

Wiigwaasi Jiimaanike - Building birchbark canoes: A study of cultural immersion programs

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North American Indigenous peoples have experienced a cultural resurgence and revitalization in part by engaging in cultural immersion programs that focus on important traditional activities including birch bark canoe building and Native language. This essay explores the history, importance, and process of building birch bark canoes and looks at various cultural immersion programs to identify important themes, beneficial practices, and guiding principles for the promotion of future efforts.

Birch Bark Canoe History and Importance

The origin of the birch bark canoe has been passed down through history by oral legend. One version says that the Anishinaabeg were given the knowledge and taught how to make the birch bark canoe by the cultural hero Waynaboozhoo (Densmore, 1979). The birch bark canoe has historically played an important role in the lives of Indigenous peoples in all the Tribes living throughout the boreal forest region of North America. Where natural water travel routes and birch trees are found, the birch bark canoe has historically been the preferred vessel of transportation. In the 1700s and 1800s, Anishinaabe birch bark canoes were enlarged by French, British, and American fur traders for greater cargo-carrying capacity although most of these fur trade canoes were made by Native builders. Clearly, the birch bark canoe is an Indigenous technology of North America that was utilized extensively by European-Americans.

Following the Fur Trade came European settlement and colonization of the United States and Canada that created extensive changes in Native lifeways. These changes were forced upon Native peoples through tragic periods of genocide, relocation, and assimilation. The effects have been a significant loss of Native culture, language, and identity. By the mid-1900s, very few Native builders of birch bark canoes remained yet the knowledge was retained and shared through generations and kept alive.

In the past several decades, Native cultural traditions have seen a significant resurgence. Birch bark canoe building is often a key activity for Indigenous culture revitalization and carries deep meanings and implications for Native people not readily realized by non-natives. These include reclaiming Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITEK), strengthening Tribal communities and sovereignty, and contemplating broader aspects of meaning, memory, power, identity, and history (Low, 2015). The birch bark canoe can be a strong metaphor symbolizing Native exploitation as well as self-determination and Tribal sovereignty. Building a birch bark canoe in a supportive group setting can represent cultural pride, acceptance within the community, and an opportunity for racial equality, healing, and renewal.

Public birch bark canoe building programs are occasionally promoted as shared Native and non-native activities seeking to reconcile history and strengthen community through shared interactions. For non-natives, the birch bark canoe can be a reminder of cultural appropriation, the effects of colonialism, guilt, and racism. This became evident in 2017 at Standing Rock, North Dakota when many United States military veterans asked forgiveness from Dakota and Lakota Chiefs for the collective historical atrocities committed against Indian Nations by the U.S. Federal Government. Euro-Americans are also in need of hands-on Indigenous cultural immersion programs to learn about and appreciate traditional Native values and historical perspectives. Traditionally grounded birch bark canoe-building programs are effective in preserving Indigenous culture and healing from oppressive history for Native and non-native people.

Anishinaabe Birch Bark Canoe Construction

The birch bark canoe is an ancient vessel of Indigenous design that has been used extensively throughout northern North America for thousands of years. Its complex construction made from natural materials available in the forest with primitive tools allowed this technology to flourish with all the Tribes living within the range of white birch trees. The utility of the birch bark canoe allowed for a vessel that was stable yet relatively fast on the water, capable of transporting heavy loads, and light enough to be carried overland on portages. Its basic design was stylized by each tribe for specific adaptation to individual terrain characteristics such as rapids, large lakes, or small streams, and for freighting or subsistence fishing, hunting, trapping, and wild ricing in the traditional Anishinaabe seasonal round.

The birch bark canoe became integral to the traditional way of life for cultural and religious reasons as well. Much of the power in the birch bark canoe comes from the living spirits *manidoog* within forest materials and their place of honor in the Anishinaabe worldview, which acknowledges natural materials as animate spiritual beings (Plummer-Steen, 1997; Swanson, 2001). Tobacco *asema* was always placed in the ground before gathering birch bark *wiigwaas*, spruce roots *wadab*, spruce pitch *bigiw*, cedar *giizhik*, or bear grease *makwa bimide*. *Asema* was first offered to the four directions, the earth, the sky, and the Great Spirit *gichimanidoo*. The person gathering the substance talked in a gentle voice, saying the substance was intended for a good purpose, that no more was to be taken than necessary, and asking that its use might be successful (Densmore, 1979; Swanson, 2001).

