



Original Article

PKWENEZIGE (SMUDGING CEREMONY): A FIRST NATION RIGHT TO CEREMONY

Amy Shawanda¹

^a *Professor, Department of Indigenous Studies, University of Toronto, Amy.shawanda@utoronto.ca*

ABSTRACT

In this article, the information regarding the Pkwenezige (Smudging Ceremony) and sharing the information about Pkwenezige and why it is important for Indigenous Peoples to have access to it. Sage, either by itself or in combination with other medicinal plants, is burned during the ceremony, causing an aromatic smoke to be produced. Sage may be used alone or in combination with other medicinal plants. This article will provide policy considerations and collaboration with Indigenous communities on smudging policies and protocols. The purpose of this is to assist those who are developing policies concerning the use of Pkwenezige. This article shares considerations from Indigenous terminology, addressing ventilation systems, fees for Knowledge Holders, Traditional Medicines, to Accessibility.

Keywords: *Anishinaabe, Smudging Ceremony, Indigenous ceremony, healing practices, Indigenous Rights*

¹ I am Anishinaabe (Odawa) kwe (woman) from Wikwemikong Unceded Territory. I was born and raised within my community on Manitoulin Island. Both sides of my family stem back generations within Wikwemikong. I was raised with language, teachings, stories, and have lived experiences as an Anishinaabekwe. In addition, I have been residing in urban spaces away from my community, where I have learned many teachings throughout Anishinaabe territory. When I share my experiences, they are mine and mine alone. When I talk about my interpretations, they are my ideologies and sometimes others may have the same reflections and others may not. I may share common threads of traumas, oppression, and marginalization that our Nations experience. Additionally, I do celebrate the strengths of our resiliency, pride, and love for our Nations. Therefore, I do not speak for all Anishinaabek or Indigenous Peoples. I share my knowledge in the way I have interpreted Anishinaabe Knowledge and Teachings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pkwenezige has many names: Smudging Ceremony, Smudge, Sage Ceremony and Sage-ing. It also has traditional names: Kwenizige – Smudging Ceremony, Nookwez – Smudge medicinally etc. It is important to know that many First Nations/Indigenous People² engage in this ceremony, however, it is not a homogenous practice. Edward Benton-Benai-baa³ (2010) states

No one way is better than another. I have heard my grandfathers say that there are many roads to the High Place. We need to support each other by respecting and honouring the “many roads” of all tribes. The teachings of one tribe will shed light on those of another. (p. 4)

Although we are diverse in Nations, we incorporate different *Ways of Doing* according to our teachings. The Anishinaabe may go clockwise while smudging, while the Haudenosaunee may go counter-clockwise – if they engage in Smudging practices at all. When using the term Indigenous, it tends to generally encapsulate not only First Nations, but Inuit and Metis as well. However, both Inuit and Metis do not traditionally practice the Smudging Ceremony and to my knowledge have no historical references of doing so. It is important to not pan-Indigenize our cultures as we are distinct in what we do and how we engage in our traditional customs. It is crucial to engage with any First Nation Inuit and community members for what practice they would like so your institutional space accommodates their needs. Indigenous communities are diverse and our needs will differ from coast to coast to coast.

Pkwenezige can be utilized by everyone, as long as it is respectful of the culture and traditions of Indigenous Peoples. It is a way for non-Indigenous people to learn about our cultural practices. Often this ceremony is usually used as an introduction to Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing. Like many of our Teachings, this ceremony is optional and voluntary. If one does not wish to participate or clashes with their worldview, one can always decline to join.

Pkwenezige is what the Anishinaabe use to ground themselves. The moment when the medicines are lit and the aroma fills the space, it becomes the moment we connect, reflect, and centre our Spirits. Richard Wagamese-baa (2019) elaborates,

² The Original Peoples that reside on in North America. Our Anishinaabek Nation extends into the United States and we share similar practices of those residing south of our Canadian border.

³ The term -baa is used to refer to someone who has passed onto the Spirit World and joined the Ancestors. The hyphenated term is to refer to someone as permanently sleeping.

