

Indigenous Takes On Environmentalism: An Interview on the Front Lines of Indigenous Land Defense

Megan Kinch¹ in conversation with Giibwanisi, Anishinaabek Nation²; Kaikakons, Anishinaabek Nation³; Sleeping Grizzly, Haudenosaunee Nation⁴

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Doing an interview with someone who is currently doing a land reclamation meant that the usual email method had to be modified a bit. As Giibwanisi is currently on location at the site, answering my emailed questions would have meant typing out essays on a smartphone. So instead, after a long day chopping wood and doing work, he read my questions to himself and his friends Kaikakons and Sleeping Grizzly, and they answered in the form of a conversation by the fire. The Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp is a land occupation and cultural revitalization project: the Anishinaabek Confederacy To Invoke Our Nationhood (ACTION). What follows, is a shortened and condensed version of their discussion.

DISCUSSION

Megan Kinch (MK): Mainstream environmentalism has been hopelessly sidetracked into greenwashing, environmental capitalism and tokenistic gestures. When even David Suzuki is writing essays about the failure of environmentalism, we know that something has gone wrong. People

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- 1 Megan Kinch is a journalist and activist in Toronto with the Toronto Media Co-op and Basics Community News Service.
 - 2 Giibwanisi, Bear Clan of the Anishinaabek Nation, and is a co-founder of the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp and ACTION.
 - 3 Kaikakons, Loon Clan of the Anishinaabek Nation, is also a co-founder of the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp and ACTION.
 - 4 Sleeping Grizzly, Bear Clan of the Haudenosaunee Nation and a member of the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp.

affiliated with “environmental justice” movements in Canada have been trying to address previous shortcomings by putting solidarity with indigenous people at the forefront, but it hasn’t gathered the kind of support that mainstream environmentalism used to enjoy, nor has it been able to define what exactly that solidarity means. Do you see your struggle as relating to environmentalism? Is there an “environmental movement” that you feel could support struggles like yours? Or does a new movement have to be built from the ground up?



Kaikaikon: If you want to call our struggle “environmentalism” yes, sure, but at the same time we are much more than that. It’s a spiritual struggle, it’s a political struggle. [Our struggle is] a different kind, we have a way of life. Its environmentalism, its spiritualism, its matriarchy. Environmentalism is just one aspect of it. We are so much more. Its [limiting it to just environmentalism is] kind of like bastardizing who we are.

Giibwanasi: To answer that question I think you have to look at the medicine wheel and you have to look at the physical, the emotional, the mental, the spiritual. The land, the air, the fire, the water. It is all one. One and the same. We cannot look at it as just one aspect of, one category...

Kaikaikon: Its not under one genre or ideology of struggle or fight, you can’t categorize our fight as Anishinaabe liberation movement and resistance. Even the Annishinaabek indigenous resistance movement where there’s our people who have security culture and I guess warrior-ism, for lack of a better word, what we’re doing is trying to achieve every aspect of who we once were and trying to bridge the gap with trying to live in this society with using the technology of everybody who is in that medicine wheel. When you go back and classify our individual struggle as environmentalism, then we got to say no. People have their own definition of ‘environmentalism’. Greenpeace has their own view of environmentalism, and they are against seal hunts, which is people’s traditional diet and right to feed themselves from the land. If you want to start utilizing who you are, there are some things our allies may not agree with. Hunting, trapping. And that’s not, in their eyes, environmentalism (laughs).

Sleeping Grizzly: It is not really environmentalism, it's more of us living with the land with what the land provides. But don't take from the land more than you need. When you take from the land you have to make sure that what you're taking, like when we want firewood or we want to build a box or a canoe or something we're going to take from the dead. We'll only take from the living when we need to build something with structure, something that can dry over time and provide a lot of strength. Something we can manipulate to the way that we need, but not take more than we need, just take what we need.

Giibwanasi: I have not seen an environmental movement that could support struggles like us because, as we said before, there are so many different genres of environmental "activism", whether its fracking or tar sands or pipeline or nuclear or 'save the water' or 'save the trees' or 'save the air' or anything like that. There is not a single organization that I have seen that encompasses it all. So if you want to consider Anishinaabekism or Haudenosaunee-ism who stands against all of these things then I think that maybe if there is one of those things out there maybe, I don't know, I have not seen it. "Idle no More" seems to be about the water and some of Bill C-38 and Bill C-45 but at the same time they have their own view of liberation and they're very exclusive. So a lot of the times we were not included into their liberation agenda. Because at one time they were adamantly and vehemently opposed to blockades and land reclamations and they distanced themselves from them.

