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**Recipe for decolonization and  
resurgence: Story of  
O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation's  
indigenous food sovereignty  
movement**

**Asfia Gulrukh Kamal and Shirley Thompson**

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# Recipe for decolonization and resurgence: Story of O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation's indigenous food sovereignty movement

Asfia Gulrukh Kamal and Shirley Thompson

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## Abstract

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In the era of “contemporary colonialism,” food sovereignty for indigenous peoples is a necessary struggle for cultural survival. In a wealthy country like Canada, Indigenous populations are deprived of basic necessities needed to maintain health, living in a state that institutionalizes poverty. However, despite the state-controlled political economy, indigenous scholars argue that the path to food sovereignty, decolonization and resurgence is possible. Communities and individuals are gaining strength from ancestral language, knowledge sharing, traditional and locally available diet, spiritual enrichment and most importantly community solidarity. This paper considers how OPCN’s Ithinto Mechisown (food from the land) program is promoting sustainable traditional teaching and indigenous sovereignty through containing seeds for decolonization, First Nation resurgence and OPCN peoplehood.

## Introduction

In the era of “contemporary colonialism,” (Conrtassel, 2012) food sovereignty for indigenous peoples is a necessary struggle for cultural survival. In a wealthy country like Canada, Indigenous populations are deprived of basic necessities needed to maintain health, living in a state that institutionalizes poverty (Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Power, 2008). However, despite the state-controlled political economy, indigenous scholars argue that the path to food sovereignty, decolonization and resurgence is possible. Communities and individuals are gaining strength from ancestral language, knowledge sharing, traditional and locally available diet, spiritual enrichment and most importantly community solidarity (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2012). This paper considers how OPCN’s Ithinto Mechisown (food from the land) program is promoting sustainable traditional teaching and indigenous sovereignty through containing seeds for decolonization, First Nation resurgence and OPCN peoplehood.

## O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation - History and politics

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN) is commonly known as South Indian Lake. The community of 1200 population is made up almost exclusively of Aboriginal peoples – mainly Cree people from NCN (OPCN, 2012). In 2009 a University of Manitoba study found high food insecurity in the community (Thompson et al, 2011), which is an indicator of food disruption and lack of food access (Thompson et al, 2011; 2012). This community had the highest rate of food insecurity of the 14 northern communities studied, even higher than remote fly in communities (Thompson et al, 2011).

OPCN Community members were registered under Nelson House Band/Nischichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN), as a satellite community, until recently. However, a small group of people from NCN that settled near their traditional food harvest area was recently recognized as having a unique identity. Since its inception the community grew with a strong culture of hunting, fishing, trapping and sustainable care for nature in its vast land of lakes. People lived well and had sufficient resources until the start of 1970s with many of the Cree residents living over a century showing the health and vigour of the community. Community elder 98 year old Annie Spence talks about how 2 of her brothers and sisters or cousins, as well as her mother lived well past 100 in OPCN.

The drastic fall in OPCN's socioeconomic situation came in the 1970s when Manitoba Hydro supported by the Manitoba provincial government developed a hydro electric dam called, the Churchill River Diversion (CRD), in northern Manitoba (Waldram, 1985; Hoffman, 2008; Lienafa and Martin, 2010). Like many other development projects in Canada, this project did not consider the long lasting environmental, cultural and economic repercussions to the indigenous communities living in and around the "target" area.

Instead of harnessing the hydroelectric potential of the Churchill River by building plants right on the Churchill River itself, most of the Churchill River water was diverted into the Burntwood and Nelson River systems to use at the generating stations being built on the Nelson River. Diverting Churchill River water as opposed to building plants on the Churchill River reflected a cost advantage in excess of \$600 million (Hydro, 2013) but the communities did not benefit in any revenue sharing way. The compensation came much later. In December 1972, a license to proceed with the diversion was issued to Manitoba Hydro by the Water Resources Branch of the Manitoba Department of Mines, Resources and Environmental Management. Construction contracts were awarded in 1973 and immediately executed without any precautions or planning for the First Nations impacted so that the diversion was in operation in 1977 (Hoffman, 2008; Lienafa and Martin, 2010). The community members were forced to move into a nearby settlement designated by the province without any proper compensation or socioeconomic support or adequate infrastructure lacking running water and sewage to their homes. In 1991, almost 20 years after the severe socioeconomic and community health damage. In 1989 under the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA), OPCN signed an agreement of compensation with Manitoba Hydro, Manitoba Provincial government (Hoffman, 2008, p. 120-122), out of desperation without money to rebuild for 20 years. At the time of relocation, the Community Association of South Indian Lake (CASIL) was formed (Hoffman, 2008, p. 120-122) and an amount of 18 million dollars was awarded to CASIL in 1992 to compensate for their losses (Hoffman, 2008, p. 120-122; Lienafa and Martin, 2010, p.56). However, the CASIL

agreement and compensation worked as a “layer of protection” for Manitoba Hydro by negating any further compensation for “alleged socio-economic damages” except to compensate harm caused by “a physical or biological impact” (NFA article 6.05) (Hoffman, 2008, p. 121). The procedure for compensation and agreement was not without bias. As Waldram states, “the legal representation of the affected community was either omitted or impaired through poor advice, funding restrictions, legal stalling tactics and the refusal on the part of the Government to disclose the necessary information to allow the communities to properly define their legal positions” (1984, p. 233 quoted in Hoffman, 2008, p. 121).

