

Traditional Ecological Knowledge: An Anishnabe Woman's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of recent literature is combined with the author's life experience to produce a personal yet academically supported reflection on the current state of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) research in Canada as it relates to Aboriginal women. Issues around Western scientific attempts to quantify and document what is essentially a way of life are discussed. Examples of Aboriginal women's efforts to carry on their traditional roles in the face of increasing research pressure are briefly presented.

RÉSUMÉ

L'analyse de littérature récente est combinée avec l'expérience de vie de l'auteure pour produire une réflexion personnelle quoiqu'appuyée académiquement sur le présent état de la recherche sur la connaissance écologique traditionnelle au Canada en ce qui a trait aux femmes autochtones. Des questions sur les essais scientifiques occidentaux pour essayer de quantifier et de documenter ce qui est essentiellement une façon de vivre sont discutés. Des exemples d'efforts de femmes autochtones pour continuer avec leurs rôles traditionnels face à une pression croissante à faire de la recherche sont présentés brièvement.

INTRODUCTION

*There is no way to quantify a way of life,
only a way to live it.*

Winona LaDuke (1999, 132)

For me, Winona LaDuke's words capture the fundamental dichotomy at the heart of current controversy in the field of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in Canada: namely, the vast and ongoing separation between the academic "experts" who study TEK and TEK issues, and the Aboriginal people who actually live according to TEK teachings. My goal in this paper is to discuss this separation between the knowledge holders and the so-called "experts," and to do so from my own perspective as an Aboriginal woman who has a window into each of these disparate worlds. As an Anishnabe from Wiigwaaskinga (Birch Island), on the Whitefish River First Nation in Ontario, and as a PhD holder and Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto, I struggle almost daily with issues around the possibility (or perhaps impossibility), of reconciling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives in fields such as TEK. This paper explains some of the thinking behind my efforts to understand these issues more fully.

ABORIGINAL VS WESTERN SCIENTIFIC VIEWS OF TEK

Aboriginal and Western scientific world views differ to the extent that simply translating the Western-derived concept of TEK into Aboriginal language and ways of understanding has proven virtually impossible to achieve. When attempting to compare Aboriginal and Western ways of seeing and relating to various issues, simple translation of words is insufficient at best. For a non-Aboriginal person to understand those ideas which in Aboriginal world view might most closely resemble "traditional ecological knowledge," for example, a more detailed explanation of the Aboriginal concepts is required.

Writer Winona Laduke, who is also an Anishnabe woman, struggles repeatedly with these and other issues. In her book, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), she describes the Aboriginal concept of "Minobimaatisiwin," meaning "the good life," involving revival, rebirth and renewal. Minobimaatisiwin is the "lifeway" that has sustained Anishnabe nations for thousands of years, and will continue to do so, despite the colossal injustices of the past and present. LaDuke (1999, 127) adds that it is the "culturally and spiritually based way in which Indigenous peoples relate to

their ecosystem." Although Minobimaatisiwin can be seen as an Aboriginal representation of TEK, there is a fundamental concept that must be recognized and understood before issues of how to use it or reconcile it with Western science can be addressed. This is that, in order for Minobimaatisiwin to be useful, it must be *lived*. It cannot be passed on through simple studying or memorizing of facts as per the Western scientific system. From an Aboriginal perspective, if you are not living the good life, then you are not doing TEK. Minobimaatisiwin comes from the Creator; it is not made up by academics.

In the Western academic sense, TEK refers to the body of environmental or ecological knowledge that Indigenous people have that has sustained them over thousands of years (Berkes 1999; Johnson 1992; Lewis 1993; Nakashima 1993; WCED 1987). The term TEK itself is a concept that was coined in the early 1980s by academics to describe the knowledge held by Indigenous people relating to the environment. Conceived of by Western academics, TEK research continues to be driven largely by non-Aboriginal interests and those who are considered to be experts in the field are most likely to be non-Aboriginal as well (Nadasday 1999). Although Indigenous ecological or environmental knowledge has long been of interest to academics (and often considered in areas of study such as ethnobotany or ethnoscience), it was not until the recognition of the environmental crisis and the realization that Western science alone could not solve this problem that "alternative" approaches were sought (Berkes 1999; Knudtson and Suzuki 1992; Mander 1991). It was suggested that those cultures that were sustainable for thousands of years might have something to say about cultural and environmental sustainability (Clarkson et al. 1992). Berkes (1999, 17) notes that the popularity of TEK has much to do with a "presence of dedicated scholars producing not only academic material but also feeding information into the international policy circles." Johnson (1992) adds that the rise (and increasing recognition) of Indigenous rights is a major factor as well.

