



**Matriarchal Beads:  
The Resistance, Resurgence, and Reclamation of  
Traditional Indigenous Beadwork**

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**Abstract**

*Beading, weaving, and sewing are Indigenous cultural traditions that have been practiced by many nations across the North American continent since time immemorial; ultimately, these practices carry significant Indigenous knowledges and belief systems. The impact of colonization on Indigenous women throughout the continent limited and reduced the function of their matriarchal roles within their communities. In turn, they have adapted, evolved, and gained a stronger sense of culture and identity through their traditional artistic practices of beadwork; this includes the transmission of knowledge, culture, and identity. Indigenous matriarchs have used the reclamation and resurgence of the traditional practices of beadwork as a form*



*of resistance and decolonization. This article looks to explore, understand, and interpret these issues from the position of a First Nation Ininiw Iskwew (Swampy Cree woman) lens, as the author is a proud matriarch originating from the community of Norway House Cree Nation.*

**Keywords:** matriarchy, beadwork, Indigenous, colonization, decolonization

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### **Resumé**

*Le perlage, le tissage et la couture sont des traditions culturelles autochtones pratiquées par de nombreuses nations à travers le continent nord-américain depuis des temps immémoriaux; en fin de compte, ces pratiques véhiculent d'importants savoirs et systèmes de croyances autochtones. L'impact de la colonisation sur les femmes autochtones à travers le continent a limité et réduit la fonction de leurs rôles matriarcaux au sein de leurs communautés. Pour leur part, les femmes se sont adaptées, ont évolué et ont acquis un sens plus fort de la culture et de l'identité grâce à leurs pratiques artistiques traditionnelles de travail des perles, ce qui a contribué à la transmission du savoir, de la culture et de l'identité. Les matriarches autochtones ont utilisé la récupération et la résurgence des pratiques traditionnelles du travail des perles comme forme de résistance et de décolonisation. Cet article cherche à explorer, comprendre et interpréter ces enjeux du point de vue d'une Première Nation Ininiw Iskwew (femme moskégonne), puisque l'auteure est une fière matriarche issue de la communauté de la Nation Crie Norway House.*

**Mots-clés :** matriarcat, travail de perles (perlage), Autochtone, colonisation, décolonisation

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of matriarchy is complex, particularly from the perspective that gender is a colonial construct which has been utilized to create disruption to Indigenous community structures through assimilation. For the purpose of this article, matriarchy is defined as an individual's leadership role and not solely inclusive of colonial female gender

identification; rather, matriarchy here is presented as a fluid concept that encompasses Cree cultural values such as relationship, unity, equity, and respect. These leadership roles are based within a cultural community that supports, mentors, guides, and takes action to build a stronger and more collective community. Scholar Kim Anderson explores the use and importance of roles within the community (rather than emphasizing gender identification of females) in her 2011 book *Life Stages and Native Women*. As a First Nations Ininiw Iskwew, I largely follow the Cree value systems which embody these ideologies, as they relate to the teachings I have gained through my lived experiences and ceremonial ways of life.

Scholar Marie-Françoise Guédon argues that we may avoid a great deal of confusion by adopting the following perspective:

(a) [C]onsidering matrilineality as having to do with kinship, and matriarchy as having to do with governance (following Peggy Reeves Sanday's proposition), then (b) paying attention to the ways in which matriarchy is defined by the communities who use the term to describe themselves - regularly not as a mirror image of patriarchy but as an entirely different, less hierarchical system in which women play a central role while upholding the importance and value of all members of the society, including men. (2020, p. 5)

It is imperative to understand and allow Indigenous Peoples to assert their own ways of articulating their ways of thinking, being, doing, and seeing in relation to the concept of matriarchy and matriculture because Indigenous understandings are complex and differ significantly from Western Eurocentric ways of understanding. This, in fact, is part of the reclamation of matriarchal roles within our communities and broader society, leading to decolonization.

