

BLACKFOOT WAYS OF KNOWING: THE WORLDVIEW OF THE SIKSIKAITSTAPI

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III. Affirmation of Indigenous Knowledge

8. *Kakyosin* – Traditional Knowledge

Reconstructing *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing begins with sacred knowledge held in the stories and ceremonies that have been handed down through a web of kinship alliances. One of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* explains how these relationships are learned at an early age:

We have to respect our Mother and Father. This is what we are all raised with: to respect our relatives. During ceremony, when our relatives are smudging, if we understand, then we understand our way of life. That is where it starts, where prayer [good heart] begins.

Learning *Siksikaitapi* ways of knowing begins with the family, which is literally *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [the Source of Life] in all domains, especially for the child. The reader is reminded that the *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* is the great mystery that is in everything in the universe. *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* lives in each and every form of creation, as all life forms contribute and participate in giving life. Therefore, learning the ways of knowing originates with the family, because they provide the source of knowledge during early childhood and adolescence.

Knowing is relational and dependent upon relationships that are learned in childhood. *Siksikaitapi* ways of knowing are dependent upon relationships, which create and generate knowledge. All life experiences are a source of knowledge. As an example, dreams are a primary source of knowledge for *Siksikaitapi*. Often dreams are prophetic,



contain warnings, or reveal knowledge. Such dreams are passed on through the oral traditions among the people and are repeatedly found in stories and ceremonies.

Akaitapiwa prepare and guide us through dreams; sometimes these dreams reveal the future. One of the *Kaaahsinmooniksi* shares her experiences with this form of knowing:

My dream told me: you are going to be one of the Horns. I saw the buffalo dancing. I heard the song. I said, “this is the song.” The way those men are dancing, that is how the buffalo dances. After a while, after a few years, we then transferred. When I was in the Horns, my whole family got to understand the Horn way. As time went on, I had another dream, a baby was calling me. This baby said, “I am from the north; I want you to be my mother.” It wasn’t long after that that I carried a medicine bundle. I carried the Beaver Bundle.

Dreams like this provide guidance and protection. The individual is shown gifts that can be pursued. If they are accepted, then the individual will be protected. More importantly, dreams reveal knowledge that guides us in our personal responsibilities [*Kiitomohpiipotokoŋ*] in life.

One of my own experiences in which knowledge was revealed through my dreams occurred in the initial phases of my dissertation. The dream came in the early morning, at dawn. As with most powerful dreams, I awoke immediately after the dream. I have taken up the practice of writing my dreams in a journal so that I don’t forget important details. In one dream I clearly heard the voice of *Akaitapiwa*. Their message was: *The knowledge that you are seeking is in the teachings of our people. Come to learn and understand these teachings and share them in your life. Others will be able to use them and apply them to the problems of the day.* The dream revealed the need to generate knowledge from *Siksikaitsipoyi* ways of knowing to combat the problems of the day. I understood that the primary teaching process is life as it unfolds. In each relationship, in each

Blackfoot ceremonial bundle, 1926. Photographer Edward S. Curtis. From “Curtis,” *North American Indian*, vol. 18. Glenbow Archives NA-1700-178.

moment in time, in each thought, in each word, and in each action is a teaching, which contributes to the intricate balance of a cosmic universe.

The grandparents provide examples of how daily observances can be used to learn how to maintain good relations and balance, for example:

This is where it starts. What *Kaaahsinnooniksi* are telling us is meant for a purpose. This is where you begin to understand. For example, you do not walk by or near *Itawaamatosimmopi* [place for smudge] and you do not disturb [touch] your relatives' possessions. You understand that the teachings of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* are told for a purpose.

Knowing begins with appreciating that life can be understood through the teachings of the relatives, *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, and *Akaitapiwa*. Thus, the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi* is an integral part of where their place is within the cosmos. By knowing one's place in the cosmic universe, we form intricate alliances with the world coming from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. From these relationships arises an intricate constitution of *Kiitomohpiipotokoi* that forms the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi*. Through these responsibilities we, as *Niitsitapi*, come to know who we are in the universe; these responsibilities become the source of knowing our place [*Mokaksin*].

Indigenous people have long recognized the consciousness of the natural order, in fact, since the beginning of our time. The fundamental premise of *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing is that all forms of creation possess consciousness. The non-separation of nature and humans is one of the demarcations between Eurocentred and Indigenous philosophy. This demarcation creates completely distinct paradigms of reality, truth, and knowing. For example, a symbol in the Indigenous paradigm is not an abstraction or a representation of reality, but rather a medium for communicating with the cosmic forces of the universe, a spirit, and it is alive with consciousness from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. The following story, told by one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, illustrates the power of the cosmic alliances which manifest, in various forms.

My father (*Ninna*) told me this story and my brother also told me the story himself. He began the story:

My brother enlisted in the Second World War. He did not pass the physical requirements due to a congenital ear defect. However, he was not discharged but was stationed on the coast. His duties were assisting in shipping army supplies. Prior to departing for his duties, one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* had made an amulet for his protection. The young man was instructed to wear it at all times. However, he took it off for his daily showers. One day while he was taking a shower, as usual, he put the amulet on the windowsill. On this particular day, as he reached to pick it up, it was gone. He asked if anyone had taken it. No one had seen it. He never found it. After some time had lapsed, he wrote to my old man and he told him that he had lost the amulet. After some more time, my old man told *Kaaahsinnoon* that my brother had lost the amulet. *Kaaahsinnoon* said, "It is home. It has come home."

The amulet is an example of the absence of separations or categorical demarcations of the *Siksikaitapi* worldview. Concepts are used for distinguishing parts of the whole. For example, the amulet possesses power from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* that protects the person who wears it. The entity embodies the relationships of specific protectors. In the world of *Siksikaitapi*, knowledge, science, and religion are not separate. Reconstructing Indigenous reality involves developing and using constructs that will distinguish reality, truth, and, subsequently, the consciousness of *Siksikaitapi*. For example, the nature of being, the nature of knowledge, and the methods of knowing are clearly delineated in the process of maintaining balance in the world. The interrelationships of these constructs are the means for understanding the holistic nature of consciousness and the nature of generating knowledge and truth. These constructs furthermore reflect the interrelationships of the natural world and the intricate knowledge that balances ecological and spiritual beings.

The land, animals, and spirits are not separate but an integral part of the *Siksikaitstapi* world. They, too, are the source of science and knowledge. This same relationship exists with the elements, earth, wind, water, and rock – all are within the consciousness of the universe [*Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*] and make up the circle of life. They all have their own roles and responsibilities within the universe. *Siksikaitstapi* are taught to work with these responsibilities. This is done in part through ceremonies. We call them ceremonies because we are working with the sacred powers of *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* [Source of Life]. Here is an example of how *Siksikaitstapi* make alliances for sustenance and medicinal purposes:

The healers will know when they are out walking and they come to some herbs, they will know what they can use them for in healing. We always give thanks; we acknowledge the herbs, berries, and the trees for their gifts. We offer tobacco and pray before we pick the berries.

All knowledge and wisdom comes through the alliances with insects, animals, and plants. Sometimes *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* doesn’t speak directly to humans; instead, the knowledge is revealed through the natural order, such as animals and stars. As Cajete (1994, 102) comments for *Niitsitapi* in general: “Plants are alive; and you must give them good talk.” One of the grandparents shared the alliances of a healer:

My father was also a healer. X’s [referring to another *Kaaahsinnoon* in the room] father was also a healer. Their life is centred on healing people. They never packaged their herbs, and they did not tell the people which herbs they used. They knew when someone was sick, and they went there to doctor them. They would make a brew. They knew the names of the herbs that they used. It is also true that we would be told to use a certain herb for certain ailments. We would try to copy them, but they would work only for those who were given the gift to heal.

I have seen herbs brought to people who have cancer. The white doctors do not know how to mix the herbs. Healing is a gift we get; we will not lose it; it will stick with us.

The healers work with herbs in a holistic manner that recognizes the alliances of herbs and roots; however, an integral component of healing is a gift from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, which is the source of healing. As a result, healers have their own ways of diagnosis and knowing whether they can treat ailments and imbalances. If they know that they treat an imbalance, then they will perform a ceremony that is a part of the healing.

One of the grandfathers shares the story of the healing of his father as it was told to him:

X was a healer and he lived at the west end of the reserve. My father had already moved to the northeast end of the reserve. *X* had heard that my father was sick, so he rode down to my father's place. It was in the winter. He told my father: "I know that you did not ask me to come and doctor you." My mother began to gather gifts to give him, but *X* said, "Do not give me anything until I know that I can doctor him."

Kaaahasinnoon described the doctoring, and with one of the procedures *X* revealed that he now knew that he could doctor my father. So he proceeded to doctor him.

He then received the gifts that were given to him. My father was healed and made a vow. Soon he was transferred the Long Time Medicine Pipe.

Healers have unique and special powers that have been given to them by the alliances. However, healing is not a given but is dependent upon the relationships of gifts given by the alliances. These relationships are forever premised on the great mysterious force of the universe [*Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*], and the more one understands the dynamics of this tremendous sacred power, the more effective is the work with these alliances. This is one

of the reasons that *Kaaahsinnooniksi* are sought as teachers for the younger people.

The nature of the *Siksikaitstapi* universe is understood as consciousness that manifests in all life forms and is the basis of the principles that underlie conduct, thought, and knowledge. What manifests is *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, the Source of Life. This understanding of the universe structures reality, the ways of knowing, knowledge, and the truth of a culture. In addition, the theory of the origin of nature, and the methods and limits of knowledge, are also based on this particular understanding of nature. *Siksikaitstapi* ways of knowing begin with knowing one's responsibilities among tribal alliances. The next section will explore the ontological responsibilities of *Siksikaitstapi* that are the foundation of our theory of knowledge and its validity.

9. *Kiitomohpiipotoko* – Ontological Responsibilities

The ontological theory of *Siksikaitstapi* is premised on the experience with the sacred, *Ihtsitapiyo'pa*. The individual's experience of the sacred provides the fundamental orientation of what it means to be human among *Niitsitapi*. Therefore, the focus of human development is premised on experiences, which connect the individual to the transformational powers of the universe. (These powers are called "transcendent" in Eurocentred thinking; however, for *Niitsitapi* they are immanent spiritual presences.) This ontological theory contains a complex system of kinship relationships based on which *Niitsitapi* teach their children the meaning of life and the purpose of life. The meaning of life is rooted in the experiences grounded in the sacred relationships of alliances. The understanding of what it means to be a human being is premised on the connections with the sacred and the development of transformational experiences. In essence, the identity of the people and the theory of human development is based on a framework of moral and ethical relationships.

They have been referred to generically as the spirituality of Indigenous

people. They are the basis of becoming and being *Niitsitapi*. The tribal identity of *Siksikaitsitapi* begins with having good relations; prayer is the path for good relations among one's alliances; it is also the process of making alliances and acknowledging them. This has been expressed as follows by one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi*:

In order to regain our identity and maintain our way of life we need to have good relations. We don't leave out prayer in anything that we do. This is our way. The spirituality, it is just part of the way of life. Being *Siksikaitsitapi* means you have to take care of your mental, your spiritual, your emotional, and your physical. All these things. The spiritual is part of it, especially through prayer [*Aatsimoyihkaani*]. It is a powerful part of it.

One of the essential components of every ceremony is the making of incense by *Aawaatowapsiiks*. It is offered to create and balance an alliance, particularly for communicating with cosmic alliances, e.g., *Naatosi* [the Sun] (Pete Standing Alone, personal communication, December 1998). *Aawaatowapsiiks* and *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, who have been initiated, make incense in the early morning and at dusk in acknowledgment of the rise of *Naatosi*. It is offered for a balanced and harmonious day. *Nii'ta'kaiksamaikoan* adds that smudge is used to ask for blessings, such as good relations with relatives or that the journey of life be long and full of kindness. Incense carries the words of *Aawaatowapsiiks* to the alliances and its power helps guide and protect their words. The story of *Paiyo* [a.k.a. Scarface, *Ihpowa'ksski*, *Pahtsiipissowaasi* [Mistaken-for-Morning-Star], and *Poiyawa*] describes how the sacred power of incense was given to *Siksikaitsitapi* (N. Blood, personal communication, December 1998). The following is an example of the powerful use of smoke in our tradition:

If something is so hard and you call upon *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, then it will happen. Spirit hears us when we call, when we are making

incense. The fragrance goes to *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. We are listened to, we are loved when we make a vow to the pipe and to *Ookaan*. My brother, he was sick with cancer. The doctors could not heal it. And then we took him to X. And they couldn't take it out. I was looking at my brother. [Pause] He is a big person. [Pause] And then I made a vow to the pipe for him to get better, to get out of the hospital healthy. That is how strongly I believe in my faith. It wasn't long after that that my brother came out of the hospital. I danced with the pipe.

This statement addresses working with the alliances of the Medicine Pipe, incense, and the reciprocity of responsibilities. Children learn the profound powers of smudge at an early age. They learn to respect the cosmic alliances accordingly:

I brought them up with prayer, I taught them to pray and to smudge so that my house is good. I am making smudge because somebody taught me how to smudge. I was given the right to smudge with sweet grass; smudging with sweet grass is good. Smudging restores balance and if things are unbalanced, we smudge. That is how we get our children to respect us.

The transformational experiences are generated and created through the interactions, communications, and participation with the natural and cosmic alliances through ceremonies, such as the use of incense. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* give us the following example:

Certain things in our life are given to us. We *Siksikaitsitapi* have the responsibility to do certain things. That is our way of life. These are very personal (individual) things that cannot be handed down. I think that in some cases those of you who are learning are now trying to understand this part of our way of life.

In the above quotation, *Kaaahsinnoon* is referring to those students of traditional knowledge who are attempting to understand the transformational experiences generated through *Siksikaitstapi* ways of knowing. By connecting with *Naatosi*, *Ko'komikisomm*, *Ksisstsi'kò'm*, etc., and through the use of incense, a ceremony can alter the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual domains of individuals and the cosmos. This process simply cannot be fully explained, and *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* remains a mysterious power.

Four of the five *Kaaahsinnooniksi* had family and parents who were healers. Three of the four also had been doctored. One of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, whose father was one of the most prominent healers in the recent history of *Kainai*, said,

I cannot explain my father's life. Why did he as an individual get his power to heal? What did he know? I cannot explain my father's life and neither my mother's. All I know is what he did; I have also observed him healing. It is given to us by the *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life]. It was given to him. He could not teach anyone. He could not pass it on.

