

Gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing: A resurgence of Anishinaabeg nationhood

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Abstract

Land is medicine and has always been a crucial site where Anishinaabeg pedagogy transpires to transcend western notions of time, law and boundary. In the fall of 2013, four of our Anishinaabeg communities, belonging to Treaty Three, came together and embodied nationhood by occupying Neyaashing (the Point) and engaging in land based practices - Gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing (we roasted wild rice at the Point). This paper identifies how kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing (roasting wild rice at the Point) honours and renews Anishinaabeg's relationship with one another, Neyaashing, and manoomin, and in doing so enacts governance. Our people have always gathered at Neyaashing and through colonial processes we have been displaced from it. Kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing is a land-based pedagogy that inspired Anishinaabeg elders, youth, men and women to participate in creating a space for remembering, reclaiming and re-visioning nationhood on our land. As the Elders have shared, Anishinaabeg's treaty with manoomin and relationship with Neyaashing continue to be vital in positioning an empowering assertion of nationhood. This paper discusses this important act of resurgence.

Keywords: *sovereignty; Anishinaabeg; land-based pedagogy; resurgence*

Introduction

I always look forward to the end of summer and beginning of fall. It is my favourite time of year, as this is the time that we Anishinaabeg prepare our sacred food – manoomin (wild rice). One hot summer day, in July 2013, I visited with my grandparents and my uncle and we talked about the upcoming harvesting season. We wondered where we were going to get manoomin, how manoomin was going to be this season, and I also made my annual promise to my grandpa to travel back home from the city to help him with roasting. While these conversations are common, on this day our conversation took a different turn.

“Gramp, wouldn’t it be cool if we roasted manoomin at ‘the Point’ this year?” I asked. “That would be awesome!” he immediately replied, a huge smile on his face.

With that approval and upon leaving my grandfather’s house, I called people who I knew could help make the gathering at Neyaashing (the Point) happen. By the time I left Couchiching to return to Thunder Bay, plans to roast manoomin at Neyaashing were in the early stages.

On the drive back to the city I reflected on roasting manoomin at Neyaashing and its significance. This was exciting. This was important. The more I thought about us gathering at Neyaashing to roast manoomin it became clear that this would be a meaningful act of resurgence for Anishinaabeg. We would assert Anishinaabeg nationhood by re-presencing ourselves on our traditional lands, lands that we have been displaced from; we would engage in land-based practices that have always sustained our people.

By roasting manoomin at Neyaashing, we were reclaiming the space for Anishinaabeg. One hundred Anishinaabeg from the communities of Couchiching, Naicatchewenin, Mitaanjigaming and Nigigoonsiminikaaning came together as our ancestors always had. We honoured and renewed our treaty with manoomin, as well as our relationships with Neyaashing and one another. This is the essence of Anishinaabeg governance. While some of us may not have realized what we were doing that day in the fall of 2013, our Anishinaabeg communities belonging to Treaty 3 embodied our governance by coming together and engaging in land based practices. Gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing (we roasted wild rice at the Point).

Our physical occupation at Neyaashing allowed the opportunity to imagine and revision what nationhood and governance could look like for our People. As active agents of liberation, our imaginations and visions shattered colonial confinements; the past, present and future came alive at the same time. In those moments of roasting manoomin at Neyaashing, time had no boundaries. *Just as before, manoomin and Neyaashing brought the Anishinaabeg together again!*

Within Anishinaabeg pedagogy, land is a source of knowledge about how to conduct good relationships that transcend Western notions of time, law, and boundaries. Kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing means roasting wild rice at the point. By engaging in kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing, Anishinaabeg honour and renew the relationship we have with Neyaashing, as well as our treaty with manoomin. The traditional harvesting of manoomin has become depoliticized instead of being understood as a strong political act of resistance that embodies Anishinaabeg governance. Living Anishinaabeg governance in these ways will allow

us the strength to confront the violence of colonialism we experience in a multitude of ways on a daily basis.