Indigenous matriarchs have systematically been the targets of an imposed patriarchal society introduced by European settlers and Eurocentric worldviews; assimilation through the process of colonization changed the course of transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems, culture, and identity. In turn, Indigenous matriarchs adapted and evolved to gain a stronger sense of culture and identity through their traditional practices, including that of beadwork, a traditional cultural way of life that has been practiced by many nations which holds important epistemological and ontological belief systems and knowledges. As Bowler notes, "Beading as epistemology advances the idea that through the process of beading, individual and subjective knowledge, memory, and experience are created and then stitched into our beadwork." (2020, p. 23)

As understood through the practice of traditional Indigenous beadwork, this article outlines the historical underpinnings of the loss of matriarchal roles in Indigenous communities, resistance attempts throughout the colonization process, autoethnography based on my own first-hand experience as the Indigenous Scholar-in-Residence with Ininiw and sub-Arctic beadwork in the Hudson's Bay Company collections at the Manitoba Museum, and the current resurgence and reclamation of beadwork practices made through social media. Despite facing adversities, Indigenous matriarchs have continued to break barriers in the fight to asserting and reclaiming their traditional matriarchal roles since colonization, effectively utilizing beadwork as a vehicle of resistance, resurgence, reclamation, and decolonization.

## Background

For centuries Indigenous epistemological and ontological understandings and knowledge bases were passed on from generation to generation through word of mouth in the form of oral tradition, storytelling, and teachings given by their Elders and the Knowledge Keepers within their communities and nations. Beads were used in a multitude of ways: to represent stories, events, relationships, visions, agreements, identities and/or treaties. Beading is a time-honored tradition that predates colonization. (Marsden, 2004, p. 58)

The transmission of knowledges largely occurred by offering traditional stories or oral traditions through the process, creation, and wearing of beadwork. A single piece of beadwork held deep and significant meaning to the artist and their community; these stories and meanings, derived from their everyday practices, influenced its creation. Often, the work was integrated into items of necessity and usefulness. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015, p. 136) For example, scholar Naomi Adelson describes the way in which James Bay Cree mothers securely wrap and bundle their infants lovingly in *waasipisuutaan* (moss bags), a traditional item created for babies made from fabric or leather, often stuffed with moss and designed to replicate a womb-like environment that would keep them warm. (2000, pp. 87-88) These moss bags, referred to in Ininimowin (Swampy Cree) as *wáspison*, are hand sewn and often embellished with beadwork; each bead is placed meticulously as an indicator of the love, patience, and care for the individual for whom it has been created.

The use of woven and sewn items such as baskets, blankets, or clothing was of the utmost importance to various nations across North America; upon them their survival depended, as well as their culture, identity, and the passing to younger generations of their deeply-rooted traditional epistemological and ontological knowledge systems.

Through the crafting of a beading basket or belt, a young woman would learn cultural knowledge, access spiritual connections and cultural values, and cement relationships with other women and the natural world. (Ray, 2016, p. 367)

These traditions would prepare a young woman to thrive in the often harsh climates of the northern and sub-Arctic regions, as well as being able to pass these traditions on to others.

Their clothing was not only sewn for the warmth and the protection that it afforded against the elements, but significant time and care was taken to make these useful items beautiful and appealing to the eye; this often meant embellishing them with beadwork. For example, in their 2015 monograph, Berlo & Phillips state that in the central sub-Arctic, Cree women often used moose hide for clothing that might also be richly decorated. (p. 172) The delicate and elaborate weaving and beading techniques that were practiced since time immemorial have been passed down throughout the years to sustain not only their way of life, but also their self-sufficiency.

At the initial contact, partnerships and positive relations were abundant between Indigenous groups and the incoming European settlers. These partnerships were mutually beneficial: Indigenous peoples began to rely on the new trade goods brought by European settlers and the settlers needed the help of Indigenous peoples for many reasons. Both sides were gaining something through the trade process. (Miller, 2000, p. 50) A well-documented example of initial friendly relationships is from the eastern region Haudenosaunee and the gift of the Two-Row Wampum Belt, which also connects to the significance and traditional practice of beadwork prior to the impacts of colonization. (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 343-344)

The Two-Row Wampum Belt was hand-beaded with white and purple shell beads, woven to set the purple beads in two separate lines; this wampum belt held and holds significant meaning to the Haudenosaunee peoples. Often referred to as the first treaty negotiated between First Nations peoples and the incoming settlers, as well as being a significant example of Indigenous resistance through beadwork, the beaded wampum belt represents the paths of both the Indigenous peoples and the newcomers as distinct and autonomous. The lines - which never overlap - tell a story of both groups of people being separate and living alongside each other in peace and harmony. (Muller, 2004, p. 18) The creation of this treaty agreement incorporates Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies to show the deeply significant and spiritual teachings which Indigenous peoples utilized in the creation of their beadwork.

