

Traditional Native Ways Alive and Well in "A-sig-a-ning" (Michigan) Odawa War and Peace Chief Writes Book, Promotes Native Cultural Revival

- by Nigwagun

I first met Mack-a-da Ming-giss-was (Black Eagle), who is familiarly known as Pine, in 1987g while participating in a Michigan walk for global nuclear disarmament. Co was a frequent walk participant who, in a quiet and patient way, worked to establish wider and deeper connections between Native and Euro-American cultural groups.

Pine recognized that nuclear weapons were (and are) a great threat to Native cultures as well as everyone else, but saw much deeper than that. Those weapons are perhaps the ultimate symbol of a culture that lacks basic respect for people or for the rest of nature. Their very existence tells us that we lack a sense of connection with the processes that have long

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sustained us and can continue to sustain us if not too quickly and drastically altered. Pine and a number of us Euro-Americans on the walk forged a connection partly based on understanding those weapons as being symbolic of a spiritual void - a lack of meaning following from a lack of connection with something larger and more sustainable than our individual selves.

Pine's work continues much the same today, and the results are becoming more visible. Much of that work, and the basis for it, is reflected in a draft of a book, presently uncompleted, that is one result of cos long-term research, life, and learning.

The introduction to "The Sacred Fire of the Odawa" says, "...it is time to make known the truth." Much traditional knowledge and practice has been kept hidden from those outside Native traditions - especially from Euro-American people, who in so many ways have tried to suppress Native culture. But in recent years Native people of many different traditions have become more open about sharing their traditions, though not from any assurance that cultural genocide is a thing of the past - far from it - but because the earth is increasingly in trouble, and more and more people - Native, Euro-American, and others are recognizing that we must draw on the strengths that all our traditions have to offer in order to heal our human race and protect the planet.

Pine's first acknowledgement of support, before the "Thousands and thousands of people [who] supported my efforts and encouraged me...", is to Gi-iji-shi Min-ni-do (The Great Spirit), "who watches over all of us, gives us all good things, and made it possible for me to write this book."

Pine's conclusions are grounded in reflection upon cos own life, many years of study, listening to and seeking out information from elders, and respect for traditional ways. "In our Wa-wa-na [Real or Traditional] way of life, we do not break our lives into little pieces, with one piece for spiritual things, another piece for business, another for education, and



another for recreation. They are all intermingled in our daily life, for all things are connected."

An increasing number of Euro-Americans have become aware that "The Great Law of Peace", especially as developed and practiced by the Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] Confederacy, served as an important part of the basis for the formation of the USA Government. Pine writes, "All Anishinaayba [Native American] Law is based on the Great Law of Peace. When the Anishinaaybeg followed their traditional ways, they did not need any jails or prisons."

"All disagreements were to be settled in a peaceful manner, and if the people could not agree on a solution, the matter was taken up at a Council. All of the people with an interest in the matter had their say, and the matter was discussed until a solution was found which was agreeable to all."

Those of us who have learned the benefits of working consensually may relate to Pine's criticism of the "democratic" process: "Matters settled by a

majority vote are never truly settled. They crop up again and again because all of the people who had an interest in the matter did not agree with the decision. Often as many as 49% of the people do not agree with the 'majority', and they will put all their efforts into overturning the decision. In the long run, more time and effort is required to settle these problems over and over again than what it would have taken to reach a unanimous agreement the first time the problem arose. Majority decisions bring war, not peace."

"The Anishinaayba Law was not designed to provide one way of justice for the rich, and a different kind of justice for the poor - all wrong doers had to face the council and make amends according to the same system of justice. There was no such thing as plea-bargaining[;] the full truth about the matter was brought out at the Council, and everyone was free to speak about it openly. The final decision was also made openly, so all the people knew the true story, and were satisfied with the solution."

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Of the Odawa language, Pine writes: "Our words are very descriptive and easily pictured, unlike the many abstract words in English, which can be interpreted in many different ways." The book is largely meant for Odawa people, but Pine says, "I am using English, seasoned generously with Odawa, because of a sad truth. Many Anishinaayba [Native American] were taken from their homes and sent away to schools, where they were whipped and beaten if they were caught speaking our language, so they forgot many of the words, and could only teach their children and grandchildren the words they remembered."

Pine expands on the history behind this: "Shortly before I was born, the U.S. Congress passed the Citizenship Act of 1924. This was a unilateral act to make all Anishinaaybeg citizens of the United States of America, provided that each individual freely accepted citizenship. But in order to be a citizen, our people were told that they must renounce their Chief, and their way of life, register to vote, and vote in a democratic system. This has not been done freely, but through the system of forced education, when each of us was 'ruled by the rule.' What I mean is that if we did not listen or learn their way, the backs of our hands were mighty sore at times from being hit with a ruler."

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Ten years later the "Indian Reorganization Act" of 1934g allowed Native peoples to vote for a "tribal government" with "a constitution approved by the Secretary of the Interior." Pine says this was a "Chi-mok-mon [White people's] system of government contrary to our ways." When someone came to bring tribal government here about 1936, the Odawas "ran that Interior representative out of town."

Pine puts the problem of tribal councils forcefully: "The earth is being destroyed and polluted, and tribal councils are taking part in signing leases to multinationals through the U.S. bureaucracy. Tribal councils have nothing to support the Anishinaaybeg way of life, but when election time comes around, they are very quick to put on the mask of tradition. They have pledged their allegiance to a system which is intent on destroying our traditions - a system where church is separated from state, where religion is separated from land. A system of divide and conquer. But according to our Odawa tradition, all things are connected."

A chapter on treaties details some of the duplicities used by the USA government in its attempts to get various treaties accepted. These included getting Native people drunk, forging names, and dealing with people who had not been authorized to represent the Native groups

they were supposedly representing. That chapter is to be updated with information learned since it was written. But a basic fact remains: The Odawa people have never accepted jurisdiction by or ceded their territory to the USA Government. Thus Pine concludes: "A-shig-a-ning [Michigan] was, and still is, under Odawa jurisdiction and our Sacred Law."

In 1984g Pine's "sponsor", after talking with and getting approval from other elders, revived the Sacred Fire Council, the traditional meeting and decision making institution not only of Odawas, but of many other Anishinaayba tribes and nations throughout the region. At that first Council Pine received cos name and designation as Peace and War Chief. About ten people participated; it has since grown to about 500.

Pine felt bothered about the "War Chief" part, and later went back to that elder for an explanation: "He then explained to me that 'War Chief' does not mean that I should take up a gun or rifle, or hatchet. What it means is that I should try as hard as possible to do good things to counter the bad... He said that I shouldn't accept the bad goings on in today's world...where the super rich people are exploiting the earth's resources and people."