Medicine burns when touched by fire. The smoke curls and spirals upward, plumes of it rising, swirling, pushing themselves in ribbons higher and higher until the smell of it becomes the ancient aroma of blessing, teaching, and communion. Within its fragrant cloud you can feel peace descend upon you. There is Spirit here. You can feel it if you allow it and that is the heart of the Teaching – the Allowing. (p. 15)

The medicines that are lit create a sacred ambiance. A space that welcomes and invites the Ancestors to connect the realms of our physical space and the space that they reside in (Shawanda, 2017). This is the space that prayers can be heard, where stories can be accessed, information can be provided, and where healing can take place.

Pkwenezige has many teachings to different Nations and it makes use of a wide range of regionally specific plants. Medicines can be lit by themselves; be put into a smudge stick; within an abalone shell; a small fire-resistant bowl, or can be accessed in a liquid form (Shawanda, 2017). Smudging enables non-Indigenous schools, organizations, and institutions to conduct ceremonies on-site. All that is required is an open window, the installation of a fire-safe ventilation systems, or fire extinguisher nearby (Shawanda, 2017). This ritual is one of the most adaptable and versatile of all ceremonies because it can be used in both simple and complex ways (Shawanda, 2017). One does not need to be immersed in Indigenous traditions or have spent years working with Indigenous People to understand the underlying teachings to appreciate the significance of Pkwenezige (Shawanda, 2017). Sage sticks, for instance, have been popularized by non-Indigenous People because it has been featured in television shows, websites, and films. Non-Indigenous People can purchase sage sticks from online stores to health food stores. Although, this has caused the over-harvesting of various sage plants (Cannon, 2022; Mejia, 2023). Furthermore, the sage ceremony is commonly categorized by western sciences as "New-Age" practices, which take a metaphysical stance towards health, healing, and health-promoting rituals (Mejia, 2023). Since the Smudging Ceremony has familiar to mainstream markets this article sets assists individuals that want to learn about the Pkwenezige and implementing the Smudging Ceremony practices and protocols into their workplace for Indigenous Peoples. Lastly, it will provide guidance for western practitioners to be proactive in facilitating Indigenous customs and ceremonies that are dignified and engage with their ceremony within a reasonable time frame. For example, Indigenous Peoples should not have to schedule a Smudging time or be placed outside to access their rights to ceremony.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE ISSUE

This article is written to build upon and strengthen previous graduate work on *An Examination of the Integration Processes of Anishinaabe Smudging Ceremonies in Northeastern Ontario Health Care Facilities* (Shawanda, 2017) and personal experiences with healthcare institutions to find that there is still work to do. There are many institutions that have been slowly incorporating the Smudging Ceremony into their buildings to be inclusive, extending from medicine and education to courthouses across Canada (Alberta Health Services, 2023; McMaster, n.d.; Provincial Court of Canada, 2023; Rudin, 2018). Individuals may observe the Smudging Ceremony while learning about the Ceremony's practices and protocols, or they may just participate as there is no wrong method to Pkwenezige as long as they are respectful (Shawanda, 2017). Some ceremonies like the Naming Ceremony, Vision Quest, the Marriage Ceremony, the Berry Fast, the Sun Dance, the Rain Dance, the Full Moon, and the Sweat Lodge Ceremony, to name a few, may require an entire year of preparation in various capacities, whereas others may require only a few days (Shawanda, 2017). Pkwenezige is one of the few traditions that allows a community to support and incorporate traditional First Nation practices. There are ceremonies, which can have strict requirements and require extensive planning. The Smudging Ceremony does not require a complex set of regulations (Shawanda, 2017). Therefore, Pkwenezige policies are in place at a particular facility will have varying standards; a single person may visit multiple facilities and have a variety of encounters (Shawanda, 2017). For example, someone may find it offensive that the closed room is unavailable, while some may prefer to turn off the fan while igniting their medications because the fan removes the essence of the smoke from the air. Then accessibility such as entrance into a Smudging Space or certain medicines may not be available because they are stored in a different room, or perhaps there is limited access to Traditional Medicines because of the season (Shawanda, 2017). There are also storage issues, that could spoil the medicines where they become wet or mold grows on the plants. Mejia (2023) explains that Sage "is seen as a gift from the earth, and thus must be respected and honoured before, during, and after use" (para. 10). Therefore, it is important to learn about the Smudging practices from gathering, drying, storing, and preparing the medicines for ceremony use.