The wildlife and natural vegetation, the basic food resources of the indigenous people in northern Manitoba was severely damaged by the flooding and on-going control of water levels by dams (Waldram, 1985, 1988; Hoffman, 2008). A number of northern communities were affected and OPCN is one of them. Conditions of communities on reserve, already experiencing poverty and ill health, deteriorated. Settlements like OPCN, outside the reserve system, suffered the most (Waldram, 1988b). According to Loney (1995, p. 235) the effects are long lasting and have direct impact on damaging the “harvesting subsistence economy”.

The settlement of OPCN was relocated in the late 1960s and early 1970s to an arm of the lake that joins South Bay to the main body of the lake. This location made access precarious by boat after the Churchill Diversion Project, as this dam had changed the direction of the rivers flow and increased its speed of flow, as well as resulted in massive debris due to flooding in the waters. As a ferry was not available until 1977, the lake’s effectively cut off access to other communities. The community is about 130 air km Northwest of Thompson and 64 air km from Leaf Rapids. However by road from Thompson the trip takes about five hours as the dirt road is not level or easily navigable. Nothing less than a truck is recommended on these roads. This community lacks any public transportation, such as Greyhound.

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin/South Indian Lake was recognized as a community in 1971 by the provincial government and by the federal government in 2005 as a First Nation reserve, named South Indian Lake Cree Nation Reserve. However, only one street out of the whole community has received Federal Reserve for Indians status officially. Its territory of use and occupancy has been trying to receive First Nation status for many years but remains to this day in provincial territory.

Since the flooding, the community food champions have been organizing training on hunting, fishing and other traditional skills for the youth to learn their traditional ways of living off the land. Details of community activities will be described in later part of the article. Each year since 2006 they make a pilgrimage to their original community for Kiwikapawetan and many families

camp there for the entire summer. For example, Spence family with Elder Annie Spence, at 97 years old last year stayed there the entire summer from June until October in 2012.

### **Indigenous Food sovereignty: A holistic concept of peoplehood, resurgence and decolonization**

Food is a gift from the Creator. In this respect, the right to food is sacred and cannot be constrained or recalled by colonial laws, policies or institutions. Indigenous food sovereignty is ultimately achieved by upholding our longstanding sacred responsibilities to nurture healthy, interdependent relationships with the land, plants and animals that provide us with our food.  
(Morrison, 2011, p. 100)

Food sovereignty concept is often discussed as an alternative concept of food security to broaden the discussion to local people's control over the food system (Wittman, 2011). However, "indigenous" food sovereignty, in the context of indigenous peoples living in Canada, is understood through the lenses of decolonization, peoplehood and resurgence theory (Morrison, 2011). These lenses strive for indigenous empowerment using everyday action both outside of and in counterpoint to the state's colonial forces that deprive and isolate people from land, culture, community and traditional food and medicinal resources. Thus, indigenous food sovereignty is a holistic approach that embodies "being" an indigenous person, considering their place-based identity (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005). This cultural identity offers celebrating equal access and share of everyday resource consumption in community.

Indigenous food sovereignty is fundamentally based on "action" or the day-to-day practice of nurturing healthy relationships with the land, plants and animals. These provide the medicines and foods to nourish life and culture. Continued participation in Indigenous food-related action at the individual, family, community and regional levels are fundamental to maintaining indigenous food sovereignty as a living reality for both present and future generations (Morrison, 2011, p. 100).

Therefore, participation and a special bond with nature are associated with the indigenous food sovereignty concept. Livelihood practice and the food economy embedded with respect for the environment is an integral part of this process (Gombay, 2004). Ties between humans and the plant as well as the animal worlds are seen as spiritual, in a way that sees that the "environment is literally alive. The various elements of the environment are vital and infused with purpose" (Gombay, 2004, p. 97). This realizes an "awareness of dependence" on nature, the principle of interconnectedness with all living beings (Gombay, 2004, p. 96). An elder in OPCN described how it is important to play your part in giving as well as taking from the food

chain, giving the advice , “You should leave fish guts for seagulls so you can get seagull eggs”(Moose, personal conversation, 2012). Living a life is an experience that should be shared, complimented and completed by sustaining a reciprocal relationship with nature and protecting each other.