While Neyaashing has always been an important site where Anishinaabeg come together, colonial processes have impaired our previous connection to the site. Kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing is a way to strengthen this connection and pass on land based pedagogies. When Anishinaabeg youth, women, men and elders come together and create a space for remembering, reclaiming and re-visioning nationhood on our land, we provide the venues to pass on Anishinaabeg values and live out practices of governance with each other. Our treaty with manoomin and our relationship with Neyaashing continue to be vital to Anishinaabeg governance and nationhood.

Land: A way of life

Harvesting and preparing manoomin has always been a way of life for Anishinaabeg. My grandmother, Florence Yerxa, speaks about how “everything we do, we learn from manoomin.” I remember as a young child playing outside my great grandfather’s house and watching him prepare manoomin by dancing on it. This was my first introduction to manoomin. In speaking with my great uncle, Leo Yerxa, he recalls manoomin as being “our life when we were young.” His father, my great grandfather Bert Yerxa, carried on this way of life as best he could with the changing times and changing landscapes, by always welcoming us young ones to take breaks from running around and playing hide and seek in his yard to dance on manoomin. These breaks from play that my great grandfather provided were welcomed. We loved taking off our shoes, placing our little feet in the deep holes that were dug into the ground, and helping by dancing on manoomin. I did not realize it then but through these interactions my great grandfather was introducing and familiarizing me with the responsibilities I inherently carry as an Anishinaabe person – responsibilities that are embedded in our treaty with manoomin.

Our land based practices carry the very essence of who we are as Anishinaabeg. They are alive within the land as well as in our elders and community members that hold strong relationships with the land. My grandparents speak to me about the importance of being on the land so that my relationship can flourish and so I am able to learn more about who I am as an Anishinaabe person. They tell me the land is my university, my book. My grandfather, Willie Yerxa, said:

You will not be out on the land exactly the way I was. Or your grandmother. Or your great grandfather. Or all your ancestors that came before you. That is ok. You will know the land and see the land in your own way. Some the same. Some differently. But get out there because you are connected. It is who you are as Anishinaabe.

This speaks to how Anishinaabeg do not exist in isolation. We are our relationships. To understand your connection to all of creation is to better understand who you are as an Anishinaabe person. Anishinaabeg resurgence cannot happen in isolation and without love.

Leanne Simpson (2011) writes that, in order to access Anishinaabeg thought, it requires all of who we are, “our physical beings, emotional self, our spiritual energy and our intellect” (p. 42). This is true when it comes to harvesting manoomin. Our Anishinaabeg values, political processes, ceremonies and philosophies are embedded in the process of harvesting manoomin. Such Anishinaabeg ways of being are transmitted through the process of making manoomin; our entirety is active with manoomin, water, land, and one another. Making manoomin is a ceremonial act, as much as it is a practical act, as much as it is a political act. Manoomin is complex, “There are voices who speak of its cultural and religious significance; others speak of its economic and nutritional importance; and still others recognize its political symbolism” (Avery Kinew, 1995, p. 44). It is true that manoomin is each of these things and all of these things at once.

Nationhood

During the Treaty 3 negotiations, Anishinaabeg nationhood and governance were strongly asserted. Chief Mawendopenais confidently stated, “the Great Spirit has planted us on this ground where we are” (Morris, 2010, p. 41) and “...where we are, is our property. I will tell you what he said to us when he planted us here; the rules that we should follow...to govern us rightly” (p. 41). Chief Mawendopenais affirmed that Anishinaabeg territory and governance were granted to Anishinaabeg from Gitchi Manidoo. Having a relationship with the land brings roles and responsibilities for Anishinaabeg to honour and live by, according to the rules we have inherited. For that reason, Anishinaabeg governance is about being accountable and honouring our roles and responsibilities granted from Gitchi Manidoo. Our sacred stories tell us that manoomin was gifted only to Anishinaabeg by Gitchi Manidoo and it is because of this that our relationship with manoomin holds distinct aspects of nationhood and governance for Anishinaabeg.

