

Minowakiing Chibizhiwag Dewe'igan (In the Good Land, the Panthers Drum)



Figure 1 photo by Cynthia Bergloff

Gaa ozhibii'iaan (Written by) Nathan Breu

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Abstract

Minowakiing Chibizhiwag, Milwaukee Panthers, is a Native American Big Drum group that was started at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The *dewe'igan* (drum) plays an important role in Native communities. The *dewe'igan* is so important that she is spoken about as an animate member of the community. The drum beat represents the *ode* (heart) *we* (sound), the heartbeat, of *Shkaakaamikwe*, Mother Earth, and all living on her. In the Fall of 2016, *Gete Dewe'igan* (Elder Drum) was found in the office of American Indian Student Services wrapped in a blanket and was taken out and feasted. From that moment, the drum began to wake up and people from all walks of life joined in to learn songs, learn *Anishinaabemowin* (the Ojibwe language), and improve the visibility of the Native Americans. This essay is about the history of the *Anishinaabek* Big Drum, one specific *Gete Dewe'igan*, and how this *dewe'igan* came to be part of the community, and how she functions to promote wellbeing in this community.

Introduction

Minowakiing Chibizhiwag, Milwaukee Panthers is a Native American Big Drum group that was started at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). The actual date the drum was first played is unknown but according to oral history and some photo evidence the drum began to be used in the mid-1970s. The *dewe'igan* (drum) plays an important role in Native Communities. This paper is about the set of practices known in most North American native nations as Big Drum traditions, how it came to the Anishinaabek, the Ojibwe people, along with the origin of the Big Drum at UWM.

History of the Big Drum

The following is the story I heard from my Uncle, Ginew Makwaba, from the Keeseekoose First Nation in Saskatchewan. This story was told to me by Ginew Makwaba in the 1980's as I recall it. The *Anishinaabek*, specifically the Ojibwe in Minnesota and North Dakota, were gifted *Gichidewe'igan*, Big Drum, by the Dakota in the 1860's. There was a great hostility between the Ojibwe and the Dakotas. The Dakota, also known as Bwaan by the Ojibwe and Sioux by the United States government, competed with the Ojibwe in for resources in the western Great Lakes region.

The battle at Strawberry Island in 1745 removed the Sioux out of the area now known as Lac Du Flambeau¹. These battles continued with both sides competing for resources, settling debts, and seeking revenge or retaliation for the death of somebody in their village.². An area once dominated by the Dakota was taken over by the Ojibwe first as part of a westward

¹ "History of Lac du Flambeau." Lac Du Flambeau Chamber. Accessed November 30, 2017. <https://lacduflambeauchamber.com/history/>.

² White, Richard. *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

migration several thousand years ago and more recently because of colonization and settlement in the 1800s. The encroaching settlers and the steady fighting between the Ojibwe and Dakota caused the United States to intervene and start the Dakota War of 1862 which ended with over 300 Dakota were sentenced to death and given a trial without representation, all but 38 were pardoned, 38 Dakota Warriors were hung in Mankato, the biggest mass execution in US history.³

According to the *Gichidewe'igan* origin⁴ story, it was against the will of *Gitchimanido*, (the Great Spirit), for the Ojibwe and Dakota to kill one another. The *Gichidewe'igan* was given to the people to provide peace and protection to the families and communities who served as caretakers of the drum. The *Gichidewe'igan* brought peace between the nations and the ceremony is still practiced today among many of the Anishinaabek. The drum beat represents the heartbeat of *Shkaakaamikwe*, Mother Earth, and without her heart beat, life would not exist. The *Dewe'igan* is an animate being according to the Anishinaabek. I refer to her as “she” because my teachings include stories explaining she is life and for balance is played only by men. Other groups sometimes refer to a Big Drum as “grandfather.” One of the characteristics of the Anishinaabe diaspora is a wide range of ways to interpret related traditions. Teaching surrounding the Big Drum are no exception to this diversity of practices. She is referred to as being a spirit and is used for gathering, healing, dancing and learning.

Gete Dewe'igan (An Elder Drum) Found

³ "The Trials & Hanging." The Trials & Hanging | The U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. Accessed November 30, 2017. <http://usdakotawar.org/history/aftermath/trials-hanging>.

⁴ Treuer, Anton. *The assassination of Hole in the Day*. St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books, 2011.