This information was not only shared in interviews but witnessed in every day acts. During the research fieldwork I was told that one should take only what one needs from nature, without exploiting any element of Mother Nature and share the fruits of nature with every living being. I saw fishermen in OPCN leaving fish guts for the seagulls and heard stories about a hunter always leaves tea, tobacco or something valuable behind after killing a moose. Similar practices can be found in many other indigenous communities in Canada (Gombay, 2004; Natcher, 2009). This sharing principle includes nature and its elements not only living beings as part of indigenous spiritual reciprocity.

Country food eating and sharing is considered mandatory for cultural survival and important for spiritual fulfillment. Sharing food is a way to celebrate life and builds community bonds to help unite the indigenous community. Based on the devotion of people to the land, identity and community bonding is deepest applied to country foods. Continuous sharing of food between households is one of the major societal practices in indigenous communities in Canada (Natcher, 2009; Sandlos, 2007). This builds bonds and is a way of sharing common property – every living being in the world has common, equal and shared access to natural resources. Thus, country food shared by the hunter is interlinked with a complex set of relationships, which defines the individual, societal and communal association (Sandlos, 2007; Gombay, 2004). While describing Indigenous peoples in Australia, McDonald (2000) explains how identity is formed around food in terms of moral codes, stating:

Aboriginal moral codes and kinship frameworks are more concerned with how to be uniquely oneself in the context of obligations and concerns, which involve deep relatedness to, significant others. This is the primary reason why and how Aboriginal societies have survived throughout the progressive changes wrought by their colonization (McDonald, 2000, p. 102).

This morality code based on reciprocity adds to the formation of personhood/identity (Gombay, 2004). If positioned in the context of wild game sharing, these principles define how indigenous peoples should relate to the people around them and what their relationship with nature is. While explaining the significance of country food in Inuit communities, Gombay (2004) describes that hunter-gatherer society’s necessity to share food constructs an individual’s identity in relation to the collective. The sense of collectiveness, sharing and exchange signifies

cultural uniqueness, which leads to community formation (Caulfield, 1997). According to Corntassel (2012):

If one thinks of peoplehood as interlocking features of language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories, a disruption to any one of these practices threatens all aspects of everyday life. The complex spiritual, political and social relationships that hold peoplehood together are continuously renewed (Corntassel, 2012, p. 89).

In many hunter-gatherer societies eating country foods is very political and social. Massive starvation of First Nation peoples resulted from the dismantling of their food system through colonial and post-colonial policy, which affected the whole community. OPCN is an example. It is an essential part of being an indigenous person (Egede 1995, Gombay, 2004; Natcher, 2009) as well as being part of the collective. Eating and sharing country foods rebuilds the indigenous food system, which will help regain sustainable wellbeing and peoplehood. Indigenous food consumption practice in everyday life is an act that builds community and fosters individual well-being. Collective food sharing maintains a culture friendly healthy life that keeps land, language, ceremonies, and histories alive.

Traditional diet of indigenous people is not only important for cultural nourishment but also health (Waldram, 1985; Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996; Kuhnlein et al., 2006; Turner and Turner 2007; Kuhnlein and Receveur 2007; Power, 2008; Kuhnlein et al., 2009). Traditional foods are rich in nutrition, require a healthy outdoor lifestyle to obtain, and are culturally appropriate (Waldram, 1985). Wild meat and fish can be both a source of protein and minerals and contains less fat and cholesterol. Waldram's (1985) statement discusses the health benefits of country foods:

The more common bush floral resources tend to be higher in both Vitamin A and Vitamin C content than the common vegetables found in the northern stores.... The people of Whitefish Lake utilize a variety of floral resources when they are out in the bush, especially berries, mint tea, and spruce gum... (p. 45).

Food collected from the bush has great nutritional value. Wild meat and fish are a source of quality protein and minerals and the local berries (strawberries, moss berries, raspberries, blueberries) and herbs (Wiggis, Wiggiskowa, wild sage, yarrow, spruce gum, birch bark, juniper, cedar leaves, balsam, hemlock and many more) (Field note household food security survey, 2009) have been a source of vitamins and antibiotics for northern Manitoba people.



OPCN lost access to many of its traditional diets after flooding. Not only the concern about mercury poisoning to fish, habitat for wild games (moose, caribou, beaver, muskrat, mink) was also damaged (Waldram, 1985; Loney, 1995). Wild berry patches and medicinal plants are not easily available in the community after flooding and community members need to travel far to harvest these products. During interviews many community members mentioned about the severe loss of moss berry patches after the flooding. During this research community health workers have stated that it is important to revive the traditional eating habit to keep the younger generation healthy and reduce rates of diabetes and high blood pressure.

