



Turtle Lodge Report
Land-Based Ojibwe Teachings

MALS

August 11–14, 2018



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Background

One of the areas that the Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy (MALS) has incorporated into their work plan is the “Aboriginal Languages / Land-based Teacher Education.” [2] To gather data related to this topic, MALS instructed their Aboriginal Languages Consultant to attend a 4-day Ojibwe land-based camp in Sagkeeng First Nation, Manitoba.

Introduction

This report documents data collected from the Aboriginal Languages Consultant’s attendance at the Turtle Lodge Ojibwe land-based program in Sagkeeng (lake) First Nation, Manitoba. The program was run by Elder Dave Courchene Jr., other Ojibwe Elder men and women, and many helpers.

Rationale

There is a need to locate current relevant research to assist the MALS organization to uncover research related to their goal of identifying and defining land-based teacher education programs. The purpose of this research is to assist Manitoba Aboriginal Languages teachers to augment their aboriginal language programs.

Methodology

The Aboriginal Languages Consultant attended the Turtle Lodge Ojibwe land-based program and participated in the four-day program. She took notes and asked questions. Data collected from this event were combined to formulate a description of the Turtle Lodge Ojibwe land-based program. The handouts that were distributed at the program are in Appendices 1–4.

What is the Turtle Lodge?

The Turtle Lodge is located in a country setting on the Sagkeeng (lake) First Nation. The main building is shaped like a large turtle with a smaller turtle on its roof. According to Elder Dave Courchene Jr., the Turtle Lodge is based on a vision he had when he fasted on the land to seek his purpose in life to help his people. However, in his vision he was told that he was to bring all races together, not just his people. His vision was to bring peace and love for one another amongst all peoples. [4]

The Turtle Lodge is also known as the Anishinaabe Mikinack Kinamakamik, which translates to Ojibwe Turtle Place of Learning. As cited in their mission statement, the Turtle Lodge “is an Indigenous place open to all people, for reconnecting to the earth and sharing ancient Indigenous knowledge, based on the Seven Teachings.” [3] The Seven Teachings are respect, love, honesty, truth, bravery, courage and wisdom.

Turtle Lodge Ojibwe Land-Based Program

Day 1: August 11, 2018

When we arrived at the Turtle Lodge, a sacred iskode (fire) was burning. The sacred iskode was lit on the first day of gathering and burned for four days and four nights. According to Elder Dave Courchene Jr., the sacred fire has always been important to the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe people) because it is the central doorway for the spirit to enter. It is how Anishinaabe people communicate with the spirit world. Along with the lighting of the sacred iskode, asaama (tobacco) is offered to the fire to say miigwech (thank you) to the spirits.

On day 1 of the Aboriginal Languages Consultant's visit to the Turtle lodge, the program consisted of an Ojibwe opening prayer, introductions, and completion of the participant input form (see Appendix 4). Whenever Ojibwe people gather, it is customary to open the gathering with a prayer by an Elder in the Ojibwe language. The leaders were Elder Dave Courchene Jr., and other Elders as well as several of his helpers. The participants were adults and children from various communities. There was also a group of youth from a First Nation in Manitoba.

Day 2: August 12, 2018

On the second day, we were taught to say a prayer in Ojibwe (see Appendix 3). We were instructed to say the Ojibwe prayer 4 times because it would help us to remember it. Next, Elder Dave Courchene Jr. and helpers prepared their pipes for smoking. During this time, two children took around a basket so participants could place asaama (tobacco) into it. The participants were asked to say their individual prayers while the pipes were being smoked. The pipes were then smoked by Dave Courchene Jr. and the other pipe carriers. The pipe has the power to call forth the spirit to come near us.

Afterwards, Elder Dave Courchene Jr. shared teachings in the Ojibwe language and translated the teachings into English. Some of his lessons included the following:

- when the pipe is smoked, the spirit is evoked.
- the spirit is the most important part of the four quadrants of the medicine wheel.
- the sacred fire is the doorway to the spirit world.

Following the Elder's wise words, the other Elders sang three sacred songs in the Ojibwe language, accompanied by a drum. The songs were the *Morning* song, the *Rattle* song and the *Prophecy* song.

The *Morning* song is called Wabunong (East). Long ago, Ojibwe people would rise before the giizis (sun). They would sing a song to give thanks to the sun for rising. The Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe people) knew that without the giizis, there would be no life.

The *Rattle* song says that in the time before human beings were created, there was darkness. Out of the darkness came the first sound. It was the sound of the rattle. When we shake the rattle, we remember our creation.

