

ANISHINAABE BIMISHIMO

An Indigenous Company that Understands the Sovereignty of Jingle Cones

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INTRODUCTION

First Nation business organizations and entrepreneurs have existed for thousands of years. In Canada, the number of contemporary Indigenous organizations has grown exponentially over the past 10 to 20 years. In the early 1990s there were an estimated 6,000 Indigenous organizations in Canada, and the number now stands at over 30,000 (Weir, 2007). Anishinaabe Bimishimo — located in rural Manitoba — is one of 27,000 small First Nation businesses operating in Canada (Weir, 2007). Rooted in traditional values, community sup-

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Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development 2022, 12(2), 31; <https://doi.org/10.54056/BELF1069>

port and engagement, and ensuring that First Nation peoples' voices are represented, Anishinaabe Bimishimo strives to provide its jingle cone product with traditional respect. Moreover, Anishinaabe Bimishimo contributes to First Nation community development by providing inexpensive and locally produced jingle cones while offering its community members employment and training opportunities. In shifting the paradigm of jingle cones being manufactured by non-Indigenous companies, Anishinaabe Bimishimo is the only Indigenous-owned Canadian company that produces jingle cones. By understanding the context of starting a small business with no credit, no equity, and being denied by every bank across Canada, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's CEO Émilie McKinney provides a blueprint of what is necessary to overcome challenges as a First Nation woman entrepreneur in Canada. This paper explores the successes and challenges of developing the first jingle-cone manufacturing company. Anishinaabe Bimishimo's history, products, and the industry in which it operates are examined. While a personal reflection strengthens Anishinaabe Bimishimo's commitment to becoming a successful Indigenous economic enterprise, it also serves to remind that the company is based on traditional First Nation values. By examining Anishinaabe Bimishimo's process of becoming a successful small business in rural Manitoba, the company presents itself as a model to all First Nation entrepreneurs.

INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Anishinaabe Bimishimo was founded on the principle of First Nation traditional values: "the whole point of starting Anishinaabe Bimishimo was to bring the authenticity of the jingle back to North America" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Up until Anishinaabe Bimishimo's opening in 2017, people within the powwow community received their jingle cones from distributors in Taiwan. It did not make sense to McKinney as to why a sacred dance such as the jingle dress included jingle cones that were manufactured in a foreign country by non-Indigenous producers that were making an economic profit off of Indigenous people. As a result, McKinney started Anishinaabe Bimishimo not for the monetary profit; rather, she created the business for the people (personal communications, November 5, 2020).

Although Anishinaabe Bimishimo was created to be the supplier of local jingle cones in North America, it was not long after Anishinaabe Bimishimo's inception that many jingle-cone producing companies sprang into existence. *Missouri River*, *McPherson*, and *Teton Trade Cloth* are the main competing jingle-cone producers in North America (personal communications, November 5, 2020). It is important to note that while all three companies are operated by non-Indigenous people, they claim on their websites that they are Indigenous-owned, which ultimately exacerbates harm inflicted upon not only Anishinaabe Bimishimo, but Indigenous consumers as well. McKinney (2020) argues that "buying licensed Indigenous art from non-Indigenous designers is not the same as supporting authentic Indigenous works." Unfortunately, non-Indigenous companies make profit by exploiting Indigenous cultures and ceremonies; Haida designer Dorothy Grant (2020) agrees: "[T]here is a history of abuse, of theft of everything that belongs to Indigenous people, and this is another format of that." As a result, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's competitors *Missouri River*, *McPherson*, and *Teton Trade Cloth* have appropriated the jingle cone and have made an economic profit off its Indigenous consumers in which they disregard the sacred meanings, teachings, and stories associated with the jingle cone (personal communications, November 5, 2020).

