

# BODIES OF WATER: EXPLORING BIRTH PLACE AND CEREMONY IN MANITOBA, CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

The place of birth is a part of the political landscape of Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state. This paper explores the notion of birth place and the relationship between Aboriginal people and the land and water through the notion of 'carrying water'. Based on qualitative interviews with elder women who practice Midewiwin ceremony, this paper explores ceremonies surrounding birth and the relationship that is created through these practices. By understanding the importance of the continuance of ceremony for individuals and communities, a new understanding of the current state of maternity care in Aboriginal communities emerges and extends to broader discourses of indigenous rights. The paper concludes that in the ceremonial practices of a group of Aboriginal women in Manitoba, the generalized discourse of realizing rights becomes an intimate and complex process of place making through the relationship of bodies and landscape.

Keywords: childbirth, Midewiwin, place of birth

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## INTRODUCTION

The place of birth for Aboriginal peoples in Canada is a political issue on multiple levels. For the past 30 years, the practice of removing women from communities to birth in urban centre hospitals, called maternal evacuation, has been a part of the dialogue between First Nation organizations, the Canadian state, policy makers, and academics. Concurrent with the practice of evacuation, there is a movement to repatriate birth to First Nations through Aboriginal midwifery. This paper explores the connection between place of birth and relationship to the land and water through an exploration of the notion of "carrying water." I began to think about the relationship between birth and land through water during a berry fast ceremony I attended in the winter of 2010 during my PhD fieldwork in Manitoba. During the ceremony, an auntie stood up and talked about the water. She poured us all some water to drink, and talked about the importance of taking care of the water. She spoke of birth water, amniotic fluid, and how we must take care of this water in our bodies. She told us of the importance of the water breaking when you are in labour. She also spoke of the ceremonies they do each spring, walking with water on the land, in order to keep that water healthy as well. The image of these women walking with pails of water immediately struck a chord, and I felt that a new way of understanding pregnancy and birth in the context of birth place had just opened up in front of me. I resolved to get in touch with the auntie who spoke about these things, and learn more about being a "water carrier." The notion of "carrying water" has come to be fundamental in my understanding of the issue of birth place. The health

of the water, both in the body and on the land/territory, is fundamental in the movement to revitalize and restore health and healing in Indigenous communities. In this paper, I explore the connections between our bodies and bodily substance, focusing mainly on birth and babies, and the landscape, through my conversations and interviews with elder women who are currently “practicing their culture.” From these connections, the role of these ceremonies and what they are telling us can be placed in the current state of maternity care in Aboriginal communities.

Contestations and conflict over Indigenous rights to land and water are a major part of the Canadian political landscape; in recent years, the debate has moved to the forefront of political discourse through the articulation of these rights in both national and international processes. For example, decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada and the International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007<sup>1</sup> have articulated the rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada to continued use of the land and resources in the midst of industrial development, and evaluated and reevaluated issues of self-determination and governance. The fear of the government in losing control of the land and its resources is evident in the frequency of court cases involving them and various Indigenous nations across Canada. These often result in the Supreme Court forcing the state to recognize the rights of Indigenous people. Running parallel to, and sometimes intersecting, the national debate is a global discourse surrounding right(s) to health, and, in particular, the right to reproductive and sexual health. The latter has focused on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) numbers four and five which aim to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health. Recently, the Canadian state has made a push to support maternal health in an international context, marked by Prime Minister Stephen

Harper’s 2.85 billion Canadian dollar pledge to support maternal health initiatives globally, and his role as co-chair of the United Nations Commission on Information and Accountability for Women’s and Children’s Health (Canadian International Development Agency, 2012). His support insists that the focus of these discussions appropriately lies outside of Canada’s borders, and fails to acknowledge the large disparity between Canadian Indigenous and “non-Indigenous” populations in maternal and child health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> I combine these disparate discussions of Indigenous rights to land, water, and resources, and the right to reproductive health by looking at place of birth for Indigenous peoples in Canada. The paper will show how place of birth contributes to the broader issues of Indigenous rights through an exploration of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land and water. The spiritual and close connection of Indigenous peoples to the landscape is often referred to in broad terms, with emphasis on the ability to be on the land for purposes of hunting, fishing, trapping as proof of this relationship. Likewise, the discussion of returning birth to communities also tends to make broad statements about the importance of the connection of birth to the landscape without deeper consideration of what this really means. In the ceremonial practices of a group of Indigenous women in Manitoba and their role as “water carriers,” this generalized discourse of realizing rights becomes an intimate and complex process of place making through the relationship of bodies and landscape.

