

George Kanipitetew, Nêhiyawak Elder, Onion Lake Cree Nation

I come from Onion Lake, my name is George Kanipitetew.
My late father would take me all over the place to tell stories.
I would hear him many years ago, when people helped raise each other -
how people were put upon this world throughout and how it was.
You want to hear about how people were selected to be a Chief.
People were scattered throughout. There was a Chief amongst them.
How was the Chief selected? The person did many things - if he went on war parties,
There were many things, life. How the person lived his life -
That is the kind of person that was selected to become Chief.
A person who took care of the people. This person accomplished many things.
That's how a person was selected. Just like today we call that person the Chief -
that person is supposed to be called Chief. That's how we know the person.
The way he continues to do things, the person tries to help his people.
That's how we select the person. That is the same as it was done long time ago.
A person had a helper, a village crier. When something was going to happen with the people,
that village crier would go around the village and announce the Chief wants your audience.
That was our way a long time ago. This is how our forefathers lived a long time ago.
If the Chief wanted to do something, it wasn't all his/her decision to make.
Here, too, he/she would call the people together, see what their thoughts were,
or what the people's preference was. That is something the person did, too.
There was this old lady - the way she had it made, she was alone.
The way the old people were, there was one lead elderly lady.
She was the one who advised the young ladies. She taught them everything.
Even her fellow ladies, she was given great respect. In many ways the elderly lady was involved.
Even in the process of fixing medicine, she took the lead role. She prayed for everyone -
the women, the young ladies, and the children. That is why we still have a lead elderly lady.
She is at Chicken Dances, at Sundances. She sits in the Grandmother Spirit seat,
because the Grandmother Spirit is important. This is how this elderly lady was used.
Never a young lady, it's always an elderly lady. She was the one who told young people many things.
When young ladies came of age, the elderly lady spent time with them away from the camp.
The elderly lady would not allow the young ladies amongst the people during their [moon] time,
During this time, the young ladies lives were highly respected. That's why it was done.
More often, up to the recent times, things have greatly changed.
We see the change where we are at, things are changing a lot.
About sixty years ago or more, when I was a boy, I went with elders everywhere -
to hunt, to look for food. Or when they gathered, I would go and listen.
These elders had good words/wisdom. They thought of young people.
They were preparing them, trying to teach them how to interact with each other.
They (elders) would use kindness to each other. That is what they used, the only thing.
In the future, that is going to take you far. That's what was said when they (Elders) gathered.
There were times when people relied on elders, with tobacco, to speak to their sons -
to have good thoughts into the future. That's what elders worked on with the youth.
They would speak to young people, so in their future they will have good advice to use.
They (elders) put foremost - to get along and to be kind to each other.
To be resentful to others has no purpose, the elders had said. I heard them say these words.
Even when something was happening, like a Sundance, the elders would get up and speak,
talk about hard times in the future, and people would see these times. Old people said this.

Something is going to distract young people. It's going to be a bad thing.
The person we call a Whiteman is going to bring this evil - something to distract young people.
That is what's happening today. I see it. But further into the future it's going to get harder.
You're going to see young people struggling, but we have to turn to our elders.
In the past, when I was ready to become a young man, what elders did with us was bring us to ceremonial lodges with parents, and listen to elders.
My dad made us listen to elders. Several took turns standing up to speak to us.
True, I worked for elders when I was a young man. I was an elders helper.
They (elders) had a way with words - predicting the future, what was going to happen.
But I was told never to give up, because one day I was told I would work as an elder.
Always be hopeful and help young people and people with the ceremonies.
In this way, you will pave a way for young people. For real, I did those things.
And where I grew up with my friends, I have never known for us to have a feud.
Because we listened to old men, the elders, to what they told us.
We always stayed in one place, we calmly stayed. We were never allowed -
I wasn't allowed to wander around for anything at night, or even to go camp with anyone.
I always stayed home to take care of my parents. I never traveled around.
Always stayed in one place. I took care of my grandmother and grandfather on both sides.
I did these things.

How did things start to change ever since the treaties?

