

Structuring the Bidassigewak Native Way School Governance Model:
Assembling Organizations in our Anishinaabe Ododemiwan

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We accept this community governance project as conforming
to the standard required.

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Wegimaawadizid is a word used by Mitaanjigamiing First Nation in Northern Ontario to describe their process of reinstating traditional methods of Anishinaabe governance. It was first introduced to me at my community's "Nation Building Forum: An Engagement with Anishinaabe Governance" held on November 17, 2011. Larry Spence, regional manager from National Centre for First Nations Governance, visited our community to discuss the pursuit of Nationhood by the greater Anishinaabek Nation through successful restructuring of individual Anishinaabe communities and governance. I am not yet a fluent speaker, but I seek to understand concepts that are conducive to the work I engage with (among other conversational and spiritual topics in Anishinaabemowin). It proves to further advance concepts in both the Anishinaabe worldview and the one I currently have, which is in the process of being decolonized, liberated, and indigenized in my studies and life walk. So I had been searching for a term that means to make our decisions or to determine our own path, because then perhaps I could conceptualize the idea with an Anishinaabe worldview rather than using low-context¹ words like autonomy and self-determination—which simply hold no weight or regard for larger conceptions of reciprocity in Anishinaabe philosophy. *Bimaadziwin*, an oft-used word for *life* can be meant to refer to how we "walk" through our life journey, from one end of the lodge to the other. I have often thought of this concept as relevant to the fact that we can experience the journey in this world in its wholeness, but contingent upon the reminder that we walk in harmony with everything. But this term does not thoroughly encompass the concept of determining the order of political, social, and spiritual cohesion and relationship with the whole during that walk in the lodge. It felt good to be introduced to the term *Wegimaawadizid*, which means, *Our way of Governance*.

¹ Discussed further on p. 9

I had not been confronted with the possibility that research could be utilized as a tool for liberation, and extensively, as a tool for indigenous liberation, until my later years at IAIA. Until then, I had felt that research was a sterile and precise process, and one that can't be engaged with unless the researcher is viewing from an objective and "informed" perspective (informed in what, I wasn't sure). Being in the classroom with other indigenous intellectuals representing different places meant realizing that our experiences are very subjective indeed—subjective to our histories, places, stories, knowledge, and relationships. Due to the nature of our marginalization in modern society, it is problematic in many ways to discard our own intellectual cultures in favor of the self-validated Western one. So I researched in a benign way, only to later understand that through the pursuit of original knowledge, we can build a modern solution for our communities.

Certainly my time at IAIA taught me the technical aspect of collecting data and the nature of research in indigenous communities, but I took for granted that IAIA as a highly indigenized space represents several perspectives of the indigenous community. In that space, it is easy to feel safe and included as another indigenous intellectual/artist/student. For this reason, IAIA graduates can be culture-shocked when stepping back out into the Western academy (the ones that go on to non-indigenous programs can, anyway). Is this necessarily a negative thing? It surely reveals our naïveté, but I think it could be a testament to the fact that we have an indigenous learning space to feel comfortable in. Though for myself, making that transition from an all-indigenous learning space to an indigenous learning space situated in the academy was not particularly difficult.

I don't like to think of research as an action of liberating knowledge from the minds of the knowledge keepers to all those who seek or want it, but rather as a sort of liberation into the

greater community or place from which the knowledge is born. I like to think of it as an act of resurgence, as it is not a liberation of knowledge previously unknown, but rather a release back into the people who once held, celebrated, and acted upon original knowledge. Our community has stated many times that it is important to regain our identity of being Anishinaabe, which was stripped away from the community beginning in 1849 when the Mount Elgin Indian Industrial School was built on our territory. Colonial institutions are a normalcy in our lives, and I see many people who, like me, are feeling incomplete without the in-depth knowledge of Anishinaabe ways and customs. These Anishinaabe ways do not inform our everyday existence, and that needs to change. Land base, territory, and place are incredibly powerful factors in understanding a people and their knowledge. Place and knowledge are inextricable in the indigenous intellectual tradition. The connection between knowledge and place is true in Anishinaabe territory, and specifically so in Deshkaan Ziibii, my home.

It feels wonderful and comforting to know that I am home on my land where my grandmothers and ancestors have always been, and it's been a pleasure doing my work in a place where I am directly accountable and affected by the outcome of my work. I have been specifically interested by the idea of inherent or DNA memory in the research, as the information I have collected and been enlightened by is new, but strangely, not a far reach from original teachings I have grown up with. It's been formative in this project, this concept of understanding the power of place—and how it manifests a wondrous bursting of remembrance and knowing. Or the familiar feeling you get when you're feeling connection to something larger than you, such as land base, peoples, or events that stir compassion and the happiness of just being...Anishinaabe, a human, a component and result of this whole scheme of things.