Working in the mainstream TEK field in Canada today primarily involves "studying" and "researching" this knowledge. The process requires the knowledge to be "decontextualized," meaning that the approach and methods are geared to

extracting knowledge from the holder and the holder's context, and applying it elsewhere (Brubacher and McGregor 1998). This process, which occurs not only in Canada but around the world, is not conducted in the best interests of the Aboriginal people concerned (Agrawal 2002; Nakata 2002), and raises a multitude of moral, ethical and even legal issues (WIPO 2000). It also fails to recognize that from an Aboriginal perspective, Minobimaatisiwin is so much more than *knowledge* about how to live sustainably. Rather, it is *living* sustainably. It is not just about understanding the relationship with Mother Earth, *it is the relationship itself*. Academics are not incorrect to say that Indigenous people all over the world possess knowledge that is sustainable in nature and can be helpful to broader society. Indigenous people have been saying this for years (Clarkson et al. 1992). TEK includes specific knowledge that can be described as ecological or environmental, but it is much more than that.

SUMMARIZING THE ISSUES

Because of the unresolved differences in views as to what TEK is and how it should be applied, TEK as a concept, a field of study and a practice has come under fire from a growing number of Aboriginal people (AFN and ICC 1991; McGregor 2000), as well as a few non-Aboriginal people (Nadasday 1999). Nonetheless, there are still many First Nations, Inuit and Metis groups in Canada who remain highly interested in TEK and what it can offer in terms of increased involvement and control over important environmental and natural resources decision-making (AFN 1993; Healey 1993). Whether it is helpful or not for individual First Nations to get involved in TEK is a matter of opinion, and strong views exist on either side of the question (Nadasday 1999; Smith 2000).

I will not dwell on all the issues that plague the field, as there are far too many to discuss here, ranging from Intellectual Property Rights (Posey and Dutfield 1996; Settee 2000), the dominance and imposition of Western approaches and methods (Brubacher and McGregor 1998; McGregor 2000) to the outright rejection of the value of TEK itself (Howard and Widdowson 1997). Some Aboriginal people refuse to use the term TEK at all, preferring instead "Naturalized

Knowledge System" (Lickers 1997) or Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) as the Inuit people call it. For the purposes of this discussion it is important to remember the following:

- ▶ the TEK field as it is known for the most part in public policy and academic circles originates externally from Indigenous people;
- ▶ TEK is a field that is dominated by non-Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal people (mostly scholars) are regarded as the experts and their job is to obtain information/knowledge from Aboriginal people;
- ▶ TEK as a term is becoming increasingly unsatisfactory to Aboriginal people;
- ▶ there is a lack of shared meaning between Aboriginal people and others on what TEK actually means;
- ▶ Aboriginal people do have knowledge that can contribute to sustainability; and
- ▶ many Aboriginal communities, despite the problems with the TEK field, wish to gain more control over environmental decision making on their territories by sharing their knowledge.

This last point is the main reason why I am continually drawn back into the TEK field, to find out what kind of sharing is mutually beneficial, respectful and perhaps most importantly, "decolonizing."

LIVING WITH BOTH WORLD VIEWS

Winona LaDuke's understanding and assertion that one has to *live* Minobimaatisiwin puts a person such as myself, who comes from an Aboriginal background and who now works in both Aboriginal community and Western academic settings, into an awkward position. I know that from a Western point of view it is a luxury (and one that I enjoy!) to have the privilege of reading, discussing and writing about such concepts as TEK from within the comfort of an abstract university setting. On the other hand, I also concur with LaDuke in that one must live and experience this knowledge in order to truly understand it, and for it to have any real benefit. How does one reconcile these two

ways of understanding TEK? Is it possible? What might be the role of Indigenous academics (particularly women) in the field of TEK? Can TEK be de-colonized? Isn't TEK supposed to be good for Indigenous people? I don't have the answers, but I sure struggle with the questions.

With this dichotomy in mind, I can relate well to the dilemma Amy Tan describes in her work, *The Opposite of Faith* (2003), where she discusses the two world views (Western and Chinese) she has struggled with her whole life. She asks us to, "Picture these two ideologies as you might the goal posts of a soccer field, faith at one end, fate at the other, and me running between them trying to duck whatever dangerous missile had been launched in the air" (11). For me, one goal post represents TEK as non-Aboriginal academics understand it. At the other end there is TEK or Minobimaatisiwin as Anishnabe people understand it. As an academic, and as an Anishnabe woman with two children I wish to raise according to Anishnabe beliefs, I feel like I am running around the soccer field of TEK and Minobimaatisiwin.