The experiences of his father's healing power are premised on the ontological theory of *Siksikaitstapi*. Experiences of the sacred are the basis for the definition of humanity. The understanding of what it is to be human is based on the cosmological origin of *Siksikaitstapi*. Cosmological beings are allied with such powers as *Naatosi*, *Ko'komikisomm*, *Ipissowaasi*, *Pahtsiipissowaasi*, *Miyohpo'koiks* [Pleiades], and *Ihkitsikommiksi* [Big Dipper]; they have revealed or given to *Siksikaitstapi* the natural laws of the universe. They hold and are the original instructions for maintaining life and the balance of the world. These natural laws were given in ceremony, and the creation stories provide a context for the responsibilities that define humanity for *Siksikaitstapi*. Cosmological beings also provide an orientation to

the natural world, a place to come from and a place from which to enter the natural world.

Naatosi and *Napi* reveal the knowledge of the mysterious cosmic force referred to as *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, which is the source of the transformational powers as experienced and transferred to *Siksikaitsitapi*. Such transformational powers are common among *Siksikaitsitapi*, but an increasing disconnection from the alliances has changed our experience – we experience them to a lesser degree now. The sweat lodge, *Tsisksaan*, is another a source of transformation. It was given to *Paiyo* as one of the numerous ceremonies that embody the transformational powers for *Siksikaitsitapi*. The story of *Paiyo* is also a form of traditional knowledge instructing *Siksikaitsitapi* how to live their lives; it is passed on from one generation to the next. Story and ceremony are the primary ways of learning to be human, to be *Niitsitapi*, “one of the people”; this means having the connections and integrity of *Paiyo* and the ability to participate in a way of life that is transformational. The story of *Paiyo* tells of the blessings that one receives when one is connected to the teachings. *Niitapitapiyssinni* means to live by the traditional teachings and to participate in the renewal and transformation of the world. One of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* illustrates *Kiitomohpiipotokoi*, the ontological responsibility of participating in ceremony, and the characteristics required for participation:

As long as I live, I will continue to do my ceremonial work.
We share love, kindness, and generosity. We help each other.
We are helping each other. My friend here is going to open
his Medicine Pipe bundle. I will always help my friend in his
ceremonial work, too. The gifts you gave me, I gave them to
him. You see for yourself, you did not hear about it.

In addition to participating, at an early age, *Kaaahsinnooniksi* learned the ontological responsibility of listening:

My father passed away. I was still very young. I don't remember too much about my father. I grew up with my grandfather. At our home, there were many things that we were told not to do. We were told to be quiet when we had visitors. *Kaaahsinnoon* would say, "Sit down and be still when the visitors come to tell stories."

You can tell if a young person is listening. You can observe what I am talking about.

At times, when *Kaaahsinnoon* had visitors, we were told to leave the room. We were not ready to hear the conversation. When other visitors came, we could stay and listen. It was *Kaaahsinnoon's* way of saying, "listen to what we are talking about because you are ready to understand our talk. You will be able to use it to understand your life as you get older."

Children were often told the legends of *Napi*, which contain the sacred teachings of what it is to be human among *Siksikaitstapi*. *Napi* stories provide the context for human development, specifically regarding the necessary moral and ethical sanctions to follow in order to be *Siksikaitstapi*. The origins of *Napi* are not clear (Bullchild 1985, 86). One interpretation (P. Standing Alone, personal communication, October 1997) is that *Napi* has creative powers that are similar to the powers of *Naatosi*. Without the sun, life could not be sustained on the planet. *Naatosi* is literally *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, which means: we live only because of *Naatosi's* life force (without *Naatosi*, there is no life). *Naatosi* is a manifestation of *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*. Bullchild also addresses the origins of *Napi*. He states that *Naatosi* gave his spiritual powers to *Napi* and taught him the teachings that were needed in order for his brothers and sisters to survive on Mother Earth and to lead them to more learning from time to time (Bullchild 1985, 86). *Napi* came to live among the people to teach a good way of life. He taught them two very sacred precepts: to hold the sacred ways of *Naatosi* and to be faithful and obedient to the natural laws of balance. These are the precepts that maintain the cultural integrity of *Siksikaitstapi*. The cultural integrity of most North American tribes as perceived by

Kaaahsinnooniksi is held in the stories of our ancestors and in the teachings contained in these stories. Each culture has its own way of being *Niitsitapi*.

Now, this way of prayer was given to us. Those who live outside our boundaries, they live a different way of life; they were given a prayer too.

This is what is given to them [their own cosmologies]. We are given our forms of ceremonies.

The ceremonies, lands, stories, ritual, language, roles, and responsibilities are the hallmarks of a holistic worldview. They are intertwined and interdependent with each other and form the cultural and ceremonial integrity of *Niitsitapi*.

The stories of *Napi* teach *Siksikaitstapi* fundamental responsibilities and powers given to them in accordance with the natural laws of the universe. It is the responsibility of *Siksikaitstapi* to use these powers to strengthen life and not to use them for selfish and foolish reasons. Most importantly, they must not be used for personal vanity. The greatest weakness that can befall the people is for them to think they possess the powers and begin to use their knowledge for their own selfish purposes.

Stories of *Napi's* exploits impress upon the listener the destructive aspects of humans and the powers of the universe. Through these stories, *Siksikaitstapi* are taught that human beings can be fraught with deceit, greed, cruelty, cowardice, egocentricity, brutality, and fallaciousness. The trickster *Napi* illustrates not only how the destructive tendencies can become dominant, but how they have consequences in the social world (Harrod 1992, 167). The stories also talk about the ability to transform. The powers of the universe give life, but they also destroy. *Siksikaitstapi* must learn to balance these powers; through the *Napi* stories, they understand the purpose of their existence and the relationship to their own powers as human beings. One of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* illustrates the power that ceremonies have for maintaining balance:

I was raised in the residential school. I prayed every day, but it did not mean anything. Prayer is for grave imbalance. If a person is in grave imbalance (trouble/problems), he/she will think of prayer. He/she may be in a grave imbalance in life. It may be a sickness that makes them think of the *Omahkohkana-kaaatsiisinni*, *Maotoki* or *Ookaan* [ceremonial societies]. They go and have their faces painted. We *Siksikaitapiti* say our life is shown to us. Life was shown to me.

Kaaahasinnon, and all *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who participated in *Kanohsin*, were ceremonial brothers and sisters through their initiation into *Omahkohkana kaaatsiisinni*. They had began the revitalization and renewal of this society:

At one time at *Aakokatssin* there were only nine teepees. There were only a few *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* dancing. The other bundles had been sold. I am one of these people who was very bad in the past. Then I thought that I wanted to get involved in *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*. I joined *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* with my friend and these people that are sitting here. I was around when *X* was still alive. He was a person who totally lived our way of life. There was nothing that he did not know. He talked about spirits telling a person what to do. An old person would experience this. You would say that he is holy. We continue our prayer. That is what I have to tell you. If you don't live our way of life, then it won't be. That old man said prayer is what keeps the way of life going.

Ookaan transformed the lives of these *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. They are living the knowledge of the alliances. Their understanding of the teachings, which they have developed through their experiences, is the primary knowledge of the ways of the alliances. This is how their lives have been transformed. Today their teachings and guidance can assist others who want to know *Niipaitapiyssinni* and who want to transform their lives by coming to understand their relationships with the alliances.

Ceremony and prayer are an integral process for connecting with the “good heart,” which is a path of kindness and generosity. Respect presupposes kindness, which acknowledges the life-giving nature of all creation. Respect maintains a balance among the powers of *lhtsipaitapiiyopa* [source of life]. Death is inevitable and part of balance.

These teachings are given through stories from *Kaaahsinnooniksi* and *Akaitapiwa*. The first humans were very pitiful; they had no knowledge for survival on earth, so *Napi* provided them with the path and necessary conditions to survive by maintaining their responsibilities for balance. He showed them roots, berries, and animals that they could eat, as well as various plants for healing.

Whatever these animals tell you to do, you must obey them, as they appear in your sleep. Be guided by them. If anybody wants help, if you are alone ... cry aloud for help, your prayer will be answered. The response may come from the eagles, perhaps by the buffalo, or by the bears. Whatever animal answers your prayer, you must listen to him. (Harrod 1992, 44)

Humans possess senses and abilities different from other animals. Non-human animals create a consciousness that has different powers than human consciousness. As a result, they mediate a number of transformational powers for humans. Animals are a major source of knowledge because their knowledge of the natural world exceeds that of humans.

The deer has been a source of knowledge and guidance for me. In 1985, I went to a conference in Niagara Falls, Ontario. During the conference I participated in a workshop in which the facilitator, through ceremony and meditation, guided the participants to that “place Indians talk about” (Cajete 1994, 42) or the “still quiet place” (Colorado 1988, 54). I refer to this place as the centre of the universe. As I experienced the “still quiet place,” a deer walked up to me and gave me love and understanding. The experience was transformational. I learned that the power

of love pervades the universe and that dignity and respect arise from mutual understanding. Since that experience I have often seen the deer in times of conflict and despair. On these occasions it has brought love or understanding to the situation and thus transformed an experience of imbalance. I remember one of the difficult times I had at one of the intensive seminars during my dissertation work. I even thought of withdrawing from the doctoral program. I had left the residency and walked into the hills among the redwoods. Suddenly I felt the presence of someone. I stopped to look up the hill I was approaching. A doe stood quietly, a mere ten feet from where I was. As our eyes locked, I felt the quiet, gentle love that was immanent in her presence. I felt a sense of peace come over me; tears began to fill my eyes and soon rolled down my face. At that moment I realized any conflict could be resolved with the understanding that each person has a unique journey, which must be respected with love.

Niisitapi have always had a relationship with animals. At one level, this interconnecting and interdependent relationship reflects the people's need to consume animals as food. On a different level, *Niisitapi* are also dependent upon animals for guidance and protection. The animals are helpers because they possess a powerful source of knowledge and wisdom. Their behaviour, if observed carefully, will reveal many secrets of balance and harmony. The natural world knows how to live in harmony. Among the Plains cultures, animals not only possess consciousness, but will and soul. Subsequently, they are often the medium for the transfer of sacred power between *Ihtsipaitapiiyó'pa* and the people. This is why animals are integral partners in the transfers of bundles.

The ontological responsibilities or transformational powers bestowed on the people by *Naatosi* as well as the dark potentials of humanity are characterized in the adventures of *Napi*. The stories teach the characteristics of *Siksikaitsitapi* understanding of psychological health. They are attained by living the laws of the natural order, respecting the powers emanating from *Ihtsipaitapiiyó'pa*, and working with all the powers of the universe. The stories shape the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi* as heroes, tricksters, and creators – an identity founded upon transformational experi-

ences with the sacred. It is described in the distinct narratives that illustrate appropriate forms of relationships for each way of being (Harrod 1992, 64). However, the dark powers of humankind and their consequences are also described in many of the adventures of *Napi*.

The following story, told by a *Kaaahsinnoon*, illustrates the vanity and selfishness of humanity and the effect that these may have on one's life:

Napi went to the women's dance; the women had medicine. The men were all standing in line. The women were choosing which men they wanted to marry. The head woman wanted to marry *Napi*. *Napi* did not want her. The women then went to put on their finest clothes. After they had dressed in their finest clothes, they went back to the men. *Napi* noticed the beauty of the head woman. He wanted to marry her. However, the head woman told the other women, "Do not take *Napi* for a husband." On their return, *Napi* stood in front of the head woman hoping she would choose him, as he found her extremely attractive. She paid no attention to him. He continued to avail himself to her, but she continued to ignore him. *Napi* was left alone, no one had chosen him for a spouse. Now, this story is found in our language, and when we go to dance, we may often hear a man say, "I was never asked to get up and dance."

The story teaches humility. The adventures of *Napi* also provide the history of the people, showing how the world came to be such as it is, and the characteristics of humans. The roles, responsibilities, and characteristics of the animal world are also included, as are the origins of sacred places and the friends and neighbours of *Siksikaitstapi*.

The *Napi* legends are the teaching tools for *Ihpi'p'o'tstspisti*. The stories hold the origins of *Siksikaitstapi* as well as the means for interpreting and making sense of our world. Coming to know [*Mokaksin*] means experiencing the alliances; they form the ontological ground for *Siksikaitstapi*. Following the principles expressed in the stories gives rise to an educational philosophy that fundamentally teaches *Siksikaitstapi* to be good hu-

man beings. It means coming to know the characteristics of humanity that produce powerful alliances and create transformational changes in *Kiipaitapiyssiinnooni* [our way of life] and our ancestral connections.

Siksikaitsitapi are dependent upon all of creation for survival. Learning how life is interdependent is therefore a preeminent objective in the educational process. Learning how to connect the power of self with all other forms of life is the essence of human development. *Siksikaitsitapi* talk about interdependence by saying that human beings exist only in relation to their relatives. An individual cannot exist without a network of kinship alliances. Knowing who you are is knowing your relatives – and knowing your relatives is being in your centre. Being in the centre of the universe means knowing one’s place in the universe, and that place is at the centre of our tribal, natural, and cosmic alliances. Being centred means knowing the specific interdependent relationships one has with natural and cosmic beings. The process of coming to know [*Mokaksin*] is a life journey that begins with coming to know your own responsibilities [*Kiitomohpiipotokoi*] to your relatives and the alliances. In short, *Mokaksin* is knowing oneself in this way.

The self is central to the process of understanding tribal responsibilities within *Niipaitapiyssiin*, the cosmic order. The “concept for life sake” (Cajete, 1994) is the pursuit of understanding the complex interdependence of all life. This brings one to that “place Indians people talk about.” It is the centre of thought, the centre of one’s being (Cajete 1994, 45–50). The “place Indians talk about” is the journey of becoming complete and whole; it is a place of experiencing oneness with the universe. Often this place is expressed through the phrase “we are all related.”

A good heart means many things. Its benchmark is maintaining one’s integrity with the natural laws of the universe. They allow the heart to align with the sacred knowledge of tribal life. *Mokaksin* comes about by experiencing and living the teachings.

The sacred science is concerned with “revealed” knowledge and with the “beginnings of things.” It rests in the assumption of a

“common energetic origin to all bodies,” an ultimate spiritual source which alone is able to animate matter, an undefined cosmic energy. (Ani 1994, 99)

A good heart aligned with *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* enables sacred science, the effect of undefined cosmic energy that reveals the sacred teachings through the heart. This science is understood and practiced by *Siksikaitsitapi* through the concept of *Pomma’ksinni* [transfers]. It is the process of initiation into the sacred ceremonies of *Siksikaitsitapi*. *Pomma’ksinni* is a process of renewing the power alliances of kinship relations. The ceremony transfers sacred or medicine power. The powers of natural and cosmic alliances are transferred by and through those who are carriers of the bundles and pipes. Their being becomes connected with the alliances of the particular bundle or pipe. In the transfer of sacred medicine power, the bundle holders and pipe carriers are initiated to perform the ceremonies that renew the alliances of *Siksikaitsitapi*. As a result *Aawaatowapsiiks* and *Kaaahsinnooniksi* return to the sacred state of balance and harmony. This is taking the good red road or having a “good heart.” *Kaaahsinnooniksi* have identified the following responsibilities as essential for a “good heart” or the “place Indians talk about”:

As *Kaaahsinnooniksi* we should tell the truth. We are asked to be *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* must be honest, speak straight, speak the truth, be kind. We tell what is true. If the truth is not told, then the Society may be hurt, or we ourselves may be hurt.

