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Anishinaabeg Maternal Activism: We Sing a Prayer for the Water

My Anishinaabeg maternal activism arises from the water songs of my ancestors and the women of my Anishinaabeg community. As Anishinaabeg women and mothers, our maternal activism around water and water rights is rooted in our interconnected relationship with the water as women and mothers. The traditional and modern rationale of maternal activism is rooted not only in treaty responsibilities but also in the nibi-dibaajimowinan, such as our sacred prayers and songs. Anishinaabeg mothers, women, and those LGBTTIQQ2S+ persons who identify on the female gender spectrum take up the role of the water activists to honour and uphold their duties to the water. The activist role is really an extension of our traditional roles as carriers of the water (e.g., menstruation, pregnancy, or inside copper pails during our ceremonies) and keepers of the treaty rights of water. Activism for the water is not only like protecting a relative but also like protecting ourselves because we are not living well as human beings, Anishinaabeg, unless we care for the water that sustains us. Anishinaabeg maternal activism is born out of our water songs. In this article, I explore why Anishinaabeg mothers engage in activism for the water. I explore the traditional teachings that inform Anishinaabeg maternal relationships to water. I explain Anishinaabeg women's path to activism through the teachings of women's role in warriorship. Last, I share some traditional prayer songs for the water that have been publicly published and explain their importance to Anishinaabeg maternal activism in relation to activism for the sovereignty of Indigenous water rights, culture, health, and territory.

Water is our relative! Water is sacred! We fight for the water! I raise my daughters to be activists for the rights of water. My maternal activism arises from the water songs of my ancestors and the women of my Anishinaabeg¹ community. One morning several years ago, I lay in bed cuddling my daughter Juniper, humming a traditional water song. She asked me what I was humming,

so I taught her the words, one by one, until she could sing it with me. Juniper sang them out with a little voice and then asked to sing them to the water at the nearby lake. We talked about how important the water is to women and girls. I explained to her that this is why we bring our sacred semaa or tobacco to the waters of the nearby lake. We bring her semaa, talk to her, and visit with her like an auntie or grannie. Activism for the water is like protecting a relative but also protecting ourselves because we are not living well as human beings, Anishinaabeg, unless we care for the water that sustains us. Anishinaabeg maternal activism is born out of our water songs.

I learned from my Anishinaabeg women mentors that maternal activism has deep roots in our *nibi-dibaajimowinan* (water teachings; knowledge; stories), or women's teachings about responsibilities as women, or *kwewag* to the land and water. Women, mothers, and grandmothers are charged to protect, preserve, and pray for the water. It is for this reason that many of our Anishinaabeg women stand at the front of protest lines or marches (e.g., Water Walks) singing prayers for the water. As Anishinaabeg women and mothers, our maternal activism around water and water rights is rooted in our interconnected relationship with the water as women and mothers. The traditional and modern rationale of maternal activism is rooted in not only treaty responsibilities but also the *nibi-dibaajimowinan*, such as our sacred prayers and songs. Anishinaabeg mothers, women, and those LGBTQ2S+ persons who identify on the female gender spectrum take up the role of the water activist to honour and uphold their duties to the water. The activist role is really an extension of our traditional roles as carriers of the water (e.g. menstruation, pregnancy, or inside copper pails during our ceremonies) and keepers of the treaty rights of water. No matter the reason, we are those that guard the sovereignty of the water and the territorial waters of our nation.

In this article, I first explore why Anishinaabeg mothers engage in activism for the water. I examine the traditional teachings that inform Anishinaabeg maternal relationships to water. Second, I explain the Anishinaabeg women path to activism through the teachings of women's role in warriorship. And, third, I share some traditional prayer songs for the water that have been publicly published and explain their importance to Anishinaabeg maternal activism in relation to activism for the sovereignty of Indigenous water rights, culture, health, and territory.

