

Researching Métis Spirituality: Insights and the Work Ahead

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Abstract

By way of introducing herself to the readers of *Pawaatamihk*, Dr Chantal Fiola, member of the Journal's Circle of Editors, offers a brief summary of her fifteen years of research into Métis spirituality. She has been particularly interested in Métis relationships with traditional Indigenous ceremonies and has confirmed—through oral history, archives, literature, and primary research—that some Métis historically participated in Sundance, Midewiwin, and sweat lodge, among other ceremonies. Her research also points to a contemporary resurgence of traditional ceremony among Métis people. Below, she shares select key findings across her two books: *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality* and *Returning to Ceremony:*Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities, and introduces her latest study, a national project titled, "Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Homeland."

Key words: Métis spirituality, Circle of Editors

Boozhoo nindinawaymagunidoog! Zaagaatekwe nidizhinikaaz, biizhew nidoodem. Niin naawenaangweyaabe, bezhig Mide, onimiw pakosimowin. Michif ndaaw.

Greetings, my relatives! I am called Sunrays Shining Through the Clouds; I belong to the lynx clan (through my adoption by the late *Mizhakwanagiizhik*, Charlie Nelson of Roseau River First Nation, former Chief of the Minweyweyigaan Midewiwin Lodge). I am Two-Spirit, first-degree Midewiwin, and a Sundancer. I am Michif, a citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF). My maternal grandparents, Dorothée (née Guiboche) Normand and the late Robert Normand, are from the historic Métis communities of St. Laurent and St. Vital, MB, respectively. My ancestors, Pierre "Bostonnais" Pangman¹ and his wife, Marie Wewejikabawik, helped establish St. Laurent in 1824 after the Métis had been pushed out of Pembina when it became American territory.² I grew up in my French Canadian father's community of Ste. Geneviève and went to school in the neighbouring Métis community of Ste. Anne, MB.

My spiritual journey is interconnected with my academic journey—I have studied Métis relationships with traditional ceremonies for fifteen years. Below, I outline my doctoral research and subsequent study (and the resulting books), including insights I have learned about Métis spirituality. I conclude by introducing my current national research project. In this way, I introduce myself, a Pawaatamihk Circle of Editors member, to the readers.

Rekindling the Sacred Fire and Returning to Ceremony

Walking away from the Catholic Church as a teenager left a void in my life that would not be filled until I found ceremonies through graduate school. I had been searching for a spiritual home where I would be accepted as a Two-Spirit Michif woman. In Toronto, I participated in my first sweat lodge, and the conductor, Wanda Whitebird, explicitly welcomed Two-Spirit people. After that life-altering experience, I participated in ceremonies as often as possible, including with Anishinaabe Elders Edna Manitowabi, the late Doug Williams, and Shirley Williams, while completing a PhD in Indigenous Studies at Trent University. Eventually, they encouraged me to return home to develop relationships with Elders from my territory. I moved back to Winnipeg, where I met Dr. Rainey Gaywish (Nêhiyaw/Plains Cree), who would become a spiritual mentor and sponsor my initiation into the Midewiwin Society.³

Through these experiences and guidance from Spirit via ceremonies like fasting, I decided to study Métis relationships with spirituality for my doctoral research, resulting in my first book, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality.* With a conviction that Métis can contribute to the work of the *Oshkibimaadiziig* (New People) spoken of in the *Niizhwaswi Ishkodekaan* (Seven Fires Prophecy)⁴ of the Anishinaabeg, a parent culture of the Métis, I studied Métis collective history and learned how settler colonialism (notably, institutionalized Christianity, day/residential schools, child welfare system, and legislation banning Indigenous ceremonies) dispossessed Métis from our lands, communities, culture, and relationships with First Nation relatives, resulting in intergenerational disconnection from ceremonies for many Métis families.⁵ I crafted a Métis Anishinaabe methodology and interviewed eighteen individuals with Red River Métis ancestry, mostly from Winnipeg. They generously shared their experiences regarding family history and relationship with place, identity, culture, and religion/spirituality, as well as their personal experiences with racism, discrimination, identity, and spirituality.