The Haudenosaunee and the Dutch agreed on three principles to make this treaty last. The first was friendship; the Haudenosaunee and their white brothers will live in friendship. The second principle is peace; there will be peace between their two people. The final principle is forever; that this agreement will last forever. (Deyhowähda·dih, n.d.)

The Two Row Wampum Belt holds a sacred agreement and shows the significance of oral tradition; it was not only a piece of art gifted to explorers.

Wampum belts, made from small tubular shell beads woven into symbolic designs, were essential elements in Hodinöhsö:ni' treaty-making, which was based on the belief that wampum could capture the words and pledges made in its presence. (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 327)

This belief made the use of wampum critical to maintaining the oral memory of treaties for the Haudenosaunee. Scholar Melinda Gray (2017) asserts that:

Woven in the wampum treaty belts is a history of politics and a complicated value system that owes its existence to beads. Wampum belts were worn in the past as a signal of social and political status among Indigenous peoples. Today they are a symbol of resiliency that reflect the political marginalization that Indigenous leaders have endured throughout the centuries after European contact. (p. 3)

As stated, this ideology continues to be shared; it is still evident throughout various Indigenous cultures, within their traditions, knowledges, and understandings. (Joly de Lotbinière, 1991, p. 91)

## **BEADED RELATIONS**

Within traditional Ininiw culture, women were seen as highly respected life-givers because of their ability to create life and give birth to children, ultimately holding the communities' next generations within their bodies. This was understood as a special gift given to women by the Creator and contributed to justifying women's matriarchal leadership roles within their communities. Cree women held the right to govern and make decisions within the community, and were important leaders. (Brown, 1980) Essentially,

Cree kinship ties are matrilineal and societies were matriarchal. Matriarchy is a comprehensive societal structure that prescribes more equitable values and roles within the community. (Greyeyes & Vipond, 2022, p. 13)

In her book *Life Stages and Native Women* (2011), Kim Anderson argues that Indigenous women's roles were of the utmost importance to governing the community. As respected Saulteaux Elder named Mosom Danny Musqua explains in their interview with Anderson:

We never had any doubt that women were the centre and core of our community and our nation. No nation ever existed without the fortitude of our grandmothers, and all of those teachings have to be recovered. (p. 162)

The imposition of Western cultural and social structures shifted and changed the role of women in Indigenous communities, affecting not only women but also men, Elders, children, and gender-diverse individuals. The devastating loss of women's vital roles culminated with the need for resistance, reclamation, and resurgence of traditional practices of Indigenous knowledge systems in order to work towards decolonization.

Specifically, the overwhelming influence of a Eurocentric patriarchal worldview dismantled the traditional matriarchal roles of Indigenous women and impacted families, communities, and nations. Patriarchal society disempowers women and many Indigenous women became disconnected from this [matriarchal] way of knowing and were unable to pass this knowledge to subsequent generations. (Bowler, 2020, p. 1) Scholar Lana Ray (2016) states in her 2016 article 'Beading Becomes a Part of Your Life' that patriarchy has created a hierarchal structure that holds Indigenous women and their modes of knowledge production and transmission as less intellectual in comparison to males and, therefore, less valuable. (p. 366)

The beadwork-based transmission of traditional knowledge systems predominantly came through the women. "While both men and women wear beads and their manufacture is often a male activity, working with beads is generally categorized as women's knowledge." (Racette, 2008, p. 70) Furthering this point, scholar Carmen Robertson (2017) states:

...collaborations and mentoring among women of the Plains were key aspects of such beadwork production in the past as well as the present. Sharing patterns and ideas, support, and community remain at the heart of beaded art practices. (p. 15)

Indigenous women have been passing on traditional knowledge of cultural practices such as beadwork for generations; ancestral knowledge has always been an integral part of Indigenous identity and culture and this was disrupted by colonialism.