Understanding Minobimaatisiwin has been part of my life since long before I heard of anything called TEK. My family remains connected to hunting, fishing, gathering medicines, making maple syrup, and speaking the language, and yet they never refer to anything called TEK. Long before I learned any "fancy" (as my mother would call it) terminology, I was learning the principles, ethics and values that form Minobimaatisiwin and that were simply part of growing up. I have been fortunate to have people in my family and community who have worked hard to keep our traditions alive. We are also fortunate to have sacred sites such as Dreamer's Rock in our community, and we continue to host Elders gatherings in recognition of various occasions.

The Anishnabe, like many Aboriginal people in Canada, have not been spared the racism and oppression that is unfortunately characteristic of our relationship with the Canadian state and many of its institutions and citizens. Despite the negativity of such a history and its impacts on current and future generations, these experiences contain valuable lessons on how to resist oppression and recover from the forces of colonization. Such lessons have become part of our traditional teachings (Fitznor 1998). As LaDuke (1999) states,

Minobimaatisiwin and its teachings on rebirth, revival, and renewal emphasize our ability to transform and re-create ourselves. TEK then, from an Anishnabe perspective, is very broad and includes understanding colonization and working towards reversing that process (de-colonization).

Minobimaatisiwin has been a fundamental part of my learning and how I perceive the world. It was only as I started to learn about Aboriginal people and environmental knowledge as a student, and now as a teacher, researcher and academic, that I came to appreciate the value of this life experience and how it shapes how I feel and think. My focus became formalized as it became part of my Western academic studies, and in this context, I call it TEK. I teach and have taught university courses on TEK; I have studied, written about, presented on, and worked professionally in the field of TEK; I am regularly called upon to give advice to various agencies and individuals in relation to TEK. However, the term TEK (as conceptualized in academia) is something I don't relate to easily; in fact, I feel quite alienated from it. Nevertheless, because I am an Assistant Professor in a university, have a PhD and work professionally in this field, it is assumed I must have something insightful to say about TEK. Whatever the case may be from a Western viewpoint, I am certainly not an expert on Minobimaatisiwin as seen from an Aboriginal perspective. It is impossible for someone who is not fully living according to Minobimaatisiwin to be considered an expert on it. Simply studying TEK does not make one an expert. I have much to learn, including fluency in my own language. The dichotomy between the two ideologies becomes particularly evident when considering what I do at the university (read, write, present, etc.) and what I do with my children and family (visit, feast, make maple syrup, etc.). As an Anishnabe woman, I am expected to be a bearer and transmitter of knowledge, yet I have a long way to go. This role keeps me honest; no matter how involved I may become with my academic pursuits, it reminds me that the term TEK does not have much to do with Aboriginal people except as research subjects.

TEK AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN

So what, then, does all this have to do with Aboriginal women? I am an Aboriginal woman

providing my perspective on the field of TEK as it is currently understood in the dominant discourse in environmental and resource management in Canada. This discourse is dominated by the Western scientific paradigm (RCAP 1996; Wolfe et al. 1992) to the exclusion of Aboriginal people and their knowledge. The discourse is weak on Aboriginal perspectives, let alone specifically women's perspectives. With a few exceptions (Battiste & Henderson 2000; Higgins 1998; LaDuke 1994; Settee 2000), the voices and viewpoints of Aboriginal women are conspicuously absent from this debate. However, this does not stop Aboriginal women in Indigenous communities from living and breathing TEK as was understood and intended before the term ever arose. Aboriginal women are not waiting for the outcome on the merits of TEK to be debated, defined or improved; they are out there practising TEK, they are the experts. They are busy protecting their families, nations and Creation. They are doing what they have always done to ensure the continuance of our nations. This is not to say that gender has never been considered in the academic world of TEK; it has. It is presented as a factor to consider in undertakings involving Indigenous people and knowledge (Grenier 1998; Emery 2000). However, gender and TEK is approached as another topic to delineate, debate, document, analyze, interpret and draw conclusions on. It is not regarded as a fundamental part of the whole story (way of life, or Minobimaatisiwin), but a part of TEK that requires specialized extraction and analysis. As such, it has thus far not been an empowering discussion for Aboriginal women.