This brings forth one of the first questions I considered as an Anishinaabe in academia: what is my role as an Anishinaabe researcher working with my own community? I have always felt compelled by the idea that our nation can pull together using our resilience, intelligence, and knowledge traditions to ensure tomorrow is another good day, if not better day, for the Anishinaabe Nation. My research has been concerned with understanding the variables that form our reality today as Anishinaabe people, and projecting that knowledge for not only my own healing and decolonization of worldview, but for the collaboration and collective consciousness that exists in indigenous knowledge spheres. So in what ways am I going to realize that goal or work toward the tangible outcome of nationhood, governance, and otherwise positive self-sustainability? How do we work toward *Wegimaawadizid* for *Deshkaan Ziibii*? Jim Dumont's words in "The Original Clan System" were particularly influential when engaging in the research project:

From here, we must attempt to show how this ancient ordering of clans can be 'translated' into a contemporary framework but still be in keeping with a traditional Native understanding of belief and the inter-relationship of beliefs, principles and the function of clans. (Dumont 14)

I realized that the translations of Doodem roles in a modern context might not literally be a translation project if the teachings still exist and the roles apply. If anything, we are currently living in a different reality and must then translate words and language, but to what extent is it necessary to translate the concepts of clan roles? By constructing an alternative space altogether, why can't we have all concepts and protocols apply in our space? In writing the governance structure and exploring the roles of individual Doodem, I could see why the Ododemiwan was an excellent model for governance: every role was inclusive of a particular feature needed to form the society. Everything is there, it is inclusive of all aspects of civil life; from policing to medicine, intellectual tradition to mediation, education to provisions, preserving social capital through the care of human beings to the renewal of external relationships and ensuring internal

cohesion was fluid and operational. There are clan roles for the care and welfare of children. There are roles for conflict resolution and grievances. There are roles to ensure balance with external communities. When listening to the original teachings of how we are to be toward each other, and further—how we can be compelled to observe these traits as reflected in our Doodem clans and relationships, we are gifted with a reciprocal and brilliant system of governance that is respectful and entirely relevant to place. Our particular nation should reflect on our knowledge and privilege those who are keepers of it by retaining and caring for those sources and developing the means to nurture and project the knowledge. This is in line with the vision of Bidassigewak and other native way schools—to provide our own way of being and resist the assimilative vision the state holds in our future if we choose to comply with bureaucratic illusions of self-government through the Indian Act.

To define the project, my work has been concerned with helping Bidassigewak to articulate their needs for governance by developing a relevant structure rooted in Anishinaabe worldview and practice. Working with original knowledge in the modern context, I engage with it and develop new ideas while discussing the content with community members and fellow Anishinaabeg, and oftentimes I am wowed at the utility, sense, humour, wisdom, and love that is contained in our knowledge. At times, my thought process wandered into the possibility that transmitting knowledge for use in our current reality is a rite of passage for the indigenous intellectual. As I was thinking through the process, I enjoyed Vine's description of this phenomenon in Power and Place:

The hallmark of the true Indian philosopher was the ability to hold in suspended judgment the experiences he or she had enjoyed or was told, and to file away that bit of knowledge until the time when more data of closely related content came his or her way. (Deloria, Wildcat 6)

Through these words, I found that the process of learning and engaging is a pursuit that requires time, caring for relationships, and dialogue/reflection of those concepts and values.

When beginning the project, it was difficult to not feel overwhelmed at the complexity of Anishinaabe worldview and my job in structuring a document that is meant for the purposes of community governance. Writing a document like this meant that people would be referring to it all the time, and I had to get comfortable with this fact first. I was a little worried since I had never written a document quite like this before and I was unsure of how to begin. Writing a structure like this is really about speaking with the community and getting a comprehensive understanding of their needs while recording the process. Raising questions about the technical, logistical, and structural components of the end piece is also necessary, as is making sure that all points have been covered so that the structure is suited for the use by the community.

One example of this is when I was first asking the community about the first draft of the project my community supervisor Mary Deleary and I had worked through. Each of the original Seven Clans (Bird, Crane, Loon, Marten, Deer, Bear, and Turtle) were included in the structure and we were going to discuss any edits that needed to be done to Clan Roles. Someone raised the issue that Wolf clan was not included in the structure's Clan Seats. The 7-star mandala featured in the Bidassigewak logo was being utilized as a visual reference, and the community was trying to accommodate the number of seats with the original structure—even though our oral history states that new clans have been added with necessity of place, marriage, and alliance with other tribes. The 7-pointed-star symbol is one that is associated with the clan structure in Jim Dumont's writings and teachings, and it is considered the more traditional visual and teaching interpretation. We realized that our adherence to the visual might be problematic for the reason that it made individuals feel excluded from the process of governance, and Wolf clan members were not prepared to sit with another clan (which would mean that whatever Clan Seat the Wolf sat with would have to speak for both clans). We had a consensus discussion in which a few

