

# Nehiyaw iskwew kiskinowâtasinahikewina— paminisowin namôya tipeyimisowin

## Learning Self Determination Through the Sacred

WAHPIMASKWASIS (LITTLE WHITE BEAR)  
JANICE ALISON MAKOKIS

*Cet article peut être vu comme un outil pour les femmes autochtones à la recherche de nehiyaw pimatisiwin (une leçon de vie pour les Cris) et qui veulent se donner le pouvoir, ainsi qu'à leur famille, à leur communauté et à leur nation, d'y arriver. Ce texte assure que les femmes Cris voient l'autodétermination comme faisant partie intégrante de leur vie et posent la question: comment la vie cérémoniale peut-elle aider les femmes nehiyaw à conceptualiser l'autodétermination et pourquoi il est important de faire évoluer une vision autochtone de la gouvernance.*

*Tanisi wahpimaskwasis nitisikason nehiyaw iskwew niya onicikiskwaponihk obci niya.* I begin this article by introducing myself in my Cree language because it sets the context of how my vision and interpretation of self-determination relates directly to this act. In the colonizer's language, this translates to "Hello, the Cree spiritual name that has been given to me is 'Little White Bear,' and I am a Cree woman from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation." The significance of having a spiritual name, knowing what it means and knowing where you come from are all connected to how *nehiyawak* (Cree People) understand self-determination within a *nehiyaw* paradigm. This paper is a discussion and expression of my own ceremonial journey to understand what self-determination is and how other *nehiyawak* in my reserve community relate their own stories of what this means to them. The ideas in this article do not speak to all Indigenous women's experiences, how Indigenous women come to understand their sacred roles, or what an Indigenous gendered perspective of self-determination is. The foundation of this paper revolves around ceremony because it was in ceremony that I came to understand *iyiniw pahminsowin* (self-determination—how we regulate/organize ourselves) from an anti-colonial framework and how it is implemented within our daily actions. By anti-colonial I am referring to the spiritual space in which Indigenous peoples utilize and practice our systems of knowledge and ways of being; found in our language, our

teachings, our stories, our songs, and our ceremonies. By practicing our ceremonies we are engaging in a form of resistance to colonialism. We are calling on the collective memory of our ancestors to remind us of the path they have fought and created for us to follow and in these actions we are practicing self-determination at the most fundamental level. These are the conceptual elements that I examine in this paper as they are the sacred frame (hoop) that holds together and guides a nation's existence (Allen). The philosophical principles that hold this frame together are the spiritual blueprints that provide people within a clan, a community, and a nation direction in choosing their path and directing their life that inevitably contributes to the good of the collective.

This article should be read as a tool that Indigenous women can use to seek out ways to empower themselves, their families, their communities, and nations in aspirations of seeking *nehiyaw pimatisiwin* (A Cree-Indigenous Way of Life). This paper will argue that Cree women view self-determination as intrinsic to our core ways of being and asks *How does ceremonial life become an integral aspect of where nehiyaw women conceptualize self-determination and why is this important in moving an Indigenous vision of governance forward?*

### Re-Framing, Re-Thinking and Re-Telling the Concept of Self-Determination

In recent years the word "self-determination" has generated some controversial debate amongst academics, political theorists, grassroots Indigenous peoples, and those committed to Indigenous political issues. A significant part of this debate concerns terminology and its importance to the Indigenous political agenda within Canada. Because it is problematic to define or understand what self-determination is in its scope and meaning when viewed solely through the lens of a euro-western paradigm, it is necessary to analyze self-determination through an Indigenous

philosophical framework to provide a more appropriate and interpretive understanding that reflects our relationship to this concept. Because this paper is about Cree women and self-determination I began to question what this term meant, how it might inform the socio-political movement of what happens at the grassroots level, and how this ideological concept might be reframed to be more inclusive of an Indigenous epistemological framework found within our Indigenous languages and teachings. From this critical position, I sought out literature that would help articulate my argument that self-determination should be contextual-

found within ceremony inform a nehiyaw vision of self-determination not found in a formalized legal/political interpretive understanding. This euro-western perception of self-determination assumes a universal homogenous way of seeing and understanding its scope and content. As a result, this political legal discourse determines what fits within the ideological box in order to give self-determination meaning. This articulation of self-determination assumes the “core values of human freedom and equality” to be enjoyed by everyone in the same way at the same level. How can this be possible when an elite and select group of

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ized in anti-colonial language to help assert an Indigenous identity premised on principles found in our authentic ways of being. An important aspect of this positioning is recognizing that our ways of being are learned through working with Elders and Indigenous knowledge holders in the communities and nations we come from.

The international political scene helped foreground the beginning of the self-determination debate. Scholar James Anaya, has written extensively on how the international political community, more specifically, international law has influenced Indigenous people's ability to articulate their demands, both in their home territories and internationally. Anaya elaborates on the principle of “self-determination” as it is commonly used within the international scene.

Extending from core values of human freedom and equality, expressly associated with peoples instead of states, and affirmed in a number of international human rights instruments, the principle of self-determination arises within international law's human rights frame and hence benefits human beings *as human beings* and not sovereign entities as such. Like all human rights norms, moreover, self-determination is presumptively universal in scope and thus must be assumed to benefit all segments of humanity. (76)

This interpretation of self-determination has been constructed within an individual “rights discourse” framework that automatically places it within a euro-western perspective of rights as it relates to international law. The language inherent in this explanation takes away from other perspectives or interpretations of what self-determination could mean. For this reason, the questions I seek within this paper relate to ceremonial life and how teachings

people set and determine how we are to enjoy these “core values”? The values established through human rights law are premised on western notions of what individual “human rights” are. Further, they aspire to define all people in the same way by “benefiting all segments of humanity.” From an Indigenous perspective, we must be critical of the body that creates these “rights” which are derived from European law. The positioning of these “rights” within a euro-western paradigm impacts and restricts our ability to navigate within this framework because euro-western paradigms refuse to see these ideological concepts from an Indigenous philosophical foundation.