Maternal Treaty Responsibilities for the Water

From a young age, Anishinaabeg learn that water is an ancient ally to the Earth and to human beings. We are taught that all Gizhew-Manidoo (Creator; Great Spirit; Great Mystery; Kind Spirit) asked the water to join her sister in creation, the Earth, to create the human beings (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*

12; Benton-Banai, “Anishinaabe Creation Story” 27). Furthermore, the water, the land, and all life on Earth accepted the responsibility to nurture and provide sustenance, shelter, and protection to human beings because they were helpless without them (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 12). Water agreed, and as part of that agreement, human beings agreed to live in accordance with the Creator’s Great Laws (Gizhew-Manidoo Gchi-Inaakonigewinan) (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 12) and, specifically, those referring to the water were called the Gchi-Nibi Inaakonigewinan or Great Water Laws. These are what are called our original treaty responsibilities or legal responsibilities. Human treaty responsibilities with the water are set out to protect the purity of the water, to preserve it as it was first created, and to offer thankful prayers not only to honour that close relationship but also to think of that water as a relative - a sister and auntie to us all.

The first treaty responsibilities we are introduced to are with the water. As biological females, we form our eggs while we are inside our mothers when they were themselves unborn babies nestled inside the wombs of our grandmothers. Water is there before we are even conceived. Each egg contains cells filled with water. When we begin our monthly cycles of menstruation at puberty, each egg is bathed in water as it is released into the fallopian tube and travels down to the uterus to await fertilization. If no fertilization takes place, the waters of menstruation wash out the unfertilized egg from the woman’s body. The womb is replenished with new waters for the next month and then awaits the new egg’s arrival. At conception, the sperm arrives to the fluids of the woman’s womb and joins the egg to create life. The new cells of the fetus are surrounded in a protective sack of water, which will deliver the baby on a wave of water into the world. Once born, the baby’s first food is the colostrum waters of the mother, which arrives before the milk. The milk then hydrates and sustains the child. The first treaty every human being has is with the maternal waters or mide-waaboo (sacred water) of their mother.

My treaty responsibilities also extend to those treaties with the Canadian government. My Anishinaabe-Ojibwe and Nibisiing ancestors on my mother’s maternal side have always lived along the waters of Lake Nipissing, Trout Lake, and the French River. I am a member of Dokis First Nation on the island of Okikendawt. My relationship and ancestral connections to those waterways is embedded in the written words of the 1850 Robinson Huron Treaty signed by my great, great, great grandfather Michel Eagle Dokis, whose Spirit name was Petawachuan. According to Norm Dokis Jr., Petawachuan translates to “I hear the rapids far away,” and Dokis was actually his nickname that got turned into his legal last name (Becking). The Treaty created the present boundaries of Dokis First Nation. By signing the Treaty, Petawachuan sought to protect past, present, and future legal rights to exist on the waterways and lands of the French River. Under the stress of westward

colonial expansion and threats to his people's territorial resources, particularly lumber, hunting rights, and territorial waterways, Petawachuan did what he knew would protect their resources for his people. By signing the treaty, he knew he was saying goodbye to a lot of his ancestral territorial lands, but he was also under immense pressure to protect the sacred grounds of Okikendawt. The place where our ancestors went to honour the sacred phenomenon of the cauldrons or kettlepots where the little spirits of the memegwesiwag dwelled. Okikendawt would have been a sacred location for the Anishinaabeg to conduct Midewiwin ceremonies to gain knowledge, medicines, and travel to the Spirit World under the tutelage and watchful eye of the memegwesiwag (Conway 124-26).

While the entire Treaty process was and still is highly problematic as a mechanism for the colonization of the Anishinaabe peoples of Northern Ontario, I am still very thankful for the foresight of Petawachuan in seeing to the preservation of those traditional territorial waterways and land that we still have today. I still bring my tobacco to the river waters, and I have had the privilege to leave tobacco at the cauldrons with the aid of my cousin and nature guide Clayton Dokis. Performing those small ceremonies and rituals honours not only the traditional rites of Anishinaabeg women and mothers to our responsibilities to the water but also the treaty signed by Petawachuan. My maternal activism resides in those duties and responsibilities to the waterways of my ancestors.