points were raised: first, the wolf clan was not of the original Seven Clans, but that did not mean it was not as valued and necessary in the modern context; second, there are two other clans that do not sit with the Original Clans anyway (Lynx and Otter who, like the Wolf, came after the first gifting of the Seven Clans) and if Wolf is being accommodated, then these clans need to be as well; and third, there is a significant population of Wolf clan members at Bidassigewak, and it would be unwise to exclude a clan whose responsibilities lie in the traditional Wolf clan role of caring/welfare for the children and family, especially when they are nearing majority in the organization. Through the consensus discussion, the issue of changing the Ododemiwan was brought up. On the other hand, are we changing this system to fit *our* needs, and do we want to do this, especially if the point of Bidassigewak is to bring back these ways of being? If we are going to engage in this structure, it is important that we utilize the teachings for what they are, or, as some members of Bidassigewak were concerned, we would risk the integrity of the Ododemiwan. It was decided that there would be an “independent” seat at the Council to represent these three additional clans (Wolf, Otter, Lynx). The resulting decision was made through consensus discussion, which is a technique featured in table 7.4 in the model.

I was feeling that gathering data on governance was a daunting task in which I would be doomed to burning midnight oil in my room surrounded by texts...perhaps I was expecting a typical IGOV course load! But engaging with Anishinaabe communities does not condemn one to solitude; I was reminded that much of the enlightening material is passed through oral and relational means, as is typical in indigenous research—it was necessary to converse with my community and figures of knowledge, to attend meetings and lectures, presentations and conferences, celebrations and feasts; this was much more effective than restriction to text material in this project. As I delved deeper into the project and began looking back into methods

of academic data collection and indigenous research, I found a piece of advice that I had filed away, much in the same manner Vine explained of the indigenous philosopher, though I had nearly overlooked it. Professor Waziyatawin writes:

The first and primary responsibility of a Dakota historian has always been to ‘tell it straight’. A new interpretation is not necessary and in many instances is entirely inappropriate. Moreover, at present our elders, who have been charged with the intense responsibility of passing on history through the oral tradition, are very consumed with the industry required in remembering the stories...In this way they differ from the academic historians who are playing with historical theories, reconstructing, revising, deconstructing, and examining history as an intellectual exercise, albeit one about which they may be passionate. (Wilson 42)

Thus, I began gathering material with the reminder that it is imperative for indigenous academics to become well versed in worldview and language, and just as importantly, to remember the nuances that are passed with the spirit of narrative...it is beautiful to experience what it is to be Anishinaabe, and re-telling these stories and learning the spirit and protocol with which they come is the work of knowledge keepers and the responsibility of indigenous academics to guard and preserve for our own use and benefit. As one of my former elementary teachers and member of the Bidassigewak Community Leslee Henry-Whiteye said, “We don’t do anything for nothing, everything has a purpose.” My work in gathering methods of social and political cohesion for use in a modern organization is linked with Anishinaabe intellectual and knowledge traditions for the reason that all those involved in the process of governance are learned and versed in the Anishinaabe ways of being and the protocol under which it is passed.

The description of high and low context cultures can, at times, feel dichotomous, but I think it is useful in describing some basic cultural traits that exist in both indigenous communities and settler societies. Anthropologist Edward Hall defines the terms in his book *Beyond Culture*. According to Hall, high context cultures essentially rely on relationships and protocol to inform much of their social interactions, and therefore have the potential to have much more information contained within linguistic or cultural concepts as a result of their constant interaction with each

other (Hall 147). Comparing this with low-context cultures like the settler states of the U.S and Canada (who need to accommodate a population with a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds), low-context cultures tend to have a broad social understanding that allows for quick transference of concepts, as building and retaining relationships is not as vital to communication and social knowledge requirements (Hall 53). Understanding then, that we are possessors of highly contextualized concepts of governance based in place and relationships; reciprocal action is among the criteria for participating in Anishinaabe structured governance. This always reminds me that my journey as an Anishinaabe intellectual is lifelong and conducive to participation in my community and original ways of being.

Mary stated in one of our meetings that we are creating a structure with the mind that our children and children's children will be looking to it for answers on how to organize themselves in a way that is relevant to the continued existence of Anishinaabe identity and worldview, and one that we are presently in the process of building for them. This is a profound statement. This means that through our actions and protocols, we are recording and placing precedent for how our children can choose to live if we are to plant the seeds of knowledge for them. Through this document, the point was not to define Anishinaabe worldview, but rather to construct the space, understanding, and atmosphere in which Anishinaabe life ways are privileged and confirmed by our own engagement. In effect, Bidassigewak is an organization that relies on Anishinaabeg governance principles to function in its intended manner as a space that will serve to enlighten our children and people, and it is validated by Anishinaabe knowledge and the surrounding community who see these systems as legitimate.