One of the classic texts about the future of Canadian Indigenous self-determination is the edited book, *Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State* (Little Bear, Boldt and Long). The ideas expressed within its pages still have relevance today and contain passionate declarations from Indigenous authors who seek answers from with(in) our own systems of thought. Iroquois scholar Oren Lyons expresses his belief in the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples when he states:

My people, the Iroquois, were very powerful people. They had a coalition of forces that was governed by two fires: the spiritual fire and the political fire. The central fire, of course, was the spiritual fire. The primary law of Indian government is the spiritual law. Spirituality is the highest form of politics, and our spirituality is directly involved in government. As chiefs we are told that our first and most important duty is to see that the spiritual ceremonies are carried out. Without the ceremonies, one does not have a basis on which to conduct government for the welfare of the people. This is not only for our people but for the good of all living things in general. (5)

Lyons eloquently outlines the centrality of spirituality to a nation's political actions. He also states that governance is integrated in important ways with tribal life. Lyons' idea of "spiritual law" supports my own understanding of why ceremony and governance are important in advancing a different path to replace Eurocentric ideals of how we can achieve political autonomy within *our own* traditional territories.

Self-determination has also been rethought to mean a political discursive formation to secure nationhood (Deloria and Lytle; Alfred 1999). In their book, *The Nations Within*, Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle capture the political culture of Native Americans and the importance and primacy of what the word "nationhood" and its inherent indigenized meaning stands for. They state:

When we distinguish between nationhood and self-government, we speak of two entirely different positions in the world. *Nationhood* implies a process of decision making that is free and uninhibited within the community, a community in fact that is almost completely insulated from external factors as it considers its possible options. *Self-government*, on the other hand, implies a recognition by the superior political power that some measure of local decision making is necessary but that this process must be monitored very carefully so that its products are compatible with the goals and policies of the larger political power. *Self-government* implies that the people were previously incapable of making any decisions for themselves and are now ready to assume some, but not all, of the responsibilities of a municipality. (14)

In understanding *who we are and where we come from* we are much more grounded in articulating a counter anti-colonial narrative. We become more equipped intellectually against those colonial forces found in the power structures that continue to subject us to occupy spaces of silent passivity within the intellectual academic arena. Traditional ceremonies are our spiritual centres and allow us to redefine self-determination in our own ways.

The existing literature informs us that Indigenous peoples must reassert our voices to claim our rightful place in the paradigm wars that we find ourselves in (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz). We are living through a time where it is critical for us to affirm our presence through the utilization of our own Indigenous languages where a decolonized reality can be sought, in an effort to breathe life and meaning into concepts such as self-determination, sovereignty, and self-government (Turner; Alfred 1999), instead of allowing them to be defined in the euro-western framework they are often created in. It is of paramount importance to assert our Indigenous voices within the political and legal discourses which ultimately influence the agenda that affect our livelihood within our territories. This inevitably influences the lives of Indigenous women

who carry the future of our nations by virtue of having the sacred responsibility of giving life and socializing children in their cultural framework at home.

The most recent piece of work that advocates a strong Indigenous intellectual presence to create a "critical Indigenous philosophy" that "unpacks the colonial framework of these (the language of rights, sovereignty, and nationalism) discourses" is Dale Turner's work in *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*. In reading Turner's book I agreed with much of his analysis for "word warriors" except for his position of *where* spirituality fits within creating a "critical Indigenous philosophical framework." In Turner's words:

This does not mean we must ignore the spiritual dimension of Indigenous thought in our teaching, in our scholarship, or in Canadian courts of law for that matter—far from it. What it does highlight is that when we use a concept like "spirituality" in European philosophical discourse, especially in political philosophy, we must appreciate that in order for it to do the philosophical work we believe it ought to do—say, in generating a richer understanding of political justice—we must be able to find a place for it within European philosophical discourse. Finding the right "place" for terms like "spirituality" is essential to a critical Indigenous philosophy. (115)

If our philosophical foundation is premised on or found in ceremonial rituals or teachings, then how can we make the claim that "we do not know how to incorporate or where to place spirituality" within a philosophical exercise of creating a critical Indigenous philosophy? In much of my experience in coming to know and understand what an Indigenous epistemology is, it came through teachings that originated in ceremony. One can read all the books she wants about "what an Indigenous philosophy is" but only when one truly immerses and embraces his/herself within Indigenous ceremony do they find the true meaning of an Indigenous way of thinking and experiencing the world through a true anti-colonial framework. It is through the experiential knowledge acquired by participating in various ceremonies that you appreciate the importance of a philosophy based on ceremonial teachings found in the spiritual realm of an Indigenous existence.

First and foremost our actions should be guided by our own epistemological frameworks if we are seeking true vindication from a philosophical colonial construct that has held us to be social, political, cultural, and economic prisoners within the very spaces we seek redress. In doing so, we have to return to our teachings found in the languages we speak, the songs we sing in ceremony, the teachings found in the ceremonial structures that have been passed on to us from our ancestors, and the philosophical bundles of knowledge found in the ways of our ancestors.

There must be a mass summoning of Indigenous people to embrace a critical Indigenous thought process premised on our own Indigenous ways of knowing. It is in this intellectual space that we can find solace and refuge to think, experience, live and practice ways of living that reflect those of our ancestors. In unearthing the meaning of “self-determination” through our sacred positions as Cree women (held within the teachings that inform us of our roles and responsibilities) we are better equipped to assert our rightful places within our nations which will inevitably lead us to support the prosperity of our nations survival.

reviewed for this article articulated the respect given to women within their traditional (pre-contact) societies, the role of ceremony in provoking women to uncover what their “traditional roles and responsibilities” was missing from the literature. The reverence given to ceremony is apparent but the connection it has to shaping autonomous individuals which translates into what it means to live an autonomous life uninhibited by colonial thinking is not expressed thoroughly.

