

Kalli Eagle Speaker

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Kainaiwa Beadwork Research Paper

Oki, niisto nitaniko Itsoyaik'anasoyakii. Niisto nohto'to Kainaiwa. Niisto aissksinima'tsaa Iniskim. My name is Kalli Eagle Speaker and my Blackfoot name is Shining in the Water Woman. I am Blood/Blackfoot from the Blood Reserve, otherwise known as Kainaiwa which is a part of Treaty 7, and a member of the Blackfoot Confederacy. I am a student at Sacred Buffalo Stone, the English interpretation of the University of Lethbridge. I come from a family who have many traditional beliefs and knowledge about our culture regarding ceremonies, traditions, skills, and values. I started familiarizing myself with the artistry of beadwork when I was about 12 years old, and I began becoming more serious about beading bigger projects when I was 18 years old when I beaded myself a full set of women's jingle beadwork.

The skills and knowledge I have accumulated thus far were taught to me primarily by my sister Torry Eagle Speaker, where she taught me the knowledge of lazy stitch and two-needle techniques. Torry was taught her basic beading skills by our mother Tanya Eagle Speaker, where her skills progressed very quickly and she began beading for herself, for me, and started taking on orders from local customers from our reserve. The artistry of beading is both a collective and individual labour, in terms of how much knowledge can be spread amongst one another, and how one needs the support and encouragement when learning how to do the physical skill of beading. Beading is an endless and timeless realm of knowledge, and it is a continuous loop of exchanging stories, techniques and building relationships, which we will discuss in this paper.

This paper will reflect Blackfoot ways of knowing, primarily Kainaiwa knowledge, as well as ways of knowing from other nations included within the literature. Beadwork techniques, knowledge, and rituals remain relatively similar across various tribes, but there are still noticeable differences that make each tribe's knowledge distinct from one another. It is impossible to state that there are any exact rules when it comes to creating beadwork, there are no definitive answers to any questions, yet there are only stories and knowledge to be shared amongst one other. The transmission of knowledge from one person to the next will continue to be fluid and ever changing over time, as knowledge can be interpreted differently by everyone, and therefore will be dispersed according to how one has interpreted it. Any information and stories told to myself regarding crafting beadwork allows me to change or adapt what I currently know and enables me to utilize the new knowledge that I have received.

Beadworking as an Indigenous Research Paradigm by Dr. Tiffany Prete highlights key characteristics of Blackfoot transmission of knowledge. Prete is also an academic who comes from the Blood Reserve, and her dissertation focuses on beadwork as a research paradigm, as an act of resistance, and as an act of knowledge transmission. The transition between beadwork knowledge being passed on from one person to another, and then paving its way into Indigenous academia showcases that this knowledge is beyond simply beads, a needle, and thread. Prete's analysis on the research paradigm aspect of states that beadworking "is rooted in the historically and geographically located epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies of Indigenous peoples." (pg. 30) Beyond the act of crafting beadwork, the epistemological perspective of beadwork is an ongoing and continuous way of thinking. The values and beliefs that come with this mentality exemplify how important the traditional, emotional, and spiritual aspects of beadwork are.

Prete's dissertation elaborates on beadwork as an act of resistance by discussing the Indian Act 1914 amendment, where it was illegal for Indigenous people to wear their traditional regalia anywhere beyond the reserve. With this act set in place, Indigenous people needed permission from the Superintendent general of Indian Affairs to leave their reserve to partake in any activity that would require their traditional regalia to be worn. Otherwise they would face either monetary penalties, imprisonment, or both. This act is a prime example of the trials and tribulations that Indigenous people had gone through to simply wear their cultural attire, although the Crown still controlled what they could wear when off-reserve. When residential schools came into place, the children wore "European-styled clothing as a part of the mission to civilize the Indian." (pg. 32) The Indian Act itself is a doctrine that was created with the sole purpose to abolish Indigenous peoples and disintegrate their culture. However, with the persistence, strength and integrity of our ancestors, our culture is still very much alive today.

Indigenous culture is very much centered around oral history, where knowledge is intended to be verbally passed down to educate others of our ways and traditions. Prete's dissertation calls this *issksinnima'tsstohksinni* which describes "pedagogy" as an "important distinction regarding the traditional educational practices of the Blackfoot people." (pg. 35) Prete's beading lessons centered around learning and practicing Blackfoot philosophies, those being reciprocity, interconnectedness, kindness/generosity, respect, balance/harmony, and sharing/giving. (pg. 35) Beading utilizes all of the philosophies mentioned in reference to giving and receiving beadwork as gifts, the kindness instilled in oneself for gift giving, and the balance and harmony needed when creating beadwork to ensure positivity is embedded within your work. Blackfoot beadworkers have utilized the philosophies from the past and into the present.