Nibi (Water): The Sovereignty of Anishinaabe Women

Traditional maternal roles and responsibilities are the roots of contemporary maternal thinking and what drives current maternal activism related to environmental advocacy, activism, protest, resistance, and cultural resurgence. Indigenous matricentric governance roles are rooted in perceptions of water as relative/relation, as an embodiment of female identity, and as mothers. In the not too distant past, my female relatives understood their bodies in terms of the governance of it by the Earth, moon, and water cycles. Women are taught that water controls their menstrual cycles, our ability to carry a viable pregnancy. It is present during our miscarriages to cleanse our bodies and acts as a wave of water to usher in the new life of our children. And when our menstrual cycles leave us as menopause, water stays with us as a familiar companion to walk with us on the final stage of life. Matricentric laws are bound within these physical, spiritual, and emotional connections to the water that resides, controls, and guides our female and maternal bodies throughout our life path (miikana-bimaadiziwin).

Mohawk Elder and midwife Katsi (Tekatsitsiakawa) Cook writes as follows:

It is important to begin at the beginning. In everything the People do, they start at the beginning. When I asked, “How do we teach the young about birth?” I was told, “Begin with the story of the first birth.” So, we turn to our origins to understand women’s ways. The Creation stories, the cosmologies, contain the worldview and values of Indigenous peoples. They are the spiritual foundation of traditional communities, and an important place to start when we need to understand how to deal with the problems we face here and now today. (80)

According to Cook, Indigenous Creation (or maternal Creation stories) provides Indigenous women with “perceptions about life” in relation to the water as women: mothers, daughters, sisters, grandmothers, aunties, and LGBTTIQQ2S+ (Cook 81). She notes that it is from those original stories that we find that “the entire universe is a family, and we learn that the greatest good is harmony. We learn the responsibilities and original instructions that all Creation has in maintaining this harmony” (Cook 81). Cook advises us that to know about birth, motherhood, and womanhood, we must look at the story of the first birth and the role of water; likewise, to understand maternal roles and responsibilities towards the water, we must look to the teachings of the first woman, the first mother, Aki or Ashkaakamigokwe (Mother Earth), and her sister Nibi, the water.

Complementary to this point is the teaching on first woman offered by esteemed Anishinaabe Elder Bawdwaywidun Bensaise Edward Benton-Banai-ba² who writes in his seminal 1988 book *The Mishomis Book* the following: “*The Earth is said to be a woman*. In this way it is understood that woman preceded man on the Earth. She is called Mother Earth because from Her come all living things. Water is Her life blood. It flows through Her, nourishes Her, and purifies Her” (Benton-Banai 2). Benton-Banai explains to his readers Anishinaabe understandings on Creation and the order of life on Earth. This brief passage presents several significant teachings. First, he teaches that before all else came Kwe, a woman in the form of Mother Earth. The Earth itself was mother to all of Gzhe-Mnidoo’s Creations on the planet, feeding all life with her body and offering medicines, shelter, clothing, protection, companionship, and education. Additionally, Benton-Banai makes the connection between women, mothers, and water. He notes that women have a reciprocal and unique relationship with the waters of the Earth. Among the Anishinaabe people, it is believed that our women in particular share a sacred connection to the spirit of water through their role as child bearers and have particular responsibilities to protect those same aspects in water.

Second, Benton-Banai highlights the importance of water in the order of Creation. Along with woman, water was placed on the Earth before humans.

Anishinaabe Elder Peter Akinson from Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation clarifies this idea further: “There are four levels above the Earth too. The third is water. It is said that a spirit hit the Earth when the Earth was only water, and it took water up to the third level. It’s said that water will always flow and always be beautiful” (qtd. in Craft 25). Anishinaabeg further holds the following:

This family is basis of all creation in the universe. This family was created by Gitchi Manitou, the Creator. Earth is said to be a woman. She preceded man and her name is Mother Earth because all living things live from her gifts. Water is her life blood. It flows through her, nourishes her, and purifies her.

[Gaa-zhi-nwendiwaad gowenwag n’swi, mii gaa-wnjiimgak kina gegoon maawndi kiing. Mii we gaa-zhitood Gzhe-mnidoo. Kwewid we Mzakmig-kwe kidnaanwan. Jibwaa-wzhichgaaznid ninwan, gii-bi-yaa ntam we Mzakmig-kwe. Kina gaa-bmaadziwaad wgashktoon-aawaa wii-bmaadziwaad Mzakmig-kwewan wnji. Wdoo-mskwiim, mii gaa-aawang nbi. Aabjjwan dash Mzakmig-kweng ji-bmaadziid gye wiin miinwaa ji-biinaabaawnind.] (Pukaskwa National Park)

Both Elders Atkinson and Benton-Banai teach that water comes from the actual physical body of the Earth; water has life, has Spirit or Manidoo, and is protected by powerful spirits that live in her and around her (Craft 25; Benton-Banai 2). All life requires water, even the Earth itself needs it to continue to be life sustaining. *Nibi*, water, is important for our individual and community survival, health, wellbeing, and sustainability as well as for ecological integrity and function.