Truth is dependent upon the experience of the speaker. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* teach from their individual experiences, the stories, and the ceremonies. They teach and pray from their heart, which is the very essence of their being. The good heart or coming to the quiet place is where the sacred balance of harmony can be experienced. It is a process of connecting with

Akaitapiwa. Kaaahsinnooniksi have learned that honesty and kindness is the means of coming to the still quiet place of the ancestors.

The transfer of knowledge is not always direct. It requires learning to recognize the interdependent relationships with the natural order. Thus, to be a *Siksikaititapi* requires rigor, integrity, and self-discipline. *Niitapitapiiysinni* comes from fulfilling ontological responsibilities [*Kiitomohpiipotokoi*], which in turn is rewarded with the transfer of knowledge.

As a result of experiencing the universe as an integral whole, the knower becomes one with the known. In this way one intuitively knows what it is to be the other, because the other is an extension of oneself. Among the sacred sites I have visited are the pyramids of Mexico. One afternoon, an Aztec ceremonialist took a group of us to the Pyramid of Thunder on top of a mountain. The climb was arduous, the rocks were slippery, and it was hot. There were many times during the climb when I thought I would not make it to the top of the mountain. As we sat down and began our prayers, I instantaneously felt aliveness, the universal power from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*, the sacred medicine power of *Naatosi*. At that moment I knew I was at the centre of the universe. I was one with the sacred medicine power of the universe. I felt the perfection and the intelligence of the universe. This experience transformed my relationship with the universe and altered my way of relating to life and myself. Transformational education is the pursuit of spiritual knowledge through participating in ceremony. It is through experiencing the alliances that I have connected with the spiritual forces from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* and experienced the transformational powers of the universe.

My cousin, Leonard Bastien, who is one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, told me, "It does not matter if you do not understand what is going on; come anyway." He is referring to ceremony. I interpret this to mean: if you begin seeking the cosmic alliances in the teachings of the ancestors, then the understanding will come through participation. *Kaaahsinnoon P. Standing Alone* (October 1997, personal communication) explains further, "Many of the young men who join the *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* [Big All Comrades] may not understand the purpose of the society, because

membership is not based on selection criteria but on the willingness to vow to join the society.” Membership is self-selected. He also stated, “Many only understand their roles and responsibilities after they have been initiated or long after initiation.” The critical aspect of coming to know is participation.

To summarize, *Siksikaititapi* ontological experience of the sacred arises within a complex system of kinship relations. They constitute our ways of knowing and construct the human development and educational practices of *Siksikaititapi*. The epistemological function of this elaborate and complex system of relations generates the knowledge; the practices of living this knowledge create *Siksikaititapi* transformational powers.

10. *Siksikaititapi* Ways of Knowing – Epistemology

Epistemology concerns itself with theories of knowing and provides frameworks for discussing validity issues. It provides cultures with a philosophical and theoretical framework of assumptions for seeking knowledge as well as processes that define truth. Epistemology impacts the informal and formal educational process that is dependent upon such theoretical interpretations and understandings of the nature of the universe, reality, and truth. The educational foundation of a culture originates from its epistemological assumptions, its pivot of reality interpretation and maintenance.

Most Eurocentred epistemologies are premised on rationality and the objectification of knowing. As a result, nature is understood to be made of identifiable qualities that are, at least potentially, completely knowable. Scientific inquiry is the pursuit of discerning the knowable qualities of an objectified universe. The rational goal of objectifying observation is to identify the various discrete parts that are assumed to exist and from which understanding and knowledge are derived. By identifying the component parts of the universe, or understanding how these parts are interconnected, the knower garners the power to control,

manipulate, and predict the movements of people and objects (Ani 1994). Reality, as understood in the Eurocentred worldview, consists of physical, observable, quantifiable, reproducible, and controllable phenomena. Scientific rationality and objectivity are considered possible because of the assumption that humans are fundamentally rational beings. The Eurocentred paradigm distinguishes human beings not only as separate from each other, but also as separate from the natural world by virtue of their intellect or ability to reason.

To think properly about an object, to gain knowledge of (mastery over) an object, we must control it. We can only do this if we are emotionally detached from it. And we gain the emotional distance from the “object” by first and foremost gaining control over ourselves; that is by placing our reason (intellect) in control of our emotions (feelings). (Ani 1994, 37)

Marimba Ani further describes Eurocentred epistemologies as invoking certain ontological foundations that have a cognitive bias. These assumptions are even embedded in the structure of the English language. Language in general is the medium through which structures of power are perpetuated and concepts of “truth,” “order,” and “reality” become established (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 7).

Truth is what counts as true within a system of rules for a particular discourse; power is that which annexes, determines and verifies truth. Truth is never outside of power, or deprived of power, the production of truth is a function of power ... and we cannot exercise power except with the production of truth. (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 167)

It is imperative for colonized people to step outside the implicit body of assumptions carried by the English language and to resist a dissociative and objectifying epistemology. If Indigenous epistemologies are to survive,

the use of native languages and the appropriate storied philosophies is mandatory. Indigenous epistemologies have to assert their distinctness to ensure that they are not appropriated or undermined by universalistic assumptions and other features of Eurocentred epistemologies, languages, and value systems (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 11).

For *Niitsitapi*, intelligence means participating within the world from which one has acquired the wisdom of nature and the knowledge of experience. This understanding invokes a number of relationships that contrast with the Eurocentred concept of intellect. The objectification of knowledge through the manipulation and control of observation has negated other forms of epistemologies, modes of cognition, worldviews, therefore limiting the ability for people to experience the universe as cosmic (Ani 1994, 37–39).

Niitsitapi epistemologies are premised on a set of assumptions through which knowledge and validity are constituted. All knowledge rests within a cosmic union of human beings who are interconnected with the natural order through the spiritual forces coming from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*. They constitute the collective consciousness of *Niitsitapi*. It is based on the spirituality of a cosmic order. One of the *Kaaahsinmooniksi* shares his experience with *Siksikaititapi* epistemologies:

I had moved to the Sundance with my parents. *X* [an older person who was a member of *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*] approached me to assist him with his dancing [ceremony]. He said, “Would you assist me when I dance out from *Tatsikiiyakokiisinni*, the centre tepee. I did not want to do it. I did not feel good about doing it. *Y* [another man, who overheard *X* asking for my assistance], interjected and said, “He is asking for your assistance. Why don’t you want to assist him?” I then agreed to help *X* with his dancing. *X* said, “You watch me, when I come out of *A’mii*, *Tatsikiiyakokiisinni*. I will wave to you.” *X* did as he said, and I entered the centre and danced with *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*.

In the morning, I was sleeping and was awakened by the sound that people make when they want to enter a lodge. The sound is a way of announcing their arrival. My mother called to them to enter. Three *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* members had come to visit my father.

Kaaahsinnoon meticulously and elaborately informs the members of *Kana'kaaatsiiks* [society members] about the household arrangements of the lodge, and the proper place for the various occupants (family and visitors). He then proceeds to discuss protocol:

After the visitors told stories and had tea, my father asked them, “Is there a purpose for your visit?” *X* told my father, “Your son created a grave imbalance yesterday [Note: an uninitiated person dancing with the bundle without proper preparation caused the imbalance]; it is not good. He went to the centre and danced with the bundle.” *X* continued, “When it is midday, he will go to the centre lodge. The person who is going to paint his face will be sitting waiting for him.” *X* did not say whether I would dance with the bundle again. After they left, my mother told me, “Do as you are told; go to the centre lodge.” She gave me offerings [gifts] for *Kaaahsinnoon*, who was going to paint my face.

At midday I went to the centre lodge. *X* was there. He pointed to *Kaaahsinnoon*, who was going to paint my face. Later, I danced with the bundle. This was an imbalance I made. It bothered me. Later, I knew I wanted to join *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*.

In the above narrative, *Kaaahsinnoon* addresses how he was guided by the ancestors and the alliances of *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* in becoming a grandfather. His participation began with an imbalance that could have had severe consequences for himself and his family. However, through their advice and guidance he was protected. Through this experience *Kaaahsinnoon* began to learn the ways of balance and harmony. For

example, in his narrative, he addresses the proper movements within the lodge, which exist for the purpose of maintaining balance and harmony among the occupants.

As we have seen earlier, *Pommaksinni* [transfer] is central to *Siksikaitstapi* epistemology. It is a process of transferring spiritual knowledge through an intricate and complex system of kinship relations. *Siksikaitstapi* ontology and epistemology are inextricably intertwined. The following epistemological assumptions illustrate these relationships:

- The nature of the universe is interconnectedness.
- It is interconnected through spiritual intelligence or consciousness, *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*.
- It is the nature of the universe to work for balance.
- The universe has sacred power and influence; it works in reciprocal ways among all the interdependent parts.

Siksikaitstapi epistemology creates a way of being, a way of relating to the world that embodies a system of kinship relationships. They entail responsibilities, which are connecting to a “body” of knowledge which is experienced – knowing is experiential. In this way knowing becomes a part of the knower, *Mokaksin*. Knowledge itself has spirit that is “transferred” in the relationships between the knower and the known. Through these methods and rules of knowing, knowledge and self become and are one. In addition, in coming to know, transformation is achieved by changing the relationship between knower and known. In describing such an experience of *Siksikaitstapi* epistemology in action, one *Kaaahsinnoon* said:

There are certain things in our way of life that I understand are given to us. You have to do certain things. That is your life. These are the real personal things that *Siksikaitstapi* must do. These things cannot be handed down. I think that in some cases those of

you, who are attempting to learn our ways, you are trying to understand this aspect of our way of life.

It comes directly from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* to you. It will be shown to you in one way, shape, or form. It will be taught to you.

It is given to you, for you to use in a good way.

Kaaahsinnoon refers to one of the most powerful assumptions of Indigenous epistemologies: it is in the nature of the universe to give in the form of gifts, blessings, and lessons – all meant to be used in a good way. Many of the gifts given to us are not immediately understood nor do we see their value; at times we never do. Many of them will only be understood after a long period of time as life unfolds. Sometimes it can take nearly a lifetime before we understand the meaning and purpose of a gift. They are personal and shape an individual's purpose in life. This is how each person contributes to the overall balance of life. One example was given by one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who was given the gift of ceremonial songs. These songs are a personal gift from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* and are given to strengthen and contribute to ceremony. This is very special since many of the ceremonial songs have been forgotten.

In my own personal life, I have come to understand the power of my experience in residential school and in the Eurocentred academic system. I now have come full circle. After being almost completely disconnected from my own tribal kinship alliances, I began the journey of reclaiming and reconstructing the ways of knowing. As part of it I have come to understand the difficulties in letting go (or giving up) the dissociated self. I have also come to understand the prerequisites for reconnecting with tribal relationships. I continue to grow in awareness of the mechanisms used by the state and church to destroy the spiritual connections of *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing. As I deepen my connections with ancestral guides, my past experiences become a resource for the work of reconstruction. They are providing insights into what is missing and what I need to do.

Among *Niitsitapi*, the unfolding of universal intelligence is revealed through careful observation using our Indigenous epistemologies.

Transfer of knowledge is the exchange of medicine power and responsibility. The physical reality is sourced through thoughts, ideas, language, and knowledge unfolding from an undefined cosmic energy, which *Siksikaitsitapi* refer to as *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life]. It is through the relationship or interaction with *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* that the physical order is altered and the knowledge necessary for renewal and balance is learned and lived.

Kaaahsinnooniksi state the epistemological assumptions of *Siksikaitsitapi*:

The white people, they try to break down everything. Everything is broken down too much. Everything has to have logic. If it doesn't have an explanation, if you cannot explain it, they don't care; they don't believe in it if they cannot explain it.

I refer to the great mystery, to the legends, sacred stories – that is something that they cannot do anything about. *Siksikaitsitapi* have their connections with *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. It put us here. We don't try to analyze; why do you think *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* created me in this way. I don't try to analyze my life. I go back to X [*Kaaahsinnoon*]; he told me a long time ago, “In the future you will be sitting here [meaning that the speaker will be *Kaaahsinnoon*], listen carefully and observe carefully. This is our way of life.”

Our ancestors, it was through their connections that they were instruments. We call them in and honor *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. These are the stories, some of the things that we pass on. *Akaitapiwa* did not just sit with them. And I just don't sit with them.

Our theory of knowledge is found in the sacred stories that are the living knowledge of the people. The stories explain the nature of reality, the science, and the economic and social organization of *Siksikaitsitapi*. They are the accumulated knowledge of centuries. Each generation of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* is responsible for retelling the stories to the next generation. The knowledge contained in them is living because it is applicable to each generation. Each generation, however, must listen carefully so that they can adapt the lessons and wisdom that apply to

the present situation. The ways of knowing, of acquiring knowledge and truth, are dependent upon skills of observation, *Kakyosin*. They include the knowledge that has been accumulated in the retelling of stories over time and by applying knowledge to the present. Knowledge lives in the process of observing, reflecting on connections among observations and applying the experiences of *Akaitapiwa* and interrelationships of alliances to one's personal observations and experiences.

Reconstructing the ways of knowing allows me to integrate my experiences, to know myself, and to know how I am a part of the universe. In my own work, specifically during the process that eventually resulted in this book, I have deepened my understanding of tribal responsibilities in a number of ways. Participation in ceremony has deepened my understanding and purpose of life. It helped me to develop my personal purpose, mission, and responsibility. In ceremony I have asked for the ancestral alliances to guide my inquiries and writing. I have established alliances with *Kaaahsinnooniksi* and allowed their wisdom to guide my process. Their counsel and prayers have helped me to interpret my own experiences and the teachings they have shared. I have also established alliances with *Niitsi'powahsinni*, the language, reconnecting to the breath of life, *Niipaitapiyssinni*. I recommenced speaking the words of *Akaitapiwa*, which allows me to learn, teach, and write about the wisdom of the ancient ways of knowing.