In my subsequent study, I expanded the focus from individual Métis relationships with ceremonies to such relationships within Red River Manitoba Métis communities. A fateful visit with Elder Maria Campbell on her land near Batoche taught me that Gabriel Dumont, famed historic leader of the Métis, was deeply connected to ceremonies, including being a pipe carrier and sweat lodge conductor. I also returned to the archives and found more evidence of historic Métis participation in ceremonies. Moreover, I learned about the gifting of the Sundance ceremony by the Nêhiyawak to the Métis and Saulteaux (Anishinaabeg) in the early nineteenth century to solidify the Nêhiyaw-Pwat/Iron Confederacy (an alliance between the Nêhiyawak, Assiniboine, Anishinaabeg, and the Métis).

Previously, I relied heavily on Anishinaabe teachings learned from my relatives in the Midewiwin lodge when creating my methodology; now, I endeavoured to strengthen a Métis-

specific and community-centred methodology. ⁹ I adhered to the MMF's Manitoba Métis Community Ethics Protocol (MMCREP), obtaining their approval to undertake the study. Since the publication of *Rekindling*, the problem of Indigenous identity fraud had increased exponentially, ¹⁰ so I stopped emphasizing Red River Métis "ancestry," and began utilizing the national definition of Métis as a criterion for participation; namely, "'Métis' means a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation." ¹¹ Participants also needed to be connected (by birth, residence, or family scrip) to one of the focal historic Métis communities of the study (Duck Bay, Camperville, St. Laurent, St. François-Xavier, Lorette, and Ste. Anne). With funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) via the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA), I hired six Métis Community Researchers to assist me with everything from recruitment to dissemination. We interviewed thirty-two Red River Métis from these communities on the same themes as the first study, resulting in my second book: *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities*.

Understanding Métis Spirituality: Individual and Community Insights

Below, I highlight intriguing findings from *Rekindling* and *Returning* before sharing a preview of my newest project. Specifically, I note patterns regarding Métis family residence and connection to Métis land and territory; family relationships with Métis culture, religion, and spirituality; and insights from participants' spiritual journeys.

Nearly everyone I spoke with in *Rekindling* lives in Winnipeg, but one person also maintained a second residence in their home Métis community (Camperville). Similarly, most people in *Returning* live in a city; however, nearly 40 percent live in their home Métis community. Moreover, in *Returning*, intergenerational residence patterns emerged: multiple generations have lived in the same Métis community, and families are connected to multiple Métis communities (often due to the history of forced Métis dispossession).¹²

Despite dispossession from Métis communities, in *Returning*, people discussed their family's strong relationship with Métis culture. People shared stories about living on the land and subsistence activities (especially hunting, fishing, harvesting, trapping, gardening), and a few spoke of small-scale farming. Traditional foods, like beignes, gallet, boulettes, and wild meat, were identified as staples of a Métis diet. For a majority, social gatherings, such as Métis Days and large family reunions, as well as music (fiddling) and dance (jigging), represented ways of relating to Métis culture. Cultural values, such as sharing, humour, and kinship, were noted as important to a Métis worldview. 13 Similar patterns emerged in *Rekindling*, including intergenerational cultural subsistence practices, traditional foods, relationship with land, holistic education/modelling, and cultural activities like fiddling and jigging. However, in Rekindling, people spoke more about their family's relationship to culture as marked by denial, disconnection, shame, marginalization, and silence (though noting an improvement over time); 14 perhaps this can be explained, in part, by urbanity. While nearly everyone in Rekindling lives in Winnipeg, a significant portion of people in *Returning* continue to live in their Métis community—some of these retain greater Indigenous than non-Indigenous populations, thereby facilitating the maintenance and transmission of Métis lifeways.

