

# Traditional Indigenous Beadwork Technology: The Application of Indigenous Beadwork in Métis Identity Reclamation through a Master of Education Program

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## Abstract

The traditional technology of Indigenous beadwork is a longstanding art form with deep historical ties to many Indigenous communities in Canada. The ongoing practice of Indigenous beadwork has been reclaimed by artists nationwide to connect to their traditional heritage. This paper dives deeper into the cultural impacts of Indigenous beadwork and how I have worked toward reclaiming my Métis heritage through beadwork. The entirety of my Capstone Project – a requirement for a Master of Education program in Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan – is analyzed in comparison to the literature regarding traditional Indigenous beadwork and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Indigenous beadwork, identity reclamation, Métis beadwork, traditional practices, healing



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## **Vignette**

*A newly accepted graduate student finds himself in his first class contemplating the impacts of colonialism on the education sector. New thoughts and invigorating conversations captivate him as he dives deeper and deeper into the hegemonic legacy that formed his nation. Having never considered colonialism to have a direct impact on his life, he only engages in empathetic feelings. As contemplation begins to creep into his existence, he begins to question how he has failed to see this connection before ...*

## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will demonstrate how I engaged in reclaiming my Métis identity by completing a beading project. This beading project was an artistic representation of my Master of Education journey in Curriculum Studies and was used to fulfill the requirements for a Capstone Project. This paper explores how engaging in the reflective Capstone Project allowed me to critically analyze my family heritage and experiences to understand the more profound impacts of colonialism on my family. Using a traditional Métis technology and art form allowed me to reclaim a traditional cultural practice that previously existed in my family before the impacts of colonialism.

## **Positionality**

### *Identity*

My positionality as a student of the colonial education system with both Indigenous and European heritage has set me on a course of identity reclamation and a desire to decolonize the education system. On the maternal side of my family, I am white with a mix of French and Polish descent. This side of the family migrated to the Quebec area before finally settling in Saskatchewan. On the paternal side of my family, I am Métis heralding from the Red River Settlement, Manitoba before migrating to Batoche, Saskatchewan. The Métis experience is exceptionally unique in the colonial system as we find ourselves walking the line between oppressed and oppressing identities. I experience this uniqueness daily, however, the introduction of white heritage adds an additional layer of complexity as I understand the privilege that comes with being white passing in both appearance and heritage, while also trying to reclaim the Indigenous heritage that was lost from my ancestors.

It wasn't until my post-secondary experiences that I learned more about my family connection and history. I learned that the different practices that my family engaged in had more traditional knowledge than I understood. I also knew, however, that much was lost due to colonialism. As a graduate student, I began to critically analyze how my family navigated our past. I was able to see that we still had many traditional ties, although they were overshadowed by the sheer vastness of colonialism. I began to see those certain practices my family followed, such as being out on the land, had a far deeper Indigenous connection than the simplistic labels of sport-hunting and acreage-tending that colonialism uses. This energized me to continue my critique of my family's experiences to more truly understand the traditional values that colonialism has suppressed for so long.

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## *Educational Experiences*

Part of the learning and critiquing that I have done has led me to critically reflect on my experiences in the public school sector. I graduated from the Saskatchewan public school system in 2012, having spent the previous thirteen years experiencing and further empowering the colonial powers. The experience I had parallels many Indigenous students' experiences wherein we do not see ourselves reflected in the education experience. As Battiste (2013) notes, "These educational purposes imply a disintegration of the family and culture for the abstraction of the society as defined by a standard curricula, and its defined outcomes and successes as identified as graduation from high school and now some post-secondary school, college, or university." (p. 29). All students in the public education systems are products of forced-colonial influence.

The Saskatchewan curricular guides I was exposed to in my elementary and secondary school experiences were created to perpetuate settler ideologies further. This is first exemplified by the separation of knowledge sources into different subjects that don't overlap. This is a colonial way of thinking where knowledge is labelled, categorized, and experienced in a linear, succession-based system. Students can't learn and experience holistically, much like traditional Indigenous knowledge, which is holistic – some of the subjects that I was forced to take further forced the colonial hegemony less subtly.