Non-Indigenous companies profiting off Indigenous forms of artwork is evidently a common occurrence that has impacted consumers' choice as to who they decide to buy jingle cones from. When presented with an array of companies that supply a product, consumers within the powwow industry buy from companies that are Indigenous owned and operated (personal communications, November 5, 2020). McKinney (2020) states, "[C]ustomers will pick the authentic Indigenous-owned jingles as opposed to knock-off jingles that have been imported and are owned by non-Indigenous businesses." She further acknowledges that non-Indigenous businesses selling jingle cones is a form of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation has been defined as "when a person from one culture takes culturally distinct items, aesthetics or spiritual practices from another culture and mimics it ... They adopt it as their own without consent, permission or any cultural relationship to the object or practice, in order to make money" (Brant, 2020). In effect, the cultural appropriation of jingle cones has been viewed as inflicting harm upon Indigenous people, their culture, and their communities. Competition within the context of jingle cone production is also defined by the sound of the jingle cones. Emily McKinney distinguishes the quality of jingle cones by using the reference of "the louder, the better!" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). McKinney states "customers value the sound of the jingle where the louder the cone is, the better quality it is" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). By providing the loudest jingle cones, customers choose and stand by Anishinaabe Bimishimo.

While it is important to identify the nature of jingle cone competition in the powwow industry, it is critical to understand how the supply and demand of jingle cones is impacted by the time of year and geographic location. First, the jingle cone industry is significantly contingent on pow-wows. During the spring and summer months, when many powwows are taking place across North America, the demand for jingle cones is extremely high due to artisans making regalia (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Conversely, the demand for jingle cones is low during the fall and winter, which contributes to a high supply of jingle cones during this time. Anishinaabe Bimishimo capitalizes on this reality by emphasizing their efforts at marketing their jingle cones during the spring and summer (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Second, the demand for jingle cones differs by geographic location. There is a high demand for jingle cones in Ontario, Minnesota, and Alberta, which reflects the passion dancers in these areas have towards the jingle dress dance (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Dancers in provinces and states, such as Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and New York, also express similar interest in the jingle dress dance, but the demand for jingle cones is highly dependent on Indigenous population within their region (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Anishinaabe Bimishimo meets the demand of jingle cones coast to coast by shipping via Canada Post in Canada and via the United States Postal Service in the United States.

Ultimately, the industry in which Anishinaabe Bimishimo competes is impacted by powwows, geography, and the time of year.

HISTORY, ORGANIZATIONAL CHART, AND PRODUCTS

The traditional teachings of the jingle dress have played a vital role in the creation of Anishinaabe Bimishimo. It is important to understand that without considering the significance of the jingle cone to the jingle dress, McKinney would not have started Anishinaabe Bimishimo. The jingle dress is a healing dance, and the shape and sound of the jingles is to

spread healing, whether dancing for one person or a whole nation (Johnson, 2020). The dance gets its name from the rows of metal cones called *ziibaaska'iganan*, which are attached to their dresses that make a distinctive sound as they dance (Johnson, 2020). Accordingly, once she realized jingle cones were manufactured in Taiwan, McKinney understood that such jingle cones did not have traditional meaning; therefore, she did not consider the sacred teachings of the jingle dress (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Thus, before creating Anishinaabe Bimishimo, McKinney had to first consider elders' teachings, ask for approval from elders, and also consider community members' ideas (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Consequently, the tradition in which Anishinaabe Bimishimo is built has been defined by respect not only for elders and community members but for the sacred jingle dress itself. CEO Émilie McKinney followed traditional protocol; as a result, she has proven that the history of the jingle dress is intertwined with her company's values and ensures that the jingle cone is respected, nurtured, and properly taken care of.

Every small-business organization has some form of an organizational structure. Anishinaabe Bimishimo operates under an informal organizational structure and is recognized as an Aboriginal Economic Development Corporation. Showcased by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, the majority of the 260 Aboriginal Economic Development Corporations operating across Canada are considered to be small businesses, meaning they have less than 100 employees (White, 2016). For Anishinaabe Bimishimo, it has two employees and two business owners; the ownership is shared between Émilie McKinney and her mother Natalie Foucart: 51% and 49%, respectively (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Until McKinney turns 21, Foucart legally signs off on all paperwork. Currently, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's organizational chart appears to be small; however, as the company continues to grow, the chart will too.