Sleeping Grizzly: There is a group down in Kansas City right now that are living off of 180 acres, they are planning to build and right now gathering supplies to...live off the land and what they can grow and gather themselves.

Kaikaikon: Look at the different camps, like the Unist'ot'en camp and all these similar actions who are living off the land. Under the definition of what an "environmentalist" is I'm not too sure if it is, or is not, other indigenous nations (laughs).

Giibwanasi: Ya, I think I'd have to agree with the Unist'ot'en...

Kaikaikon: Because, first, under our teachings it says we have to concentrate on the South, the family, community, nation, the people of our Turtle Island, our continent. Then we start making alliances with these

other folks. And I think our ideas and teachings can really benefit this person whose asking these questions, but they could learn a lot from our people. Even, all these questions, if they have some humility that they can adapt and just observe. Because our people have been observing for thousands of years and survived, we're still surviving. They can just observe from the people who've been here first and lived through a lot. A lot of environmental disruptions and we're still here surviving.

MK: Your occupation at Oshkimaadiziig Unity Camp is on the site of a Council Fire. It's been an ongoing debate on the left as to how different peoples should relate to each other in struggle. Some would argue that everyone should be in the same organizations and struggle on a class basis, others that nationally oppressed peoples need their own separate organizations which should relate to others. Today, there is also the theory that settler organizers need to 'take direction' from native organizers, but this is more useful as a guideline for settlers participating in native struggles rather than as a directive for social movements as a whole. What do you think should be the organizing relationships between native and non-native people?

Kaikaikon: [In] my own opinion, what we're trying to achieve here is we're trying to create a confederacy, we're trying to rebuild our confederacy. We had alliances with other indigenous nations like the Haudenosaunee and the Cree and the Wendat, so we're trying to build or own, reassert our own laws, our trade alliances and through that came the two-row [wampam]. And the settler society, we have an agreement with them we're trying to uphold here. I don't want to sound racist (laughs), I have to be careful about how I answer this. But our nations have been dealing with Euro-centric people for too damn long. And we need to start any kind of agreement. It comes to a point [where] we need to drop out of these treaties and even the 1764 Niagara covenant chain belt and reestablish something new [with] the other people who are oppressed from all over the world, something has to come representative of the 1764 Niagara chain covenant belt, but something that is more representative of the minorities and the oppressed people. And when the question is asked "non-native people' you have to ask "what non-native people'. I think we have to have an equal relationship but it has to be with people of struggle who come from other nations. And they have to maybe start a new government.



Giibwanasi: So what should be the organizing relationship?

Kaikaikon: Until that happens all lands come back to us! (chuckles) We can establish zones like their cities and shit where they can remain but we're still the landlords. This is kind of radical but those people they need to overthrow their friggen governments. But we need to work with these people whoever are out there to overthrow the governments and the police and the military which is a damn hard thing to do, but we need to do that. And reestablishing our governance, our agreements, our relationships. And that I believe is the other minorities who come here. They don't even know the relationship that exists and I think we'd find common ground to unite stronger.

Giibwanasi: Going back to the two-row wampum, it says that we're not supposed to steer each other's boats. But the way that I perceive things is that the canoes have been hijacked and is actually aboard the settler ship. And we are basically trying to live our canoe way of life on top of that settler ship. So, saying that I'm not supposed to steer the settler ship. Well you know what, my fucking canoe is sitting in that fucking settler ship. So national liberation for native people and organizing is like saying, you know what, I don't want to tell you how to run your own fucking ship but you're ship and the people that run it, the captains, they are not listening to the workers or to whoever, the deckhands and whatnot. So I guess the way to answer that question is, if you are not actively trying to overthrow the captain, then I think that maybe its time that we are in a position to say, you know what, in order to save humanity, to save ourselves, save Turtle Island, that ya, I think at some point, because the original agreements have been so intertwined and entangled, that I think at times that native people are, do have to be in a position to tell non-native people what to do.

