

Not long ago, I shared with some of you something I read about a “United Species Council”, and if there were one, they’d probably vote the human species out 99-1! (EarthWords for June 15, 2014) Well, as it turns out, according to Anishinaabe teachings, there once *was* a united species council, gathered to discuss the pitiful state that people, ‘with no wings, or feathers, or claws’, had gotten themselves into. [See *dibaajimowin* beginning on page 127.] And so those above the earth, below the earth, and on the earth *argued for days* whether or not they would help us! Fortunately for us, they all made a promise to *manidoo*, the Great Spirit, before he created us, to help us when we were in need. And so all the species appointed Bear and Otter, the only two species with a plea on our behalf, to a committee that would come up with a plan to save us from our pitiful selves...

REVIEW SUMMARY FOR:

Geniusz, Wendy Makoons. 2009. *Our knowledge is not primitive: Decolonizing botanical Anishinaabe teachings*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

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7.12.14

OVERVIEW

Our knowledge is not primitive is an important contribution to both scholarly and wider audience readers and thinkers. First, Geniusz thickens the ‘definition’ of what knowledge is from the Anishinaabe perspective. Knowledge is not simply something ‘we know’ but it is something that has been *given*; knowledge is a synthesis of our daily practices stemming from who we are, “our way of being” (11). Second, she adequately describes not only the importance of decolonizing botanical knowledge but *all* Anishinaabe knowledge. Botanical knowledge is simply one ‘category’ of knowledge that exists in foreign knowledge keeping systems, out of place from its context, and represented for, in, and from a different worldview (6). And finally, one of the most valuable features of Geniusz’s work is its tribute to the Biskaabiiyang research approach, developed by indigenous researchers, as well as its implementation in her study (8). Geniusz sustains all of these

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I. ANISHINAABEMOWIN TERMS USED FREQUENTLY
IN THIS RESEARCH

<i>Explicit Modified Form</i>	<i>Unmodified Form</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
anishinaabe-gikendaasowin	gikendaasowin	knowledge, information, and the synthesis of our personal teachings
anishinaabe-inaadiziwin	inaadiziwin	anishinaabe psychology, way of being
anishinaabe-izhitwaawin	izhitwaawin	anishinaabe culture, teachings, customs, history
aadizookaan (sing.) aadizookaanan (pl.)		traditional legends, ceremonies
dibaajimowin (sing.) dibaajimowinan (pl.)		teachings, ordinary stories, personal stories, histories

Figure 1 "Anishinaabemowin terms used frequently in this research" (Geniusz 2009:11)

features, interconnecting them throughout her text. In the following review summary, I will discuss each of these contributions and point to some of the important reading excerpts from the text for further understanding.

GAA-IZHI-ZHAWENDAAGOZIYANG (THAT WHICH IS GIVEN TO US IN A LOVING WAY BY THE SPIRITS)

All *Anishinaabe - gikendaasowin* (Anishinaabe knowledge, information, and the synthesis of our personal teachings) is said to have been given to the Anishinaabe from *manidoog*, “the high spirits” and *Gichi-manidoo*, the Great Spirit (67). Because the subject of the text is ‘botanical knowledge’, I will begin with this interesting section on “Plants within Izhitwaawin” (52):

It should be noted that there are no words for “plant” or “botanical knowledge” in Anishinaabemowin, although there are names for different plants and various ways one can describe certain kinds of plants. There is a word for tree, *mitig*, but whether or not everything we think of as a “tree” in English falls into this category is a matter to be debated. Although one can describe wanting to know about how the Anishinaabeg use a *mitig*, the concept is alien to *gikendaasowin* because the use of trees and plants is not a category prescribed by *gikendaasowin*. Instead, there are things that one learns within the context of *izhitwaawin*, and these various things require learning about how to use, work with, and ask for the assistance of plants and trees. To make certain objects, such as shelters and canoes, or to prepare foods and medicines requires a certain amount of knowledge about working with plants and trees. There are also certain spiritual understandings about plants and trees that are necessary to participate in *izhitwaawin*. Therefore, although “plant knowledge” or “tree knowledge” are not terms that readily translate into Anishinaabemowin, having this knowledge is essential to many aspects of *inaadiziwin* and *izhitwaawin*. As will be explained, botanical knowledge is an integral part of *inaadiziwin* and the decolonizing process.