This paper focuses on the act of “carrying water” and its different meanings within an Indigenous context. First, I explore the understanding of pregnancy as carrying “sacred water,” referring to amniotic fluid, through Annishnabe<sup>3</sup> teachings surrounding pregnancy, birth, and the body. I show how these teachings and associated ceremonies

1 Although the Declaration was voted on in 2007, Canada did not become a signatory until 2010, citing issues with the potential that the Declaration could be “interpreted to go beyond existing jurisprudence of the Supreme Court of Canada regarding the collective rights of Aboriginal ... such as the right to hunt, to fish and to gather,” and “in relation to lands and resources, the use of the concept of free, prior and informed consent, and the Declaration’s approach to self-government, among others” (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2010).

2 For example, the infant mortality rate of First Nations in Manitoba is 10.2 per 1,000 live births as compared to a rate of 5.4 for the non-First Nations population in the province (Smylie et al., 2010).

3 Annishnabe, or Annishnabekwe, are a group of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States. They have also “been called Ojibwas (spelled variously), Chippewas, and Saulteaux or Saulteurs” (Pelletier, 2003, p. 1). It is important to note that while these ceremonies are rooted in Annishnabe culture, the practice is not exclusive to Annishnabe, and can be seen as more broadly “indigenous (or even pan-Indian) spiritual principles and practices” (Gone, 2008, p. 395).

connect the body, both literally and metaphorically, to the land and water. In exploring both carrying water in the body and on the land as practice, a new understanding of place of birth emerges, and reveals how it is situated within the political framework of Indigenous rights. From this understanding, the discussion of rights to land and water can be expanded to rights to bodies, babies, and birth in the current context of relocating Indigenous women from their home communities for childbirth. Through this exploration I conclude that within an Indigenous cosmological framework the commonly perceived separation between the struggle for recognized rights to land and water, and the struggle for rights to control bodies and birth does not actually exist: they are, in fact, the same struggle.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a larger multi-site ethnographic research project I completed for my PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. The study focused on the politics of childbirth in First Nations communities in Manitoba, Canada and sought to unpack both the evacuation of women from their communities to give birth and the attempt to return birthing practices back to communities through the reintroduction of Indigenous midwifery. I was able to follow the issue of evacuation from the embodied perspective of women leaving their communities, and the discourse of evacuation at different levels of policy and jurisdiction. In this paper, I focus on one set of interviews I conducted with Indigenous women who practice various ceremonies relating to women's cycles and water. I also draw from my own experiences of being in ceremony. Participation in these ceremonies in both my fieldwork as a social anthropologist and my personal life as a First Nations mother and wife of an Anishnabe sun dancer also contribute, in more ways than I probably realize, to my understandings of this issue.

## BACKGROUND

Access to water is an important world-wide issue, reflected in a United Nations resolution (document A/64/L.63/REV.1) which "enshrines access to water as a fundamental human right" (Dearing, 2010).

