

# Carrying the Pipe

## Maliseet Elder, Healer, and Teacher Imelda Perley

MAURA HANRAHAN

*Imelda Perley est une aînée Maliseet dont le travail se concentre sur le langage comme un remède. Son travail lui a permis de faire connaître le leadership des femmes autochtones durant la dernière période colonialiste. L'approche de Perley est profondément enracinée dans les traditions Maliseet, et quoiqu'elle soit inspirée par des ressources extérieures, elle travaille à l'intérieur des contraintes rencontrées par toutes les femmes autochtones.*

Present-day New Brunswick and Maine are home to the Maliseet,<sup>1</sup> Algonkian speakers who call themselves *Welustuk*, “people of the beautiful river,” a reference to the Saint John River. In the post-invasion period as they lost their hunting lands and river access, the Maliseet were concentrated on five reserves: Oromocto, Fredericton, Kingsclear, Woodstock, and Tobique. There were 4659 registered Maliseet in 1996.<sup>2</sup> The Maliseet face many of the problems other Indigenous peoples try to cope with (Hamilton and Owston), including high suicide and accident rates, and widespread unemployment and poverty. However, as in most Indigenous communities, there are many people working and innovating on these and other issues. Many of these leaders are women (Laronde; Anderson and Lawrence) and one of them is Imelda Perley, *Opolahsomuwehs* (Moon of the Whirling Wind), of Tobique, New Brunswick.

Like many Indigenous women leaders, Imelda is not paid for most of her “work” (quotation marks hers). She is the volunteer co-founder of the *Wolastoqey* Language and Culture Centre, located in Tobique and at St. Mary's First Nation. The Centre runs a long list of programs, including Family Harmony Weekends, an anti-violence initiative incorporating the ceremonial and cultural practices. Imelda's nineteen-year-old son committed suicide last year and she and her husband, David Perley (who is running for a band council position this year), hope to establish an anti-suicide program. Her paid work includes teaching language and culture at the University of New Brunswick and the University of Maine at Houlton.

Imelda advises Indigenous nations to give priority to language revival, maintenance, and preservation, promoting language in every aspect of community life. She says that each nation should have a language policy to protect language rights.

Besides reflecting her own resilience and strength, Imelda Perley's work and her approach say a great deal about Indigenous women's ways of analyzing health and healing. For Imelda, violence, addiction, and sickness are community, not individual, problems, rooted in losses that are multiple, multi-generational, and collective. In Imelda's work, there is much adaptation and compromise, some of it quite creative. Such an approach is necessary, for Imelda is a Fourth World woman living and working in a colonized setting. This, of course, frames and limits her agency, despite her deeply held beliefs, remarkable personal strength, and optimism. In this, her experience reflects that of Indigenous women leaders all over Canada and beyond.<sup>3</sup> I spoke to Imelda, a Maliseet Elder, just after she had finished a four-day fast with her neighbours, the Mi'kmaq of Big Cove. Imelda and the others fasted and danced from dawn until dusk to free their communities from violence and addictions, reflecting the beliefs that energy is shared and that making sacrifices can lead to community healing.

I met Imelda at a gathering of Indigenous women in Winnipeg sponsored by the Native Women's Association of Canada. We came from all across Canada to identify and define concepts of Indigenous health and the factors that contribute to Indigenous health. I am an urban Newfoundland woman of English, Irish, French and Mi'kmaq ancestry in her early forties. I have spent much of my life and career learning about and from my Indigenous roots—and those of others as I work on land claims/rights, policy analysis, and policy development for Mi'kmaq, Innu, Inuit, and other Indigenous communities and organizations. More than ritual, more than songs and books, I find that listening to female Elders like Imelda

connects me to that which is Indigenous, in me and in all of us. Being with female Elders brings me back into relationship with my own deceased aunts who unassumedly practiced Mi'kmaq medicine and healthways. It also brings me into relationship with the very land I come from. Because I am introverted and formally educated, I learn by listening and writing. Imelda, too, is formally educated but her focus is the spoken word and she likes the more traditional format of speaking to an attentive listener; hence, this transcribed discussion between the two of us about Imelda's work.