When it comes to treaties, at first when the Queen arrived and she sent her representatives, when the representatives of the Queen came, their words and promises sounded wonderful.
When the Whiteman arrived, they came to negotiate. He came with things.
He always came with his words. Our forefathers never agreed on anything at first.
It was on Sundays when everyone gathered, as it was said, where we were at.
It was along the river, at a small house, when they arrived to negotiate with the old people. What they stated (Queen's representatives) - We are not here to buy the land. We are here to borrow it. In the future, our people are going to come over the oceans. They are going to come to make a living off the land farming.
They have animals that he will raise off the land. That's what was said. But when we take up land, I will ask you permission to dig a well for water.
Also to water my animals, that is one thing I ask. Plus the trees, pine trees - the trees, too. I will ask permission so we can build houses.
in the future, your people will use houses, too. You will pay nothing when a house is built for you.
Another promise by the people who arrived - Anything underground will be yours.
I don't ask for the lakes; that is yours to keep. The life you live, the fish you live off, and everything else - we don't ask of them. The animals you hunt, we don't ask of them.
That is your way of life, we don't ask for it. But the person who sent us - the Queen who sent us - she wants from you. She is the one we represent.
In the future, Indigenous people will never worry or suffer. With the length of my arms, we will always take care of you. You will never go hungry from my breasts.
If you want anything, I will give it to you.
When we create lands for you, I will give you workers - like a finance officer.
He took care of the money, he worked with it. If the people or Chief wanted anything, the finance officer would go and represent the Aboriginal people; speak on their behalf in regards to what they wanted. That was his job. Another person was the farm agent.
That's what he was called. He said you (Aboriginal people) would be given animals annually.
That is what he said. I truly seen that happen. They were given animals - horses and cows

every year. Plus tools - like farming tools - were given. And the farm agent taught. That was his job. Another thing was the red coat - I will give him, too. He was the policeman. You will keep him here. But you own him, he will keep you if things don't go right. He will watch and fend for you. These are the orders to him (police) by the Queen. Another person given was a doctor. I will give him to you. Medicine, he will take care of it. I will give you a medicine chest, but he (doctor) will take care of it,. You will never pay for medicine in the future, was a promise by the Queen. One more person was a worker, a notetaker was available. I come to see all these people. When decisions were made by the Chief, the notetaker took notes of everything. There was another. Someone who was a manager. He watched over everything. This person came from a different place. He was directed to come once in awhile. He would go check on all the reserves. She said, he will give you a manager. All these things are what was promised to us by the Queen. I would hear Elders tell stories about the treaties. A lot was promised to us, and we are given five dollars every year. That's not all that was given. Twelve dollars was given to each person. For two years it ran this way. but it was changed by the government, the White people. It was to be kept for safekeeping. Seven dollars was put away and five dollars will be given to you once a year. The reason given was Aboriginal people didn't know how to use money properly. To this day, that money is still being put in a trust. I don't know if anyone has every inquired. These things I am talking about, us in our reserve - we were first to get reserve designation of all the reserves around our area. That is why people around our area called the land "reserve." They, too, would come - the Dene, up to Frog Lake and Thunderchild - when payments were given out. There were lots of people from all over when they came and got money, because it was a central area of the reserves. But later reserves were divided out in different areas. This is what I have come to see. Plus, what you asked me to talk about is what I heard from Elders about the treaties. Sometimes I hear my fellow elders. But their stories vary in different ways. But it was at the small house by the river negotiations took place. This is where the elders' stories originated. A few seen those days, too. My grandfather, his name was "ka-nip-tit'iw." He was the Chief on our reserve before the other chiefs. He watched over the people he was related to. When the reserve was created, he was supposed to be a signatory. But it didn't happen. Up the river, "Sikaskoch", he was trying to be Chief. That's why he did what he did. He signed on to our reserve as if he was from there. So this didn't turn out that way. My grandfather was originally from here. That's how it happened. That's why my grandfather was first to be given a house when houses were first built. It was a beautiful house. I came to see his house. It was a beautiful house - because he was originally from the reserve. He was the Chief.

What was life like before treaty? How did people live?

A young man and a young woman - how they're to be humble, how to be respectful to elders. I had seen how we, too, were treated. Example of a person entering - We weren't allowed to get up and walk around. Be respectful of a person who enters, that is what we were taught. I have seen men and women totally respectful of each other. They helped each other with everything they did - like when they were building a house. They would all throw their support to each other - even when a person was haying, when crops were planted. There was a lot of people. I helped when I was about 30 or 40. As many crops of fields we had - shared fields. There were so many people, it didn't take long for the old people to finish. It was the same for the women. If they were to fix something,