Water plays an important role in Anishinaabe maternal ceremonies, especially in puberty rites, pregnancy, and birth ceremonies, along with breastfeeding rituals. It is a fundamental part of how we come into this world as human beings and are sustained through breastmilk. Mide-waaboo (the sacred water of the womb; amniotic fluid; fluid in our cells) is present to usher our eggs through to the fallopian tube to the uterus, at conception, and carries us through the gestation period until it announces our birth to Creation on a literal wave of water (or gentle bath as in the case of my babies birthed via c-section). For this reason, water is prioritized in many of the Creation stories of Indigenous nations across Turtle Island (North America). Girls and women are taught that throughout our lives “we carry the life for the people” (qtd. in GURSOZ) when we carry water either in our bodies or during ceremonies. In Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language), women, mothers, and grandmothers are given the title of Nibi-Mide-Ogichidaakwewag (medicine warriors for the Spirit of the water) because they protect the rights of the water, they speak the prayers for the water, sing the songs for the water, dance

for the water, and fight for the rights of water to be honoured. The sovereignty of the water is closely aligned to the sovereignty, leadership and agency of our maternal rights and those of our Indigenous nations.

Mohawk Elder and midwife Katsi Cook stresses the following:

Control over production and the reproduction of human beings and all our relations is integral to sovereignty. It is this area of sovereignty which falls primarily in the domain of the female universe and encompasses the balances and forces which promote the harmony and well-being of the People. Women are the base of the generations. They are carriers of the culture. (Cook 5)

Women are leaders in the governance of the sovereignty of our Indigenous nations territories, cultures, and intellectual traditions. As a people, we often use the saying, “Anishinaabe women birth the nation.” Similarly, Mi’kmaq Elder and artist Shirley Bear says that Indigenous “women are powerful because they birth the whole world” (qtd. in Anderson 164). One of my own cultural mentors, Anishinaabe Elder Edna Manitowabi, describes women as a “sacred lifegiver” (qtd. in Anderson 194). Indigenous women Elders—like Cook, Bear, Manitowabi, as well as Mohawk herbalist Jan Longboat—speak about revering the sacredness of our female bodies, especially during puberty, pregnancy, birth, and menopause. Longboat shares that her mother used to talk about preparing the body to give life: “She was very conscious about keeping healthy to give life” (qtd. in Anderson 195). For our Indigenous ancestors, awareness of the body worked to inspire healthy eating, planting medicines, and mental preparedness; additionally, it contributed to how they viewed themselves as a sacred part of the wider cycle of life on Earth and the Creator’s plan for human beings (Anderson 195; Solomon, 34; Child 16). Anishinaabe Midwife Carol Couchie describes the care of the female body in relation to the woman’s responsibility to look after the water that she carries and protects within her body (Anderson 195). Additionally, according to Anishinaabeg scholar Brenda Child, for the Anishinaabeg, water both in the female body and those on her territorial lands are a “gendered space,” where the women hold personal and legal water rights (29-30).

Cook writes that maternal rights can be understood through the concept of the “women’s community,” which she says teaches women and those among the LGBTQ2S+ who identify along the female gender spectrum to “comprehend our physical and spiritual powers as women” and as maternal figures (Cook 5). Anishinaabe women learn their identities through the support, guidance, and education offered by the company of other women, if not through immediate families, then through their alternative families of community members, friends, and Elders. Women teach the girls, youth, and other women their responsibilities in terms of production and reproduction,

which include our sacred responsibilities to water. Cook asks: “What threatens the sovereignty of women: of the women’s community? What threatens the self-sufficiency of women in matters of production and reproduction, not just of human beings, but of all our relations upon which we depend for a healthy life?” (85). First, there is a threat to our waters in our environmental ecosystems and territorial waterways. These threats include problems with pollution to the land, access to water, interference or altering of the traditional movement of water due to dams, mining, pipelines, or industrial development, which affect the viability of traditional hunting and gathering food sources. Second, Cook offers the following:

With the development of new and dangerous technologies affecting the control of women’s cycles and female mechanical means of reproduction, it is more important now than ever to perceive what meanings lie in our existence as human beings and as Native women.