Water is an especially important issue in Canada, which contains seven percent of the world's fresh water. A recent Statistics Canada report noted that southern Canada is losing "renewable fresh water at a rate of 3.5 percent per year." (Dewar and Souland, 2010, p. 1) Further, despite the country's large supply of fresh water, the condition of water on Canadian First Nations reserve communities is dire.<sup>4</sup> Paralleling this national fear of losing water, similar prophecies are often told by North American Indigenous spiritual leaders. In 2002, Bawdwayadun, Grand Chief Eddie Benton of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge, prophesied at a Sundance ceremony at Pipestone, Minnesota that "abuses of water will result in severe shortages and only those that can afford it will have water to drink, and if we don't do anything about it, our water will cost the same as gold" (Mandamin, 2003). Fundamental to this discussion is that multiple contradictions and confusion exists over who controls water and who has rights to control it. Is water under federal or provincial jurisdiction? In the Indigenous context, what rights to water currently exist and are these being infringed upon? Like most questions of Indigenous rights in Canada, we will have to wait for court decisions on these issues (Phare, 2009, p. 2).

These same questions posed around rights and access to water can be asked of the current policies of childbirth for Indigenous communities. What are the rights to reproductive choice in relation to birth place, and are these being infringed upon within the current policy framework? Jurisdiction surrounding childbirth in Canada is as complex and inadequate as that pertaining to water. Access to health care for people in rural and remote settings often requires leaving the community. In First Nations communities, accessing health care becomes more complex. In Canada, the provincial governments are required to provide health care under the Canada Health Act. However, because of Canada's constitutional responsibility to First Nations and Inuit peoples, primary health care provision for First Nations falls under a separate remit: it is delivered on reserve by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) of Health

<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the Government of Canada reported 110 First Nation communities across Canada were under a drinking water advisory and that 21 of those were "high risk" and required "remedial plans because the problem is so severe" (Phare, 2009, p. 7).

Canada. (Government of Canada, 2011).

The bifurcation of health jurisdiction is a major factor underlying many of the issues of adequate health care delivery for First Nations people, and has major implications for the issue of place of birth. Barriers to returning birth to communities at the federal level include: the inability of the federal government to employ midwives in communities, the perceived roles of responsibility when it comes to birth, and the varying opinions of state officials surrounding the safety of rural maternity care (Olson and Couchie, 2010). In the province of Manitoba, it is estimated that each year “as many as 1,100 prenatal women relocate temporarily from First Nation communities in rural and remote regions of Manitoba to Winnipeg or urban tertiary centres to give birth” (Phillips-Beck, 2010, p. 11).

## INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

To attempt to define the relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples in relation to “rights” is to walk on contested terrain. The majority of discussion surrounding the relationship has taken place within the arena of rights to land, and in particular, rights to use of land. Rights are realized mainly through the Constitution of Canada and Supreme Court decisions. According to the Canadian Constitution (1982, Section 35(1)), there is a preexisting Aboriginal or treaty right to continued use of the land for hunting, fishing, and trapping. This gives “priority to Aboriginal and treaty rights and states that the government must only infringe upon these rights to the extent necessary to achieve a substantial and compelling objective” (Ross, 2001). How the government regulates resource development initiatives while not infringing upon Aboriginal and treaty subsistence rights has led to an intense examination of the nature of the relationship between Canada and its Indigenous population. Court decisions such as *Sparrow* (Supreme Court of Canada [S.C.C.], 1990) and *Delgamuukw* (S.C.C., 1997) have attempted to address this by articulating the government’s fiduciary duty to consult “meaningfully” and “adequately” with First Nations. This fiduciary obligation was discussed for the first time in *Guerin*

*vs. R.*, which explained it as “the ability of the Crown to make unilateral decisions that affect the rights of First Nations and encompasses a requirement of consultation where such decisions are being made” (Adkins and Neville, 2000, p. 3). It is said that this particular fiduciary duty is held “*sui generis* [of its own kind] in that it arises from the historical relationship between the aboriginal peoples and the Crown, and the powers over aboriginal interests which are vested in the Crown” (Adkins and Neville, 2000, p. 3). The articulation of the fiduciary duty is that the government holds the power to make decisions for Indigenous people’s interests, and because it holds this power to effect change for Indigenous people, the Crown then has the duty to consult with them before such powers are exercised.

