Anishnaabe-Kwe, Traditional Knowledge, and Water Protection

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Dans cet article, l'auteure partage ses expériences de travail sur les questions environnementales, particulièrement sur celles qui concernent l'eau. Comme mère, comme membre d'un clan, comme membre des Premières Nations et comme professeure, l'auteure se sent responsable du partage de ses connaissances. Cette réflexion est basée sur son travail avec les aînées et les tenants du savoir traditionnel en Ontario, surtout de celui qui se rapporte à l'eau. L'information part de deux projets majeurs dans lesquels elle a été impliquée.

> *Water is a sacred thing. This is reflected in many traditional beliefs, values, and practices.*
>
> —Ann Wilson, Anishnaabe Elder, Rainy River First Nation

For thousands of years, Aboriginal people have created and passed on knowledge resulting in sustainable relationships with all of Creation. Ann Wilson's words serve to remind us that we still have this knowledge and a responsibility to pass it on in order to maintain such relationships.

In the course of Aboriginal history in Canada, significant compromising of Aboriginal peoples' ability to make decisions based on traditional knowledge has only occurred within the last 150 years. Since that time, deliberate, systematic attempts to eradicate Aboriginal worldviews, philosophies, traditional knowledge and values have seriously undermined traditional forms of governance and related processes (Mercredi and Turpel; RCAP). Many First Nations, having suffered the oppressive forces of colonization, are now revitalizing their customs, values, and knowledge so as to re-establish a relationship with Creation based on their own traditions. This process forms an important part of the day-to-day as well as the political lives of First Nations peoples.

A key component of this revitalization is the recognition that the role of women in traditional Aboriginal societies has been one of the most impacted as a result of colonization processes. Aboriginal women have been ignored, and their knowledge and contributions to sustaining Creation have been devalued by colonial society (Clarkson, Morrissette and Régallet; Lawrence and Anderson). Aboriginal women now have to interact with a society which functions in a reductionist, compartmentalized ways and that also struggles to see how everything is related to the whole.

If Aboriginal women's contributions to sustainability do not currently have a place of honour in dominant western society, they are increasingly given this honour in Indigenous society as Aboriginal peoples and communities continue the process of decolonization and recreation. I have seen the recognition, acknowledgment, and respect of women's knowledge in Indigenous communities through my work. At the June 2006, Canadian Water Resources Association 59th Annual Conference in Toronto, Ontario, for example, where discussion centred on the dominant western worldview that the "water crisis" can be solved by science and technology, the session chair, Haudenosaunee scholar Dan Longboat, invited Elder Edna Manitowabi, Grandmother and Professor Emeritus at Trent University, to speak on Anishnaabe women's views of water. It was most welcome to hear a woman of Edna's distinction remind us that Aboriginal women have traditionally played important roles with respect to water and that their voices must be included in present-day discussions. Without the invitation extended by Mr. Longboat, however, the participants would never have been exposed to these views.

In another recent meeting with a prominent community leader in which I was exploring the role of Aboriginal knowledge in urban contexts, I was told that Aboriginal knowledge is alive and well, even in urban centres like Toronto. I was provided with the specific example that there are many Aboriginal women living in Toronto who take their roles seriously, honouring the water by conducting moon ceremonies within the city itself. I myself was part of a water ceremony conducted by Elder and Grandmother Pauline Shirt in a workshop convened

specifically to discuss the role of traditional knowledge and water in March 2006.

I hope that by sharing my experiences working on environmental issues, especially those concerning water, I am fulfilling an important responsibility as an Anishnaabe woman. As a mother, a clan member, a member of a First Nation, and as a teacher, I have a responsibility to share knowledge. This reflection paper is based on my work with Elders and traditional knowledge holders in Ontario in relation to the role of traditional knowledge in protecting water. The information presented here is largely derived from two major projects on this topic with which I have been involved in recent years.

The Role of Traditional Knowledge in Protecting Water

In May of 2000, seven people died in Walkerton, Ontario, due to contamination of the local water supply. The Walkerton Inquiry was subsequently established to examine both the immediate and systemic causes of this incident (O'Connor 2002a). The Walkerton situation, while it was ongoing and when the Inquiry's findings were released, shocked the country, and rightly so. Sadly, however, tragedies associated with environmental contamination are far from being new to Aboriginal people in Ontario. A significant number of First Nation communities have been living under boil water advisories such as that issued for Walkerton for years (Gelinas; O'Connor 2002b). The recent evacuation of Kashechewan First Nation in north-eastern Ontario due to water contamination further reminds us that such issues are relatively commonplace in Aboriginal communities.

To help shed light on Ontario's "water crisis" from a First Nations perspective, the Chiefs of Ontario in 2000 prepared its own report to the Walkerton Commission Part 2 Inquiry. I was asked to undertake a research project on traditional knowledge as part of the preparation of this report. From the Elders who were interviewed, a clear message emerged: women play an important role in First Nations cultures as spokepersons for water and carrying the primary responsibility for protecting that water. This message was confirmed and expanded upon during a collaboration in 2005 between Environment Canada and the Chiefs of Ontario aimed at better understanding the role of traditional knowledge and water protection from an Elders' perspective. During workshops held across the province involving over 40 Elders and traditional knowledge holders, the prominent role of women was repeatedly raised and recommendations emerged to support women's involvement in all water-related decision-making.