Everywhere we look, the measure of suffering for female life is the same. Reproduction for human beings and many of our relations is hardly a natural process. Chemicals, instruments, machines and distorted values sap the foundations of women’s ways...Chemical contamination of our bodies and our environments is known to be the leading cause of high rates of cancer, genetic mutation, and disease. (85)

What threatens the women’s community and women’s legal rights is the threat to the sacred feminine relationship to water—physically, mentally, psychologically, and spiritually.

What are we doing as mothers to teach our daughters and LGBTTIQQ2S+ children about their relationship with water in order to raise them to be warriors for water rights? We teach them to understand and connect to the water or spirit of the water, to understand their treaty responsibilities to the water, and to know that they are protectors of the water, which does not have the ability to protect itself from the threats of the contemporary world. I teach my daughters that the “water has a spirit and is looked after by spirits” (Craft 25). As women, it is our traditional and sacred duty to act as water protectors.

“We are the voice for the water” is the rallying call stated by the *Anishinaabe* women’s grass roots group Akii Kwe, from Bkejwanong Territory (Walpole Island Unceded First Nation) (Akii Kwe 1). Akii Kwe acted as a community of women to protest water pollution on their territory by industrial and chemical development by Imperial Chemical Industries. This group of women explains as follows: “We view our fight for water as a spiritual journey. It is part of our collective and individual growth as people” (Akii Kwe 1). Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor, who interviewed the women of Akii Kwe states the following:

For many years, Indigenous women in the Bkejwanong territory have noticed changes in water quality, particularly because they have a close and special relationship to the water. It is part of the Anishnaabe-Kwe tradition that women speak for the water. In the process of rediscovery, revitalization, and healing, the Anishnaabe-Kwe of Bkejwanong Territory organized themselves to speak for the water. Akii Kwe members state that in Bkejwanong, nature provides the foundation of the Anishnaabe culture and the ways in which the people conduct themselves (systems of governance). It is because of this that people have a responsibility to act on behalf of the water. (McGregor 139)

Anishinaabe women's role is the carriers of the knowledge of water governance or Anishinaabe-kwewag nibi inaakonigewin. As the Kwewag within Anishinaabe society, it is our kinship responsibility to act on behalf of not only the people and their rights to water but also the rights of the water itself.

The Anishinaabe women are respected for this deep connection to the Spirit of water and are provided the leadership title of "Water Carriers." This is our sacred inheritance and our sovereign duty to be the voice and physical representation of water. Thus, the responsibilities of the Water Carriers lie in making decisions and taking up responsibilities for the ceremonies and teachings related to maintaining harmonious relations with water (Nibi). Our daughters are trained in the knowledge, ceremonies, and leadership duties of the water carriers. According to Nibi dibaajimowin (Water Teachings), there are four types of waters that the women as Water Carriers are responsible for protecting: the waters that flow from the sky to nourish and cleanse the Mother Earth; the waters that flow through the trees and give us medicines to heal us; the waters found in the lakes, rivers, and streams that form the lifeblood of Mother Earth; and the waters that flow within all of us, nourish us, and nurture our babies. Of particular significance for my discussion here is the last responsibility mentioned involving the waters that flow within our bodies as women and more specifically our wombs. With the rise in pollutants in the environments that threaten the health and wellbeing of mothers, their unborn children women, and the health of the generations to come, women Water Carriers are rising up as warriors of the water, with their songs, to meet the obligations they hold to protect Mother Earth and her sister, the water.

Ogichidaa-Niimi'idiwin-Kwe (Anishinaabeg The Woman's War Dance)

My brothers! My sisters! My totem and my family and I have been given a great injury. Indeed, the tribe itself has suffered harm. We all suffer equally when a member of the tribe dies. There is one brother less in our family and in our totem; there is one member lost to the

tribe. My sister ... our sister ... was killed in the village of our tribal brothers in our own land. Not only has the enemy injured my family - but it has scorned our tribe by attacking a village of our brothers and sisters in our own land.