As I try to think about how to present additional information about *gaa-izhi-zhawendaagoziyang* here, I struggle. Instead, I have decided to make the “important reading excerpts” more lengthy in this section than the final two so that you can read, hear, and allow the author words to speak to you. This is important for many reasons but primarily because I am astonished in the new ways I can see after reading this work. (Keep figure 1 close while reading—it took me half way through the text before I didn’t have to look at it anymore.) The majority points to reading chapter 2 but I wanted to outline what’s there so you’ll be tempted to read what interests you! (Available at MTU and KBIC library)

Important reading excerpts:

Mashkiki (medicine) within *Gikendaasowin* (53-55)

Categories of animate and inanimate within inaadiziwin (55-56)

Enawendiwin: Our Relationships with all of Creation (57-63)

This section provides a crucial viewpoint in which to see and explain our current problems concerning societal and environmental justice issues: *Permission for Gathering is not Always Given* (63-64)

Guarded versus public gikendaasowin (64-66)

This section contains Nanabush's teachings (67), "The greatest lesson Nanabush imparted was how to learn.": *Gidendaasowin comes from the manidoog* (67-69); *from dreams* (68-69); and *from animals* (69-70); and *does not come from random experimentation* (70-72)

This section contains a teaching story about trees and growing conditions (a man gets his head stuck in a bear skull and becomes lost; he finds his way by knowing, feeling trees, and habitats). Additionally, teachings are said to be a way to not just teach beings but to honor beings.: *Gikendaasowin is maintained through stories* (72-73); *through songs* (73-75), "sing about the cedar, and cedar does sing" (drum, flute); *through oral teachings* (75-79); *through apprenticeships* (79-80); *through personal notebooks* (80-83); and *through a recording system* (83-86)

Some gikendaasowin must be purchased (86-88)

The following two stories are teachings for Anishinaabe children revealing how *Nookomis Giizhik* (Grandmother Cedar) and *Nimishoomis wiigwaas* (Grandfather Birch) came to be given to the Anishinaabe people by manidoog: *The Creation of Nookomis Giizhik* (Grandmother Cedar) (127); and *Nenabozho and the Animikiig* (Thunderbird) (136).

Balance and health (159)

DECOLONIZING ANISHINAABE-GIKENDAASOWIN (ANISHINAABE KNOWLEDGE, INFORMATION, AND THE SYNTHESIS OF OUR PERSONAL TEACHINGS)

Colonization has both destroyed and preserved native knowledge (3). The urgency of decolonizing knowledge is its reach into "Anishinaabe minds and our very beings" (2); colonization affects the way Anishinaabe see the world and themselves, seeing through the eyes of the colonizer (90). Geniusz's intent is to explore knowledge so that it may be "decolonized, reclaimed, and made useful to programs revitalizing Anishinaabe language and culture" (3). She has a substantial section on the history of Anishinaabe knowledge in the written record. She writes: "Gikendaasowin has been collected and represented to the world for more than 170 years" (92). Beginning with documentation by early European explorers to the Americas, Geniusz then outlines published anthropological sources that had its beginnings with Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) in 1879, followed by the American Anthropological Association in 1902, and the Wisconsin Archeological Society. Geniusz explains (22):

The BAE, and arguably its contemporary anthropological organizations given that they were also staffed and connected with those running the BAE, was an integral part of the mechanisms that supported the colonizing structures in North America. It was part of the federal government, and many of those working and researching for it were also

personally connected to the subjugation and oppression of Indian peoples. The BAE's first director, Powell, had been a major of artillery in the Union Army during the Civil War (Judd 1967, 4). Although this position did not necessarily put him in armed engagement with Indian peoples, Powell still fought for the same colonizing force that did.

Four decades later, "ethno-botany" would become an established field of research and Geniusz outlines major contributors and sources of Anishinaabe botanical knowledge (37) in the ethnobotanical record. In reflection of the existing sources of Anishinaabe knowledge, Geniusz uses the following statement to assess colonization and the collecting of gikendaasowin (97-98):

Through the colonization process, non-natives from all walks of life have become "experts" on certain indigenous peoples. Throughout history, criteria for being an "expert" on a particular group of indigenous people have not been very selective. ... During this colonization, the world began to see these researchers, and not the [people] themselves, as experts on [the people's] knowledge.

Finally, on the documentation of Anishinaabe knowledge, Geniusz presents unpublished sources (34) and concludes with more recent sources (including Scott Herron's work and GLIFWC's *Plants Used by the Great Lakes Ojibwa* that many of you are familiar with). A major critique of many of the unpublished resources is that they exist behind locked doors and many miles away from Anishinaabe revitalization programs; and recent sources access through library databases by costly membership, only two examples of the problem of accessing this information (36-37).

Before I continue on the significance of decolonizing gikendaasowin, it is important to distinguish the difference between sacred (guarded) knowledge versus everyday knowledge according to the author. In the Anishinaabe culture, Geniusz speaks to the decolonization of everyday knowledge because this knowledge "belongs to the people" (65), "knowledge that every Anishinaabe needs to know for survival and in order to participate in Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin [Anishinaabe psychology, way of being] and Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin [Anishinaabe culture, teachings, customs, history]" (10, 64-66).

