

Ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif opîkiskwîwin êḡwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin ôta Sâḡitawak: To Bring to Life the Michif Language and Indigenous Ways of Life in Île à la Crosse

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Abstract

This paper will discuss ways of uplifting the Michif language and Indigenous ways of life in Île à la Crosse. Language and culture in Indigenous ways of life are extremely important and if we do not have language, then we most often lose our culture as well. The Michif language has been on a continuous decline in our community because our youth are not being taught the language at home. Culture is not as prevalent as it once was. I discuss my upbringing and various cultural activities that are being taught in our schools to bring our language and culture to life again.

Keywords: Michif, language, Métis culture, land-based learning, decolonization, relationships



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Language and culture are essential to the Indigenous way of life. Connection to land and animals through language, culture, values, and beliefs are vital to Indigenous people. Willie Ermine (1998) stated, “Loss of language creates the danger of loss of identity” (p. 21). It is clear to see that when a language is lost or in danger of being lost, loss of culture is also at risk. Culture and language come hand in hand, they inform one another. Culture and language come hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. Kirkness (1998) affirmed that,

The importance of language as an expression of a culture, of who we are as a people must be upheld by each individual, each family, each community, and each nation. Language is the mind, spirit, and soul of a people. Every effort must be made to protect, preserve, promote, and practice our Aboriginal languages. We must gather into the circle all the knowledge and wisdom we possess to ensure their survival. The documentation has been done, and what is left to be done is action. The last generation of fluent speakers are with us. Without their help the work toward the survival of the languages will be more difficult. (p. 104)

This is why ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif opîkiskwîwin êḡwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin ôta Sâḡitawak is so crucial.¹ My generation has a huge responsibility ta-kocîtahk ta-ohpinamahk opîkiskwîwina ôta Sâḡitawak.² The younger generation in Île à la Crosse is not learning the Michif language because the language is not being passed down to them in their homes. This is of no fault to the parents, there are many reasons for this occurrence. One of the main reasons is that of colonization. The reason I say my generation has this huge responsibility is because we are the generation that needs to learn the language from our Elders in order to pass it down to our children. Once we learn the language, it is our responsibility to pass the language down to our children, grandchildren, and families. Through this paper, I will discuss how land is our best teacher and can provide students the content needed to learn about our Métis culture and language. Interacting with our natural environments allows Michif to be taught and learned with more ease. There is a sense of safeness and calm when connecting to the land and speaking the Michif language. This paper is based on experiences with Elders and âsônamekêwin³—the teachings passed down to me by nohkom êḡwa nimoshôm êḡwa nôcâpânak.⁴

Situating Myself

Erin Laliberte nisihkâson, Desjarlais nistam nî-apacihtân. Sâḡitawahk ohci niya. êḡota ôma î-kî-nihtâwikiyân. ninâpîm, Austin isihkâsô. nitânis Mikaela êḡwa niḡosis Lucas isihkâsôwak. nohkom êḡwa nimoshôm, Ovide êḡwa Irene Desjarlais nikî-ohpikihikwak. tâpitâw nimoshôm êḡwa nohkom kî-nehiyawîwak. apisis poḡo Michif êḡwa nehiyawêwin ni-kî-pîkiskwân, âta nikî instohtamân n'dayamowin. tâpitâw kihtâyak kî-pî-kîhokîwak wâwîs nôcâpânak Francois Desjarlais êḡwa Napoleon êḡwa Marguerite Johnson.

My name is Erin Laliberte, originally I used the name Desjarlais. I am from Île à la Crosse. This is where I was raised. My husband's name is Austin. My daughter's name is Mikaela and my son's name is Lucas. My grandmother and my grandfather, Ovide and Irene Desjarlais, raised me. My grandparents always spoke Michif and Cree in our home. I only speak a little Michif and Cree but I understand the language. There were Elders present in our home regularly, the most frequent being my great-grandparents Francois Desjarlais and Napoleon and Marguerite Johnson.

I have lived in this community all my life, except for leaving to attend university. I used to travel to different communities with nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm to visit their friends, and in doing so, I would always have kids my age to play with. I was always jealous of the children because they could speak their Indigenous language, and I could not, especially when we went to Minahik Wâskahîkanihk.⁵ I could understand the children speaking in Cree, but I would only respond in English. It had never occurred to me at that young age to try and speak my language. I always felt inferior, like I did not belong to the Indigenous world because I did not speak Michif.