As the researcher, or gatherer of information and data, my responsibilities were in establishing a starting point for the project, and I decided to begin by looking for similar

structures among our Haudenosaunee neighbours. However, whether through my own lack of persistence in reaching out or a lack of interest on the end of the organizations I had reached out to, I was met with little to work with unless I was prepared to make lengthy trips to nearby freedom schools. I opted out of researching these points due to the nature of the project, but I am still convinced the native way school movement can effectively create a network of allied organizations that are of the same mind and goals—to perpetuate our knowledge for the future—and they can greatly benefit from such an alliance. I didn't feel discouraged at the lack of response, but rather wondered if it was a pressing task to examine how our neighbours had helped themselves. We concluded, with the help of Raymond and Danny Deleary (My supervisor's sons) that a unique process needed to occur in order to begin laying the framework for the structure in an Anishinaabe context rather than Haudenosaunee context. I do not intend to imply that advice and council with other Nations is not helpful in similar projects, but given the time constraints and the ability to continue on without this data, my decision to abandon the collection of experience in forming native way schools was one that I made in order to continue through to the completion of this document. Again, I feel that if native way schools developed a rapport with each other, opportunities might present themselves from social to organizational resource aspects, and it might be worth it for Bidassigewak to look into these possibilities in the future.

Through the Governance Project, I was looking for a component of my community that I was concerned about and to which I could lend a hand. Where could I lend my skills to better help my community in terms of governance, liberation, decolonization, or resurgence? It turns out that there are a number of niches I could find myself in if I wanted to aid in Nation building and policy development. I made my choice simply because it is increasingly clear that there is no

alternative to compulsory westernized education in my community. My concern is that if there is no alternative to state sanctioned curriculum—specifically if there is no Anishinaabe pedagogical practice and intellectual engagement with original knowledge—we are moving farther into an aboriginal/minority identity that chooses to engage with settler knowledge networks rather than working to build upon Anishinaabe knowledge engagement and preservation of intellectual capitol.

Every community member has an opinion on the state of education and what should be done to patch problems or issues in the local elementary school. These opinions vary from a re-haul of the school's discipline and methodological policies to closing up the place and bussing kids off reserve. In Field Day, Getting Society Out of School, Matt Hern points out,

I have long noticed just how many people want to talk about schools. Not only parents and kids, but most everyone has a wheelbarrow full of opinions, many of which they are eager and willing to share at the slightest provocation...It might be because virtually all of us have been schooled for big chunks of our lives...it might be that people feel an authority to speak about schools because they have had so much direct experience with them (Hern 11-12).

In addition to Hern's observation that we are all products of modern education systems, I feel that Anishinaabe peoples have a profound, urgent obligation and desire to make each succeeding generation of education practices to be a little bit better; a little less invasive, western, assimilative, colonial, or authoritarian; it is a passion that drives us to imagine language nests and immersion schools, native way and freedom movements, teaching lodges and learning houses. As Daniel Wildcat states in Power and Place:

[I]f we want to truly exercise self-determination, there is no better place to start than with an effort to give our children an inheritance too many generations of American Indians were outright denied or have struggled mightily to maintain: identity within tribal cultures we were actively engaged in, as opposed to existence within a culture of indoctrination facilitated [by the state]. (Deloria, Wildcat 9)

We've all experienced this system aimed at our very demise, and everyone seems to understand that it's not effective to our survival as *Anishinaabe*. This conclusion comes from the fact that people have been disillusioned by the system themselves, or because they are witnessing

the delusion by which the system currently holds the children. In the context of mandatory and isolated forms of assimilative education policies aimed at indigenous populations, there is no doubt that education is viewed wearily by many, and conversely, as indications of individual diligence and intellect:

That schools are a common good is virtually unquestioned, and yet, absurdly, there is also a broad understanding that schools are not benign. It is a truism that kids hate school. There are few institutions that evoke such hostility and antagonism. We have a very strange and confused relationship with schools, a simultaneous deification and contempt. (Hern 12)

By obliging ourselves with the task of creating a relevant structure on which to build our learning spaces in our own determination, we can at least turn away from the destructive practices of compulsory school systems. We need only be careful that we do not re-colonize the spaces of learning in an attempt to mimic what “works” for settler standards. We should be proud that we are continuing traditions of learning and discovering the world around us, and why can’t we imagine and realize a place of learning where that can happen? It is possible to change our attitude toward education, but only by constructing the alternative in our own rites.

