I am aware how lucky I was, and currently am, to have the opportunity of generations of teachings. I am grateful to continue to hear my father's stories and words of wisdom. Placid Morin, my great-grandfather (Mushum) read his Bible every morning and every night. In his Elder years (retirement) he continued this practice. Additionally, despite his age, he liked to keep active, so he made headstones for community people when they died; he became the cemetery headstone maker for the Green Lake community and I would help him make the headstones. He would share stories with me about that person who had departed. This did not seem unusual to me.

My Kookum—Great-Grandmother

As we continue on our drive, I am curious about my great-grandmother (Kookum), Margaret Laliberte. My father, Dan Ross, told me that Kookum, my great-grandmother, Margaret Morin-Laliberte, “was a midwife, she delivered babies it didn't matter what time of the night it was or if it was bad weather” (Ross, 2012). He recalled that “one night she was woke up after midnight, it was cold outside, the daughter of the woman in labour travelled to Kookum's house with a team of horses, Kookum got up, grabbed her medicine bag, she had herbal remedies,

and went with her in the dark, cold night to deliver the baby. They were strong women.” He emphasized, “That’s the way it was” (Ross, 2012).

Similarly, Préfontaine (2012) writes that “Métis women delivered many of the pioneers’ babies, while others tended the sick through the use of traditional medicines and remedies” (p. 1). The shared story showed me that my Kookum practised and shared her Traditional Knowledge with the Métis community and this world view assisted all people to live miyo-pimatisiwin. It was a reciprocal way of living and being.

Helping the Old People/Elders in the Community

We, myself and my siblings, helped our Mushum and Kookum with chores so they could continue to have the ability to sustain their home and life. Many times my siblings and I would haul in wood and water for their heat and drink. What’s more, this was expected of us; it is a cultural value for family to help each other. It was as if it was an unspoken rule, which we just seemed to know inherently, these were our values, principles, and world view of the good life, miyo-pimatisiwin. It was a community of people who “valued reciprocal relationships between family members” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 5). Our Old People/Elders were valued for their kinship, knowledge, and for sharing their wisdom with their families and community through their oral stories.

Kinship

Métis culture is rich in kinship, sharing, prayer, stories, laughter, and values. The empathy and connection in the community was expressed in the collective strengths they demonstrated when others were going through challenging times. For instance, the community held fundraisers for various causes to raise money to assist each other in times of hardship.

For example, Dan Ross, my dad, said that when someone had “hard luck” they had community support to help them through this difficult period in their life (Ross, 2012). I asked my dad what he meant by hard luck? Ross replied, “When they lose someone, somebody in the family died.” Ross continued, “people did fundraisers to help them with the cost and help them to grieve losing their family by giving them food too, so they didn’t have to cook and worry about that.” Moreover, “People prayed and held wakes, they used to have them in houses, we had no hall then.” And “they told stories about that person who passed at the wake, prayed, sang hymns in Cree for that person who left and for the family, the community helped” (Ross, 2012). My dad continued to communicate that laughter was good too, “even at wakes,” he expressed, the community had compassion for the grieving

family, but it was important to show humour, good, and fun times—“it helped people to heal” (Ross, 2012).

I remember there were also many dances and music events held in the community. Dan Ross related that, “the community held dances, where they played the fiddle, jigged, and enjoyed themselves; they worked hard, played hard, prayed hard ... everybody brought food, most everyone knew how to play fiddle and guitar” (Ross, 2012). Préfontaine (2012) explains that “in the oral tradition, as told by Elders, the Métis were a proud and independent people who ... spoke their own Michif language, were stewards of the land, danced and jigged to spirited fiddle rhythms, told stories, had reverence for the elderly and the young, and were deeply religious” (p. 1).

Miyo-Pimatisiwin

This mutual experience, with my father Dan Ross conveying his story and oral history of his life, work, prayer, humour, laughter, music, and fun, provided meaningful insight into the traditional concept of miyo-pimatisiwin. Although I grew up with miyo-pimatisiwin (a good life), I did not fully realize the meaning of this Métis/Cree word and concept. This was a way of life and of being that I took for granted. However, as my awareness of this concept expanded during this trip with my dad to visit my aunt, I fully comprehended that this practice is a way of being and living. Likewise, “Mitho-pimatisiwin is a northern Woodland Cree term that means ‘the good life,’ in reference to the overall quality of life or well-being that is culturally embedded in a northern way of life” (Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2012, p. 113; Beatty, 2006; Hart 2002; Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). Moving forward in my life, I will embrace and continue the practice of miyo-pimatisiwin.

In that moment when my father, Dan Ross, made his request to visit his sister (my aunt), I recognized that I had subconsciously observed miyo-pimatisiwin simply by my choice to honour and assist my father to realize his request. This was a reciprocal act that involved one of the characteristics of living miyo-pimatisiwin. The shared experience also provided me with the ability to accomplish my research on the meaning of the concept miyo-pimatisiwin through the perspective of Métis traditional ways of teaching oral history and storytelling. In addition, I also noticed another lesson within the storytelling—my ability to listen and hear improved because there were no other distractions. Choosing to talk at the right time and place was another lesson. I understand now why my Old People/Elders wait for the right time to speak about certain topics. These acts and ways of being were inherent, value-based choices that shared a world view that encompassed miyo-pimatisiwin.

The research enhanced my understanding of the traditional concept of miyo-pimatisiwin (a good life); it also deepened my awareness that it was a way of being and living that is inclusive of the quality of life or well-being that is socially rooted in the Métis way of life. Deer (2008) states that, “Appreciating the importance of relationships that are explored in all dimensions of miyo-pimatisiwin gives some life to the idea that collective balance, health, harmony and growth, to name a few, are essential to the notion that what is desired is a life that is experienced in its fullest, healthiest sense” (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre. [MFNERC], 2008). This concept is just as vital for Métis people in modern day as it was in the past, to maintain and empower self-determination.

Miyo-pimatisiwin is an important concept to sustain in the present day because it will encourage self-determination for families who move away from their communities for various reasons and live further apart. Many people often live in different locations mainly due to lack of employment not available in many home communities. This development can lead to a sense of loss of community and perhaps the potential to lose sight of this cultural concept and the ability to live this concept. Thus, people conceivably lose their sense of identity and self-determination. The sustenance of miyo-pimatisiwin in a modern environment can empower the individual by the continuance of the traditional practice in the community collective.

Actualization—Miyo-Pimatisiwin

This can be actualized by the application of community gatherings with Elders and youth that demonstrate and live miyo-pimatisiwin and the specific elements of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual balance to live a good life. Miyo-pimatisiwin “is based on the traditional view of co-existence, respect, collectivity, representation and recognition, and it is also grounded in the requirement to prepare the next generation to ensure the continuance of those perspectives” (Zoe, 2009, p. 267). Thus, the support at gatherings demonstrating these views, that are shared with youth by the Elders and Leaders of the community, is fundamental for all to have and live a good life. This traditional way of being is helpful for aspiring to successful interactions in the urban environment. As my father indicated in his stories to me, the people shared what they had and it was their ability to stay connected to community that provided the elements to live a good life. Furthermore, this can be actualized by oral stories/history and the community collective spirit that embodies the elements of miyo-pimatisiwin, and how that can be conducive to self-governance and, moreover, empower entrepreneurship, education, and jobs amongst the youth and the community to promote the continuance of a good life.

Past and Present Communities

Listening to my father, Dan Ross, brings to mind how community-centred we lived when I was a child, and how that same sense of community is hard to live by in the urban environment since that sense of community is not as available. However, I do recognize that myself and my immediate family do practice and live miyo-pimatisiwin. And, upon reflection, the significance of my dad’s oral history lessons and the way of living he has modelled for us, has helped me and my family to stay connected, get together regularly, and help each other out through difficult times. This value has been a constant source of support for myself, my siblings, our children, parents, and grandparents which helped us stay strong in our identity and our self-determination. Similarly, Deer (2008) affirms, “that many of us have ... our families and ourselves may be best appreciated by affirming and celebrating those aspects of our ancestry, languages, and experiences that inform who we are” (MFNERC, 2008). Present-day urban living, passing away of the Old People/Elders and their shared stories puts at risk the loss of this Traditional Knowledge and cultural values to live miyo-pimatisiwin.

Conclusion

This research has shown me that in many ways the old ways my father, Dan Ross, spoke of demonstrated that the people were interconnected, connected to their culture, cared for each other, and built community and alliances that sustained a good life (miyo-pimatisiwin). Additionally, this research heightened my perspective of the importance of actively listening to Elders and their oral history and the skill involved in conveying these oral stories and histories, as well as their influence and the continuous inspiration they provide today because:

Not only do the Métis people have their own stories to tell, but they have their own way of telling those stories. Métis oral histories form a complex web of valuable lessons, traditions and customs. They are the cornerstone of Métis knowledge, culture and ways of knowing. (Lombard, n.d.)

Thus, it is imperative that the Old People/Elders, Métis Leaders, and community ensure the continuity of this practice for the youth, so all have the ability to live a good life.

These traditional concepts are and can continue to be integrated into the urban landscape by sustained inclusion of self-governance structures, community, language, shared values, and wealth:

Consistently throughout history, the Métis people have acted collectively to protect and fight for their rights, lands and ongoing existence as a distinct Aboriginal people and nation within the Canadian federation – from the Métis provisional governments of Riel in Manitoba (1869-70) and Saskatchewan (1885) to contemporary Métis governing bodies. This dedication continues to exist as citizens and communities throughout the Métis Nation Homeland keep the nation's distinct culture, traditions, language and lifestyle alive and pursue their own social and economic development. (Métis National Council, 2019)

Therefore, working as a community in modern-day life we can collectively and collaboratively work towards a healthy self-governance system and a Métis Nation Constitution that promotes miyo-pimatiswin. Consequently, the “Métis people from throughout the Homeland have consistently expressed their desire to have a Métis Nation Constitution in order to strengthen Métis nationalism and build a stronger and more effective governance structure” (Métis Nation Constitution, 2019). Thus, as Métis people we need a local urban organization that reminds us of the strength of the community collective and caring that will enhance miyo-pimatisiwin for all, and that continues to foster who we are as a people with our own culture, values, and world view, and as a community of people with a rightful place in modern-day Canada. This right to identity must be recognized and valued in order to live miyo-pimatisiwin (a good life) in this country:

Within a Métis Nation Constitution, we can effectively reflect our values, principles and aspirations as a nation and put them into effect by how we choose to exercise our self-government. A Métis Nation Constitution can serve to bind our people together so we can move forward as a united Métis Nation exercising its inherent right of self-government. A Constitution for the Métis Nation can indeed function as a mirror reflecting our national soul! (Métis National Council, n.d.)

I conclude by arguing that the traditional concept of miyo-pimatisiwin (a good life) is essential for Métis people in present day, as it was in our historic past. The concept of miyo-pimatisiwin is a cultural value, and incorporates all aspects of a way of life. Miyo-pimatisiwin itself contributes to self-determination and is an important Indigenous concept for all Indigenous people to understand and embrace as a cultural way of life and being. And, despite living in the rural/urban modern landscape, this concept can be significant to retention of cultural values

and living a good life today. Miyo-pimatiswin is a world view that is important for understanding a way of life—living a good life: “It is based on the traditional view of co-existence, respect, collectivity, representation and recognition, and it is also grounded in the requirement to prepare the next generation to ensure the continuance of those perspectives” (Zoe, 2009, p. 267). For this reason, the significance and remembrance of the traditional concept miyo-pimatisiwin in the modern environment is essential for well-being, identity, and self-determination and also encompasses the concept of wakohtowin (all my relations). These concepts are central for the strength of the community. These Métis concepts have been lived by my Old People and Elders and have contributed to my sense of identity, way of being, and living a good life.

Notes

1. Cree (Algonquian language family) has five dialects generally associated with geographical areas, and three of these are found in Saskatchewan. The Plains Cree spoken in the northern, central parkland area speak with the plains y- dialect, as in “miyo” (good).
2. Other spellings include *wahkootowin* and *wahkôhtowin*.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Education

“Not First Time Smart”: Reflections on a Modern
Education System of Pimatisiwin in Northern
Saskatchewan

Moch Nistam Ithinisowin: Pimatisiwin
Mamitonethihtamowina Ote Kiwetinohk
Saskatchewan

Josephine McKay

Amisk Osakahikan (Beaver Lake), Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation
Signatories Treaty 6 Adhesion 1889; located on Treaty 10

Abstract: When I was young, growing up in northeastern Saskatchewan, “not first time smart” was a phrase used by my *Nimosom*, my late grandfather, and it has stayed with me throughout my life. The lessons of this concept are two-fold. First, it instills in us values to respect the intelligence and wisdom of *Kesayak*, the aged Elders, and to honour our First Nations heritage and where we come from. Second, it teaches us to be mindful of our families, our lands, our history, and our future. This article is a reflective criticism—through the lens of my experiences and my grandfather’s lessons of “not first time smart”—of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by the government education and employment systems. In order to receive a modern education, Indigenous Peoples were, and some would argue continue to be, forced to compromise their distinct languages, cultures, and connections to the land. I argue that the only way that governments’ educational and employment systems can learn from the past is to remove all systemic barriers faced by Indigenous people. This article concludes with a personal reflection of how my late *Nimosom*’s lesson continues to influence my life towards a more positive *pimatisiwin* (life). 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*.

Knowledge is something that is embedded,
and it takes on a life of its own when it's
lived experience. (Beatty, 2018)

Introduction

This article is about a lesson that was taught to me by my *Nimosom*, my late grandfather. The lesson illustrates a traditional way of teaching lessons that remain as important today as they were then. My Nimosom Rodrick McDermott (Figure 1) was a respected Cree Elder in our community of Denare Beach in northeastern Saskatchewan. I consider this community to be part of the traditional northern homelands of my maternal parents and grandparents.

The traditional lessons that all our grandparents taught me and other family members were related to the overarching values of *mitho-pimachesowin*, a Cree term (“th” dialect)¹ meaning “living a good way of life (Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2013, p. 113). The lesson I am sharing is the concept of “not first time smart,” which is about the experience of lessons being taught, learned, and relearned. The essence of this concept is two-fold. First, it instills in us the values of respecting the intelligence and wisdom of *Kesayak*, the aged Elders, and to honour our First Nations heritage and where we come from. Second, the concept teaches us to be mindful of our families, our lands, our history, and our future, all of which are interwoven in a holistic perception of life. This article is a reflective criticism of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by the Canadian government’s education and employment systems, through the lens of my experiences and lessons of “not first time smart.”



Figure 1. Nimosom Rod McDermott (left) sharpening a hide scraper in the early 1990s for my Nikokom Marie McDermott (right)

I start with the contextual background to situate my story. I then discuss the broad negative impact that colonialism had in my community through the government’s imposition of education and employment systems that stereotyped Indigenous people as being “less than.” That dehumanization created a cascade of losses in people’s lives that affected their language, culture, lands, and livelihood. I argue that government education and employment systems can only improve if all systemic barriers are removed. I then encourage an imagining of a “what if” scenario to help transform the education and employment systems. What if Indigenous people were not seen and treated as being “less than”? I suggest that the lesson of my grandfather’s “not first time smart” concept for the government today is for decision makers to learn the lessons of the past, decolonize their systems thinking, and remove barriers that foster the negative treatment of Indigenous people. If Indigenous people were treated more positively in these systems, their opportunities and attainment of a better *pimatisiwin* (life) would dramatically increase. Finally, on a personal note, I will conclude with thoughts on how my grandfather’s concept will continue to positively influence my life.

Where I Come From

I am a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN) and I was raised in the small Northern Saskatchewan community of Amisk Osakahikan, which means Beaver Lake in the Cree language. Many refer to the community as Denare Beach, which is also the name of the northern resort village that is close to the reserve. Denare Beach is located about 20 km from Creighton, Saskatchewan and Flin Flon, Manitoba (Figure 2). According to the 2021 Canadian Census, the population of Denare Beach is 699 (Statistics Canada, 2021), and about 32% are Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2016); the majority of these Indigenous people are members of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (Irvine & Quinn, 2016).

The Northern Village of Denare Beach has a resort-like atmosphere and is a tourist destination, especially in the summer when the population doubles as cottage owners return to the community (Northern Village of Denare Beach, n.d., para 23). I identify with the Indigenous community within Denare Beach. This distinction is important to note because the “side” of Denare Beach that a person was from influenced the different trajectories of a person’s life.

The Indigenous community was established as the official PBCN reserve community of Amisk Osakahikan in the 1990s. Prior to this, the Indigenous community within Denare Beach was referred to as “The Fish Plant” (Strom, 1999, p. 147) since in the 1960s and 1970s everybody worked in the local fish plant industry (see Figure 3). When asked where I was from, I would say “The Fish Plant,” and locals from Denare Beach, Creighton, Flin Flon, and surrounding areas knew where that was and who lived there.