When I began my teaching career in Île à la Crosse, I was told that I was to teach Michif because it was known that I understood the language. Because of my feelings of inferiority, I did not feel right in teaching my language. As time went on and I was mentored by other teachers in our school, those feelings of inferiority dissipated. It was when I began my first Master's of Education journey in 2012 that I started to feel more confident in teaching the Michif language. On that educational journey, I began to accept who I was as a Métis woman and a Michif language learner; it just took time. I am proud of who I am and of my upbringing, and all that my family has taught me.

In beginning my own process of decolonizing, I have become immersed in the Michif language so that when I speak in English, I am rethinking my words in Michif and I then repeat the English sentence in the Michif language. nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm spoke to me in Michif and Cree all of the time so I understand both languages, and what I did not understand, I was never afraid to ask what it meant. Now that I am older, I am trying to speak Michif more often and am beginning to teach my children at home. nimâmâ Barb eḡwa nipâpâ Ted⁶ are helping me now that nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm î-naḡitaskîcik.⁷

Learning From the Land

Being on the land always gives me a sense of peace. There is a connection to land that is tough to explain. In being raised by nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm, we spent a lot of time out on the land, at our family's or another family member's cabin, on the land picking berries, or collecting medicines. I feel like I was fortunate in the way that I was raised. I still remember being a little girl and exploring nature, being in awe of the land and creatures around me. nohkom instilled pride in our language and culture at a young age. I learned from nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm through watching and listening. Learning cultural activities was never forced upon me; it was always my choice to learn. Angelina Weenie (2020) wrote, "In Cree, the term for passing on the teachings is *āsōnamekēwin*. I am passing on what I have learned from *kēhte-ayak* and knowledge keepers and through lived experience, about land-based education (p. 4). When thinking about my childhood, I am taken back to a rich learning environment filled with Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. These are the teachings that my grandparents passed down to me.

I am taken back to the times when nohkom and I would make la ḡalêt⁸ together and how she would show me how to mix it and knead it just right. I think of how proud I was when she would put my little la ḡalêt on display for the family to praise. I also think of when the whole family would go out in the spring to collect waskwayâpoy⁹ and then make waskway sîwâpoy.¹⁰ During this time, we were surrounded by our extended family. I vividly remember how everybody had a job to make the waskway sîwâpoy, and everyone was always busy. This activity takes a lot of patience, and as a child, I did not have much of that. What kept my attention was being out on the land with my cousins, enjoying and exploring nature. Weenie (2020) stated, "Our families were self-sufficient, and I was learning how to interact with land-based activities. My mother and

grandmother were sharing cultural practices with me in a significant way" (p. 4). I agree with this statement because Indigenous people learn how to be self-sufficient when out on the land using Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. This is what my grandparents taught me, and I will continue to pass on that legacy.

âsonamekêwin gifted to me by my grandparents is something that I love sharing with my students. Land-based activities such as plucking and preparing ducks, skinning and cooking rabbits, and making bannock on a stick, leave more of an impact on my students. Students keep the memory of being out on the land with them because it is something meaningful and it is a connection to who we are as Indigenous people. At our schools in Sâkıtawak,¹¹ we hold cultural days at certain times of the year. Students are given the opportunity to participate in cultural activities that are relevant to the season. Elders, being a part of the cultural days on the land and speaking Michif, make these days more meaningful to the students. They make wonderful connections with the Elders, and the knowledge that is shared by the Elder is more sacred to the students. Shawn Wilson (2008) stated,

The importance of relationships, or the relationality of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology, was stressed by many people who talked with me about this topic. Several stated that this relational way of being was at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous. (p. 80)

This statement resonates with me because relationships are who we are as Indigenous people. Relationships with each other, relationships with the land around us, and relationships with our spirituality are the foundation of Indigeneity.

I am decolonizing my practice by teaching my students the Michif language and Métis culture as I know it. By doing this, I am fighting for what I believe in, which is revitalizing our Michif language and encouraging a traditional Métis way of life. I teach my students aspects of their culture that they may not have known before, such as taking them out to make connections with the land and collecting waskwayâpoy and then making waskway sîwâpoy, picking berries and medicines, preparing rabbits and ducks. Students may not have been taught these practices by their parents or grandparents due to the legacy of colonialism. I also think of the wonderful ways of knowing and living in nature that I was brought up around, that nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm taught me. Through another act of decolonizing, I am teaching my students this knowledge. I am also teaching my children what nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm taught me, teaching them things about our culture that were passed down to me. In doing so, I am teaching precisely the way nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm taught me. I fully believe that all of my life experiences are helping me become a more culturally responsive educator.