Beadworking beyond the physical labour can utilize *issksinnnima'tsohksinni*, where there are important distinctions and philosophies in traditional Blackfoot practices compared to other tribes such as designs and colours. *The Blackfoot Shirts Project: "Our Ancestors Have Come to Visit"* curated by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown is a great example of highlighting important distinctions of design, attire, stories, and lessons of the Blackfoot people. Peers and Brown utilized the traditional knowledge of Blackfoot elders to listen to stories regarding Blackfoot shirts, which had made their home from Blackfoot territory to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. The shirts were made of hide and included quillwork panels and scalp locks on them, which was when the Blackfoot would count coup on their enemies and would take their scalps. The shirts made their way to pay a visit to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, which allowed neighbouring tribes from the Blackfoot Confederacy to visit, touch and listen to stories. The significance of these shirts coming back home to visit lies in the history, leaving us wondering who they had belonged to and what stories went with the creation of these shirts.

Those who were in attendance of the shirts had partaken in a rich part of Blackfoot history, which emphasizes the importance of creating and maintaining beadwork and traditional attire. The distinction and philosophies lie within the creations of these shirts in the designs and knowledge of Blackfoot history, highlighting that even though the shirts are over a hundred years old, current Blackfoot people treated them with respect. The shirts sparked conversations about "Blackfoot values, stories, and cultural knowledge and their relevance today." (pg. 6) The shirts are a prime example of how important passing down knowledge is, as creations today will still be very important to future generations to come. Educating current and future generations about designs, colours, distinctions, and philosophies is what will keep the Blackfoot culture alive.

The transmission of oral history and knowledge is a key factor when it comes to beadworking, in terms of knowing the correct colours, tribal designs and learning the history of why these colours and designs pose such a significance. Elizabeth McCoy's thesis *A descriptive analysis of Blackfeet Indian beadwork* highlights significant elements of Blackfeet/Blackfoot knowledge regarding men's and women's beadwork designs, traditional colours, and in-depth descriptions of different techniques. Beadwork has many different reasons for its creation, ranging from ceremony or religion, social customs, emphasizing pride in creation of designs, to add additional beauty to the work, as well as "adornment to clothing, tools, riding equipment, household items, and ceremonial props" (pg. 24). McCoy discusses that designs were also to be determined based on if a man or woman was constructing the design, as men worked on creations used for religion/ceremony or rituals, and women primarily beaded abstract and geometric designs. Geometric designs were used to "make things 'pretty'" (pg. 19).

McCoy's thesis specifies that the Blackfeet used red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white, and noted that the Bloods' dominantly used yellow in their work (pg. 22). With respect to colours and designs, two of the main shapes used include a square and a rectangle which can create many distinct designs, even as simplified as it is. Becoming and remaining knowledgeable about what designs mean and which tribe they belong to is an important part of Blackfoot beadwork. Many designs and colours are generational, belong to certain families, are meant for specifically men or women, and are used for ceremonial purposes and adornment. An important aspect beyond the physical creation of beadwork is ensuring to learn what designs can and cannot be used for beadwork creations. Kainaiwa beadworker LouAnn Day Chief spoke passionately about the significance of being knowledgeable on Blackfoot designs.

LouAnn Day Chief spoke on the importance of being aware of designs and colours when creating beadwork pieces. Day Chief's grandmother Ruth Little Bear taught her "to share knowledge, our Blackfoot people, the ladies [are] how we kept our traditions alive. We pass them down to our families, our friends." When it came to retaining knowledge regarding designs and colours, Little Bear taught her granddaughter about the significance of looking nice in terms of owning nice beadwork and regalia. Day Chief stated her grandmother taught her that "Blackfoot people are very proud people, very clean and proud of dressing up. We put all our love and creations into our design, so that the people will know how we cherish our families." This sentiment emphasizes the Blackfoot belief that beyond the physical creation, it also holds a more intimate meaning being tied to the love and respect of family. Little Bear taught Day Chief that "everything we did and created was based on our surroundings like the mountains and water. That's how people distinguish the Blackfoot people... with our geometric designs."

Similarly, self-taught beadworker and designer Carol Mason explained her teachings of what she came to know as Blackfoot designs. Mason's business Northern Plains Design has required her to distribute her knowledge that she has accumulated over the years. Mason stated that when she creates pieces, she "traditionally stay[s] within our Blackfoot culture. What those colours, designs, and symbols meant."