Figure 2. Location of Denare Beach in northeastern Saskatchewan, south of Flin Flon. Source Tourism Saskatchewan and OpenStreetMap, <https://www.tourismsaskatchewan.com/community/396/denare-beach>

Unfortunately, the economy that my community was actively involved in took an unrecoverable hit in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The commercial fishing industry was limited by the Government of Saskatchewan when the fish plant was shut down, resulting in unemployment. In addition to this and at about the same time, the fur industry was negatively impacted by anti-fur lobbyists and the market shifted to farmed and synthetic furs (Statistics Canada, 2006; Wilkie, 2013, p. 4). These two economic changes resulted in extensive unemployment for our community. We were no longer able to make a living off the land as trappers (winter) and fishermen (summer), affecting the trajectories of our lives.

My community was full of the beauty found in people with deep connections to the land and a way of life. However, folded into this experience there was also a dark and unattractive side of pain and trauma due to the history of residential school; poverty from conditions that no longer allowed families to live off the land; and the threats to a way of life, including language and culture that were rapidly disappearing (Massie, 2008). Although elements of our former community continue to exist today, it is harder to see because of the grip this darkness has on many people. The beauty is still there; it is just not as obvious as it was thirty to forty years ago.

Back in the 1970s, my family could live a blended lifestyle without giving up their identity. They could make a living off the land and also earn a pay cheque from employment with business or government. This was how my family—my parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles—got by. Today, however, it seems all too easy for me to give up a part of myself in order to live a totally modern life. This is in part due to circumstances beyond my control, such as past policy (the Indian Act); actions of others (anti-fur activists); and the need for continued progress and the conscious economic choices of today that inadvertently result in trade-offs. As a result, it seems as though I am giving up the “smarts” that came with my parents’ and grandparents’ way of life, in exchange for a modern life.

“Not First Time Smart”

Rod McDermott was a pillar in our community. My Gramps was a prominent, well-respected man in Denare Beach. He worked with the Government of Saskatchewan’s Department of Natural Resources (DNS) from the 1940s. He was also an avid trapper, hunter, fisherman, and harvester of wild rice. He did well, living a blended life to achieve *mitho-pimachesowin* (to make a good living) for his family. Even after he retired from DNS in the 1970s, he continued to live off the land until well into his 70s. He provided for and took care of my Gran, Marie, and their nine children (seven girls and two boys), and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Both my grandparents worked hard all their lives to provide for their family: if they were awake, they were working. They continued to work until their bodies failed them in their late 70s and early 80s.



Figure 3. McDermott family in front of fish plant, 1972. Reprinted with the permission of those pictured.

When I was growing up, my Gramps would say “not first time smart” in his broken English, and he would look at me with a smile on his face because he said this when I did something that was not so smart. He was clearly teasing, but his phrase “not first time smart” continues to echo in my mind after all these years. In this context, in saying “not first time smart,” my Gramps was actually saying, “hey look, you are giving up something, and be mindful of what’s going on. There is more to you than what’s going on; there’s more to you than going to school; there’s more to you than working, and there are connections to the land.”

My initial interpretation of “not first time smart” was as a criticism of the formal education that we (his grandkids and others) were receiving. We were ignorant of other types of education, including the Cree language and culture; knowing how to live off the land; and the food, medicine, shelter, and education provided here. Respected Métis trapper and Elder Ted Trindell summarized it best: “to me education is just a tool. It’s how you work with it. If you’re educated and don’t know how to meet the circumstances, it’s still no good. You can take the most educated white man and take in the bush with me and—well, he’s just lost” (cited in Morisset & Pelletier, 1987). That’s me today. While I am not a white man, I am educated and if you took me in the bush I would be lost.

Not everyone in my family received my grandfather’s and Ted Trindell’s kind of education. Some within my generation were exposed to it in a marginal way, so we have established some connection with traditional ways of making a life, pimatisiwin. However, I am keenly aware that I am missing what should have been my “first time smarts.” This loss includes my first Indigenous language, *nehithawewin* (Cree); my cultural sense of identity that is tied to the land; and my experience of our traditional livelihood activities. The hardest part is not being able to pass this Indigenous Knowledge on to my children and grandchildren. This learning and knowledge was lost in the trade-off for modern education. My parents and grandparents knew we had to obtain a modern education in order to earn a living. In fact, they encouraged it. Unfortunately, choosing this seems to have come at the expense of my Cree language and culture, and my connections to the land. I’m not sure my parents and grandparents fully realized the extent of what we were losing over time.

The Modern Educational System Not Meeting the Needs of Indigenous Students

It is no secret that, from a historical perspective, educational policy in Canada forced Indigenous people to give up who they were, and replaced this with Western notions of education. This has been framed by Indigenous people attending Kindergarten through to Grade 12 in Western schools, followed by going to work somewhere, or attending trade school and then working, or

attending a post-secondary institution and then working. This education was only in one direction, and we had to leave our identity behind.

There has been extensive research on the education of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In a speech to the Ninth Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair (2010) succinctly describes this relationship:

for more than 150 years ... Canada enforced a racist policy of assimilation against Indigenous Peoples through the use of boarding schools. The belief was that Indigenous Peoples were inferior and uncivilized and with the assistance of Church organizations, they could be Christianized, and therefore become civilized and equal ... The Canadian government stated early on, that, through their policy of assimilation, within a century, Indian people would cease to exist ... within a few generations, Indigenous cultures, beliefs, languages, and distinct identities would be extinguished ... The results while unintended have been devastating. We witness it first in the loss of Indigenous language and traditional beliefs. We see it more tragically in the loss of parenting skills, and, ironically, in unacceptably poor education results. (p. 3–4)

Unfortunately, there wasn’t the time, space, or appreciation to also include an education about living off the land nor an immersion in our own language and culture. Furthermore, the pursuit of this type of education, and anything to do with being Indigenous, was viewed by Eurocentric colonialist culture as being somehow “less than”:

The centuries-old assimilation projects of Canada aimed at “civilizing” the Indian were predicated on the belief that a sense of shame (shame about being an Indian) should be inculcated in the minds, souls, and hearts of First Nations children. Generation upon generation of First Nations children were forcibly removed from their homes and brought into “educational institutions” where, among other things, they were programmed to abhor anything that contained, reflected, or symbolized their First Nations heritage. (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2002, p. 21)

In the Western education model, Indigenous people were encouraged to leave our Indigenous culture and language at the door. Over time, things further evolved so that Western education then became “a way out.” I now question, a way out of what? What were we trying to get out of? A way out of who I am, a Cree woman and a successful professional in a modern society? Why couldn’t the two thrive

together, me as a Cree woman, with her grandfathers' and grandmothers' teachings intact within this modern society, and alongside Western education? Therefore, "not first time smart" is really a look at the trade-offs that have taken place with the pursuit of Western education. At some point, I need to turn around and come back—back to our original "smarts" as Indigenous People.

Some of the Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing that my parents, grandparents, and Ted Trindell knew, are now lost. Fortunately, efforts are now being made to incorporate Cree language, culture, and living-off-the-land knowledge into modern education. Progress has been slow to blend Indigenous ways of knowing into modern educational systems. Nevertheless, efforts are being made throughout the educational systems across Canada to take action to be more sensitive to the need to recognize and blend in more Indigenous content within the modern education system (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiim & Hare, 2016).

Within the modern educational system in Canada, educators and administrators have been questioning the lack of success for Indigenous students. Initially, this failure was attributed to an Indigenous student's identity. In other words, there must be something wrong with them. This was the basis for the residential school system: the government aimed to remove the Indian from the child. The sentiment below was expressed and held by numerous Canadian officials since colonization. For instance, Indian Affairs Superintendent P. G. Anderson stated at the 1846 General Council of Indian Chiefs and Principle Men in Orillia, Ontario:

it is because you do not feel, or know the value of education; you would not give up your idle roving habits, to enable your children to receive instruction. Therefore, you remain poor, ignorant and miserable. It is found you cannot govern yourselves. And if left to be guided by your own judgement, you will never be better off than you are at the present; and your children will ever remain in ignorance. It has therefore been determined, that your children shall be sent to Schools, where they will forget their Indian habits and be instructed in all the necessary arts of civilized life, and become one with your white brethren. (Rheault, 2011, p. 1)

This racist attitude was the basis of education for Indigenous students and, while it is not held with the same level of rigour now, threads of this attitude remain.

Canadian statistics continue to provide evidence that our educational system does not meet the needs of Indigenous students. In 2016, the graduation rate was only about 48% for on-reserve First Nations students. This compared to high school completion rates of about 75% for off-reserve First Nations, 84% for Métis students, and 92% for non-Indigenous students (Richards & Mahboubi, 2018).

For First Nations people off-reserve who did not complete high school, about 50% of men were employed in 2017, and 24% of women (Anderson, 2019). For First Nations people off-reserve who completed high school, the employment outcomes were significantly better: 68% men and 57% women employed; for those with a university degree, 93% of men and about 91% of women were employed (Anderson, 2019).

There is a distinction made between on-reserve and off-reserve outcomes. The education system on-reserve is funded by the federal government, while off-reserve the education system is funded by the provincial governments. The education system on-reserve has been chronically underfunded, which could partly explain the poorer outcomes for those students (Drummond & Kachuck Rosenbluth, 2013).

With regards to post-secondary education, the statistics communicate a similar story. Indigenous adults have a lower literacy rate and attainment rate in post-secondary education and trades although the rates have been increasing (Statistics Canada, 2021).

According to these indicators, national statistics seem to support the perception that perhaps Indigenous people are not smart by those benchmarks. What is holding Indigenous people back? A Statistics Canada (2015) report indicated that the barriers for Aboriginal adults to further their education and training included time constraints, courses not matching needs, lack of confidence and preparedness, not a personal priority, cost, personal and family responsibilities, and personal/family health. These are valid reasons for the reduced participation in modern education and employment systems. However, what if we had a different system?

What If?

What if the education and employment benchmarks here in Northern Saskatchewan were based on Cree language, culture, and the ability to live off the land? What would the educational and employment statistics look like then? How would Indigenous people's graduation rates compare with non-Indigenous people? The suggestion here is not that one is better than the other. The suggestion is that, within both the current educational and employment systems, there is a glaring omission of Cree language, culture, and connections to the land, all of which are needed to achieve *mitho-pimachesowin*, to make a good living.

The current educational system cannot respond fast enough to the needs of Indigenous students. Politically, this issue has been ongoing for generations, and very few political organizations, at all levels of government with jurisdiction to do something, have been able to create a system to properly educate our youth. During

my three years working within a K–12 on-reserve education system providing secondary-level program support, I observed several political issues that appeared to create barriers. These include, but are not limited to, the following points.

- Indigenous self-determination is desired but has been difficult to achieve under the current infrastructure (political, governmental, and administrative), which is restrictive.
- Funding arrangements and administration of those funds are not flexible.
- The existing curriculum lacks Indigenous language, culture, and connection to the land—there have been notable improvements but more dedicated resources are needed.
- Physical infrastructure barriers: many upper-year students in northern communities have to leave their home community to complete high school and to access post-secondary.
- Finally, the quality and qualifications of educators who are challenged to embed Indigenous Knowledge and ways of knowing into the Western system of education.

Enriching the educational and employment systems to achieve *mitho-pimachesowin* by engaging Indigenous youth with the knowledge that this is their right, and giving them the skills necessary to make a good living in society today, will close the education and employment gaps they experience. Inclusive curriculum would result in better educational retention and completion rates because Indigenous students will be innately connected with what is being taught in the classroom. As noted earlier, the statistics indicate that better high school completion rates result in better employment rates for Indigenous students. The cost of limiting Indigenous people's ability to participate meaningfully in our communities, to be contributors, and to find their purpose, is wasted human ability and human potential. This has also contributed to diminished economic capacity. In a report released by the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve (n.d.), the following estimate of the economic cost to society was provided:

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning estimated that the social and economic costs of First Nation people who have not completed high school will amount to \$3.2 billion over ten years. Based on the current 40 percent graduation rate, the cost of non-completion among the 15–19 year old cohort alone is \$887

million; which would be repeated for each subsequent cohort if conditions do not change. (National Panel, n.d., p. 2)

To continue to ignore the gaps and the shortfalls, not of Indigenous people, but of the education and employment systems that plague Indigenous people, is harmful for all communities. So much work needs to be undertaken over a long period of time to ensure Indigenous people are educated in a manner that works for them. This manner is described vividly by Dr. Marie Battiste (2010): “Learning then, as Aboriginal people have come to know it, is holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential, communal, spiritual, and learned within a language and culture” (p. 15). Several of these core elements are absent in the modern educational system and I would extend this to employment. Battiste goes on to validate the need to preserve Indigenous Knowledge:

Indigenous Knowledge is being revealed as an extensive and valuable knowledge system that must be made a priority or mission in education, not just for Indigenous students, but for all students. Scientists, ecologists, and social justice activists are coming to understand the consequences to the world when Indigenous peoples, their languages and their knowledge, are denigrated, dismissed, or denied the resources necessary to retain them. (Battiste, 2010)

This right is affirmed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), which states that Indigenous people have a right “...to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language” that is provided by the state in collaboration with Indigenous people (United Nations, 2007, Article 14.3). Of course, the challenge is in bringing Indigenous languages, culture, and connections to the land to the forefront of our educational and employment systems. Actions that can be taken by governments, administrators, educators, parents, and communities include the following:

- speaking Cree language in the classroom, and in home;
- practising our cultural ways without judgment;
- moving the classroom back into the community and out on the land; and
- improving education that provides for a wider array of skills will result in more employment options for Aboriginal youth and for employers.

Traditional Knowledge and ways of making a living should and can be an option for Indigenous youth. Through this process, education and employment success will increase across all Indigenous Nations. This shouldn't be an either/or option, it should be both. In the words of my Nimosom Rodrick McDermott, "not first time smart," Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing need to be included in, and a part of the education systems here in Canada. Indigenous students should not have to compromise their language, culture, and connections to the land—these should be integral parts of the educational system. We would all be in a different place had this been the case from the beginning. My grandfather's concept will continue to influence my personal and professional life.

Notes

1. Cree (Algonquian language family) has five dialects generally associated with geographical areas, and three of these are found in Saskatchewan. The Woods Cree spoken in the northerneastern area speak with the th- dialect, as in "mit^{ho}" (good). Variant spellings of *pimachesowin* include *pimâcibisowin* and *pimacihowin*.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Education

Celebrating Our Path of Ahkamimoh in Northern Saskatchewan: Developing Resiliency in Youth through Education

Emocikihtayak Ahkamimohwin meskanaw Ote Kiwetinohk Saskatchewan: Sohkeyimowin Oskayak Ekiskinwahamacik

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Abstract: This article defines *ahkamimohwin* and how it can be practised in education. Ahkamimohwin is a Northern Cree word that means resilience (*ahkameyimowin* in Plains Cree, y dialect). It is a word that is commonly used to describe “persistence” or “never giving up.” Residential school trauma has affected northern Canadian communities such as Beauval, Saskatchewan, and it has continued even years after the school was closed. Today, many communities in Northern Saskatchewan suffer from addictions, poverty, and other challenges that impact negatively on ahkamimohwin and *miyo-pimatisiwin* (living a good life). By incorporating knowledge of traditional culture into our schools, as shared by Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the community, along with incorporating an awareness of place and belonging through connections to the land, family, community, and spirituality, ahkamimohwin will be integrated into education and will lead to miyo-pimatisiwin. Through this integration I believe our Beauval community can heal from the trauma of the residential school experiences and can build resiliency with our youth. 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*.

Introduction

This article focuses on *ahkamimohwin* and how it can be enacted and practised in education to strengthen youth in northern communities. Ahkamimohwin is a Cree word that means resilience (*ahkameyimowin* in Plains Cree).¹ It is a word that is commonly used by Cree speakers to describe persistence or never giving up. By incorporating knowledge of traditional culture into our schools, as shared by Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the community, along with incorporating awareness of place and belonging through connections to the land, family, community, and spirituality, ahkamimohwin will be integrated into education and will lead to *miyo-pimatisiwin* or “living a good life.”

Residential school trauma has affected the entire community of Beauval, Saskatchewan, even years after the school was closed in 1983. Today, many communities in Northern Saskatchewan suffer from addictions, poverty, and other challenges that negatively impact on ahkamimohwin and *miyo-pimatisiwin*. I believe the community of Beauval can heal from the trauma of the residential school experiences, and that together we can build resiliency in our youth by integrating ahkamimohwin into our education system and schools.

I begin by defining and discussing the importance of ahkamimohwin, as far as building and sustaining youth development through revitalizing traditional culture, ways of life, and connections to the land. I will describe the importance of ahkamimohwin to our way of life in Beauval. I will then provide a short historical and contemporary profile of the community to illustrate how Métis and First Nations Peoples in northwestern Saskatchewan have lived *miyo-pimatisiwin*, and the challenges they have overcome to maintain their way of life. Second, I will discuss the elements of ahkamimohwin and its contribution to building self-identity through family and community, and the strengthening of spirituality and the connection to the Creator and Traditional Knowledge. Third, I will examine the impact of residential schools on education for Indigenous individuals and communities, and the need to heal and create a new model for education based on Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Finally, I will advocate for the application of ahkamimohwin to education in my community of Beauval.