Storytelling

Storytelling plays a massive role in Indigenous research and also everyday life as an Indigenous person. In all reality, everything is a story that people have created. Elders are such gifted storytellers, and when they tell stories, one takes what one needs from those stories even if one feels they are irrelevant at the time. The moral of these stories may be necessary for the future, and you can think back on the teaching from stories once listened too. Herman Michell (2009) affirmed that, "Building relationships with *Khîtyâk (the old ones)* is the first step when gathering local knowledge. Cree people are gifted in diverse ways. We possess different forms of traditional knowledge and skills" (p. 69). Storytelling is just one example of how teachers can teach our students about their history and culture. Sharing cultural stories through language is more

beneficial than sharing in English. Topics for storytelling that teachers could teach students about are the stories of *Wisahkecahk*,¹² stories that teach a lesson, also using storyboards and felt boards, stories that have been passed down from our *câpânak*¹³ and grandparents. The story of how *Île à la Crosse* got its name is one example of what can be taught to children. One could teach this by using storyboards or felt boards and using stick figures to tell and show the story.

There are many variations to story of the way *Île à la Crosse* got its name but *nôcâpân*¹⁴ Nap Johnson's story is the one that I remember being told as a child. He was interviewed by Michael Tymchak in October, 1975 for the Our Legacy Research Project. A portion of *nôcâpân* Nap's interview transcript is as follows:

N: They said that this manager that was there, Fort Black...that's how they come to call that Fort Black...I guess they make a place where they got buildings in here and they put sticks around the Fort. Yes, I guess that's why they named...and another thing, this Mission Point here, we are over here now, this new town, Mission's over there and then there's an island here what they call...*Ile-à*...they used to play ball there, they call "lacrosse." So, "Ile" is "island" in French and then this is how they got this name of "*Ile-à-la-Crosse*" here.

M: From the Indian people who came to play lacrosse there?

N: Lacrosse here on this island, yes, so that's why they call this.

M: And that was actually just a little island off...

N: Yes, a good-sized island...nice flat ground you know. (Tymchak, 1975)

Nap explained how Indigenous people played lacrosse on an island that is visible from *Île à la Crosse*, now the island being spoken of is called Big Island. There were a lot of French settlers here at that time, he explains that "*Île*" means island in French, and that is how *Île à la Crosse* got its name, the island where lacrosse was played.

nohkom eḡwa nimoshôm were wonderful storytellers, they painted out their stories so well that you felt like you were a part of their journeys. *nohkom* received her gift of storytelling from her father, my *câpân* Napoleon Johnson. When I was a little girl, I would sit and listen to him tell stories of his life and Indigenous legends and was captivated. He was a very animated storyteller and I use his gift of storytelling when I teach my students. I utilize storytelling as much as I can in my classroom, stories that are relevant to our area; *Sâḡitawak* is very rich in heritage and culture.

Land-Based Learning and Identity

As an educator, I teach within the conventional Western school system. I teach what is given to me through the Saskatchewan curriculum, which is designed through a colonial lens. Throughout this curriculum and pedagogy, land-based learning is hardly noticeable. If teachers want students to learn Indigenous ways of living in nature and the Michif language, including land-based learning and language is the responsibility of the teacher. Simpson (2014) stated,

Not one time has an Elder ever told me to go to school to learn Indigenous Knowledge. Not one time has an Elder told me to go and get a degree so that I can pass Indigenous Knowledge down to my children. Yet, we place tremendous pressure on our youth to gain western academic credentials. (p. 14)

My grandparents encouraged me to get a Western education while growing up and as Simpson (2014) stated, a lot of pressure was put on me to succeed in Western academia, so I in turn set the same expectation for my children. This pressure, perhaps, stems from being so accustomed to colonial beliefs that have been forced upon us, Indigenous people feel the need to overachieve within their system.

Although there is pressure to achieve in Western academia, there is equally as much pressure to reclaim Indigenous ways of living in nature. The need to take back what was taken from our great-grandparents and grandparents through the residential school era. Simpson (2014) wrote,

My experience of education, from kindergarten to graduate school, was one of coping with someone else's agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my well being as a kwezens, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence. (p. 6)

This was my reality; the traditional knowledge that I had in being a Métis woman was dismissed and invalidated. What I learned about Indigenous history only came in university, and even then was all surface level.

Colonialism and the after-effects from residential school play a large part in the disconnection of Indigenous peoples to their language and culture. Wildcat et al. (2014) stressed, "Settler-colonialism has functioned, in part, by deploying institutions of western education to undermine Indigenous intellectual development through cultural assimilation and the violent separation of Indigenous peoples from our sources of knowledge and strength—the land" (p. II). The residential school era was a disturbing part of Canada's history from which Indigenous people still suffer. The racism that was produced in those schools is still alive and visible today. There is a disconnection between Indigenous people and the land and language because of the residential school era. This is why many people do not know their language and culture. There is a sense of being afraid to practice Indigenous ways of knowing because, for many, it was not allowed and was practically erased from their memory.