“Are we to let this bloodshed stand? No, my brothers! We must not allow the enemy to enter our territory in order to beset our brothers and sisters and wave their war clubs in our faces. They will regard the Anishnabeg as no more than crows who are cowed by every small bird in the sky. Our safety is threatened! Our courage is at stake! I, for one, will not allow a member of my totem or of my tribe to be harmed without redress.... I am a peaceful man - but I am not afraid of war! For you and for our children I have risked my life in the past. I now risk it again” (Johnston, *Ojibwe Ceremonies* 66)

This speech is spoken by Bebon-Waushih (Flying-in-Winter), a character in the traditional aadizookaan (traditional story) written down by Anishinaabe Elder, scholar, linguist, and ethnologist Basil Johnston-ba2 about the Baunindobindidowin (the Path to War) (Johnston, *Ojibwe Ceremonies* 57, 59). For me, I see the teachings of Baunindobindidowin reflected in modern contemporary maternal activism because it roots itself in duty to the land, the culture, the people, and the nation.

In the story of Bebon-Waushih, he and his community members dance the war dances as an act of defiance against an invader’s devastating actions. Colonization has forced our Indigenous women, especially the mothers and the grandmothers, to walk the Path of the Warrior or Ogichidaakwe. We sing and dance the warrior songs of the water, land, and women. Traditionally, our people were primarily directed towards peaceful interaction and living a lifestyle that embodied peace, tempered thoughts, passions, words, and deeds (Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies* 135). As Johnston-ba states, “We are to be peaceful.... All this is hard to achieve. But we must strive for peace of heart in this life and peace of soul in the next” (*Ojibway Ceremonies* 135). These are some of our tenets of Anishinaabeg ethics related to Anishinaabeg mino-bimaadiziwin (Anishinaabeg way to live a good life; live well as a human being), which act as moral imperatives to maintain not only bizaanenindiwin (the way of peaceful living) but also agoozo miinawaa gikinootaadiwin (balance and harmony) (DesJarlait). Thus, both women and men were judged to be worthy human beings based on their generosity and adeptness of skills, not the amount of bloodshed (Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies* 59). The Path to War was never entered into lightly and was only sought out after all alternatives were exhausted and to primarily avenge an injury, whether real or imaginary, to oneself or to one’s relations (e.g., family, community, clan, or nation) (Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies* 59).

Historically, Baunindobindidowin was not regularly performed by Anishinaabeg women. Rather, men and Two-Spirited warriors took up the bagamaagan (war club), the miigaadiwin-mashkikiwan (war medicines), and performed the ogichidaa-niimi'idiwin (war dance) (Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies* 59). But modern activists are seeking out the stories of the Path to War in order to learn the embedded teachings, philosophy, and ethics as a foundation for contemporary mobilization, cultural resurgence, and decolonization. The spirit of Baunindobindidowin acts as a defiant strategy against those forces that further impose colonization, globalization, industrialization, hetero-normative-sexist culture, environmental degradation, and the extinction of traditional resources land bases. Colonization has altered our ways of life so irreparably that it forces the women to be zoongide'e (brave) and have mangide'e (courage) to embody the ogichidaa (warrior) spirit in our hearts to become modern sacred protectors for the rights of our children and those future generations yet to come.

Therefore, modern Indigenous warriors find decolonization through Baunindobindidowin, which is both a philosophy and a ceremony of the people. Baunindobindidowin requires Indigenous people to return to their cultural roots, tools, and ways of communication in order to find the appropriate approaches for a modern warrior creed that can rebuild and cause a resurgence of agency. Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) scholar Taiaiake explains the following:

The journey is a living commitment to meaningful change in our lives and to transforming society by recreating our existences, regenerating our cultures, and surging against the forces that keep us bound to our colonial past. It is the path of struggle laid out by those who have come before us; now it is our turn, we who choose to turn away from the legacies of colonialism and take on the challenge of creating a new reality for ourselves and for our people. (qtd. in Alfred 19)

Therefore, just as Bebon-Waushih and his community members perform the war dances as an act of defiance against an invader's devastating actions, they also give lessons to the mothers who are now singing the prayer songs as warrior songs to root their activism in the ancient traditions of their ancestors.