To address maternal and reproductive health rights, a number of international documents are key. In 1994, in Cairo, at The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), “participating States recognized that sexual and reproductive health is fundamental to individuals, couples and families, as well as to the social and economic development of communities and nations.” The Commission on Human Rights confirmed that “sexual and reproductive health are integral elements of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health” (Hunt and Bueno de Mesquita, n.d., p. 3). In the International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 23 and 24 also reaffirm these rights. They state that Indigenous people have a right

to be actively involved in developing and determining health, housing and other economic and social programmes affecting them ... indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices ... indigenous individuals also have the right to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services. (United Nations, 2007)

In June 2011, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC) published a policy statement regarding the “sexual and reproductive health, rights, and realities and access to services for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in Canada” (SOGC, 2011, p. 633). While this global discourse of

reproductive rights is just now becoming part of the Canadian Indigenous landscape, it is vital that discussion of rights to maternal health should not be considered new terrain on which to negotiate the relationship between the state and Indigenous people. Rather, the established rights of Indigenous peoples' use of the lands and resources, and the obligation of the Crown to protect these rights, should form the basis of this discussion. As this paper argues, the rights to maternal health and the rights to access to land are not mutually exclusive, but are an interconnected part of the Indigenous landscape.

## MIDEWIWIN CEREMONY AND THE "TRADITIONAL"

The historical and political context of Indigenous peoples is rife with traumatic events, such as relocation to reserve communities, residential schools, and the on-going assimilationist policies directed towards the "modernization" of Indigenous peoples and their identities. There is an articulated loss of connection to the land and "traditional" ways of being on the land. In my experience doing research in Manitoba, this loss is often mitigated through a return to, or a continuation of, practicing ceremony. The importance of returning to ceremonial practices lies in the fact that so much of ceremonial practice establishes and reestablishes the relationship of Indigenous peoples, both individually and collectively, to the land and water. I have seen this relationship in almost every ceremony I have ever participated in, both inside and outside of my research, including women's ceremonies associated with pregnancy and birth.

As the use of the terms "traditional" and "ceremony" may raise red flags in anthropological modes of thinking, a brief explanation of what I mean in this context is necessary. In First Nations communities in Manitoba, certain "contentious" terms are used quite freely to describe certain practices. This may be because of our long history of having anthropologists within our midst: being "traditional" or practicing one's "traditions" or "culture" have become part of the common vernacular. The use of these terms, however, does not mean that these practices are static and not adaptive; rather, the pro-

cess keeps going and does not "yield precise replicas of past performance" (Ingold, 2000, p. 147). In this way, "tradition is more than a badge of ethnic identity, it is a mode of engaging with the world" (Csordas, 2002, p. 163). In most instances, ceremony refers to the practice of what can be considered rituals of healing. Rituals are

an important part of the way that any social group celebrates, maintains and renews the world in which it lives, and the way it deals with the dangers and uncertainties that threaten the world. (Helman, 2007, p. 224)

Csordas (2002, pp. 162–163) connects ritual healing and identity politics by focusing on "bodily experience" as an "experiential transducer" between the "religious and political domains" that allows us to look at these rituals through the "context of politics, or as the opening of a performative window onto larger political processes."

The women I interviewed about ceremony, including members of the Midewiwin Lodge, all actively practiced traditional ceremonies in some form or another. The Midewiwin Lodge/ceremony originates within the Anishnabe, and it was originally exclusive to them. In some of its current forms the ceremony welcomes Indigenous peoples from across "Turtle Island" (North America); therefore, participation is no longer exclusive to Anishnabe. The Midewiwin ceremony has its roots in the *aadizookaanaag* (sacred narratives), which was the Anishnabe's "explanation for the origin of the world, and the behaviour of all things" (Angel, 2002, p. 4). These narratives told of Nanabozho, the hero and trickster, and his role in the "creation of a new earth." The Anishnabe were told of:

... the birth of the first people, how their descendants had been taught many things by Nanabozho so that they would be able to survive. They learned of the power of visions and dreams by which they could communicate with the *manidoog*, or spirits, and they learned to pay respect to their animal brethren with whom they shared their existence.... The most important of Nanabozho's gifts ... was the institution of the Midewiwin, since practitioners were promised a long life if they followed its teachings. (Angel, 2002, p. 4)