In addition to understanding Anishinaabe Bimishimo's organization, it is also important to understand the products the company provides. In 2016, Anishinaabe Bimishimo only carried jingle cones as its sole product. However, events such as COVID-19 and Trump's increased tariff on steel have created challenges for Anishinaabe Bimishimo in exclusively selling jingle cones. This had led McKinney to become creative with products and "to think outside of the box in order to stand out and make sales during trying times" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Subsequently, in addition to jingle cones, Anishinaabe Bimishimo added new products, such as apparel and Boychief blankets (Anishinaabe Bimishimo website, 2020). The apparel Anishinaabe Bimishimo provides are adult and kid sized t-shirts and hoodies. Additionally, the company also carries Boy Chief Woollen Blankets that range from \$200.00–\$400.00 CAD (Anishinaabe Bimishimo website, 2020). Most important, Anishinaabe Bimishimo provides consumers with many different types of jingle cones. Specifically, there are different sizes of cones and lids that are either plain or embossed and that come in either brass, copper, nickel, or ruby red. Altogether, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's overall products are jingle cones, apparel, and Boychief blankets (Anishinaabe Bimishimo website, 2020).

CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS

The journey of operating Anishinaabe Bimishimo has been accompanied by both defeats and triumphs that have forced CEO Émilie McKinney to constantly persist with innovative ideas. From the outset, that the odds have been stacked against Anishinaabe Bimishimo was

clearly indicated when every bank across Canada denied their requests for start-up loans (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Equally important, world events have risen that have hindered the company's development and are identified as Trump's increased tariff on steel imports and the development of COVID-19. Nevertheless, CEO Émilie McKinney has persevered in the face of all challenges by utilizing supports aside from banks, lobbying efforts across provincial and federal governments, and adapting her company's products suitable to the pandemic. Above all, Anishinaabe Bimishimo has proven that despite obstacles that could have led to bankruptcy, the company has persevered.

First Nation individuals face numerous financial challenges when opening and managing their businesses. Likewise, it is widely recognized that young entrepreneurs are more likely to identify access to financing as an obstacle to business growth than older entrepreneurs (Government of Canada, 2016). Combined, the obstacles that faced Émilie McKinney when she wanted to start up Anishinaabe Bimishimo were huge. First, McKinney's initial challenges were related to her status as an underage First Nation woman who had no equity, no credit, and no savings (personal communication, November 5, 2020). Underlined in *Barriers to Aboriginal Entrepreneurship and Options to Overcome Them* (The Conference Board of Canada — Northern and Aboriginal Policy, 2017), access to financing is the top challenge identified by Indigenous women entrepreneurs. It is hindered by eligibility criteria for equity investment, collateral, proven credit history, full-time involvement in the business, and lack of availability of micro-loans (The Conference Board of Canada — Northern and Aboriginal Policy, 2017). Also highlighted by The Conference Board of Canada (2017), First Nation businesses have cited that being a new, high-risk business, having too much debt or a poor credit rating, dealing with bureaucracy, and being First Nation are some of the leading barriers inhibiting economic development. Similarly, Émilie McKinney and her mother experienced all of the same impediments in starting Anishinaabe Bimishimo. McKinney notes:

The biggest challenge in starting Anishinaabe Bimishimo was being able to financially start the business. In the business world, you must be rich. Myself being 16 with no equity, no credit, no savings, and my mom being a single mom with 8 kids was a challenge. Every bank across Canada said no to us, even the First Nation banks. For that reason, it became a racial thing.

Indeed, the early challenges faced by Anishinaabe Bimishimo threatened its establishment. McKinney then approached organizations such as First People's Economic Growth Fund and Women's Enterprise Center in helping her start up Anishinaabe Bimishimo. Both organizations provided financing support to Anishinaabe Bimishimo as the company proved that its business plans were not only economically viable but would promote growth to Indigenous communities across Canada.