Figure 1, moccasins with Blackfoot designs by Carol Mason



Mason stated “all of those teachings to me represent something about who we were and who we are today. Those are our identity of who we are and maintaining that identity. In a different way, in our way, we continue to keep our identity through our traditional crafting.” The significance of Blackfoot designs and colours has proven to be very prevalent throughout the literature and individual knowledge from experience beadworkers.

Transitioning from historical knowledge about designs, colours and techniques, it is also important to focus and acknowledge the beginning stages of learning beadwork processes. Lois Edge’s dissertation *My Grandmother’s Moccasins: Indigenous women, ways of knowing and Indigenous aesthetic of beadwork* focuses on personal anecdotes, research and beading circles held for Indigenous women to visit and bead. Edge’s dissertation is an academic and personal scramble of knowledge and experience, which compliments one another in terms of how it relates to learning about Indigenous knowledge. Beading - physically, mentally and emotionally, takes much time, effort, relations, and patience, which does not come fast or easy to anyone. Edge’s dissertation especially highlights the relationships built between the women transitioning from strangers to sisters, while they all learn and share stories amongst themselves. Forming and building trusting relationships created a safe space for the women participating in the beading circles, as stated in the dissertation “we support each other; we hear each other’s trials and tribulations. Other people listen to us. They hear us — other Aboriginal women” (pg. 78).

Female relationships and maternal guidance are very sacred and are an important part of traditional knowledge. Alexandra Kahsenni’s *From Great-Grandmothers to Great-Granddaughters: “Moving Life” in Baby Carriers and Birchbark Baskets* attests to the significance of maternal knowledge. Kahsenni discusses the importance of *tikinaagans*, meaning cradleboard, which are used for babies to sleep in. Kahsenni discusses the significance of designs

and knowledge transfers in them that are “lovingly crafted by family and community members in order to welcome new life...” (pg. 101). Kahsenni also discusses *madjimadzuin* which means “moving life-line” or “moving life” in Anishinaabe, where “women were considered to be guardians responsible for maintaining this netted chain of “moving life” (pg. 101).

The female relationships and maternal knowledge shared poses great significance to Indigenous people, regardless of which tribe they come from. Stretching from the realms of herbal medicines, family responsibilities, and learning all there is to know about crafting are just a few examples of why these teachings are sacred. Blackfoot/Cree beadworker Tanya Lujan demonstrates the truth to that statement as Lujan has been creating beadwork since childhood and was taught primarily by her grandmother Louise Big Plume. Lujan spoke very respectfully of the knowledge her grandmother instilled in her, stating “my grandmother taught me to always give thanks that your hands are able to sit there and create with God. Whomever you’re making that beadwork for, pray for them.” Lujan shared a story that her grandmother told her “you always have to make a mistake [in your beadwork], if you go back and look at your beadwork and there’s not a mistake, go back and add a different bead” and Lujan did not question this advice until later in life. When she finally did ask why she was told to add a flaw, her grandmother responded, “because life’s not perfect, we all make mistakes.”

Similarly, Torry Eagle Speaker experienced the shift in knowledge from learning to teaching. Eagle Speaker was taught her beading and seamstress knowledge from her mother Tanya Eagle Speaker, and wants to fulfill her maternal duties of teaching her daughter Toka’sa Leya. Eagle Speaker stated, “learning as a family and having those teachings passed on is really meaningful and important because one day, you’re going to be looking back at projects and there is going to be a lot of meaning behind it knowing who taught you...” Eagle Speaker spoke

passionately about the knowledge passed down to her from her mother, expanding on her skills and wanting to pass it down. The emphasis on maternal knowledge from the interviews and literature proves how significant and respected generational knowledge is in families and tribes.

With respect to traditional beadwork used for ceremonial, ritual, and traditional purposes, a modern perspective on beadwork is continuously rising for Indigenous artists. *Land and Beaded Identity: Shaping Art Histories of Indigenous Women of the Flatland* by Carmen Robertson attests to this by highlighting examples of work created for museums and storytelling. Robertson discusses the comparison between traditional use of beadwork and used in the realm of art showcases how the “relationship and storytelling (both oral and visual) combine to acknowledge the long histories of beadwork” (pg. 19). There is an important distinction in modern times regarding the creation of beadwork initially intended for the use of traditional purposes, creating for family, and wanting to decorate your belongings with familial and tribal colours and designs. As we see in upcoming literature and from the interviews conducted, there continues to be a much wider discussion about the transition from sole traditional usage and into the economical factor about utilizing beadwork for financial gain.