Both of these projects focused on gaining an understanding of First Nations' traditional views on caring for water, and how this knowledge can contribute to community and government-level source water protection planning in Ontario. Further key findings of this work are summarized below.

Water finds significance in the lives of First Nations people on personal, community, clan, national, and spiritual levels. Water is understood as a living force which must be protected and nurtured; it is not a commodity to be bought and sold.

The Meaning of Water

In attempting to express the meaning of water as a discrete concept, we risk obscuring the meaning that is associated with water in traditional Aboriginal philosophies. For many Aboriginal people and their ways of life, water offers "life-giving" forces, accompanied by certain duties and responsibilities (none of which can be adequately expressed in a report). This knowledge must be lived to have meaning. Key points frequently raised by Elders and traditional knowledge holders were summarized in D. McGregor and S. Whitaker's 2001 study Water Quality in the Province of Ontario: An Aboriginal Knowledge Perspective, and are paraphrased below:

- Water finds significance in the lives of First Nations people on personal, community, clan, national, and spiritual levels. Whatever the level at which it is considered, water is understood as a living force which must be protected and nurtured; it is not a commodity to be bought and sold.
- Water is, and always has been, viewed by Indigenous people as something precious: a fundamental life-giving force. Concern for water is not new in Aboriginal communities.
- Water in Aboriginal traditions has cleansing and purifying powers. It is the giver of life with which babies are born. Water has tremendous significance before birth, during the birthing process, and after birth.
- It is imperative to keep the water clean so it can continue to fulfill its purpose. Respect must be shown to water. This is frequently done by offering tobacco to the water.
- Recognizing the vital importance of water to survival

is the beginning of a healthy perspective. Water is the blood of Mother Earth. Similar to blood, which circulates throughout our bodies, nutrients flow into the land via water. Without our blood serving its proper functions, we would die. It is the same with water. If it cannot perform its functions, we, as part of the Earth, will perish.

•In addition to people, water supports the lives of other beings or aspects of Creation that are important in the whole web of life. Again, Indigenous people benefit from this life-giving support. For example, there are medicines under and around the water. Water is the basis of life; we cannot live without it.

•Water was also used as a medicine, or as a part of medicines. It has medicinal properties and should be collected in certain ways.

•Although there are shared perspectives and teachings between men and women in Aboriginal societies as to the importance of water, and although overall responsibilities to care for water are collective, women have a special relationship to water.

•Aboriginal Elders who are men recognize the special role women have in relation to water. In workshops held with Elders in 2006, participants repeatedly stated that women, as life-givers, have a special connection with water.

•Many of the Elders who participated in the projects talked about the medicinal and spiritual properties of water and most of them identified these teachings as coming from their Grandmothers.

Women's Roles and Traditional Knowledge

Everyone has a responsibility to care for the water. Women, however, carry the responsibility to talk for the water.

—Ann Wilson

In the Aboriginal worldview, water has been closely associated with the female. Kim Anderson writes:

> Symbols of female and male balance can be found everywhere in the Aboriginal world. We have brother sun and Grandmother moon; father sky and mother earth. We talk frequently about the significance, the properties and the energies of water (equated with the female) and fire (equated with the male). We know that both water and fire are critical to our survival and the balance between these properties must be respected, as each has the ability to consume the other. (174)

According to the Haudenosaunee and the Anishnabe peoples, the moon is viewed as Grandmother, and represents continuous rebirth and renewal. The Grandmother is a leader and she is respected in this way. Kasti Cook states:

> We are grateful to her and continue to extend to her our greatest esteem, attention and appreciation for all that she does. She has a special relationship to the waters of the Earth, big and small. From the waters at the doors of life, such as the follicular fluid that bathes the primordial ovum, the dew on the grass in the dawn and at dusk, to the waters of the great oceans, she causes them all to rise and fall. Her constant ebb and flow teaches us that all Creation is related, made of one breath, one water, one earth. The waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are one. Breastmilk is formed from the blood of the woman. Our milk, our blood and the waters of the earth are one water, all flowing in rhythm to the moon. (139-140)

Women thus have a special relationship with water, since, like Mother Earth, they have life-giving powers. Women have a special place in the order of existence. They provide us, as unborn children, with our very first environment—in water. When we are born water precedes us. With this special place in the order of things come responsibilities. No one is exempt from caring and paying respect to the water, but for women there is a special responsibility. In some ceremonies, women speak for the water.

The voice of Aboriginal people remains largely absent in the discourse around water protection in Ontario. Of major concern is the lack of recognition of the role of women and their knowledge regarding water. However, Aboriginal women are not waiting for permission to act, nor are they waiting for public policy and legislation to recognize them; they are going ahead and fulfilling their responsibilities to water according to their own traditions and worldviews. The two examples below are wonderful and inspiring illustrations of this, and help to create awareness of the important role that women play in regards to water.