The social interactions that we engage in both privately and publicly become the basis for the institutionalization

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**Ceremony is where we connect to our ancestors, their teachings, and the way of life they left for us to practice. Ceremony demands understanding traditional knowledge as the tool we utilize to discover who we are and the place where we practice self-determination, governance, and our natural laws.**

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### **Indigenous Women and Self-Determination**

To fully grasp and understand the traditional roles and responsibilities of women within our respective Indigenous Nations it is critical to recognize the belief systems, Natural Laws, and governance structure(s) that traditionally guided the governance of our Nations. This understanding is conveyed and understood by many Indigenous women as they seek to understand their place within their own nations (Anderson 2000b; Anderson and Lawrence; Makokis; Monture-Angus 1995). Kim Anderson (2000a) explains the traditional political role of women, stating, “Native women had political authority because our nations recognized the value of having input from all members of society. The inclusion of women in decisions was critical for the security of a nation” (65). In order to delve further into this “inclusion of women” that Anderson states, it becomes paramount for women to seek out what their traditional roles were in order to uncover their sacredness, respect, and reverence within their Nation. It is thus important to shed light on what actions Indigenous women are taking to “seek out” their traditional roles in order to find out what their responsibilities are. By responsibilities, I am referring to the sacred positions and gender balance inherent in a governance structure honouring women in relation to their family, community, and nation.

Taiaiake Alfred (1999) states that Indigenous peoples generally have to understand their role within the Nation they were born into to fully understand what being autonomous from a “colonial mentality” means. This recognition of an internalized autonomy came to me as a result of experiencing ceremony, because through ceremony I realized what my role and responsibility is to the Nation that I have been born into. While many of the authors

of normative standards thus producing and (re)producing a set of societal norms, through the process of embodiment. The societal norms that are of interest to me in this discussion are those that relegate Indigenous women to marginal positions to the point where our voices become suppressed and oppressed in this “cycle of colonized-colonizer” as articulated by Leona Makokis. In her discussion of the historical legislation via government policies including—the *Royal Proclamation of 1763*, the *British North American Act of 1867*, the *Indian Act* to name a few—she shares how these policies continue to impact our current realities. Dawn Martin-Hill voices her concern with the oppressive state many Indigenous women find themselves in. She states, “The fragmentation of our cultures, beliefs and values as a result of colonialism has made our notions of tradition vulnerable to horizontal oppression—that is, those oppressed people who need to assume a sense of power and control do so by thwarting traditional beliefs” (108). While many Indigenous women encounter this oppressive form of “traditionalism,” it should also be noted that there are examples of communities that maintain traditional teachings, values, and beliefs that do not coincide with oppressive measures as Martin-Hill speaks about. Recognition of “thwarted” traditional practices and ceremonies that do not honour the role of women within their nation can occur through an integrated sense of self-worth and autonomy. Shauna Bruno reinforces this statement by emphasizing the need for “Aboriginal women to question how tradition is framed and in what context it is being used, in order to construct a positive lifestyle” (9).

Many Indigenous women continue to face circumstances of powerlessness and disempowerment, which is the sad and unfortunate legacy the road of colonialism has paved for Indigenous peoples. Uncovering the “the

collective memory loss” of the oppression that women encounter is paramount to reclaiming and uncovering the esteemed position of Indigenous women (Monture-Angus 1995: 238). Oklahoma Choctaw scholar, Devon Abbott-Mihesuah reinforces the need for understanding the importance of ceremony and spirituality in this process of reclaiming, when she states, “Many modern Native women leaders point to their tribal religions and traditions as inspiration and justification for their positions as leaders” (143). When our women and our men come to understand their place and role in the nation or community that they are responsible to, then our nations become fully revived (Monture-Angus 1995). Ceremonial life as expressed through Indigenous spirituality and culture must be looked at more closely to see how it guides Indigenous women in the work they do within their community to lead their individual communities to a place of an existence premised on Indigenous ways of knowing. This point brings me to the following question, how does ceremony become a focal and integral aspect of nehiyaw women guiding and moving their vision of autonomy forward within the Saddle Lake Cree Nation? Delving deeper into this question becomes important for mapping out potential strategies and actions of an autonomous nehiyaw existence guided by our Elder’s teachings of *iyiniw pahminsowin*.

### Contextualizing the Spiritual Element of Self-Determination

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by positive nehiyawak that live and model their life after the teachings of our nehiyawak ways, which has resulted in teaching me how we practice these within our life as part of the larger nehiyawak community we belong to. My community is the Saddle Lake Cree Nation. It is located approximately 150 km northeast of Edmonton and is recognized as one of the largest Cree nation communities in Canada. The nehiyaw ideological concept that best articulates self-determination is *iyiniw pahminsowin*. This is the Cree term that explains “how order and organization are given to the people” (Makokis), and it is foundational to the conceptual meanings we find in our teachings and structures of our nehiyawak ceremonies. This concept of how we understand *iyiniw pahminsowin* as a Cree framework for guiding our life is best articulated by a Cree female Elder interviewed by Leona Makokis::

...we are not individualistic and independent of each other, much less the Creator. We have been born into a social order that is based on sacred laws and teachings of responsibility to one another. Hence, we are interconnected and interdependent beings. At no time in our lives, are we ever alone. We each have to fulfill roles and responsibilities as a result of our birth into Cree society. (119)

The words conveyed by this Elder clearly demonstrate that a Cree interpretation of what “self-determination” is becomes intrinsically and intimately linked to one’s ability to take appropriate action to fully embody a person’s nehiyawak identity.

