

Identifying Indigenous Voices within Traditional Conservation and Moving Forward

Nature Walk with **Mary Ellen Little Mustache** sponsored by Sierra Shade and Sabrina from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society.



Oki itamiskanatooni/Happy Day. We really thank you for your interest in our beautiful river.

Siksikaytsitapiiks/Blackfoot Nation have a history that goes back thousands and thousands of years where this was our original territory. Everything that I tell you today happened in this place. What we have made within this territory is a whole lifestyle that worked very well for us. We lived in lodges (tipis). We used wood for our shelters, and for many tools to help in our daily lives.

We are thankful to our Creator for everything that we have and everything we are...for giving us life and for giving us another day. When I harvest trees, I thank the Creator for being able to make games. Playing is one way of teaching our children. Learning was beautiful and kind, encouraging children to become strong and happy people. When we were teaching our children, we didn't have schoolbooks and rulers. We taught children with love and with games, teasing their brains, making them want to run and dance, to the sound of "the beat".



Springtime is like our New Year. We listen for the first thunder. This May weekend we are having many ceremonies at home and all around our territory to bring out the bundles. All the people laugh and dance and sing and enjoy this time of year.

[From: <https://piikani.ca/about/origin-of-the-beaver-bundle/>]

Napi O'topiim- A story of the rainbow (Napi's Rope)

Napi is a Blackfoot trickster. He came along when the earth was being created. He could dance and sing and practically do anything!

Miii skooohs! A Long, Loong time ago!

Napi insspapsi mii ookoowa. Napi was resting at home

Kainaok ... Here it is ... a far-off cry!

“Napi Noohk Spoomookiinaan”! Help us Napi now!

The cry came from the **Siksikaytsitapiiks** (Blackfoot people), who were camped in a valley, under wicked attack from **Ksistsikoom** (Thunder)! Thunder was hurling his powerful lightning and thunderbolts! Waves of icy cold rain and hail pelted the poor people in their soaked hide skin lodges. Unable to continue to stand the onslaught, they finally gave up and called upon Napi.



Napi...sometimes helpful, sometimes hinderance...heard the cry! Slowly rising from his comfortable warm bed, he stood and dressed himself with utmost care. Then, running in his best “saving hero” gait, he arrived, forthwith, to the desperate camp. There he reached into his Bag of Tricks, which was hanging from his belt. He pulled out his rope – Napi O'topiim! He tied a big circle and roped Thunder, who thrashed and fought until he was subdued. Napi dragged him to the top of Ninastako/Chief Mountain. There he held him down until all Thunder's “fight” was gone. Napi let him sit up and Thunder began to cry. He did not want these wonderful Blackfoot people to be afraid of him. He spoke of many wonderful gifts he could give them. So, Napi agreed to help him make peace. Ksistsikoom promised the Blackfoot people to announce new life in the springtime. Heralding; warming from the winter cold, new babies in the animal kingdom, new life cycles for the plants, and new gatherings for the People!

So, Napi and Thunder, Ksistsikoom, made Napi O'topiim, a symbol of peace and good fortune with the **Siksikaytsitapiiks** that exists to this day! Now, we listen for the first Thunder every springtime with welcome, not fear!

In Napi's Rope song, when I sing, I am talking about Napi's Rope and the colors.

NAPI O'TOPIIM

Moohsinatsi, Koomoniinatsi, Ootskwiinatsi,

Saisksimakwiinatsi.

Napi Napi O'topiim Napi O'topiim

Napi Napi O'topiim Napi O'topiim

Oot'hhkwiinatsi, Aot'hhkwiinatsi, Moohsinatsi

Napi Napi O'topiim Napi O'topiim

Napi Napi O'topiim Napi O'topiim

Nitsikiitamiyitak'hh Napi O'topiim

Nitsikiitamiyitak'hh Napi O'topiim



Written by Mary Ellen Little Mustache- It is important to be able to decipher the pronunciation of the colors. Mispronunciation causes meaning to change!

(see Blackfoot Songs at: [Blackfoot Songs — Building Brains Together](#))

Nitsi kii tami-yi takh - I'm really happy..... Nitsi kii tami-yi takh Napi O'topim - I'm really happy. I'm really happy with the Rainbow!

When we talk about **our** territory, we refer to the four bands of the Blackfoot Confederacy: Piikani, Kainai, Siksika, and the I'nakiisookasimiiks (now extinct). The northernmost point was the

Ponoka'sisaahtaa/Elk River, which is now called the North Saskatchewan River. It passes through Edmonton,

Alberta. To the south, our boundary was the **Otahkoitahtaa**/Yellowstone River. To the west, the **Niitsiistakiimists**/Rocky Mountains (our Backbone), then reaching all the way **Piinapoohs**/east, to what is now Saskatchewan, and parts of North/South Dakota. When we signed the treaties with the Canadian and US governments, this area was recognized to be our territory. Much land has been stolen since then.



We had no written orthography. Everything that we had from the paintings on our lodges, to the designs on our clothing, told our story. Our world was concentrated mainly on the buffalo. It provided many things for us,

especially food. Their skin was tanned to make beautiful, comfortable coverings to go over the huge Lodgepole pine structure poles. They were stitched together and painted with particular designs of the owner. Some lodges would use 15 buffalo hides. We are very particular about how we make our lodges, every piece telling a part of our history. As we walk along our nature walk, imagine a big camp of tipis.

