

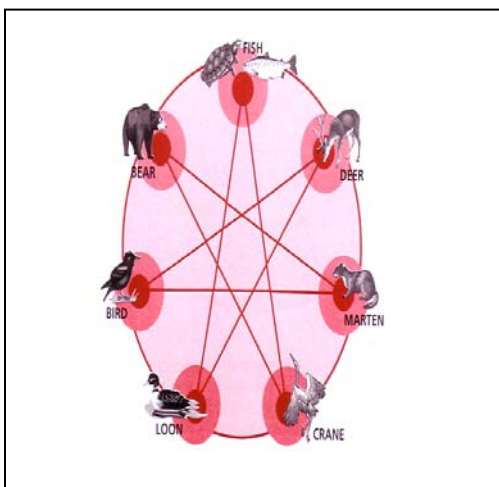
“What are your Clan Responsibilities during the Algonquin Land Claims and Self-Government Process?” The Anishinabe Clan System of Governance



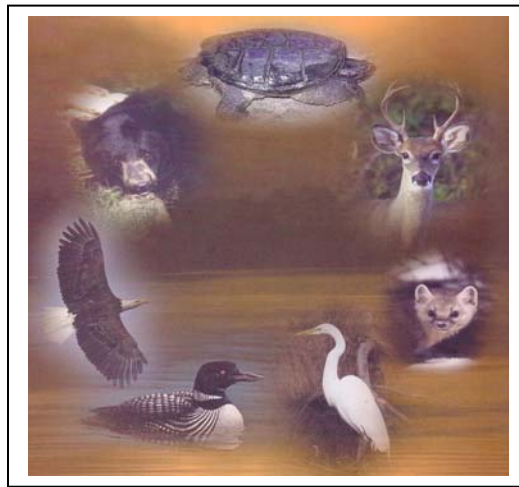
By: Lynn Gehl, Algonquin–Turtle Clan

Before the European invasion, Indigenous societies had their own systems of governance, which differed immensely from European systems of government. Indigenous historian Olive Dickason explains that the main difference between these two systems was what she calls “internal moral codes” employed by Indigenous societies versus “external moral codes” employed by European societies. The Anishinabe Clan system of governance is one such example of an Indigenous system of governance that continues to exist in partiality today. This governance system ascribes responsibilities to individuals in a meaningful and evocative manner that, subsequently, begins to guide and direct their agency and behaviour in a particular direction toward living the good life or, better said, “Pimadiziwin”. It can be said that the Anishinabe Clan system of governance is a powerful cultural structure that holds for believers’ representative, directive and constructive function.

Tradition provides us with a teaching of the Anishinabe Clan system of governance that informs us that before humans inhabited this world, the Clans were already present. According to the Three Fires Society, and as Edward Benton-Benai describes, there existed seven Clans; Fish or Turtle, Deer, Martin, Crane, Loon, Bird and Bear. See figure 1 and 2 below. In this teaching, each Clan has particular responsibilities and roles that they live by. The Crane and Loon Clans are responsible for leadership and sharing as it is said that the Crane has a loud voice and can be heard for miles. Members of the Fish or Turtle Clan are made up of the intellectuals and are often called “star gazers” because they are known for their constant pursuit of meditation and philosophy. Further, it is the responsibility of members of this Clan to settle disputes.



Anishinabek Nation Government



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Fig. 1 and 2. The Anishinabe Clan System of Governance

Members of the Bear Clan serve as a type of police force as they spend most of their time watching over communities. In addition, because they spend much of their time with nature, they have also become known for their knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants and roots. Members of the Martin Clan serve as warriors for the people in that it is their responsibility to protect communities from outsiders. Today, members of the Martin Clan are appreciated as master strategists in their planning of defense. Members of the Deer Clan are the gentle people who would not harm anyone or even engage in harsh words, while members of the Bird Clan are responsible for spiritual leadership and are noted for their intuition and sense of awareness of what the future holds.

The Clan system was, and continues to be, a powerful system of governance in that together the Clan responsibilities hold the power to govern the whole. In the Clan system, everyone has a role and is responsible for the well-being of the larger community. Relationships between the Clans are mediated by the seven Grandfather teachings and decisions are made through consensus. The beginning, though, starts with the individual and their appreciation of their Clan responsibilities.

It is said that one's Clan is with you from the time of your birth and that one's Clan walks with you and looks after you during your life's journey. In Anishinabe tradition, children were given their father's Clan. However, due to processes of colonization, many people today are without their Clan to rely on for guidance and protection.

This being said, the Anishinabe Clan System of Governance is invaluable to the Algonquin peoples during this time of their land claims and self-government process. Algonquins, like many nations, are struggling with issues of internalized oppression, questionable leadership practices, lack of qualified leadership, power usurping, government controlled funding, a lack of moral and ethical codes, lack of knowledgeable and traditional Elders, lack of gender balance, lack of youth involvement, male dominance, dominance of hunting issues, poor policy advice, the imposition of western culture, the imposition of linear time, the appropriation and manipulation of Indigenous culture, the inappropriate and manipulative use of "Treaty rhetoric" such as nation-to-nation, as well as outsiders guiding the process thinking they know what is best for Algonquin peoples. These are gigantically huge negative dynamics that can only serve to shape the land claims and self-government process in a problematic way and, thus, down a questionable path.

Although many Algonquin people do not know what their father's Clan was or for that matter is, there is another and equally well-respected method of achieving one's Clan and, thus, one's responsibilities, as they would apply to the land claims and self-government process. Algonquins can approach an Elder, a ceremonial person, or a traditional knower such as Jim Windigo and others, that they have a relationship with, offer them tobacco, and respectfully ask them to retrieve their Clan from the spiritual realm.

For example, although I am not a member of the Three Fires Society, I am Algonquin Anishinabe kwe and even though due to process of colonization, I do not know what my father's Clan was, several years ago I offered tobacco to an Elder who retrieved my Clan from the spiritual realm. Today, it is my Clan teachings and responsibilities that have become my internal moral code that guides me forward. Further, over the years I have come to appreciate that, in fact, my Clan is my internal sovereignty.

Borrowing cultural meaning systems, as I have and advocate we should do with the Three Fires Society Anishinabe Clan system, is a good thing versus a bad pan-Indianism thing and I encourage other Algonquins to do the same. All Algonquins need to know what their Clan responsibilities are in the land claims and self-government process in order to ensure that the process is guided and shaped in a good way versus a bad way.

Lynn Gehl is a second year Indigenous Studies Ph.D. student at Trent University where her dissertation topic is the contemporary land claims and self-government process.

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