Regarding Métis family relationships with religion and spirituality, Roman Catholicism appeared as a dominant influence for all but one person across both studies (a United Church Christian family adopted him during the Sixties Scoop). 15 In Returning, a quarter of the participants also mentioned Indigenous ceremonies in their family or Métis community while growing up (as did a handful in *Rekindling*). These relationships were often marked by secrecy or conflict due to the repression of Indigenous ceremonies by church and government (and internalization of colonial messaging). 16

In discussing their personal spiritual journey and finding their way back to ceremonies, participants across both studies identified similar factors that inhibited their reconnection and those that encouraged it. In *Returning*, the most common disconnection factor was Christianity, including via day/residential schools. On a related note, people spoke of fear, anxiety, and selfdoubt, including internalizing the stereotype that Métis people do not participate in ceremonies. Consequently, many talked about divisions between Métis and First Nation kin resulting from colonization. ¹⁷ I did not ask those in *Rekindling* about disconnection factors, but these emerged similarly, including fearmongering and the demonization of Indigenous ceremonies by the Church; impacts from day/residential schools; outlawing of ceremonies by the Canadian government; addictions; and government-caused division between Métis and First Nations. 18

Similar connection factors were noted across both studies. ¹⁹ Key people and places were identified as having a nurturing impact on reconnection to ceremonies, especially friends, family, elders, and reserves, but also Indigenous-centred jobs, conferences, and Friendship Centres. Among older participants, the Indigenous sovereignty movement during the civil rights era was instrumental in the re-emergence of Indigenous pride, and cultural and spiritual resurgence. Conversely, several younger Métis identified higher education as their entryway to spirituality through access to Elders and ceremonies on campus. Traumatic catalysts—such as illness, abuse, and death—were noted as disconnection and connection factors. While people in Rekindling identified ceremonies as connection factors, those in Returning further identified the types of ceremonies they participate in, especially sweat lodge, Sundance, smudging, pipe, and medicines.

When describing their spirituality, people in both studies spoke about a powerful connection to Spirit; commitment, interconnection and relationships; giving back; and spiritual fulfillment.²⁰ While most Métis need to travel to access ceremonies, they are becoming increasingly available within Manitoba Métis communities, including the return of Sundance in Duck Bay (MMF President Chartrand's home community). 21 Despite ongoing settler colonialism, the Métis people in my studies have found their way back to the ceremonies that our ancestors (including Métis) participated in historically. Métis spirituality has always included ceremonies and always will.

Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Homeland

Having studied Métis spirituality among Red River Métis individuals and communities in Manitoba, I am now expanding my focus to the broader Métis homeland and also considering Métis Catholicism. I continue to strengthen a Métis community-centred methodology, this time drawing upon shared Michif, Nêhiyaw, and Anishinaabe concepts like wahkotowin (relational

accountability), keeoukaywin (the visiting way), and mino-bimaadiziwin (good, balanced life).²² To undertake this national project, I have enlisted the help of a Métis dream team!

I am the Project Director and Manitoba Lead, Dr. Emily Grafton (Métis, Associate Professor, University of Reinga) is Saskatchewan Lead, and Dr. Paul L. Gareau (Métis, Associate Professor, University of Alberta) is Alberta Lead. We have partnered with three historic Métis communities across the Prairies—St. Laurent, MB, Lebret, SK, and St. Albert, AB —represented by a Métis Community Liaison from each and a Knowledge Keepers' Council (two Elders with traditional and Catholic perspectives connected to each community). We are collaborating with the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research (RCMR) and Director Nathalie Kermoal (Breton, Associate Professor, University of Alberta). We have partnered with three academic institutions the Universities of Winnipeg, Regina, and Alberta-notably, Religious Studies units and the Office of Indigenous Engagement at the University of Regina via Associate Vice-President Lori Campbell. We have hired three Métis graduate student Research Associate/Assistants. We are receiving support (cash/in-kind) from academic and research partners, SSHRC, and the MRA.