One of the Traditional Knowledge Holders have shared: All plant medicines are sacred, but not all plants can be used for Pkwenezige (Shawanda, 2017). This is because there are teachings that go with these medicines. The phrase "not all plants can be used for the Smudging Ceremony" because the grounding, healing, and cleansing properties are not the same in all plant medicines. For example, this can be compared to acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Where certain plants have specific healing properties. Additionally, Anishinaabek make reference to "trickster plants" – resembles a plant medicine but does not have any healing properties, could harm a person. This is why it is important to work with Indigenous People who have this specialized Traditional Plant Knowledge. Moreover, each region had unique tobacco, cedar, and sage species flourishing within

its territory. As Indigenous Nations are reclaiming Traditional practices, we began cultivating certain plants as part of the "Four Sacred" classification of medicines without acknowledging that the plant species varied across regions. The four common medicines used within Pkwenezige are Sage, Tobacco, Sweetgrass, and Cedar. Sometimes lavender is added for its calming properties or Pine is used if Cedar is unavailable. Each plant has its own teaching and medicinal powers. I will briefly share the Anishinaabek origin stories of the four commonly used medicines for Smudging, which cover why they are used.

I will begin with Sweetgrass, Tobacco, Cedar, and Sage. Benton-Banai-baa (2010) shares that Sweetgrass was one of the Anishinaabek first medicines to grow in our territory. It was a gift given by Gzhe-Mnidoo (Great Spirit) and Nanaboozhoo helped us identify it as a medicine for the Anishinaabek to use. It is highly regarded because of its many teachings from strength, resiliency, community, and the hair of Mother Earth. It provides a feminine energy and has teachings around soft and gentleness. Johnston (1976, 1987) shares that tobacco came to the Anishinaabek from the Animikiig (Thunderbirds). The Anishinaabek were entering sacred spaces and did not ask for permission. The Animikiig and Nanaboozhoo were part of creating the tobacco offering protocol for the Ancestors (Benton-Banai, 2010; Johnston 1976, 1987). There are many origin stories of tobacco but the teachings remain the same that it is what we offer for a reciprocal relationship, our 9-1-1 call to the Creator, and when we need to amplify our prayers (Shawanda, 2017). Genuisz (2009) shares that the Cedar tree was a gift from the clan animals because the Anishinaabek had lost their way. Mkwa (Bear) and Ngig (Otter) shared how to use the medicine in times of need. Shawanda (2017) also revealed that the Thunderbird gave the Anishinaabek the Cedar and when it crackles it is calling the Ancestors for assistance. The healing properties of Cedar is that it purifies, cleanses, and restores our heart, mind, body, and spirit. Benton-Banai-baa (2010) and Johnston (1976, 1987) share their interpretation of Maskodewashk (Sage). My knowledge Holders have shared with me that it is a gift from the Prairies and in some stories, it was Nanaboozhoo who had a dream about a plant that grew amongst the tall grass that looked like it was on fire. The Sage uses are it clears bacteria from the air, many types of sages, and sage aligns and balances spaces, places, and items (Shawanda, 2017).

I have used previously published Anishinaabek stories. There are other sacred stories around these medicines, but not everything is meant for the academy. Also consider that each Nation will have their own version of how medicines, plants, trees, animals, and land formations came to be. There are many origin stories and are all equally valid. Please seek out Knowledge Holders to further get the teachings and do not forget to offer tobacco when requesting Sacred Knowledge. Each Nation uses different medicines in Pkwenezige and there is no right and wrong way to Smudge but rather there is a preference of medicines as each Nation does not have access to each of these.