Niitsitapi epistemologies represent knowledge from an ever-present time. It is experienced in the moment, which is infinite and all-encompassing. Following *Niitsitapi* logic means experiencing the whole, the interconnectedness of an indivisible universe. Rationality, on the other hand, denies the spiritual nature of knowledge and sacrifices the wholeness of human beings (Ani 1994, 32). One example of the denial and sacrifice that results from Eurocentred logic is one that my friend, colleague, and ceremonialist, Duane Mistaken Chief shared with me regarding the use of plants and herbs (personal communication, December 1998). He said, "Eurocentred scientists dissect the herb and extract the elements of the herb that they have found to have medicinal properties. However, what

they don't understand is that the plant functions as a whole – other properties of the plant may be important because of their cleansing functions.” It is the nature of the universe to function as an interdependent whole. This natural law has profound implications for education and the process of learning.

The following principles encompass the epistemologies of *Niitsitapi*;

- Knowledge, truth, and meaning are revealed to *Niitsitapi* through their relationship with the *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life] and through a network of interdependent kinship relations. Knowledge is holistic, and every aspect of nature contains knowledge that can be revealed.
- Knowing, learning, and teaching are reciprocal in nature. *Niitsitapi* learn the nature of existence through the guidance of kinship alliances.
- The reciprocal nature of knowing is understood and appreciated through the concept of transfer [*Pommaksinni*]. It is premised on creating and generating the knowledge necessary for maintaining balance.

These principles of coming to know [*Mokaksin*] correlate to the manner in which the education and human development processes and practices are traditionally organized among *Niitsitapi*. The primary medium for seeking to understand life, *Niipaitapiiyssin*, and for coming to know [*Mokaksin*] *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life] is through kinship relations. Knowledge is transferred through these relationships. Knowledge exists in a process of renewing and generating alliances for knowing. (*Pomma'ksin* and *Aipommotsp* are discussed further in chapter 14 below.)

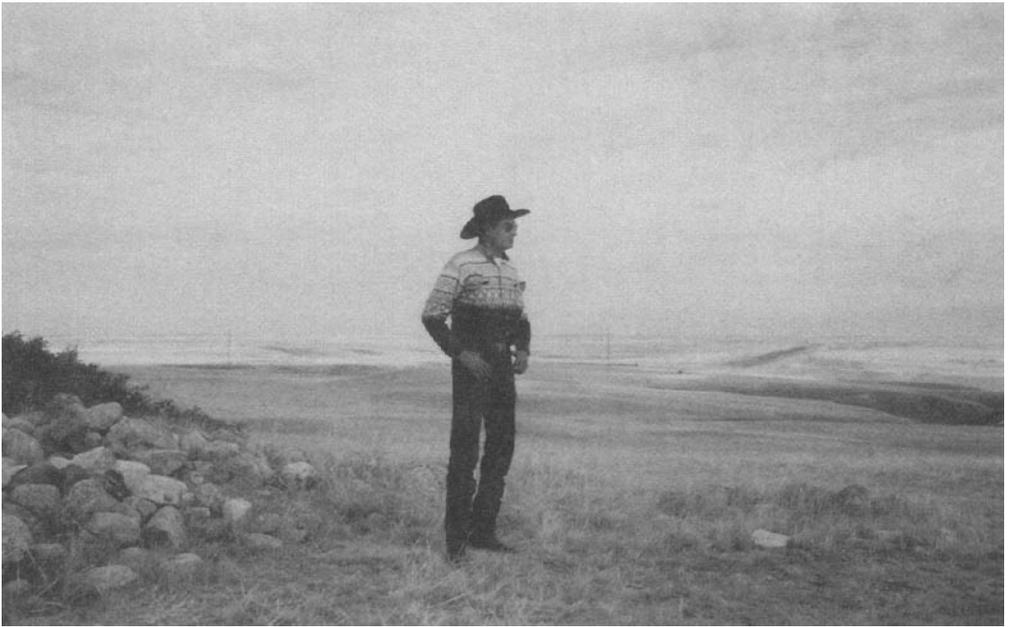
Ceremonies are the forms through which a common sense of transformation and transcendence is experienced. The meanings associated with *Pomma'ksin* are shared by the people (Harrod 1992, 67). As long as these bundles remain in the community, the people will retain their connection to the transformational ways of being. They will continue to renew their

responsibilities as instructed in the original *Pomma'ksin* described in the old stories. Song, prayer, dance, and other mimetic movements were given, and they embody the vibrational patterns by which the power of the alliances can be transferred to *Siksikaitsitapi*. For example, in *Pomma'ksin* of sacred power and knowledge of *Niinaimsskaahkoyinnimaan* [the Thunder or Leader Pipe], *Ksisstsi'ko'm* said:

I am of great power. I live here in the summer, but when winter comes, I go far south. I go south with the birds. Here is my pipe. It is medicine. Take it and keep it. Now, when I come in the spring, you shall fill and light my pipe, and you shall pray to me.... For I bring the rain which makes the berries large and ripe. I bring the rain which makes all things grow, and for this you shall pray to me, you and all the people. (Harrod 1992, 70)

Whenever you transfer the Pipe to anyone, steal quietly upon them just before daybreak, the time I am on the move, and take him by surprise, just as I do, chanting my song, and making the sound of a bear charging. When you catch a man and offer him the Pipe, he will not dare refuse, but must accept it and smoke it. It is sure death to refuse, because no one dares to turn away from the grizzly bear. The owl is also a prominent figure in the Pipe because he is a bird of the night. When the society are after a new member, they chant Owl songs and pray to Owl for power to enable them to catch him in a deep sleep. In this way, a spell is cast over him and he cannot escape.” In order to have the help of Owl, they also use the root that is the Owl’s favorite food. (McClintock 1992, 253–54)

The *Niinaimsskaahkoyinnimaan* story lives in the ceremonies and through the lives of *Aawaatowapsiiks* and *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, who renew these alliances to bring peace and prosperity to the people. Each year after *Ksisstsi'ko'm* [Thunder] is first heard, *Ninaimsskaiksi* know it is their responsibility to hold the annual Medicine Pipe dance. The narrative



Ni'zakaiksaikooan, Pete Standing Alone, ceremonialist at a sacred site in Southern Alberta.

illustrates the reciprocal responsibilities of prosperity and balance between *Ksissti'ko'm* (including all the alliances represented in the bundle) and the people. The protocol requires people to show respect, seek good relations, and maintain alliances with *Ksissti'ko'm* each year when *Niinaimsskahkoyinnimaan* are opened, the ceremonial dances are performed, and songs are sung to honour the *Siksikaitstapi-Ksissti'ko'm* alliances for another season.

Each of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who participated in the Source of Life had family that had been *Niinaimsskaiksi* or had personally been Medicine Pipe Holders at one time in their lives. Each of them related their own transformational experiences with the alliances of *Niinaimsskaahkoyinnimaan*. The following is an example:

My daughter, who has had previous miscarriages, became pregnant again. She was visiting the doctors in town. I told her while she still carried the unborn child, “Your baby will dance with the Medicine

Pipe this spring.” I went to X’s house [Medicine Pipe Keeper], and I told him the story.

The child was born premature and in the spring the baby danced with the Medicine Pipe.

Another statement tells about a young child who was often sick and hospitalized:

After I had brought the Medicine Pipe into my home, I was left with a young boy (a relative). I had been resting while the child was sleeping. I saw an old man smoking the Medicine Pipe. He was healing the boy. The old man smoked four times. I related the story to my spouse. I told her it is not mysterious: He will dance with the Medicine Pipe.

Medicine pipes are used for curative purposes. In contemporary Indigenous societies, many individuals are plagued with alcohol and drug abuse; one third of Aboriginal people die from violent deaths, and incarceration and lack of meaningful work is at an unprecedented level and continues to rise. These conditions are indicative of the need to reconnect with the healing knowledge generated through alliances, such as the Medicine Pipes. Healing means reclaiming and regaining the tribal ways of generating knowledge and restoring the responsibilities to life. Learning the responsibilities of traditional alliances is the path of coming to know one’s purpose in life and learning the sacred knowledge that can address adversity experienced by contemporary *Niitsitapi*.

The sacred power of the universe is pervasive and reveals itself through all of creation, including thoughts, objects, speech, and actions. It speaks through rocks and animals, it may take the form of an animal that transforms into a person, or it may begin with a person who transforms into an animal (Harrod 1992, 23). As one aspect of the transcendent or transformational powers of the universe, people migrate regularly into what is described by Harrod as dream worlds. These migrations provide the

meaning and knowledge sought and acquired by *Siksikaitstapi*. In fact, all human beings, according to the Plains cultures, transcend beyond the limits of their embodiment through these migrations. They are normative experiences, which means that they were interpreted as ordinary experience (Harrod 1992, 25).

In summary, *Siksikaitstapi* epistemology manifests in the practices of *Pomma'ksin* [transfers]. It is a theory of knowledge that purports that all knowing comes from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life] and manifests simultaneously through a web of kinship alliances. It is through a complex network of relationships that *Siksikaitstapi* "come to know," *Mokaksin*, and the knowledge that is revealed supports and strengthens the cosmic and natural order. Inherent in knowing is the responsibility of living the knowledge. Living the knowing is a fundamental aspect of identity and the source from which self emerges.

Through *Pomma'ksin*, *Kaaahsinnooniksi* attempt to live with respect and generosity according to the natural laws of a cosmic universe. They teach by performing the ceremonies and strengthen the lives of the people by renewing the alliances through *Pomma'ksin*. Giving and sharing the sacred knowledge in this way reflects the essence of *Niitsitapi* relational and participative epistemologies. This way of knowing is living the knowledge. Teaching and learning traditional knowledge are not separate from living the knowledge. The essence of education is living the knowledge and connecting with the alliances. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* literally give their lives away in sharing knowledge, wisdom, and experience with students. Sharing my own experiences in reconstructing the tribal ways of knowing is also giving my life away. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* who participated in this inquiry gave their lives away in hopes that I can write their words for those who want to learn their tribal responsibilities of giving and strengthening the alliances of tribal knowledge through *Pomma'ksin*. One *Kaaahsinnoon* had the following experience when she transferred her bundle:

After a while, after a few years, we transferred our bundle. I was sad when we transferred, but I also knew that it was the way you

make it live. You give another family the opportunity, so they too will come to know.

The bundle keepers become extremely attached to their alliances. They are the most reverent and precious of kinship alliances. Often their lives have become transformed through the relationships with *Otsistapiistsi* [bundles]. For *Siksikaititapi*, they are also the source of the most profound experiences with the sacred medicine powers of their alliances. In addition, bundles, in essence, are our family. An extremely deep and profound relationship exists with each one. One *Kaaahsinnoon* told me, “we do not leave our bundles home alone, we have someone stay home with them or we bring the bundle to the home of another *litssinnaiyi*, so that they can keep it in their home. This is a practice we do if we cannot keep it in our own home” (D. Weasel Moccasin, personal communication, November 1996). Subsequently, it can become very difficult emotionally to transfer these bundles. However, *Pomma'ksin* is the process of strengthening life among *Siksikaititapi*. It strengthens the collective experience of the tribe with the natural and cosmic alliances of pipes and bundles.

11. Knowledge is Coming to Know *Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa*

In the traditional context, knowledge comes from *Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa* [Spirit] and knowing means connecting with *Ihtsipaitapiiyo'pa*. Knowledge has spirit. Knowledge is spirit. Knowledge grows through the ability to listen to and to hear the whispers of the wind, the teachings of the rock, the seasonal changes of the weather. By connecting with the knowing of animals and plants, we strengthen our knowledge. As in all relationships, consent must be given and obligations and responsibilities need to be observed (Peat 1994, 65). Ceremonies embody the delicate balance of the cosmic order and thus provide connections to knowing. These relationships are also evident in creation stories and cosmology.

Spirits participate in teaching the ways of knowing. *Kaaahsinnoon* shared the following pertinent story, which describes an alliance with spirit:

At the time we were *Omabkobbkanakaaatsiisinni*. Now *X* is dead. He knew our way of life very well. He had gone looking for horses. He became hungry and had seen his grandfather's house. He decided to go there and have something to eat. That was our way in the past. He went to his grandfather's home.

In the past, we would not go in front of the owner of the lodge's bed, unless we were told. We sit on the other side of the lodge. My friend, he sat himself near the door.

The night before, they [his grandfather and grandmother and other *Kaaahsinnooniksi*] had *Kanotsisissin* [All-Smoke Ceremony] from which they had some berry soup left over. Grandmother was serving the berry soup. Grandfather said, "Give some of the soup to your son." She replied, "I am going to serve him." She got up and reached for a dish to pour the soup into. As she placed the soup by his place of seating, he felt someone sit beside him.

The Ghost helper had come into the house and had sat down beside the young man. He was jealous because a place was not set for him. He told grandmother, "How come you serve the soup to him first?" My friend knew the Ghost helper was upset. Grandmother replied, "I will serve you too." She poured his soup and my friend *X* continued to feel the presence beside him. He wondered: how is he going to drink the soup?

Within the blink of an eye the soup was gone.

In the meantime, *X* took his time eating. He did not know if the Ghost helper was younger or older than him. He decided to talk to him. The Ghost helper called him "*Tsi'ki*" [a name which is used to refer to a younger person than the speaker]. *X* knew then that the Ghost helper was older. *X* thought he would ask him some questions. The Ghost helper responded, "*Tsi'ki*, before you ask me any questions, I will tell you, there are some things that I cannot

tell you. And there are things that I could tell you.” X asked him, “What is better, here where I am, or where you are?”

Ghost Helper responded, “*Tsi’ki*, I already knew you were going to ask me that question. This is why I told you, there are some things that I cannot tell you. If I told you: it is very good the way that you are living and where I am is very sad, then, maybe in the future, there may be no way out of a sickness. You may get sick and you will remember what I said. You will think it is not good where I am going. You will be frightened; you will not want to lose your body and perhaps you will not be able to help yourself get better. On the other hand, if I say the opposite, then if you get sick, you will want to lose your body. You will not want to keep it. You will find out for yourself when you get here.”

The social organization of *Niitsitapi* reflects the influence and teaching role of *Akaitapiwa* [ancestors]. As Goodman (1992) illustrates in his discussion of Lakota star knowledge, the star world and the microcosmic world of the plains are intricately interconnected. The same connections are considered important among *Siksikaitisitapi*. In partial fulfillment of these relationships, we have four major annual ceremonies that correspond to the seasons. The ceremonies are: *Niinaimsskahkoyinnimaan*, the Medicine Pipes, which are opened after the first *Ksisstsi’koim* in spring (Thunder is a potent sky spirit who has given protection to *Siksikaitisitapi* through the Medicine Pipes); *Aakokatssin*, the Sundance, which is held in July or when the Saskatoon berries ripen; *Ksisststakyomopisstaan*, the Beaver Bundle, held after the ice breaks in the spring; and *Kanotsisissin*, the All-Smoke, held in the winter when the nights are long. These ceremonies are the collective consciousness of *Siksikaitisitapi*, which places them at the centre of their universe. During these ceremonies we acknowledge and give thanks to our alliances for another cycle. We ask for continued protection, prosperity, long life, growth, and strength.