The exact origins of the Midewiwin have been

under scrutiny since the first explorers and missionaries encountered the ceremony (Angel, 2002, p. 5). For the purposes of this discussion, the origin, or authenticity, of Midewiwin ceremonies is not a concern. Rather, it is important to understand how the Midewiwin fits into the lives of the people:

The Midewiwin was an integral part of the [Anishnabe] cosmology ... within the Midewiwin ... special powers were gained as a part of a process that also taught them the meaning of life and death, their place in the universe, and the origins of the [Anishnabe] people. In other words, it was more than just another ceremony, for it provided an institutional setting for the teaching of the world view (religious beliefs) of the [Anishnabe] people. (Angel, 2002, p. 48)

The ceremonies of the Midewiwin are highly complex and layered with meaning. Depending on the level or degree in the Lodge, narratives are told with either more or less detail. As my friend, anthropologist Allice Legat, constantly tells me, “Elders will speak to the least knowledgeable in the room”; therefore, the knowledge given to me in these teachings can be seen as rudimentary at best. This being said, however, most scholars of the Midewiwin emphasize that historically

its central ritual was a healing ceremony meant to protect the [Anishnabe] (and practitioners from neighbouring tribes) from disease and to promote long life ... the ceremony clearly addressed not only the health needs of the community, but also its spiritual and social condition. (Angel, 2002, p. 13)

In present day, one of the ways the Midewiwin is practised is as the “Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge,” which is described on their website as a “contemporary movement of the sacred Midewiwin Society” (Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge, 2009). They hold ceremonies and initiate members into different levels and degrees. The grandmothers that I interviewed for this study all were initiated members of the Midewiwin Lodge. While my husband’s family is Anishnabe/Saulteaux and my ceremony practice has been primarily with them, they do not participate specifically in these Midewiwin Lodge ceremonies and teachings. As my mother-in-law explains, “what we do is Midewiwin, but not in that

way with the degrees.” Therefore, my experiences in ceremony could be on one level characterized as Midewiwin, although not in the formal sense of receiving the teachings of the Midewiwin Lodge.

## LOOKING FOR OUR TISSY BUTTONS: CHILDBEARING IN THE INDIGENOUS LANDSCAPE

At the berry fast ceremony, I learned that pregnancy is carrying sacred water. I asked Kathy Bird if I could visit her again and ask her some further questions. She gave me a phone number to set up an appointment at the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority. I found out that there is a clinic called the “Aboriginal Traditional Wellness Clinic,” which Kathy runs at the Health Sciences Hospital in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I called the number and booked an appointment. I was instructed to bring tobacco and a gift, and to dress appropriately in a long skirt. It is interesting that an exploration that started in a First Nations community hall ended up in the halls of an urban hospital where Aboriginal women go to have their babies. Suddenly, my connection between ceremony and the health care system did not seem so divergent.

On the day of my appointment, I found myself in the basement of one of the many hospital buildings. I went through a set of doors, and found another door that I knocked on and waited for an answer. Inside, I found three women preparing the room. There was a table set up with jars of all shapes and sizes filled with different herbs, and a lady was putting some in small, brown paper bags. Another woman was kneeling beside a bear skin and a burning smudge, setting out the ceremonial items. Kathy was organizing papers and talking on her cell phone. I went in and sat down; I gave Kathy the tobacco, explained my research, got the necessary consents signed, and turned on my recorder. The first thing Kathy said to me explains her view of pregnancy and the body:

I think the main thing that is important, and that we are trying to teach the girls and the young women is our own creation story, like where life comes from.... Our spirit comes from the Creator and ... we need to nurture that respectfully and

with dignity. So that is what we are trying to teach the young girls: who they are ... and where we come from and how we walk upon the earth, and then we go back to the spirit world.... And that there are responsibilities all the way along there, and so that to us is what life is all about. So when that spirit starts, for us that happens right away, that already your baby has that spirit, and it doesn't come at birth, it is already there, from the moment of conception. So your body is moulding and shaping the body of your baby, to surround it and protect it, to protect that spirit. So that is why for us it is important to look after yourself all through your pregnancy.... And you want it to be healthy, and you want it to be well and everything to be okay. And there are a lot of teachings along with that. (04/05/2010)