There a number of key features distinguishing 'colonized' texts and documents, and indeed, the author talks about 'varying degrees' of colonized resources throughout the text; I'll just point to a few. First, very little attribution is given to the providers of this information except to outside 'experts' (33). In many works, not only is an individual source not named, but most do not even name an Anishinaabe group or region; the source is identified as "Indians" (16). Second, as explained more fully below in the explanation of Biskaabiiyang, colonized texts lack *context* (19). Anishinaabe knowledge is rich in *aadizookaanan* and *dibaaajimowinan* (traditional legends, ceremonies, and teachings, ordinary stories, personal stories, histories). From the Anishinaabe worldview, *gikendaasowin*, *inaadiziwin*, and *izhitwaawin* are all interconnected and cannot be separated (57), or presented as so (6). It is the presentation of knowledge, narrowly defined fields of study, categories, and information (6), that poses extremely problematic (13): "Most of

these texts present information according the philosophies, cosmologies, and knowledge-keeping system of the colonizers, which are alien to those of izhitwaawin.” For example, a plant’s physical properties cannot be separated from its spiritual properties (80). Colonized documents also include presenting information as if it exists in *past* (32). And finally, one of the most damaging aspects of colonized texts is degrading statements about the Anishinaabe and their culture (33). The author sees this aspect as one of the most motivating features to decolonize existing resources as an Anishinaabe encountering this degradation may chose to no longer seek out Anishinaabe knowledge and culture.

Important reading excerpts:

Anishinaabe botanical knowledge documentation in the written record (14-49)

ABOUT THE *BISKAABIYANG* (RETURNING TO OURSELVES) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A key component of decolonization is approaching research in ways that reflect Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin (Anishinaabe psychology and way of being) in order to reclaim Anishinaabe knowledge. The Biskaabiiyang approach to research was developed by indigenous scholars beginning with the Maori people (Smith 1999, 183). In 2003, developed by students with the help of elders, the Indigenous Knowledge/Philosophy Program of the Seven Generations Education Institute began decolonizing research methodologies for the Anishinaabe (9). Geniusz writes (12):

Use of the first person is an important difference between Biskaabiiyang and other research methodologies. Biskaabiiyang approaches to research begin with the Anishinaabe researcher, who must look at his or her own life and how he or she has been personally colonized in order to conduct research from the standpoint of Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin.

Geniusz states that “for the survival for Anishinaabe people and culture”, this is “the most crucial part of Biskaabiiyang research methodologies” (9). She continues explaining Biskaabiiyang methodology (12):

Rather than assuming an unbiased stance to research, a researcher using Biskaabiiyang approaches to research submerges him or herself within Anishinaabe-inaadiziwin and Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin, the very things that he or she is researching. From this position, the Anishinaabe research must acknowledge his or her personal connection to the research he or she is conducting because the protocols of Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin require that one always explain his or her personal and intellectual background whenever he or she shares an aadizookaan or dibaajimowin. To do otherwise takes credibility away from the information presented and insults those who gave that Anishinaabe those teachings.

This approach provides a common ground for Anishinaabe academics and communities (9) for talking about and doing research. Later, Genusz goes on to explain that this is additionally connected to the way Anishinaabeg introduce themselves. First, they'll give the name of their clan, their home communities, and their Indian name, "so that those listening to them will know the origins of their teachings" (78). One's name is the last part of telling others who you are, showing humility and illustrating the long line of knowledge that one comes from.

The Biskaabiiyang approach also has differing objectives and priorities for research; this approach concerns "returning to our teaching" (51). Biskaabiiyang objectives for research serve the interests of the community first, "research that is meaningful for the people" (52). "Our priority is to revitalize this knowledge within our own lives so that it will be there for our children and grandchildren and their children and grandchildren" (8), she writes. The priority is not academia, science, or preservation for the colonizers (8), "Anishinaabe reasons for conducting research is not about explaining to others, but to regain and revitalize teachings that were or are being lost from our families and communities" (51-52). Additionally, these approaches guide the researcher to writing in the 'first-person' as well as presenting information according to Anishinaabe systems of information and knowledge. Anishinaabe systems of knowledge are contextual, as the author notes that the "practice of gathering lists of words or names is part of an alien knowledge-keeping system" (19), an example of colonized knowledge. But again, Genusz points out that colonized texts rich in wordlists, vocabularies, and other vital resources "are wonderful examples of texts that can be decolonized, reworked, and made useful to programs revitalizing izhitwaawin" (19). And finally, the Biskaabiiyang approach includes equal focus on both oral and written sources of information. Genusz writes (52):

Written and oral sources are used together to help us learn all we can about these practices so that we may use them in our own lives. using multiple sources is particularly helpful when talking about certain teaching and pieces of information that are no longer a part of our everyday lives because these are the kinds of things that are most in danger of being lost from our communities.

Important reading excerpts:

Background on the Biskaabiiyang approach to research (8-12)

Presenting (decolonized) knowledge using the Biskaabiiyang approach (chapter 4)

Connecting an individual's present knowledge to knowledge of many generations (76-78)