Aakokatssin is currently hosted by the sacred and secretive *Omahkohkanakaatsiisinni*. The gathering of those who live by the ways of the

smudge come to renew the delicate balance of life and death and ensure the continued survival of the people. This is a renewal of the ancient and ancestral ways of knowing and healing. Each tribal member's collective responsibilities in maintaining the sacred balance of the world are renewed. *Aakokatssin is the place in the universe where we the earth people, strengthen the sacred alliances with which the delicate balance of life is renewed.* In contemporary terms, the translation of *Aakokatssin* has been referred to as the Sundance, but its literal translation means "circle encampment" (Taylor 1989, 153). Standing Alone informs me that *Aakokatssin* also means "moving to the centre" (personal communication, October 1997). The term symbolizes the movement to the centre of the universe where one is in balance. Many other society members and other tribal members have specific responsibilities, but all members of the tribes can participate in various roles and responsibilities. It is an opportunity for all members to collectively renew their alliances and live up to their fundamental responsibility to strengthen the alliances with whom we work interdependently for the survival of life.

A *Kaaahsinnon* told this story about the relationship between ceremonial societies and knowing:

There was the time when *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* were going to transfer. My father was a member of the *Maohksiipssiiks* [Red Belt Society] at the time. He did not want to join *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*. I think it was because he had problems with his legs. He never said it, but I think that he found it too difficult to join with an impediment. He moved to the mountains when the *Siksikaititapi* began to gather for *Aakokatssin*. He moved with his family to attend to the task of cutting timber in the mountains.

He had been up there for many days. One night, he dreamt of *X* [a member of *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni*], who was going to transfer. My father was older than *X*. In his dream, *X* was chasing my father. He came to a fence and he crawled under the fence. As he crawled under, he got his leg caught in the fence. So he was caught.

In the morning, after he woke up, he began to pack and moved his family back down from the mountains. He sent a message to *Omahkohkanakaaatsiisinni* to let them know he had surrendered. He would take whatever role and responsibility they would give him.

The narrative speaks of the power from *Ihtsipaitapiiyó'pa* in the transfer of knowledge. This is understood and experienced. Transformation occurs in this transfer of knowledge. Validity of knowledge is demonstrated through the observed transformation of individuals. One dream that altered my life occurred in the early dawn in the fall of 1987. I awoke with a powerful message. The ancestral guides spoke clearly, and their message was that the consumption of alcohol was weakening my connections with *Ihtsipaitapiiyó'pa* by obscuring and confusing my social responsibilities and negatively affecting my physical composition. The moment I awoke, I knew that I could no longer consume alcohol. I did not understand why a message such as this would be given to me because I did not have an issue with the use of alcohol. I was known among my family and friends as a non-drinker, although I did occasionally consume alcohol. While I do not understand why the message was given to me, I have remained abstinent from alcohol since then.

The spirit of knowledge often speaks through dreams. They are central to the tribal ways of knowing. The general principle of understanding one's responsibilities is through the process of participating in ceremonies. They are participatory and experiential and provide traditional forms of education. In a sense, they function as a university for traditional knowledge.

The ceremony of *Aakokatssin* is central to the survival of our ways of knowing. The following excerpts describe the origins of *Aakokatssin*. The story explains to the reader the relationship between knowing and celestial relatives that are the basis of this knowledge. It is the story of the *Ookaan* of an elderly woman whose child was very sick. She asked *Naatosi* for help. Potvin reports the story in the following way:

One night as the woman was asleep Natos himself appeared to her.



Tsiinaki, Rosie Red Crow, ceremonialist teaching me the art of making pemmican, a traditional food among *Siksikaitsitapi*.

He told her if she built a lodge for him and offered sacrifices, her child would recover. When she woke up she told her people about her wonderful dream. With everyone's cooperation, a lodge was constructed, sacrifices were offered, and a festival was held in honor of Natos. As a result, the woman's child regained health. Ever since that day, the great celebration of the Sundance has been held every year. (Porvin 1966, 86)

During the time in which the government and the church prohibited the *Aakokatssin* ceremony, a woman, the wife of Eagle Child, made a vow to have this ceremony, because her husband was very sick. Soon her husband was well; he had recovered from his illness. In the summer then, Mr. and Mrs. Eagle Child moved and set up camp at the place where *Aakokatssin* was to be held. Other *Siksikaitstapi* began to move and set up camp too. The Indian agent sent word to the Eagle Child family, reminding them of the prohibition and advising them to move back to their homes. It is reported that Eagle Child sent word back, telling him to personally come and speak to him. The Indian agent did not do as he was asked. *Aakokatssin* continued and effectively ended the prohibition against *Aakokatssin* among *Kainai*.

The alliances of the ancestors continue to live through the ceremony of *Aakokatssin*. The following is one of the narratives of *Paiyo*, who is the brother of *Ipissowaasi* [Morning Star]. He had traveled to meet with *Naa-tosi*. This alliance continues to live through stories and ceremonies. *Paiyo* was given the living knowledge based on which *Siksikaitstapi* continue to experience this alliance.

Then he told Scarface everything about making the Medicine Lodge, and when he finished, he rubbed a powerful medicine on his face and the scar disappeared. Then he gave him two raven feathers saying ... "They must be worn by the husband of the woman who builds the Medicine Lodge" [Grinnell footnotes:

the word “sun” is translated as “having sun power” or “something sacred”] (Grinnell 1962, 101).

Their relationship with the cosmic world is manifested in every aspect of *Niipaitapiyssin*. The story of *Paiyo* and the knowledge that has been given by *Naatosi* are the instructions given to *Siksikaitsitapi* for acquiring knowledge and alliances from which our sacred science is gleaned. The ways of coming to know [*Kakyosin/Mokaksin*] are in the stories, the ceremonies, and the language of the people. Knowing is an interdependent relationship with the cosmic order. *Kaaahsinnoon* explains coming to know:

I am still learning about our way of life. I am learning by listening to the stories. They are true stories. When I was young, I sat in many bundle openings. I worked. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* often told stories. After they told their story, they may ask, “How did you come to know?” The story maybe a little different, but it would be the same. They knew the way we were raised, the way we live. You heard what we said, use the stories in the way you heard them.

Being true to the traditions, *Kaaahsinnoon*'s advice is to listen to the stories that they have given me, and to take and apply them to my life. I need to use them in a manner that will benefit the people; this includes sharing them.

This knowledge is a living knowing. It is illustrated through the heart of *Siksikaitsitapi* epistemologies and pedagogy, *Pomma'ksin* [transfers]. In this way the initiated take care of the bundles and pipes that are the connections of alliances, the partners of *Siksikaitsitapi* in maintaining the delicate balance of life. This includes an all-encompassing responsibility to teach and pass on the knowledge to the next generation of initiates. These alliances are the source of *Siksikaitsitapi* identity, of their knowing and knowledge of balancing and maintaining good relations in life. These responsibilities must be passed on to ensure the survival of all. *Pommaksi-*

istsi are the ceremonies which transfer knowledge and maintain the tribal integrity of *Siksikaitstapi* ontology and epistemology.

12. *Kakyosin/Mokaksin* – Indigenous Learning

Traditional learning is an interactive process that involves a network of relationships known among *Siksikaitstapi* as “alliances.” Traditional learning is premised on a “knowing” that is generated through a participatory and experiential process. This chapter and the subsequent chapters discuss the dynamic and intricate relationships of traditional learning through language, experience, and *Pomma’ksin*. These modes of learning are founded upon experiencing the knowledge of the alliances through these processes. They are the basis for learning the sacred knowledge of protocol, which forms the path of the sacred science of *Niitsitapi*.

Pedagogy is the Western term for the “art and science of teaching.” It usually presents an organized method of teaching and a rational way of explaining its functions and practices. Pedagogical practices complement the epistemology of a culture. The cultural methods of teaching reflect conceptions of the natural world and cultural reality.

Central assumptions within Eurocentred pedagogy are linear rationality (the idea that there is a logical sequence of thought which advances from a single cause to a definite conclusion) and objectification (the philosophical doctrine that stresses the external, independent existence of what is perceived or known). The same assumptions are part and parcel of the process of colonization during which participatory *Siksikaitstapi* pedagogy becomes replaced with an objectifying and predominantly rationalizing approach to teaching. Education under conditions of colonization denies the epistemologies of Indigenous cultures, which emphasize interrelationships.

Dossey (1985) argues that the relationship between culture and pedagogy manifests itself in a society’s approach to teaching and learning.

For example, methods of teaching that are based on a Cartesian approach maintain the separation of body and soul, allowing the dissection and formal analysis of the various parts of phenomena. They are based on the notion that the universe has machine-like characteristics. This made it culturally acceptable, for example, to dissect human bodies, since it was believed that no harm would come to the soul (as the soul and body are seen as separate). The dispiritualization of a cosmic universe (in which the European peoples lived in earlier times) has become part of the pedagogical foundation of Eurocentred cultures. The secularization and desacralization of the universe is extended to human beings and to the entire process of learning.

Eurocentred methods of teaching are dependent upon a system of logic that is often insufficient for understanding complex phenomena – it is counter to the systemic logic of Indigenous perspectives. Various critiques, including those by postmodern philosophers, have shown the limitations of merely rationalistic approaches. It is no longer possible or legitimate to ascribe machine-like qualities to the basic functioning of the universe. Philosophers and physicists, such as Bohm, Capra, and Peat, see the universe as an indivisible dynamic whole whose parts are essentially interrelated and can only be understood as patterns of cosmic processes (Capra 1982, 77–78).

Traditional learning begins by identifying who we are in the context of tribal relationships. It is the life journey of understanding *Niipaitapiiyssin*. It is made up of the tribe's cosmogony containing the basis of its philosophical precepts. Subsequently, learning is an individual process, but it occurs in the context of the tribe's way of life. Children learn through participating in and experiencing their intimate and interdependent kinship relations.

My grandparents raised me, there were a lot of people in my family. They taught me to respect everything, even the rocks. *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* put the rocks there, so they are there for a reason. The trees, the water, all that you see is there for a purpose and we're

supposed to respect it. In the past, rocks were heated to make fire, which maintained warmth all night.

Children also learn their cosmic relationships through the stories that they are taught within the oral tradition. Language, *Niitsi'powahsinni*, brings stories to life and conveys to the child the world of *Akaitapiwa*. The child experiences the stories in a language that embodies the connections with a cosmic universe. The stories hold the alliances and *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* moves through the words as they live in our breath. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* state that today the children are only learning the words, but not the connections. Even when they speak *Niitsi'powahsinni*, it may carry the imprint of thinking in English.

One *Kaaahsinnoon* shared a story that had been told to him:
My great grandmother would tell my father the stories. Great grandmother would tell the stories in secret. There was not much written then.

Another *Kaaahsinnoon* said:

There are some things that we do not talk about. We talk around it. The person must reflect on what is said. There is only one way we can talk about certain things.

Nowadays, many children do not experience the relationships and the deep knowledge that language holds. Most importantly, they are not experiencing the alliances of a cosmic world.

When they come, they will see the value of the language, because it is a spiritual language and it is all because of ceremony. [It is good] if people are really interested or inquisitive. Just to be curious, just to [want to] know what is in the bundles [is good]. I often offer: "Come and get painted, you will see them open up." So, to me the

ceremony makes more sense because I have experienced it, because it is my lived experience.

The language carries our breath to the ancestors. A good example is found in the importance of names. The people who give names also have specific responsibilities. The tribal names among *Siksikaitsitapi* have many purposes and functions. We have a ceremony for giving a child or infant a name. Names are a connection to the cosmos. As we call the ancestors, each person must identify himself or herself by name. When sharing with one of my relatives the significance of names in relation to our connections with the ancestors and the support they provide in our daily living, she related the following story:

When I was a child, my grandmother, who was at one time a keeper of the *Missamaahkoyinnimaan* [Long-time-medicine-pipe], took me to Aakokatssin and had my face painted. Also at that time, she gave me my tribal name. My grandmother died and no one seemed to call me by my name, but I never forgot it. It is strange that I would remember my name mostly in times of crisis and grave challenges in my life. I would call my name and remember who I am. Somehow I would find the courage and strength to overcome my challenges.” (Josie Smith, personal communication, October 1986).

This story inspired me to recover and reclaim my own tribal language. I began to pray for my connection with *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* by way of my native language, and a year later, in July 1997, my friend Pete Standing Alone and I initiated a language immersion camp. We had invited *Kaaahsinnooniksi* to participate. We had also secured the services of the tribal administration video recorder to tape the conversations. I was extremely pleased throughout the proceedings because I wanted the words of the people captured on tape so I could revisit the messages of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. I felt the spirit of *Niitsi’powahsinni* throughout

these conversations and was elated. The words seemed to infuse my very being with energy, love, and connections. After each day I felt whole and at peace. Throughout the process I wanted to take notes to remember and preserve the sacred words of my language, but I didn't because I was confident that the conversations were being preserved on videotape. A few weeks after the camp, I asked to review the tapes. I was told then that the first day's tapes were blank and the quality of the second day's tapes were so poor that they had to be thrown into the trash. I was extremely disappointed. Then I remembered that I had prayed to connect with the spirit of the language. This had happened. I also remembered that I had experienced traditional learning immersed in language and the words of *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. This allowed me to re-connect more deeply with *Niitsi'powahsinni* and the source it comes from, *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. I don't remember much of what was said during my time at the camp. I could barely speak in sentences. Yet, what was important was that I was immersed in the spirit of language.

I have since spoken publicly in my own language on numerous occasions. In the fall of 1998 I gave a speech at the inauguration of newly elected trustees of the school board in my home community. I apologized to the elders for the mistakes that I would make in pronunciation but expressed my sincere desire and effort to engage in the thought structure and decision-making processes that are held in the language. I felt the elders' overwhelming support as I spoke in my broken tribal language. The feedback I received was good.

Traditional learning is an experiential and integrative process that uses all faculties necessary for learning. The people are dependent upon each other for strengthening and preserving the *Siksikaitstapi* way of life. Children and students can learn this through traditional learning. One *Kaaahsinnoon* explains that this means listening to the stories, reflecting and observing the cosmic world, and participating in ceremonies. Here he describes learning through the transfer ceremony:

We got transferred; we lived the life, the way of life given to *Siksikaitstapi* for us to use. *Niipaitapiiyssin* is passed on; it is passed down to each child.

I still go to *Kaaahsinnooniksi* for guidance. I am still learning our ways. My grandfather too, he gave me advice.

If we were selfish about our ways, the teachings, and our advice, if we only used it for ourselves to better our lives, then this way of teaching and learning our way of life would not be here today.