Background

Beauval is a Métis community in northwestern Saskatchewan. The village is home to about 700 people whose ancestors are French and Cree. Beauval was founded by the Catholic Church in 1895 when it built a residential school to which students from surrounding communities were forced to attend. In spite of the destructive era of the residential school, the community of Beauval still continues to practice

ahkamimohwin, as demonstrated by many people still speaking the local Michif language and carrying on the traditional and life-sustaining activities—hunting, fishing, gardening, and gathering medicines—for food security and sovereignty.

Ahkamimoh

In Beauval, ahkamimoh is a Cree term that, when translated to English, means resilience. In trying to discover what ahkamimoh means in my community, I asked Elders to explain their definition of the concept. They replied by stating that it means “to have persistence,” “to try harder,” “to stay focused,” and to “never give up.” At the same time, scholars state that ahkamimoh—self-determination or being resilient—is based on the following concepts: self-identity, spirituality, holism, achieving balance and well-being, the land, relationships, kinships, epistemologies, communities, community-based education, natural resources, social capital, cultural knowledge, storytelling, and reliance on other people (Beatty, 2012).

Being resilient is often measured by having a successful life, which includes a steady income, stable marriage, and having a good life (*miyo-matsibitowin*) despite all the challenges of oppression (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Resilience is also linked with the ability to adapt to one’s surroundings and to face stress rather than avoid it (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Additionally, resilience is developed by finding ways to cope, adjust, thrive, and not give up. Resilience is defined as being brought back to the original state after being bent or compressed. Some writers state that it is the ultimate goal of the individual, family, community, nation, global system, and any ecosystem (Kirmayer et al., 2009).

The concept of ahkamimoh or resilience is an emerging one in academic literature. In the mental health field, resilience is defined as a “person’s ability to overcome stress and adversity” (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 63). Fleming and Ledogar (2008a) claim that many mental health practitioners retain the view that resilience is an individual asset. While the concept of resilience in this field is often “individual-centred,” there is an emerging focus on “community resilience” and how people use social networks and practices to manage stress, trauma, and challenges (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 63). Kirmayer et al. further describe the importance of community resilience for Indigenous health and well-being. In an Indigenous world view, the importance of family and community creates a type of ahkamimoh or resilience that is based more on the community than the individual.

Anderson explains that Indigenous resilience has a “collective aspect, combining spirituality, family strength, Elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, identity, and support networks” (2008a, p. 4). Anderson also explains that there is no unified Indigenous view of resilience, but that many of these views are based on Indigenous relationships to the land (Anderson, 2008b). Furthermore, Du Hamel (2003) states that Indigenous people were very connected to the land and resilient:

“Our people were engineers, governors, doctors, healers, lawmakers, scientists, architects; we had to be everything to survive on the land . . . What’s happened today to Native Youth is that this connection has been shattered between their cultural self, spiritual self, and the land” (Du Hamel, 2003, p. 214).

This is where the whole concept of family and community, which is better known as *wahkootowin*, or “kinship,” for Indigenous Peoples, is addressed (or *wāhkōhtowin*). The concept of *wahkootowin* validates that land and family relationships are essential to the development of resiliency. Our community hopes that a revitalized connection to the traditional way of life, through the support of Elders and their knowledge, and to the land, will build resiliency in our youth.

Family, Self, and Community

One concept that promotes resiliency in Indigenous communities is self-identity, which is knowing who you are and where you come from. Self-identity is the foundation of Indigenous ways of learning and knowing. According to the Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 23), identity is the first basic factor in knowing who you are, followed by spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional factors. These factors extend to learning from family, community, and social relations.

My grandparents were ranchers, fishermen, and farmers. My great-grandfather, Joseph Burnouf, came from France as an Oblate missionary for the Catholic Church. He travelled to Northern Saskatchewan to serve in the Catholic faith. He was a talented builder who must have been summoned to build a school in the Northwest. It was here that he met and married my great-grandmother, Hermaline Daigneault, who was a Métis woman from Île-à-la-Crosse. Joseph left the Oblate brothers but the events surrounding this are not known. The Catholic Church gave him land six miles south of Beauval and he cleared a spot overlooking the Beaver River where he and Hermaline built a homestead in what is now known as Riverside Ranch. This homestead was self-sustaining and was in a strategic location since it was the resting place for people heading to Île-à-la-Crosse. Joseph established a small store for people to buy basic necessities as they travelled along the river system from one community to another. It is likely they also supplied fresh meat and fuel for those travelling by snow buggies or heavy-duty trucks. Apart from his involvement in the building and construction of the school, Brother Joseph travelled to Prince Albert and Saskatoon and was contracted to build churches in these areas. His name became well known and requests from engineers took him away from the Beauval area at times.

Joseph and Hermaline had six children and one of their sons was my grandfather, Alex Burnouf, who raised his family on the ranch where they tended cows and had a very large garden. Alex was also a commercial fisherman and

left for months at a time to fish all over Northern Saskatchewan. In addition, he worked at the residential school as a maintenance man and developed trades skills in woodworking and plumbing; he also took engineering training, predominantly with the boiler system. My grandmother, Germaine, cared for the home and family which included nine children. Together, Alex and Germaine persevered and made it possible to raise their children and pass on the legacy of traditional values and lifestyle through the generations. Today, the heritage of resiliency, traditional beliefs and knowledge, and hard work has resulted in the Burnoufs being very successful in many ways (Burnouf, 2019).

Métis identity is based on family and community. Macdougall utilizes genealogical research to describe how the Métis based their world view on family (Macdougall, 2010). She uses the Cree word *wahkootowin* to describe how familial relationships form Métis identity. Specifically, Macdougall states that, “in the context of *wahkootowin*, individuals were taught that who they were could only be understood in relation to others in their family and community, as well as in relation to the environment, the sacred world, and outsiders” (Macdougall, 2010, p. 56). Essentially, Macdougall’s work uses genealogy and the concept of *wahkootowin* to explain Métis ways of knowing in northwestern Saskatchewan. In turn, identity must be taught through example, such as during celebrations and cultural experiences, in order for youth to gain an appreciation of our familial roots and homeland.

The life of Louis Riel models this. Goulet takes us through the trial of Louis Riel and the many injustices inflicted on the Métis people (Goulet, 1999). His book provides a detailed account of the resiliency displayed by Louis Riel and the courageous stand he took that led to the recognition of the Métis people and the birth of the Métis Nation. Louis Riel displayed pride and belief in his nationality. As individuals, community members, educators, and Elders, we need to continue modelling the tenacity that our forefathers and foremothers had, to continue to strive for “making a good living,” and to be bold enough to be proud of our Indigenous roots.

My family is one of many in a resilient and proud Indigenous Nation that overcame the government’s destructive tactic of creating residential schools where the attempt was to kill our seed. The systemic oppression and colonial violence also resulted in lateral violence among our own people. However, we have overcome many obstacles and we will continue to stand up and have faith and hope so that our children, our youth, will rise up and believe that they are good enough and will not compete or tear down their brothers and sisters, but will live the good life called *miyo-pimatisiwin*. The importance of community cannot be ignored. A community shapes an individual’s identity, social network, friends, clubs, and organizations, where people come together with common interests. Furthermore,

the North itself is a community where there is a connection between the people and the land (Beatty, 2012). The term community can be thought of as common and unity (Bopp & Bopp, 2006, p. 12). In the North, we are unified; we share because we need each other to survive. Northerners historically had to do this for survival. For example, long ago, if one person killed a moose, they fed the whole community. There was no such thing as packaging it all up and putting it into a deep freezer. Today, we do not practice this as much as we once did. The loss of this type of communal sharing has led to the deterioration of miyo-matsihitowin (having a good life); however, this type of sharing must be revitalized to encourage resiliency among the youth.

Spirituality and Resilience

Spirituality encompasses more than just the spiritual beliefs of recognized religions. Spirituality is interlocked with culture and “the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the individual is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred,” and which motivates “the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution” (Benson et al., 2003, quoted in Wong et al., 2006, quoted in Fleming & Ledogar, 2008b, p. 49). Spirituality helps build resiliency. Health care professionals use spirituality to address and prevent alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, and suicide, which have been the experiences of many Indigenous people. Youth who have high self-esteem and strong cultural identity experience less alcohol and substance abuse in comparison to those who do not (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008b). For Fleming and Ledogar (2008b), “Aboriginal spirituality should not be treated merely as an antidote to pathologies like substance abuse and suicide. It is a resource for ‘navigating life’ and for transcendence” (p. 62). Hanohano (1999) contends that spirituality is often mistaken and confused as “religion”; however, it is much more than religion.

For further validation of this, Beauval Elder Abraham Gardiner explained to me that spirituality was in everything that our people did and was an ongoing relationship with the Creator (Gardiner, 2019). The everyday tasks in life were carried out in accordance with spirituality. They consulted and waited, and only if they were sure they heard from the Creator, would they then proceed to act. Moshum (Grandfather) Abraham continued to share that Aboriginal people, the term he prefers to use, have a natural connection to the Creator because spirituality was embedded in the Aboriginal ways of learning and knowing. It was not a foreign concept to them which allowed it to be easily understood. That is why, today, practising spirituality comes to Indigenous Peoples very easily (Gardiner, 2019).

Elders always had a connection to the Creator. In fact, their connection was so strong that they could predict what was going to take place in the future. For

instance, in the school where I work, Elder Abraham, our school spiritual teacher, once told me to practice patience and be ready to have a soft and pliable heart, which he explained was *opsisowin* in Cree (Gardiner, 2019). Later, it was close to the end of the day when an angry parent came in to see me concerning her child. I instantly remembered what Elder Abraham told me that morning and I applied patience, compassion, and wisdom to create a suitable solution for her child. If we train ourselves to be in tune with our Creator, we will hear the teachings and instructions resulting in miyo-pimatisiwin.

Knowledge

Cree knowledge and ways of knowing are essential to building resilience in our youth: “Our Cree ways of knowing are based on collective memory and long-term relationship with the land” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 13). The skills, experience, and insights of our people are key elements for achieving self-determination, especially as it relates to experiential knowledge about the land, the natural environment, and livelihood (Beatty, 2012). Battiste supports this:

The recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of remediation, recognition of rights of Indigenous peoples, and a renaissance among Indigenous scholars, social activists, and allies. Their struggles represent a regeneration of the dignity and cultural integrity of Indigenous peoples, where success has been found in affirming and activating the holistic systems of Indigenous knowledge, engaging Elders, communities, and committed individuals. (Battiste, 2013, p. 94)

Knowledge for Cree people includes common sense, being mindful, and considering others and one’s surroundings. One example is the traditional natural medicines that are harvested locally in our community. My uncle and aunt are medicine people. They attained this knowledge from the Elders, and from their grandparents, who attained it from their grandparents, so it was passed down through the generations. Today, my aunt and uncle prepare all types of medicines for every ailment. This is why Elders are key people who keep the stories and Traditional Knowledge alive so that we may all experience miyo-matsihitowin.

Elders also play a very important role in making sure that the knowledge and teachings are passed on to the next generations; thus, *ahkamimohwin* is practised. Elders are often known because of their wisdom and ability to teach others. As Hanohano writes, “Elders bear an important responsibility for the tribal community by functioning as a parent, teacher, community leader, and spiritual guide” (1999, p. 206).

In my conversations with Elder Abraham, he stated that wisdom in Cree is referred to as *ainesowin*. He explained that this knowledge is a gift from the Creator that gives people insight into gaining wisdom and knowledge for problem solving and decision making. In addition, Elder Abraham shared that *ainesowin* is about tapping into the spiritual realm. Therefore, the wisdom and knowledge that is attained cannot be known only through the act of researching (Gardiner, 2019). Today, it is crucial that we continue to go to the Elders and seek their knowledge as though we are seeking treasure. Their knowledge and understanding is a valuable resource that we must not ignore.

For example, Elders can be utilized in schools to help bridge the Indigenous ways of learning and knowing and merge this into today's ways of life. Elders can help our youth and teachers to make sense of things such as damaged emotions, and can help with positive decision making. Elders in the schools also help foster a caring environment that can promote restorative justice instead of punitive discipline strategies that actually cause more harm than good. This way of influencing youth gives skills and a voice to the students and teachers so they can openly share their thoughts and come to an agreement to repair or replace the troublesome behaviour with positive behaviour. Elders model a sense of spirituality by praying openly with the students and teachers. In our school we identify and engage Elders who live and model *miyo-pimatisiwin* (living a good life). Their strong sense of spirituality enables them to guide our youth.

Many Elders are gifted as storytellers, which is a very important part of retaining or rebuilding resiliency among our people. Bizhiw (1999) explains that the importance of storytelling has two aspects. A cultural story is told by human beings, and there is a non-human person that can be interpreted as the "spirit of the story." Bizhiw further explains that the Anishinaabe have a name for this, *aadizookaan*, which "speaks to the listener through a voice of the human cultural storyteller" (1999, p. 79). In summary, Bizhiw emphasizes that the main objective of the human and spirit storytelling is to bring *mino-bimaadiziwin*, "a good life" (Bizhiw, 1999). Storytelling is both a cultural and a spiritual tool. It creates a safe and caring environment of trust, kindness, and empathy (Battiste, 2013, p. 184), and enables a greater interconnectedness that is fundamental for community belonging.

Education

How is *ahkamimoh* related to education? In this section I discuss what has happened to Indigenous People in regards to education and, as a result, how this history continues to impact us today. Indigenous People had a very sophisticated way of governing themselves; there was a political governance system within the community. This knowledge was not recorded or written down but was embedded in the people through storytelling and experience.

Indigenous knowledge systems do not encompass a singular body of knowledge but reflect many layers of being, knowing, and methods of expression. Indigenous knowledge systems include knowledge about economics, politics, music, leadership, transportation, building, autonomy, women's unique contributions, art, literature/stories, humour, and community values (Settee, 2007, p. 15).

The most devastating and oppressive acts that impacted Indigenous ways of knowing and the governance of Indigenous communities were colonization and then forcing Indigenous children to attend residential schools. Settee states that "historical events such as colonization imposed dominant systems of governance, economics, and schooling that have created near genocidal conditions" (2007, p. 16). Early contact with Europeans created a relationship of mutual trade where explorers and traders relied on the knowledge and skills of Indigenous Peoples. This changed when settlers arrived and sought land. The colonial British and then Canadian governments looked for a way to assimilate the Indigenous population, and they created the residential school system:

The arrival of an age of peace, immigration, and agriculture in British North America meant a dramatically different relationship between Natives and newcomers, a shift in relations that explains the effort of state and church to assimilate Aboriginal communities through residential schools. (Miller, 2012, p. 62)

Boarding schools run by the churches were viewed as an efficient way to re-educate Indigenous children, and Indigenous Peoples' relationships to traditional education were severed.

Residential schools had a destructive ripple effect on Indigenous communities. Widespread apathy amongst youth can be directly linked to the impact of the residential school system, which has hurt many Indigenous families and communities across multiple generations. In our community, the impact of the Beauval Indian Residential School is evident in the widespread lack of self-esteem. We are so afraid to be successful and when we do achieve and are recognized for it, some of our own people abuse us through lateral violence. Tousignant and Sioui propose that "the challenge for Aboriginal communities is to overcome the

historical burden of colonization, to repair their social fabric, and to assert pride in their culture” (2009, p. 43). This is where the holistic idea is brought forth to not only repair or reinstate the Indigenous ways of knowing and learning but to enhance them. This is achieved through community-based education, Elder involvement, language revival, and bringing traditional ways of knowing back into the schools. As community educators, there is a need to commit to the healing of community members (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009).

The community’s goal in Beauval is to develop community-based education by forming partnerships with the parents and the community. To develop a true sense of unity between the community members, community resources, and the school, we, as local educators, must strive to have a balance between the incorporation of the community into the school and engaging the school within the community. Our school mandate must be to create an environment that respects the natural ways of learning through modelling. This is why it is so important to bring in Elders and community role models to encourage and support the students. There needs to be a transformation in the relationship between the school and the community. It is not just a focus on the academic way of learning, but also the blending of community-based lifelong learning. For the Métis from Beauval, this is a natural way of learning and it is now being recognized as a valuable approach. This approach impacts all four areas of the Métis development: self, family, land, and languages and traditions (see Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model in Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 23).

In spite of the devastating acts of dishonouring the Indigenous Peoples and the genocide that almost occurred, Indigenous People remain resilient and are now in the process of restoration and healing, along with the revitalization of our stories, culture, dignity, and self-identity. In spite of all the trauma that Indigenous People have endured, we must continue to strive for self-determination and persevere to remain resilient. We must practise *ahkamimoh* by continuing Elder engagement and support—both in the school and the community—promoting the Michif language and incorporating traditional ways of learning in Valley View School, Beauval, Saskatchewan. Elders model resiliency by being “the change they want to see.” They govern their life around the teachings that they live by. In addition, Elders must see themselves as a “mouse” to be humbled and, like a mouse, observe and listen. This is viewed by the whole community as a model to help others who struggle and who can take a strengths-based (positive) approach to life instead of a deficit-based (negative) one.

There must be a greater emphasis in policy and procedures for school administrators so that they are supported as they become aware and value Elder involvement, encourage the revitalization of Indigenous languages, and use community involvement to link or merge cultural practices with the school

curriculum. By rewriting, and then implementing, more culturally inclusive policy and procedures, school administrators will have guidelines for how to bring Elders into the school and for the various ways in which Elders can contribute (i.e., storytelling, praying, meeting with and greeting staff and students, role modelling behaviour, and meeting social-emotional needs).

