The Story of Healing with O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN)

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Introduction

I went to OPCN for the first time in 2009 to do a household food security survey as a part of my research work at the University of Manitoba. I was shocked to discover that a community in Canada, only 12 hours away from the very privileged and the very urban cosmopolitan Winnipeg, was deprived of basic needs such as running water, healthy and affordable quality food, proper housing, and health and educational services.

While doing my door-to-door visits, I noticed that community members were doubtful about my "asking the same questions and reproducing the same answers and results never shared with the interviewee" kind of research. They used to ask me, "Are you from the government? What is the purpose of this survey?" Throughout my survey, I became aware that this intelligent, friendly, and resilient group of people was deeply hurt by a one-sided research practice. For me, the questions were clear: in this realm of the colonizer and the colonized, whose side am I taking and what can I do to break this practice of a one-sided research?

Building Relationship with the Community

I felt fortunate that OPCN invited me to participate in their food-related projects. Before my research formally began, I was invited to the community school to participate as a volunteer in a number of gardening workshops with the Frontier School Division's Regional Gardening Coordinator. Working with young minds who were eager to learn, play, and care for plants was a life-altering experience. My personal interaction with school students, teachers, elders, and interested adult gardeners during these workshops proved to be pivotal in winning the trust of the community. The youth started calling me "the garden lady".

The survey and open-ended interviews revealed that OPCN suffered a severe flooding and displacement due to Manitoba Hydro's Churchill River Diversion (CRD), a hydroelectricity production project that resulted social, cultural and economic impoverishment in the

community. The survey results revealed that OPCN had a high food insecurity; children were surviving on junk food because of limited access to a healthy diet. These impacts were underlined as I started to talk to some community members. I heard stories of fetal alcohol syndrome, suicide, depression, untimely death, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, unemployment and many more. I learnt that these major issues have been uncared for and neglected for decades in many northern Manitoba communities. I felt that every person in OPCN needed care to transform his or her life into a healthy, positive, and culturally appropriate manner. They said that meant sharing food, listening to Elders, hugging the children, smiling at each and every individual you meet, and expressing that "I am here for you". I learnt through my fieldwork in OPCN that this caring is *pasekonekewin*, meaning "I will take you by the hand and help you stand."

I felt people's thoughts were articulate, rich with meaning, and rooted in cultural principles. During a gardening workshop in 2010, Elder Vivian Moose expressed,

> We do not harm another person so we get a better life. If you want to be in this community, you need to understand this. That is your journey. (Personal communication July 10, 2010)

My personal endeavour for understanding their Indigenous worldview and relationship grew deeper from this point onwards. As an outsider and researcher, I recognized my participation needed to be guided and informed by this Indigenous worldview.

Personal Is Political

I started my official fieldwork in OPCN in 2012. During my stay, the more I interacted with people, the more I learnt about their values. For me, it was a continuous process of dismantling and unlearning myself — am I scared of them, am I being respectful, am I listening the way I should be, am I being patient, am I trusting them enough with money, do I understand their jokes, am I using the right word while communicating, am I controlling and influencing their decisions, am I being helpful, am I being positive and smiling enough, am I sharing enough? These questions during different events and every day became my practice of confronting a researcher's self-supremacy. I do not know if it was because of my cautious behaviour, my brown skin, or my gardening workshops that I received acceptance in the community more easily than a Canadian citizen. When I asked them about it during a focus group, the Elders said, "We are happy to see you because you kept your promises; you came back to the community." Further, "You never asked us to do anything. You came to visit us, stayed with us, and then we started something together." Finally, the most important comment was made, "That is an easy answer. What you said made sense. You came to our gathering; you gardened with us, cooked for us, and ate food with us." I realized I was accepted not because of my skin colour but for becoming part of their most cherished memories by organizing and participating in land-based activities. I understood that research with an Indigenous community should be a constant effort to break the colonial worldview — that is, dismantling control, keeping promises, ignoring contradictions, and fighting violence against nature and human. For me the process started as soon as I started my journey to find myself within the collective in order to commit.

The Elders in OPCN told me many times that if I am telling a story I should share my roots and my personal views. My story starts in my homeland, Bangladesh. It is an overpop-

ulated Third World tropical country, mostly known for poverty, flood, and most recently microcredit programs. When I came to Canada a decade ago for graduate work, I came with a stereotypical "romantic" impression of North America, which was built from popular TV shows — beautiful houses with trimmed lawns, clean neighbourhoods, children making snowmen in winter, no slums, poverty or hunger, and abundant resources, which are distributed evenly to all, or at least better than my country. To my surprise, in northern Manitoba I found hidden slums of the "West".