Indigenous peoples in North America have a symbiotic relationship to their traditional lands which directly ties them to their cultural practices. Most, if not all Indigenous nations practiced some form of braiding, weaving, sewing, and beading preceding the introduction of glass beads in early contact through trading. These sewing and weaving practices developed over time based not only upon styles relating to Indigenous people's specific cultural knowledge, but the materials that grew naturally in their region and were available to them. Beads could be made from a variety of different natural materials, such as shells, stones, clay, copper, nuts, seeds, pearls, and animal materials such as hooves or horns, teeth, and bones. (Bowler, 2020 & Dublin, 2009, p. 263) To further this point, ecological knowledge of their territory and region influenced not only the creation of naturally-made beads, but also their way of life and spiritual practices; these are also closely tied to a nation's culture, identity and had a large role in the creation of their art. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015) For example, "Porcupine quill work, a sacred art form connected to the ceremonies, societies, and protocols of the Plains peoples, served semiotically as a direct signifier of the land, with quills culled from porcupines and dyes derived from plants and other natural materials." (Robertson, 2017, p. 16)

Moving into the sub-Arctic region, Cree women living in the James Bay area were highly influenced by their surroundings and not only put to use the natural materials available to them but found inspiration to create distinct patterns, shapes and techniques. Traditional knowledges stemmed from the lands upon which each nation lived and guided the transmission and practice of beadwork.

## **RESISTANCE**

Glass beads were introduced by European and French explorers through trade with Indigenous peoples in the 1700s; this began the evolution and ever-changing ways in which Indigenous peoples would practice their traditions of weaving, sewing, and beading. More specifically, as Indigenous nations across the eastern and plains regions began to integrate the use of glass beads over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cultural and artistic expressions changed and adapted the new technologies to suit shifting identities. (Robertson, 2017, p. 16) Beads became a staple of trade between the explorers and Indigenous peoples, as new glass beads came in colors that were unavailable; popular colors included white, black, red, green, or blue. (Gray,

2017, p. 7) The adaptation of traditional methods of beading to new materials began; the quills, feathers, and natural pigments that adorned traditional garments were, for example, interspersed or replaced with glass beads, trade cloth, and new designs, (Robertson, 2017, p. 16) It was not unusual for the incoming European settlers to notice how Indigenous women took great pride in their appearance and their usage of newly introduced glass beads. The traders commented upon the care in which Cree women took in fashioning their hair in elaborate knots and plaits, painting their faces and adorning their garments and persons with beads and bangles.” (Van Kirk, 1980, p. 21) Scholar Sherry Farrell Racette asserts that “Women’s artistic work gives evidence to the critical role they played in integrating new materials and ideas, while simultaneously maintaining a certain stable and continuous core of ancient knowledge.” (2009, p. 285) Beadwork became a form of resistance and an assertion of matriarchal roles.

Over time, the influence of the hierarchal patriarchal system that was implemented and imposed on Indigenous peoples through forced colonization and the assimilation process deeply transformed Indigenous communities and the traditional matriarchal roles of women, leading to widespread adaptation of cultural practices. European settlers did not respect the traditional matriarchal roles of Indigenous women, as they viewed men to be the stronger of the sexes and the leaders. In her 1980 book *Many Tender Ties*, scholar Sylvia Van Kirk states that “Fur trade writers articulate a view of women as being the fragile, weaker sex dependent upon the chivalrous protection of men.” (p. 17) When government systems, policies, and legally documented agreements began to be implemented in the early stages of colonization, the impacts of a patriarchal society quickly became evident.

The Indian Act of 1876 further emphasized patrilineal descent and legitimate birth as criteria for Indian status. These criteria were integral to European notions of the male-female relationship and the role of women in society. (Green, 1985, p. 81-95)

These government documents further strengthened European legal control over Indigenous peoples, which, in turn, further undermined the traditional roles of Indigenous matriarchs. This created further impediments to the passage of knowledge systems to the next generations.