III. HISTORY OF SMUDGING

Early traditional societies depended on plants' healing properties and used them as medical treatments (Mohagheghzadeh et al., 2006). Since the discovery of fire, many cultures all over the world have kept the practice of burning fragrant plants in religious and ceremonial settings (McGoverne, 2016). For instance, first materials used to start a fire in ancient cultures included twigs, plants, leaves, bark, and other pieces of foliage and trees (Shawanda, 2017). These materials wafted a variety of aromatic odors into the air and filled the area around them with scent. (Bower, 2022). Myrrh and frankincense were the first medicinal substances to be recorded as being burned, and this practice was common in Ancient Egypt (Mohagheghzadeh et al., 2006; Shawanda, 2017). Regions like Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, Australia, the Pacific Island, and so on all have been recorded as having used incense in sacred ceremonies at some point in history.

In the Anishinaabe teachings, Pkwenezige follows the Elders' or Knowledge Holders' presentation of their teachings on various traditional practices. For example, before the Smudging Ceremony occurs, the Teachings are shared about why we smudge, what is the purpose, the spiritual significance, and how to Smudge effectively, which can change significantly depending on their Teachings (Shawanda, 2017). The scent is the first indicator that Pkwenezige is taking place, Indigenous People are often aware that they are entering a sacred space, surrounded by a positive or healing environment, or individuals are receiving spiritual healing (Shawanda, 2017). The physiological and psychological effects of fragrances are distinct from one another, despite they frequently occur simultaneously (Shawanda, 2017). The aromas of Pkwenezige have calming effects on the body, mind, and spirit (Hongratanaworakit, 2004). A significant number of individuals who have taken part in a Smudging Ceremony have reported that the aroma of natural remedies being burned not only has a calming effect but also gives off a sense of sacredness after the teachings have been conveyed (Shawanda, 2017).

My community knowledge on Sage is that it is usually used in larger groups because it does not single out against women who use it, for two reasons. The first is that women are discouraged from touching medicines when they Smudge because they are thought to be close to the Creator due to their ability to give life. The second is that women are especially powerful during their menstrual periods and because of this, women are known to neutralize the healing properties of medicines during their menstruation cycles. The sage has been known to perform powerful purification and grounding capabilities.

IV. AN INDIGENOUS RIGHT TO CEREMONY

It is evident that Indigenous Nations had their own distinct ways of doing ceremonies. Many adopted and adapted other people's ceremonies. Pkwenezige was used quite often by the

Anishinaabek in the pre-contact era. However, once the arrival of Europeans there was a shift in attitudes towards the Anishinaabek which resulted in targeted policies that were deliberate and violent towards Indigenous Populations. In Figure 1. Historical Timeline demonstrates how ceremonies were impacted because of creeds, policies, and laws. Also, this timeline provides the advocacy that ignited reports that outline the ongoing racism and proposed recommendations to diminish racism and discrimination.