Western education systems are fundamentally concerned with the formation of compliant citizenry populations—those that would be used to following orders, comfortable with submitting their will to an authority, and familiar with hierarchical chains of command while being instructed in the virtues of the state (Hern 19). As we can plainly see, these principles are at odds with the Anishinaabe worldview of responsible individual autonomy. As Leanne Simpson states in Lighting the Eighth Fire:

Our cultures were designed to produce individuals who had a lot of individual freedom and a strong sense of belonging, as well as a sense of collective responsibility in the absence of coercive or authoritarian restrictions on freedoms. (Simpson 209)

This, coupled with the obvious fact that state schools do little to accommodate Anishinaabe children’s needs and daily experiences, is the reason we seek to privilege our worldview in our own controlled and mandated spaces. It works better for the well being of our Nation from

nurturing the children to renewing knowledge traditions, and it is a planned step in the direction of self-governance.

Bidassigewak Native Way School had just moved into a space on my grandmother's property and was in need of development as an organization. I have always had a relationship with the family who started the school (they are distantly related to my grandfather's family), and thought it would be a great opportunity to align myself with folks who were knowledgeable and active in Anishinaabeg traditions of governance. I approached Raymond first and asked what type of help Bidassigewak was looking for. I had originally thought that Bidassigewak required policy or curriculum development—and in retrospect I am glad I was appointed to working with governance. I feel that the work in the other fields might not have been as formative for my understanding of governance as was this project, and in any case, not much can be implemented without a plan of action to stand on. Bidassigewak already had the foundations for beginning a working and thriving organization; there were plenty of community notes, ideas, and discussions around the topic of governance, policy, and curriculum, and add in the traditional knowledge of Anishinaabe social cohesion that the community possessed through involvement with the Midewiwin Lodge—and they just needed somebody to organize and develop the data to formulate a working document they could use as a community committed to Anishinaabe life ways. This is where I found my work: gathering experiences, concepts, and teachings to organize and revise a structure that had served us for generations leading up to the systematic attack on our peoples.

I engaged with this work by attending teachings and conferences on Anishinaabe governance while otherwise meeting with members of the Bidassigewak community to gather their needs and ideas for the school. Mary is an excellent source of original knowledge, which she has

gained through her upbringing in Kitigami Zibi (an Algonquin community in Quebec) and longtime involvement with the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge. She raised her family with these teachings, and it is through their collective efforts that Bidassigewak is able to organize and function under the auspices of Anishinaabe knowledge ways and pedagogy.

In creating the structure, one of my first concerns was that I didn't want to superimpose Anishinaabe values overtop a typical corporate policy governance style. I didn't want to replace the white faces with brown faces, so to speak. This is where I spent a lot of my time looking over templates for a structure—I was researching alternative schools from Waldorf to Montessori and Native Way Schools like Little Red School House and Akwesasne Freedom School to look for answers in the process. It yielded few results that would lead me to a concrete conclusion of what the Bidassigewak community needed in terms of a structure of organization. From researching, I learned that community led grassroots approaches were built from the ground up utilizing the community's needs for effective governance. It was not a difficult conclusion to come to, but it was by my acceptance that there was no rulebook or outline I had to go by that charged me to seek others' counsel. It did prove successful to speak to people who had experience in structuring ways of governance (I was able to sit down with Jim Dumont who was instrumental in the first Bidassigewak school in the 1980s); I found that the answers were contained in the community itself. This is where I had my "duh" moment...and I am glad to say that it wasn't too far into the project that I had this epiphany. When working with a community that holds traditional knowledge like the one at Bidassigewak (most, if not all, of the community is involved in Midewiwin Lodge), it was important to remember that knowledge flows from the people and my only work was to help catch it and reiterate it using my skills to benefit their needs. I began sifting through their expectations for a method of governance that would work for their school.

Jodi Bruhn of the Institute on Governance points out 5 universal techniques of First Nations governing structures observed from the non-Aboriginal perspective. That is to say, these are 5 major themes found from extracting and interpreting texts from indigenous scholars, for possible use in settler reconciliation purposes (Bruhn 4). It is a document aimed at recognizing Aboriginal concerns and relations with the state and provides the suggestion that settlers are seeing the attractive features of First Nations governance (Bruhn 7). I was not at odds with the proposed techniques of traditional forms of governance, and found that Bruhn's interpretation of these points were concise and useful in conceptualizing the structure. *Attunement* is the understanding of universal interrelatedness, and how our Anishinaabe worldview is contained within the universal structure; it is our goal to maintain the structure and natural order of the world around us (4). As Vine said,

Eventually it was recognized that the world had a moral being and that disruptions among human societies created disharmony in the rest of the world. This belief corresponded to modern professional ethics but differed from them in that the whole tribal society was involved in healing the lack of balance. (Deloria, Wildcat 63)

Responsive, Responsible Leadership is maintaining an obligation to the community and environments surrounding the organization; those in leadership positions hold values, principles, and morals of the Anishinaabe worldview of utmost importance (Bruhn 5). According to Taiiaki Alfred, "A leader is a person of responsibility and respect as opposed to one of ambition and greed: an adviser rather than an executive." (Alfred 2009 114) Jim Dumont states in "The Original Clan System":