*Indigenous women, men, children, Elders, and communities. How have you used language in promoting healing?*

Our language is our ancestral breath. We can't lose that. Language is who we are and who we will be; it is the centre of my learning and teaching and a gift from creation.

I do a lot of plays as a way of teaching, involving the whole community. Our plays have messages. We had animal characters who observed a treaty being signed and they talked about what the treaties meant, what rights and responsibilities the treaties recognized. Now, the treaties were written in the English language, not ours. So that's

---

**Our language is our ancestral breath.  
We can't lose that. Language is who we are and who we  
will be; it is the centre of my learning and teaching  
and a gift from creation.**

---

*There are so many challenges facing Indigenous people—land claims, the effects of residential schools, language loss, health issues—multiple, collective losses. It seems everything is uphill at times with little progress. How do you identify what to tackle, or which issue or problem to focus on?*

My family warns me I'm doing too much, always traveling, always working. They're always telling me this. But if you are a pipe carrier for the community, you have already given yourself to the community.

My focus is language. As a language carrier, it is my duty to transmit the gift of language to others. We've lost so many (*Wolastoqey*/Maliseet) speakers. There are so many people who don't know who they are and where they came from because of this. Let me give you an example of what language loss means. The Maliseet word for the "moon" is "Grandmother." When we call Grandmother "the moon" in English, we are objectifying her and this separates us from her—we lose that connection to her.

There has never been a time I didn't use language. One woman came to me in a crisis. Her husband was drinking and holding a gun; he wanted to kill himself. The woman wanted me to go to him and I said to her, "He doesn't know me, so how can I help?" She said, "No, he doesn't know you, but he's heard of you." There was some power in this. So I went to him, bringing my eagle feather, and I saw the gun. I knew he was a (Maliseet) speaker so I told him we didn't want to lose another speaker, it's too important, and we have lost so many. I asked him how the language would be passed on to his children without him because his wife didn't speak Maliseet. He said he hadn't thought of it that way. Then he put the gun down and we smudged. My work is about going where I know I can make a difference.

*I know that you see language as healing in itself, as medicine—in fact, you see it as very central to the healing of*

a problem and it might have been different if they were in our language. So that's in the play, too. I want the kids to know their language because they will one day be responsible for the treaties. The treaties were signed with the Maliseet nation but without our language; we won't be a nation anymore.

In 1994, I asked if I could teach a Maliseet first-language course in New Brunswick high schools. At first, the parents said, "What's the use? It's better to learn French to get a good job." Then I did home visits and I told the parents the kids have to know who they are so they can learn better. We have to teach each student as a whole person. Even if their mom is non-native, they're still Maliseet and they have to know what that means. That's how they become whole. I remember one kid got kicked out of school but he still did a project for my class; the language meant something to him.

*"Culture," including language, of course, is often put forward as a solution or a method of healing. But there is also the argument from Australia and elsewhere (Brady) that cultural practices alone cannot heal because Indigenous people remain in oppressive political and economic contexts, for example, in Fourth World situations. What are your thoughts on this?*

Right now our politics are separate from our culture. Everything changed after contact (with Europeans); for instance, we began to hunt with guns and then our whole hunting concepts and methodology changed. I grew up in a completely Maliseet-speaking milieu and now I am teaching Maliseet as a second language once a week for three hours. Men are now responsible for politics and women are now responsible for culture. We have been so badly affected by assimilation policies. Sharing is missing now.

We are trying to find a way to integrate culture and politics. When people speak at band council meetings, they should hold an eagle feather. They should avoid profan-

ity and speak with respect to Elders, with no yelling. We should open our meetings with prayers. All these things are traditional; they are part of who we are as Maliseet.

The hierarchy of current politics is foreign to us. There is power at the top and things are enforced, not the result of consensus. There is a lot of big spending and borrowing but, you know, there is a way of living without money. Some are being rewarded by this system, by the way our communities are administered, and they don't want to change it. On our band council of 12, there are four who think like me.

we have seven language nests in New Brunswick with language education from the womb to beyond the grave. Mothers learn how to talk to their baby in Maliseet before the baby is born.