The *Prophecy* song is sung to remind us that the Anishinaabe prophesied that the future would bring us hope and inspiration. It is foretold that these visions of hope and inspiration will help guide our people “to a greater understanding of life and our purpose as human beings in bringing love, respect, peace, beauty and harmony to the world.” [1] (p. 38)

After these songs, the Water Teaching was presented by female Elders. The Water Teaching was preceded by the singing of the sacred *Water* song (nibi nagamowin).

Thereafter, more teachings were given by the Elders, such as:

- a person needs to know her/his purpose in life.
- Mother Earth needs to be taken care of and treated in a good way.
- people need to acknowledge the sacredness of the spirit and the land.

This part of the program was concluded with the participants learning to make a tobacco pouch. The pouches were collected in baskets by 2 children, to be offered by the Helper to the Sacred Fire.

We were then taught the Ojibwe words provided in a handout (see Appendices 1 and 2).

Once we finished learning the Ojibwe words, speaker Darren Courchene presented on the topic of Indigenous languages. He stated that there are 6000 languages spoken on the earth today. There are 70 languages on Turtle Island (North America). Maybe 3 of these languages will survive into the future. The languages that may survive are Inuit, Cree and Ojibwe. Cree has 34,000 speakers and Ojibwe has 27,000 speakers.

Darren also said if we don't use our gifts such as language, we get sick. He made the following statements:

- language is part of our identity.
- language gives us a sense of belonging.

Darren also stated that if we don't have language, we lose our way. He gave a brief history of the original migration of the Ojibwe people to different parts of the world. On this migration, there were three major language groups:

1. Ojibwe nowan, which includes Ojibwa, Ojibway, Ojibwe, Chippewa, Saulteaux and Nakawe.
2. Odaawaamowin.
3. Boodewaadomiimowin, which includes Potawatomi, Pottawatomie and Bodewadmimwen.

These groups settled our migration. As our population grew, we were sent out west. Sagkeeng was our first stop during this second migration. Then we went to the Interlake and the Swan Lake areas.

Darren acknowledged that language differs in accordance with the way the language is being used. These differences can be categorized as follows:

1. Mamawimowin: Everyday language.
2. Anami 'emowin: Prayer language.
3. Ojiiaskomowin: Ceremonial language.
4. Manidookemowin: Language of our Spirit. The Spirit language of our dreams and visions: no one needs to teach you this language, it's inside of you.

Elder Dave Courchene Jr. spoke about a time when the Ojibwe people would talk in Ojibwe to the plants, and the plants would talk back to the Ojibwe people. He felt that we need to get back to that; we need to reconnect with nature. We can learn so much from nature. For example, the strawberry represents the heart, and the branches around it represent the family.

Darren described an Ojibwe language prophecy that declared that "A person will dream the Ojibwe language back into being, and there is hope to revive the language." He also said that "the Creator had a vision that a child would witness the bringing back of the language in a dream." That child would bring the language back even if it's only one word.

Next Darren told us a Creation story. According to the Anishinaabe, the Sky woman Nokomis made humanity. Her first-born was a woman. Her twin was a boy. He was the last one to be put on earth.

Then Darren recounted a Nanabozo (an Ojibwe spirit, trickster and culture hero) tale. He described how Nanabozo started the Great Flood. Nanabozo didn't listen to the animals who said, "You are over-hunting us." As a result, he lost his brother the wolf. He retaliated by doing something to them and then said, "I won." He was told "No, you didn't." The story concluded with "the people who survived the Great Flood are the ones who went to the mountain."

After the tale, Darren made three comments: that language can change, and if it doesn't change it can become stagnant; that Anishinaabe means a human being who was lowered to the earth; and that Ohwe means "the Ojibwe came from the mountain."

Darren ended his presentation by making a few more remarks about the Ojibwe language. He shared that, according to Elder Tobasonakwut Kinew from Onigaming First Nation, Ontario, talking the Ojibwe language in each doorway of the Madoodookan (Sweat Lodge) is unique. There are four doorways: in each doorway, the Ojibwe language is spoken a little differently.

Next, Darren shared that “there are thirteen different ways of understanding the Ojibwe language,” and “the highest of Ojibwe fluent speakers can create new Ojibwe terminology or new words.”

Following Darren’s presentation about the Ojibwe language, Elder Dave Courchene Jr. spoke about the Ojibwe language. He said language is in the spirit; it’s there, we just have to access it, and he said an Elder once told him that a child will dream the language, then speak it and share it with others.

Elder Dave Courchene Jr. was also told by an Elder that as long as we can dream, we can speak our language. Languages never die. In our dreams, we speak our language, we just don’t remember it. The language is in our spirit.