For many nehiyawak within my community, ceremony acts as the repository of our knowledge systems, the place where our knowledge is stored, learned, understood, and transferred to those who wish to seek out traditional ways of being (nehiyawak knowledge). Ceremony is where we connect to our ancestors, their teachings, and the way of life they left for us to practice. Ceremony demands understanding traditional knowledge as the tool we utilize to discover who we are and the place where we practice self-determination, governance, and our natural laws. Ceremony is the place where we discover the spiritual aspect of our being and it is the space where we understand by experiencing what a decolonized existence looks, feels and is like. One of the participants that I interviewed for my thesis research captured the importance of ceremony to our way of life. Vincent Steinhauer is a pipe holder, a sweat lodge holder, and a tribal college teacher who integrates Indigenous knowledge systems within the curriculum he teaches. He says:

*...in ceremony that’s where we put the method into practice. And we are people of practice. We have to practice. If we don’t practice then we don’t have it anymore. So we practice. And the more people that can get into it ... it’s like having a workout. The stronger we become. If we don’t work out then I don’t know what we’re becoming. So we talk about roles of people and we talk about self-determination. Self-determination is a funny thing too because self-determination is all about self-responsibility. What is your responsibility? Yet when you go to ceremony you give up your responsibility to a higher power.... You can plan to the best of your ability but once that ceremony starts the spirit takes over. And whatever happens, happens. Your responsibility is no longer there. But your responsibility IS there because you have a small part to play in that ceremony. If you don’t play that small part then that ceremony doesn’t happen. And it’s all about the collective.... It’s all about our nation when we come together in ceremonies. Sure there’s an ohnikaniw (the headman there), oskapewsak (helpers), the fire keepers, the door keepers, the pipe holders. But it’s everybody working together that makes that ceremony, what that ceremony is. Everybody. So if everyone has their own responsibility but yet they give up their responsibility so that everybody moves along ... that’s ceremony and that’s self-determination.*

Vincent notes that through integrating ceremony with self-determination we pass on our traditional cultural values inherent within our epistemological system. But it is within these sacred spaces that we learn and practice

what self-determination and governance mean. Ceremonies are thus important for our contemporary existence because they remind us of who we are, where we have come from, and what our connectedness means to our ancestors who provide the spiritual guidance to us in everything we do.

The impetus for this piece of writing stems from my own spiritual transformative experience(s) and seeing the profound strength that Indigenous women embody as they relate their own understandings of *iyiniw pahminsowin* through their relationship, connection, and involvement with ceremony. The purpose for uncovering the meaning of this term for Cree women is process-driven and found in personal learning and individual decolonization by living and practicing ceremonial teachings that explain our roles and responsibilities as women. By roles and responsibilities I am not referring to the euro-western gender discourse that conjures up notions of inequality, hierarchy, difference or power and how “gender” explicates this socially structured phenomenon (Kimmel). I am interested in the sacred positions that the Creator gave to us when we were created as humans and more specifically as women, and learning how the acts of uncovering these Creator-given roles help us to recover and reclaim a post-colonial identity found in seeking *iyiniw pahminsowin* through the spiritual realm of ceremony. I can speak abstractly on the significance of the women’s pipe teachings because it allows the spirit of the teachings to speak without breaching cultural protocol. They guide my every day action(s) and help me understand how my activity is and should continue to be regulated around these teachings. By learning the teachings of the women’s pipe I had a more clear understanding of my role as a woman. This inevitably led me to realize that by being born into Cree society we cannot do things by ourselves but our individual actions should be made for the betterment of the collective group. As women, it is our role and responsibility to nurture and prepare our children to understand the gift they have been born with so they can fulfill their purpose in their own lives because we are not here for ourselves, but we are here as spiritual beings on a human journey. Translating my transformative spiritual experience into action is upholding my responsibility as a nehiyaw *iskewew* and ultimately practicing self-determination.

### Unpacking our Spiritual Lodge: Knowing Who You Are and Where you Come From

For many nehiyawak, we derive our identity from the family, community, and nation we are born into. How we relate to each other is a fundamental component of how we organize and govern our lives, which inevitably shapes who we are and who we become. By “relate” I am referring to how we relate to “all of our relations” and this includes our human relations, animal relations, spiritual relations, and the intimate relationship we have to Mother Earth who is

our lifelong teacher in these unique kinship relations. In relating to each other, nehiyawak in my community will often ask the younger generation questions such as: where are you from? Who are your parents? And, who is your extended family? When I was younger I never quite understood the significance behind these personal questions but as I began to learn more about nehiyawak governance and social organization, I realized that we (nehiyawak) organize ourselves around our relationships to each other, to our families and how this becomes interconnected with our community. By relating to each other in this way we are able to establish a unique governance system based on kinship relations whereby, each person holds a unique piece of our community governance lodge together. This unique *nehiyaw* worldview, which is based on kinship relations, is best articulated by Makokis:

The Cree world view is intrinsically and extrinsically shaped by the members of the Cree society and their relationship to self, others, the environment, and the cosmos. It is considerate of all things that have been created and given to the Cree by the Creator. The Cree people have to completely understand the way of life given to them. In finding the spirituality of self, one also develops the bonds to nature. Human beings are of the natural world and are related to the animals, plants, and all of creation. It is a Cree belief that by observing the habits and characteristics of the animals, lessons are learned.