I invited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to our community because they have a program that enables Aboriginal students to become linguists and they're trying to save languages through texts. We need to leave written texts for the generations that will come after us. Three MIT staff came here to Tobique and spent a week with our Elders and had daily talking circles in Maliseet. MIT

---

**Indigenous women are the first teachers and there is something gentle about their teachings. Indigenous women maintain that connection to the earth, our land, our ancestors.... Women need our language to stay connected to what keeps us alive.**

---

Culture can heal our community and our governments; it builds self-esteem. I think of the kindergarten kids I have given spirit names. I had to find a way to make our culture appealing to them; I didn't want it to be like just another class. One boy was misbehaving and I gave him the spirit name of wolf and I told him how the wolf behaves. I gave each kid whatever spirit name worked for them. Now these kids are in middle school, they're about 13, and I'm taking five of them on a fast in August. I'm asking them not to take drugs or drink. I don't want them confused about who they are or about how to handle the struggles in their lives. I am very hopeful about this.

There were some kids getting into drinking and I had an Elder give a sweat lodge on a Tuesday night. They had to be sober for four days prior to that. Some of them thought they couldn't do it; they thought four days was too long and it included the weekend, which was deliberate on my part. They had to learn to be clean; they had to learn that discipline for their adult lives. Sixteen out of the 23 kids I invited made it to the sweat. That was in 1995 and six of them have never touched a drop of alcohol to this day. I think our leadership can be healed, too.

*I'm struck by how you have been so successful in bringing outside resources to bear on your goals. You've built or supported various projects successfully by inviting well-resourced institutions into your community and you've worked hard at making alliances that can assist the Maliseet and other Indigenous people.*

Some of it is small. I got a small grant from the New Brunswick Arts Council a few years ago to collect stories of the little people and shamans. My goal is to develop these stories into curriculum.

In 1997, I visited the Maori in New Zealand and learned a lot about language nests, sites in which there is complete immersion in the Indigenous language. Now

wanted me to do my Masters degree there but I didn't want to leave my Elders. Meanwhile, they are trying to recruit Aboriginal people to do their undergraduate degrees with MIT paying for their studies. They're also giving us ideas on how to expedite the preservation of our stories.

I have good connections (internationally). For example, the Indigenous Language Institute out of Santa Fe, New Mexico has been very generous to us, donating clocks and watches and other items in our language. They have given us DVDs aimed at helping with language retention.

I also joined the NDP provincially and federally. I realized that non-Aboriginal MPPs and MPs are making decisions on behalf of Maliseet and other Indigenous people. I asked the NDP candidates to put up campaign signs in Maliseet and they did. The candidates met with our youth and Elders in talking circles. (Federal NDP leader) Jack Layton came to our territory and he was respectful of where he was. I was impressed by this.

I campaigned for Allison Brewer (New Brunswick NDP leader), who has worked with the Inuit. I invited her to our community for a circle and she listened. She said she had no idea how difficult things are in our community; I felt her truth, honesty, and sincerity.

Not all politicians are like Allison. When (Liberal) Andy Scott was Minister of Indian Affairs, he came to a debate at the University of New Brunswick and said, "I know a lot about Aboriginal people." I waited, I was just an observer, but then I spoke and I said to him, "You know a lot about Aboriginal *policies* because you write them." I told him, "Our logs are going to build your summer homes while we live in prefab houses, which is not our traditional way." I invited him to spend one night in a single mother's home in Tobique and to drink our water and eat our fish because we can't do it, but I never heard from him afterwards.

I've never been politically inclined and I normally wouldn't vote in a provincial or federal election. But I see how I have to become involved to protect the rights of my grandchildren. Maybe I'll run for office one day but first I want to concentrate on healing my community.

*I've found that Indigenous women's work often gets to the heart of the matter. Women may not occupy as many official leadership positions as men, as you say, but I see so many Indigenous women leaders doing their work in other capacities. Do you see women's leadership roles changing? What do Indigenous women bring to leadership roles?*

Clan mothers were always important to us, and that is a tradition we have to bring back. Clan mothers were responsible for the well-being of the whole community. The purpose of ceremonies was to support the clan mothers in their duties. We've revived the ceremonies to promote the spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being of our women. And we do this for the sake of our families, our communities, and our nations.