We were given a teaching about the tawagun (drum). The drum is the sound of our heartbeat: the heartbeat of our mother and the heartbeat of mother earth. [1] (p. 37) When songs are sung with the drum, it touches our human spirit and also summons our spirit guides during ceremony. The drum connects our human hearts, which inspires us to be a peaceful society.

We were taught the Aambe haaw bindige aya aa (*Calling in*) song. We listened to the women sing the Zhaawong Ikwe (*Women’s Honour* song).

Afterward, Elder Dave Courchene Jr. shared that an Elder told him the “spirit” is most important. *The Journey of the Spirit of the Red Man* says the following about the spirit:

Where the Creator sits is in the heart of all humanity. The heart is the centre of our being and the Creator sits in each of us. In the centre of the continent, we connect with our own centre, our heart, to the Creator who sits in the centre of our spirit. [1] (p. 4)

We were given lessons about where the medicines come from and what medicines the Mishomis (grandfather) and Nokomis (grandmother) are responsible for. The Mishomis gives us the animal world. The grandfather is also named the giizis (sun). From the animal world, we get medicines, such as feathers from the birds. We get medicine from snakes, and the two- and four-legged animals. For example, bear grease from the bear is a medicine. The Mishomis Giizis (grandfather sun) also gives us vitamin D.

Additionally, the Mishomis gives us the rock and mineral world. In the Sweat Lodge, the Mishomis sits in the Ningaabi’anong (West). The Mishomis is responsible for going to the mountains to gather medicine like copper. Copper is used for helping people with arthritis.

The Nokomis gives us the plant medicine world. The Nokomis sits in the Zhaawanong (South) in the Sweat Lodge. Some of the medicines from her world are

- asema (tobacco)
- wingashk (sweetgrass)

- wike (ratroot)
- bashkode jiiibikik (sage)
- giizikaan dagoons (cedar)
- aszaadi (poplar)
- wiigwass (birch)

Sage is used as a medicine by first boiling its stems to make a tea-like liquid. It is used as a medicine for cramps.

The four medicines, asema (tobacco), wingashk (sweetgrass), bashkode jiiibikik (sage), and giizikaan dagoons (cedar) are also used for smudging.

In addition to providing us with the plant medicine world, the Nokomis gives us the tree world. The medicines come from the willow, cedar, aszaadi (poplar) and wiigwass (birch) trees. The willow is honor medicine. The cedar is protection medicine. The poplar tree gives the gift of life. The birch tree teaches us about life, and there are male and female birch trees.

The Nokomis gives us healing energy when we walk on aki (earth). We need to take time to walk on aki or we get sick.

Nokomis Dibiki Giizis (grandmother moon) moves the water so it's not stagnant and makes it drinkable for us.

This day concluded with speaker Darren sharing that, according to the Ojibwe, the Star Nation and the Rainbow have teachings. Each star has a teaching, and the stars are our clock. The birds know when to fly south.

The Rainbow gives us medicine. The Rainbow gives us emotions like happiness and joy.

Day 3: August 13, 2018

On Monday morning, August 13, 2018, we sat in a circle in the Turtle Lodge. The day started with a prayer, then Elder Dave Courchene Jr. and helpers prepared their pipes for smoking. Traditional teacher Coco Ray Stevenson sang a pipe song with a hand drum as the pipes were being smoked.

Elder Florence Paynter sang a song and later explained how the song she sang told of a time when the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) had to go underground with their ceremonies.

Then she did a prayer for the water. According to the Ojibwe teachings, the water is a gift from the Creator. The water provides life, and without it there would be no life. The water has healing powers. Water is used to give birth. The body is 70% water, and the blood is 90% water. We need to drink water to live. Without water we would die. The plants and animals need water, as does Mother Earth. We also use the water for cleansing our bodies. It is used for doing laundry, washing dishes, making tea and soup. We also use water for

recreation like swimming. We need water for tears so we can cry and release pain. In the Ojibwe culture, the women are the water carriers: they are responsible for taking care of the water.

After the teaching about the water, Elder Mary Maytwashing sang the nibi nagamowin (*Water song*).

Following the nibi nagamowin, Elder Robert Maytwashing taught us about the medicine wheel and the Sweat Lodge. He described the medicine wheel as having four directions, and within those four directions are four races. The races are Anishinaabe, Asian, Black and White. His teaching concurred with *The Journey of the Spirit of the Red Man* (p. 15), which explains that in the medicine wheel, the Anishinaabe are part of the East direction and were given the gift of understanding the spirit and our sacred relationship to the earth. The Asian people are part of the South direction and were given the gift of understanding emotions and air. The Black people are part of the West direction and were given the understanding of body and water, and the White people are part of the North direction and were given the gift of mind and fire.