The change in food procurement not only damaged their physical health but the traditional food chain. This change also isolated people from their cultural bonds with food and nature, which is essential for their spiritual wellbeing. The newly formed local indigenous food movement and community development planning inform us that the revival of this loss is possible through regaining a traditional bond with nature and food resources (Thompson et al., 2011; Witman, Desmaris and Weibe, 2011; Morrison, 2011). Harvesting food from the bush with others and sharing with family have been a tradition for hundreds of years.

The act of harvesting food consists of a deep cultural meaning for the Cree people living in Canada (Brightman, 1993). Brightman describes the role of food harvesting in the culture of Cree people in northern Quebec, who had similar socio-economic consequences stemming from colonial development projects; Brightman states that the act of hunting and fishing is a “part of a lifestyle that is an end in itself” which is idealized from the “Cree notion of religious love”, a relationship with nature that involves “within the single activity of food harvesting, spiritualism and aesthetics” (1993, p. 263).

### Research Methodology

This research is a joint collaboration between University of Manitoba and OPCN. Community based participatory research was conducted in 2012 under ethics J2012:066. Participatory video, open-ended interviews and focus groups are three major methods undertaken from May to November 2012. A literature review was also undertaken to relate the findings to the literature.

69 OPCN community members participated in the study; 33 of them were self identified Metis, 21 identified themselves as Cree and the other 15 identified as First Nation. Participants’ age range from 19 to 97. Annual income of the participant ranged from \$4,000 to 45,000. Open-ended interviews, focus group and observation of community gatherings were undertaken. Open ended qualitative question ideas were based on household food security survey qualitative questionnaire component from Thompson et al. (2011) relating to common

concerns and experiences with food insecurity, barriers and challenges of (community and individual) traditional food harvest practice and also strategies for coping with food insecurity as well as post flooding trauma, loss of cultural heritage and health.

Participants were recruited via announcement from community band office and the community health complex. The principal investigator met people at OPCN band office from 9 am to 5 pm and invited them randomly for interviews. Interviews were also taken at the health complex by organized focus groups with elders and single mothers. Refreshments were provided during the interviews. Tobacco offerings to elders, traditional tea, snack and homemade bannock were also offered to the elder participants. Data were collected by audio and video recordings and supported with hand written notes taken during the interview.

### Finding

The findings of the indigenous food movement were largely around key events including community gatherings on the land, Ithinto Mechisowin, education programming, youth empowerment and the importance of day to day engagement with land based food as resurgence.

### OPCN's Indigenous Food Movement and community gatherings on the land

Indigenous food movement is important for empowering OPCN people. Since its inception OPCN is known as a community that tries for “empowerment and reflexive action” (Lienafa and Martin, 2010, p.58). Traditionally, before flooding passing knowledge to younger generations on how to live of the land sustainably was part of everyday life (Waldram, 1984; Hoffman, 2008; Lienafa and Martin, 2010, p.58-59). Children helped their elders and parents harvest food from the land as a well-accepted part of celebrating life in all seasons. In time, with all kinds of colonial impositions, like residential school, CRD and relocation, many people were deprived of access to country foods. In order to bring back their heritage and health, community food champions started to organize a summer food harvest and youth training camp called kiwikapawetan, which is a Cree word meaning returning home. The community takes the youth to their original settlement that was flooded to teach them different skills of traditional way of harvesting.

The goal of kiwikapawetan is to remember all the positive cultural practices and memories, which were lost due to the flooding and other colonial impositions. The program aims to teach the children about cultural belonging and the importance of gaining identity by learning about traditional food and medicine and connecting to ancestral land and community. One of the community members says:

Part of this event is to invite the youth for these kinds of training. [It] is their freedom to learn. We don't ask them that come and learn. They come and watch and participate willingly. We lived it and we learnt. And now they love the interest of that (Dysart, personal conversation, 2010).

The event consists of training on different kinds of food harvesting activities such as setting nets, cleaning and filleting fish, smoking and grilling fish in teepee fire, preparing moose and caribou meat for smoking, pounding meat and making traditional moose meat recipes, bannok baking on an open fire, cutting geese and preparing geese, harvesting medicines and learning to use different traditional medicines etc. The event also organizes sports events including a fishing derby, canoe racing, scavenger hunt for nature elements (medicinal plants and other indication of wildlife etc.) along with dancing and singing competitions that invite the whole community to participate. It is very well accepted by the community members and recently has started to invite outsiders to join in. From 200 to 350 people attend the campout, including people coming back great distances to be part of it. In 2012, the event received the recognition of Manitoba Spirit of the Earth award from the government of Manitoba. This group fundraises all year round to support their summer camp.