Anamewin Nagamowinan: The Water Songs of Maternal Activism

Due to the fact that water and watersheds are under constant assault by corporate extractions, pipelines, and pollution, Anishinaabeg women are turning to their songs as their mechanism to fight, protest, speak out, and to sound the alarm. Water songs communicate our worldview, our intentions, and assert our identities as Indigenous peoples to Turtle Island. Furthermore, our songs signal to our people, our allies, the offenders, and the land that Indigenous mothers are assembling to protest the violence perpetuated against

the water or our water rights. The songs are our way to call out to the land that it is not standing alone and that we will fight for the rights of the water as a Spirit Being and those Spirit beings, creatures, plants, and the land that require it to exist. The water songs are a statement of thanks and territorial land acknowledgement.

Each song to the water is essentially a prayer. Furthermore, the sounds and vibrations awaken the land and cause the listeners to hear the message, emotions, and powers the singer is trying to evoke. These prayers are different with similar themes and intentions. For instance, there are specific water songs of thankfulness, such as the one written by Doreen Day, titled “Nibi Nagamowin: Water Song.” It goes as follows:

Nibi, Gizaagi’igo

Water, we love you

Gimiigwechiwenimigo

We thank you

Gizhawenimigo

We respect you. (qtd. in Lorimer)

Teachings on miigwechiwendan or thankfulness for something are grounded in the teachings of dibasediziwin, meaning humility in Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language). Humility in Anishinaabeg contexts refers to acknowledging yourself as part of the natural scheme of Creation. In Anishinaabeg culture, “Humility is represented by the wolf. The wolf lives for his pack and the ultimate shame is to be an outcast” (Seven Generations Institute). Saying a prayer or singing a prayerful song, such as Day’s song, is an act of recognition that the water allows us to live, that it sacrifices itself so that we might survive, that we must cherish the water as precious, and that we respect that water for all the many gifts that it brings us. “Dabas” means “lowering” oneself before someone or something. We are offering our thanks by lowering ourselves, showing that we are not better than the water but equal in the eyes of Creation. We sing thankful songs like this to tell the water we prioritize it, speak for it with good intentions, and serve it as it serves us—with humility, compassion, and patience.

Another theme within the prayers is acknowledging the interconnectivity and relationality between the water and other beings that depend, protect, support, and require the water to ensure the natural balance of Creation. When Anishinaabeg women sing these songs, we are invoking these beings, spirits, and creatures to aid in our activism. They are witness to our work and our calls for help. The following song, titled “Nibi Water Song” and sung by Zoongi Gabowi Ozawa Kinew Ikwe (Strong Standing Golden Eagle Woman) demonstrates these fundamentals. Zoongi Gabowi received this song in a dream, and it goes as follows:

Way ya hey ya
 Way ya hey ya yo
 Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Miigwech Kzhe-Manito. Thank you, Great Spirit/Creator.

Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Way ya hey ya
 Way ya hey ya yo
 Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Miigwech ikwe miia nibi kinagajitowin. Thank you, woman for taking care of the water.

Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya hey ha yo.

Way ya hey ya
 Way ya hey ya yo
 Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Miigwech Pinasiak (or Animikiig). Thank you, Thunderbirds.

Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Miigwech Nookomis. Thank you, Grandmother moon.

Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo.

Way ya hey ya
 Way ya hey ya yo
 Way ya way ha yo
 Way ya way ha yo. (Turtle Lodge)

Finally, the last song I will share is called “Nibi Waaboo” and in Omàmiwininiwag (Algonquin), the water song is also called the “Algonquin Water Song: Nibi Waaboo.” The significance of this song as a site of activism is that it calls on women and the people of the nation to remember that the Earth is our First Mother in Creation and that water keeps the Earth alive. Water nourishes everything on Earth like mother’s breastmilk does for babies.

The song goes like this:

Nibi waaboo endaayang, aki miskwi nibi-waaboo
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya hey
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya ho.

Nibi waaboo endaayang, aki miskwi nibi-waaboo
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya hey
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya ho.