This Métis-led interdisciplinary project centres community-based dialogue and collective understandings of Métis spirituality and religion across our homeland. Aims include reconstituting relationships across Métis communities in the Prairies; reflecting upon intergenerational experiences and situated knowledges; and co-creating nuanced understandings of Métis spirituality and religion in the Métis Nation. Phase I consists of two-day, land-based gatherings in each partner Métis community, culminating in a one-day symposium in each partner university. In addition to land-based, cultural, and social activities at the Métis community gatherings, research engagement will include interviews, talking circles, and questionnaires. Next, symposia provide opportunities for dialogue between partner Métis communities, Métis scholars and students, and allies. A 20-minute video based on each gathering/symposium will be produced with/for each community. Phase II consists of Métis community tea and bannock visits; collaborative writing with partner communities, Métis scholars and students; publication of a community booklet and an edited academic book; and creation of a university course on Métis spirituality and religion. Phase III continues knowledge dissemination via additional tea and bannock visits to discuss findings and screen the videos in the partner communities, at academic conferences, and in student workshops.

Closing Thoughts

I have come to understand Métis spirituality on a continuum with Métis expressions of traditional spirituality and ceremonies on one end and Métis expressions of Christianity (especially Catholicism) on the other; localized, relational syncretism²³ is present throughout. By centring Métis self-determination, I reject institutionalized and settler colonial dichotomies and definitions. As I mentioned in the conclusion to *Returning*, after hearing Métis people across the homeland share their truths in the forthcoming study, "we can re-evaluate the concept of a continuum and determine whether it remains useful; perhaps the concept of constellations across our homeland might become a more accurate reflection of Métis family and community [and nationhood] relationships with religion and spirituality."24 I look forward to collaborating with and learning from Métis people across the Prairies, and exploring Métis kinscapes and localized

Métis knowledges as informing understandings of Métis spirituality and religion in ways that uplift Métis nationhood and sovereignty.

As this new study begins, I reflect upon the knowledge Red River Métis people and communities have generously shared with me over the years; I am indebted to them for deepening my understanding of Métis spirituality and methodology. I say *miigwetch* to my Anishinaabe relatives for letting me lean heavily on them and their spiritual knowledge while I gave myself permission to recognize the intergenerational truth that Métis spirituality has always included ceremonies. Unlearning settler colonial and institutionalized religious messaging takes generations; but Métis are increasingly critical of outdated stereotypes. I am inspired by Métis who have remained steadfast in their relationship with ceremonies throughout the generations, and those who have found their way back contemporarily.

Biography

Chantal Fiola is Michif (Red River Métis) with family from St. Laurent, Ste. Geneviève, and Ste. Anne, MB. and is a registered citizen of the Manitoba Métis Federation. She is the award-winning author of two books, including *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities*. Currently, with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, she is Project Director on a research study titled, "Expressions of Métis Spirituality and Religion Across the Homeland." Dr Fiola is Interim Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Engagement at the University of Winnipeg, where she is also the Distinguished Indigenous Scholar's Chair (2021-2024), and an Associate Professor in the Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies. She is part of the Circle of Editors for *Pawaatamihk: Journal of Métis Thinkers*, and a founding member of the Two-Spirit Michif Local (MMF). Chantal lives in Winnipeg with her wife and their daughter.

Endnotes

¹ Bostonnais, a renowned bison hunter, was one of the first leaders of the Métis; a nationalist who fought to preserve a Métis way of life. He was arrested during the Pemmican Proclamations—unjust "laws" against bison hunting—imposed by the first Governor of the Red River Settlement, Miles Macdonell. In retaliation, Bostonnais "held a group of Macdonell's men captive for six days at a Turtle River encampment as his freeman party painted their faces, sang and drummed." See Conn, "Peter Bostonnais Pangman."