Other events in the community also aim to pass culture to youth. Another group of community members have been organizing similar youth training camp at the end of summer every year called Wassasihk. This camp started with the notion of healing the community and teaching the youth about traditional believes, practices and ways of living. This camp consists of training on traditional food harvest techniques including hunting, fishing, trapping, use of medicinal plants, making moose meat lard etc. This camping does intensive spiritual healing for community members, elders and youth by also conducting a sharing circle for women, sweat lodges, drum singing, keeping fire, traditional story telling etc. OPCN health complex provides financial support for this camp to conduct a diabetes workshop. The community Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative worker conducted several health education and food consumption workshops during three days of camping with both youth and adults.

The core vision of the program was to create capacity building. This program provides a learning system through which the community elders can pass their knowledge of traditional land base livelihood and food harvesting techniques to youth. The objective of such educational training in First Nation communities in Canada is founded on passing on the knowledge, reducing generational gap and recreating respect for land base culture (Food Secure Canada, 2012, p. 9). OPCN food champions have strengthened this alternative learning/training system by linking this community practice with food sovereignty and economic development.

### Capacity building education on country foods

Knowledge exchange activities shared country food teachings in different seasons. Every workshop involved community food champions and adults present who shared stories about traditional food harvesting, respecting the land and the ways of living before flooding. The health aspect of traditional food was discussed considering why traditional food is needed and how much nutrition it carries, etc.

Through these workshops the University of Manitoba student, Asfia Kamal, observed the cultural significance of food from these events but also filmed them. She provided technical workshops on participatory video to give people the skills to share their stories with the outside world, which particularly interests the media-savvy community youth.

The following table shows some of the seasonal training/knowledge exchange activities done with different community based organization before Ithinto Mechisowin program was formed. The process was interactive and reciprocal.

Season	Activity type	Facilitator	Participants	Number of people trained per workshop
<b>Summer and Spring</b>	Healthy Cooking workshop at the school At School	Graduate student from U of M, principle researcher at the community.	School students, teachers and educational assistants	20 (15 youth and 5 adults)
	Traditional cooking lessons At the health complex	Community elders	Graduate student from U of M, principal researcher at the community and community health complex staff	20 (adults)
<b>Summer and Spring</b>	Fish fixing workshop at community camp	Community food champions and elders	Graduate student from U of M, principal researcher at the community and youth	25 (20 youth and 5 adults)
	Geese fixing and plucking workshop	Community food champions and	Graduate student from U of M, principle	15 (10 youth and 5 adults)

	at community camp	elders and principle researcher	researcher at the community and youth	
<b>Fall</b>	Participatory video and photo voice workshop At school	Graduate student from U of M, principle researcher at the community.	School students, grade 9 and 10.	12 (11 youth and 1 adult)
	Moose meat fixing workshop At in land lake area	Hunters	Graduate student from U of M, principle researcher at the community and community members	15 (adults)

After different knowledge exchange and capacity building activities of these kinds over seven months (May to November 2012) the country food program was formed. These activities provided an opportunity for both groups to learn and change the societal system.

Recent day First Nation economic development literature brings some common themes that any Aboriginal community development plan should prioritize. For example, sustainable economic development needs to be accompanied with Aboriginal self-governance. The community economic development approach should be based on: self-reliance; local control over their own programming; Aboriginal culture and a planned comprehensive approach. The government supports with flexible and long term funding are few (Loxley, 2010). This realization was understood and dealt by the community-University participatory engagement.

**Ithinto Mechisowin (food from the land) program**

Ithinto Mechisowin is a Cree word that means food from the land and is the name of the new traditional food program at OPCN. This food from the land program includes fish, local vegetable crops and meat and in 2012 established its own building complete with three freezers and a commercial kitchen to cut the fish and meat.

The program focuses on elders and single mothers for sharing country food and community youth for training them regarding country food. Ithinto Mechisowin provides on average 5 to 10 lbs of fish to the most needy 16 to 20 families, as required every week. The program started to distribute food in June, 2013 and in two months it was able to provide fish, fish heads, fish eggs, berries etc. to approximately 100 people out of 1200 in the community on different schedules.

The number of people taking food from the program is growing. Also these country foods are provided to cultural gatherings and campouts to ensure traditional foods are the center of community activities.

The Ithinto Mechisowin program started with a vision to support residents of OPCN to improve their community food security and health in a way that facilitated culturally-appropriate community inspired social and economic development. By involving youth in educational workshops on hunting, fishing, processing and sharing through the school and community activities there is a large capacity building component to this program. To ensure the program is run in a culturally appropriate manner the program takes regular guidance and assistance from the elders. The project has already received in kind support and positive remarks from the community school, the Northern Store, community Band/local government, Fishermen's Association, Trappers Association.