Elder Robert also explained that mind and heart need to work together. As people we cannot only use our mind but have to use our hearts as well.

He said that each direction in the medicine wheel contains one of the four elements. The East comprises the element of Earth. The South includes air. The West holds the element of water. The North encompasses the element of fire.

Before discussing the Sweat Lodge, Elder Robert explained the importance of fire. He acknowledged that fire is used at Anishinaabe ceremonies because it is the gateway to the spirit world.

Elder Robert then pointed out that the Sweat Lodge is made in the shape of a mother's womb. The purpose of the Sweat Lodge is to cleanse and heal oneself. He said suffering comes from hurts we are carrying.

He also said that it is dark in the Sweat Lodge because it is dark when entering the spirit world.

In the afternoon, we made ribbon skirts and participated in a Sweat Lodge.

Day 4: August 14, 2018

On Tuesday, August 14, 2020, the day opened with a prayer. Then there was a song and blessing of the water.

Elder Dave Courchene spoke about the four grandmothers who said they would be responsible for four waters. One grandmother said she would be responsible for ice water. The second grandmother said she would be responsible for the lakes and rivers. The third

grandmother said she would be responsible for the salted water. The fourth grandmother said she would look after the birth water.

In the afternoon, Darren Courchene showed us an Ojibwe game on his laptop, titled "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" This was another way to practise speaking the Ojibwe language.

Afterwards, the children and youth were invited to participate in a Healing Ceremony conducted by Elder's Florence Paynter and Mary Maytwayashing. The children were prayed for and an eagle fan was gently patted on them for healing.

Following the Healing Ceremony, Coco Ray Stevenson sang the miigwech (*Thank You*) song. Participation certificates were handed out before lunch.

Here are more teachings from Elder Dave Courchene. He said long ago the Native people had a relationship with the land, the trees and the animals. We were able to talk to the plants and the plants would talk back to us. The tree is alive: put your tobacco down and talk to it, it will talk back to you.

Elder Dave Courchene also suggested to go into the forest, put your tobacco down and ask the eagle to help you. Or ask the turtle to help you. He said talk to the tree, plants and animals, they will talk back to you. We need to get back to that. That's what we used to do. He said you are never alone, even though you may feel that way.

Elder Dave Courchene also said turn to the Spirit and ask for help during hard times. He said traditional dance shows your relationship with Spirit. Songs also show your relationship with Spirit. Song and dance uplift the Spirit.

Coco Ray Stevenson said singing helps him through hard times.

Elder Dave Courchene said, "Everybody needs love."

Conclusion

The land-based Ojibwe teachings that took place at the Turtle Lodge in Sagkeeng First Nation illustrate a new way of learning. They encompass past teachings from the land and nature under the guidance of traditional Elders. At the Turtle Lodge, students had the opportunity to observe and interact with nature. The Elders provided cultural teachings on Mother Earth, Father Sky, Grandfather Sun, and Grandmother Moon. They also taught the students how to speak and pray in Ojibwe. Participants were informed by the Elders that the Ojibwe people have their own creation story. Furthermore, that everything has a spirit.

Students were made aware of Creator's gift of the four elements. They include water, air, earth and fire. The Elders gave teachings about the plants, trees, birds, and animals. Participants were shown how to access nourishment and medicine from mother earth and how to respect and take care of her. Students were given the opportunity to take part in traditional ceremonies such as smudging, singing, drumming and attending a Sweat Lodge.

This way of learning is more meaningful and personal for me. It is my belief that I will retain the knowledge and teachings I received for a long time to come. My learning at the Turtle Lodge has taught me that land-based teachings can't be acquired through conventional textbook methods. One cannot fully understand something unless they've experienced it.

References

- [1] Bone. H., Copenace. S., Courchene. D., et al. *The Journey of the Spirit of the Red Man* (2012). USA: Trafford Publishing.
- [2] *Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy Work Plan* (2015). Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy.
- [3] Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/pg/theturtlelodge/about>.
- [4] Retrieved from *The Turtle Lodge with Elder Dave Courchene* (2002). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I22DiiRNIAE>.

Appendices

1. Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness: Kay-Manidokaymowin (Ceremonial Language).
2. Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness: Anishinaabe Kagiizhiitaagoziwin (To ask in a humble way).
3. Turtle Lodge ALI Participant Input Form (Beginning).
4. Turtle Lodge International Centre for Indigenous Education and Wellness: Anishinaabe Prayer.