Kaaahsinnooniksi are living up to their responsibilities by sharing experiences that live through their words. These words touch my heart. I feel their love and kindness. I am aware of my own responsibilities to share and live this way of learning. They speak their wisdom in hopes that I will understand and begin to live accordingly.

In our previous research, *Kaaahsinnooniksi* addressed the critical nature of learning the responsibilities of *Siksikaitstapi* relationships as part of the general education process. They said:

Children who are not raised with the ways of *Siksikaitstapi* do not understand their role or responsibilities as *Siksikaitstapi*. It is important to know these things because they structure the thinking of the *Siksikaitstapi* and shape our behaviour. It is through the language and the knowing of our relations and our responsibilities that we know who we are. For example, many of the uninitiated do not know how to assist or contribute to the *Ookaan*. It has come to a place and time where we *Siksikaitstapi* are afraid of our own ways, our prayer; we scare each other with it. Many of our people do not know.

The children of those who have been colonized by Christianity have become afraid of their own kinship alliances because they did not learn about them by participating in ceremony. This fear is reflected at various levels of society and can be observed most obviously in acting

out through spousal, child, and elder abuse in Indigenous communities. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* cautioned the educators that families are alienated from each other as a consequence of fear. Since language embodies the connections, relationships, and responsibilities of *Siksikaitisitapi* alliances, children must be taught orally, and the search for the understanding of life must be maintained at the relational level (as opposed to developing a curriculum focused exclusively on cognitive understanding).

Kaaahsinnoon offered guidance about traditional pedagogy to me:
The Eurocentred way is easy to follow – in fact, it is a lot easier to follow than our ways of learning. We have to follow our protocol, our Indian way of life.

He then gave an example:

Maybe with some of the stories we told you, you could begin by reflecting upon them with your heart, and perhaps keeping the questions you have asked us in mind. You will begin to find your answers in the stories.

Your ingenuity and reflection will put into place an understanding for you [of the questions that you have asked us].

The traditional *Siksikaitisitapi* pedagogical method teaches children to listen, and they are encouraged to meditate and reflect on what they see and hear. This requires self-discipline and a conscientious effort to understand how to apply the stories to one's life. The stories are holistic and encompass all aspects of life.

One *Kaaahsinnoon* said:

Through language there is the opportunity for children to learn their responsibilities and to come to know who they are.

Traditional instruction begins with *Siksikaitstapi* ontological theory (see chapter 9 above), which addresses the origins of the people. What does it mean to be *Siksikaitstapi*, to be *Niitsitapi*? What is the ultimate substance of the universe? Answers to these questions are provided by our *Siksikaitstapi* theory of being and reality, which addresses the origins of their relationship to a cosmic world. It is a framework from which the individual, from early on, begins to learn the responsibilities of family and tribe or community. Children are taught through language and through the care they receive from family and community.

Kaaahsinnoon shared the following child-rearing practices during *Kanohsin*:

A woman would put her child on her back. The child would be with the mother while she did her work. I would be cooking and my child would be on my back. Or I would take a long piece of rope and make a swing. I would sing to the child. [She sings a lullaby.]

The song is a story about a small child. It warns the children that if they sneak out at night, they may be eaten by a man. The story continues by stating that the man eats blood clots and sings. She finishes her statement by saying:

This is how we sing to our children as we work.

Infants begin learning the stories through lullabies even before they can speak. The songs establish very powerful connections with the ancestors. I had a profound experience with one of the sacred songs at *Aakokatssin*. As the dancers were coming out of the lodge, I was carried to a time where I could see *Akaitapiiksi*, the previous keepers of the bundles. It seemed like I was immersed and absorbed into the cosmic world of the ancestors. The feelings associated with these connections were the kindness, generosity, and acceptance of the cosmic alliances. I was filled with feelings of joy, humility, thankfulness, wholeness, and acceptance.

This, I knew, was truly a gift. I now understand that when I go to get my face painted for protection and guidance, I connect with all those who are my ancestors and who also were previous keepers of the bundle. Each year, as *Aakokatssin* begins to draw to completion, I have feelings of loss and sadness as I see *Itsskinnaiyiiks*, *Maotokiiks*, and others, who came with the sacred bundles, return to their homes. The power of their song, their dances, their presence is tremendously overwhelming, and their absence is correspondingly sorrowful. After *Aakokatssin* I wondered how someone could compose a song that would be so ingenious that it would produce this kind of effect on me. It is a song that truly exists for all time.

Traditional learning prepares children to survive in their world.

Among *Siksikaitstapi* survival has various meanings. In fact, most prayers are finished with the term “*Kaamotaani*” [surviving of all perils], the intentions for long life. It is also used when someone has successfully overcome grave challenges and imbalances. *Kaamotaani* can be translated literally as “survival” and is also used to mean “to be complete with a specific challenge in life, being receptive to the challenges and obstacles of life.” Implicit in the term is an understanding of the process of coming to know the connections of alliances that will enhance and nurture these intentions. As one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* noted:

Education is teaching children the ways to survive as a people.

13. *Niitsi’powahsinni* – Language

Language reflects the philosophical system of a people. *Siksikaitsipowahsin*, an agglutinating language, evokes and describes the relational perspective of *Siksikaitstapi*. *Niitsi’powahsinni* is a mirror of the sacred world of the *Niitsitapi*. *Nipaitapiiysinni* is the *Niitsitapi*’s life; it is the world of the sacred – a world that is called into being by the people’s words. Language

holds the knowledge, the content, and the relationships that constitute the sacred way of life, the “good heart” of the people.

In the following quote, one out of the group of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* clearly states that *Niitsitapi* ways of teaching [*Niipaitapiiysin*] are based in language. Oral tradition is the mode and the grandparents are the medium for this form of learning:

I told her we would call those old people, *Iipommowaiksi* – those who have been transferred [initiated ceremonialists], those who pray the Indian way. It goes with it. It is a part of the language. They go together. Our speaking, our talk will be on the good path of our Indian prayer, our way of life – if we do not lose our language. If we lose our language, then it is no longer in the same way as our way of life.

Kaaahsinnoon is stating that *Siksikaitsipowahsin* [the Blackfoot language] and *Aatsimoyihkaani* [the good heart] are one and the same. If *Niitsitapi* lose their language, then the way of life, the good heart and prayer, the connections to the cosmic world of alliances, and, subsequently, the good path will be altered. Kremer (1994) describes this process of separation as “dissociative schismogenesis,” (as discussed in Chapter 5 above) a form of dissociation that is culturally based and normative for Eurocentred cultures. It is the separation of heart and mind and the separation of human beings from their natural world. This separation is also the disengagement from *Siksikaitsipoyi* sources of knowing.

English is a colonial language that continues to have a significant impact on the consciousness of *Niitsitapi* and their experiential relationship with natural phenomena. Eurocentred concepts are often abstract distinctions contextualized within the philosophical orientation of the colonizer. They reframe the holistic concepts of *Niitsitapi*. For example, English concepts such as “person” or “individual” do not evoke the experiential connections to the sacred that the *Siksikaitsipowahsin* equivalents do. Rather, the relationships correspond to the worldview of the colonizer in

which meaning is organized in a linear sequential format of subject, verb, and object relationships. On the other hand, *Siksikaitsipowahsin* involves the spiritual connections with *Ihtisitpaitapiyo'pa*.

The separation and disassociation of Eurocentred consciousness from the natural world changes the reality of *Niitsitapi* by altering the cognitive and psychological aspects of their relationships. English fundamentally nullifies these relationships through the assumption that *Siksikaitsipowahsin* is directly translatable. It disallows awareness of the relational complexities that are thinned into abstractions in translation.

Our language expresses the natural alliances of *Niitsitapi*. The process of conceiving reality is shaped by the fundamental question of humankind's relationship to self and nature. Language distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. Human consciousness has, as part of its distinguishing ability, concepts to determine what it means to be human. Through this process, it identifies itself as human. Language is critical in this process of developing the consciousness that becomes the essence of human creativity. This creativity is expressed by distinguishing "humankind" as concept, by giving it distinguishing characteristics that become the essential elements for experiencing and interpreting the world. This creative process develops the characteristics of what it means to be human. Thus the self is rooted in a specific worldview and constructed through a language using specific cultural constructs.

Language reflects the meaning and purpose that humans ascribe to their existence. Language contains the assumptions and relationships of people. In other words, language links the self to the universe.

European consciousness distinguishes reality categorically into separate entities and objects. Human consciousness is conceived as an abstract entity distinct from the rest of the natural world, including other human beings. Reality becomes linear, and objects affect or impact each other in this fashion. The mental constructs generating and maintaining reality result in an objectified world, created and recreated through abstractions that are easily manipulated and controlled in their separateness. The manifestation of such constructs in a given culture creates specific

abstracting relationships among people, together with a distancing perception of the world. In the case of the English language, its concepts facilitate the perception of natural phenomena as a world that can be manipulated. Youngblood-Henderson (1992) states from a tribal perspective that Algonquin-speaking people define themselves linguistically as do most other *Niitsitapi*. Using the English language to translate *Siksikaitsipowahsin* means altering the relationship of *Siksikaitsitapi* and their connections within a world of cosmic alliances. *Niitsitapi* cultures engage in direct connections with the spiritual beings of the natural world. These connections are concrete and cannot be dismissed as mere ideas; they are a way of being.

Siksikaitsitapi pedagogy is embodied in the use of our language, *Niipaitapiiyyssin*, meaning “to teach the way of life.” It carries the sacred knowledge expressed in *Niitsi’powahsinni* which transmits the context for making meaning out of the human existence of *Niitsitapi*. The word refers to a verb-based language reflecting the view that human existence is transformational. *Niipaitapiiyyssin* is a facet of an interactional and relational world. In this transformational world, *Niitsitapi* learn experientially the ways of striving for balance within their world. The experiences we have as we live are perceived as learning opportunities and challenges for living in harmony with ourselves and within a cosmic universe. Striving for balance is the way of life of *Niitsitapi*. Language constantly informs speakers and listeners about rules of conduct to follow and responsibilities to fulfill in order to maintain balance. This experiential learning process is interpreted through the *Niitsitapi* paradigm of connecting and maintaining balance with the alliances. For example, the concepts *Inna’kotsiisinsin* [respect] and *Isspommotsisinni* [giving and sharing] provide rules of conduct. These basic values are acknowledged in daily living and are part of recreating and validating the natural order of balance. These rules of conduct or values express the unity of an organic universe and are the manifestation of a balancing way of being with oneself and with others.

Language describes the relationships that create the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi*. It is in these relationships of responsibility that we

become human beings in the *Siksikaitstapi* way. These ways, values, roles, and responsibilities of *Siksikaitstapi* are held in a sacred way within the language.

Language carries our ways of knowing, and through *Saitamsin* [the breath of speaking], life among *Siksikaitstapi* is informed and expressed. Language orients us as we learn and understand where we are and what our relative level of maturity is. In addition, language carries the responsibilities of the people because they cause things to happen (Cajete 1994). It is this aspect of the language that is essential for *Siksikaitstapi* pedagogy. It is instrumental in creating the reality of *Siksikaitstapi* by altering the order and structure of relationships toward balance. This aspect of the language transmits the transformational consciousness of *Siksikaitstapi*.

When I was a child, my grandmother often reprimanded me for saying things that were inappropriate. She taught me that word and thought give birth to events. Although I did not understand the significance of what she was telling me, I realized that I had to be careful with what I said. The power of words is demonstrated through prayer and the power of breath in song. Every aspect of life has breath and therefore influence and impact; breath is the manifestation of what comes from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* (Source of Life). Cajete (1994) states that the inner forms of mountains have language, they have words, songs. For example, in the Diné tradition thoughts are the result of winds (*Nitchi*) acting on individuals and their “winds standing within” (Cajete 1994, 53). The cardinal directions are the sacred winds who have influence on life forms; they, too, have responsibilities in the cosmic world. Each direction holds knowledge for the people. For this reason they are respected and acknowledged for their gifts in all ceremonies. The breath of life is the power that takes pity on the people. *Siksikaitstapi* understand it as the power from and through which Thunder, buffalo, berries, and others give people the knowledge necessary for living. It works through words, songs, and ritual. Prayerful words and the relationships among them give a visual image of the constant movement of energy. Any and all movement of breath has influence. It is life's source.

Language connects the people to the experience of the dynamic motion

of life. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* use praying with sacred songs [*Naatoyinnaiysin*] to connect with cosmic forces and to balance the structure and order of the universe. Prayer is central to the ability of co-creation and transformation of reality; it is a way of aligning with the universal energies as co-creators of reality. One fundamental responsibility while praying is speaking from the source of a good heart – your heart must be in a state of all that is good in order to be able to maintain and perform the responsibilities of balance and harmony.

Niitsi'powahsinni, speaking our indigenous language, is a spiritual process that originates in an organic holistic world. An example of the organic nature of *Siksikaitsitapi* language is the root “*aato*,” which can be found in a number of concepts that form an intricate and complex web of relationships. This group of letters or sounds is found in the words for sun, sacred, prayer, and power. The sun is referred to as *Naatosi*, meaning “sacred power.” *Naatosi* is found as a particle in such words as *Aawaa-toyinnaiyi* [to sing powerful sacred songs] and *Aato'si* [to have (healing) powers]. The interrelationship of these words reflects the intricate nature of cosmic relationships. They originate from *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. Sacred Power is the spirit or force that links these relationships. It is the life force, and this is the name that *Siksikaitsitapi* use when addressing the source of all. It connects them to an organic and indivisible whole. *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* links the concepts of sun, sacred, prayer, and power. This illustrates that the connections between sacred power and the manifestation of natural alliances and responsibilities are the sacred knowledge in language and the source to draw on to express the meaning of the everyday relations of *Siksikaitsitapi*. Language has the capacity to articulate sacred knowledge based on experience and is the medium for transmission from one generation to the next. Language provides words for understanding the nature and structure of the natural and cosmic worlds of *Siksikaitsitapi*. Nothing in reality can be taken for granted nor can it be assumed to exist without power or influence. People who have great influence are described as *Aato'si*, as having sacred power. The concepts reflect the interchangeability and transformational world of *Siksikaitsitapi*. Each of the concepts

puts “self” in a particular place of the universe and provides the context for meaning to unfold. Sacred power places the people in the centre of the universe. The relationship that *Siksikaitstapi* have with sacred power is central to their identity.

I will use *Aatsimoyihkaani*, the concept of prayer, as example to illustrate the dynamic power and knowledge held in language. I want to attempt to convey its holistic nature, but in so doing I also want to illustrate the difficulty in using English to convey the meaning, knowledge, and experience held in *Siksikaitstapi* language. The example illustrates two major functions of language: the complex web of kinship relations in one all-inclusive organic universe and the prerequisite protocol.