Throughout all the courses – math, science, history, English Language Arts – colonialism penetrated the learning and imbued it with hegemonic notions of the purportedly only way to learn. These epistemologies are far from the holistic ways of knowing that Indigenous peoples used precontact, and still value today. As Battiste (2013) states, "The current structure helps preserve class structures and a ruling elite rather than sort out everyone according to their inherent capacities" (p. 29). The critical analysis of my life experiences from a decolonizing standpoint acts to disrupt the current hegemonic ideals that are deeply embedded in our society.

## **Guiding Questions**

Throughout this reflective paper on my Capstone Project, I will be exploring the following questions:

- How has my understanding of my identity been shaped by my beading journey?
- How has the traditional technology of beading helped Indigenous people connect with their heritage?
- How has the process of engaging in my Capstone Project influenced my identity reclamation?

These guiding questions were designed to analyze my personal experiences with my family and heritage to deepen my understanding of my identity.

## **Literature Review**

Indigenous beadwork has long been admired by many and seen as a staple of Indigenous culture. The historical context that situates beadwork in Indigenous cultures across Canada shows the longevity of its presence. Racette (2011) explains how the Indigenous people of

Canada excelled in a variety of arts before the introduction of seed beads in the 1830s as a trading commodity. By the 1850s, beadwork had become a dominant medium for many Indigenous artists across the northern plains. Furthermore, beadwork became a way in which stories of the past have come to light once more, both through the imagery and the methodology behind the beading (Racette, 2011). Although the beadwork became abundantly apparent in Indigenous culture, multiple methods have arisen through the years. As Racette (2011) states, “There are almost as many different ways to bead as there are bead-workers ... Each must find your own way” (p. 5). Regardless of the method and reasoning behind the beading, it is clear that beadwork is still a strong form of technology that connects Indigenous people through a historical context.

Given the traditional nature of Indigenous beadwork, there are many uses of beadwork from artistic expression and storytelling to healing and therapy. Ansloos et al. (2022) conducted a study wherein Indigenous participants’ voices were analyzed through digital and interview processes to discuss the therapeutic healing done by sharing traditional beadwork through digital spaces. They state,

Our analyses demonstrated several contexts for healing such as: beading as a healing tradition; as a socio-emotional and psychological healing practice; as a communal and collective process; as feminist and queer expression; as environmental and land-based relations; as holistic and integrated process of cultural resurgence; as having positive material and economic impact that benefit one’s well-being and safety; and as an act of political resistance (p. 9).

The multitude of ways in which beading as healing was identified parallels the knowledge that many Indigenous people inherently know. For eons, art across the globe has been used as therapy, through informal and unofficial means, and Indigenous beadwork is no exception.

Another piece that Ansloos et al. (2022) identified in their analyses was the use of beading for cultural resurgence. Indigenous people have been turning to traditional beadwork as a way of reclaiming their identity and connecting back to their traditional cultures. As previously mentioned, the historical connection of Indigenous beadwork extends for many generations across Canada. Similarly, Robertson (2018) explains that beading technologies and knowledge are shared generationally, thus connecting the artist to their heritage and ancestors. Additionally, she goes on to explain that beading is representative of the land that the artist comes from and that her analysis of five women artists shows a strong traditional, cultural knowledge that represents the flatland life of Saskatchewan. This phenomenon is again documented as Holfeuer (2024) also analyses the art of Cree artist, Ruth Cuthand, and recognizes the traditional techniques and methods being used. Using traditional methodologies and knowledge, Indigenous artists can connect back to their cultures and heritages that may have been lost through the impacts of colonialism.

### **Capstone Project**

In this section, I will outline my process and takeaways from completing my Capstone Project. As previously mentioned, a Capstone Project is necessary to fulfill the requirements for a course-based Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Curriculum Studies from the University of Saskatchewan. The purpose of this project was to outline the learning journey of students completing their M.Ed. in any format that best suits the learning journey.