In an interview with *Talking Leaves* magazine, Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook (2000, p. 1) adds to this by describing a women's pregnant body as the baby's "first environment":

Our grandmas tell us we're the first environment, that our babies inside of our bodies see through the mother's eyes and hear through the mother's ears. Our bodies as women are the first environment of the baby coming, and the responsibility of that is such that we need to reawaken our women to the power that is inherent in that transformative process that birth should be. (p. 1)

Katsi also talks about the water. She says that "we thank the waters. The waters of the rivers and the waters of our bodies are the same water.... It puts you in that state of relationship" (2000, p. 1).

In the basement of the hospital, in the Aboriginal Traditional Wellness Clinic, I saw the woman who spoke about water at the berry fast ceremony. She was tending to the ceremonial items, so when I asked a question about the water, Kathy switched places with her. The woman began to tell me about birth water:

There is a spirit that comes, during that time when that water breaks, [and] washes that doorway for the new spirit to come. She is called *Seeimigaykwe*<sup>5</sup> [this means "she who pours the water"]. There is a song that goes with it, and you sing that song to welcome that spirit and encourage that spirit. Because that is a very painful passage for that spirit. It is hard ... it is actually painful when you are

coming through that doorway, and then you sing and you calm that little spirit, you calm when you sing that. When you are singing it is actually not you singing, it is that spirit, *Seeimigaykwe*, singing that song to that spirit. And it is very calming and soothing to the mother and also to that new spirit that comes through that doorway. *Seeimigaykwe* washes that doorway for the new spirit. (04/05/2010)

Thus, the body as environment and our relationship to the environment through our bodies is made clear in the context of pregnancy. As Kathy Bird elaborates:

And then it [the teachings] goes back to ... how when we carry life, we carry it in that sacred water, that water keeps baby warm, that water protects baby, baby's skin ... everything that is in that water is constantly being cleaned, our body is naturally doing that, and when it is time for us to give birth, what is the first thing that happens? The mucus plug comes out and the water breaks ... usually this is what normally happens ... and we say that it cleans the way out for the baby to be born.... So that whole connection of we female spirit and Mother Earth female spirit, and Grandmother Moon ... it is all connected. (04/05/2010)

Communicating these teachings about water, pregnancy, and birth is as much a part of passing on traditions and ways "of the past" as it is a comment on the current state of First Nations communities and a warning for the future of First Nations. Bringing people "back" to practising ceremonial ways is seen as a healing process from the trauma encountered by First Nations peoples in Canada, as well as a way to both maintain our connection to the land and water, and to keep that same land and water safe for future generations. The absence of these ceremonies becomes a comment on the current conditions of First Nations in Canada — the background — reinforcing the need to return to ceremonial practice to maintain balance and ensure a good future for our communities.

A ceremony that connects the foreground of ceremony with the background of conditions of life for First Nations in Canada is taking care of the umbilical cord after the birth of a child. When the umbilical cord is cut, the baby's remaining umbilical

5 This is my spelling of the Cree word.

cord dries and falls off within the first few days after birth. Keeping this stump, or, as Kathy Bird refers to it, the “tissy button,” is important for the future of the child. She explains:

Once it dries up, you don't just ... throw it away in the garbage. Our people always looked after those things. And there were ceremonies, little ceremonies, that they did for [a] girl's umbilical cord, and certain ones for boys. For us, back home [NHCN] it was for girls wrapping the umbilical cord with needles, thread, cloth, leather, and tying it in a bundle and putting it in a tree or stump or burying it, so that she would be able to sew, you know, to look after her family's clothing in a good way. That is what they did with the girls. With the boy's they put it in a little leather pouch with a bow and arrow or a little fishing rod ... so that he would be a good provider of food for his family. (04/05/2010)