Akii Kwe: Aboriginal Women Who Speak for the Water

We are the voice for the water.

—Akii Kwe, Bkejwanong Territory (Walpole Island)

I had the privilege of meeting with this amazing group of women as part of research I was conducting a few years ago. Akii Kwe is an informal grassroots group of women speaking out on what they know about how to protect water in their territory. They began by protesting what was happening to the water, in particular by responding to Imperial Chemical Industries' indication that they wanted to dump more pollution into the waters flowing around Bkejwanong Territory. The women decided to speak for the water and try to stop such actions. Below are insights shared by Akii Kwe as expressed during the

meeting I had with them and in a position paper they provided to me.

For many years, Indigenous women in the Bkejwanong territory have noticed changes in water quality, particularly because they have a close and special relationship to the water. It is part of the Anishnaabe-Kwe tradition that women speak for the water. In the process of rediscovery, revitalization, and healing, the Anishnaabe-Kwe of Bkejwanong Territory organized themselves to speak for the water. Akii Kwe members stated that in Bkejwanong, nature provides the foundation of the Anishnaabe culture and the ways in which the people conduct themselves (systems of governance). It is because of this that people have a responsibility to act on behalf of the water. Akii Kwe members have, over the years, observed birth defects and other changes in animals. One particular example was that the meat of the snapping turtle began to turn yellow. Such changes in the environment (food chain) were attributed by the women to problems with the water, and yet they were told that the level of contamination was "acceptable." The women know this not to be true. The water was not okay, and what was happening to the water was not okay. What was and is happening to the whole environment was and is not okay.

Water is continuously being poisoned. Akii Kwe members conduct their work from a spiritual plane and rely on traditional teachings to guide then through their work; such guidance comes from ceremonies and Elders. The women state that it is their responsibility to protect the water and thus fulfill their roles as women and as members of their respective clans. They say, "We view our fight for water as a spiritual journey. It is part of our collective and individual growth as people" (McGregor and Whitaker 24).

Akii Kwe members see their strength as lying in their spirituality. Western science does not have this in its methods. When the women focus on the spiritual plane, they are not bogged down with bureaucracy. They do not need "permission" to do what they know is right. Their approach is holistic, and considers emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual aspects. While scientists, environmentalists, and politicians frequently ignore or only permit marginal representation of Aboriginal women in their discussions of water, Akii Kwe are working to affirm that their unique and powerful ties to water and should be integral to any such processes.

The Great Lakes Mother Earth Spirit Walk

Anishnaabe Grandmothers, Josephine Mandamin and Irene Peters are inspiring role models. These women are taking matters into their own hands in order to help preserve the water in and around the Great Lakes. They are doing so by leading awareness-raising walks around the Great Lakes. The first walk—a 1,300 kilometre trek around Lake Superior—took place in 2003.Each walk is lead by a Grandmother ("Mother Earth Water Walk") and begins annually in the spring with a water ceremony, feast, and celebration and. Routinely covering distances of over 1,000 kilometres, the goal of each walk is to raise awareness about water and try to change the perception of water as a resource to that of a sacred entity whichmust be treated as such. The 2006 walk involved two groups of Anishnaabe men and women travelling around Lake Ontario and Lake Erie simultaneously.

On these journeys the Grandmothers carry with them a vessel of water and an eagle staff. Supporters of the Mother Earth Water Walk maintain a web site and are always happy to receive assistance from supporters. The beauty of this project is that it is led by women who are fulfilling their role and trying to engage as many people as they can in raising awareness of the spiritual and cultural significance of water. The walks have inspired Anishnaabe women in other communities to organize their own water walks.

Aboriginal women are not waiting for permission to act, nor are they waiting for public policy and legislation to recognize them; they are going ahead and fulfilling their responsibilities to water according to their own traditions and worldviews.

Future Directions

The guidance received from Elders and traditional knowledge holders in the work I have been involved in clearly states that women should have a special place in decision-making about water: as it stands, women's important link to water is largely ignored. For example, most recently, the Government of Canada's Minister for Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Environment Canada, Health Canada, and the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations announced the creation of a panel of experts that will examine options for a regulatory framework to ensure safe drinking water in First Nations communities. There are no Aboriginal women on this panel (INAC). Such exclusion is even occurring in many Aboriginal communities, where Aboriginal women have essentially been denied their inherent connection to water in western-imposed systems of "water management." Moreover, with respect

to efforts to share and understand traditional knowledge, it was found that, "Without the equal input of women, the Elders were able to only give half of the knowledge available" (Lavalley 34). It was therefore recommended that "…women receive special mention in the invitation to discuss important matters, such as water" (Lavalley 34) Any discussion about water protection must ensure that women are equitably represented.

In summary, Aboriginal women have a special connection to water that mainstream society has not considered in formal decision-making processes. This lack of recognition has not stopped Aboriginal women from fulfilling their obligations. They continue to do as they have always done, guided by spiritual teachings, traditions, values, and ceremonies. My hope is that by sharing with you my experiences working with Elders and Grandmothers, I too have in part fulfilled my responsibilities as an Anishnaabe woman.

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