It is important to recognize here that the role of leadership is not one that is authoritarian or dictative but is a role that is given because of the qualities of one's capabilities as spokesperson for the whole of the clan, of one's ability to communicate effectively with all of the clan and one's dedication to the whole of the clan as determined by the clan membership. (Dumont 13)

Harmony in consensus-based decision-making also embodies similar obligations to greater communities. As a peoples who defined worth and values by relationships and ability to care for

one another, our cohesion in political bodies and alliances was strengthened by both an awareness of the necessity and sanctity of relationships. This is practiced by leaders who are disciplined in counsel and dialogue. Counsel and dialogue is a process by which we discuss the possible outcomes of decisions until issues are resolved, or abandoned by seeking alternatives for the desired outcome based on necessity and strategy, much like Alfred describes:

“[The People] were unified in their communities and in their actions. This sense of unity was especially important to them because they understood that disunity degraded not only their existence as collectives but also their spiritual power as persons. Reciprocity and mutual obligation were the foundations of human interactions and of relationships with other elements of creation. (Alfred 2005 83-84)

Related is the concept of “*Now our minds are one*” from the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address (Alfred 2005 13), the leadership has in mind the well being of the people, the land, the creation and its spirit, or the whole; and are empowered to act on the collective understanding of good faith and intentions.

Alfred’s mention of *tewatatowie* meaning, *We Help Ourselves* (Alfred 2005 135) is a point of linguistic context recognition and traditional concepts of sovereignty (Bruhn 5), the people must care for themselves, the land, and their obligations (relationships) for the order to be maintained in community. Social cohesion is tied with land and territory, for worldview stems from original knowledge contained in place. *Respect* is an all-important concept in relationships; this principle is what guides our relationships with land, water, place, creator, spirit, animals, plant life, and ecological surroundings (Bruhn 4-5). Governance in an indigenous context should start with the consideration of holistic knowledge (or connectedness) and awareness of our surrounding world. It is necessary to examine the reality of creation, or the whole, of which we are a part of as human beings, and this relates directly with Bruhn’s discussion of attunement.

It is simple: good things happen when we consider the whole. In fact, I’d argue that governance really isn’t possible without considering the surrounding impact before making

decisions. It may be authority, but it sure isn't governance. Not all of us are burdened with the obligation of formal title in governance, and thus, it is easy to not think about "the whole" in our proceedings through life—but among the topics in reflections of Anishinaabe governance, this is one concept that is absolutely important to understanding how we assemble ourselves.

The whole for the Anishinaabe can be meant to describe the ecological and directional aspect of territory and place, those beings living within the territory; the peoples, the language, and the culture contained within the group; and the relational reciprocity that is happening with external forces. The narrative of experience becomes knowledge systems, or epistemology, but is often disregarded as invalid information to western spheres due to its abstract and therefore inconclusive nature (which is really quite ironic, since we see physical evidence and proof of indigenous knowledge *all the time*). Daniel Wildcat speaks to this in terms of how the mystery of spirit cannot be explored in western spheres since it is considered an anomalous foray into the abstract metaphysical:

The difficult task for many of us first-generation 'academic' individuals—Euchee, Lakota, Salish, or otherwise—is to recognize that the wisdom we want to explore is born of experience. In addition, for those *traditional* scholars or elders deeply imbued with this understanding, self-conscious discussion or analysis of their so-called metaphysical systems would be difficult at best and may rightly seem foolish or dangerous—possibly both. (Deloria, Wildcat 49-50)

Falling into the trap of questioning the validity of systems of knowledge is one that can happen easily when exploring the western scientific views on spirit, since there is little room for other and marginalized perspectives—let alone knowledge and examples of the manifestation of spirit.

When we were exploring what governance means to us in an Anishinaabeg worldview, we conversed about the fuller meaning of original teachings and our place within all of it. Mary discussed the placement of the whole in terms of universal knowledge of stellar beings and ethereal power. The whole was explored as an Anishinaabe concept of complex systems of related beings; and as living and being upon its own accord regardless of human interaction with

its reality. This is the reason for our given structures of law and governance. We were gifted with knowledge of how to organize ourselves by observing, respecting, and reciprocating with our sibling beings. That is the Anishinaabe way, and we are of these lands like the plants, animals, insects, waters, winds, and trees. These surround us, and we are encompassed in its entirety.