I am a woman of Bengali Muslim heritage. I grew up in a small residential public university campus known for its lakes full of lotus and winter birds and natural green vegetation. My father was an academician who died of misdiagnosis at the age of 48. My mother said he used to do rural development work. I have a few feeble memories of my father working with the students in adult education and the free cataract surgery programs offered for elders in a village near our house. I always wanted to be like him and do something meaningful. Since my father died because of a doctor's mistake, my mother used to avoid doctors and relied on herbal medicines if we were sick. I grew up seeing my mother doing social work, trying to cope with the loss of my father. She wanted us to be kind, forgiving, and respectful to others. She taught me to love food, gardening, and singing. She prepares the best fish curry in the world.

In 2004 when I came to Canada for higher studies, it was my first experience away from my mother and my family. Initially I did not feel "at home" in Winnipeg. I missed my language, food, warm weather, and familiar faces. My homesickness significantly contributed to my poor social skills, feelings of vulnerability, failure, inadequacy, and unfamiliarity during the first five years of my stay in Winnipeg. This changed when I started to work with OPCN. I was at ease as I saw people were warm and welcoming. They have vibrant language, colourful artistic minds, and great aspirations for relationship-building. I realized humour, funny expressions, and jokes were an integral part of communication — they express trust, safety, fun, love of nature, and intelligence through wit. Once I asked my community friend, "How did you cook the moose nose?" He said, "Oh, we fix it and boil the snort out of it! Try some!"

Before I started my fieldwork in OPCN, some Southerners told me that it was not a "safe" place for me. However, my experience was the opposite. During my stay, the most drunken man, and supposedly the most unreliable as well, in the community was concerned about my safety and walked me home. The children invited me to play with them, the Elders invited me to fix fish and make bannock for them, and the adults invited me to go berry picking and to traditional gatherings. By the end of the second year, I found a family who loved me, fed me delicious fish, took care of me, and wanted me to be a part of their lives. That summer at OPCN reminded me of my childhood in a community surrounded by water and lots of trees, fresh fish, and taking herbal medicines. I felt at home in OPCN — whether I was requested to cook for the community for a funeral or a feast, or I was requested to teach in healthy eating workshops in the school or in the health complex with youth, elders, and single mothers.

The sense of collectivity and gaining strength from relationships in the community helped me to cope with the experience of struggle and grief I had to observe every day as part of living in an Indigenous reserve community. I understood that everything in OPCN is built on the idea of relationship and based on the obligation of sharing — share pain, love, care, responsibility, knowledge, skills, food, home, land, water, plants, medicines, and anything that contribute to people's well-being in OPCN. This idea is described with the word

wichihituwin, which means "something that can be used to help each other". A community member said, "*Wichihituwin* could be boat, library, book, labour, skills, and most importantly, food." The expression reflects reciprocity culture in OPCN.

A mother in the community once shared with me in a private meeting the following:

> I live by this lake ... it is flooded. My son drowned in this water in a boat accident. He was so young. Every time I look at this water, I feel lost. I cannot go anywhere else because my job is here and I have to feed the rest of my family. But it is so difficult to learn to live this life ... Something so close to my heart is gone forever.

She became quiet after saying the above statement and avoided me for weeks after this meeting. In OPCN the CRD project controls the water level of the lake by the settlement and causes fluctuation of the water level. The result is constant erosion of land. Since the CRD flooding, many islands in the lake were submerged; the flooding also created massive accumulation of debris in the water. People riding boats often experience accidents and die because they are unable to see debris or the tip of a drowned tree.

The Food Lady

Elders in OPCN told me not to leave a feast or a funeral without eating since sharing and eating food in such events is a form of praying for the well-being of the community and the individuals. Most of my initial community outreach started by feeding people personally, and also by organizing gatherings for single parents, Elders, and school children. Whenever I had a meeting with community food champions, I tried to bring food for them — baked whitefish, multigrain bannock, soups, wholegrain blueberry muffins, yogurt, fruits, etc. I also tried some multicultural cooking: I made curried beaver, fish, and moose meat for some of my friends a few times. One friend made fun of me saying, "You must be the first woman in the world cooking beaver curry!" After my first year, from a "garden lady" I became a "food lady" for OPCN children and youth.

Building the *Wichihituin*: *Ithinto Mechisowin* Program

As part of my community activities, OPCN requested that I work with them while they created their own food program. I began by offering help and participating in community events — providing cooking workshops, helping people to write proposals, gardening and listening to the elders by organizing focus groups and gatherings. The process helped to identify the key community food champions. We convened a group and named it "*Ithinto Mechisowin*" ("Food from the Land") Steering committee. As a committee, we discussed the needs and wants of OPCN in regard to access to traditional food, and we identified our priorities and shared them with supportive organizations in the community — the band office, the school, the health complex, the Community Association of South Indian Lake, South Indian Lake Environmental Steering Committee, and the fishermen and trappers association. We did a presentation and submitted our proposal to all. To my surprise, despite some visibly challenging relationships between the organizations influenced by small town politics, they all came together in a common platform and offered immediate in-kind support to jump-start the program. My roles ranged from coordinating meetings to finding a carpenter, or ordering materials that were needed for the program office renovation. I wrote proposals, met people, socialized, and tried to learn how to be patient as a researcher. I went fishing

with fishermen; I learnt how to fix moose meat with the hunters; I learnt how to make bannock from elders; and I heard stories about the significance of medicine, visions, and dreams from many of the community members.