Our community has stories that are filled with immeasurable knowledge and wisdom, which will continue to impact the next generations. The knowledge that our people attained through the many generations cannot be lost. Who will take this forth? It is the self-determined, the resilient, the risk takers who are not afraid to tell their stories and share them so that today we can be inspired to go forth in spite of all the oppression. McCallum states that “the struggles we face today are the experiences and building of new strengths for tomorrow” (2012, p. 13). He further shares that “growing up as a child I remember some difficult situations in my life of being the black sheep of the family where sometimes you just don’t know where or who to turn to” (p. 45). Today, Leonard McCallum, who is from Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, says, while telling his story, that no matter what struggles you face there is always hope. There are so many success stories and testimonies from northerners that, in spite of the tragedies they have encountered, illustrate resilience and *ahkamimohwin*. We need to go to the people and hear their stories, and give them an opportunity to be heard and to share these stories with the youth.

Child and Community

Brendtro et al. (1990) claim that in order for a child to prosper the following four elements in the “Circle of Courage” must be present: mastery, belonging, generosity, and independence. These elements are essential for youth to develop self-identity and self-determination, and to acquire resiliency.

Fostering self-esteem is the primary goal and encompasses four components, which are significance, competence, power, and virtue (Coopersmith, 1967 quoted in Brendtro et al.). To have significance means to possess “acceptance, attention, and affection to others” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 44). Competencies are acquired once a child masters the environment. Power is the ability to have self-control and virtue is to possess values of one’s culture.

The spirit of belonging is to “be related, somehow, to every one you know” (Deloria cited in Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 46). Child rearing was traditionally done by the whole community and “the ultimate test of kinship was behavior, not blood: you belonged if you acted like you belonged” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 46): “Treating others as related was a powerful social value that transformed human relationships” (p. 47). The spirit of mastery can be celebrated by practising what you are good at and developing it to a level of competence. Playing games and

using creative play to simulate adult responsibility leads to mastery. The spirit of independence teaches children responsibility and ways they can empower themselves. Indigenous Peoples followed the teachings of respecting their children, and children were shown consideration by all the people in their lives who helped in their upbringing. Children were disciplined with gentleness and were expected to have responsibilities. Talking to children was the most effective way to model independence. The spirit of generosity is to be generous and to practice giving: “Children were instructed to always share generously without holding back” (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 57). The mastery, independence, belonging, and generosity that Indigenous Peoples practised were the true elements of resilience. These must be brought back and retaught in the home, community, and school.

Indigenous Peoples, referred to as “native” peoples by Brendtro et al., had the most sophisticated approach to child rearing (Brendtro et al., 1990). This was not recognized by the colonizers and was, therefore, disregarded in favour of the “European approach,” which was forced on Indigenous Peoples. According to Brendtro et al., “Native peoples possessed profound child psychology wisdom that might well have been adopted by the immigrants to North America” (1990, p. 44). Instead, the children were subjected to a way of discipline that was foreign to them. Indigenous children were traditionally governed by positive discipline that was likely the most effective way. Today, this notion of positive discipline has elements of what some call “restorative justice.” Brendtro et al. state that “These approaches emerged from cultures where the central purpose of life was the education and the empowerment of children” (1990, p. 44).

At Valley View School, where I am currently the principal, we strive to model the above practices that were used by our ancestors. We have introduced a model called “Restorative Practices,” which enables us to bring back similar past teachings. In spite of all the hardships that have been imposed on the people of Beauval, we continue to push forward by implementing restorative circles as our ancestors did prior to colonization. We were aware that colonization brings many forms of dysfunction to any organization if not dealt with or corrected. We recognized that our people were disengaged and appeared to have lost their voice. We knew we were not a safe school with the amount of violence, both visible and discreet, being directed at individuals, students, and adults. We wanted to be proactive instead of being reactive, so we had to create a space for our people to feel safe, justified, and empowered. The whole purpose for restorative justice was to encourage our people to vocalize their trauma and pain. If there has been an injustice made towards anyone who is involved in the school, there is the option of having a restorative circle to address the situation. We have two spiritual Elders who are present in the circle, along with administration, to help guide the procedure. The people who have been hurt will state their case and we try to resolve the issue by having the

student(s) vocalize the trauma they experienced. Everyone has an opportunity to tell their story. We use guiding questions to help them express their feelings. A solution is developed by providing ways to correct the undesired action and we close the circle with a prayer and by offering a chance to forgive each other. We restore the individual by using compliments and solutions rather than by being judgmental and punitive. The application of restitution to one person at a time will result in the whole village practicing ahkamimohwin.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to describe the elements of ahkamimohwin and their importance for building self-identity and community resilience. The article advocates for community-based education that integrates Elders’ teachings and traditional ways of knowing and being in order to enhance resilience amongst youth and help the community heal from the devastating impacts of colonization and residential schools. This article further provides an aerial view of the incredible knowledge and wisdom that our ancestors had by practising ahkamimoh, and how they governed themselves in the most sophisticated ways.

I thank God for the resiliency that was gifted to our people. It is a gift from the Creator and a blessing to bless others as we inspire and help others towards ahkamimohwin. We are to inspire the youth so they can become leaders in carrying on ahkamimohwin. I am in awe and have acquired a greater respect and appreciation for my Métis heritage. The gift of humour that is needed when speaking to Elders enables us to never forget the past.

Resilience is a concept that has to be taught, modelled, and celebrated with individuals, homes, schools, communities, and nations. Let us make it a point to never be afraid to teach and model the most amazing gifts that our relatives and Elders left us. I am so thankful today for all of my *wahkominuk* who continue to practice ahkamimohwin. As I continue my journey, I will tell the stories and ensure the knowledge is passed on to the next generations. I will practise what I preach, to honour ahkamimoh.

Notes

1. Ahkamimohwin in Northern Cree is an adjective referring to being resilient. The term “ahkamimoh” is a singular imperative word telling or encouraging someone to be resilient (in the context of “have faith/do not give up”). The word Ahkameyimok—in the y dialect, Plains Cree—is more like an imperative encouragement to a group.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

The Legend of Thanadelthur: Elders' Oral History and Hudson's Bay Company Journals

Thainaltth'er noriya hołts'j, Ęna chu Dene chu ěłehěla nj; Běgha honj ěritł'is hěla (HBC), ałnědhě behoniě tth'i ła sj

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Abstract: This article introduces the legend of Thanadelthur, a Dene woman who had a profound impact on the Dene people in Northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba during the eighteenth century fur trade. Thanadelthur was instrumental in the negotiation of a peace treaty between the Dene and Cree, and in helping the Dene to build a trade relationship with the Hudson's Bay Company. These actions helped to create new economic opportunities for Dene communities and a good life for Thanadelthur's people. While Thanadelthur's life is documented in scholarly works and Hudson's Bay Company journals, those records do not tell the entire story. Thus, this article also recounts oral stories told by Elders and others in order to expand this legend to include the perspective of the Dene. In bringing together the reports from Dene oral historians, scholars, and other authors, this article outlines the remarkable events in Thanadelthur's life in order to underscore her historical significance to our communities and Canada at large. 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*.

Tthainaltth'er t'a-u Cımpani Kqě ha Dene chu, Ena chu ěłěhela nj snj, t'a-u dahłělghěl nj-u; Ałnědhi chu Cımpani Kqě honj njhenjla si diri běgha honj sj. Dene ěłěhela tl'aghě tsádhedh k'ets'jdel nj. Tthainaltth'er Denesuline ha njdhen-ú, la Dene ha horenjle hěl, Dene dorełti njthen t'a Dene ts'jn nj. Tthainaltth'ur běgha honj ła, ěritł'is k'e tth'i hěla, ałnědhi behoniě tth'i ła sj. T'a-u Tthainaltth'er huya, yanathě honj k'onj ha. Canada k'eyaghě náide si, Tthainaltth'er denegodhě helj kuli horjcha hołts'j nj; Dena ha.

Introduction

This article introduces the legend of Thanadelthur, a Dene woman who had a profound impact on the Dene People during the eighteenth century fur trade in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The Dënesųliné herald Thanadelthur as the “Peacemaker,” as she was instrumental in the negotiation of a peace treaty between the Dene and Cree at a time when the Cree, who had access to guns, were prohibiting the Dene from accessing Hudson Bay. The famous peacemaking expedition, the 600 mile (966 km) walk led by Thanadelthur on June 27, 1715 (Book, 2001, p. 71), made a mark on Canadian fur trade history. Important references have been made to Thanadelthur’s peacemaking journey in the *Canadian Biographies* (Thorman, 2018) and the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (Conn, 2018). There are poignant points of Thanadelthur’s life that have been included in Hudson’s Bay Company archives and re-told by Elders and in stories shared by family and the community of Wollaston Lake, also known as Hatchet Lake Denesuline First Nation.

The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) also credit her negotiation skills for enhancing the company. Van Kirk (1974) states, “In the fall of 1714 when James Knight reclaimed the fort from the French under the Treaty of Utrecht, he was anxious not only to re-establish English trade but to extend it northward” (p. 41). Governor James Knight had a future plan—he wanted the Northern Dene to trade at York Factory (Fort York), on the southwestern shore of Hudson Bay. For his plan to work, however, peace would need to be made between the Dene and the Cree (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 67).

The Athabaskan Dene from Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake in Northern Saskatchewan are part of the Athabaskan People traditionally known as *Ĕdtthēn Eldeli* (Caribou Eaters). The Athabaskan linguistic group of Dene occupy a vast area from Alaska eastward to the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and northern British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba along the Subarctic treeline. This article conveys the story of the Peacemaker from the perspectives of the Dene in Northern Saskatchewan. The literature and resources I rely on are from scholars, other authors, and Dene oral historians, who discuss how the story of Thanadelthur came to life and the events that unfolded. This is a story of a young Dene woman who took charge of a peace mission in order to benefit her people.

Thanadelthur’s Story

The company clerks who wrote the Hudson’s Bay Company journals recorded that, along with a small group of Dene hunters and her female friend, Thanadelthur was captured by Cree during a 1713 raid while hunting caribou south of the Barren Lands between Chesterfield Inlet and Eskimo Point, now known as Arviat. This young woman, described as a slave by her Cree captors, was from the *Ĕdtthēn Eldeli*; in the history books she is Thanadelthur, while oral Dene historians called her *Tthainaltth’er* (Marten Shake), and the HBC archives refer to her as Slave Woman. Contemporary Dene recently took offence to her “Slave Woman” name, and they renamed her “the Peacemaker.”

Thanadelthur and her friend were held captive by their Cree master Natawapish, who took the two women as wives for a year. While in captivity, Thanadelthur observed the Cree using tools and utensils that her people did not have and which could ease the work of her people. Abel notes that Thanadelthur’s captors used guns and tools that made life easier for women and provided the weapons that killed her people, and reiterated that, “the metal tools and household utensils would make the lives of Dene women very much more comfortable in the facilitation of everyday tasks” (Abel, 1993, p. 51). She also overheard the Cree talk about trading at the Fort (York Factory) for necessities like guns and ammunition. Thanadelthur “was amazed when she realized that the Cree did not make all the weapons and utensils that gave them power” (Abel, 1993, p. 49). It was then that Thanadelthur began to formulate the idea that if the Cree could use tools to make their lives easier, the Dene could also enjoy these tools. According to Book (2001), Thanadelthur stated that “I want nothing more for my people than peace. I want them to have the things that make your lives easier; that make you better hunters, and make things better for your women. I want this for the Dene” (p. 97).

The version told by the historical records of the company men and the Hudson’s Bay Company archives indicate that Thanadelthur and her friend escaped in the fall while her master was busy at a tribal meeting. Almost a year later, and near starvation, Thanadelthur encountered the British: “Shortly after her companion had perished, she stumbled across some tracks which led her to the tent of the Company’s goose hunters on Ten Shilling Creek” (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 66). The men took her to York Factory and presented her to Governor James Knight. The Governor queried her, and she hastily told him that Cree captured her. She also told Knight tales of gold, copper, and wealth on her homeland (Book, 2001, p. 68). Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002) mentioned that Thanadelthur promised James Knight, “yellow mettle and gold” (p. 133). She said her people covered a vast area and when taught to trap for furs, they would trade at York Factory.

Governor Knight saw the quality of strength and resilience in Thanadelthur. According to Van Kirk (1980), Knight said, “he had come to regard Thanadelthur as one of the most extraordinary persons he had ever met” (p. 69). Thanadelthur’s determination and passion cast her for the role to successfully navigate the HBC peace mission. She was instructed by Governor James Knight to accompany William Stuart and the Cree Captain Wapasu to help navigate the peace mission because she was familiar with Dene territory. Thanadelthur was an asset to the expedition because in addition to speaking her Dene language, she spoke Cree and English; she would be instrumental when peace talks began. The arduous peace journey that began June 27, 1715, and ended May 7, 1716 (see Figure 1), guided by Thanadelthur, is considered one of the most significant accomplishments in Hudson’s Bay Company history (Van Kirk, 1974, p. 41). Sickness and starvation forced most of the Cree in the delegation to return to York Factory. Thanadelthur and the others were camped near the site where another group of Cree had recently massacred a Dene camp. Abel indicates that the Cree party had attacked, and that “nine recently dead bodies were still lying in one of the tents and the other inhabitants had fled” (Abel, 1993, p. 49). At this point, William Stuart deemed the expedition no longer necessary; however, Thanadelthur took control of the situation and requested she journey alone to find her people.

Many researchers have reviewed the Hudson’s Bay archives and reported on the historical events (Oswalt, 1973; Van Kirk, 1980; Heber, 1989; Abel, 1993; Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002); however, the archives do not include the Dene oral history version of Thanadelthur. There is no written account of her ten-day walk in Dene country; however, specific details and events are in traditional oral stories.

The camp waited for ten days; Stuart and the Cree waited for Thanadelthur, and on the tenth day they decided to take the camp down. At the very last hour, an epic moment, and a pivotal moment for Dene history, she appeared with approximately 160 of her people. William Stuart was so happy to see her according to Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi:

With the timing of a legendary heroine, Ttha’naltther chose the last moment to make her dramatic return and the peace ceremony was initiated: On the tenth Day when they were [Resolved] to Stay there no longer the Woman came and [hollered] and made her [signal] she had found some Indians ... 160 of the handsomest [strongest] that Stewart had ever seen in his life came to their tents. (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002, p. 140)



Figure 1. Map of a possible route of Thanadelthur's peace delegation. Adapted from *Teacher's Guide for Blackships /Thanadelthur: Young Heroes of North America, Vol. 1*, by Rick Book, 2001 (p. 31), developed by Jane Huck, Heartland Associates, 2004. Reprinted with permission.

Although her people came along with her, the tension and fear between the Dene and the Cree were intense. Book states Thanadelthur was frustrated with her kin because she felt they were afraid to make peace and she yelled at the men and women:

‘Do you want to live like hunted rabbits? [sic], Do you want the constant threat of war?’ She was enraged and frustrated because no one was making the first move, she just wanted peace. Thanadelthur stamped her feet in disgust. Whirling around, she ran back, grabbed some women by their coats and pulled them out of the trees into the clearing, ‘Do you want war or peace?’ She pleaded, ‘Do you want sharp knives and guns that mean your children will never go hungry again?’ (Book, 2001, p. 103)

Thanadelthur’s energy and determination were to ensure *ēghēna*, a term used by Dene that means to ensure healthy living, to provide sustenance, and to live by

the laws of the land. When she was near exhaustion, her people finally relented and smoked the peace pipe with the Cree. Book notes that Thanadelthur asked, while smoking the peace pipe with Dene and Cree, “years from now around the fires whose names will be remembered from this day” (2001, p. 103)? Despite the peace negotiation, animosity was still prevalent, and trust had to be re-established. What a momentous moment to begin peace talks; these talks would have been through translation and no doubt Thanadelthur took the lead role.

There is no known painting of Thanadelthur; however, the company clerk could describe her features. William Stuart described Thanadelthur: “She had a flat brown face of a Copper woman with a broad handsome nose and full wide lips” (Book, 2001, p. 64). Her most striking feature was her eyes; there was such determination as though she was obsessed: “There was fierce burning I had never seen before, not in any same man, not in any woman for certain” (Book, 2001, p. 65). An Elder reported that, “She was a very good looking woman” (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002). When raiding and massacring Dene camps, the Cree often took slave women, especially if they were pleasing to the eye. Hendley (1967) quotes Hudson Bay explorer Samuel Hearne’s description of a Dene’s version of beauty: “A broad flat face, small, high cheekbones, three or four broad black lines across each cheek, a low forehead, a large broad chin, a hook nose, tawny hide...” (p. 11). Multiple sources describe Thanadelthur to be of small stature, five feet tall, and beautiful, and that she could make a full-grown man shake from fear of her (Hendley, 1967; Houston, 1989; Book, 2001; Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002). The stories told by Elders also describe her as a beautiful woman; however, the oral historians did not detail her as a beauty, rather, they acknowledge and concentrate on her accomplishments.