The community-university engagement brought limited economic resources with it. However, the university saw the strengths and assets in the community, including the wealth of knowledge regarding the land and land based foods. Without dedicated resources in terms of building, staff and money, many of the community food champions, leaders and organizers could not envision a community based food program. However, with planning and community human and social capital a program was born. This under evaluating of their own community capacity is a product of historical marginalization (Loxely, 1981) and colonial rule. Government laws and Indian agents tried to control every aspect of their lives, which undermined their culture and created a certain amount of apathy in response to these "external" pressures (Loxely, 2010). Despite the lack of Canadian support the Aboriginal community members have recognized the need for community economic development:

Native communities have inevitably had to go well beyond the defensive positions designed to preserve the existing way of life and consider adjustments to, and possible improvements in, their way of life in the face of these external pressures.

(Loxley, 2010, p. 20).

The hope of starting a country foods program was shared with University of Manitoba in 2009 when a group of researchers came to shoot a documentary called Harvesting Hope in Northern Manitoba (2010). Based on this community interest and knowing that food programs to distribute traditional food had the largest impact on food security, University of Manitoba student Asfia Gulrukh Kamal focused her doctoral thesis in this area. Ms. Kamal has helped the community form the community food program, Ithinto Mechisowin, under the wing of OPCN's Tommy Thomas Memorial Health Complex and Community Care immediately. The importance

of this focus was confirmed by a model indicating country food programs have greater impact on improving food security (Thompson et al, 2012) than access to competitive food stores or road access. Nelson House Country Foods program provided an example to guide the program but it had to differ as unlike Nelson House it had no funding for six permanent workers. OPCN's Ithinto Mechisowin program is providing one part time permanent worker in the position of program coordinator. The program also provides honorarium and gas for elders and adults who help to train the youth and harvest the food sustainability.

Food sharing was occurring before the Ithinto Mechisowin program started. This food sharing was individual but had also been organized by Community Association of South Indian Lake (CASIL), which started to distribute moose meat in the fall season from their Big Sand Lake Lodge in 2009 for free. To jumpstart community economic development where there are few opportunities, CASIL built a tourist lodge beside Big Sand Lake, a fly-in lake away from OPCN's main settlement to attract rich American hunters and fishers in the 1990s. Since its inception the lodge created employment opportunities by hiring local hunters and fishermen as guides, cooks and care takers. The lodge is well equipped to cut and package meat and contributes the cost of distribution to individual households as well. In 2012, the lodge donated nearly 6,000 pounds of meat of which a tenth of that went to OPCN's Oscar Blackburn School's grade nine and ten student's alternative life skill class to teach student how to eat traditional food in a healthy way. This organized sharing of land based foods formed organically to respond to the need for cultural revival but also food insecurity.

Since the flooding community food champions have felt the need for a sustainable program to allow everyone access to land based foods. OPCN's identity, culture, livelihood and sustainable well being was dependent on ready access to country foods – resources that has been damaged and access curtailed, particularly since the flooding for the last three decades. In the last few decades traditional initiatives have occurred at OPCN but did not reach the entire community and were seasonal. A traditional food program for families and youth was needed to have opportunities to hunt and fish, which they were deprived of most of the time due to its large expenses. These isolated initiatives (Kiwikapawetan, CASIL, Wassasihk) inspired OPCN to combine all the community resources and activities for access to traditional healthy food consumption and youth training.

Ithinto Mechisowin program is culturally appropriate and plays an important role in empowering OPCN's peoplehood. Our study finds that by creating access to country food, doing collaborative project for resource and capacity building and engaging youth can create pathways to indigenous food sovereignty, decolonization and bring strong peoplehood and sustainable resurgence to the community. The community members through Ithinto

Mechisowin are healing and rebuilding a means to access food from the land in community. Food sovereignty is needed for OPCN's resurgence and peoplehood. For a community like OPCN where traditional livelihood and social structure is deeply smitten by colonial and post-colonial forces, these kinds of initiatives are essential. The community needs support from outside to inspire them, help them get through the everyday challenges and make them believe that sovereignty is possible. That is largely being achieved at OPCN by collaborative actions taken towards youth capacity building. The youth and community members are becoming healthier through Ithinto Mechisowin and allowed a University of Manitoba student to be a part of it, as a witness but also an organizer, proposal writer, and advocate to larger society, to gain funding, approvals from Manitoba Conservation and Public health, which helped realize the first step of a food program center complete with three large freezers and a cutting table.

The consumption of land-based food is fundamental to eradicate food insecurity from Northern Manitoba (Thompson et al. 2012, Fieldhouse and Thompson 2012). In OPCN the post flooding modernization has replaced its traditional hunting and fishing diet with high calorie junk food, which comes at high cost from its only store, The Northern Store. The food program providing local country foods is the answer to food sustainability in north according to interviews and other findings.