Aatsimoyihkaani requires a good heart, which builds the connection to a sacred and harmonious state within a cosmic universe. It is made up of *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, the great mystery of the universe. Through *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, the universe is organic and indivisible. *Siksikaitstapi* participate in this all-inclusive universe through their ancestors, *Paiyo*, *Ksissksstaki*, and *Kissisi’kom*, as well as the people of plants, animals, water, etc. The word teaches *Siksikaitstapi* about their kinship alliances in a cosmic universe.

Niitsksinnipi Omahtanistaissihpi means, “how we know how things (the universe) are the way they are.” The nature of the universe has consciousness, and through it all life is connected to *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*. In effect, universal consciousness of life is *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, and through it our relationships as *Siksikaitstapi* are strengthened, and alliances are established and renewed. By connecting to *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, *Siksikaitstapi* learn the natural laws of the universe. They contain the traditional knowledge of responsibilities.

“*Natoa’pi*” can be translated as “sacred science,” the knowledge contained in ceremonies. It means knowing the responsibilities of working with *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*. *Pomma’ksin* [transfers] are the essence of renewing the responsibilities for living and strengthening, renewing, and maintaining the cosmic order. This word teaches *Siksikaitstapi* that

all knowing and knowledge is for survival and that we can ensure our survival through ceremony.

Ksahkomma Ikatsimapsiwa, Aawatsimihkasatawa means, “The Earth is sacred, our relationship is sacred.” In this relationship, like all of our relationships, we see behaviour that maintains harmony with the earth. (We make amends to it for everything we do to it and take from it). We give tobacco; the giving of tobacco is renewing the state of balance. When we take from the natural world, then it potentially upsets the harmony and sacredness of our relationship, for example, when we kill animals. When taking their life we attempt to continue our good relations by offering tobacco to their spirits; we put it in the ground or on their dead body, i.e., *Aawaatsimihkasatai*. The act of offering tobacco is an act to return relationships to the previous balanced state. *Aatsimihkasin*, from which “*Aawatsimihkasatawa*” is derived, means “sacred way behaviour, actions, acting.” Through sacred actions we maintain the state of sacredness that was threatened by taking life. The relationship to land, resources, and technology is based on the connections with sacred alliances. For example, knowing the roles and responsibilities of interacting with herbs, roots, plants, berries, and animals is essential. The buffalo rock and Saskatoon berries are examples. Both play a role in ceremonies depicting their relationship to survival and balance of life.

Niitaoni’pi ki’tao’ohsinnooni means “how we recognize our land by its geographical features,” geography. The relationship of *Siksikaitsitapi* to sacred places such as *Ninnaistako* (Chief Mountain), *Katoiyisiks* (Sweet Grass Hills), and other presences (such as the sacred four directions, plants, rocks, rain, and thunder) are lived examples. *Niitaoni’pi ki’tao’ohsinnooni* teaches *Siksikaitsitapi* the behaviour or rules of conduct with these alliances. This is the ecological knowledge of the natural world; life is maintained through specific responsibilities assumed for the sake of cosmic balance.

Inahkotait sinik a’ topi means “that which has been passed on through the generations through stories,” history. The stories and legends of the ancestors include narratives of the lives and stories of

Oonistaahsiiso'kasimiwa (Calf Shirt), *Naatosinnipiwa* (Comes Down the Sun), *Mi'kyasto* (Red Crow), winter counts, migration, and war exploits. These stories connect *Siksikatsitapi* to the history of holistic relationships. They reflect the transformational relationships with *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* and teach fundamental principles and responsibilities.

Niitsikso'kowammootsi'opi means “how we are related to each other,” social structure. The societies, clans, and family relationships are examples of the normative structure of the *Siksikatsitapi* world. Each of the age grade societies teaches each person *Kiitomohpipotokoi* [ontological responsibilities]. These responsibilities are the manifestation of knowledge, skills, values, and roles of holistic living. As tribal members mature, responsibilities grow accordingly, and subsequently their own understanding of these responsibilities (*Kiitomohpipotokoi*) deepens. These ways of *Siksikatsitapi* being emulate our understanding of *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. They are the ways of *Niitsikso'kowammootsi'opi* [social organization]. The meaning of our relationship to others emulates our understanding of the cosmic order. Relationships that form the social structure of *Siksikatsitapi* are directed by this understanding of our ontological responsibilities. Human existence complements the cosmic order by being responsible for balance, for good relations with all relatives, for maintaining their natural alliances, and, finally, by having strong connections with spiritual guides as partners in building knowledge. It is understood that the alliances and guides are partners with *Niitsitapi* in the continuing creation of reality.

The following ontological responsibilities are examples of the values imbuing and forming our social structure. The words are who we are as *Siksikatsitapi*, our existence means manifesting these values.

They include *Kimmapiiyipsinni* [compassion], *Isspomotsisinni* [sharing and support], *Ainnakowa* [respect], and *Isskanaitapssti* [relationship]. These responsibilities are the source of our collective and tribal identity. They form the stages and processes for human development among *Siksikatsitapi* and subsequently delineate distinctions and integrity among tribal societies.

Kimmotsisinni and *Kimmapiiyipsinni* relate to being kind, compassionate, and generous. These values are premised on the observation and understanding that the universe is fundamentally compassionate and generous. This orientation of the universe is the heart of the *Niitsitapi* way of life. The oral traditions and ceremonial alliances are contextualized based on this premise. Many of the stories of the initial transfers of *Siksikaisitapi* ceremony begin by recounting the compassion and kindness of these alliances. Thunder, Beaver, and others were given to the tribe for survival. Compassion transcends any conflict and misunderstanding, because it negates judgment.

Isspomotsisinni [sharing and support] denotes the gift of contributing to the existence or activity of others. It is through this way of being of service to others that we strengthen relations – thus the cosmic alliances of the universe are strengthened. Each person relates to the collectivity or wholeness of the tribe through this way of being. It is by way of this responsibility that tribes comprehend the reciprocal and indivisible nature of the universe. People have a gift, which, as it is put in service of the tribe, is their contribution to the collective. Individuals may be gifted with song, medicines, creativity, and insight. These and other gifts are pieces to strengthen the circle.

Ainakowa [respect] is attempting to preserve the natural or sacred state of the universe. Tribal protocol and customs are the manifestations of this mission. Respect is contextual, and as tribal members mature they understand that intuition is the best indicator of how to be respectful. This way of being is constantly mindful of the interrelatedness and interdependence of our relationships. For example, by learning to respect the natural world, one becomes knowledgeable about the inherent properties of plants and their contribution to the survival of the tribe. This means learning how to maintain harmony with particular medicines. This same example can be extended to all relationships that make up our collective identity.

Isskanaitaptsi [relatedness, relationship] means that life is purposeful and all-inclusive. This responsibility is premised on understanding the natural order and the mysteries of the universe. The wisdom in traditional

knowledge and custom manifests the understanding of the sacred nature of relationships and relatedness. Often personal experiences are reflected against the stories of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* and other ancestral stories. The appropriate form of relationship is clearly delineated, for example, in the stories of *Napi*, as well as the consequences of undermining them. The pedagogical practices for becoming *Niitsitapi* are based on personal inquiry, reflection on stories, and advice from *Kaaahsinnooniksi*. Without these, there is neither wisdom nor the opportunity to fulfill one's responsibilities. The life experiences of *Akaitapiiks* [ancestors] and *Kaaahsinnooniksi* are the means of fulfilling and extending the wisdom of a cosmic universe to the next generation.

Responsibilities, such as respect (i.e., following protocol), are what help us to connect with and become a conduit for the manifestation of the spiritual forces. When we embody these responsibilities, we align ourselves with the spiritual forces around us and manifest the spiritual nature of life and humanity. This means we are spiritually authentic. And, conversely, authentic presence manifests life force in our conduct and fulfillment of responsibilities. If claims to spiritual authenticity don't manifest in relationships, these claims are seen as untrue, invalid, and inauthentic. Authenticity arises from the maintenance of good relations with tribal kinship and cosmic alliances. They implement the mission of Indigenous cultures to strive for harmony and balance.³ Once understood, good relations guide to ways of being that allow *Siksikaitsitapi* to connect to *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* and thus to their true identity. The values that support these responsibilities include: consensus decision-making; a fluid structure for leadership; integrity of word; giving and sharing; being humble, honest, patient, and kind; listening attentively; and being of service to others. These are the ways to strengthen prayer, and they constitute the source of tribal strength. Human existence and, subsequently, the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi* are directed toward giving of oneself for the survival of our relations and fulfilling our responsibilities within the alliances we are a part of.

3. For example, see the story by Narcisse Blood in chapter 2.

The notion of prayer has its root in a good heart. It is at the core of *Siksikaitstapi* identity. For example, there are many sacred songs and rituals for the initiated that provide connections with the sacred and the powerful. The grave responsibilities associated with having access to such great power are learned through specific rules of conduct and protocol during initiation. Knowing and maintaining the proper conduct necessary for balance protects the initiated. The good heart is a process arrived at by following the rules of conduct as expressed in *Niitsi'powahsinni*. The language used in ceremony connects people to a universe of ancestors who are part of the spiritual alliances.

Language determines the nature of human beings by forming part of the normative structure of the culture by identifying values, roles, responsibilities, and rules of conduct among people and in their relationship to creation. It expresses a matrix of relationships that is, in essence, the connection to *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*.

The way of life, on the other hand, is *Niipaitapiyysin* or the constant motion of breath. I visualize this as the movement of *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* permeating creation. Sacred power is the source that generates the distinctions that allow our perceptions of reality. The words "*Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*" and "*Niipaitapiyysin*" identify the meaning and purpose of life. They construct the context in which language carries identity, knowledge, relationships, and the meaning of relationships for life itself.

Traditional learning is grounded in the importance of direct knowledge gained through experience. Experience is the teacher of life and cannot be exchanged or inherited. *Kaaahsinnooniksi* are the teachers because they have experienced the life of *Siksikaitstapi*. They said:

It is good to sit here in this way. The subjects that we are talking about are not things that we have heard; these are the things that have occurred. We have experienced these things you have asked us. This is why it is good that you come to ask us these things that you want to know.

Primary knowledge comes through the integration of self with the roles and responsibilities of *Siksikaitstapi* tribal alliances. Learning these responsibilities occurs in the context of a good heart, i.e., the moral responsibility of maintaining balance. *Ao'sisstapitakyo'p*, knowing, the completed act of cognition, means active participation in the world and the integration of experience through reflective meditation. Knowing is the ability to make reference to past experiences and to contextualize them in a system of meaning that makes sense of present experiences. Decision-making is a process of assessing meanings rooted in the moral and ethical responsibilities of *Siksikaitstapi*. They comprise knowing the inherent patterns of relatedness in an interdependent ecological world.

Dissociated from the pedagogical foundation based in experience, *Siksikaitstapi* are not able to perpetuate the values of human development and education that are essential for our survival as a people. In other words, survival of *Siksikaitstapi* is dependent upon knowing how to participate in life together with cosmic relatives. This knowledge comes from experience and participation, the ways of learning the basic responsibilities of being *Niitsitapi*.

The continued integration of experience, reflection, and meditation leads to an understanding of the connections within the holistic patterns of life. This translates into kinship relations as part of an organic reality. Experience alters the knower and the known; in experience the known and knower can become one. Learning through experience and reflection involves listening for connections and meanings in the words heard. By listening carefully, we respect the breath of life as it flows through the words and through our lungs. The wisdom in the breath of life is understood in the singing of songs that connect us to the ancestors. In loving the child for the gift of life, we come to know the delicate balance of life and death. Speaking with resource creativity and kindness strengthens the alliances. Giving strength through words to others allows individuals to achieve what they ordinarily could not do. *Siksikaitstapi* learning is dependent upon the oral tradition and *Niitsi'powahsinni* [language]. Oral tradition is the medium through which tribal people enter into relation-

ships with the *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*. It represents the life and spirit of learning. Storytelling has three aspects: (i) the teller, who enriches the story and brings to the story understanding based in experience; (ii) the listener who is experiencing the story and through it a connection to the ancestors; and (iii) the relationship between the teller and the listener(s) of the story. In this way, the stories are alive and people are engaged in the experience of the relationships. The function of language is its embodiment of the transformational consciousness of *Siksikaitisitapi*. The words hold the sacred vibrations that alter the cosmic world by creating distinctions that are experienced through the alliances of the cosmos. Speaking is connecting to all of creation, and through language one touches, relates, connects, and participates with the powerful force of the universe. The mysterious force or *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa* moves through language. It touches, connects, and lives through words as it makes life move.

14. *Aipommotsspistsi* – Transfers

Traditional learning is experiential. This forum for learning is centrally exemplified in the *Siksikaitisitapi* practice of *Aipommotsspistsi* – the practice of ceremonial transfers. They bring *Siksikaitisitapi* ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy together through methods of transmitting sacred responsibilities and knowledge from generation to generation. They are the initiations into sacred responsibilities and knowledge that are passed down through each generation to ensure the renewal of cosmic alliances. These medicine bundles have been transferred to *Siksikaitisitapi* with the original instructions for coming to know, *Akaotsisstapitakiop*, so that “we have come to understand (not merely know) it.” During the original *Aipommotsp* of the medicine bundles, the initiates were given instructions of how to conduct the ceremonies. In essence, the transfer ceremony is working with *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, the Source of Life, from which knowledge is revealed or transferred. As such, the transfers

are the processes of renewing the original responsibilities as taught to the *Siksikaitsitapi* in the original transfer.

One of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* said:

Traditions, as they have been taught to us through our ancestors and through the ceremonies, are the most accurate at this time; as opposed to other forms of knowledge, such as reports from ethnologists and other academic or published materials.... Tribal identity is learned through experience. Conversely, students and non-Native people who want to learn of our ways often will use the literature; they do realize that the literature is fraught with inaccuracies and false information. The language and the experience of our relationships has been our way of teaching and learning.

Aipommotspistsi are a medium of becoming one with the universe. They are the connections to all time as well as the ancestors and ancients since time immemorial. They ensure the continuance of *Siksikaitsitapi*. As one ceremonialist said,

“Our life is transferred to us.” Transfer is the way knowledge is passed on, it is the way to maintain balance among all our relations. The ceremony maintains the connection with *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, the Source of Life.

It is our responsibility, in the *Siksikaitsitapi* way, to give back what we have been transferred. It is not the way of the people to sit with or keep that which has been given to you. For example, those who have received an education return and give it back to the people. The *Siksikaitsitapi* way, our way, the *Niitsitapi’s* way, is to help, to assist, and then *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* will help us. We have to try hard and work hard. It is good, *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa* will help. We need not worry.

The *Siksikaitsitapi* way is premised on giving and sharing knowledge and, through prayer, it assists and helps the group to survive. It gives strength and supports life.