White birch bark *wiigwaas* is ideally peeled from a healthy, living tree in early to mid-summer, the mid-to-end of June to early July is prime for many regions. Great care in selection and harvest is afforded to not harm the cambium, the inner bark, during harvest. Like people, birch bark is self-renewing, strong, pliable, and dependable, yet can also be fragile and delicate. It is used for the canoe hull, being laced with spruce roots *wadabiig* and sealed with pitch *bigiw*. There is much to learn about proper harvest, care in handling, and crafting with birch bark. Unfortunately, birch trees are endangered in North America due to acid deposition (Ahmicasaube, 2017; Chiras, 2010).

White cedar *giizhik* is considered one of four sacred plants of the Anishinaabe, along with sage, sweet grass, and tobacco. Cedar wood is harvested in lengths adequate for canoe gunwales, ribs, planks, headboards, stems, and paddles. Cedar is selected from healthy living or quality dead trees with no knots or branches in the desired sections and without a twist in the trunk. Once cut it is split with hardwood wedges into desired sizes to pack out of the woods. Hardwood, including ash, birch, and maple, is used for thwarts and pegs due to its superior strength.

Spruce root *wadab* is gathered in spruce and tamarack bogs and delicately extracted in long lengths for use in lashing gunwales and lacing birch bark. Care must be taken to not kink or damage the root in handling. Care must also be given to replace all moss disturbance at the site of harvest. The root must be processed by carefully scraping and removing the bark off the root, trimming root hairs, and then splitting the root in half.

Pitch *bigiw* can be collected from most evergreens including white or black spruce, white pine, red pine, jack pine, cedar, and others, although balsam fir is generally not used. Pitch is collected by chipping resin off of naturally damaged or scarred trees. It is then heated to liquid consistency and mixed with softwood charcoal and tempered with animal fat; rendered black bear fat known as bear grease *makwa bimide* is preferred. Mixing proportions is a matter of climate, ingredient quality, and experience. Some modern builders choose to use a synthetic sealant instead of traditional pitch sealant due to ease, lack of knowledge, or less maintenance.

Traditional tools used in birch bark canoe building include the awl *migoos*, axe *waagaakwad*, and crooked knife *waagikomaan*. Additional tools may include a froe, draw knife, shaving horse, drill, or saw. For cultural programs, a discussion and plan for building a canoe should precede harvesting and construction so all members of the team agree on approaches and expectations for the project.

The site of canoe construction is a primary consideration. Traditional building locations had access to a lake or river for water, level ground for an earthen building bed, a fire pit, shade, and adequate open space for material processing, camping, and gatherings.

Anishinaabe birch bark canoes originated from a common Algonquin-Anishinaabe design, known as the ancient model or old form. It evolved into regional variations defining Algonquin and Anishinaabe Tribal identities yet retained time-proven design and construction. The Ojibwe old form is generally noted by having highly upturned gunwale ends, a wide beam, flared shallow-arch hull shape, relatively straight sheer except for the gunwale ends where sheer is moderate to extreme, significant rocker near the ends, and symmetrical end profiles of fairly abrupt, slightly curved to nearly straight, vertical cut-water ends at mid-stem height showing slightly more “chin” than “nose” as compared to the Algonquin model. Today this is known as the Eastern Ojibwe form, old style, or ancient model, which is most prevalent in Ojibwe regions northeast, east, southeast, and south of Lake Superior. The ancient model is still constructed in Minnesota, especially around Lake Superior due to its seaworthiness.

The Ojibwe to the north, northwest, west, and southwest of Lake Superior largely adopted a second Tribal form of birch bark canoe known today as the “long-nose” or Western Ojibwe form. The Ojibwe long-nose is thought to be a more primitive design than the Eastern Ojibwe form, having been adopted from designs used by the Dakota and influences from Cree canoes, which both use a rounder end profile with an elongated “nose” at mid-height (Adney, 1983). The Western Ojibwe long-nose canoe also differs distinctively from the Eastern Ojibwe old form model by employing independent stem pieces and headboards whereas the Eastern form utilizes an end-frame where the stem and headboard are securely attached with a brace, root lashings, and wood pegging, and is therefore significantly stronger in design. Another characteristic of the long-nose is that it is often built with only four thwarts rather than five or seven to accommodate wild ricing by allowing more space between thwarts for a longer and more effective stroke of the arm and wild rice flail *bawaa'iganook*.