Anishinaabeg have long understood treaty making to be about creating and defining relationships that bind nations and beings to one another. Treaties bind people through shared connections that promote living in harmony with all life forms. Treaty allows us to define how we, as Anishinaabeg, are to peacefully co-exist amongst each other based on an ethic of mutual respect, by establishing our roles and responsibilities that we agree to uphold with one another. From an Anishinaabeg perspective, since our treaties are rooted in living relationships, they are meant to be constantly revisited and renewed (Stark, 2010). Anishinaabeg’s treaty with manoomin is one of our most significant and oldest treaties. We revisit and renew our treaty with manoomin every harvesting season.

Part of our governance was exercised through meeting frequently and “carrying out the [manoomin] harvest” (Avery Kinew, 1995, p. 129). My grandparents speak of what it was like

when they were growing up and how generations of Anishinaabeg families gathered every harvesting season in different places to work with one another to prepare our food. Governance was asserted through our families gathering on the land and being living examples of what it means to be self-sustaining. Those with an extensive knowledge of manoomin were the ones who guided our communities about when, how and where the manoomin harvest would happen. Avery Kinew (1995) shares stories about how the Rice Chief was respected and guided this process for Anishinaabeg. When gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing, you could see the many Rice Chiefs reflected in the Elders of each family who worked alongside the younger generations passing on a way of life and governance by caring for manoomin.

Throughout Avery Kinew's dissertation (1995), the central role manoomin has in our lives as Anishinaabeg was acknowledged. My great grandfather, the late Bert Yerxa, is referenced stating that manoomin was "the spiritual foundation of [Anishinaabeg] people and government" (1995, p. 152). In our treaty, we are to care and respect manoomin, which will ensure that it grows in abundance. In return, manoomin will care for Anishinaabeg and be a plentiful source of nourishment for our bodies. Throughout many hard winters, manoomin has sustained our people, making sure we did not starve. Our treaty relationship with manoomin is based on respect, care, reciprocity, and interdependence.

Colonial impacts

Our battle is not only in the physical realm, over disputes about land and, in this case, Neyaashing, but also in the psychological warzone of our minds. Our minds have become infected with colonial mentalities, which perpetuate, reinforce and normalize our disconnection from our Anishinaabeg ways of life, such as the traditional harvesting process of manoomin. A sure indication of colonial mentalities is our emphasis on seeking recognition and validation from the colonial state while spending significantly less energy on addressing our disconnection from our traditional territories and practices. Additionally, this is evident when we rely solely on band council to represent our responsibilities to land and organize our governance, instead of actually practicing our responsibilities to the land and allowing the carrying out of these responsibilities to facilitate governance within and between our communities.

Currently four of our First Nations communities are working through land claims processes to regain jurisdiction over Neyaashing and to exercise stewardship over the land again. This approach is problematic because it is wrapped up in the "politics of recognition" that Coulthard (2007) discusses and critiques. When we believe that the best way to resist Crown sovereignty takes place in the space of the courtroom and by engaging in the land claims process, the focus becomes about recognition and validation from the colonizer. Through this process we automatically negate what we are trying to assert - Anishinaabeg nationhood - because we grant authority to the Canadian state to decide matters over our lives and our lands. It becomes the state that will grant us permission to be on our land and engage in practices that have always sustained our nation. This is dangerous for Anishinaabeg because we become distracted by this

and forget to live out the responsibilities granted to us by Gitchi Manidoo. However, if Anishinaabeg were to engage in a 'Manoomin Movement' where we come together collectively on a yearly basis to harvest manoomin, renewing our treaty with manoomin, as well as our connection with the land and our relationships with each other, we would be restoring an aspect of true Anishinaabeg governance, where the power resides in collective responsibility and accountability to the land and each other.

Anishinaabeg governance

When we are coming from a place of accountability, which is fundamental to Anishinaabeg governance, we are not only aware of our connection to place but the responsibilities and relationships that make up who we are as Anishinaabeg. To restore the traditional harvesting practices of manoomin and to gather at Neyaashing is to strengthen and deepen one's understanding of what it means to be Anishinaabe because we learn about who are from the land and each other. Our learning, our ways of governing, and who we are is alive at Neyaashing, within manoomin and in our relationships with one another. Corn tassell (2012) identifies that the very essence of the struggle with being Indigenous today is to "reclaim and regenerate one's relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing, destructive forces of colonization" (p.88).