To understand the Cree worldview in its entirety, we are encouraged to seek out ceremony to help us learn about the connectedness we share with our non-human relations in order to fully grasp the gifts Creator has given to us on Mother Earth. It is in this phase of questioning in our lives that Elders tell us to seek out our “Truth” and to find the meaning of who we are and what our purpose on this earth life is. In “truth seeking” we are exposed to a broader interpretation of what is encompassed within a Cree worldview. During this process, we uncover the meaning of self-determination or known in Cree as *iyiniw pahminsowin*.<sup>1</sup>

### Who Am I?

The importance of why nehiyawak have spiritual names was conveyed to me by Veronica Morin, a female Elder present during the talking circle I held to collect research data for my Master’s thesis. She said:

*We’re all born with a spirit. And you have a spirit name. If you don’t you must get one; and have it tattooed so that you will never forget it (Laughter). But you also put it here (pointing to her heart) and you live with it. And that’s like having it tattooed within your heart. Your being, your way of thinking, that’s your guide. Your*

*spirit teaches you. All you have to do is ask. But that commitment is there. You committed yourself. Or your parents or your grandparents committed you already. When you had a name when you were born, you grew up with it, so now that is your guide, here in this life. This is the spirit, the name that you were given.*

Prior to this talking circle, I had not been taught *why* nehiyawak (Cree people) have spiritual names and the meaning behind *why* our parents, or in my case, my grandparents insisted on getting one for me and their other grandchildren. I remember sitting in a sweatlodge ceremony at a very young age with my grandmother not understanding the significance of what we were doing or why I had to be there. But, after hearing Veronica explain the importance of having a spiritual Cree name, it made sense. My grandmother was clearly exercising her role as a Cree woman and a grandmother by making sure her granddaughter knew who she was, knew where she came from, and knew what her responsibilities were and are to her people and community by giving me that spirit name which would act as my guide. Because my grandmother passed away when I was eight years old, I never had the opportunity to learn more from her. What I do remember is the legacy she left and the path that she and other Indigenous activists blazed during the 1970s for future generations of our people. I hold their passion and conviction for change close to my heart as it is the collective legacy of ancestral memories of my relatives that provide direction for me and other Indigenous peoples to continue to seek social justice so that we can truly live in relation to our homelands in the way our forefathers imagined us to.

When I recall my childhood and adolescent memories they are steeped with happy but confused recollections of what it meant to be Cree as I grew up. Up to the age of eight, I vividly remember spending a lot of time with *nookom* (my grandmother) Alice and *nimosom* (my grandfather) Vernon as their house was within walking distance from my parent's house. I remember watching my *nookom* sew, speak Cree, and make an effort to teach me about our culture, traditions, and way of life. Despite not having the opportunity to get to know *nookum* Alice in later years, her memory and legacy of rallying events of socio-political change has lived on through my generation of grandchildren as we seek out ways to bring forth strong grounded Indigenous voices that were evident in the 1970s group of political leaders. It is the memories passed on through stories, teachings, and ways of life that my family and other closely related relatives (both immediate and extended families) lived that enable me to move beyond the colonized identity that shaped my early adolescent years to the identity I currently embrace as I continue to seek out what it means to be a nehiyaw *iskwew*. When I think of self-determination I think of my grandparents and what they went through to raise their children (my father and his siblings) and the efforts they

made to teach their grandchildren about what it means to be a nehiyaw.

My story of Cree women and self-determination stems from the stories I have heard about my grandparents and what they did to make certain that our people were formally educated in the western sense but more importantly, their unwavering energy to incorporate a strong Cree identity in our education. One of the stories that resonates deeply with me is when I hear my aunt speak about how our local tribal college, Blue Quills First Nations, was taken over locally and was later operated by our own people. At the time of the takeover, in the 1970s, my grandparents were both involved at some level in this political endeavour. They had the foresight and vision of seeing our people formally educated in the western sense while infusing the educational experience of our people with nehiyaw ways of knowing. Their purpose was to ensure that future generations of students that walked through the doors of the college would know what it meant to be nehiyawak. The fundamental principles guiding the actions of our people initiating this takeover came from traditional Cree teachings of upholding the responsibility to consider the future of the next seven generations to come and to practice the teaching of *iyiniw pahminsowin*, whereby, appropriate actions were taken to regulate and organize their activity to consider the future of their families, communities and nation. One of the stories that I have heard from my aunt about my grandparent's involvement in this event is how one of the "priests" working at the college (which was a residential school) asked my grandfather, "How do you expect to run this school when you can't even read or write?" My grandfather responded, "Maybe I won't be the one running this school but my children and grandchildren will." These words speak volumes as they embody the spirit of what lied within the hearts and minds of my grandparent's belief that our people would take our rightful place in our homelands by educating our people with our language, teachings, and cultural way of life to ensure our survival within our territory as our forefathers envisioned.

My grandmother epitomized the strength and resilience that many Indigenous women embody because of her sheer willpower and determination to survive despite what colonial policy created to break their spirit. In my grandmother's case she was a survivor of the residential school system and used those horrific experiences to try to make change within her grandchildren's generation by ensuring we knew who we were, and instilling pride within us by teaching us about what it meant to be Cree. My grandmother made a conscious effort to teach her grandchildren our Cree culture and language because she knew the importance of having a strong foundation in our culture for the survival of our people and subsequent generations.

When my grandmother passed, everything changed for our family because she was no longer there to be the

rock that kept our family together both spiritually and culturally. During the 1970s Saddle Lake Cree Nation began to seek out cultural guidance and help from other nations to teach us how to live as nehiyawak. I have heard stories from people and Elders in my community that the “civilizing and residential school era” forced our people to practice our ceremonies underground and in some cases we lost our connection to our traditions. In efforts to revive and recover our nehiyawak ways of life some people in my community took it upon themselves to learn traditional ceremonies from their Indigenous brothers and sisters south of the border. My grandmother and her brothers sought the guidance from well-respected Ojibwe Elders and asked for help in teaching them about our cultural ways. My grandmother was one of the few people that took it upon herself to learn the ceremonies of another nation in an effort to bring back life to our people and community. In this process my grandmother and her brothers were re-introduced to ceremony and the Elders who were teaching them said that our Cree ways of living would be revealed to them in ceremony. These stories of resistance and cultural recovery live within me, my family, and my community.

The passing of my grandmother became the pivotal point in my life where I went from having a strong foundation of knowing what it meant to be a nehiyaw, to a confused state of being. It was my grandmother’s insistence on learning our nehiyawak ways that encouraged my parents to learn our ceremonies. So, when my grandmother passed on it impacted our family’s journey along this path, which in turn impacted my exposure to ceremony at a young age. My re-introduction to ceremony would come later in my adolescent years and its meaning would be taught to me in my early twenties as I began to search for my own nehiyawak identity in ceremony.