Since starting my Master of Education journey, I have focused the choices of classes and research around two general themes: decolonizing education and my Métis identity in the context of education. Upon starting my learning journey to completing my M.Ed., I knew that I wanted to work on learning more about my own culture and traditions that were lost. As such, I decided to learn how to bead in the style of Métis beadwork as there were members of my family who used to practice traditional Métis beadwork, however, colonialism has taken that practice away from my family. Consequently, I began my traditional beadwork journey at the same time in which I started deepening my understanding of the colonial impacts on education.

When tasked with the Capstone Project, I challenged myself to complete a beading representation of my learning throughout my M.Ed. program. This section will expand on these beaded artifacts and analyze their impacts on my own Métis identity.

### Beaded Artifacts



*Image 1: The entirety of my beaded Capstone Project. The entire canvas is approximately 45cm x 30cm.*

Each beaded artifact represented a key learning in the course while still connecting back to my identity reclamation. How this traditional technology guided the design of my Métis identity made the project worthwhile on a holistic level.

#### *The Métis Flag and the Heart*

The first addition to my Capstone Project was a beaded Métis flag (see Image 2), connected to the next piece with a black line. The purpose of this was to represent my current state at the beginning of the Master of Education journey. This flag represents my basic understanding of my heritage with little connection to the deeper meaning behind this heritage. The black line

seen in Image 1 that connects the Métis flag to the next artifact represents the darkness that I lived in regarding my Métis heritage before leading to the next beaded artifact, the heart.

Although it isn't a traditional Indigenous symbol, the beaded heart (see Image 3) represents my intention to discover and reflect on my traditional heritage. It represents the love and passion that I had discovered toward my own lived experience and family history. The lines that follow this piece have shifted from black to the colours/pattern of the Métis sash, thus representing the fact that I was more aware of my identity from this point in my learning journey.



*Image 2: The beaded Métis flag*



*Image 3: The beaded heart*



*Image 4: Métis floral beadwork*

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### *The Métis Flower*

The next artifact is a traditional Métis floral beadwork (see Image 4) that I have created to represent the learning in my first graduate course. The course that I took was titled Decolonizing Education and I was inspired to reconsider every experience I had in a new, decolonizing lens. I chose the traditional floral pattern as it is uniquely Métis, thus demonstrating my desire to learn more about my heritage. Racette (2011) states, “Most (but not all) Métis beadwork is based on floral designs, and there seems to be an unlimited variety of compositions and patterns” (p. 4). Throughout this beaded artifact and my first graduate class, I realized that colonialism truly impacted my family. This realization furthered my desire to connect with my heritage and continue my beading learning journey.

### *The Cree Syllabics*

I chose to bead the next piece as an homage to the importance of language in First Nation and Métis identity. The beaded syllabics (see Image 5) spell out the name of the Cree language, *nehiyawewin*. Language is a fundamental piece of all cultures, and Indigenous people have been using language to recapture identity since the languages were forcibly repressed by the Residential Schools system in Canada. Reflecting on my own family experiences, I realized again that my family had more traditional connections than I first considered. After critically thinking about the languages spoken by the Métis French and European-French sides of my family, I realized that my Métis side of the family spoke more of a Michif dialect than they did pure French. This was never directly identified as I always considered both sides to speak solely French, regardless of Métis heritage. I now realize that this is the colonial regime that influenced my worldview to see the language as nothing more than one of the colonial languages.

### *The Medicine Wheel*

The Medicine Wheel is a longstanding symbol and source of knowledge for Indigenous people. This beaded symbol (see Image 6) stands for the Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that I have become aware of throughout my M.Ed. journey. Kovach (2021) lays out the groundwork for how to properly, respectfully, and adequately research on, and with, Indigenous peoples or lands. She discussed the notions that Indigenous people were historically mistreated in academic research, paralleling the mistreatment in the education sector with the Residential School system. Kovach (2021) also discusses how knowledge is constructed by many sources and the epistemology, ontology, and axiology of Indigenous knowledge are fully holistic.