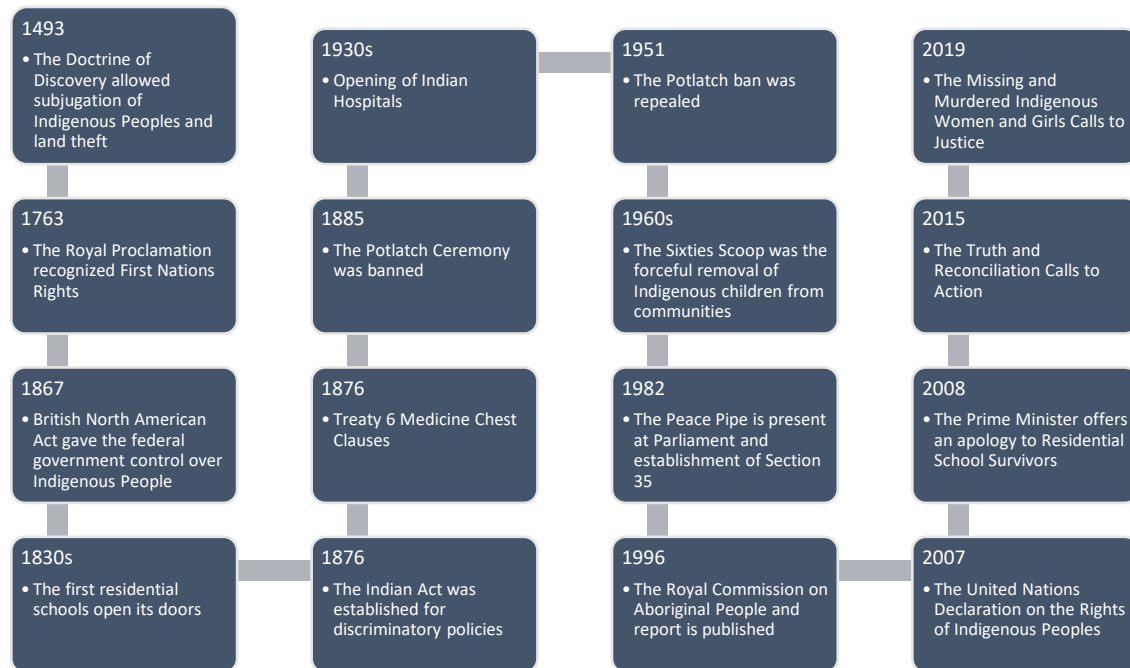


Figure 1. Historical Timeline

Note. In this figure, these are the notable points in history that impacted Indigenous Rights to ceremonies. There are other comprehensive timelines created that outline the Indigenous history, and encourage readers to explore the timelines further.

Indigenous Peoples have endured historical and ongoing oppression of cultures, traditions, and practices. In this section I provide an outline of recommendations to incorporate the Pkwenezige and other Ceremonies uses laws, policies, Calls to Action, and Calls to Justice to ensure Indigenous Peoples have the Right to Ceremonies within western spaces:

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2023) Codes states,

The smudging ceremony is a common purification rite performed in Ontario that involves burning one or more sacred medicines, such as sweetgrass, sage, cedar and tobacco. There are many variations on how a smudge is done. The OHRC heard that people often faced barriers when seeking to smudge. This was often due to a lack of clear protocols and inclusive design measures to facilitate the practice in a timely and appropriate way. (Ceremonial Practices and Customs, para. 3)

The Federal Government shares the Constitutional Right and Section 35 where the OHRC further explains the existing Indigenous and Treaty Rights of the Indigenous Peoples where they are recognized and affirmed.

Section 25 of the *Charter* and section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* recognize and affirm the constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This includes but is not limited to enforcing treaties and Aboriginal land titles, and the right to preserve traditional cultural practices and activities such as fishing, logging, hunting and other customary and sacred traditions. (Charter and Constitution Act, para. 1)

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) explains that

Article 12: Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains. (p. 12)

Furthermore, the Truth and Reconciliation Calls (TRC) to Action (2015) positions the Call to Action:

Call to Action 48.2. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. (p. 5)

As a final point, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Calls to Justice continues

Calls to Justice 3.1 We call upon all governments to ensure that the rights to health and wellness of Indigenous Peoples, and specifically of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people, are recognized and protected on an equitable basis. (p. 180)

Given the many advocates in Health and Justice to allow for accessibility and accommodation for the Right to Ceremonies within these spaces. When creating the Smudging Ceremony policy it should allow for flexibility, otherwise it is not an authentic action rather it “reinforce[s] colonial hierarchies and serve to condescend the interests of Indigenous peoples” (Gansworth, 2022, p. 65). The ORHC, TRC, and MMIWG all call upon the governments to allow for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Rights to ceremonies be upheld. Indigenous People are aware that there are individuals who may have health issues and may need to opt out of this ceremony. With that said, all of our ceremonies are optional and anyone can opt out and observe.

V. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

There have been many policies written on Pkwenezige which have been created since I completed this research. Often, I am approached to share my knowledge on wise practices in the Smudging Ceremony spaces. Each institution or space is unique. It should have a consultation with its community members, Indigenous Advisory Committee, or local First Nation Health Centre. Here are some starting points for policies to identify potential barriers, identifying limitations, cultural competency, and cultural safety:

Terminology

- How are you defining the Pkwenezige?
- What Medicines are being used? How are you defining Elders/Knowledge Holders, etc.

Community consultation

- Was there meaningful consultation with local First Nation communities and urban communities for the Smudging room and/or policies?

Room Requirements

- Is there a dedicated space or can smudging be anywhere?
- Do Indigenous clients/patients/students have to go outside to access this ceremony? If so, do they have a shelter in place to protect them from the elements?

- What happens if that space is not available?