### **Journeying to Understand *Iyiniw Pahminsowin*: A Transformative Process**

I introduced myself in Cree at the beginning of this paper because it reminds me of who I am, where I come from, who I am accountable to, and the responsibilities I have in upholding certain teachings that have been passed on to me. I was born into a family of educators, ceremonialists, and socio-political activists. As a result, I was brought up and taught from a young age that certain laws guide my life and these laws are to be found in the journey that one undertakes to seek *nehiyaw pimatisiwin* (Cree journey/way of life) and its meanings. This paper should be read as a personal reflection of my journey in discovering what self-determination means to me as a nehiyaw *iskwew*.

It was not until taking a course with Dr. Jeff Corn tassel (Self-Determination and Indigenous Peoples in Canada) during my Master’s degree program that I really began to think of self-determination in a different light. Dr. Corn tassel asked us to find out what this term meant to us in

our own language, which forced us to seek this meaning from Elders or knowledge holders that come from the community or nation we belong to. Prior to this exercise I had most often associated self-determination with a legal, economic, political, or socio-cultural framework because much of the discourse on the subject is and has been written within this realm of understanding. This exercise encouraged me to seek an alternative understanding to articulate this principle and to look within myself, my family, and my nation to see how this concept is recognized and practiced within my community. The way that I have approached conceptualizing this paper has been to practice *iyiniw pahminsowin* (self-determination), found within our Indigenous ways of knowing. By this, I am referring to the knowledge framework that exists outside the euro-western system of knowledge that we have been socialized to think is the normative standard upon which all knowledge is derived.

Taiaiake Alfred’s (2005) most recent book *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* resonated deeply with me as I began to think of relating Indigenous pathways of self-determination to ceremony. His forthright criticism of the current state of Indigenous peoples and what needs to be done to reconnect and assert our rightful place within society made me reflect on my own personal journey and helped me connect self-determination to spirituality.

The root of the problem is that we are living through a spiritual crisis, a time of darkness that descended on our people when we became disconnected from our lands and from our traditional ways of life. We are divided amongst ourselves and confused in our own minds about who we are and what kind of life we should be living. (31)

These words and the ideas inherent within Alfred’s work speak to the importance of “building a social reality toward a restored spiritual foundation” and the connection this has to evoking a socio-cultural revolution that can aid Indigenous peoples and nations to move towards a contemporary anti-colonial social order (22). Connecting this idea about the need to spiritually revolutionize our people turned my attention to the important role that our women have in our families, societies, communities, and nations. I became interested in how Indigenous women’s spiritual transformative journey’s can aid in attaining an Indigenous-centered vision of how we can live in our homelands according to our own ways of being. Alfred’s work helped me theoretically conceptualize how self-determination can be explained within the spiritual realm as a way to seek out what is holistically natural to Indigenous peoples in an arena outside the political rights-based discourse framework which has overshadowed and diverted the path of what self-determination really is to many Indigenous people. Spirituality is central to Cree women’s lives and is important in helping us learn about

and practice self-determination. Spirituality practiced through ceremony moves our communities toward a nehiyawak vision of governance.

My own decolonized transformative process began as I sought out ceremony to help me understand who I am and what being a *nehiyaw iskwew* means. It is through ceremony that nehiyawak learn how to organize and live life by the traditional roles and responsibilities our ancestors formed and gave to us in hopes that we would protect, keep, and live authentic nehiyaw ways of life. Prior to walking this path, which is often referred to by Elders as “the sweetgrass

characteristics of the animals, lessons are learned” (87-88). Makokis states that “observing habits and characteristics of animals” helps make the connection to establishing and learning principles such as “integrity.” We learn integrity from those “beings” or animals that live their life according to their birthright because they live their entire lives as whatever animal they are, never straying from that path because they know how to survive as a bear, an ant, or a bird. Like the animals remaining true to their birthright, it is the responsibility of nehiyawak to seek out what it means to live a life premised on a nehiyawak existence

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**It is in ceremony that we begin to strip away the layers of colonialism that keep us bound to a colonized existence. Through ceremony we learn what our role and responsibility is to our people and it is this role that keeps us relationally accountable and on the path to living the “good life,” *miyo pimatisiwin*.**

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trail, or red road,” I recognized that my idea of what it meant to be Cree was shaped by the colonized existence I was socialized into. Living in a “colonized” state of mind made it difficult to attain truth because I was continuously justifying behaviours that do not resemble an authentic nehiyaw way of life (Alfred 1999; Memmi). This is why our Elders tell us to go to ceremony and learn the ways of the old people because it is in ceremony that we begin to strip away the layers of colonialism that keep us bound to a colonized existence. Through ceremony we learn what our role and responsibility is to our people and it is this role that keeps us relationally accountable and on the path of living the “good life,” *miyo pimatisiwin*.

I grew up in an environment where being nehiyaw was all around me through language and ceremony. But it was not until later in my life, as a young adult, that I began to wonder about the significance and meaning of the ceremonies I participated in. Up until the age of 23, I had only attended sweat lodge ceremonies on an irregular basis and even then I did not know their deeply-rooted nature and purpose. It was during a difficult time in my life that I really began to ask the hard questions such as: Who am I? What does it mean to be a nehiyaw? What is my purpose? *And*, what is my place within my family, tribe, community or nation? I began to ask my mother more about the annual “fast ceremony” she participated in and this later led me to participate in “the fast” as well.

This act of questioning and seeking deep “self-reflection” is articulated by Makokis who states, “The Cree people have to completely understand the way of life given to them. In finding the spirituality of self, one also develops the bonds to nature. Human beings are of the natural world and are related to the animals, plants, and all of creation. It is a Cree belief that by observing the habits and

and to honour that birthright if we are to remain truthful to who we are.