Thanadelthur is considered the first woman in Dene history to be recognized and “one of the few women to have achieved a place in the history of the Canadian North” (Van Kirk, 1974, p. 41). In 2000, Thanadelthur was recognized by the Government of Canada as a Person of National Historic Significance, and in 2003 she was also named an historical role model for youth by the Government of Canada. This recognition was initiated by the Churchill Ladies Club and Sayisi Dene Chief Powderhorn (Book, 2001, p. 107). In 2017, the Sayisi Dene of Tadoule Lake and the communities of Black Lake, Fond du Lac, and Hatchet Lake (Wollaston Lake), along with Parks Canada, bestowed honours on Thanadelthur with a commemorative plaque in Churchill, Manitoba, unveiled by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) Manitoba representative. Canada’s then Minister Responsible for Parks Canada Catherine McKenna, said:

I am proud of the commemoration of Thanadelthur, an inspiring woman who occupied a central role in the consolidation and expansion of the northern fur trade. Her story highlights the significant contributions of Indigenous women in our country’s history, and her accomplishments, as a result of her peace-making attitude, are an inspiration for all of us. I invite all Canadians to discover and be inspired by the stories of the people, places, and events that shaped the land of Canada. (Government of Canada, 2017)

Van Kirk notes that few people in their lifetime attain the status, respect, and authority that this Dene woman achieved in her short life (Van Kirk, 1974). She had a strength of character and raw determination, which could so quickly and easily overturn centuries of patriarchal domination. In McGoogan’s (2003) book, Samuel Hearne, an explorer for the Hudson’s Bay Company, observes that “like beauty, a woman’s temperament was of little consequence, if only because the most stubborn females would be brutally beaten into compliance” (p. 134). Beauty was irrelevant; nevertheless, hardiness was a desirable quality in Dene women who worked hard to keep the camp in order. Their work was a basic expectation and not appreciated by their male kin. Oswalt (1973) further explained that “females were subordinated to men in every way. They were treated cruelly and were held in gross contempt by the men” (p. 42). Thanadelthur’s strength of character indicates that not all women were victims of male power and at the time of her abduction she was in her Dene territory enjoying life on the land.

Oral stories tend to be descriptive, entertaining, and captivating. Unlike the records written by the company men of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the Elders recall that Thanadelthur joined the Cree at the Fort (York Factory) to trade and was told to stand outside, out of view, and to wait. Elder Bart Dzeylion’s version reported that, “The Hudson’s Bay men take Thanadelthur to the fort where the Cree are inside negotiating trade. The manager of the post, Chief Factor James Knight, sees Thanadelthur and asks her to come in” (Holland & Kkailther, 2003, p. 31). She was curious and started looking through the window, and the Bălai (a term used to describe French) saw her and told her to come in. The term Bălai was also used by an Elder in Bussidor’s book (1997, p. 14), and also by Elders who shared their stories of Thanadelthur. (This was in the early 1700s, and the term Bălai was used exclusively at the time the English and French were vying for fur trading territory and competition to conquer the Hudson’s Bay Company.)

According to my father, A. Tsannie, the first encounter with Europeans was fascinating for Thanadelthur, who he referred to as “our grandmother”; she apparently said, “they stood there looking at me like seagulls (bright blue eyes), and they look deathly pale as though they lack blood” (Tsannie, 2015). She took

advantage of her circumstance and began telling the Governor that the Cree were killing her people, and when loud icicles fall Dene people died. She could only relate to her world; there were no guns, and she was referring to the icicles breaking and snapping and making loud cracking noises. Thanadelthur told her people, “These items are for you to lead a good life, *eghēna ha* (to provide life), and to bring fur pelts to trade at York Factory. You will trap marten, fox, and otter to trade at York Factory.” This is how the Dene learned to trap and trade, and this is when Dene started to trap (Tsannie, 2015). My father was a trapper, and we lived this life too.

In the early 1700s, Dene people were in constant hiding, knowing if the Cree came upon them, they would die for sure. One of the gifts given to the Dene by the HBC were hatchets; traditionally, the Dene used a crude handle made from tamarack and with beaver teeth wrapped by caribou sinew for chopping purposes. Imagine how tedious these blunt beaver teeth hatchets would be compared to the steel axe of today. My father told me that it took the Dene one week to chop down trees on a big hill (Tsannie, 2015)! Bart Dzeylion, cited in Holland and Kkailther (2003), shares his story of the Dene’s introduction to the axe:

Before this they use to use beaver teeth. Boy, that axe was sharp! When the people came to the big hill they stopped. One of the men cut down a spruce tree. Then another ... then another ... thousands and thousands of trees. Just about all the trees were gone from that hill. It’s called Sheth gai ye. (p. 32)

According to a young leader, P. Gazandlare (Gazandlare, 2016), this hill is near Keehn Lake in Northern Manitoba. This famous hill is identified as Elders retell the story of when Dene people first accessed axes. According to B. Dzeylion, the location of the hill was White Hill Mountain (as cited in Holland & Kkailther, 2003, p. 32). It is near the vicinity of Keehn Lake (known as *Sakie Tue* in Dene), the location coordinates are latitude 59.1661 and longitude 101.0760, northwest of Whitmore Lake.

Oral stories told by Elders recall that Thanadelthur followed the Cree because she understood Cree. She understood their discussions about business at York Factory. Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002) did a comparative study on oral history and the HBC archives, and they found that oral stories differ if told by Elders who did not speak English compared to Elders who spoke English. There may be a bias from Elders who spoke English:

Elders who retained important traditional knowledge spoke primarily Chipewyan [Dene]. Those Elders who also spoke English were often insistent on relating the story in the Chipewyan language. When asked to repeat a traditional story in subsequent interviews, they did so in an almost rehearsed fashion, with the story maintaining its identical form and content. (Contu & Hoffman-Mercredi, 2002, p. 132)

There are many versions of Thanadelthur’s story. Dene from different communities convey slight variations; however, the original story of her captivity and introduction to the fur trade are similar. What the Hudson’s Bay Company did not capture in their journals is the ten-day trek; this version is told through generations of oral storytelling. Thanadelthur wanted her people to participate in the peace exchange. She was exhausted and travelled many miles to find her people. Because of the warfare, the Dene were challenging to find; however, she knew her country and found them. She worked feverishly, talking and shouting to them; thus, her voice was hoarse upon her return to York Factory.

Thanadelthur was a remarkable young lady who exhibited and earned prestige in her role as a negotiator. She was an example of determination in the eighteenth century, and she was an intelligent young woman. She demonstrated her knowledge of the land, linguistic ability, and leadership skills by navigating the peace mission. As indicated by Book (2001), she navigated “using the sun by day and the Wolf Star at night” (p. 67). She successfully negotiated a peace between the Cree and the *Ēdthēn Eldeli*. She was reportedly an eloquent woman, forceful enough to persuade hundreds of men to choose commerce over war. She changed a way of life for her Dene people and the Cree by trading peacefully at the Hudson’s Bay Company. While on an expedition, she did not hesitate to discipline her Cree companions. According to Contu and Hoffman-Mercredi (2002), “She made them all stand in fear of her as she scolded at some while pushing at others ... and forced them to be at peace” (p. 138). Her journey of peace was so important to her that she used all her power and might to establish peace and was admired by people who knew her, including the company clerk who admired her:

William Stuart was full of admiration, ‘Indeed she has a Devillish Spirit and I believe that if there were but 50 of her Country Men of the same carriage and Resolution they would drive all the Northern (Southern) Indians in America out of their Country.’ (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 68)

During Thanadelthur’s short life, she continued to promote both the interests of the Hudson’s Bay Company and of her people. Even on her deathbed, she

wanted to ensure her people were cared for. As stated by Book (2001), “she was so determined that her people get new goods that she taught a young English lad her Dene tongue, in her last feverish days” (p. 106). She was sick for several weeks, and her immune system could not handle the European diseases. Then, sadly, she died on February 5, 1717. Governor James Knight lamented her loss and was devastated. Thanadelthur’s character and passion affected the lives of people who were honoured to be in her presence, the Hudson’s Bay Company and Elders who continue to tell her story.

Thanadelthur’s story is about creating a good life for her people; they live by the concept of *ëghëna* (living and creating a good life). She created economic opportunity and resource sustainability for her people and for the Hudson’s Bay Company. The fur trade era caused monopolization and exploitation of land for trapping that resulted in war between the Cree and Dene. As Bone (2001) wrote, “profit was the foundation of the Hudson’s Bay Company. For over 300 years, the HBC dominated the Canadian fur trade. This British company was the most powerful economic, social, and political force in the Canadian North” (p. 71). Thanadelthur’s role as a peacemaker impacted the lives of the Dene, *Ėdtthën Eldeli*, for over three hundred years. As stated by Bart Dzeylion, an Elder interviewed by Mary Ann Kkailther and cited in Niigaanwewidam and Cariou (2011), “Thanadelthur is the reason we exist today” (p. 90). She is esteemed by Dene people, and they credit her courage for their existence.

Through the leadership of Thanadelthur, the Northern Dene were enticed from the boreal forest and barren lands to begin a new way of life; they were introduced to a world of commercialism. There can be no denying that the lifestyle of the people improved; however, the fur trade economy demanded that there was a cost to be paid—diversion from traditional survival to sustain the fur trade exploitation. What was the compromise for the Dene to leave a way of life on the land for commercialism—freedom to travel and hunt without fear for their lives, and access to tools to make their lives easier and to explore their new status as trappers. Canada and the Dene People acknowledge Thanadelthur’s role in history, which leaves an everlasting image of a woman who wanted only a life of comfort for her people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a young Dene girl changed the course of history for her *Ėdtthën Eldeli* People. This story has been told through the Hudson’s Bay Company archives and celebrated by Elders who are the “gems” in the oral history library that keep her spirit alive. I, among other writers, took excerpts from these sources of information to formulate how we interpret this famous expedition. I also rely on traditional oral stories passed on by Elders, Dene authors, and my father.

Although there are discrepancies in the foundation of Thanadelthur’s historical events, stories will convey her through the historical envelopes of her Dene people. Her feats and accomplishments are told and celebrated. People may challenge the oral stories; however, these stories are in the memory and minds of Dene people. This is a story of Dene people; they came out of the boreal forest and barren lands to trap and it has changed their way of life forever by creating the concept of *ëghëna*. In her short life, Thanadelthur introduced commercial hunting and trapping as a way of life for her people. I am inspired by this young Dene heroine who, at the time of male patriarchy, would not bow down to submission and created a place for her people in the history books of Canada.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

Participation in the Traditional Economy in Northern Saskatchewan: The 21st Century Landscape

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Abstract: This article discusses the resilience of the northern traditional economy. In northern Saskatchewan *mitho-pimachesowin* speaks to the freedom and capacity to make a good living. For northern Indigenous People, this includes participation in the traditional economy that reflects their culture, identity, and way of life. Most still blend their land-based livelihood activities (harvesting, trapping, commercial fishing) and other forms of revenue income to support their families and communities. This blended approach is an example of sustainable development that works, and it should be supported by all levels of government with strategic approaches and investments. 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*.

Introduction

This article argues that the federal and provincial governments need to support and invest in the traditional market sectors (commercial fishing and trapping) of Northern Saskatchewan through long-term strategic incentives and subsidies to ensure the region's overall sustainable development. Northern Indigenous people and their governments are not static, and while they are increasingly engaging in economic partnerships with industry, they also remain protective of their traditional lifestyles. It is a blended way of life, not an either-or situation. Research findings suggest that the northern Indigenous traditional economy is still resilient and continues to make significant contributions toward protecting a northern way of life with its conservation and ecological knowledge and economic benefits (Beatty et al., 2013).

The northern blended economy is characterized by Indigenous subsistence activities (food production) and local industry (commercial fishing, trapping, and wild rice harvesting). Northern Saskatchewan is also a smaller regional economy and support from governments is limited (Beatty et al., 2013). Indigenous producers continue to face many fiscal and regulatory challenges (Beatty et al., 2013); nonetheless, many still practice their traditional livelihoods. Their resilience lies in an inward zeal to protect their homelands, their identity, sustainable food sources, and their spiritual, cultural, and economic way of life. I recall my late dad saying many times, “if you are worried and stressed, go out on the land for a while and you will get better” (O. Beatty, n.d.)—thus referring to the importance of overall health and wellness for economic well-being.

This article discusses some research findings that illustrate the resilience of the northern traditional economy, something that Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders have known all along, and what others have noted (Winther, 2016; Rusic, 1978). It begins with a brief discussion of the northern traditional economy to set the contextual background. The article then briefly introduces the research and summarizes its key findings with respect to the main indicators of participation in the traditional economy to help characterize the northern traditional economy and discuss its ongoing significance. It concludes with recommendations for informing both policy and further research.

Northern Traditional Economy

The interactions between Indigenous Peoples and the early fur traders resulted in stereotypical images of northern trappers, hunters, and fishers struggling in a subsistence and emerging market economy. Thanks to misrepresentations of Canadian history, First Nations Peoples have been portrayed as primitive (Cardinal

& Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 3), and certainly not considered on the slate of Canada's “founding fathers.” Indigenous Peoples and their traditional economies were not primitive, of course, and they did not lead lives of poverty and perpetual hardships (Coates et al., 1992, p. 20). Their economic livelihood what the northern Cree refer to as “Pimacihowin,” an economic, spiritual, and cultural way of life (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43). This term can be both a noun and a verb denoting purposeful production activities and journeys made in making a livelihood. In their own history, First Nations Elders attribute everything to the Creator that placed them on the lands of North America to make a good way of life, to share and live in peace (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 5). Treaties with Europeans were considered mechanisms towards cementing good relations and sharing (p. 7).

Colonial government expansionism and racism against Indigenous Peoples resulted in an erasure and devaluing of treaty arrangements for centuries—the epic clash of values underlying this also subsequently resulted in many atrocities involving people, their identities, and their land rights. Developments after the Second World War, along with successful legal and political challenges by Indigenous Peoples, led to many improvements through land claims settlements and recognition of Indigenous Rights (Beatty et al., 2013; Southcott & Irlbacher-Fox, 2009).

The contemporary Indigenous traditional economy that emerged from this colonial history was tattered, but not broken. According to Rusic's study (1978) of the James Bay Cree, the northern traditional Cree economy continued to reflect a blend of seasonal wage labour and bush economy, consisting largely of hunting and trapping in isolated areas (p. 4–6). However, larger economic changes have transformed the traditional economy into a vulnerable sector often overlooked by governments. Rusic notes that the traditional economy also tended to be overlooked by researchers who did not understand the economic value of subsistence activities and the labour and savings involved in food and harvesting production. The narrow view of economic development, predicated upon principles of wage income, “Indian–White relations,” and education, has often obscured the “close symbiosis” of the wage economy and subsistence harvesting, although many acknowledge the cultural significance of the traditional economy (Rusic, 1978, p. 7). A better description of the northern traditional economy is that of a mixed cash–subsistence (Holen et al. 2017, p. 89) or a blended economy, built upon principles of local control, self-determination, and partnerships.

A traditional economy remains a challenging life, but it is also what many northern Elders recount as a “good way of life” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). It produced a bountiful land-based cultural and economic way of life where making a living was both autonomous and cooperative, and very reliant on kinship networks and personal ingenuity (Beatty et al., 2013). The exchange with the

external Western market system came early by way of the commercial trapping and fishing trades, not to mention taxes and regulations imposed by provincial and federal governments. The traditional economy was vulnerable, however, not only to the dictates of nature and weather, but also changing government policies, fluctuating market prices, and demographic changes. Today, making a living in Northern Saskatchewan—Pimachesowin in Woodland Cree or Pimachiowin or Pimâcihowin in Plains Cree (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43)—requires necessary engagement in both the wage and traditional economies to make ends meet, and the subsequent vulnerability of this way of life needs government support and incentives.

The Danish economist Gorm Winther (2016) has described the traditional economy as a Subarctic transfer economy (p. 5). He classifies three main systems in his analysis of northern regional economies (Arctic and Subarctic), where one of the sectors includes the Subarctic transfer economies of Nunavut and Greenland consisting of hunting, trapping, fishing, and reindeer herding (p. 5). Aside from the reindeer herding, this Subarctic transfer economy could very well describe Northern Saskatchewan. The extent to which the traditional economy contributes to the national GDP is often overlooked due to larger government transfers. Winther infers that the traditional economy should not be ignored given that harvested subsistence foods are healthier and can offer important substitution values by replacing the more expensive goods imported from southern Canada. This argument makes sense insofar as addressing the need to protect the traditional economy, food security, and northern Indigenous Peoples' access to their resources. In Saskatchewan, the traditional economy is an Aboriginal and treaty right, but governments still have much control and much more needs to be done (Beatty, 2019).² Elders believe that Treaties guarantee the right of First Nations livelihood and rights to the land and its resources (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 46). It is also a cultural preference and one of affordability given the high costs of living and travelling in the North (Holen et al., 2017, pp. 95–96).