² Audreen Hourie, "St. Laurent History," in *The Metis Homeland: Its Settlements and Communities*, ed. Lawrence Barkwell (Winnipeg: Louis Riel Institute, 2016), 55–56. http://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/11956; Nicole St-Onge. *Saint-Laurent, Manitoba: Evolving Métis Identities, 1850–1914* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2004).

³ Midewiwin (Way of the Heart) is a spiritual way of life practiced especially among the Anishinaabeg and Nêhiyawak (and some Métis, I would later learn), historically and today.

⁴ See chapter 1 in Chantal Fiola, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 1-12. This Anishinaabe prophecy predates the arrival of settlers in

North America and traces the development of the Midewiwin, impacts of colonialism, the emergence of a New People who would retrace the steps of their ancestors and to re-establish their original ways, and a choice between two paths in the time of the Seventh Fire that could lead to balance or destruction in Creation. See also Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: Voice of the Ojibway* (Hayward, WI: Indian Country Communications, 1988). ⁵ Fiola, *Rekindling*, Chapter 3, 38-74.

- ⁶ Chantal Fiola, *Returning to Ceremony: Spirituality in Manitoba Métis Communities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021), Chapter 1, 15-29 & Chapter 2, 30-52; Charles Duncan Thompson, *Red Sun: Gabriel Dumont, The Folk Hero* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Press, 2017).
- ⁷ Fiola, *Returning*, Chapter 2, 30-52; See lettre à Monseigneur Alexandre-Antonin Taché, de Laurent Simonet, St-Laurent, Lac Manitoba dated 2 avril 1866 in Collection Les Cloches de Saint-Boniface, Centre du patrimoine de la Société historique du Saint-Boniface, Winnipeg, MB.
- ⁸ Fiola, *Returning*, 27–29; 237; Nicholas Vrooman, "Many Eagle Set Thirsty Dance (Sun Dance) Song: The Metis Receive Sun Dance Song," in *Metis Legacy II*, eds. Lawrence Barkwell, Leah Dorion, and Audreen Hourie (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2006), 187–91.
- ⁹ Fiola, *Returning*, Chapter 3, 53-72.
- ¹⁰ Darryl Leroux, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2019); Darryl Leroux and Darren O'Toole, "An Analysis of the MNO's Recognition of Six New Historic Métis Communities: A Final Report," (Manitoba Métis Federation, 2020).
- ¹¹ Métis National Council, "Citizenship" accessed 30 April 2023, https://www.metisnation.ca/about/citizenship.; Manitoba Métis Federation, "Citizenship Application FAQs," accessed 30 April 2023,

https://www.mmf.mb.ca/citizenship-application-fags.

- ¹² Fiola, *Returning*, 107–111.
- ¹³ Fiola, *Returning*, 132–135.
- ¹⁴ Fiola, *Rekindling*, 124–127.
- ¹⁵ Fiola, Returning, 146.
- ¹⁶ Fiola, *Returning*, 229; Katherine Pettipas, *Severing the Ties That Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994).
- ¹⁷ Fiola, *Returning*, 190–202.
- ¹⁸ Fiola, *Rekindling*, 163–167.
- ¹⁹ Fiola, Rekindling, 167–188; Fiola, Returning, 103–113.
- ²⁰ Fiola, *Returning*, 230–231.
- ²¹ Fiola, *Returning*, 238.
- ²² Brenda Macdougall, "Wahkootowin: Family and Cultural Identity in Northwestern Saskatchewan Metis Communities," *The Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (2006): 431–62; Janice Cindy Gaudet, "Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way–Fostering an Indigenous Research Methodology," *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2019): 47–64.
- ²³ Miigwetch to my friend, Dr. Gareau, for grappling through the limitations and possibilities of relational syncretism with me. See Paul L. Gareau, "Mary and the Métis: Religion as a Site for New Insight in Métis Studies," in *A People and a Nation: New Directions in Contemporary Métis Studies*, eds. Jennifer Adese and Chris Andersen (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 188–212.
- ²⁴ Fiola, *Returning*, 234–235.

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