It is meaningful connection and the power of story that ultimately moves people to act. It is the stories of Neyaashing and manoomin that have been passed down, from generation to generation, about our ancestors gathering at Neyaashing to discuss important matters related to our Nation and to work together while harvesting with each other, that sustained the truth that Neyaashing is Anishinaabeg Aki (land) into present day Anishinaabe consciousness. Ever since I was a child, I have always been told that Neyaashing would be returned to Anishinaabeg in 2009, after the expiration of an unjust ninety-nine year lease. Ever since I was a child, the year 2009 was highly anticipated by Anishinaabeg for this reason. It is these stories that continue to be told that fundamentally made it possible for one hundred Anishinaabeg to gather at Neyaashing once again and create a powerful collective celebration of our re-presencing on our land. The strong relations that exist in community amongst Anishinaabeg and our inherited connection to Neyaashing and manoomin were vital in our communal mobilization.

The organizing that exists within Anishinaabeg communities happens organically. This may appear somewhat disorganized to outsiders of the community. However, this is not the case. The contributions made by various people are determined by what knowledge and skill set is needed and will be helpful. Everyone has different gifts that they can contribute and various roles need to be fulfilled; whether it involves chopping wood, making fire, roasting manoomin, preparing food for the feast, or taking care of aspects for ceremony. This is what was relied upon in making the gathering at Neyaashing a success.

Conclusion

As Anishinaabeg people, we must work to restore our intimate relationship with manoomin and Neyaashing that our ancestors had. Our governance was exercised through meeting frequently and “carrying out the [manoomin] harvest” (Avery Kinew, 1995, p. 129). Neyaashing was our gathering place to discuss important issues as they related to our nation’s well being: “It is in returning to this intimacy with [manoomin], together with the practicing of the traditions, that the Treaty 3 Elders say is the way in which the wild rice will again grow in abundance and the government of the rice will be reasserted” (Avery Kinew, 1995 p. 86). When we live our responsibilities to manoomin, Anishinaabeg nationhood will blossom because we will be following the rules given to us by Gitchi Manidoo on how to govern ourselves properly, just as Chief Mawendopenais asserted at the negotiations of Treaty 3. Anishinaabeg nationhood will blossom because manoomin is a pathway for our people to become self-sustaining in a manner that honours the integrity of who we are and where we come from, reinforcing our philosophies and way of life. Manoomin is part of our economies, rooted in interdependence and respect for the land, allowing us to live a balanced life that is in harmony with creation and each other: “When we, as Indigenous Peoples, can feed ourselves then we have freedom” (Taiaiake Alfred, personal communication, 2012). Manoomin was part of this freedom for our ancestors and remains part of the alternative to colonial rule for us today.

When gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing, we challenged and supported one another to transcend the confined colonial spaces that we have been forced to live in - the spaces that we must learn to do without. We were not consumed with the politics of recognition. Rather, we *became* decolonization in motion and resurgence in action. As Leanne Simpson (2011) writes, “[Anishinaabeg] philosophy propels us to focus on ourselves in terms of transformation” (p. 19), and this is what we did!

There was much anticipation and excitement leading up to what we called “Manoominikedaa Neyaashing” (Let’s Make Wildrice at the Point!). The day was a celebration filled with pride as forty fires burned bright! It is amazing and inspiring to engage in acts of resurgence with your own people on your own land. Taiaiake Alfred (2005) says, “a true revolution is spiritual at its core...and how you fight determines who you will become when the battle is over” (p. 22-23). This is why a Manoomin Movement is in order! It has already begun, one cool September day in the fall of 2013, when gii-kaapizigemin manoomin Neyaashing! I am proud to say that we completed our second gathering of “Manoominikedaa Neyaashing” (Let’s Make Wildrice at the Point!) with some old and new faces, and I don’t see it stopping anytime soon. This makes my heart fill with pride and happiness. To Anishinaabeg in Treaty 3 territory, manoomin is life!

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