The cost of goods and services from southern Canada, especially healthy essential foods, are beyond most household budgets, often leading to food insecurity and related issues. Incentives, subsidies, and other support programs for hunters and trappers are one way of supporting traditional economies. There are precedents for these initiatives across the Far North. The Government of Nunavut, for example, provides support and incentive programs like the fur pricing program for its Indigenous trappers and hunters ("Nunavut to pay hunters more for sealskins furs," 2015). The Nunavut Harvesters Support Program has estimated that it costs \$200 for a weekend hunting trip, an amount beyond the budget of many northern households (Holen et al., 2017, p. 104). The Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario also has a harvesters subsidy program and a trapper's

support program (Moose Cree First Nation, 2021). The James Bay Cree of Northern Quebec, through their land claims settlements, have had an income support program for nearly fifty years to help Cree trappers and hunters maintain their traditional way of life (Rusic, 1978).

In Saskatchewan, provincial governments have increasingly minimized their support over time, and the interaction and relations with Indigenous trappers and fishers is largely through enforcement of provincial regulations (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). Northern commercial trappers and fishers have set up their own volunteer advocacy organizations to try to address the needs of their local economies. The Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association, for example, has been around since the 1970s (Pattison & Findlay, 2010) and it continues to advocate for the supports needed for trappers to practise their northern traditional economy. The Saskatchewan Cooperative Fisheries Ltd. and other related groups likewise advocate for the northern commercial fishing industry.

Methodology

This article is based on data from a 2010–2012 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research project that explored how Aboriginal populations in Northern Saskatchewan engaged in community, cultural, and political processes (Beatty et al., 2013). A telephone survey was conducted in the northern administrative district of Saskatchewan and this was later followed up with youth focus group sessions in eleven northern communities. The focus group sessions provided greater context for the survey in general, and also added voice for the youth population (aged 18 to 24) that was underrepresented in the telephone survey. The survey was administered in English, Cree, and Dene. In total, 851 individuals completed the survey, including 161 Métis respondents and 338 First Nations respondents.

For the purposes of this article, only those parts of the research that highlight the extent to which the Indigenous traditional economy continues to be practised within Northern Saskatchewan are highlighted in Table 1 below (Beatty et al., 2013, p. 10).

Findings

Table 1 presents the broad summary data on survey items relating specifically to practices in the traditional economy. In particular, three indicators were used to measure respondents' participation in the traditional economy. The responses suggest a robust traditional economy in the North. People still frequently engage in outdoor harvesting activities. First, the survey asked respondents approximately

how many times they engaged in outdoor activities—such as hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering wild roots and berries—in the past twelve months. In turn, respondents reported an annual average of 33.8 times they engaged in these traditional outdoor activities, or approximately three times per month over the course of a year. A second indicator to measure participation in the traditional economy is giving away or sharing traditional foods with others. The survey found that over 70% of respondents had engaged in this practice in the past year. Finally, the survey asked those respondents who self-identified as First Nations and Métis how important they felt it was for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life; in response, the survey found that 84.4% of Indigenous respondents indicated that this was very important.

Table 1. Summary Statistics on Traditional Economy Activities in Northern Saskatchewan. Source: Beatty et al., 2013.

	Mean	n
1. In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you engaged in outdoor activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering wild roots or berries?	33.84*	840
	% Yes	n
2. In the past 12 months: did you give away or share with others traditional foods such as moose meat or fish?	72.2	851
	% very important	n
3. How important is it that Aboriginal communities maintain traditional ways of life?**	84.4	507
*S.D. 78.64. **Question 3 was asked on a four-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 was not at all important and 4 was very important		

A Closer View

Looking at the results a little more closely, responses by sex and gender suggest some variance but not extensively overall. When the three indicators of participation in the traditional economy were analyzed by gender, over the past year women hunted, trapped, fished, or picked mushrooms and berries an average of 26.4 times, and men participated in these activities an average of 43.2 times. There could be multiple reasons for this difference, but since women tend to be primary caregivers of family households, having little spare time would be an issue. Another factor could be the traditional male roles of hunting, fishing, and trapping to feed their families. This is a factor that is slowly changing as women engage in more traditional economic activities, not only for food, but also for social and economic support. Giving away or sharing traditional foods and sustaining the traditional ways of life is a common practice. About 68% of women responded that they gave away or shared traditional foods with others over the past year, while 77% of men gave away or shared traditional food. Finally, when asked about the importance for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life, 88.2% of First Nation and Métis women indicated that it was very important, while 80% of First Nation and Métis men indicated that it was very important.

The level of education also suggests some differences amongst the three indicators of participation in the traditional economy, but not greatly overall. First, when respondents’ engagement in outdoor activities was analyzed by level of education, it was revealed that respondents with some post-secondary education engaged the most often with an average of 40.4 times over the past year, followed by respondents with grade school/some high school education, who engaged an average of 38.7 times over the past year. Respondents who had completed secondary education engaged in outdoor activities an average of 37.6 times. Meanwhile, respondents with completed post-secondary education engaged the least amount at an average of 26.8 times over the past year, which again could be attributed to many factors including not having spare time to go out on the land.

Second, when asked if respondents gave away or shared traditional foods over the past year, respondents with grade school/some high school were most likely to engage in that practice (79.1%). Following this, 76.2% of respondents with some post-secondary education and 73.1% of respondents with completed post-secondary education reported that they had given away or shared traditional foods over the past year. Overall, most respondents in all categories gave away or shared traditional foods. As well, the survey found that over 80% of respondents, regardless of their level of education, responded that it was very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain their traditional ways of life.

When looking at the age factor, the three indicators measuring the respondents' participation in the traditional economy illustrated more commonalities. The respondents between 50 and 59 years of age engaged in traditional outdoor activities the greatest number of times at an average of 39 times over the past year. This was followed by respondents under 30 years of age who engaged in outdoor activities an average of 36 times over the past year, then respondents between the ages of 40 and 49 engaged in outdoor activities an average of 34.5 times over the past year. Respondents between 30 and 39 indicated their engagement in outdoor activities an average of 30 times over the past year. Finally, respondents over the age of 60 expressed their engagement in outdoor activities an average of 28.5 times over the past year.

Next, most respondents, regardless of age, reported that they gave away or shared traditional foods with others over the past year. Specifically, 78% of respondents under 30; 71.4% of respondents aged 30–39; 70.5% of respondents 40–49; 76% of respondents 50–59; and 66.4% of respondents over the age of 60 reported giving away or sharing traditional foods over the past year.

When First Nations and Métis respondents were further asked about their perceptions of the importance for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life, close to 90% of respondents between the ages of 30–39 and 50–59 indicated this is very important. Of those respondents aged 40–49, 83% also perceived this to be very important, and 79% of respondents under 30 and over 60 perceived this to be very important.

The three indicators of participation in the traditional economy were then analyzed by respondents' self-reported employment status. It was found that self-employed respondents engaged in outdoor activities the most with an average of 54 times over the past year. Respondents who were employed part time at one job or employed at more than one job indicated engaging in outdoor activities an average of 50 times over the past year. Respondents who were employed full time at one job reported an average of 31 times over the past year, while respondents who were unemployed reported the lowest amount of engagement in outdoor activities with an average of 23 times over the past year. Again, while multiple factors were likely involved, this lower engagement by those reporting unemployment could reasonably be attributed to their inability to afford the costs of hunting, fishing, or trapping.

As far as giving away or sharing traditional foods, there was high participation across the spectrum (employed, self-employed, or unemployed) in this practice—82% of those respondents employed at more than one job, 75% of respondents who were self-employed, 74% of respondents who were unemployed, 70% of respondents who were employed full time at one job, and 69% of

respondents employed part time at one job, reported that they had given away or shared traditional foods over the past year.

Lastly, most of the respondents across the employment–unemployment spectrum responded that it was very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain their traditional ways of life. The survey found that over 80% of respondents who were employed full time at one job, employed at more than one job, self-employed, and unemployed, and 78% of respondents employed part time at one job indicated they found it very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life.

Observations and Conclusion

Most Indigenous respondents displayed high levels of participation with the traditional economy in Northern Saskatchewan. Responses suggested a high level of sharing traditional foods and the majority considered it very important for Indigenous communities to maintain their traditional way of life.

There were some differences across the variables (gender, education, age, and employment) and one can only speculate to explain these due to the multiple factors at play. In the category of gender, for example, men appeared to participate in the traditional economy at higher rates in comparison to women. This could be attributed to women not having the resources nor the time to go out due to being primary caregivers for their children and families. Another factor could be culture, where the traditional role of men was to go out and make a living on the land for their families; but with changing social and economic challenges, this is also changing.

The age variable suggested the most commonalities overall, with the respondents aged 50 to 59 engaging in traditional outdoor activities the greatest number of times a year (35) and those aged 60+ reporting 29 times a year. The rest (aged under 30, 30–39, and 40–49) reported engagement in traditional activities in the mid-range (30–35 times a year).

The other more common variables of wage income and education suggest an attachment to the traditional economy regardless of wage income levels or education; however, there are also barriers. Time and cost issues are an example but may not necessarily be complementary. Those with completed post-secondary education reported lower engagement in outdoor activities than the others (grade school/some high school, completed secondary, and some post-secondary). Time may be an issue here. In terms of wage income, those reporting self-employed status suggested the highest levels of outdoor engagement (54 times over the year), and those reporting unemployed status suggested the lowest levels of participation (23 times over the year). This suggests that people want to engage in traditional activities and do so when they have sufficient resources and time.

The overall findings suggest what Rusic calls a “close symbiosis” (1978, p. 7) between the wage economy and subsistence harvesting, and this needs to be taken into consideration when discussing sustainable economic development. The research here and elsewhere suggests participation in the traditional economy is tied to the northern Indigenous culture, identity, and way of life. Most Indigenous northerners continue to rely upon traditional harvesting (commercial and subsistence) to supplement their overall household income and needs. However, the costs associated with time and getting things ready to engage in these traditional pursuits are increasing and consequently inhibiting engagement by those who need it most. The mixed cash–subsistence economy (Holen et al., 2017, p. 89) of Northern Saskatchewan remains an important component of sustainable development, and all levels of government need to support and invest in the traditional market sectors (commercial fishing, trapping) through long-term strategic incentives and subsidies.

Notes

1. Here, northern refers to the Northern Saskatchewan Administration District (NSAD) (Government of Saskatchewan, 2021).
2. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are broadly applied interchangeably here. The term Aboriginal is a constitutional term defining Aboriginal Peoples in Canada as being Indian, Inuit, and Métis (s. 35, Constitution Act, 1982), while previously, the term Indigenous Peoples was linked to more of a global scope. With UNDRIP (the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), the term Indigenous is now being used to refer to issues both national and international.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

Mitho-Pimachesowin (Earning a Good Living):
Training Indigenous Youth for Readiness in a
Blended Economy

Mitho-Pimachesowin: Oskayak Takisinwahamacik
Atoskewina Ta Isi Pimachesocik

Gregory Seib

Deschambault Lake, Northern Saskatchewan

Abstract: In order to enjoy a good life (*mitho-pimatisiwin*) and earn a good living (*mitho-pimachesowin*), Indigenous youth must receive innovative education and training to obtain the skills necessary to find suitable employment. Many Indigenous youth in Canada live in poverty and face challenges in obtaining suitable employment in and outside of their communities. In order to address the poverty cycle and high unemployment of Indigenous youth, the author engages the reader in various Cree concepts, discusses a blended economy training approach, and presents a hypothetical education training model whereby Indigenous youth are trained to work in a blended economy. This blended economy consists of both local economic and Western economic industries. Training within this blended economy will take place within Indigenous communities and will incorporate and utilize the Indigenous community as a whole in the training of Indigenous students. The Cree concept of *wahkootowin* (or *wâhkôhtowin*) is the basis to guide this training. In training students utilizing the grassroots community, students will be able to learn through traditional methods, and learn their culture and use cultural concepts to learn valuable skills in a way that is innovative and unique to Indigenous People. It is the hope of the author that Indigenous youth will attain the self-confidence to achieve the dreams and goals that may have been previously unattainable. With new approaches to learning such as those suggested in this article, there is a brighter future for our Indigenous youth in Canada. 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*.

Introduction

Training Indigenous youth to obtain employment in a blended economy is key to eliminating poverty and high unemployment in many Indigenous communities in Canada. This article provides an understanding of how Cree concepts, perspectives, and training may enable Indigenous youth to achieve success in a blended economy. These concepts and the training model discussed in this chapter may provide educational institutions with an understanding in order to develop training programs for Indigenous youth within their own communities.

This article will focus on three Cree concepts: *mitho-pimachesowin* (making a good living), *mitho-pimatisiwin* (a good life), and *wahkootowin* (good relations). First, an examination of how these three concepts correlate in training Indigenous youth to earn a good living is presented. Second, the poverty cycle among Indigenous youth, leading to high unemployment and their absence in the workforce, is presented, along with a potential solution. Third, the concept of a blended economy as it relates to training Indigenous youth is introduced. Fourth, training Indigenous students for improved success in obtaining employment from the local economy and the Western wage-for-hire economy is discussed. Fifth, a hypothetical training model is presented for potential implementation at the secondary school level in Indigenous communities in northern Canada.

In the conclusion, the Cree concepts are summarized, pointing out the importance of *wahkootowin* and the cultural relationships of Elders and the community in providing guidance, stability, and training of Indigenous youth. This may enable youth to earn a living from the traditional economies in their local areas. *Wahkootowin* (or *wáhkóhtowin*) will also ensure that Indigenous students attain the knowledge of language and cultural traditions, while providing the stability, confidence, and community support needed so they can obtain the necessary knowledge and skills in trades and technology of the Western economy. Indigenous youth may potentially have the best of both worlds, which may provide future economic stability and may ensure *mitho-pimatisiwin* through *mitho-pimachesowin*.

Mitho-Pimachesowin

Mitho-pimachesowin is the Cree concept of making a good living (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) contend that *pimachesowin* is a concept that shares both spiritual and physical dimensions. These components are necessary for making a good living.

The element of respect is an important part of *mitho-pimachesowin*. Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) observe that, in the past, “the teaching of respect

associated with the concept of *pimachesowin* provided guidance for the ways in which individuals conducted themselves when exercising their duty to provide for their life’s needs from the gifts provided by the Creator” (p. 44). Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) verify that land (gift from the Creator) is closely tied to *pimachesowin*, as land “provides those things required for physical, material and economic survival of the people” (p. 43). This suggests that *pimachesowin* is part of and is derived from the land. In her dissertation, Settee (2007) shares the importance that Indigenous Peoples place on being respectful of all things. Key to being respectful is caring and compassion, and our relationship to all creation.

Earning a good living is important to Indigenous People. Speaking for myself in my own experience, the opportunities of making a good living off the land were exciting times. In my younger days I helped my uncle to fish commercially. Fishing not only brought about income, but more importantly it provided land-based education—learning the art of gathering fish, learning the Indigenous Knowledge of where the fish could be caught, utilizing the equipment required in the commercial fishing process, working hard while providing the opportunity to enjoy and have fun being out on the land. I recall one early morning out on the water, my uncle had just bought a new thirty horsepower motor and we were all excited to get out and “zoom” to our nets. All was good as we completed checking our nets and headed back home. As we were nearing home and were enjoying the fast ride, boom, we hit a rock reef (which we knew was there!). Although not funny at that moment, we now laugh about it. Our laugh is more about the land teaching us about being too carefree and not paying attention. As you can imagine, we lost many days’ catch in order to purchase a new motor and from that time on we never took the lake for granted. So I can say *mitho-pimachesowin* is not only to earn a good living, it also provides lifelong learning to continue to earn this good living.

Mitho-pimachesowin may be achieved through a blended economic model. This blended economic approach consists of training in both the traditional economy of Northern Saskatchewan Cree communities and training to work in the contemporary Western economic society. This blended economic strategy may also be a catalyst that will help Indigenous youth achieve a good life—*mitho-pimatisiwin*. To achieve *pimachesowin* in a blended economic training model, physical, spiritual, and respect for all creation components should be included.

Mitho-Pimatisiwin

Mitho-pimatisiwin, according to Beatty & Weber-Beeds (2013), “is a northern Woodland Cree term that means the good life” (p. 113). Gross (2002), in his article on *bimaadiziwin* (*pimatisiwin*) maintains that “*Bimaadiziwin* or the good life, can basically be described as a long healthy life” (p. 15–16). Settee (2007)

argues that, “for indigenous peoples, land, food and health are key components of Pimatisiwin” (p. 7). Researchers identify the “good life” as part of Indigenous culture, which emphasizes living off the land, eating the food provided by the land, and being healthy (Gross, 2002; Settee, 2007; Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2013). However, Carriere (2014) states, in her research study of Lac La Ronge Indian band (LLRIB) members regarding pimachesowin and pimatisiwin, that participants in her research were:

able to connect Pimacihowin and Pimatisiwin to their livelihood on the land and in their workplaces. They identified that achieving a good quality life is concerned with making a living. Each individual needs to make a good living in order to have a good life. In other words, each individual needs good Pimacihowin to have good Pimatisiwin, or Mitho-Pimatisiwin. (p. 103)

The grassroots band members from LLRIB view that a person needs to earn a good living to have a good life. Based on the Carriere (2014) findings, band members from LLRIB believe personal economics dictate their ability to enjoy a good life (mitho-pimatisiwin). LLRIB members also recognize the importance of being on the land and living, eating, and enjoying a healthy lifestyle; however, it appears that the view of LLRIB band members is that having a good livelihood correlates to a steady source of income.