Further challenges included facing government economic policies relating to world trade among nations. Specifically, the 2018 trade war between the United States and Canada presented challenges to McKinney's business operations. In 2018, Trump imposed a 25% tariff on steel and a 10% tariff on aluminum imports, and Canada responded by placing tariffs on U.S. food products (Swan, 2018). Anishinaabe Bimishimo, whose steel supplier was located in Chicago, was gravely impacted as the tariff affected McKinney's supply chain immensely. To shed light on its effects, Anishinaabe Bimishimo had lost two-thirds of its inventory, and the prices to reorder steel went from \$30,000 to \$45,000 because of the tariffs (personal communications, November 5, 2020). With the loss of inventory and an increased

cost of doing business with the United States, McKinney then lobbied provincial and federal governments to lift the tariff. Recorded in the Debates and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba (2019, p. 1449), opposition leader Wab Kinew stated that his government is committed to lobbying to try and get Émilie and Natalie an exemption. Ultimately, their efforts succeeded in lifting the surtax that had originally impeded Anishinaabe Bimishimo's access to steel. In effect, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's dilemma is one example of how a small business absorbs the blows of government economic policies, in particular relating to trade between nations.

Finally, the detrimental effects of COVID-19, which has hindered many small businesses across Canada, also affected Anishinaabe Bimishimo. COVID-19 has drastically altered the Canadian economy and has had a profound impact on the ability of businesses in Canada to operate (Statistics Canada, 2020). Powwows are the main source of marketing for Anishinaabe Bimishimo (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Without the ability to physically go to powwows and market their products, Anishinaabe Bimishimo's sales decreased dramatically. Consequently, in the absence of social gatherings, McKinney had to "maneuver our way to change our marketing to get more sales" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). The lack of sales resulted in Anishinaabe Bimishimo delivering new products, such as apparel and Boychief blankets. By offering new products in the face of COVID-19, Anishinaabe Bimishimo combatted the severe effects that the pandemic had on its business operations.

While Anishinaabe Bimishimo has faced many challenges in its operations, they also have developed many supports that are rooted in community development. Anishinaabe Bimishimo understands that small businesses and entrepreneurship strengthen the development of First Nation communities and their economies. As such, it should be noted that First Nation small businesses and entrepreneurs are supporting and promoting First Nation self-governance and economic development in important and valuable ways. Émilie McKinney recognizes this when she notes that "it is important to hire Indigenous peoples when it comes to Indigenous businesses because you are helping regenerate your community's economy which further supports not only your community's economic development, but its ability to self-govern as well" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Therefore, when band administrators and planners discuss First Nation self-government, self-sufficiency, and community economic development, it is important that they consider how small business and entrepreneurship can add positively to the movement (Weir, 2007). Small businesses such as Anishinaabe Bimishimo ensure that their entrepreneurial activities are committed to enhancing First Nation self-governance and the economic well-being of First Nation communities that in turn support its business as well.

In addition to the enhancement of First Nation economic development and self-governance, Anishinaabe Bimishimo supports community development through its ability to give back to the people. For example, when Anishinaabe Bimishimo released its red jingle cone, it committed to giving a portion of the proceeds to support families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. McKinney understands the importance of giving back to the community, which is clearly shown in her statement during her MMIWG campaign: "[I]t is something that I wanted to do, something new to show more of a positive influence to other people and organizations and businesses that when you host an MMIWG event, a portion of the proceeds should go to the families who are affected" (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Additionally, proceeds from the sales also went to community groups within Manitoba Swan Lake First Nation Women and Men's Group, Manitoba

Keewatinowi Okimakanak and the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre (personal communications, November 5, 2020). By committing Anishinaabe Bimishimo to support Indigenous families and people, the company understands the significance of community support.