Kaikaikon: We were just talking about this last night. And I was thinking about this all day to how to write this because its been on my mind for a while, because it needs to be said without hurting peoples

feelings. Because it needs to be said and it needs to be brought out amongst our brothers and sisters out there who are working with these activists in the different organizations. We've been colonized for so long, that some of us, even on the front line struggles and even back at home in our communities have developed a kind of syndrome that we're kind of, all these fears and intimidations and feeling inferior to white people, is something that is internal and we're dealing with. So when we're working with these people how they come and 'help' there's little subtle ways and different ways that they make our people feel inferior. Me, I feel like I'm kind of like, were dependent on their help. So no matter how they're trying to help, its funny but, they're still the colonists, the white people are the colonists. Because they're helping to "decolonize," but that word "colonize" is still in there. They are 'decolonizing," so they're still the Indian agents running around trying to do what's best for Indians. Because they're' the ones who think they know it all so they're helping us. Even by answering these questions, even though we use the English language and their ideology we're using everything that's theirs. Even their Marxism. Somewhere there's our own war chiefs and our own ideas that answers these questions and that we should be using. We're still finding out ourselves, but we need to utilize other peoples, the revolutionary schools of thought, I guess, Marxism?

MK: Do you think that that their agreements such as the dish with one spoon and the two-row wampum are relevant here? Do they apply to the state or do they apply to peoples including western revolutionaries?

Kaikaikon: What we're trying to accomplish here is to rebuild ourselves and rebuild our alliances with other indigenous nations. Our responsibility is to our people first and to our communities and our families. So it applies to the state and it applies to them. Because what you said, we can't answer that, its up to them. Its up to these newcomers to settle that and fight amongst themselves on that. Because we have our own fight to do trying to be with our people who are trying to speak and represent us, who are going against these original agreements, so we're trying to liberate ourselves from what they're doing to us, what our chief-and-council and these peoples are doing. So we're trying to liberate ourselves so we gotta work together with our common allies to remove this shit in our own communities. So it is relevant.

Giibwanasi: Personally, I think that the two-row, the two relationships between settlers and native people that the two row is, is relevant because of the entire context ... its fundamental principles. And the fundamental principals is the relationship, from an indigenous perspective, with the two-row wampum with everything. With the creator, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the two leggeds, the four leggeds, the wingeds, the crawleds, the ones that go in the water, and I think that, ya, the founding principles of the two-row wampum, we could use those things. But at the same time, the two-row wampum was never entered into the one good mind from the settlers point of view. They did not use their one good mind to make this relationship. I think it can be applied if people come with that one good mind and they want to work together, I think that can be. But also understanding the two-row wampum with the settlers, that was made with mostly white people. And now we find that we live in a society out there where there are many people of many different colours.

And if we go back to that settler ship there is class division on that settler ship. There is the captain, there was his lieutenants, there was the deckhands. There was indentured servants, and there were slaves stuffed in the back, stuffed in the bottom of those ships. So I think that the two-row wampum has to be inclusive of the other nations that are here. And I truly believe that had our people known that there were slaves stuffed into the bottom of those ships I truly believe that we probably never would have entered into those agreements, knowing how they treat other humans. Because if we were to look and see those slaves, how could someone enter into one good mind with that?

Kaikaikon: The one dish one spoon is an agreement between indigenous nations that others right to live on a territory without interfering with each others right to eat. And to provide from those resources.

Gibwanasi: So basically you could apply that to organization kind of?

Kaikaikon: Right, yes definitely.

MK: To what extent do you find western philosophies of struggle – things like Marxism, anarchism, social democracy – to be useful to you? I've seen you identify capitalism as a central force to struggle against, in addition to colonialism, does western analysis like Marxism help in understanding those forces? What are the limits of these philosophies for your struggle?

Giibwanasi: From my own perspective, I have to be open-minded to everything, to all sorts of struggles including those mentioned above. But there are things that are useful and there are things that are not useful. I don't ascribe to anarchism because I do not believe in disorganization. I like some of the things that are said about Marxism, especially the scientific approach to understanding economy, political science, and all of that. But, at the same time, there are a lot of things that I do not agree with Marxism. Such as, they often omit two parts of the medicine wheel. Marxism focuses on specifically ideology which is the mental, and probably the physical, like taking physical action of revolution. But they omit the emotional and the spiritual context of how we think and operate.