As a middle-aged Cree person, I look back on my experiences regarding mitho-pimatisiwin. Although my work life is in the field of education, the good life for me still reverts back to the days of living on the land. I remember the good life for me came from having the crisp fall air blowing in my face while checking whitefish nets and hunting moose and ducks all at the same time. The exhilaration of harvesting whitefish, moose, and ducks all in one day surpasses being in the office worrying about budgets. It is in these times that I feel that I am at peace with the world and I can enjoy and live life how it is meant to be lived.

Wahkootowin

Wahkootowin is a Cree term, “referring to kinship or the state of being related” (Beatty, 2015). Macdougall (2011) points out that wahkootowin is the relationship between land, identity, and family. Settee (2007) adds that the Cree, Mohawk, and Athabaskan values are all very similar. Settee (2007) describes these similar values as the following:

Having a focus on self-sufficiency, hard work, care and provision for family, good family relations, unity, humour, honesty, fairness and love for children. Athabaskan values also include sharing, caring, village cooperation, responsibility to village, respect for elders and others, and knowledge. (p. 14)

These values passed down by Elders, family members, or members of the traditional community are important as they provide cultural insight into how the process of life works, and also give knowledge and insight into why these cultural values matter. I recall one event of wahkootowin relationship whereby family all worked together in bringing home harvested animals. My uncles and I were out hunting and harvested some moose on our excursion. Once we had taken care of the initial field dressing we went home to share the good news of our harvest. The next day grandparents, parents, wives, and cousins came out and helped butcher the animals and haul the meat back home. The meat was then divided up and shared among family, extended family, and friends. The communal concept of working together, learning from our grandparents and parents, and providing for our family, extended family, and friends exemplified the values as stated by Settee (2007).

In order for Indigenous youth of the present day to achieve mitho-pimachesowin—to be successful and to achieve and live a good life—it is necessary for all three concepts of mitho-pimachesowin, mitho-pimatisiwin, and wahkootowin to work in unison.

Poverty

Colonialism through assimilation, residential schools, addictions, and the Western concept of education have contributed to the genocide of Indigenous culture. Indigenous People, especially youth, have borne the brunt of cultural genocide by losing their languages; wahkootowin; and the spiritual, physical, and mental connection to the land. This loss of connection has resulted in poverty, lack of identity, poor self-image, low self-worth, a general sense of hopelessness, and youth suicide.

Poverty among Indigenous youth within Northern Saskatchewan communities may be one reason why Indigenous students drop out of school and have difficulty finding sustainable employment. Bennet (2007) states, “A UN report on a decade of child poverty found that ‘among Aboriginal children, whether living on or off reserve, almost 1 in 2 lives in poverty’” (p. 276). Given Bennet’s observation, 50% of Indigenous youth live in poverty.

Kendall (2001) argues that Indigenous underdevelopment relates to the poverty of Indigenous people, suggesting that these factors of underdevelopment

are, “numerous and complex, including loss of land and sovereignty, cultural genocide, lack of education, and job market discrimination (p. 45). This lack of underdeveloped educational potential may explain the loss of Traditional Knowledge and culture that has caused hardship for many Indigenous people, especially youth.

The cultural genocide Kendall (2001) refers to has impacted Indigenous youth through failing in school, turning to gangs, developing addiction problems, suicide, and becoming parents at a young age. Consequently, the self-worth of Indigenous youth may be extremely low. When the future is bleak, depressed young Indigenous people perceive no hope for the future and fall into the poverty cycle. Young Indigenous people then turn to social assistance to live, and their children, in turn, are dependent and poor. Hunter and Douglas (as cited in Pelletier et al., 2013) describe these consequences of poverty:

Poverty can do both immediate and lasting harm to children. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to lack adequate food, clothing and basic health care, live in substandard housing and poorly resourced neighborhoods, become victims of crime and violence, be less successful in school, suffer ill health and have shortened life spans. (p. 12)

Therefore, to break the poverty of Indigenous youth, these problems need to be addressed. Incomplete education stands out as a primary cause of poverty among young Indigenous people. Pelletier, Cottrell, and Hardie (2013) indicate that statistics in Saskatchewan confirm a bleak picture: 32.5% of Indigenous students graduate from high school, whereas 82% of non-Indigenous students graduate. Bennet (2014) states that 50% of Indigenous youth live in poverty. Where is a starting point to improve these sombre statistics?

Blended Economy

One example to encourage Indigenous youth living in poverty to improve their situation is to integrate a blended economic training model at the local secondary high school level. This model would provide Indigenous youth local training in traditional economies such as commercial fishing, gathering wild rice, mushrooms, roots, and berries, and harvesting fur, while also engaging in Western trades and technology training that may provide them with the opportunity to enter the workforce to earn wages for hire. Skills gained by completing high school can be useful not only in securing employment, but also in enhancing Traditional Knowledge. As Beatty et al. (2015) argue:

The underlying idea in treaties for the proper education of young people was not to stick First Nations children in foreign and distant residential schools, but to enhance their traditional knowledge and learning in their communities with the new skills and knowledge that they needed to make a living (Pimachesowin) in a changing world. (p. 3)

Beatty et al. (2015) suggest that Indigenous youth need to be prepared to function in a dual world or blended economy. Therefore, Indigenous youth should be equipped with two sets of skills: those necessary to work in the Western economy and those that will make them strong contributors to their culture and community. Youth who can function in the Western culture, while maintaining their own culture, can achieve *mitho-pimatisiwin*.

In addition to Beatty et al. (2015), Paci and Villebrun (2004) also claim that a blended economy is important in living the good life. Paci and Villebrun (2004) further contend that a good life is “supported by Denendeh, the land and water,” but that “Dene definitions of the good life must now take into account the influence and effects of development, including the mining economy” (p. 75).

Other scholars have asserted the importance of economic independence as Indigenous people seek the good life in a blended economy. Bone (2012) shows his support of the adaptations made by Indigenous people in deciding for themselves what is best and what works for them in terms of their economic well-being. Bone (2012) claims, “Aboriginal peoples have taken giant strides to secure a new place in Canadian society. They have moved from a restrictive colonial world to a more open post-colonial one where they have gained a measure of control over their lives” (p. 225). In training for employment in a blended economy, it is imperative that Indigenous youth take back control of their lives in order to look after themselves and their families in the future.

My late grandparents, Oscar and Jean Beatty, always believed in hard work. They taught their family the Woodland Cree language and culture, and ensured that their family and future generations could live off the land if they made the choice to do so. My grandparents also knew the value of education and promoted higher education learning. My late *Nimosom* (Grandfather) once shared that *pimatisiwin* on the land was important; furthermore, he shared that although living on the land was rewarding, it was a very hard way of life at times. Like all parents, my grandparents wanted their family to have an easier way to enjoy *mitho-pimatisiwin* (good life) and obtain *mitho-pimachesowin* (earn a good living). They also wanted their family to be educated and trained, so they could also survive and make a good living in the Western economy. This vision of a

blended economy was visionary on my grandparents' part and one I totally agree with and continue to pursue for our Indigenous youth today.

Training

Educational leaders should understand that the traditional way of sharing knowledge and teaching is important when providing education and training that will work in a blended economy. According to Neegan (2000), in the past the responsibility of Indigenous education was with the “parents, elders and members of the community as a whole who were charged with teaching ‘younger people’ in such a way to ensure they led a good life” (p. 4). This observation gains significance when one considers the way Indigenous youth today are educated in schools in which the Western concept of education is followed in structured classrooms where teachers impart education and knowledge to students.

Indigenous students' full immersion in Western culture and systems may be one reason why they are falling behind their non-Indigenous counterparts. From my experience, Indigenous students learn best in their own environment when they are taught using both traditional and Western methods of learning. Although many Indigenous students do not know why they learn best in their own environment and gravitate to traditional ways of learning, it seems that this occurs because traditional learning is part of who they are as Indigenous people and it is built into their genome. Antone (2000) supports this idea: “Elders tell us that these traditions are contained in the blood memory of our people, and now they are coming out of the shadows to be revived for use in our present day cultures” (p. 4). If Indigenous people learn best through innate cultural ways of understanding concepts, it makes logical sense that traditional methods be incorporated in training.

Interestingly, the Indigenous way of learning, as Neegan (2000) observes, involves listening, looking, and learning. Trades and technology in Western conceptual teaching are taught by listening, looking, learning, and practising. These strategies are very similar to traditional teaching; therefore, Indigenous students may adjust easier to the Western training and concepts, resulting in successful training experiences.

Where do young Indigenous people find employment after successful secondary training? Some may enter the workforce after obtaining skills in trades and technology training, while others might choose the traditional economies of fishing, trapping, and wild rice harvesting. Indigenous economic self-reliance could come from working in a blended traditional and resource-based economy. In fact, there may be opportunities for Indigenous youth in the growing resource-based industry. Burke (2008) points out that “Canada has a shortage of skilled

tradespeople and that Aboriginal young people, with their background in the traditional economies, who are looking for well-paying employment might have the advantage in obtaining employment in the trades” (p. 24). Burke's (2008) assessment suggests that Indigenous youth have an opportunity to gain well-paid employment. To benefit from the shortage of tradespeople in Canada, young Indigenous people should obtain the necessary skills to enter the various trades.

To enhance Indigenous training models, the concept of *wahkootowin* should be included. Settee's logical definition of *wahkootowin* bears repeating:

Having a focus on self-sufficiency, hard work, care and provision for family, good family relations, unity, humour, honesty, fairness and love for children. Athabaskan values also include sharing, caring, village cooperation, responsibility to village, respect for elders and others, and knowledge. (Settee, 2007, p. 14)

Given Settee's definition, Elders and skilled community members could build relationships and pass on fundamental values of Indigenous traditions and culture while also teaching youth both traditional cultural practices and skills along with technology and trades training skills. Locally developed training models may provide an avenue for young Indigenous people to obtain the necessary traditional skills along with Western occupational skills to proceed directly into the local land-based economies, the outside workforce, or other post-secondary training.

At the centre of these values suggested by Settee (2007) is the idea of collaboration, or the emphasis on acting for the greater good for all. Kendall (2001) notes that this focus on the community differs from values embedded in Western culture: It is “a communal approach to living, that is, collective ownership and sharing of resources, as opposed to the idea of individual private rights that characterizes Western culture” (p. 46). This communal concept of sharing resources is related to the concept of community teaching and the passing on of Traditional Knowledge. In the last few years, communal teaching and community relationships that were a way of life in Indigenous communities have been giving way to more individualistic tendencies, including learning through Western concepts and styles. To prevent Western-concept teaching from completely overtaking Indigenous communities, *wahkootowin* must be reintroduced as the primary way of learning. The reintroduction of this critical concept will help ensure that knowledge and culture are passed on from one generation to the next.

Training Concept Model

It is one thing to suggest that Indigenous students need opportunities to study the trades; it is another to determine how to deliver such training to them. Beatty et al. (2015) argue that new ways of delivering education and training need to be explored. One avenue these authors suggest is to include training programs within Indigenous secondary school systems. Beatty et al. (2015) maintain that “youth need to have accessible training and education opportunities in their own communities. Both private and public institutions need to engage more effectively with Northern Aboriginal communities and youth to develop relevant programs that produce better educational and employment outcomes” (p. 7).

The education of Indigenous youth should also include, as its foundation, a spiritual component for all training and development. Spirituality among Indigenous cultures is a key concept in achieving pimatisiwin. Doige (2003) contends that:

Education as the Elders understand it, contains a spiritual message. It is about giving and taking the good, without apology or expectation. Essentially, it is about knowing the Creator's will for us; this is a necessary part of living. Thus Aboriginal spirituality is a way of life and a way of thinking that must be acknowledged and utilized in the classroom. (p. 149)

As Doige (2003) points out, spirituality is an important principle in Indigenous culture. This is why it is important to honour the Creator who provides and gives us the ability to learn, and to understand what he wants us to learn at a specific time. With a spiritual base as a starting point, all other concepts can be addressed.

A hypothetical community training model that could be developed may include the following characteristics.

1. A spiritual component led by Elders would encourage Indigenous youth to honour our Creator and understand their role in life while seeking wisdom and guidance. The concept of wahkootowin would be enhanced through teachings from the Elders and community members.
2. In order to provide the physical part of training, capacity and infrastructure must be in place. Capacity development at the institutional level would require Indigenous communities and school systems to partner and collaborate with local Indigenous resource people, Elders, teachers, institutions, and government

to provide, develop, and implement programs conducive to developing skills required for successful employment. As Beatty et al. (2015) suggest, collaboration and partnerships between public and private institutions and industry are important in developing opportunities and training for Indigenous youth. Initial training should incorporate Elders and community members who are skilled in the cultural way of earning a living off the land. Training could be done at the local school facility, then move to the land for developing traditional and practical knowledge and skills. Once the knowledge and skills are developed, a practicum could be completed with supervision by the Elders and community members who earn their living from the land. The concept of wahkootowin will ensure a successful understanding and create success and learning of Indigenous culture and tradition. This would generate interest and would motivate Indigenous students to attend school and may provide higher graduation rates.

3. A study of industry employment needs should be carried out to determine what trades and technology courses are required. Courses at the high school level could then be developed and implemented within the school system. The theory component of trades and technology would require qualified vocational-education teachers who are experts in their fields. Once students learn the theory, the practical hands-on learning could take place. Practical projects could come from local housing developments, where a variety of the trades are required and would potentially fit with the programming. Local tradespeople could also be utilized to provide their expertise and training from an Indigenous perspective. Elders could be utilized as advisors, providing guidance, counselling, and support as the students' progress through their training.

4. My experience in the education field has convinced me that the best way to educate our children is in Indigenous school systems within the local communities. In order for Indigenous students to be successful they need to be taught in a culturally relevant way that they can understand.

For this hypothetical model to be successful, partnerships with industry; First Nations governments; provincial, territorial, and federal governments; and community colleges and universities are key in providing training, funding, resources, projects, apprenticeship credentials, and potential employment. Second, it is imperative that the training component be local in order to accommodate secondary students. Beatty et al. (2015) agree, as they argue that youth success will be inextricably linked to having training and development opportunities located in their own communities. Further, students who are successful in the secondary level training initiative and who want to move on to higher levels of education, should also be able to access training within their communities. This opens the possibility for further post-secondary training models being developed at the community level. These post-secondary training models must be developed with complete funding and certification being provided by federal, provincial, and local First Nations initiatives. It also paves the way for Indigenous control of Indigenous education and, in the longer term, economic self-sufficiency. Kendall (2001) recognizes that Indigenous People acknowledge that economic self-sufficiency is an important step to self-determination and self-government.

Conclusion

The concepts of wahkootowin, mitho-pimachesowin, and mitho-pimatisiwin are integral to the well-being of Cree youth. This kinship and family relationship along with extended family must continue to play a role in preserving Cree tradition and culture. Wahkootowin also plays a role in the training, teaching, and passing down of Traditional Knowledge to ensure the Indigenous way of life is an option for Indigenous youth. The results of passing down this Traditional Knowledge in the wahkootowin spirit will provide the skills necessary to obtain and complete training in both the traditional and modern economies.

The cycle of poverty in many communities can be addressed through providing training and engaging the Indigenous community as a whole, thus providing land-based education to provide skills for the traditional economy while at the same time providing the knowledge and skills required to pursue employment in the Western economy. Wahkootowin is an integral part of all training as it will provide the stability of Elders and community in providing counselling, encouragement, and advice to ensure that our Indigenous way of life, language, and cultural traditions are passed on to future generations. A renewed sense of cultural identity and training may lead to new employment opportunities that may be the catalyst in turning around the Third World conditions and high unemployment of many of our northern communities.

Economic success in the traditional ways as well as in trades and technology also ensures that Indigenous youth will attain the self-confidence to achieve the dreams and goals that may have been previously unattainable. There is a bright future for our Indigenous youth in Canada. There is light and hope at the end of the tunnel. Hope coupled with action will enable Indigenous youth to flourish and take their rightful place in society. It will also present them with the opportunity to find mitho-pimatisiwin through mitho-pimachesowin. It is by earning a good living and understanding and promoting cultural identity and Indigenous Knowledge that Indigenous people truly can have and engage in pimatisiwin.

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Mitho Pimachesowin through Capacity Building

Indigineering: Engineering Through Indigenous Knowledge and Mino Pimachisowin

Nehinaw Osihcikewin: Nehinaw Kiskenitamowin Eyapatak Mena Mino Pimachisowin

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of “Indigineering,” a combination of Indigenous and engineering; my hope is that this concept can help to Indigenize the latter. Many Indigenous communities in Canada have infrastructural needs and there is an opportunity for the engineering profession to assist those needs. However, there is an access gap that exists between the profession and Indigenous communities. This is reflected in the poor Indigenous representation in the profession and in post-secondary engineering programs across the country. In response, the concept of Indigineering, or integrating the code of ethics from the engineering profession and the cultural values of Indigenous Peoples, such as the Cree concepts of *wahkohtowin* (relations, being related), *mino wicheitowin* (having or possessing good relations), and *tapwewin* (speaking the truth, or speaking with precision and accuracy), would help to Indigenize the profession and make it more accessible to Indigenous people, as well as advance the field of engineering. Practising engineering through this lens would serve to ensure an Indigineer’s ability to achieve *mino pimachisowin*—the ability to live a good life, make a good living—and to better engage the greater public, which includes the Indigenous population. 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*.