COMMUNITY GUIDANCE

First Nation entrepreneurship is the creation, management, and development of new ventures by Indigenous people for the benefit of Indigenous people (Weir, 2007). It prevents the loss of community resources and money, and provides employment and career development for community members wishing to remain in their communities or territories. Likewise, Anishinaabe Bimishimo hires First Nation employees and stays committed to only hiring First Nation people. The company hires people to assist in small labour tasks “for when people that are low on cash and need some help, I hire them for a few days of work” (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Additionally, Anishinaabe Bimishimo is in a joint venture with Swan Lake’s high school that directly benefits its students by providing them with work in exchange for necessary credit hours to graduate. In this way, Anishinaabe Bimishimo is creatively providing members with needed, relevant, and accessible job and experience opportunities. Consequently, by providing necessary job and training opportunities, Anishinaabe Bimishimo provides positive outcomes for First Nation individuals and communities.

The concept of entrepreneurship has been viewed by First Nation people as overly individualistic, anti-community, and more of a Western-European government strategy than an Indigenous approach to economic and community development (Weir, 2007). For this reason, Anishinaabe Bimishimo has resisted Western-influenced commerce by fundamentally ensuring it was to be built upon traditional First Nation values. The company has done this by engaging with First Nation elders, women, and community members in all affairs that Anishinaabe Bimishimo is involved with. When creating her company’s name, McKinney physically went to Ontario to consult with First Nation elders, women, and community members in Whitefish Bay, because that is where the jingle dress originated. She recalls, “prior to actually creating the company, I went to Ontario and asked elders for their traditional blessings and if it was okay with me creating Anishinaabe Bimishimo as I wanted it to be authentic as possible.” McKinney has ensured that the voices of First Nation people are included in Anishinaabe Bimishimo’s operations and has done so by allowing members to voice their perspectives when presented with possible product launches. For example, prior to launching different coloured jingle cones (red, turquoise, etc.), McKinney consulted with elders and women jingle dancers if it was appropriate to do so. Many of their responses embodied traditional perspectives regarding only silver cones; however, they did not overly oppose the contemporary style of coloured jingle cones. They provided guidelines in what colours were acceptable and clearly indicated that black jingle cones represented death and should not be included (personal communications, November 5, 2020). Ultimately, McKinney followed their wisdom regarding jingle cone colours and launched red jingle cones in honour of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. In effect, Anishinaabe Bimishimo has built itself on sustaining and strengthening First Nation culture, tradition, and community values by ensuring meaningful engagement with all First Nation people.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

After finishing my interview with CEO Émilie McKinney, I understood on a whole new level the sacrifices she has made for Anishinaabe Bimishimo to become what it is today. Émilie McKinney — who is also the same age as me — is somebody I have watched from a distance accomplish many great things with Anishinaabe Bimishimo. I, however, did not fully understand how much she has put into the company, and how much she has done to ensure that the company is as ‘Indigenized’ as possible.

With many organizations appropriating and benefiting from Indigenous culture, it is difficult to tell (seeing only a label) which company has actually taken the proper measures in ensuring that Indigenous culture has been traditionally respected. Often, one sees First Nation individuals boasting about non-Indigenous companies that sell Indigenous items. Likewise, similar to McKinney’s beliefs, it is understood that Indigenous items must be traditionally respected and properly taken care of. Not only has Anishinaabe Bimishimo ensured that its products encompass traditional aspects, it has committed the company to embodying traditional aspects as well. As a result, in undertaking this assignment, I have learned that Anishinaabe Bimishimo is one of the few First Nation companies that embodies true First Nation values: it gives back to the community, makes sure all of our voices are represented, and places women and elders as the leaders of our community.

In developing this paper I also have had to consider many of the perspectives regarding Indigenous economic development. I had to consider past readings and assignments regarding capitalism in order to understand why Anishinaabe Bimishimo emphasizes the importance of the community over individualism. Likewise, in producing this paper, my beliefs have resonated with McKinney’s — neither of us believes in emphasizing the individual at the expense of the collective. By considering my past readings, discussions, and assignments, I come to see alternate viewpoints. The unique context of Indigenous economic development relies on seeing all perspectives of different scenarios; as a result, it has contributed to my growth in understanding how Indigenous economics works. Overall, the business of Anishinaabe Bimishimo has shed light on not only First Nation entrepreneurship but also how Indigenous economics can effectively be intertwined with First Nation traditional values.

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