Residential schools have a complex history and will only be briefly touched on here, as they are not the primary focus of this article. Their creation was a major factor in the loss of traditional matriarchal roles and connections to beadwork across North America. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states,

Residential schools were a systematic, government-sponsored attempt to destroy Aboriginal cultures and languages and to assimilate Aboriginal peoples so that they no longer existed as distinct peoples. (2015, p. 107)

Children were forcefully removed from their parents, most significantly from the nurturing and caregiving of their mothers, their culture, and communities. Unfortunately, Indigenous children captured by residential schools lost an understanding of their own culture and ways of being, creating confusion and the loss of identity. The lack of family connection adversely affected each and every child that was placed within a residential school.

Aboriginal children learned to despise the traditions and accomplishments of their people, to reject the values and spirituality that had always given meaning to their lives, to distrust the knowledge and life ways of their families and kin. By the time they were free to return to their villages, many had learned to despise themselves. (RCAP, 1996, p. 223-224)

Over the course of time, in response to the abduction of their children and the assimilation process to which they were subjected, Indigenous matriarchs began to turn away from traditional practices such as beadwork. In 2017, scholar Melinda Gray argues in 'Beads: Symbols of Indigenous Cultural Resilience and Value' that "The trauma experienced was intergenerational and the impact is still being felt today." (p.14)

The many changes to the *Indian Act*, such as the banning of Indigenous ceremonies, further undermined the roles of matriarchs within their communities. This in turn, led Indigenous peoples to follow Western narratives and ways of being.

Because of the harsh economic conditions that were created from colonial government policies and lack of access to land, beadwork became commercialized, bringing into question the innate cultural knowledge of the craft. (Ray, 2016, p. 365)

The transmission of knowledge about and an appreciation for the traditional practice of beadwork began to lose not only appeal, but during the period of known as the 'time lag,' the active creation of beaded items in Indigenous communities essentially stopped. (Berlo & Phillips, 2015, p. 248)

The rescindment of the federal ban on their ceremonies in 1951 allowed Indigenous communities to practice their culture openly once again without fear of persecution or

imprisonment; this included beading sacred items. However, the irreversible impacts of the residential schools were evident. A glaring example provided by Farrell Racette (2009) reports that a letter received from Brandon Sanatorium in 1959 detailed,

I only have two Indian girls at present that will do beadwork. The Indians we have here do very beautiful embroidery, crocheting and knitting, but the younger generation do not know how to bead ... they tell me their grandmothers can do it, but they themselves do not care to learn. (p. 299)

The passing of traditions to younger generations of matriarchs was significantly obstructed during this period. Research has indicated that trauma is passed on through parental bloodlines and may offer answers as to why this occurred. Scholar Renee Linklater shares within her 2014 book *Decolonizing Trauma Work* the following:

Traumatic memory contributes to Indigenous people's experiences. In theory, Indigenous knowledge and contemporary research indicate that inter/multigenerational trauma is passed on through parental/institutional patterning as well as bloodlines. In Indigenous thought "blood memory" is the occurrence of an experience of those that have gone before us being embedded in our physical and psychological being." (p. 23)

However, if the theory of the genetic transmission of trauma holds true and blood memory carries trauma patterning, the theory also indicates, therefore, that blood may carry patterns of resiliency and strength which contribute to an actionable resurgence of lost or lagging traditions. Despite the devastating impacts of colonialism, many Indigenous women still have strong ties to their cultures and connections that gravitate them towards their matriarchal roles, culture, identity and knowledge systems. The creation of art in the form of beadwork may help to move them towards decolonization and the restoration of their traditional status and role.