This path to seeking out *nehiyaw pimatisiwin* (Cree journey/way of life) would help me understand what it means to be a nehiyaw and inevitably lead me to the “fast ceremony,” which introduced me to what living a nehiyaw way of life encompassed. The “fast ceremony” is a ceremony where one seeks truth. By truth I mean our own personal truth that comes from asking questions about yourself, the world around you, and how you relate to that world. When you are put out on the land without food or water for four days and four nights your senses become heightened to an unimaginable level. All the layers of what make you “human” are stripped from you as you become immersed in the natural world, and it is here in this spiritual domain that balance and harmony become realized. The mental or intellectual aspect of what makes us question logic or reason ceases because you have entered a spiritual state whereby your communication is with yourself and with your relations (the land, the animals, the birds, and everything else that makes up the natural and spiritual space you occupy). The revelations that come out of this experience helped me understand that our life is guided by something much higher than any legal or political norm created to dictate the way we think or behave. It was here that my spirit took over and I realized just how simple yet profoundly complex nature’s law is. It is in this space and place that our mind suspends all inhibitions and we embark on what Alfred (2005) refers to as a “spiritual transformation.” We must take this spiritual journey to release ourselves from the colonial shackles that keep our minds, hearts, and bodies bound to living lives that are completely disconnected from our Indigenous value systems, teachings, and principles. Nehiyawak and other Indigenous peoples must take these sentiments seriously

as the hearts of our nations are at stake. The survival of our nations should be the impetus for us to restore our ways of being and living as nehiyawak.

When I made the commitment to embark on the journey of “truth seeking” my entire life changed. I began to learn how one lives the good life, or *miyo pimatisiwin*, in Cree. Truth is powerful when you abide by natural laws and guide your life according to the path that our ancestors laid for us. When you are put out on the land that nourishes us, gives us life, and teaches us to survive without food or water you begin to see the life you lead in a different light. You make the connection between the actions you exhibit and personal accountability to your birthright. It was during my first fast that I realized that the life I was living prior to fasting was a disguise of authenticity, a mask that led me to take the easy road and just “get by.” Through “fasting” I was able to confront my inner most fears and learn how important it is to live my life following the nehiyawak teachings, particularly because our way of life is at risk. Some Elders refer to this as “walking our talk”: we are not only talking the talk, but we are in fact going down the road of “walking or living our talk.” It is vital that Indigenous people seek out ceremony—the place that traditional teachings are found—in an effort to preserve and maintain our way of life, to live an authentic Indigenous life for the health and prosperity of our nations.

### **Uncovering Our Stories and Transforming them into Teachings of Empowerment**

As women, the significance of transforming our colonial selves into our authentic nehiyaw *iskwewak* identities is paramount to the survival of our nations. Because we give birth to and raise the children we bring into this “earth life” existence, it is vital that we know who we are as nehiyawak so we can transfer and pass on those teachings to raise our children grounded with laws, principles, and teachings found in our ways of knowing so that they too discover and practice a nehiyawak vision of self-determination. The participant voices I have chosen to include in this paper for the purpose of articulating the power ceremony has on helping women embody their nehiyawak roles and responsibilities learned in their ceremonial experiences are kisapwew, Veronica, Mary and mihko kihew iskwew. Kisapwew is a young Cree mother of children who attended a tribal college and was raised by her grandmother and exposed to ceremony at a young age. Veronica is a Cree Elder who was raised in and around ceremony her entire life and is knowledgeable of Cree women’s teachings and she holds ceremonial bundles relating to these. Mary is a middle-aged Cree woman who found her connection to ceremony while attending a tribal college during her Bachelor of Social Work degree and now implements the teachings she’s received into her home and work life. Mihko kihew iskwew went to residential school and

found ceremony after residential school and is now a tribal college education/administrator who emphasizes the importance of including nehiyawak philosophy within the college she works in.

*...for me, ceremony is really important in our culture, for our people. It teaches so much about who we are and that's where being a nehiyaw iskwew is; my grandmother has taught me how to be, who I am as a nehiyaw iskwew. She's taught me how to love, she's taught me how to be kind and how to share and how to be honest. And, that's what I'm trying to teach my kids. (kisapwew)*

*...what the culture and the ceremony has given me, is my life back ... and now I want to give that back to the kids that I work with. (Mary)*

*My first thought ... is about my daughter because she just came back home. And last weekend she was in a ceremony and she was in a community that only spoke Cree. She came home and said, “Mom I went to a ceremony today and it felt good to be in the sweat and all these people only spoke Cree, but I also felt like I was deaf because I couldn't understand what they were saying. I really am starting to believe that you can't have ceremony without language because of the depth of understanding and nor can you have language without ceremony.” So that's been a teaching for me and I think when we talk about roles and responsibilities as a parent I failed. I did not provide her with the language, nor did I provide it to my son. Now it's almost at the point where I can't make her learn but I will be there when she wants to learn. I will be there to support her in her learning and we started as soon as she arrived home. I can hear her, in terms of how desperate she is to understand what people are saying. As a parent I failed to do that (teach them the language) and I really would like to make up for that in some way. I guess that's why I'm really involved in the language now. (mihko kihew iskwew)*

*For a woman it's twice as hard but within the spiritual circle the grandmothers help us. The grandmothers prepare our child before it's born. They prepared us before we were born. As women we have great responsibility. Three quarters of the work that needs to be done is supposed to be done by women. Because the man is physically stronger the grandmothers said they would keep the man going. We were supposed to be like this in the circle—in our home fires—taking care of our children we can't be running off doing other things because the child that the creator and our mother loaned us is not ours. We have to give that child direction and guidance. (Veronica)*

Women hold a prominent place within our communities because we give life and socialize our children

into who they are. For this reason, it's imperative that we reclaim our position within our governance circle and claim our rightful place in our nations to take on those important roles and responsibilities of "giving direction and guidance" to the children that become the future of our nation.