Mary explained that in regarding the presence of all of creation and our impact on it—we do after all, rely on all those around us—it is crucial that our relationship with our surroundings is balanced and reciprocal. When interpreting concepts like the clan method of social assembly, it cannot be mistranslated to mean that we simply assemble ourselves according to how “our brothers” have chosen to organize themselves (as in the *wesiinyag* or the animals). It is a much more complex concept than that. Utilizing our knowledge and relationship to our place by observing how others experience within it, we were at an advantage to gain experience and knowledge through relational means, observance, and the connection between the two—or familial sentiments and communication. This is a process, and one that involves intellectual reflection and philosophical determining through counsel with these beings. Thus we develop a worldview that is attuned and structurally relevant to our surrounding place because we see ourselves as a part of it and ultimately related to and of that place. Our knowledge of organizing ourselves comes from how the whole has assembled itself together to make up what western folk have come to call “mother nature”. An Anishinaabeg approach to this understanding might mean that our home operates in and of itself and we gather and understand our way of living from that reality. Our inherent teachings are guided by place, and we developed knowledge that each aspect of the whole is a living and thereby conscious and habitual being (not unlike ourselves).

Mary expressed that the Anishinaabeg people descend from a universal structure, so then we organize our communities in a similar way. Upon creation there has always been structure.

Whether creation's structure has been understood by humans or not is irrelevant—it operates as a form of life guiding itself and shifting throughout time. As Anishinaabeg, we are of the same material, the same structure of our place and others contained within it—we received teachings from this place and built upon them through social need and intellect, manifesting a design that held our philosophy and foresight in clear view for the people, by the people. As each autonomous individual is compelled to use her power of decision, we know this individual will act upon teachings inherent within her; it is the Anishinaabe way. As individuals, children can have agreed-upon concepts of identity and be a component of the larger group, since they were fostered and developed with these ways and peoples from a very young age. These children will not grow up to “become someone”, they already are; they are young autonomous vessels with paths yet known and experienced by way of their own free will.

Often, my mind wanders into asking how western traditions departed so radically from this knowledge, and exactly how colonialism and mass confusion has affected the perpetrator. But I keep in mind that their knowledge has purposes as well, and it is my responsibility to capture Anishinaabeg knowledge, even if it means to lament the loss of original understanding in the western context.

Anishinaabe knowledge is something I have always heard repeated and seen practiced (I perpetuate some of this knowledge as well, since I have experienced it and heard it through my life) and I clued in early on to the fact that this project is directly connected to Anishinaabe knowledge and being. If we learn anything from our own worldview, as it is interestingly repeated in western sciences, we discern immediately that everything is connected. This is a simplistic concept that goes rudely unheard in mainstream society: “Today it is only the professional who sees the imbalance, and the general society comes to believe that the scientist

can create the technology needed to bring balance back again.”(Deloria, Wildcat 62) But I like to think that perhaps not all is lost if we indigenous peoples remember and remain connection. This, again, is a profound statement that is much easier said than done. The importance for creating alternative spaces of learning for our children is again highlighted and deemed necessary—it really is all related and cyclical in nature, and change happens through action, awareness, and constructing the alternative.

In one of our meetings, I asked the members of Bidassigewak to talk about governance and what the community required in terms of oversight and visioning. Assuming that the Ododemiwan (the Clan System) was the original structure in which we assembled ourselves as Anishinaabe, I asked what the community thought about creating a structure that is to be seen as an organizational document to aid in community development, but being based in the original governance structure of Ododemiwan. Jim Dumont, a respected Anishinaabe knowledge holder and elder, has stated,

The original Clan system was spiritually endowed as a Great law. It became an effective system of social order and structure of government. Its spiritual importance was never lessened throughout its institution and operation for the social, political and governing good of the people. For this reason it continued to function for the whole of the people and wholly for their needs and pursuits. (Dumont 13)

However, Mary’s husband Nick pointed out that the clan system was not in fact a true governance model, but a structure that was used as social cohesion for extended families. I knew where he was going with this idea, but semantically I wasn’t entirely sure how he had come to the conclusion—he was essentially stating that “governance” implies that there is an ethical conduct involved that is agreed upon by all, and that the Ododemiwan is a guide on how to literally assemble ourselves (as in groups determined by animals) rather than how to govern ourselves (as in morals and ethics). We can see how this might differ from a structure that serves mainly as an outline and guide of how social organization works. Out of this, I felt that the

Ododemiwan structure differs from what we can call “self-governance” of the nation. This is for the reason that each individual participating in the Ododemiwan structure is already governed by Anishinaabe teachings if they are to act on the role of Doodem in the Lodge. The Ododemiwan serves as a guide for how to *assemble* ourselves, and in many cases, through our Doodem characteristics and spirits, we must learn individually how to *conduct* ourselves in order to effectively fill these roles in the Ododemiwan. Coupled with protocols of fasting, visioning, and wondering/wandering, we are able to engage with our *Bimaadziwin* as beings walking through this life, but we are also gifted with the ability to decide for ourselves, or the ability to self-direct our actions. In this sense, Anishinaabeg conduct themselves as autonomous individuals compelled to act for the whole in the Ododemiwan by acting responsibly and coherently on teachings and original knowledge gained in the different stages of life. The context here is that basic rules of conduct must first be learned if we wish to follow the original understanding, and further, if we wish to utilize our traditional forms of social order. This is, in effect, a guidance of teachings, but if we take Rauna Kuokkanen’s statement to be true:

“When considering governance we often think of political and/or economic institutions and structures. However, governance is more than institutions and structures. On a more fundamental level, governance is about social organization.” (Kuokkanen 232)

We see that the individual conduct is but the self-component (or unit) of the larger workings that are required to operate a system or structure of social cohesion. So as a social organization model, I feel that Ododemiwan is in fact, a governance structure because it is fundamental in the nature of social organization, but it is certainly not the only model we abide by in our social and political ethics; there are more profound and in-depth teachings that are associated with the ways of governance than merely choosing an animal Doodem and identifying by its characteristics.