In Fall of 2016 a *Gete Dewe'igan* was found in the American Indian Student Services (AISS) office University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). It was wrapped in an old blanket with a faded blue and red pattern and was starting rip. The blanket was covered in a layer of dust that fell off when it was grabbed off the black filing cabinets. She is heavy and made of wood. An elk hide is stretched over the round wooden frame. Fabric is brass-tacked into the wood rim of *Gete Dewe'igan*. There is something inside *Gete Dewe'igan*. No one is sure what produces the rattle, but one can hear small solid particles, possibly bones, stones or seeds, when the drum is moved. The fabric stretched around the exterior of the wide circular frame is dark blue and red with a triangular design. A leather pouch hangs from her for *kinnikinnic* or *asema*, (tobacco). She is held off the ground by four white U-shaped brackets connected in the middle allowing *Gete Dewe'igan* to be held in the four directions. The stand is old, and the white paint is chipping away, and the upper arms are loose. The first time she was played after a long rest, a special *nagamowin* (song) was sung and a small plate of food was put out for *Gete Dewe'igan*.

After numerous conversations with AISS staff and American Indian faculty, *Gete Dewe'igan* was taken out and played regularly. At first it was a small group of faculty and second-year Anishinaabemowin students who sang with *Gete Dewe'igan*. Over time the numbers started to grow. Many people heard the drum calling. They heard her heartbeat and were drawn in by it. By Spring of 2016, there were enough dedicated people coming, to name the informal group, *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* (Milwaukee Panthers). As *Gete Dewe'igan's* voice grew stronger the question remained, where did this drum originate?

Waldo “Buck” Martin and the Origin of *Gete Dewe'igan*

This Big Drum was brought onto the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee campus when Waldo " Buck" Martin was part of the Indian Community. Buck was born in Shawano, Wisconsin in 1946. He grew up on the Stockbridge–Munsee Reservation. Buck is a relative of Electa Quinney, a Mohican and member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community who founded one of the first schools and was the first woman to teach in a public school in the territory which would eventually become Wisconsin.⁵

Buck was the first member of his family to go to college, he earned a degree at University of Wisconsin- Oshkosh in education. After Buck graduated from UW–Oshkosh, he started looking for teaching jobs. He accepted a job Wisconsin Dells, working as a coordinator between Native American families and public schools, with funding from the Johnson-O'Malley Act of 1934. The Johnson-O'Malley Act authorizes provides support for the education of eligible Indian students who are enrolled in public schools. The program is operated and approved by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which works to meet the educational needs of American Indian and Alaska Native students.⁶

The 1970's were a challenging decade for Indian people. The Ho-Chunk, who are the dominant nation in the Wisconsin Dells area, were dissatisfied with the success rate of their students and were having disciplinary problems. Buck instituted a tutoring program after school and was pleasantly surprised that the students embraced it. Buck came to the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee to be part of a team that started the American Indian Studies program. Between 1975 and 1978 Buck worked with the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council as a education coordinator, later, working as an analyst for the Council on Criminal Justice, and helping the

⁵ Saemann, Karyn. *Electa Quinney Stockbridge teacher*. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2014.

⁶ "BIE Website." *Bureau of Indian Education | JOM*.

Wisconsin State Patrol increase its diversity. In the 1990s, he advised Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, and at one point spent a year in Washington D.C. as director of the White House Conference on Indian Education.

Preserving the Language and the Birth of Gete Dewe'igan

It was partly through Waldo "Buck" Martin's leadership that University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has an American Indian Studies (AIS) program. The Wisconsin Native American Languages Program (WNALP) was sponsored by UWM, which also helped in the process to start an AIS program at UWM, the federally recognized nations of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction with federal financial support under Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Bilingual Education Act of 1984. The group brought together elders and recorded *dibajimowinan* (stories), *nagamowinan* (songs), and *Anishinaabemowin* lessons. The group also obtained recordings from the different tribes in Wisconsin, which represent three different language families and include the Ojibwe, Ho-Chunk (formerly known as Winnebago), Potawatomi, Menominee, Oneida. Through the work of the WNALP, all the languages studied have been archived in the library at UW-Milwaukee. With a student ID or tribal ID, you can access the print and digital files. It was through this initiative that Buck, asked Theodore White Elk, a Ho-Chunk elder, to build *Gete Dewe'igan*.