In my analysis of learning while beading the Medicine Wheel, I realized that there have been many sources of knowledge that make up my identity as well. Some aspects of my paradoxical identity stem from Indigenous knowledge, while others originate from European knowledge. Given the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge, I have ascertained that the multiple sources that make up my identity should be held in an equal light. I have begun my journey by embracing my Indigenous identity and acknowledging my European ancestry.



*The Manitou Stone, Bloody Handprint, and Magpie*

The final three beaded artifacts in my Capstone Project – the Manitou Stone (see Image 7), bloody handprint (see Image 8), and magpie outline (see Image 9) – signify a fundamental learning I experienced throughout my M.Ed. program. Blood et al. (2012) discuss, through three key stories, how acknowledging knowledge sources beyond the hegemony is valid. The Manitou Stone is a story of a meteorite from the Southern Prairies that was appropriated by scientists but was held in high regard by the Indigenous peoples of the area. This story symbolizes intricacies that exist when considering the ownership and acceptance of differing knowledge. The bloody handprint represents a story of a massacre committed on the Blackfoot people of the Southern Prairies. The story exemplifies an extreme example of conflict that arises when a hegemonic worldview refuses to accept others. Finally, the beaded magpie (incomplete) signifies the last story in which magpies are seen as communicators between Indigenous people and the buffalo of the land, while congruently being seen as a pest by the colonial systems (Blood et al., 2012). This story represents how natural phenomena can be observed from differing worldviews, however, there needs to be respect for worldviews in which the phenomena are important.



*Image 5: Cree Syllabics of the word for the Cree language, nehiyawewin*



*Image 6: A beaded representation of the Medicine Wheel*



*Image 7: A beaded representation of the Manitou Stone*





*Image 8: A beaded representation of a bloody handprint*



*Image 9: The outline of a beaded representation of a magpie (incomplete)*

### **Key Takeaways**

Throughout the completion and analysis of my Capstone Project, a few key takeaways have shown through:

- Colonialism can be discreet. I did not fully contemplate the fact that my family could have been influenced by colonialism, having grown up in an affluent community where my needs were always met. The loss of my traditional heritage, however, was an effect of colonialism I had never previously considered.
- Traditional technologies like beadwork can be used for identity reclamation and analysis. I intentionally learned Métis beadwork to reclaim that traditional practice for my family. Throughout the beading process, I critically analyzed my family experiences and history, thereby deepening my understanding of my identity design.
- Traditional Indigenous beadwork is a healing practice. As demonstrated in the literature review, beadwork is healing; additionally, I have personally experienced the mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits of beadwork through this identity reclamation and analysis.

## Conclusion

Traditional beadwork is a fundamental part of Indigenous knowledge and culture. As a Métis educator raised in a predominantly colonial fashion, I have turned to Indigenous beadwork as a method of reclaiming the parts of my Métis heritage that have been lost to colonialism. The therapeutic healing benefits of engaging in Indigenous beadwork have allowed me to gain insight into my life experiences through a traditional lens. To continue disrupting the colonial hegemony, I intend to look at how beading can be used in my classroom with students. Considering the lack of Métis identity I encountered in my education, I hope that the inclusion of beadwork in the classroom may also act as an awakening for Indigenous students who wish to reclaim their lost heritages.

## Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that I am a beginner in my beadwork journey. This journey has been guided by many Indigenous artists through various social media platforms to help create the methodology that I have used.

I acknowledge that generative AI, specifically Chat GPT, was used to write the Key Takeaways section. The takeaways produced by ChatGPT were adapted, revised, and rewritten to match my purpose, aim, and experiences. Grammarly was also used to write this paper to correct grammar, precision, and writing conciseness.

I acknowledge that the images have been edited using Photoshop to adjust lighting and colour so that the individual beads' details are revealed. As such, the colours are not true to the beadwork experienced in person.

Lastly, I acknowledge that the beaded installation still needs to be completed. Given the time constraints of the Capstone Project and the academic calendar, I was unable to complete all beading artifacts fully as I am still an introductory beading artist. As of the date of publication, the project is still incomplete. It is my intention, as an artist, to continue to work on and add to this beaded installation so that it continues to represent my lifelong learning commitments.

## Open Researcher and Contributor ID (ORCID)

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