## **RESURGENCE**

In more recent times, many artists have used museum collections as a means to reconnect with their artistic legacy, and there they find objects that have preserved artistic principles, aesthetic standards, and techniques. These objects also tell stories. (Farrel Racette, 2009, p. 304) As the Indigenous Scholar-in-Residence at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba, I was able to create my own piece of beadwork inspired by the Ininiw and sub-Arctic pieces of beadwork held by the museum within the

Hudson's Bay collection. I believe that my calling to beadwork is tied directly to my spirit connection as a First Nations Ininiw Iskew and this ties together with my understanding of how I came to be given an opportunity to sit and visit with the collections of beadwork of the ancestors at the Manitoba Museum. As well, I am admittedly privileged to have firsthand experience attending and participating in the ceremonies of my people. This is a sacred gift; I have been honoured to carry sacred narratives comprised of complex and elaborate understandings of Ininiw cosmological connections to the cosmos and all living things through Indigenous ways of knowing.

The term *wâhkôtowin* (All My Relations) refers to Indigenous people's relationship to themselves, their kinship relationships to family and all human beings, the earth, the land, the water, the animals, the plants, the cosmos, and connections to ancestors and spirit. It identifies that all things are related and connected. The traditional knowledge I have been gifted by Ininiw Elders that I now carry in order to understand these connections is significant. It directly correlates with where and how I came to be involved with the Manitoba Museum where I connected with, studied, and visited the many beaded pieces, predominantly from the sub-Arctic regions, that are not openly on display to the public.

A specific sacred teaching gifted to me through ceremony encompasses Ininiw traditional knowledge systems and matriarchal wisdom; it describes how all things are connected within our lives, our purpose, or connections. Not only do they make us who we are, but they bring us to who we are to be within our lives, and even beyond to the spirit world. We are sent to Mother Earth in order to seek out knowledge to learn along our journeys, until we travel back to the spirit world. In the moments that I sat visiting with the beadwork and connecting to beads as I created my own beaded piece, using the collection as inspiration, I felt that I was sitting in ceremony with the beads, alongside my Ininiw ancestors, and alongside the Indigenous matriarchs who also carried this knowledge and have passed it on to me through their beadwork, despite the lack of physical meeting with them. Rather, I have spiritually connected with them through their beadwork.

I am not alone in this connection; well-known beader Jeanine Krauchi relates that their relationship with the Manitoba Museum has helped them regain the aesthetic standards of the past and the museum collections largely inspire their beadwork. (Farrel Racette, 2009, p. 305) My connection to my matriarchal Ininiw traditional knowledge systems and connections to ancestral beadwork within the museum is founded within these deeply rooted connections. Although I am largely a self-taught artist, I believe that the teachings

of these traditions are held in my blood memory and are carried through my spirit and the beads. The beads tell the stories of my connection to my ancestral matriarchs. I have sadly been impacted by the legacy of colonial policies due to my mother's trauma during the so-called Sixties Scoop, which resulted in my own disconnection with my heritage. Nevertheless, through the practice of beadwork I have worked tirelessly to overcome the impacts of inter- and multi-generational traumas that have effected me and my family. Healing through beadwork supports the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness of an individual, and healing oneself connects us to not only our own wellness but shapes the way we can connect to community and the reclamation of matriarchal roles. Cree scholar Lakota Wood corroborates my experience, stating that beadwork is not only a method of healing and self-connection but also a method of storytelling that allows a physical practice of knowledge transmission. (2025, p. 27) Healing through beadwork has allowed me to gratefully honour my leadership role as an Ininiw matriarch, wherein I use the gift of beadwork as a way to share my stories, teachings, what I gained through my experience at the Manitoba Museum, and the significant epistemological and ontological understandings which I have gained through ceremony. This is central to the resurgence and reclamation of matriarchal roles within our communities.

Ceremonial understanding, traditions, and ancestral ways of knowing continue to be practiced by Indigenous peoples and play a significant role in the empowerment of Indigenous matriarchs and their connections in their communities. The practice of beadwork at powwows has proven itself as a vehicle for knowledge transmission and the passing on of traditions from Indigenous matriarchs to their peers and younger women.