The second part of building our program was the renovation of a food program office space with proper food handling facilities. At this phase my tasks ranged from following up with the renovation progress with the housing manager and carpenter to liaison with the health inspector for renovation guidelines and follow-up visits. This was the most lengthy and eye-opening process for me. Nothing happened in a timely manner in a remote Indigenous community. When I contacted people in the South to order materials on behalf of OPCN, a number of times I had to face racist, rude, and derogatory responses and comments. Things were delayed because of late shipments or people being sick, and sometimes delays were caused by weather or lack of money. The good part of this phase was, every morning at 8 a.m. I had to stand by the band office to talk to a designated carpenter who would give me news on the renovation progress. I had coffee with the group of carpenters and listened to stories of experiences of hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, the legend of Big Foot or little people, and many more.

The renovation was complete in June 2013, and we started to distribute food. By that time we already had a few hands-on youth winter fishing and trapping workshops arranged. We distributed the harvested food to single mothers, low-income families, elders, diabetic patients, and disabled individuals with less access to land-based food. From June onwards, we also received fish from many fishermen and some moose meat from hunters in the community as donation to run the food program. I remember working long hours with the volunteers, my sisters and grandmothers in OPCN. Volunteers shared stories from the old days, how life was simple and easy before the flooding, how grandmothers used to keep bowls of water while fixing fish, how berry-picking was fun, how medicines were used and discarded in a safe place away from public places.

Kisthidimitowak: Healing by Respecting Relationship

Every summer I participated in traditional gatherings called *Kiwikapawetan* and *Wassasihk* for youth capacity-building organized in the community's old settlement, which is not yet flooded. During the gatherings, my task was to record and learn different techniques of food preparation and collect food-related stories for educational classes in the school. My participation in these gatherings, however, was also a process of personal reflection as I was trying to learn from the solace found within the wilderness. I was invited in sweat lodges, sharing circles, and feasts. These ceremonies are meant for spiritual reflection on inner strength — by focusing on the self as part of a collective where conversations, stories, and songs are blended with personal experiences, prayers, and cultural values.

During *Wassasihk*, I asked a community member, "What is the significance of the songs you were singing?" He told me, "You need to listen to everyone. Listen to the bird, fish, plants, water, and everyone else in your family, those who are alive and those who are not with us anymore. Listen to them well and make sure you understand and respect them so you can keep them well. That's what our songs are about." During *Kiwikapawetan*, one elder shared, "We bond with each other in terms of respect. *Kisthidimitowak* ("they respect each other") is the word that describes our values; you respectfully acknowledge loss and gain, fear, and courage." I understood the meaning of this concept when I started acknowledging my own fear in OPCN term.

In 2011 my mother had a stroke. She was partially paralyzed but recovered through a long 21-month recovery period. I started my fieldwork before she was fully recovered. I was always scared of losing her and had nightmares that she was in pain or she was falling from the bed when trying to get up. Yet, in my moments of distress, I was gaining insights — how personal experiences and coping mechanisms are shaping the behaviour of the entire community through the practice of *kisthidimitowak*. OPCN people were constantly dealing with fear as well — fear of hunger, cold, death of the loved ones, memories of abuse, and many more. But they challenged and acknowledged fear by maintaining their aspiration for sustainable communitarian life. In OPCN everything is participatory, from raising a child to harvesting and sharing food. My involvement in traditional gatherings and ceremonies took me to a shared space of collective healing where all personal experience is perceived as a communal experience. The bonding helped me ease my personal experiences of loss and fear. I felt relieved as I saw many people were praying for me and I was praying for them.

Conclusion: Repositioning Relationship

In bringing this story to an end, I want to say that I had not realized until my participatory experiences how much one needed to engage in lived experience to personally and politically bind with a community. My involvement helped me redefine research as a process of personal reflection and political responsiveness based on cultural integrity.

Research experiences vary from person to person. My experience was healing, educational, and meaningful. I felt proud of being part of OPCN's food sovereignty program and the fact that they planned and completed a vision independently, initially with no financial resource from outside. In doing so, OPCN successfully re-invented their strength as an Indigenous community and their revived spirit to heal each other. What I learnt from my experience is: for balanced research intervention at the community level, researchers should reposition themselves as learners and gain insights from an Indigenous worldview.

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