maybe it was fixing a canvas tent - that's what they were called.
When a person or young lady needed a tent, women went to lend their help.
It didn't take them very long to complete the tent. They were kind to each other,
helped each other. Long time ago, the old people, we were told this was how things were done.
To help elders, especially around prayer, a person should never be alone.
You don't need to give tobacco, if someone is having ceremony, to help the elder.
The person will be thankful to you as a helper. You will be blessed with a lot
if you go help an elder in this way. I helped in this way as a young man,
up to when I had children. It wasn't too long ago that I stopped helping out.
You will be blessed with successful childrearing, I was advised by my grandfather.
He shared his wisdom many times. At one time, at a Sundance, elders sat together.
Called me to sit with them. They told me they were going to leave me with a teaching.
We are going to bless you with the responsibility to carry on the ceremony of the Sundance,
plus other things. We are giving you these rights. Things like the naming ceremonies,
you will do this, too. We are blessing you. I truly see that now. The job of an elder is hard.
Now I get tired. I get very tired, but I carry on to help young people.
Even around our area here, young people come cut tobacco to do something for them.
On Sunday was the last time I went and did a Chicken Dance. I do lots around here locally.
Chicken Dances - they come get me. Even when I am tired, but I am still capable.
This is how we were raised as young people to be respectful to old people and others.
To help others that I go to see, and I have done it. So here on my reserve,
I tell the young people these teachings. Some understand thoroughly. Some go help
where ceremonies are taking place. Those are the ones that listen. But some don't listen.
Some are distracted with the things young people are doing today - these things brought
by the White People to distract them. It is tough to try and stop what's happening.
We are struggling, but we are still hopeful in trying to stop this thing.
There are many of us elders who speak together at meetings, trying to give advice
to the Chief and Council to help them out. They're starting to think differently.
Like the Chief, he listens carefully and pays attention to what he's told.
But some of the Council are stubborn. I don't even see them at events try to understand.
I tried telling them. I spoke to them when they got in - it's not the money you think about.
You were willing to be leaders for our reserve. You think about the children.
Plus our community. In the future, you will see as leaders it's going to be hard.
The government is going to make things difficult if you don't make any attempts, I told them.
Some didn't listen. The only one was the Chief; he did things alone along with another.
But he, too, he a lot of traveling alone. He was asked to attend ceremonies.
There were two of them. It's the same way things are, I guess, everywhere.
Some places, young people understand and help elders when they do ceremonies.
I encourage young people who continue to help.

**What would you say to young people who become leaders? What is going to help them,
the leaders who are following the ceremonies? What do they do?**

Elders, the Sacred Pipe, and sweetgrass are what leaders should seek out. This will help them.
This is what leaders should always follow - old men, also the old women - to tell them
how to live life, and how people look at each other. Plus our land, how to hold onto it.
To think about the children into the future, that is what leaders need to do. For understanding
what we call leadership, leaders must seek help from the Sacred Pipe. When something is done,
to call upon elders to come pray for them. That's what I see to help young leaders and workers.
Like the work you're doing. It's good, really good. You will find truth, whatever it is your seeking.

This Sacred Pipe is our strength. This is what protects us. This what was told by elders.
The Sacred Pipe will never be defeated by the Whiteman. That is what was told.
That's why we keep doing what we are doing. We have sweats once in awhile.
We pray for all our leaders and the people, for things to go well on our reserve.
We live in peace. Nothing else distracts our youth; it's the only thing our youth can do.
And our leaders, to put the Sacred Pipe first. Also, depend on elders to pray for them.

When did things change how women were looked upon? There was a Women's Society. Ever since the treaties, things have changed. How did things change?

This Women's Society you talk about, I really didn't hear old men talk about it.
But with the old grandmothers, there was one old lady who was my cousin.
There were two young men that were related to her. One thing she talked about was babysitting,
watching over our grandchildren. That this was a gift to grandmothers.
"Notokew" (Old Woman) - that is what we are referred as. You see us as having a home full
of our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren where there is no more room left.
That is where "Notokew" (Old Woman) comes from - no more room in our lodges.
That is what was gifted to us as grandmothers - to watch over all our grandchildren.
But in the future, things are going to switch over, the old woman would say.
I never understood what her words meant at the time. This is what you're seeing now.
Things are switching over. Maybe that's what she was talking about. Things are changing.
The term "Kisêyiniw" (old man) - it's like when ducks or other beings bring their little ones
around. When you see them, they're carefully and hurriedly watching the little ones.
It is being done with love. That's where the term "Kisêyiniw" comes from.
It's the same thing a grandfather does with his grandchildren as he watches over them.
It is where grandfathers get the name "Kisêyiniw" - it derives from the behaviour of birds.