Indigenous women are the first teachers and there is something gentle about their teachings. Indigenous women maintain that connection to the earth, our land, our ancestors. Traditionally, we buried the placenta of every baby to keep connected. Today I encourage women to do this. We have revived puberty ceremonies for girls—"Honouring Grandmother Moon." Women need our language to stay connected to what keeps us alive and to be supported in our work.

The sacred pipe teaches us about balance. One of the teachings is that I carry a male spirit within me, too. Everyone has both spirits and each spirit has to be respected and nurtured. This gets forgotten.

If women and Elders played more of a role in official politics, there would be more healing and then better decisions. We would be returning to our roots and honouring them. We would be sharing and becoming whole Maliseet people. That's not happening yet.

*I wonder what motivates you, and what inspires you to do this work? Have your motivations or inspirations changed over the years?*

My grandmother was my biggest influence. She raised me. For her, being a grandmother was a profession. She took care of the sick and the Elders; she made blankets for new babies; she worked at the church and she gardened, always giving food away to whoever needed it. For Grade Seven, I went to an off-reserve school and the teacher asked all the students what we wanted to be when we grew up. I said I wanted to be a grandmother. Well, they all laughed. When I told my grandmother, she said, "They just don't understand." I understood her quite well and I wanted to be of service myself.

Another influence on me is Rita Joe (the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw poet). Reading her poems was a turning point for me. Rita acknowledges the influences on her and she is now giving back, sharing the things that have shaped her.

Of course, I continue to be inspired by the people who

want to learn the Maliseet language. I tell them that our language is endangered, yes, but it is very much alive on the *ktahqomiq* (land) where we survive, it is our *npisunol* (medicine) that heals us. You know, it is the songs yet to be sung and in the generations yet to be born. As I tell you these things, I feel that generations of women in my past, present, and future are guiding my responses.

*Maura Hanrahan, Ph.D., is an independent anthropologist who works with Indigenous people's organizations in several provinces and at the national level. A Newfoundlander of English, Irish, French, and Mi'kmaq ancestry, Maura is a member of the Sip'kop Mi'kmaq Band, St. Alban's, Newfoundland. Her web site is [www.maurahanrahan.com](http://www.maurahanrahan.com)*

<sup>1</sup>Formerly spelled "Malecite."

<sup>2</sup>1996 Census, Statistics Canada, Government of Canada. Note also that the Maliseet are not part of the Mi'kmaq nation, as is sometimes wrongly assumed in the popular press and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup>For a better understanding of these issues, see Anderson and Lawrence as well as Laronde.

## References

- Anderson, K., and B. Lawrence, eds. *Strong Women Studies: Native Vision and Community Survival*. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003.
- Bailey, A. G. *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures, 1504-1700*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.
- Blair, S. *The Wolastoqiyik Ajemseg: the People of the Beautiful River at Jamseq*. Fredericton: New Brunswick Culture and Sport Secretariat, Heritage Branch, 2003.
- Brady, M. and K. Palmer. *Alcohol in the Outbreak: Two Studies of Drinking*. Canberra: Australian National University, North Australia Research Unit, 1984.
- Hamilton, W. D. and R. D. Owston. *School in Crisis: the Tobique Education Evaluation Report*. Fredericton, NB: np.1982.
- Harrison, M. R. P. *An Evaluative Ethno-history Bibliography of the Malecite Indians*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974.
- Kelm, M-E. and L. Townsend, eds. *In the Days of our Grandmothers: A Reader in Aboriginal Women's History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Laronde, S., ed. *Sky Woman: Indigenous Women Who Have Shaped, Moved or Inspired Us*. Penticton: Theytus Books, 2005.
- McGee, H. F., ed. *The Native Peoples of Atlantic Canada: A History of Ethnic Interaction*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.
- Wallis, W. D. and R. S. Wallis. *Anthropological Series 40, 148*. Canada Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa, 1957.