For example, myself as a beadworker who comes from a family with a business background, have capitalized on my crafting capabilities which was an idea inspired from my parents Myron and Tanya Eagle Speaker. Tanya received her diploma in Fashion Design and Merchandising and utilized her education by sewing and designing Pendleton coats, as her goal was to be self-employed as a stay-at-home mother. The self-employment aspect was my motivation to learn how to utilize my knowledge and craftsmanship and turn it into an income, as it allowed for more free time and to creatively express the art of sewing and beadwork. I began taking on local orders at the age of 17 which helped develop self-discipline and professionalism.

By being able to turn generational knowledge into a more modern perspective, whilst simultaneously respecting the knowledge and traditions, has helped me grow as a seamstress, beadworker, entrepreneur, and as an Indigenous scholar.

In addition to the economic standpoint, my interview with beadworker, seamstress and business owner Alexis Bull Bear highlighted important factors regarding the transition of utilizing crafting skills and turning them into a business. Alexis and her husband Chris own Bull Bear Creations, a business where both Alexis and Chris utilize social media and booths at powwows and similar gatherings to sell and promote their work. Alexis is primarily the seamstress and beadworker for their beaded products, allowing their family to work as one and work from home as she is a mother to four. Similarly, as previously mentioned, Carol Mason's business Northern Plains Designs utilizes her traditional knowledge by not only creating and distributing her beadwork but being able to share her knowledge through moccasin making classes and beading circles. Mason shared encouragement for up and coming Blackfoot beadworks, stating that beading "is art, it's very valued art. When you're selling your work, you want it to have the quality [and] that the value is there to be able to sell it."

Amongst all five of the interviewees, all of the Blackfoot artists shared very similar values in cherishing traditional knowledge taught to them by creating beadwork for family, as well as developing the means necessary to begin selling their work to customers and for public displays. The process of creating and selling your work is a relatively new concept compared to the very old traditional ways, and it has not always been welcomed or encouraged by older generations. Day Chief shared that her grandmother Ruth was "very disappointed that people made a living out of it. She didn't believe that we should get payment for sharing our knowledge because we didn't do that in the past." The conversation between current generations turning

their crafting skills into economical gain may not always be an agreeable concept, but nonetheless it is becoming more and more common for new generations to partake in.

The combination between traditional crafts making their way into an economical setting does not always mean that the intention is purely financial gain. Eagle Speaker, who also has her own business selling pow-wow regalia and beadwork, also has utilized opportunities to showcase her work in museum expeditions. Eagle Speaker has work showcased at her alma mater Lethbridge College, at Fort Whoop Up, and the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, Alberta, as well as creations at the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, Alberta. The perspective of traditional work in museum spaces may also have negative conversations from Indigenous people. In the past, sacred pieces of history have been stolen and withheld for centuries, but showing Blackfoot works in museum spaces currently allows for the certainty of consent to be displayed. This also allows for Indigenous cultures to be viewed from a modern lens and not viewed solely as history.

Figure 2, quilled moccasins created by Torry Eagle Speaker and Dylan Daniels for Lethbridge College.



Cora Weber-Pillwax's *What is Indigenous Research?* creates an interesting conversation about bridging Indigenous knowledge and the world of academia together as Indigenous scholars. Capitalizing on the opportunity of collaborating two worldviews allows for relationships, understanding, and educating. Weber-Pillwax states that in Indigenous research "the knowledge that we acquire from our studies is there for our own purposes, Indigenous purposes, derived from Indigenous thinking and ways of being" (pg. 169). Weber-Pillwax's take on the combination of Indigenous knowledge intertwining with academic thinking feels relevant to this paper. It is important to acknowledge that the literature and interviews conducted by Indigenous people regarding Blackfoot knowledge and ways of being are for our own purpose as Blackfoot people. Indigenous knowledge deserves to be thoughtfully respected in academia, as history showed us that knowledge and teachings were nearly decimated from Indigenous people.

The modern and historical views of Kainaiwa beadwork is a timeless conversation with a plethora of areas to acknowledge. Stretching from old traditional pieces of beadwork created for ceremony and decoration for war, to modern day ceremony and pow-wow beadwork, there is a magnificent blend of tribal history in each design. The act of beadwork has proven to be far beyond simply the physical act of beads, thread, and needles, but trickles down into knowledge ranging from physical and metaphorical lessons, tribal designs, colours, rituals, ceremony, decoration, and prayer. The Blackfoot knowledge from tribal and familial designs to traditionally used colours stems from time immemorial to our current generation of beadworkers, with every generation of Blackfoot artists interpreting and implementing this sacred information a little differently than the first. The interviews conducted by the Kainaiwa beadworkers mentioned throughout this paper is proof that traditional craftsmanship and teachings will allow the Blackfoot culture to live on for generations to come.

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