Cultural Immersion Programs

At Nay Ah Shing School in Mille Lacs, Minnesota, a cultural immersion program integrates the Ojibwe language into the K-12 curriculum and offers instruction on Ojibwe cultural activities such as wild ricing, netting, trapping, and maple sugaring. The Ojibwe Language and Culture Program also works with Elders in the community through the Elder Advisory Team. During the summer, an immersion program is offered for all students. The program was recognized in 1999 as one of the top programs of its kind in the nation (Nay Ah Shing, 2016).

In Nova Scotia, Canada, Todd Labrador leads a unique birch bark canoe-building program in the middle of the community that encourages visitors. One of the benefits is that Elders drop by and share teachings from their own Elders, things that may have been forgotten. The apprentices go out with their grandparents to harvest bark or roots. “A lot of the old stories that are almost forgotten start to come back again” (McMillan, 2017).

In Peterborough, Ontario, in February 2009 a birch bark canoe building program was held at Trent University's campus library, daily for two weeks. The Indigenous Studies Ph.D. program and the Indigenous Studies department conducted *Wiigwossi Jiimaanke* (building a birch bark canoe): *A Journey of Resurgence*. Students, staff, and faculty were invited to participate. “Our *wiigwossi jiimaan* will be both a living being and a functional vehicle. Building this *jiimaan* together, as a community and guided by Artists-In-Residence Kevin Finney and Jillian Collins, will connect and reconnect us to the land, the trees, and the water, as well as to each other. As our hands work with natural materials, our hearts and minds will interact. We will visit sharing stories and knowledge as we create.” Everyone is invited to drop in, visit, ask questions, and use their hands (Trent University, 2017).

At Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin, the Wausaugoning Ojibwe Village offers public tours of a recreated 20-acre traditional Ojibwe village in a forested setting. Lac Du Flambeau Ojibwe Band members conduct

guided tours offering superb learning opportunities from knowledgeable staff. The tour encompasses a seasonal round that includes a food cache, sugarbush, and wigwams, and discusses material culture including basketry, birch bark canoes, fish traps, tools, and more (Hocking, 2001).

The Fort William First Nations Reserve near Thunder Bay, Ontario, holds an annual summer birch bark canoe-building immersion program for middle and high school students. The program successfully engages over twenty students each year, incorporates the Ojibwe language and the students paddle the finished birch bark canoes on Lake Superior (Lentz, 2016).

The Circle of Life Academy, Bureau of Indian Affairs School in White Earth, Minnesota, on the White Earth Nation of Ojibwe Reservation, conducts a full-time K-12 school with high-quality daily cultural immersion learning. Ojibwe language is incorporated in every lesson. A birch bark canoe building demonstration was presented in September 2017, with plans for an expanded summer-long immersion program to include birch bark canoe building. The planned expansion of their year-round Ojibwe culture program includes the building of snowshoes, toboggans, and other traditional crafts, as well as to process maple sap, fish, game, wild rice, and other traditional activities (White, 2017).

At Waadookodaading Ojibwe Immersion School near Hayward, Wisconsin, the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe conducts an Ojibwe language immersion school with a cultural focus on engaging students and the community in traditional sugarbush harvesting and processing (Lac Court Oreille, 2017).

The Oshki Ogimaag Tribal Charter School, in Grand Portage, Minnesota, offers numerous cultural education presentations by community Elders in the school, immersion programs in the outdoors, and other specialized cultural immersion programs. In 2008-2009, a youth-and-elder team approach was used to cooperatively build snowshoes. The six-month-long winter program completed the traditional ash wood and rawhide snowshoes successfully with valuable cultural learning, Ojibwe language, and Elder storytelling. Oshki Ogimaag and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa have expressed interest in repeating this cultural snowshoe-making immersion program in 2018 (Waddle, 2017).

The Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe Community College in Baraga, Michigan, offers Ojibwe cultural education programs and has expressed interest in expanding its staff for year-round cultural immersion programs with specific interests in snowshoe making and traditional crafts (Colbert, 2016).