We were camped here on October 24, 1870, when the Cree tribe **Sinaikoaiks** came to attack us. There was a big, huge battle that went on in this valley, now known as Indian Battle Park. It was the last big battle with the Crees. The Cree territory is a long distance from here. They were smart



enough and strong enough to make it all the way here. Later we made peace. When the Cree had their troubles up in Red River country, they came running to Blackfoot territory, for protection. That is how some Cree communities grew, within Blackfoot territory. When I was growing up, they would speak straight Cree and interact with the Blackfoot people. As we were camped here one day, the Cree tribe came to attack us. I had an aunt who spoke Cree, so we learned a few words of Cree as well. Then the coalminers came, we called Lethbridge **Sikóóhkotok** (black rock) because of the coal mine.

I walk through the valley I see all of these dead trees. When you are going to smoke meat, that is the kind of wood you want to get and has a really good flavor. In the hunting season I am a butcher of meat and am called “the dry meat lady” in Browning Montana. The dead Cottonwood **A’siitsiksimm** and Willow **Ootsipiists** are some of the “flavorful” trees I use. I use willow trees for creating many games as well. The medicine we get from willow is “pain-killing,” like acetaminophen.



These flowers we call ‘buffalo beans.’ For the month of May we call it the Flower Moon, **Apaisaits’kiitsatoosi**. In the past, people from across the mountains would begin their trek east to hunt buffalo when these flowers were in bloom.



This is the **Pákkii’p**/Choke Cherry tree. These trees grow a cherry with a pit. The choke cherries were a staple of our diet because they were easy to dry and to pack. The berry bushes were used a lot to make arrows and the tools we needed. This is one of the trees that I

often choose to make games. Nowadays we hear the choke cherries are poisonous and its important to be careful when eating them.



This small tree has many potential uses. The main thing that I use it for in wintertime is for making medicine. When you look down the middle of a tree you will see many layers and you can see how old a tree is. With this tree I can make a game, when I take off the outer bark you can see clean to the inside.

It the same with the willow trees. Once the tree is stripped you see a green layer. Strip that off right down to the wood layer. This medicine is used for different ailments and I’m sure other people will tell you different things. I gather it and make tea for people who are sick in their stomach. We call it **Pakyoonootss**. You should be able to peel off the medicine. Because my knife slipped, I know it is not quite ready yet and is coming into a ripened state. When we’re stripping trees, we try not to strip the green part if you use the wood because it will cause a weakness in the wood.

One of the first berries of the year are wild goose berries, **Paksíni’simaan**, and they turn into currants. They’ll turn pink then into purple and they make a wonderful soup.



Before we harvest a tree, we thank our Creator and use tobacco as a prayer offering. It’s compostable and it’s our way of thanking Creator and reminding ourselves how lucky we are that we have these trees. My name **Nawaksaaki**/Tobacco Pod Woman shows how my ancestors considered these plants, as holy, to be used in ceremonies.

Mary Ellen says a prayer to Creator for the tree as she spreads tobacco. When she doesn't have tobacco, she will sing. She always has her drum so she can sing.



This song I sing to the stars. Tomorrow we will have an eclipse of the moon. This song has really helped me a lot. When you come out of the tipi door there are two constellations painted, one on each of the open flaps. One is the Big Dipper- **Ihkitsíkammiksi**. There is a Blackfoot story of The Lost Children who went to live up in the sky (see Blackfoot stories). **Ihkitsika** means seven. We call the stars **Kakatoosiiks** (see Blackfoot songs and stories; [Building Brains Together](#)).

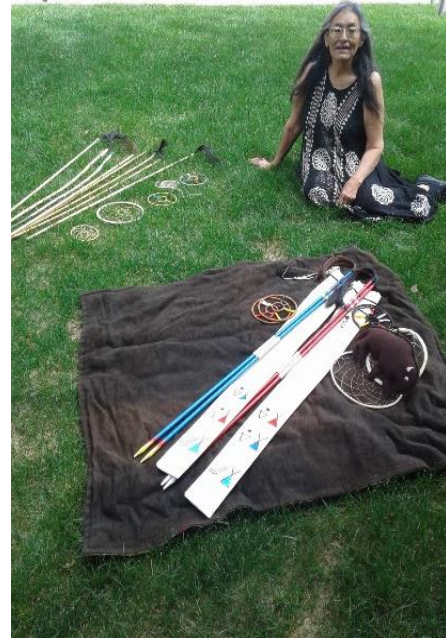
With this coming spring, we are harvesting trees for tipi poles. We need to make sure the poles are smooth, so that they won't rip the material. Imagine going into the bush and finding 24-foot trees that probably have great big branches and make a trimmed tree with a strong backbone for tipis.



One of the reasons I really like to work with fresh trees is because they are bendable. You begin to see the properties of the tree. You don't just force it because the tree has ways to move just like how our arm moves when we move it, the tree has properties as well. If we're going to make a proper ring for games or tools, we need to understand those properties.

We are taught to be always careful to use every piece of wood, branches, leaves, and bark from the trees we harvest. Nothing goes to waste. As well as creating tools, we have medicine that can be harvested simultaneously, from the trees.

Look what I have just created: A stick for Double Ball: **Natsii'pookoon**, sticks for Ring the Stick: **Sapiik'iisoohksatsit**, and two for Run and Scream: **Aksiistapooks kasi'oohkoomi** and smaller sticks for **Aokstaki**/counting games and games of intuition. All from one small tree!
(see [Indigenous Games — Building Brains Together](#)).



Moving forward we would like to see people understanding and practicing more respect with regard to nature. We all need to be more aware of the harms that humans are doing to their environment and the waste that we are producing. We can still use natural elements, but we need to respect the trees we cut from, and the plants and berries we pick so that they grow back to sustain us. **KYUN**, The End

(Mary Ellen Little Mustache)