Even in the 1970's there was a wide-spread awareness that the language had been impacted by the forced assimilation of boarding schools and relocation. In 2017 the numbers are astonishing; of the approximately three to four thousand fluent speakers of Anishinabemowin, roughly eighty percent of these speakers are sixty or older. While these numbers are better than most First Nations, many of the languages are turning into a "zombie" language, one that has

been revitalized but is not a living language used naturally every day.⁷ According to Dr. Bernard Perley approximately 90% of the world's languages will be "extinct" by the turn of the next century. This statistic has linguistics recording elders speaking to preserve the languages for as long as possible. The tribes in Wisconsin have been fortunate enough to make strides towards revitalizing their original languages and preserve their culture. The Ojibwe have started their own immersion school called *Waadookodaading* located on *Odaawaa-zaaga'igan* (Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation) in Wisconsin. The Menominee Nation is also in the process of starting an immersion program for infants.⁸

At *Waadookodaading*, all preschool through seventh grade children are taught math⁹, science, social studies lessons using only *Anishinaabemowin*. This approach replicates how many people learn a language: by hearing and speaking, and eventually through reading and writing. The students come from English speaking families and homes. Students are bilingual and communicate in both English and Ojibwe. By the end of kindergarten, most students at *Waadookodaading* know two writing systems.¹⁰

The languages and culture have been imperiled because of numerous US policies stemming back to colonization. The United States federal government began sending American Indian children to government-run schools in the late 1870s as part of an effort to solve the "Indian problem." The supposed purpose of the government schools was acculturation, but many schools emphasized manual training. As a result, rather than being returned home to their

⁷ Perley, Bernard C. "'Emergent Vitalities' as antidote to 'Zombie Linguistics': A rejoinder to Joshua Nash." *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2013, pp. 114–119., doi:10.1080/00664677.2012.750234.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZFWxheBWac>

⁹ <http://www.waadookodaading.org/the-school>

¹⁰ "Waadookodading: Ojibwe Language Immersion School." *The Ways*, theways.org/story/waadookodaading.

families and communities during the summer, most of the students were hired out to perform menial labor, like doing dishes or farming. The overall effect of these government-run boarding schools and similar intentioned missionary schools was to take away the culture, identity, and language of these Native youth. This was accomplished by forcing students to speak English, cutting their hair, and teaching them about European culture and history. According to Col. Richard Henry Pratt, the objective of these schools was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”¹¹ Students often came from tribes the U.S. government had recently defeated or fought. Families could have their food rations stopped or be evicted from their homes by the Indian agent if they did not send their children to boarding school. All of this had a lasting influence on the way American Indians view public education.

During the period of boarding and missionary schools, many families and communities did not have input as to which schools their children would attend. In fact, many of the schools were located far from the students’ reservation or tribal community of origin. The schools were deliberately located in non-Indian urban areas with the hopes that graduating students would settle there and marry non-Indians. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934¹² ordered the boarding schools to be phased out, but many of these schools continued until 1960s and 1970s. While these schools no longer exist in the same form, their impact can still be felt today. Many of these American Indian nations and tribal communities continue to work to reclaim and revitalize their language and culture to ensure that these traditions carry on in the future. Through language, ceremonies, and the *Dewe’igan*, these traditions live on.

¹¹ Churchill, W. (2005). *Kill the Indian, save the man: the genocidal impact of American Indian residential schools*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights.

¹² Prucha, F. P. (1986). *The great father: the United States government and the American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

Gete Dewe'igan in the Present

The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag Dewe'igan* is a traditional Native American Drum group on the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee campus. The purpose of the *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* is to create a safe environment for the community, while promoting the revitalization of *Anishinaabemowin*, and the *Anishinaabek* culture. Language alone does not convey or connect people to culture. It is a medium through which culture can be learned, a framework for viewing the world, and a framework for expressing culture. *Anishinaabemowin* is a language of action. In the Anishinaabe worldview, there are two ways to learn, by observing and by doing.

The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* started with just a few students who wanted to learn *Anishinaabemowin* and learn some Anishinaabek *nagamowin*, songs. As more students met to learn about the Big Drum and learn *Anishinaabemowin*, the more they wanted to know. Some days, there would be a few people in the circle *anishinaabemowaad* (speaking in Anishinaabemowin) and *nagamonwaad* (singing). On other days, the practice was more like an immersion experience.

At the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee the Native community is small but strong. The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* respects everyone's culture, language, and beliefs, creating a support system, and a family. Many of the members of the group are learning their culture and language, while others in the group have a desire to learn more about their culture and enjoy helping people. During full moon ceremonies, some of the members made a new cradle for *Gete Dewe'igan*. The cradle is made of cedar and has been left it is natural color. A new blanket was also obtained; it is a soft tan blanket to keep her warm. Eventually some nice leather sticks were

made for the men who sing with *Gete Dewe'igan* to offer an alternate to the modern set made with flexible shafts and bright electrical tape.