Beadwork on regalia may represent temporality by harkening back to past patterns with traditional meanings while simultaneously evolving it with modern techniques and tools that show the continuity and future of the art form. (Gray, 2017, p. 19)

Although the effects of colonialism and patriarchy have struck matriarchal roles strongly, the practices and knowledges tied to traditional matriarchal roles are stronger. Dakota Cree scholar Paulete Poitras (2025) says the following:

Beadwork is a necessary and living link to ancestry. The beadwork serves as a tangible and spiritual connection to their ancestors, mirroring the regalia of past generations and embodying their cultural heritage. Beadwork is for accessing 'ancestral,' allowing the speaker to connect with the wisdom and experiences of their ancestors through the act of creation. (p. 25)

Through family dynamics, communities, and their identity, Indigenous peoples have committed to resistance, and this resistance is seen within today's society and in the lives of Indigenous people from all walks of life. Indigenous women's traditional roles are no longer missing and left unacknowledged. Cree scholar Priscilla Settee (2001), celebrates the matriarchal roles of fifteen women in her book *The Strength of Women: Āhkamèyimowak*; this last term is a Cree word meaning "the strength that drives women to flourish and work for change within their communities." (p. III) One of the women, Lindsay Knight from the Cree community of Muskoday First Nation in Saskatchewan, practices her ceremonial traditions as a form of reclamation of matriarchal traditions. She describes her experience as follows:

... as having strength beyond my own awareness sometimes and [I] find that I heal for my people and then take some of the weight for those that need help. I take no credit for this. It comes from another place. We are all given gifts from the Creator and when we find them, we are meant to use them. It is a responsibility and we do not have much control over the outcomes... I have always been humble and taught to give thanks. (as quoted in Settee, p. 68)

Her understanding comes from the ceremonial rituals and teachings that are gifted to one from Knowledge Keepers, Elders, and matriarchs within ceremony, which continue to support the healing and reclamation of matriarchal roles within Indigenous communities. Despite continued negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated throughout colonization and within society today, Indigenous matriarchs have taken control of their own identities and abilities to assert their traditional leadership roles and they use beadwork in their fight towards resurgence and decolonization.

As an Ininiw Iskwew who practices my cultural traditions, ceremony, and beadwork, I look towards other matriarchs to find inspiration, connection, and strength from those that have gone before me. Scholar Sherry Farrel Racette (2009) credits this to the work created by historic artists which sets the highest standards of craftsmanship and continues to inspire generations of contemporary artists. (p. 306) Indigenous women have reclaimed their traditional matriarchal roles in many ways with the use of beadwork, proving that they are a force to be reckoned with. Cree scholar Tara Kappo writes in *Mîskistahikâcimo: to tell a story through beadwork* that the influence of her familial matriarchs connected her to beadwork has been a catalyst for decolonization and the assertion of her matriarchal role. (2021, p. 47-52) The practice of beadwork is an important part of reclamation of traditional roles and matriarchs have stepped up to this challenge.

## RECLAMATION

Today, the reclamation of Indigenous cultural practices, knowledge systems, and identity has begun making a buzz through the use of technology and social media, but reclamation has been an active focus of Indigenous peoples across North America for countless years. With the transmission of knowledge going viral through social media, the ability to learn, understand, and pick up information has drastically increased for many Indigenous peoples and an Indigenous renaissance of sorts has begun. Indigenous peoples are becoming educated on cultural knowledge, identities, and Indigenous beading practices in larger numbers and this has prompted people to connect in new and innovative ways. Scholars Amber Brown and Angela Knowles state in their 2022 chapter 'Holding Space for Future Matriarchs: Digital Platforms for Resurging Solidarity' that Indigenous beading has begun trending:

...as a part of holding space for those who may be detached from beading teachings, Indigenous people such as Michelle Chubb (@indigenous\_Baddie on Instagram/Tiktok), who is Nehiyaw/Cree, share tutorials on social media about how to bead and even make Jingle dresses... This work is done to allow for cultural reclamation and knowledge sharing. (Fellows & Smith, 2022, p. 260)

The reclamation of beadwork on global platforms has served as a crucial tool not only to allow others to learn this art form but also to gain fundamental teachings associated with their matriarchal roles as Indigenous people.