### Recognizing the Sacred Role of Nehiyawak Women

The introduction of patriarchy through western thought and belief systems has made it difficult for contemporary Indigenous women to be honoured for their important role in contributing to the survival of our nations. In hearing the stories and honouring the voices of the participants in this study it was possible to experience the revered respect given to women in our Cree society. In nehiyawak society, women are seen as life givers that have the power to bring and create life. The teachings that come from this sacred role are found in our creation stories, our pipe teachings, and other ceremonial teachings that come to us when we make the journey to seek and practice *nehiyaw pimatisiwin*. Elders who understand the impact colonialism has had on women's roles reference the spiritual strength and power nehiyaw *iskwewak* have within our ceremonies. An example of Cree women's revered roles within our ceremonies is when women are asked to be present in order for the ceremony to be complete. In our fasting ceremony, for example, women occupy half of the teepee and contribute to this ceremony by preparing the sacred feast food that is offered to our ancestors. Every evening during the fast ceremony a feast is held. The purpose of this feast is to offer food to our ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers, seeking their help in guiding the ceremony so it is conducted in a good way. In the feast, the male ceremony helpers, referred to as *oskapeyosak* (helpers) serve food to all those who are present for the ceremony. In ceremonies, these *oskapeyosak* serve everyone, including the women and children. They also take guidance from the female ceremonial holders present to help them learn the protocol of being an *oskapeyos* (helper) to the ceremony. The roles and responsibilities given to Cree women within ceremony are important because they reflect the value placed on women within our governance structure. The purpose of this paper was to bring to life the stories and teachings that give Cree women the strength and power to overcome the legacy of colonialism and see the power in our sacred role(s) as women. By uncovering our own nehiyawak epistemological process(es), this article highlights the value we place on our own ideological frameworks that are capable of deconstructing colonial mentalities. By reclaiming our sacred roles as nehiyaw *iskwewak* it is possible to decolonize and revive a governance structure that reflects a respectful gender balance and honours the power and strength women have in giving life and sustaining our nations.

### Final Thoughts

Indigenous women must re-assert and take back our rightful place within our nations so that we may assist in the healing, transforming, and strengthening of our people as they set out on that path of finding themselves so we become the thriving, powerful nations that existed prior to colonial imperialist agendas. When we begin to think about our responsibilities as women as holding the socio-spiritual power to shape and determine the outcome of how a nation functions, the importance of women's roles becomes heightened. Both men and women within Indigenous nations and governance circles must unlearn the psychological oppression we have internalized through years of colonization and take on the journey to de-colonize hurt, pain, confusion, and anger that lay within these layers of our contemporary identities. This becomes possible when we are truthful and honest with ourselves about the lives we lead and how they align with our traditional teachings held within ceremonial frameworks. Our lives are guided by deep-rooted principles found in the systems of knowledge our ancestors left for us to unwrap in the sacred bundles they kept protected from euro-western intrusion. We must begin to think of women's issues as our nation's issues because it is our women that give life to the children that become a part of the nation, and it is the women that raise, socialize, and teach these children who grow up to contribute to the daily governance operations in each of our communities and nations. This line of thinking is affirmed by Jeannette Armstrong who states, "In traditional Aboriginal society, it was women who shaped the thinking of all its members in a loving, nurturing atmosphere within the base family unit. In such societies, the earliest instruments of governance and law to ensure social order came from quality mothering of children" (9). It is the ideological deduction of self-determination from the discourse level to the personal level where ceremonial life begins to make sense in pursuing agendas of autonomy.

*Wahpimaskwas (Janice Makokis) is a proud Cree Woman from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation located in northeastern Alberta. She sees herself as a servant to her people and Indigenous peoples in general, by participating in activities that help advance struggles of self-determination and Indigenous governance within Turtle Island. Currently, Janice is studying law at the University of Ottawa. She is thankful to her family for teaching her to live as a nehiyaw (Cree person), to her community, to Indigenous knowledge holders who hold sacred teachings in trust for those who wish to learn and to the Indigenous scholars who have helped shape and nurture her critical Indigenous thinking skills.*

<sup>1</sup>Taken from Leona Makokis's unpublished dissertation entitled, *Teachings from Cree Elders: A Grounded Theory in Indigenous Leadership*. "Iyiniw pahminsowin is the Cree

term that describes how order and organization were given to the people" (129). Skywoman, a female Elder interviewed for Makokis's research elaborates further on this concept by explaining the Cree meaning of the words used to explain self-government and the concept known as self-determination:

"In defining self-government we cannot use the word 'tipeymisowin' because we can never *tipeymisonaw wikac* (be totally independent of everything). *Tipeyta* is the root word, which means 'to own', *sonaw* means 'ourselves,' and *wikac* means 'never.' Literally translated it means 'we can never own ourselves.' Because, who was born here by himself/herself? Nobody. We all are born to families, to parents. Those parents were loaned *kiyanaw* [us], the Creator loaned the two people the child. We were all loaned children, we do not own them. *Pahminsowin*, now that is different, this is where I can regulate my activity. The root word *pahmiyta* translates to 'be in control or to take care of.' I work for myself."

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*Judy Anderson, "Coyote's Trick" (installation image facing West/North), multimedia, 2007.*



*Judy Anderson, Detail, "Coyote's Song," handmade paper, family photos, blueberries, sage, dirt, muskeg, bark and wooden stand, 38 x 21", 2007.*

*Cree artist Judy Anderson, from Gordon First Nations, SK, works with multi-media including painting, installation, sound and video. Much of her work is based upon her family, family issues and Aboriginal Spirituality. She holds a BA in Native Studies, and a BFA from the University of Saskatchewan, as well as, an MFA from the University of Regina. She is an Assistant Professor at the First Nations University of Canada in the Indian Fine Arts department where she teaches both Studio Arts and Indian Art History.*