The *Gete Dewe'igan*, has a life of herself and we let her guide us. She guided us to Buck, who was given *kinnikinnic* (a special blend of indigenous tobacco) and a Pendleton blanket, out of respect for him and the drum. Buck loved the fact the drum was being used and her voice was being heard once again. Out of respect for the *Gete Dewe'igan* and the *monidoog* (spirits), *kinnikinnick* is placed on the head of the *dewe'igan* before the *Gete Dewe'igan* is played. Four sacred honor beats are played to awaken the her and the *monidoog*, now the songs can be sung. When the *Gete Dewe'igan* is not being played, she gets wrapped in a blanket for protection. A smudge (a mixture of sage, *kinnikinnic*, sweetgrass, and cedar) is used to protect *Gete Dewe'igan* and the singers. Sometimes just sweetgrass is used to protect everyone including her.

Many people continue to come back saying the drum is the highlight of their week, others have requested to pull out the drum more because they feel better being around her and needed some healing. The *Gete Dewe'igan* has turned into a healing drum for many people. Though the *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* has never claimed to be anything other than a group to support the community, *Gete Dewe'igan* is a healing drum in many ways. The group listens to what the drum wants and needs and in turn the drum calls to the group. Though not all the members understand the power of *Gete Dewe'igan*; the power is very evident. People from all walks of life will stop to listen when they hear the drum. Many faculty members have commented on how they enjoy hearing the drum. When the outside world is stressing people out, they turn to the drum and ask if the drum can be taken out. The drum is relaxing and a source of prayer. *Baaga'akokwe*, drum beat, represents the heartbeat of *Shkaakaamikwe*, mother earth.

Wezhaabwayi'ii da nagamowaad anami'aa manidoog miinawa aanikoobijiganwag miinawa anishinaabemowin miinawaa izhitwaawin, through singing we pray to the spirits, speak Anishinaabemowin and explore our shared culture. Through the drum we try to undo stereotypes and racism, unite the people, and keep the language alive.

The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* makes every effort to respect what our elders have passed down to us in the form of teachings and songs. Though *Gete Dewe'igan* survives in an urban setting, the drive to keep the language alive and the culture strong lives on. *Minowakiing*, (Milwaukee), is rich in Native history and has many objects through the area named after native items or native words. It is fitting that the drum goes out into the community to spread the knowledge and love that is associated with the *Gete Dewe'igan*. Though she was made to help keep the language strong, *Gete Dewe'igan* is doing much more than that and is still able to bring the people together almost fifty years after she was brought to life, mending the circle.

As the group moves forward in their endeavors, each one of the members learns more about themselves, their language, their culture, and other people's languages, and cultures. The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* does not discriminate based on the color of a person's skin, sexual preference, or any other factor. The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* strives to preserve the language of the indigenous communities and spread love and knowledge to all that will listen to the messages. It is not in the traditions of the *Anishinaabek* to turn anyone with a good hear, a good spirit away.

At every practice, the *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* begins by singing the American Indian Movement (AIM) song to remind us of the struggles our relatives have gone through and where we are heading. AIM was founded in 1968 in response to the mistreatment of the Indian people

in Minneapolis. It was commonplace to see Indians being beaten and thrown into squad cars for singing and expressing their identity. AIM was started to prevent these atrocities from happening in Minneapolis however, the group received national attention and became connected with numerous other battles including the 1969 Occupation of Alcatraz Island by the Indians of All Tribes, the 1972 takeover of the BIA headquarters in D.C. and the protest at Wounded Knee in 1973, to name a few. The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* always ends the practices with the *Traveling Song*¹³. This song not only sends everyone home in a good way but, it is also teaching how to conjugate verbs in *Anishinaabemowin*.

The *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* has been invited to attend several functions in the community. The group has attended rallies for the people of Standing Rock, rallies to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day, and graduation ceremonies for the children at the Indian Community School in Franklin. Though everyone comes from a different background, members of *Minowakiing Chibizhiiwag* have become a close-knit family.

Conclusion

The *Gete Dewe'igan* cared for and carried by *Minowaki Chibizhiiwag* is rich with history. Buck and other local leaders brought *Gete Dewe'igan* to life as part of preserving the language and culture for future generations. Close to fifty years later the drum is still going stronger than ever as people gather from all walks of life to sing with her, learn the language, and keep the culture alive. *Gete Dewe'igan* has created a safe environment on and off the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee campus not just for the Native students, but, for everyone.

¹³ <http://ojibwe.net/songs/womens-traditional/traveling-song/>

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*Gimigwichin Minowakiing Chibizhiwag nagamowad miinawaa gakina awiya
ninaadamawaanaan miinawaa gakina awiya gichianishinaabe.*