Introduction

This article explores the concept of “Indigineering” or the “Indigineer.” The word is a combination of Indigenous and engineering, and my hope is that this concept can help to Indigenize the latter. Engineers are known to be problem solvers and are a self-regulating profession with clear codes of practice. These codes reflect the duties to protect the best interests of people and the environment. In turn, Indigineering could be considered performing engineering while incorporating Indigenous virtues that help to secure the ability for *mino pimachisowin*—the Cree concept meaning the ability to live a good life, make a good living.¹ Currently, many Indigenous communities in Canada are struggling with infrastructure and engineering-related issues and could use help. However, access to engineers is limited because the profession is not representative of the Indigenous community as a result of barriers due to lack of inclusion and awareness. In response, I assert that Indigineering through the practice of *mino pimachisowin* would help to build a pathway between the Indigenous community and engineers, and further develop the concept of Indigineering.

This article begins by examining the infrastructural needs of Indigenous communities in Canada, and how the engineering profession can assist those needs and the access gap that exists between the profession and Indigenous communities. Access to capital is not the focus here, or at least not explored. The focus is on increasing the level of service through *mino pimachisowin* and maximizing capital investment when utilizing existing services. Next, the article elaborates on the concept of Indigineering, especially how the code of ethics from the engineering profession can fit well with the cultural values of Indigenous Peoples. Integrating Cree concepts, such as *wahkohtowin*, *mino wicheitowin*, and *tapwewin*, into engineering would help to Indigenize the profession and make it more accessible to Indigenous people, and also make it better for everyone. Finally, the article proposes some strategies for the engineering profession to start moving in this direction.

Background

I am from the historic community of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, and I consider myself a very proud Cree Indigenous northerner. I grew up immersed in a rich culture shared by those who call my community “home.” The culture of the community represented a rich way of life, revolving around traditional Indigenous practices of living off the land for sustenance and well-being. The community itself is in the heart of the Saskatchewan River Delta and represents a rich ecosystem that allowed local populations to thrive in generations past. The identity of the

community is intimately tied to the Saskatchewan River Delta and the community continues to depend on the delta to the extent it can still provide sustenance.

Indigenous People Need Engineers

The *Hamilton Spectator* reported that, as of April 25, 2016, there were twenty-eight states of emergency in effect in Ontario communities (Woods, 2016). As set out in the Canadian federal Emergencies Act (1985), a state of emergency is described as a “national emergency,” which is defined in s. 3 as follows:

3. For the purposes of this Act, a *national emergency* is an urgent and critical situation of a temporary nature that
 - (a) seriously endangers the lives, health or safety of Canadians and is of such proportions or nature as to exceed the capacity or authority of a province to deal with it, or
 - (b) seriously threatens the ability of the Government of Canada to preserve the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of Canadaand that cannot be effectively dealt with under any other law of Canada.

In other words, this term is reserved for important and serious situations. Interestingly, amongst the states of emergency documented across First Nations in Canada by Woods (2016), many pertain to infrastructure and infrastructure-related issues like water quality and quantity, which the engineering profession can impact.

The issue of water quality is of particular importance as water quality is a basic human right that is recognized internationally by the United Nations. Resolution 64/292 of the United Nations General Assembly (28 July 2010) explicitly recognizes the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledges that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights (UNDESA, 2014). As of November 1, 2020, sixty long-term drinking water advisories were in effect in forty-one First Nations communities in Canada (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2021). By this measure, Canada is failing to deliver this basic right to First Nations. Water is life, and is tied to the identity of Indigenous People. Compromising this connection to the Earth does have an effect on Indigenous well-being, both mentally and physically. Engineers are trained to solve problems, and the water quality issues in some Indigenous communities are among many very large engineering problems facing Indigenous People.

Engineering Needs to Indigenize

Making engineers, and engineering, accessible to Indigenous communities is not as easy as it might seem. The language and practice of engineering has not been viewed as very accessible to most people and this is especially true for Indigenous people. This is reflected in the poor representation of Indigenous people in the profession and in the post-secondary education programs across the country. The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Saskatchewan (APEGGS) reported in 2019 that just 1.2% of engineers identify as Indigenous (APEGGS, 2019). In comparison, Indigenous people are about 16.3% of the total Saskatchewan population (Statistics Canada, 2017) and 5% nationally (Statistics Canada, 2022). A healthy profession is one that is representative of the demographic it seeks to serve, ensuring that the perspectives, values, wants, and needs are reflective of the membership.

This idea to increase Indigenous representation in the field of engineering is not new, and this view is shared with APEGGS leadership. Past APEGGS president Andrew Loken said, “We do not have enough Aboriginal geoscientists and engineers in Saskatchewan. This is not based upon statistics but my own feeling as I meet members of our professions throughout the province. As hard as it is for an engineer to admit, sometimes numbers and statistics are less meaningful than feelings for a problem as wide-ranging as this” (2014). As Loken suggested, the engineering community at large already feels that the profession is unrepresentative of Indigenous people, and that there is a societal need to increase this representation.

The field of engineering is not exclusive to Western science practitioners and the gap is not as wide as we might think. Indigenous Peoples are resilient and have been problem solving for generations. The birchbark canoe, perfected by Indigenous people in Canada, is an example of a design that is hard to improve on and is known to be versatile and strong (Canadian Museum of History [CMH], 2016). The canoe is strong, but light enough to be lifted and transported between waterways (Monk, 1999). Another example is the snowshoe, which allowed Indigenous people to travel efficiently over snow-covered terrain (CMH, 2016). The tipi, travois (type of sledge), and wigwam are other common iconic designs developed to address problems in housing and travel in their current context. These forms of designs are examples of ways that Indigenous Peoples used their knowledge of the land, the resources, and ways of knowing to develop innovative solutions to real problems that affected their ability to live a good life. This holistic ingenuity could be called “Indigineering”—engineering from an Indigenous perspective.

Elements of Indigineering

All practising engineers commit to a code of ethics. The formality of engineering ethics, and responsibility to people, goes back 100 years. In Canada, this progression to formal ethics is related to the Quebec Bridge Disaster of 1907, an engineering disaster where a bridge collapsed during construction, killing seventy-five workers of which thirty-three were Mohawk from Kahnawake (Kahnawake, 2006). This example helped to inform the development of the Canadian engineering ritual “The Calling of An Engineer” and the iron ring. The iron ring is a symbol that all engineers wear on their working hand to remind them of their moral commitment to professionalism (The Corporation of the Seven Wardens Inc., 2016). The intent of the code is to provide engineers with what APEGGS sets out as a Code of Ethics:

All members ... shall recognize this code as a set of enduring principles guiding their conduct and way of life and shall conduct themselves in an honourable and ethical manner, upholding the values of truth, honesty, and trustworthiness, and shall safeguard human life and welfare and the environment. (APEGGS Regulatory Bylaws, section 20(1), 2016)

As presented in Table 1, section 20(2) sets out the principles that members and licensees shall adhere to.

Section 20(1) is a very powerful statement, and the code of ethics is a very powerful set of ethical standards of conduct. It is hard to imagine that any work overseen by any professional engineer would fail the people and environment it was designed to serve.

Table 1 further presents the *mino pimachisowin* code of ethics, as described by Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2013). Indigenous codes of conduct are holistic and about culture, virtues, and behaviours like listening and kindness to each other (Mainville, 2010). For instance, the values of *manatisiwin*, the inner capacity of respect, and *kisewatisiwin*, the inner capacity to be kind, are important to the Cree community and the kinship networks found in them. The virtues help to ensure that we develop empathy for our fellow persons, which is a critical skill in understanding those you work with and engage. The virtues of *kakayiwatisiwin*, the ability to develop an inner sense of industriousness or inner ability or desire to be hard working; *astoskewimahcihowin*, the inner desire or need to work; and *waskawiwini*, the inner energy to move or develop an inner sense of personal initiative, are all related and are important in the sense that Cree always have and continue to value work ethic, innovation, and being productive. This is an important point; contrary to popular mainstream viewpoints, Indigenous people were never lazy, and always strove to be productive members of society. Four

virtues reflect the commitment to develop faculties that seek to increase the quality and ability of our engagements: *nahihitamowin*, the ability to develop keen sense of hearing; *nahasiwin*, the ability to develop alert and discerning faculties; *nistohtamowin*, the ability to develop understanding; and *iyinisiwin*, the ability to develop a keen mind. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring that we are sincerely and effectively listening to our audience and everything around us, and try to know as they know, see as they see. Mino pimachisowin is a holistic concept, one that cannot be separated into exclusively physical or spiritual. It is not simply “doing,” but also “being.”

An important difference between the mino pimachisowin code and the engineering code is that one could be considered duty ethics, and the other, virtue ethics. Fleddermann (2012) distinguishes duty ethics as ethical actions performed through duties (p. 42), while virtue ethics are ethics related to the type of people we should be (p. 44). The engineering code of ethics is a form of duty ethics and outlines the engineer’s responsibilities to people and the environment. Meanwhile, the mino pimachisowin code of ethics is virtue ethics and outlines the virtues or traits that people should strive to have in order to make a living and live a good life.

A good engineer will understand and practice their ethical responsibilities to people and the environment. A great engineer will strive to be a better person and develop those characteristics that make them virtuous. The mino pimachisowin code of ethics is a great place to start in practising virtue ethics and becoming that great engineer: The Indigineer.

Achieving mino pimachisowin or the ability to make a good living is affected by many things. It is what Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2013) describe as “holistic ... includes a spiritual as well as physical dimension” (p. 43), which is a connectedness with our living Earth and the people around us. Critical to ensuring mino pimachisowin are many core values, two of which are *wahkohtowin* (connectedness and kinship) and, through that, *mino wicheitowin* (good relations).

The ability for an engineer to succeed in terms of the responsibilities as outlined by the profession, requires due diligence to people and the environment, and fully understanding the social impacts of engineering. This means ensuring the health and welfare of both people and the environment. Executing on a successful project means that the engineer has met project specifications while minimizing adverse impacts. It would be a struggle to achieve this without the necessary relationships and trust of stakeholders.

Table 1. Outline of the Code of Ethics, Section 20(2) of the Engineering Profession and the Mino Pimachisowin Code of Ethics

APEGS Code of Ethics Section 20(2)	Mino Pimachisowin Code of Ethics
(a) hold paramount the safety, health and welfare of the public and the protection of the environment and promote health and safety within the workplace;	iyinisiwin: The ability to develop a keen mind
(b) offer services, advise on or undertake professional assignments only in areas of their competence and practise in a careful and diligent manner;	nahihitamowin: The ability to develop keen sense of hearing
(c) act as faithful agents of their clients or employers, maintain confidentiality and avoid conflicts of interest;	nahasiwin: the ability to develop alert and discerning faculties
(d) keep themselves informed in order to maintain their competence, strive to advance the body of knowledge within which they practise and provide opportunities for professional development of their subordinates;	nistohtamowin: The ability to develop understanding
(e) conduct themselves with fairness, courtesy and good faith towards clients, colleagues, employees and others; give credit where it is due and accept, as well as give, honest and fair professional criticism;	kakayiwatisiwin: The ability to develop an inner sense of industriousness or inner ability or desire to be hard working
(f) present clearly to employers and clients the possible consequences if professional decisions or judgments are overruled or disregarded;	astoskewimahcihowin: The inner desire or need to work
(g) report to the Association any alleged illegal practices, professional incompetence or professional misconduct by members;	waskawiwin: Inner energy to move or develop an inner sense of personal initiative
(h) be aware of, and ensure that clients and employers are made aware of, societal and environmental consequences of actions or projects, and endeavour to interpret professional issues to the public in an objective and truthful manner;	manatisiwin: The inner capacity of respect
(i) build their reputations and offer their services on the basis of merit and compete fairly with others considering all relevant factors, not just fees.	kisewatisiwin: The inner capacity to be kind

Source: APEGS Regulatory Bylaws, 2016; Hildebrandt & Cardinal, 2013

To establish those good respectful relationships, *mino wicitowin* is necessary. Engineers need to respect the identity and culture of Indigenous Peoples to establish mutually beneficial relationships built on a mutual respect. To establish trust requires the use of another concept, *tapwewin*—or as Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2013) describe it, “Speaking the truth or speaking with precision or accuracy” (p. 45). Knowledge or any other relevant information should be shared or gathered by engineers with integrity, credibility, honesty, respect, and humility. This includes sources of knowledge that are traditional and sacred to Indigenous People, knowledge that has allowed them to persevere through adversity.

The *mino pimachisowin* code of ethics also serves as a valuable tool in building confidence for the aspiring Indigineer, or any Indigenous person for that matter. The behaviours listed in the code emphasize a sense of work ethic and responsibility to oneself and community. This would help to guide young Indigenous people in achieving their own *mino-pimachisowin*.

Just as engineering is not exclusive to non-Indigenous people, Indigineering could be performed by anyone. It could include the Indigenous engineer who performs their duties with their inherent Indigenous identity and ways of knowing, or it could be the non-Indigenous engineer who strives for a greater holistic understanding of the application of their profession through the Indigenous lens. Either way, both would serve to add value to the profession through adding a softer dimension to a perceived rigid profession. Anyone could adopt the *mino pimachisowin* code of ethics and practise Indigineering, and in fact it should be encouraged.

Indigineering Education—An Opportunity for Cultural Sensitivity

Engineering is not new to Indigenous Peoples, as shown earlier by the several historical examples of ingenuity and resilience. What is relatively new is the Western application of engineering and the ethics taught in engineering education programs to Indigenous students. Although efforts to study Indigenous engineering education have been made as far back as 1975 (Leonard et al., 1975), there has been marginal success in furthering Indigenous engineering awareness and participation.

Concurrently, the need for engineers to work across diverse teams is becoming more of a necessity as people migrate all over the world for work. Access to engineering is also now easier across borders with the development of technology and the establishment of international engineering corporations. An engineering education should address this need for cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Engineering education should ideally start before post-secondary, but there are issues to be addressed first. The problem is that Indigenous students are

often alienated by science because it does not reflect their way of knowing or their identity (Aikenhead, 2001). Reimagining the science behind engineering principles from an Indigenous cultural lens is the basis for Indigineering. Efforts are being made to implement Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, through two-eyed seeing, and more attention must be paid to bring these two worlds together to increase Indigenous participation in science and start to address issues such as care for water (Stefanelli et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2014).

At a post-secondary level, there have been many efforts to increase participation and inclusion of Indigenous people and concepts. Outreach programs, access programs, and earnest efforts to research the value of Indigenous Knowledge from an engineering lens have been made (Hess & Strobel, 2013). Teaching Indigenous concepts is critical in an inclusive education. The concept of biocultural diversity is an academic concept helping to instruct non-Indigenous people about the inseparability of culture and the ecosystem (Droz, 2015). First-year post-secondary education is the place to start implementing any kind of cultural sensitivity or humility education. Groll (2013) states, “Viewing cultural humility from a communicative and relational perspective offers promise for helping students learn to structure negotiations of cultural difference toward building sustainable mutually beneficial relationships with not only other students but with faculty and staff” (p. 135). Engineering education programs would be best served by including this type of training, and an Indigineering education would be an ideal start in Canada.

In addition, developing a national organization of “Indigineers” would serve the Indigenous community well, and would help to address the many engineering and infrastructure issues faced. This group could be incubated at the secondary and post-secondary levels, building on existing efforts to include and engage Indigenous students in science and engineering.

Conclusion

Engineers solve problems, and they are known to be good at it; but good problem-solving is not unique to the engineering profession. Re-imagining engineering as an inclusive profession that had Indigenous people practising (Indigineers) and effectively solving problems prior to Western contact would be a pathway to increase Indigenous participation and awareness in the engineering profession.

Indigineering—engineering from the Indigenous perspective—offers a pathway to increasing participation and awareness of engineering. The profession acknowledges that it does not reflect the views and values of Indigenous People because it has poor representation. The profession is making efforts to address this issue. This acknowledgement is a doorway for change and demonstrates that

there is a capacity and appetite for change. Indigineering is a concept that could facilitate that change.

Change, or improving on the profession, would mean that a considerable amount of effort would have to be communicated in hopes of persuading the engineering profession that change is for the better. A good strategy would be to take those perspective improvements and frame them in the context of the profession's existing responsibilities to people and the environment. This change is Indigineering: a blend of duty and virtue ethics that would appeal to engineers who wish to satisfy their personal values. Moreover, practising Indigineering is not exclusive to Indigenous people and could be practised by anyone. Indigineering is an opportunity for cross-cultural learning and achieving social justice in the Indigenous community.

Notes

1. Cree (Algonquian language family) has five dialects generally associated with geographical areas, and three of these are found in Saskatchewan. Swampy Cree, in northeastern Saskatchewan, speak with the “n” dialect, as in “mino” (good). Variant spellings of pimachisowin include pimachesowin and pimâchisowin.

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Cover Art

Kiwetinoḥk Pimachesowin (Northern Way of Life)

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