Along the Pacific Northwest Coast, Indigenous peoples are experiencing an exciting cultural revival of song, dance, and language. A major component is through the crafting of their ancient dugout canoes and journeying as tribal communities along the coast, rediscovering their heritage aboard vessels of their past. The paddler movement has encouraged sobriety, asking its participants to make a pledge not to drink or to use drugs, or to smoke while on a paddle journey, and seeking to support a network in suicide prevention. The canoe as a response tool for mental health issues comes at a time when American Indian and Alaska Native death rates of suicide are 50 percent higher than they are for non-natives (Oh, 2016).

Numerous other cultural immersion and language programs exist and are springing up across North America. These programs represent a revolutionary period of cultural resurgence.

Guiding Principles

Common themes that help create a foundation for positive experiences in Indigenous cultural immersion programs include values of respect and learning (Adams, 2016). A sense of inclusion and belonging is important for cultural program participants to feel welcomed. The staff has a large opportunity and responsibility to initiate this sense of welcome, caring, and support. A circle gathering at the beginning of each session allowing each participant to introduce themselves or talk is a great way to foster inclusion and a sense of teamwork that helps bond the group together. This fosters a sense of community, facilitates storytelling, and allows for laughter. In certain situations, it is a time for Elders, guest speakers, or traditional healers to perform ceremonies. It is also a focused session where the Anishinaabe language can be spoken by everyone. Quite often with birch bark canoe building programs, once the circle gathering breaks and the detailed canoe building work begins, the group fragments by

nature of small groups needing to separate into safe workspaces or go about various tasks. Ideally, these small groups continue to share and bond. It is important for the instructor(s) or staff to routinely reach out to each participant during the program session to maintain dialogue and a sense of inclusion and welcome presence.

Good ways to develop effective cultural learning programs are to base guiding principles on traditional Indigenous teachings. One example is the Seven Grandfather Teachings taught by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe which includes Wisdom, Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Humility, and Truth. Incorporating these into the curriculum is an effective way to focus on proper values.

Another approach is to employ the concept of developmental assets. Internal assets include a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity, and others. External assets include providing support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and others (Search Institute, 2007).

The Ojibwe language *Ojibwe-Anishinaabemowin* is the language of the Ojibwe, or Chippewa, which is rooted in the Algonquin language. By including Native language use in cultural immersion programs youth and adults are learning and preserving the Ojibwe language. Ojibwe vocabulary and terminology developed specifically to birch bark canoe building and are used throughout traditional Ojibwe canoe building to enhance learning (Fond du Lac, 2010). *Ojibwe-Anishinaabemowin* allows for greater insight and connection to the Ojibwe community, culture, and history. It allows for a more precise understanding of the forest and the way a birch bark canoe concentrates spiritual power from the natural and spiritual elements that went into the making of the canoe. These include energy and powers from the land, rocks, trees, water, animals, fire, and human builders as caretakers of the earth and all beings (Ottetail, 2009).

Native Youth Alliance in Minnesota Initiatives, a non-profit organization in St. Paul, Minnesota, sets guiding values and goals for Native youth cultural programs and staff. Guiding values include honoring our cultures and traditions, investing in the future for Native youth, ensuring Native youth have a voice and are heard, being passionate about helping Native youth, and striving to follow through to completion with consistency. Goals include increasing understanding of existing policies about Native youth, creating culturally relevant research on Native youth, including information provided about youth by youth, committing to a shared vision of supporting Native youth in their families, schools, and communities, and setting an expectation of all agencies to support these goals and outcomes (Harstad, 2016; Native Youth Alliance).

Summary

Traditional lifeways of North American Indigenous peoples have been drastically changed in the last 500 years as European exploration, trade, conquest, and colonization have marginalized Native peoples. Through the processes of genocide, relocation, and assimilation, traditional cultural lifeways and languages have been gradually eroded. With cultural revitalization efforts led by Elders sharing traditional knowledge, language, and skills through cultural immersion programs, a recollection of traditional cultural knowledge has surged. New tribal leaders with improved self-confidence, cultural identity, and leadership skills are helping tribes retain traditional values that strengthen their communities and sovereignty. These outcomes effectively promote a more educated and sensitive multicultural global society.

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Personal Communications

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