Ventilation systems

- How are the rooms ventilated?
- Is there a need for a fan? Open windows?
- Do they need to be? Is it possible to allow the smoke to linger in the room?

Visual information about Smudging

- Is information found in on every floor, various rooms, hallways, and on the webpage?

Accessibility

- Is it possible to be open 24 hours or open during facility operating hours?
- Who do patient/client contact if they do not have access to room or medicines?

Cultural Safety

- Are ALL the staff trained to do the smudging ceremony?
- Are new hires immediately informed about the Smudging Ceremony?
- Do they know where and how to store the medicines?

Handling medicines

- Do the non-Indigenous People know how to handle the medicines respectfully?
- Are they familiar with handling a fire extinguisher in case of an accidental fire?
- Will there be a person designated to handle all medicines or will you give out medicine bundles (a small bundle includes the four medicines with matches and a hard fire resistance surface, liquid smudge, or ask their preference)?

Competing Rights

- What are the procedures if someone is allergic to one of the medicines? Are you prepared if someone has an allergic reaction?
- What are the protocols if someone is unaware of their allergy and has a severe reaction to the medicines?

Knowledge Holder fees

- How are you paying them for their time to teach about this ceremony or in consultation for policies on the Smudging Ceremony?
- How are you providing transportation for them – if it is required?
- Are there on-site Traditional Holders to assist with ceremony for families that may require their support?

Medicines

- What types of medicines are used (loose, bundled, liquid)?
- How are the medicines stored and cared for?
- Who replenishes the medicines?

Liquid Smudging

- What is the alternative in case those that are allergic or sensitive to the smoke?
- Are you collaborating with an Indigenous organization or First Nation to create portable

liquid Smudge bottles or will you be purchasing these from a local First Nation retailer to have them readily available?

This list is by any no means exhaustive. These are starting points for conversations or consultations to have with an Indigenous advisory group. It is best to ask the Indigenous community that you interact with to see if they would benefit from having the accessibility for Pkwenezige within the non-Indigenous space.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Pkwenezige policies should be revised and updated bi-annually to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the Indigenous populations that they serve because our cultural needs continue to evolve. However, the employees within each of these spaces should learn about the Pkwenezige from the traditional teachings and the stories of the medicines. This includes personnel from custodians, security, assistants, educators, principals, councillors, human resources administrators, managers, directors, executives, and other all associates. This will assist in reducing marginalization of those who want to engage and perform the ceremony and will also contribute to cultural safe spaces.

For individuals seeking Pkwenezige, it is best to offer the medicines as liquid Smudge bottles. If your institution is low on a certain medicine, Sage is your safest option to offer individuals. Please note, that our medicines – specifically Sage and abalone shells – are being over-harvested (Cannon, 2022; Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2020). To minimize this, it may be a wise practice to designate someone or a group within the establishment to plant and harvest a traditional medicines garden. Also, to detract from overharvesting, do not purchase medicines in non-Indigenous stores and sites. When doing so this is engaging in cultural appropriation of our medicines. We are encouraging those to stay away from the predatory commercial industry that impacts our Traditional Rights and our Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing. Approach and consult with the local First Nations community, Indigenous community members, an Indigenous Advisory group, or Indigenous consultant, if it is appropriate to do so.

A notion I often struggle with is whether our traditional medicines, teachings and ceremonies should be held within Western spaces. However, as more Indigenous Peoples make their way into these spaces, we travel the fine line between what we want and need in these spaces to decolonize and Indigenize Western spaces. Although Pkwenezige has made its way into many Western spaces, there is still room to add this ceremony and revise policies as our cultures are evolving. Indigenous traditions and practices have always advanced our methods of Being, Doing, and Knowing. This is why we are still living and breathing today.

Pkwenezige can be overwhelming for non-Indigenous People and that is okay. Personally, I do not expect non-Indigenous Peoples to know everything, but rather I hope you to make an effort to learn and continue that learning journey to reduce the harms that are ongoing within the Canadian State and to Indigenous Peoples. This is a small step in the right direction and by keeping your intentions authentic is to be in better relations with Indigenous Peoples, animals, plants, Mother Earth and the Cosmos.

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