The Lodge teachings of how the gifts of the Little Boy, or the Seven Grandfather Teachings, came to the Anishinaabeg form the basis for how the Anishinaabeg are bound to ethics in both

social and individual aspects. The Seven Grandfather teachings are further discussed in the Bidassigewak Governance structure, but as a whole concept, these teachings are incredibly powerful and prove their utility as providing positive, informed, and respectful social interaction through its inter-relatedness with Anishinaabe values.

My hope is that this project can serve as a microcosm in the restructuring of the greater community's governance practices, and I have no doubt it is nearing change—our community leaders are in the process of creating a change in structure and operations to better suit Anishinaabe worldview and values. Currently, the Bidassigewak model is being viewed by members of the Chippewas of the Thames Governance Council, for discussion in the shift away from the Indian Act. I feel that this as a community project could foster ideas of resurgence and interest in traditional Anishinaabeg governance techniques as a viable alternative to current Indian Act strangulations.

And to those who are doubtful of our approach to Anishinaabe resurgence of governance (as there is, inevitably, opposition to the return of our original understanding), I have found that Alfred's statement on the "realistic" outcomes of Nationhood is succinct and truthful:

Some people may question the viability of an approach to empowerment based on education and tradition; given the social, cultural, and political disruption within Native communities, and the sacrifices that must be made to acquire a well rounded-education, maybe this isn't a realistic solution. I would answer that 'realistic' is usually a code word for 'easy'....at a time when the Native reality plainly 'sucks,' an approach that isn't realistic, that doesn't reflect the present reality, may be the best one we could take. (Alfred 2009 169)

While at home, I had the opportunity to listen to and visit with some excellent individuals working in the field of restructuring our current political bodies and advocating for indigenous Nationhood. One speaker who was instrumental in inspiring a lot of the work I was doing with Bidassigewak was Sharon Venne, a Cree lawyer from Alberta. I had the pleasure of sitting in on

three of her lectures in our territory. In Paul DePasquale's text Natives and Settlers, Now and Then, Venne describes in the preface the paradoxical and contrary nature of the settler state:

Even in this century, the non indigenous government of Canada says, 'We will give you a government that we will call self-government.' What is our response? 'The Creation gave us a government. How can you give us a government? Did the Creation pass on and make you the new Creation?' There is some kind of weird idea operating here: somehow, the treaty-making [process] made Indigenous Peoples and our entire way of living subservient to the colonizers and their institutions. (Venne in DePasquale 8)

Her words continue to inspire many people throughout Turtle Island and beyond. I have found that when researching, it is necessary to replenish the resistant spirit by listening to the truthful words of our leaders and intellectuals—and all the more fun when the speakers are duly acting as rabble-rousers! But one thing is for certain in my reflection on IGOV and listening to Venne speak: restructuring our social and political realities to reflect our worldview and needs is, to be sure, a very politicized act that requires strength in numbers and strength in spirit. For this reason, it is imperative that we recall our original understanding when seeking to restructure our peoples and systems of governance.

Reflecting on the completion of the project has led me to confirm that these acts of social, political, and spiritual resurgence cannot stay in theoretical or document form. The praxis of these forms of governance truly return the spirit of our original ways to our people. Throughout my time in IGOV I have explored what it means for us relate to one another. Our relationships are sacred and connect us all. Governance is the organization of these relationships and the projection of those sentiments in order to reach common goals and visions. When we reflect on the roles of relationships with our peoples, we understand that the concept of how we are connected is a powerful force that governs much of our decisions. When we reflect on our Doodem teachings coupled with the necessary understanding of the Little Boy's teachings and the Seven Stages of life through the Lodge, we see that we are well equipped to make good decisions regarding our lives and those around us if we are true to the virtues of Anishinaabeg.

And this is, essentially, the fundamental reason for our work in returning original knowledge to social cohesion; everything we need to know about how to care for one another and our surroundings is contained in our original structures of social order.

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This raw data has been passed through Anishinaabe First Nations and made its way to our band office some time ago. I do not know when it was published or in what periodical (if any), but it is a very influential source for clan knowledge. Dumont's work in Anishinaabe governance as well as his role in the Midewiwin community have made this piece an influential source of information for this project.

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