Beading fosters communal engagement and relations and is a catalyst for convening collective cultural and social movement. While the materiality of land cannot be replaced, these engagements and relations can be fostered and nourished in online spaces, witnessed in the rise of Zoom beading circles during the Covid-19 pandemic. (Ansloo, 2022, p. 4)

The practice of beadwork is a symbol of Indigenous resilience and has been utilized to combat the effects of colonialism and the loss of matriarchal roles within Indigenous communities. This artistic resistance to colonialism is a form of decolonization. The use of beadwork with contemporary inspiration is the focus of bead workers in current contexts. Essentially, "a reaffirmation of Indigenous epistemological and ontological foundations in contemporary times offers a central form of resistance to colonial forces that have consistently and methodically denigrated and silenced them." (Wilson, 2005, p. 255)

Beadwork is also being used to resist colonialism through its involvement in political messages such as *Land Back*, a well-known activist movement which often includes rematriation and Indigenous sovereignty. Activist bead workers use traditionally sourced materials such as hides, horse hair, dentalium shells, and unique details to represent and identify specific nations.

Bead workers are reclaiming their traditional practices in large numbers, which is making a significant impact on younger generations by continuing the transmission of knowledge systems, embodying Indigenous ways of knowing, epistemologies and ontologies; all of these lead to a reclamation of matriarchal roles. Contemporary bead artist Nadia Myre says,

The production of re-imagined pieces epitomizes personal learning, re-skilling, as well as a system of knowledge transmission. Their creation allows me to restore the cognitive processes that have been the backbone of Native cultures; in revitalizing a material practice, I am performing a decolonial gesture and forging a cultural identity. (as cited in Robertson, 2017, p. 19)

As Lana Ray notes in her article 'Beading Becomes Part of Your Life, "Over the generations, Indigenous women have subtly and cleverly tapped into the power of beading to resist colonization and assimilation, renewing and maintaining Indigenous knowledge systems." (2016, p. 367) The holistic, intricate, and intentional understandings embedded in beadwork are deeply significant in how and why the transmission of knowledge is important to Indigenous peoples.

The recovery of traditional knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those assaults. (Wilson, 2005, p. 257)

The practice and transference of traditional knowledge systems through beadwork is a valuable way that Indigenous peoples are reclaiming ways of knowing in order to begin to heal and resist colonial damage, contributing to decolonization processes, and reaffirming matriarchal roles in Indigenous communities.

## CONCLUSION

Beadwork is an integral part of Indigenous traditions and knowledge-based systems since time immemorial, holding deeply rooted epistemological and ontological understandings. Indigenous peoples have been irrevocably changed by the impacts of colonialism throughout North America, creating a disconnection to their traditional practices and knowledge systems, as well as the loss of traditional matriarchal roles throughout history. Traditional practices, however, have not all been lost to history: beadwork has not only lasted the test of time, but the resistance to colonization embedded in the practice of beadwork makes lasting impressions on the lives of matriarchs, their intrinsic roles, and ultimately their communities. Beadwork carves out a path for the process of decolonization through the use of this beautiful artform because of the strong epistemological and ontological knowledge-based systems found within them.

As scholar Franz Fanon states in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonization is a process in which the history of the colonized creates a new rhythm, a new generation, a new language, and a new humanity in order to become the focus and creation of liberation (1963, p. 2). Liberation of the matriarchal roles of Indigenous women from the assimilation process and the oppression of patriarchal Western society has been created through the use of beadwork. Decolonization has occurred not only through the resistance efforts and survival of beadwork, but through its resurgence, since decolonizing successes can be identified in the processes of reconnection and reclamation of beadwork by Indigenous peoples.

In essence, decolonization and the reclamation and resurgence of matriarchal roles continues to be moved forward through the practices of beadwork. Scholars Alfred and Corntassel (2005) assert that decolonization begins “with people transcending colonialism on an individual basis – a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence.” (p. 612) Beadwork is a site of resistance to colonialism and its resurgence is a powerful contribution to Indigenous women’s reclamation of matriarchal roles within their communities. Beadwork is art as resistance to the impacts of colonialism; its reclamation and resurgence embodies and materializes decolonization.

## About the Author

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