This small ceremony directly establishes the connection of the baby to the land. It also speaks to gender roles within communities, including how each gender is expected to take care and provide for family. The ceremony is of further importance because key to achieving a “good life” is development of the relationship between one's body and the earth. Kathy stresses this importance:

Those things [umbilical cord stumps] were very essential for our survival. So they were never thrown away. They were looked after. And it was about respect: respecting life, respecting what Creator gave us. So they did that in a ceremony. They put all that away back to the earth. It is always back to the earth, because for us, we are part of the earth, and the earth gives us life, and so that is what we do, back to Mother Earth. And again, it is close to where you live, the grandmothers say, so that you ground them. (04/05/2010)

For First Nations people, establishing one's relationship to the land is important. This individual relationship is first established at birth; shortly after, through little ceremonies, it is confirmed. The key point is that these ceremonies should take place close to one's home, where one “comes from.” This raises the question: what are the implications, of giving birth far from where you “come from”?

From this perspective, evacuation not only re-

moves social and kin support, but it removes the opportunity to establish one's relationship with the land from the beginning of one's life. On a more general level, one of the reasons given for social upheaval in communities is this loss of connection between body and the land. This teaching is explained by Kathy:

They [the grandmothers] said that the reason today our youth are so scattered and so bewildered so much ... is because a lot of those things [tissy buttons] are being discarded in the garbage. They said, “So they are looking for their tissy buttons in the garbage.” That is exactly the words they use... So the more we get back to doing this, the stronger our youth are going to be. (04/05/2010)

The implication in this is that by restoring our connection to the land through ceremony, other structural issues will again come into balance.

Another ceremony that establishes the relationship between one's self and the earth is burying the placenta after birth. According to Kathy, the placenta is “what is connecting you and your baby.” It is what is “nurturing, what is feeding, what is helping your baby grow” (04/05/2010). Like the tissy button, it is important that this is “looked after” and respected. Kathy explains the teaching around the placenta:

Once they [the mother] had the placenta, and they brought it home. And usually it is the father that takes it and buries it. Puts it back to the earth with tobacco and gives thanks that it looked after his little one in a healthy way. It is a respect; it is about respect for where life comes from. And the other thing that the grandmothers said is that when that happens, the baby is grounded... Our grandchildren's placentas are all buried near our house so that they are grounded in that place. So that is one of the things that we encourage young mothers to do, young parents to do, is to look after the placenta. (04/05/2010)

Like the tissy buttons, burying the placenta as soon as possible after birth is seen as very important. When birth took place in communities, there was opportunity to bury placentas close to one's home. Josephine explains:

I remember my grandmother was a midwife and

they would come in and get her at all hours of the night to go and deliver babies and what they would do right away as soon as the placenta was out, the natural thing is to bury it.... When the blood is the freshest from Mother Earth, because she needs that blood. (10/12/2010)

By burying the placenta in the earth, a place is created in the landscape to which the baby is both physically and metaphorically connected, thus contributing to the health of the child. In turn, giving the placenta to the earth also contributes to “her healing”:

... the placenta has to go back to Mother Earth because that’s the way it was a long time ago. People are saying they want to go back to their old ways, that’s one of the ways, help the Mother Earth with her healing, give back to her. It’s all a cycle of life, birth, death. (10/12/2010)

In the current maternity care system, primarily based on birth away from home, obtaining one’s placenta is not always a straight forward task. While some say that hospitals in Manitoba are good about giving women their placentas, others have not had the same experience. Josephine retells one woman’s experience:

Well what’s happened here there was a woman who came from up North ... and had her child, her baby, born and then when she left, her placenta wasn’t given to her. They said it would be mailed to her. So it was mailed in a package and it got lost in the mail and when she got it, it was just a grey mass of dried up.... It was very disrespectful for her and for women to be disrespected that way when she could have, you know, it could have been given to her then and there at the hospital. (10/12/2010)

In another instance, she explains:

... my other granddaughter who went through the situation where they wouldn’t give it to her, they said they had to do tests on it and to probe, I don’t know why they’re probing the placenta, and then she was told that she would have to pick it up at the morgue.... She had to pay that and she did pay for it because she had to do a ceremony, she said when she got it, it was all white, no sign of any blood in it. (10/12/2010)

Negotiating access to placentas, and having

babies (and their placentas) born far away from their communities, shows how evacuation for childbirth may affect aspects of their relationship to their home place for both the mother and the baby. In the cases described above, there is also an underlying commentary on how Indigenous people are treated by the broader health care system and the state. The juxtaposition of picking up a placenta, something that is connected to life and gives the earth fresh blood, in a morgue, a place of death, creates an image of uncertainty for the current and future states of Indigenous peoples. The metaphor of looking for our “tissy buttons” in the garbage because the hospital threw them away is a powerful commentary on the current state of First Nations, as viewed by these grandmothers. Also coming out of the descriptions of these ceremonies are notions of responsibility and accountability.

## REVITALIZATION, REPATRIATION, AND RENEWAL

In some ways, the landscape of Indigenous peoples looks very grim. Having to resort time and time again to courts of law to see their rights upheld; to the statistics of ill-health, inadequate housing, and water sanitation on reserve; to the disparity in birth outcomes for Indigenous people under the current policy of evacuation for childbirth: the foreground seems bleak. However, even though Midewiwin prophecies for the future are sometimes apocalyptic in nature, Josephine Mandamin explains that “in all prophecies there is hope. In this prophecy the hope is the word, ‘if.’ Bawd [Chief Eddie Benton], in ending his teaching ... asked of the audience, “What are you going to do about it?” (Mandamin, 2003). I have looked at some of the ways Indigenous women are addressing this question, and how this in turn, speaks to issues of rights to land and rights to maternal health across the Indigenous landscape. This was done through an exploration of different ways of carrying water. The paper explored Midewiwin ceremonies that emphasize birth and the connection to the land and water and how this is connected to place of birth. As well, the experiences of carrying water in the Mother Earth Water Walk connected these two practices. As Kathy Bird concluded:

Mother Earth for us is a living spirit, a living being, and she provides us with food, clothing, shelter, and everything that we need to survive. Water, her blood is the water, and it flows through her body, under the earth in those veins. So that is her lifeblood. And water is cleansing. Water is sacred. Water is the lifeblood of Mother Earth, and she gives life, just as we, women, give life. She brings forth life, we bring forth life. We are like Mother Earth. And the blood that flows through our veins is like the water that flows through Mother Earth. And we are the caretakers of the water, because of that close connection ... that is why we are considered caretakers of water. That is why she walked around the Great Lakes carrying that water. (04/05/2010)

The importance of establishing and reestablishing relationships to the land through ceremonial practice brings hope for the future. There is a need

... to learn those things again. We are teaching our children.... We didn't have that opportunity ... when we were young, because we got sent to Residential school, and other things beyond our control. But now we have a bit more control, and we are trying to teach our children, our grandchildren, these things. To pick up that sacred bundle, it is a medicine bundle, those teachings of the grandmothers. (04/05/2010)

Establishing this connection between the land, bodies, and birth speaks directly to current discussions of land and water rights, as well as sexual and reproductive health rights. The argument here is that they are one and the same; separating them only fuels the continued injustice perpetuated against Indigenous people by the Canadian state. The introduction of a rights-based discourse into Canadian Indigenous maternal health must be recognized as a part of the larger fiduciary obligation of the Canadian state. Exploring this topic through the connection between ceremony and birth place gives these broad discussions of the connection, and thereby rights, of Indigenous peoples to the land and water, expression through the intimate and complex interactions between bodies, memory, and the practice of carrying water. As Josephine explained,

the one big connection we have with Mother Earth ... [is] a responsibility to take care of that water and women especially when they give birth,

that's the first thing that draws from their bodies is the water and then you know that life is going come. So ... we understand that [when] Mother Earth starts flowing, we know that life is going come.... That's Springtime. (10/12/2010)

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