During a land-based immersion course in July 2021, Elder Mary Ruelling, a Dene Elder from La Loche said, "There is a balance between the land and animals. A mutual respect." This statement resonated with me because all Indigenous stories discuss how we need to respect all living things. We give tobacco or a prayer for what we take from Mother Earth to show our thanks. The respect between the land and animals is an example for us to show that kind of respect when out on the land, being in nature. From her research Okemaw (2021) relayed what an Anishinaabe language teacher explained: "that [the Indigenous knowledge system] IKS is embedded within the ancestral language...and ... Indigenous people 'are gifted and born with IKS'" (p. 78). These two statements made so much sense to me. There are things that, as Indigenous people, we just know. Cultural things that to us are just second nature because they are embedded in our ancestral language and our way of thinking. Being out on the land is natural, and I believe it has to do with the mutual respect for all living things that Elder Mary had discussed during her presentation.

To reclaim our language and cultural practices, we need to go back and visit with Elders and take back what is rightfully ours—the land. Wildcat et al. (2014) stated, "Land-based education, in resurging and sustaining Indigenous life and knowledge, acts in direct contestation to settler colonialism and its drive to eliminate Indigenous life and Indigenous claims to land" (p. III). Our ability to live on the land and for the land to sustain us is a reclamation of our Indigenous

ways of knowing. Our relationship with the land and the respect that Indigenous people show for the land and animals is one of great responsibility.

As people are beginning to decolonize their lifestyles and reclaim their Indigenous ways of living in nature, I have noticed that many families are getting back to Indigenous ways of life, living on the land and providing a cultural lifestyle for their families. Within our schools at Sâḱitawak, we have begun to provide land-based education while also incorporating our Saskatchewan curriculum requirements through the land-based activities we teach. Our elementary school and high school share a school cabin that is about a half-hour out of Sâḱitawak called Amiskowîsti.¹⁵ We also have an outdoor kitchen on our elementary school grounds. These two examples of places we can do some land-based learning activities, although anywhere outdoors in our beautiful community would provide land-based knowledge. Our schools also share a school greenhouse, and we have begun to take our students there to teach them about gardening for sustenance. We, as educators, are trying to provide the best of both worlds for our students.

Within our schools, the traditional cultural activities that we show students are rabbit snaring, ice fishing, and how to clean and prepare ducks, just to name a few. While out on the land doing these cultural activities, we have an Elder and helpers to show the students how to do these activities. The Elder and helpers usually speak continually in the Michif language, which is very important for our students to hear. They need to be able to be in the moment culturally and in the moment with the language. Simpson (2014) declared, "The land must one again *become* the pedagogy" (p. 14). I wholeheartedly agree with this statement. We must reclaim and restore our Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. We need to take back what was once forcefully taken from us.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have discussed land-based learning and ways in which ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif pîkiskwîwin êḱwa nehîyâw pimâtisiwin. The process of reclaiming our Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature and also reclaiming our language will take time and effort, but it is something that our community of Sâḱitawak will benefit greatly from. Of course, there are some aspects of cultural life and nehîyâw pimâtisiwin¹⁶ that have been left behind or forgotten such as living on the trapline, it does not mean that we cannot reconnect with those ways of life and teach them to future generations so that they will no longer be forgotten. This is not to say that the act of trapping is forgotten or not a way of life anymore, it just means that the act of living out on the trapline does not occur, in my knowledge, anymore. Okemaw (2021) stated, "Reconstructing these knowledges and the ancestral languages will take a concerted effort on the part of parents, teachers, communities, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments" (p.79). It is achievable but requires all stakeholders to be committed to the process, no matter how long it takes.

Endnotes

¹ To bring to life the Michif language and Indigenous ways of life in Île à la Crosse.

² To try and bring our language to life here in Île à la Crosse.

³ The passing down of teachings.

⁴ My grandmother and my grandfather and my great-grandparents.

⁵ Pine House Lake

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- ⁶ My mom Barb and my dad Ted
 - ⁷ My grandmother and my grandfather have left this earth.
 - ⁸ Bannock
 - ⁹ Birch tree sap
 - ¹⁰ Birch tree syrup
 - ¹¹ Île à la Crosse
 - ¹² A Cree culture hero. A legendary figure.
 - ¹³ Great grandparents.
 - ¹⁴ My Great grandfather
 - ¹⁵ Beaver lodge
 - ¹⁶ Indigenous way of life

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