**These people a long time ago, how did they take care of their children?
Things like food, blankets - how did the people earn them?**

A long time ago, how they took care of their children, there was nothing much back then.
Like we see today. There were no tools. Before the coming of the Whiteman,
there was the buffalo - what we call the plains bison. He took pity on human-beings.
He gave his whole body so people could survive - to feed themselves - and things like that.
With the bones utensils were made. That is what the Grandfather Buffalo had said.
And with my head, in the big lodge (Sundance) that will never end, they will use me.
I will smoke with the people inside the lodge, if they ask something from me.
I will do it for them, I will make it possible. That's how things happened.
Things like knives, and lot of other things, have come for people to raise their children.
The people took the bladder, dried it, and used it as containers to put water in.
That was another thing they used. And this hide, they used the hides for tipis,
clothes, pants, moccasins. And that's where clothing was taken and blankets for bedding.
They had nothing for blankets a long time ago. So the robes were used.
What the people lived off of was hunting to feed their children. In the fall, old women gathered
berries. There were no canned foods back then. The Saskatoon berries were dried,
then crushed to be used all winter for lunch. And in the plains where people lived,
people would also move to the north in the bush for the purpose of hunting.
People hunted all kinds of animals. That is how they took care of their children.
But up until recently, with all the happenings, up to now people always helped each other
to prepare for winter, in every way possible. So people had enough to last the whole winter.
Same tasks were done by the ladies - berries, dried meat. Toward the fall, work was done

to make sure the food supply would last the winter. This is how the people lived, so the people could feed the children. Things were hard long ago, not too many tools. But eventually tools became available. Today there is so much; never run out of tools. Today the food we eat is not healthy for us. Not like long ago in the past how the people lived. What the people ate for food made them strong. Today the food can make us sick in different ways. That is what the Whiteman prepared for us. Within this whole world, it's no problem for a Whiteman to kill someone. This is what he made for us - the food so it will kill all of us - sugar diabetes, and cancer, killing many people. It affects White people the same way, but now they are starting to think about overpopulation in this world. That's why he does what he does.

How do you understand the treaty right to education? Education was promised to Aboriginal people when the treaties were signed.

Our grandfathers spoke in detail about the treaties, so that the treaties would never end. Education was a promise to the youth. Government was going to teach the youth properly to help in life. So the youth would understand literature. That was wonderful. But this promise, the one I spoke of earlier, how it was promised, as soon as treaties were signed the government already had a plan in place that would take effect for a hundred years. On how it was going to legislate Aboriginal People. Government put the treaties aside. The government didn't fulfill the treaties. That is how crooked the government is. The government lied to us. I think about the lies a lot. If we lied to them, the Whiteman would charge us and be put in jail. This is what the Whiteman does. This is one of the items that is talked about a lot - treaties, Chiefs, Councillors and leaders. The leaders are trying to go back to the intent of the treaties. Maybe someday they will. The leaders with education understand the literature of treaties, but lack the cultural life and the understanding of how our forefathers lived. But the education is holding them back. That's how I understand and that is how I see it.

What do you want to say to young people about the future? Which is good for them to take forward, to think about when it comes to leadership?

And about Women's Societies in the future?

At times with the young people, we as elders are providing knowledge for the future. What I said earlier about the Sacred Pipe - in the future, it's what's going to get them through. Also to believe in the ceremonies used from the past. Youth must take notice of ceremonies and practice them. If anything, I wish young people would do just that in the future. Along with teenage girls and young ladies to turn to the grandmothers for teachings and prayers. On how to conduct themselves on the teachings of life. The woman was gifted with life to bring into this world, to raise a child. We see, if it wasn't for a woman, us men would not be here. The woman raised all of us. You had children and raised them. This is how it is. Elders would say to go ask for help from a woman. It doesn't have to be an old woman. Give her a cloth offering and tobacco; ask her for prayers,. She will pray for you. A woman's prayer sounds loud into the heavens. Her prayers are always heard. A woman's prayers are powerful because she is the person who raises humanity on earth. That is what's said by elders. I wish young ladies to continue this teaching, not to give up. For young men to keep working on trying to understand our way of prayer, as put upon the earth. The language, too. Come home to it and learn it. That is what I wish from young people.