### Youth empowerment

Recently the Idle No More movement is inspiring youth leadership and brings together indigenous and nonindigenous for decolonizing activities in Canada. With the Idle No More Movement, many indigenous communities in Canada are trying to follow the path of decolonization through local initiatives, both related and not related to food. In northern Manitoba country food program in Nishichawayasihk Cree Nation's and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation's Ithinto Mechisowin (food from the land) program are two worth mentioning with community based agendas. These program provided year round training for community youth on indigenous food consumption and sharing practices (hunting, trapping, fishing or community camping) invite youth to get out of the comfort zone of modern life and junk food habit and pay attention to true sense of indigenous purpose and belonging.

Alfred and Corntassel (2005), argue that going back to natural food resources/diet and "learning-teaching relationships that foster real and meaningful human development and community solidarity" should be considered and practiced to bring solution to contemporary colonial oppression" (p. 613). Recent day food sovereignty studies also find the need to train the youth on health, sustainability and food production (Thompson et al., 2011; Rudolph, 2012; Rudolph and Mclachlan, 2013).

### Resurgence through day to day practice



Another aspect of indigenous food sovereignty is that it is an act of resurgence. Resurgence means continuous renewal of indigenous collective being through day-to-day practices in everyday life (Corntassel, 2012) that determine habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). In OPCN when a boy shoots his first moose, often the family holds a feast on his honor and gives special mention of this event to his friends and families. This is considered a right of passage turning him into a young man with collective responsibilities and a strong connection with nature. Indigenous lifestyle is comprised of sustainable survival strategies to live off the land. Through country food procurement and sharing a community accumulates its social capital and strengthens its agency.

In modern society, resurgence is nuanced. Many OPCN community members do not perceive indigenous well-being as literally living of the land and rejecting modern conveniences and education. For them re-envisioning and renewing their identity must coincide with their present day lived realities. Improving community well-being by teaching the younger generation in traditional as well as modern concept of education is a movement in many Canadian First Nation communities in Canada today (Ball, 2004). The model combines western and traditional learning to create more resilience in youth generation (Ball, 2004). In the OPCN context, in order to hunt and fish, a youth does not have to leave school; the education system provides these activities in a special course that was recently developed. These kinds of acts of resurgence help to institutionalize decolonization in schools.

Decolonization is occurring through indigenous food sovereignty based actions at OPCN. According to Fanon (1963) decolonization should aim to create and reestablish lived experiences where “racialized subjects” could freely exchange “in societies founded on the principle of receptive generosity” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007,p. 250). This idea explains OPCN’s insights and actions of food sovereignty movement.

Freedom of exchange needs to be combined with freedom of action to use, share and access resources equally, individually and collectively. In other words, decolonization requires active and collective everyday work towards reclaiming “land-base and water-based” sustainable well being practices along with positive and growing consciousness of surrounding politics (Alfred, 2005; Regan 2005, p.4; Corntassel, 2012). Drawn from the words of Corntassel (2012), decolonization comes by “rejecting the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and recognition, and embracing a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices” (p. 88-89). And for this we need both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples to be proactive towards conscious acts of decolonization. Recently the Idle No More movement in Canada is inspiring youth leadership and brings together indigenous and nonindigenous for decolonizing activities. OPCN’s food sovereignty movement reflects on that.

OPCN lost access to many of its traditional diets after flooding. There were concern about mercury poisoning to fish (Waldram 1988b). And habitat for wild games (moose, caribou, beaver, muskrat, mink) was also damaged (Waldram, 1985; Loney, 1995). Wild berry patches and medicinal plants are not easily available in the community after flooding and community members need to travel far to harvest these products. During interviews many community members mentioned about the severe loss of moss berry patches after the flooding. During this research community health workers have stated that it is important to revive the traditional eating habit to keep the younger generation healthy and reduce rates of diabetes and high blood pressure in the community.

Harvesting food from the bush with others and sharing with family have been a tradition for hundreds of years. The change in food procurement not only damaged their physical health but the traditional food chain. This change also isolated people from their cultural bonds with food and nature, which is essential for their spiritual wellbeing. The newly formed local indigenous food movement and community development planning inform us that the revival of this loss is possible through regaining a traditional bond with nature and food resources (Thompson et al., 2011; Witman, Desmaris and Weibe, 2011; Morrison, 2011).

The act of harvesting food consists of a deep cultural meaning for the Cree people living in Canada (Brightman, 1993). Brightman describes the role of food harvesting in the culture of Cree people in northern Quebec, who had similar socio-economic consequences stemming from colonial development projects; Brightman states that the act of hunting and fishing is a “part of a lifestyle that is an end in itself” which is idealized from the “Cree notion of religious love”, a relationship with nature that involves “within the single activity of food harvesting, spiritualism and aesthetics” (1993, p. 263).