What, then, is Aboriginal women's TEK? Is this even an appropriate topic to explore? Do Aboriginal women desire to get involved in this discourse? What is the link between Aboriginal women, TEK and Minobimaatisiwin in the current context? At one time, this would have been a non-issue; women were part of the whole of Creation, in recognition of their life-giving abilities. Certainly women's roles in nationhood and sustainability have been recognized and celebrated (Anderson 2000; Clarkson et al. 1992). Nonetheless, women's traditional roles and contributions to sustainability have been undermined by the forces of colonization. We have to interact with a society that functions in reductionist, compartmentalized ways and that

struggles to see the whole. If Aboriginal women's contributions to sustainability do not have a place of honor in dominant Western society, they are increasingly given such in Indigenous society. I have seen the recognition, acknowledgment and respect of women's knowledge internally in Indigenous communities. I have sought women's knowledge on a number of occasions. In one particular instance, I was advised by a well respected male Elder/healer to seek the advice/knowledge of a woman, as she would understand the situation involving myself and my child better than he. Another example that stands out in my mind is when working with a well respected individual from the Haudenosaunee community, he deferred to his wife's views on specific matters as she was a clan mother. The role of women and the knowledge they bring to bear is increasingly recognized internally (and in many cases it has always been so).

Likely the most significant example of where I have seen women's knowledge to be particularly critical is in discussions of issues involving water. I had the opportunity to work on a submission to Part 2 of the Walkerton Inquiry with the Chiefs of Ontario. The tragedy of the deaths resulting from e-coli pollution in Walkerton in May 2000 brought the issue of water (which has always been a major concern to Aboriginal communities) to national attention. My contribution to the Chiefs of Ontario submission was a TEK component relating to water. The Chiefs of Ontario had a difficult time convincing government representatives that TEK was an important part of Aboriginal peoples' understanding of water. TEK was eventually accepted, but was viewed as a peripheral part of the project. I learned a great deal and enjoyed the process of meeting and talking to various Elders (true experts!) throughout the province. A highlight that stands out in my experience is the significant role I observed that women have in maintaining a sustainable and healthy relationship with water. Akii Kwe, a group of Anishnabe women from Bkejwanong Territory (Walpole Island, Ontario), have been diligently trying to protect water in their territory for years. Guided by their traditional responsibilities, they consider it their duty to speak for the water. Walkerton-type situations, after all, are not entirely new to them; poor water quality is an everyday reality in their community.

Due to their close relationship with water, Aboriginal women around the world often notice changes first. These women do not wait for permission, they act based on what their spiritual traditions guide them to do (Kamanga et al. 2001). In a recent example, women in the Lake Nipissing area are taking up the traditional role of women in relation to water. "Anishnabe teachings tell us of the Original Instructions given to the people by the Creator. These instructions include the woman's responsibility to care for, and protect the water - which is instrumental in support of life. Women are the life-givers of the people" (Goulais 2004, 17). Local communities formed a committee specifically to bring traditional knowledge of women's roles back to the communities. A group of women completed a 1,300-mile walk around Lake Superior in 2003 and more recently organized a shorter walk with water teachings to make them "...more aware of the teachings and to begin to take more responsibility for that water" (Liberty in Goulais 2004, 17).

What I find most comforting and inspiring in such work is that Aboriginal people, often led by women, are living Minobimaatisiwin irrespective of the pressures exerted by academics, policy makers, lawyers and researchers. So how does this relate to my understanding of TEK? I have to live in two worlds: the academic world, where I teach that TEK is not what academics say it is; rather, it is Minobimaatisiwin; and the Aboriginal world where I still find myself compelled to deconstruct the conventional meaning and practice of TEK, as this is a necessary process in moving towards decolonization (Smith 1999). However, one doesn't want to spend too much energy on this, either, because as Smith (2000, 210) believes, "such a process puts the colonizer at the centre." He feels that Indigenous people should focus their energy on what we want: "We must reclaim our own lives to put our destiny in our own hands" (211). I believe Indigenous women have been engaging in this process. Akii Kwe, and other Anishnabe-kwe, don't have time for the colonizers' labels of their knowledge or responsibilities.

I believe the most grounding message that I have learned from the women I have worked with, met, and lived with over the years, is that no matter what anybody makes up (including labels like TEK), it is women who will determine the future.

Aboriginal women are not waiting for someone to tell them what TEK is or how to do it; they are already living it. "Women are the first environments!" (Cook in LaDuke 1999, 19). Women have the power to create and re-create! We have choices and these choices will be based on Minobimaatisiwin. If we continue to live our lives, taking our responsibilities seriously as women, then those values and traditions that sustained our ancestors will sustain us and our future nations.

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