Nibi waaboo endaayang, aki miskwi nibi-waaboo
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya hey
 Hey ya hey ya hey ya ho (Womensworlds2011; S Ramsey)

The main song lyric “Nibi waaboo endaayang, aki miskwi nibi-waaboo,” translates to “The Water that I carry is the blood of Mother Earth” (Anishinabe Grandmother’s Sacred Circle). Songs like this one would be used on the activist Water Walks around the Canadian Great Lakes region, which was first created by the late Anishinaabeg Elder Josephine Mandamin-ba to raise awareness for the pollution, neglect, and abuse of the waters of Canada’s Great Lakes region, along with all lakes and rivers of Anishinaabeg territory. The water songs become activist prayers of protest along with a prayer acknowledging the sacred role of women as the carriers and keepers of the water. Furthermore, Elder Mandamin acknowledged that these water songs belong to the water itself and came from the water through dreams and visions, and thus they are sacred (qtd. in Gursoz). The teachings embedded in the songs’ words are found in the teachings of Elder Mandamin-ba, who states the following: “The water of Mother Earth, she carries life to us, and as women we carry life through our bodies. We as women are life-givers, protectors of the water, and that’s why we are very inclined to give mother Earth the respect that she needs for the water” (qtd. in Gursoz). For Mandamin-ba and many other Anishinaabeg women who carry on her message of activism for the water, water has to live: “It can hear, it can sense what we’re saying, it can really, really, speak to us. Some songs come to us through the water. We have to understand that water is very precious” (qtd. in Gursoz). As Anishinaabeg activist mothers, we sing the water songs back to the water and to the Earth so that they might hear that we appreciate all that comes from both. Furthermore, we tell them that we are willing to sacrifice our lives as they give of their lives. Elder Mandamin informs all who need to hear it that when we carry the water and sing our songs, we are telling people that we will do whatever it takes to protect the water: “We’ll probably even give our lives for the water if we have to. We may at some point have to die for the water” (qtd. in Gursoz). Maternal activism arises from the warrior’s teachings, maternal teaching, women’s teachings, and the songs water gifted us. In order to fulfill these teachings, we must ensure that these exist for future generations.

Concluding Thoughts

I come from a place that has swirling waters with rapids and fast-moving water. I have learned many lessons about life from the waters of the French River. I want to share one last water song by Anishinaabeg singer Brook Medicine Eagle, who received the song in a dream. Here it is:

“Swirling River Song”

Witchita, doo yaa, doo yaa, doo yaa
 Witchita, doo yaa, doo yaa, hey
 Witchita, doo yaa, doo yaa, doo yaa
 Witchita, doo yaa, doo yaa, hey.

Witchita, neh yaa, hey yaa, hey yaa
 Witchita, neh yaa, hey yaa, hey
 Witchita, neh yaa, hey yaa, hey yaa
 Witchita, neh yaa, hey yaa, hey. (Andrea G)

The words honour the swirling, moving, and often dangerous river waters and those river waters that are full in the springtime when the Earth is overflowing and full like a mother coming into her first milk after she gives birth to new life. The song captures the power of water to nourish the life of the land and informs us of our strong connections to the land. Activism is often defined in Western contexts as aggressive actions, but sometimes it is gentle like a song that stirs the heart and soul to listen; it is call for change or reminds us of what is important. Activism can be as loving as a mother’s arms and as simple as teaching a daughter how to sing to the water. Maternal activism is found in remembering our responsibilities as women, mothers, life-givers, creators, nurturers, caretakers, and guardians for the next generation and those seven generations yet to come.

Endnotes

1. “Anishinaabeg” is the word for those “nations” rooted in the same linguistic dialect, cultural teachings, and intellectual traditions. Those who describe themselves as Anishinaabe (meaning human being) include the following nations: Anishiniwag (Oji-Cree), Ojibweg, Odaawaag, Bodéwadmik, Odishkwaamagiig (Nipissing), Misizaagiwininiwag (Mississauga), Omàmiwininiwak (Algonquin), and Leni Lenape (Delaware). The Anishinaabeg inhabit the Great Lakes region in both Canada and the United States. In Anishinaabemowin (the Anishinaabeg language), Anishinaabeg means the original human beings. See Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*; and “Anishinaabe” in *The Ojibway People’s Dictionary*.

2. -Ba or -ban is the *Anishinaabe* way of respectfully acknowledging an Anishinaabe individual who has passed away.

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