The basic ontological responsibility, *Kiitomohpiipotokoi* or role, of giving and sharing is embedded in the fundamental philosophical premises of *Siksikaitsitapi* education. Sharing and giving are ways of being that connect to and perpetuate *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. Actions of sharing and giving are consistent with the natural order of the universe and help to maintain it in balance. According to *Siksikaitsitapi*, a fundamental aspect of the cosmic universe is reciprocity, which is experienced in *Aipommotsspistsi*, the practice of ceremonial transfers. As a *Siksikaitsitapi* word, "*Aipommotspisi*" means "we are transferred; it was given, or passed on." The word depicts reciprocal responsibilities or an exchange of responsibilities among participants. The natural law of reciprocity is extended by *Siksikaitsitapi* to their daily customs and activities.

The ceremonies are for connecting, renewing, and maintaining good relations with the alliances to ensure that life returns to a sacred and peaceful way. The ethical and moral behaviour identified through customs, language, values, and roles are often referred to as protocol or ritual. Protocols and rituals encapsulate the responsibilities and behaviour [*Kiitomohpiipotokoi*] that are the means for returning to a state of balance or ensuring good relations. A few daily examples are: give food and a drink to visitors; do not walk in front of ceremonial people or *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, always walk behind the person; greet and acknowledge every one with some gesture; and, finally, always move in a sunwise direction if you are moving in a circle. Tribal protocol acknowledges the sacred state or the good relations of food, the energy of individuals, and the movement of life.

One of *Kaaahsinnooniksi* shared the following story to illustrate the importance of the following protocol:

My brother was looking for horses. He had been riding a sorrel thoroughbred. This horse was given to him. It was a very handsome

horse. My brother rode to X's house. This was where X was wintering [X is Niinaimsskaiks, a medicine pipe holder]. My brother was a Medicine pipe child. [His father was a Niinaimsskaiksi also].

Brother went to ask X whether he had seen the horses. He rides over to X's house, and in his hurry, he jumped off his horse and ran inside the lodge with the reins of his horse remaining in his hands. X knew the protocol, but I think he did not want to follow it, perhaps it was because it was a good horse.

After my brother had received a reply from X, he returned to his horse and rode away. As he was riding west, my brother met Y and another person. Y had been driving a team with a double sled, traveling east. My brother decided to approach him to ask him if he had seen the horses. Dusk was fast approaching. My brother rides over to Y, who was getting firewood.

Kaaahsinnoon explains,

On the snow-covered earth sleds make a clear sheer flat surface. This smooth surface can be very slippery. As my brother was approaching Y's sled, his horse slid on the smooth surface made by Y's sled. The horse fell and hit his head. The fall was fatal.

Another *Kaaahsinnoon* adds,

These are the things for which we cannot give you an answer. I ask: why is it that you cannot enter the lodge [home] of a *Niinaimsskaiks* with a cigarette? Why is it, if I have given you something to eat when you come to visit me, that you have to tell four stories, if you want to take the food out of the home. This is our way of life. These are the things that are taught to us.

Through generations of *Aipommotsspistsi*, *Kaaahsinnooniksi* have been taught the rigorous discipline of the sacred science of participating in

ceremonies. The knowledge inherent in their ceremonial protocols transcends the classical Eurocentred conceptions of reality and nature. However, more recent experiments in quantum mechanics have revealed that reality is the manifestation of a “set of relationships” which, upon interacting with an observing system, change knowledge and physical reality discontinuously (Zarkov 1979, 54–79). This particular scientific view is consistent with *Siksikaisitapi* understanding. *Ahkoyinnimaan*, the Medicine Pipe, can be said to be a web of kinship relationships which, through active participation of *Siksikaisitapi*, alters and transforms reality. Included in this web of relationships are relationships with non-human animals, who also have roles and responsibilities in the transformation of life. Through participation, *Siksikaisitapi* become a conscious part of an interactive system; they are transformed in the process of participating. This aspect of traditional learning is referred to as *Aipommotsp*. Once the transfer has occurred, the initiated becomes transformed [*Aipommotsp*] because the transfer has become a part of the living body. The alliances collectively strengthen life for the sake of life, for the survival of humankind, and the universe. In the legend of *Ksissti'ko'm* [Thunder], this knowledge is given to the people as *Aipommotsp*, the transfer of the Medicine pipe [*Ahkoyinnimaan*]. The relevant alliances that are active here are illustrated in the following excerpt:

A long time ago, Thunder struck down a man. While he lay on the ground, the Thunder Chief appeared to him in a vision, showing him a pipe and saying, “I have chosen you that I might give you this Pipe. Make another just like it. Gather together also a medicine bundle, containing the skins of the animals and birds which go with it. Whenever your people are sick, or dying, a vow must be made and a ceremony given with a feast. The sick will be restored to health.” The Grizzly Bear afterwards appeared to the man and said to him, “I give you my skin to wrap around the sacred bundle, because it is larger than the skins of other animals. The owl possesses knowledge of the night. The Medicine Pipe is wrapped

with raw hide and decorated with feathers and the winter skins of the weasels. Many animal and bird skins are gathered for the sacred bundle, wrapped in a large grizzly bear skin. In the spring, when the first Thunder is heard, the Pipe is brought out and held up.” (McClintock 1992, 253–54)

Niitsitapi education is distinct from the Eurocentred educational system. It is governed by the natural law of balance and harmony. *Aipommotspistsi* are the means of maintaining the reciprocity and generosity required in order to maintain balance among *Siksikaitaitapi*. They maintain the natural order that insures the gifts of life; reciprocity is essential for the survival of all life. *Aipommotspistsi* are the embodiment of this way of life. Transfers form the fabric of *Siksikaitaitapi* culture and the social organization of our people.

McClintock (1992) gives the following example which illustrates the behavioural manifestation of cultural and societal principles: Lone Chief, *Nitainawa*, gave forty horses, an enormous pile of clothing, blankets, and provisions during his initiation. Gifts given to the previous *Niinaiims-skaiksi* [keepers of the pipe] included: a saddle, horse, bridle, whip, and lariat for the man; the woman or wife received a buckskin dress, beaded moccasins, and leggings, a robe with red paint worn only for ceremonials. *Kaaahsinnoon*, *Niita'kaiksa'maikoan*, P. Standing Alone (personal communication, October 1997) states that during *Pomma'ksin*, gifts are given because generosity is an inherent characteristic of the universe; it is the responsibility of *Siksikaitaitapi* to live up to the natural laws of the universe. *Naatowapo'kos* [keepers of bundles] traditionally give *Naatosi* [Sun] offerings that were always their very best possessions. This is to reflect the enormous gifts given by *Naatosi*, gifts that come from *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, the Source of Life. No price can be put on health, longevity, and an abundance of berries and game. Generosity has been demonstrated as part of the natural order, and therefore *Siksikaitaitapi* organize themselves to mirror these relationships among themselves and through their alliances.

The bundles are the embodiment of the sacred medicine of *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. Grave respect is therefore given to them; I was once told by one of the *Naatowapo'kosiks* that one could not be angry in their presence. Particular personal attitudes and specific conduct are strictly adhered to by the keepers and those who interact with them. Grinnell (1962) reports that the daily care of these bundles included taking them outside during the day and suspending them above the owner's seat inside the lodge at night. Once inside the lodge, no one was allowed to pass between the pipe stem and the fireplace. No one except the man or wife could move or open the bundle.

This required conduct is also demonstrated in ceremonies. The highest respect and integrity are asked of those who participate. For example, in *Naamaahkaan*, *Kaaahsinnooniksi* tell four stories of exceptional feats. I am told by *Niita'kaiksa'maikoan* (P. Standing Alone) that this individual must not tell a lie. The honesty and integrity of the individual during the ceremony must be paramount, otherwise she or he may suffer grave consequences. When I asked, "what types of consequences," he replied, "Perhaps the individual's good health." He added, "One cannot lie to *Naatosi*" (personal communication, October 1997).

The following components summarize the principles of *Siksikaitstapi* educational processes and content:

- knowledge of tribal and cosmic responsibilities;
- experiential knowledge of tribal alliances;
- embodiment of knowledge and skills acquired for the well-being of a cosmic universe;
- transfer of knowledge and skills to the next generation.

The traditional educational system of *Aipommotsspistsi* develops and reinforces the identity of *Siksikaitstapi*, their place in the universe, and the skills and knowledge they need in order to function in their society.

15. *Kaaahasinnooniksi* – Grandparents

Kaaahasinnooniksi are the teachers; they have been initiated and have experienced *Aipommotsspistsi*. The transfer is the initiation into a *Kana'kaaatsiiks* [sacred society] and/or the initiation as one of the *Naatowa'pokos* or *Niinaimsskaiksi* [bundle or pipe keepers]. The initiated are the ceremonialists who later become *Kaaahasinnooniksi* and perform *Aipommotsspist*, the rites, songs, and dances of ceremony. The transfer embodies the original instruction given by *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* [Source of Life], *Naatosi* [Sun], *Ksisstsi'koim* [Thunder], *Ksisststaki* [Beaver], etc. Each ceremony offers secrets and sacred knowledge that helps maintain balance within the partnership of these alliances. This is the sacred science of *Siksikaitsitapi*.

Those who teach and perform the ceremonies and transfers are *Kaaahasinnooniksi*. They have lived the life of ceremony and are the embodied knowledge of the sacred. Their experiences with the alliances of *Siksikaitsitapi* are the source of their teachings. Their initiation is the precondition for participation in ceremonial practices.

Kaaahasinnooniksi have cautioned regarding issues of Pan-Indianism. Pan-Indianism is largely an urban phenomenon and is quite different from the maintenance of the integrity of tribal knowledge. It is a conglomerate of various intertribal customs that may include religion and reform. Its aim is to promote traditional values and to facilitate Indian involvement among the professions and businesses (Frideres 1974, 115). As *Kaaahasinnoon* said, Pan-Indianism “creates confusion among the young people who are searching for their tribal identity; tribal identity is the connection with the ancestors in the broadest sense of the word and connects us to all time.”

The ceremonialists and *Kaaahasinnooniksi* show tremendous responsibility and discipline in keeping that connection with the ancestors. The essential responsibility of *Iipommowaiksi* or *Niinaimsskaiksi* [bundle or pipe keepers] is to maintain balance. Wolf (1991, 55) describes the responsibilities of the ceremonialists and his own experiences of initiation:

The whole is composed of parts that are connected just as dew drops of water are held by a spider's web. One drop vibrates in the breeze and the whole web responds. Every drop feels the breeze. But what was the web that connected us together? I felt that it had something to do with consciousness, but I wasn't sure. I also suspected that this vibration could heal.

Kaaahsinnooniksi addressed the responsibilities for healing and balance:

Our way of life is responsibility, the responsibility to teach the people the way of life. The teachings are kindness, respect for relatives, listening to those who talk to you and who give advice and teachings.

The consciousness of the initiated is constituted by such responsibilities as respect, integrity, humility, and kindness. Kindness and generosity are the forces of the universe, they are the forces through which *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa* functions. To give with love is the natural order of the universe. *Kuutomohpiipotokoi* [responsibilities] enable the initiate to maintain balance and identify what constitutes the identity of *Siksikaitsitapi*.

Siksikaitsitapi have always attempted to align themselves with the sacred power and intelligence of the universe through the development of their particular identity and social order, through sacrifices and offerings. Aligning with the sacred power of the universe is dependent upon the acknowledgment of the abundance of gifts bestowed on *Siksikaitsitapi* throughout the cycles of time. *Aipommotsspists* honour the animals and the plants who sustain *Siksikaitsitapi* and who are their teachers of natural laws. For example, the rituals, songs, and practices of ceremony map out the proper thought and behaviour required; at the same time, they delineate the proper and necessary behaviour for all their other relationships.

Indigenous epistemology is coming to know your heart, the "good heart" of *Siksikaitsitapi*. *Ikiniioiskitsipahpahsinni* being of good heart]

is the source of connecting to the lifelines of a cosmic universe, it is the basis of *Siksikaitstapi* ways of coming to know. Coming to know means *Ikiniioiskitsipahpahsin*, and it necessitates the maintenance of connections with the alliances of the macrocosmic and microcosmic worlds.

The principles and protocol held in *Aipommotspistsi* govern the knowledge and determine its validity. *Kaaahsinnooniksi*, having experienced the ceremonial responsibilities of transferring within tribal protocol and understanding the rules and the validity of coming to know, share this knowledge. The science of *Siksikaitstapi* is taught by *Kaaahsinnooniksi*.

It is up to us to make sure that we teach properly. It is good when someone tells me they are getting involved [becoming initiated]. I encourage them.

As one of the *Kaaahsinnooniksi* explained:

Those of us sitting here have experienced our way of life. The things we have given you are things that you could use in your life. And you could make good use of it in the future. There are no other persons or people that we could turn to. We have reached that place in our ways. The ancestors and grandparents have taught us in the past. It can be seen, it has all been seen, those things we are telling you [our teachings can be observed and are observed through our experiences]. It is all included in the teachings that we are sharing with you.

It is in the stories that we have told you. Those are the things that are there. These are the teachings that have maintained and ensured our survival.

In summary, the pedagogy of the *Siksikaitstapi* embodies the following practices:

- Experiential learning centres on individual *responsibility*. Each person in becoming *Siksikaitstapi* is learning to understand

his or her place in a set of relationships and responsibilities from which he or she can participate in a cosmic universe (i.e., social and society initiations are the foundations of the developmental phases of being *Siksikaitstapi*). Learning and understanding is dependent upon the maturity and volition of the individual and occurs from the inner centre of the person and thus is primarily an individual responsibility.

- Understanding the way of life and the responsibility to life are connected.

Siksikaitstapi learn through their relationships and connections to family, environment, geography, animals, etc. Within these relationships they experience the knowledge and understanding of responsibilities for maintaining the balance of their world.

- Understanding is demonstrated and embodied through the attitudes and behaviour of the individual. Learning means *integrating* the wisdom and knowledge experienced into who you are, into tribal identity.
- To summarize: Learning occurs experientially in direct interaction and through participation with *Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa*. It is an integrative and transformative approach to holistic knowing. Learning occurs by understanding one's own nature (personality and purpose in life) and one's relationship to life.

Traditional learning means coming to know the basic ontological responsibilities of giving and sharing by listening, observing, experiencing, and reflecting. *Kaaahsinmooniksi* who have come to know within the various aspects of self as well as the social and natural world, and who have learned their responsibilities from the ancestors, become teachers. *Kaaahsinmooniksi* embody and carry the knowledge to each new generation. This method of knowing and of generating knowledge is the essence of *Siksikaitstapi* survival as a people and the basis for the survival of the rest of the living world.