Northern Manitoba Cree and Metis people’s relationship with nature is also entwined with the importance of family relations, sharing food with the family, health and sustainable well being (Waldram, 1985). In OPCN, where there is a mix of Cree and Metis population, acts of love, sharing food harvested from the land and respect for nature are practiced daily. This traditional practice is apparent in everyday life in OPCN and is similar to an act one must do out of religious obligations.

The following timeline shows a qualitative assessment and gives a clear picture of how through different community based activities and using social and human capital the community moved forward for sustainable well being.

During one of the interviews for this study a community member at OPCN stated:

Food and knowledge are both important in our ways of living. We cannot live without any of them. Food and knowledge are no good for you if you don't understand, practice and share them. For us it is not as easy as it was before. We need to heal and we need the right kind of knowledge, activities and food to heal. (Moose personal conversation, 2012)

If the “right kind of activity” is organized by a collaborative project between indigenous and non-indigenous groups - a large socioeconomic transformation will occur that will decolonize minds and reduce structural discrimination through a true culturally educative understanding. Ithinto Mechisowin program organization of training youth all the year round with the help of school, health complex and University of Manitoba serves all these purposes.



## Conclusion

Ithinto Mechisowin program grew out of a community need. There was a need for both cultural pride but also food security, with a finding of 100% food insecurity (Thompson et al, 2011). Models pointed to country food programs as the aspect that made most positive impact on food security but also community dialogue of what was important and possible turned to discussions of harvesting land based foods all the year round and getting youth out on the land.

The goals and activities of the program were framed by the community around indigenous food sovereignty to foster decolonization and resurgence as an outcome. Ithinto Mechisowin has a focus on building youth capacity towards traditional food harvest and consumption which can simultaneously enable reconnection to the land and land base food in youth and create sustainable food security. This program is multifaceted working through existing institutions and resources. The idea is to strengthen what already exists rather than building upon a new set of skills. The requirement is not only for food but also for acknowledging the power of indigenous peoplehood. In the words of Alfred and Corntassel (2005):

As Indigenous peoples, the way to recovering freedom and power and happiness is clear: it is time for each one of us to make the commitment to transcend colonialism as people, and for us to work together as peoples to become forces of Indigenous truth against the lie of colonialism. We do not need to wait for the colonizer to provide us with money or to validate our vision of a free future; we only need to start to use our Indigenous languages to frame our thoughts, the ethical framework of our philosophies to make decisions and to use our laws and institutions to govern ourselves (Corntassel, 2005, p. 614)

What comprises indigenous food sovereignty and how can OPCN move forward independently without waiting for outsiders to help? OPCN's indigenous food sovereignty movement answers our question. Of course there are many technical, economical reasons for its success. However, community members believe that the strength of this program lies in youth involvement, traditional food oriented activities and the pro community interactive resource flow based bottom up approach.

Knowledge transmission between elder and youth is essential for indigenous peoplehood and resurgence (Corntassel, 2012). All the program activities aim to circulate resources within the community by youth capacity building. In order to do that the program is building a youth centered framework and creating educational resources on traditional food harvest skill for the school students using participatory video skills. The idea here is to not only learn about harvesting traditional food, but also to know how to document the knowledge so that it can be shared with others.

Ithinto Mechisowin is growing as a participatory program where both community institutions and non-indigenous outsider organizations are coming together with the same goal, which is a precondition for true decolonization. There is a need for non-indigenous people to shift too. In the words of Regan (2005),

To get 'unstuck' the non-indigenous society must focus not on the problem of the "other" (that is, Indigenous peoples) but turn our gaze, mirror-like, back upon ourselves. This is what Roger Epp calls the "settler problem." In essence, we must begin to take a more proactive responsibility for decolonizing ourselves (p.6).

This paper invites non-indigenous communities to perceive the lived realities of a remote, food insecure Northern Manitoba reserve community. The first step for the non-indigenous people is to realize that the "lived realities" of a marginalized community is built upon simultaneous experiences of strength based on traditional knowledge (of food and livelihood) and powerlessness created by constant usurpation of resources. Like many other First Nation communities in Canada OPCN has trusted all Canadians and invited them with an open mind. But are we, as non-indigenous people, giving just and proper response to their welcoming?

The solution for indigenous communities therefore is community activities related to understanding sustainability and cultural significance of land base food, community economic development that creates local resources and most importantly youth empowerment and capacity building. All these elements are present in Ithinto Mechisowin food sovereignty model. The non-indigenous participants in the research should join the fight with the same goal of unlearning colonial influence and learn strength of indigenous peoplehood. As a community OPCN has learn to observe its realities with a constant search for traditional strategies to fight back.

Ithinto Mechisowin provides a model for food sovereignty. At the community level, country foods are shared to educate youth, empower families, build food security and capacity build for community development. Non-indigenous people should embrace this model and the learning activities for them to see resources through the eyes of indigenous peoples, so that they can share them, starting with food, but considering the land, water and its other wealth.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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