

WE HAVE
THE RIGHT
TO EXIST

A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought

The first book ever published from an

Ahnishinahbeo'tjibway Perspective

by

Wub-e-ke-niew

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PREFACE

This book is written from an *Ahnishinahbæo'jibway* (pronounced *änish-e-nä-bee-o-t'chi-pwe*)¹ perspective, which is different from the Indian or Euro-American point of view. "We, The People" is a part of the meaning of *Ahnishinahbæo'jibway*, who are among the Aboriginal Indigenous people who have been a part of the land on this Continent since the beginning of Aboriginal time. This is how we have been explaining who we are for more than a century, but nobody could understand or interpret what we were saying. Part of the problem is that the Europeans see themselves as the discoverers of the land here, and in seeing their history this way, simultaneously define the Aboriginal Indigenous people as being an inconsequential cipher. The leaders of the European colonization of this Continent recognized our land and resources as wealth beyond their wildest dreams, and saw the Aboriginal Indigenous people as a barrier to the Europeans taking this wealth. The *Ahnishinahbæo'jibway* and other Aboriginal Indigenous people have always lived harmoniously, and did not have the Europeans' cultural and linguistic traditions of war and peace. Because we did not speak the Europeans' language of war, the Europeans had to add on to their old tradition of "rights of conquest," and develop new strategies for taking Aboriginal Indigenous peoples' immensely valuable property. These are explained throughout this book.

This book is based on the oral tradition of the *Ahnishinahbæo'jibway*, and on what my people are saying. It is supported by ten years of intensive research into the White man's² own documents relating to the history and genealogy of Red Lake Reservation, and by my lifetime of striving to understand the social fabric, values, ideals, language, and economic system of the people who call themselves Americans.

Some things in this book may not be comfortable for some readers, although I expect that there will be others who will say,

"yes, I've been saying that for years." Social engineering is never comfortable when seen from the other side. The how and why of what has been, and continues to be done to my people and to all Aboriginal Indigenous people needs to be brought out into the open. The world is changing, and in order to make this a better world, the reality of the Europeans' history on this Continent must be addressed.

The *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* say, "the Circle comes around," with the understanding that everything is connected and has consequences. As long as the people who call themselves Americans remain ignorant or in denial about who they are and about the historical foundations of their own society, the things that they are trying to ignore or hide will continue to fester, erupting in social pathology, ecological devastation, and an inexcusable waste of what all human beings have to contribute to this world.

My people did not invade Europe and try to crush the Europeans' religion, destroy their ecosystem, and socially engineer their lives. We have never harmed the Europeans. But, this land is my land. I have not only the right, but also the obligation, to speak out from my family, from the Bear *Dodem*, about what is being done on our land.

I am not an Indian; the Indian identity is an ugly caricature, created by the European immigrants to this Continent to discredit and stereotype the Aboriginal Indigenous people of this land. If the reader is looking for an "Indian Book," put this back on the shelf, because this book debunks the racist mythology of the Chippewa Indian identity. The word Indian is a European word of Latin derivation. *Indian* portrays Western European projections, and has no connection to the Aboriginal Indigenous peoples of this Continent. The mythology of Indians is crucial to Euro-Americans: to steal Aboriginal Indigenous peoples' land and resources, to hide the genocide committed against my people, and to re-define the context of European occupation of this land in ways that suit their leaders. The European category of Indian is presently being used in this way. At Red Lake, the

Chippewa Indians are a completely different group of people than the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*.³

I am *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*; I was born into the Bear Clan and *Dodem*. *Dodem* is a word in my language, also inflected as *Dodemian*, the most accurate English-language translation of which is "our extended family." Our patrilineally inherited *Dodems* are an important part of the identity of the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. Some people who identify themselves as Chippewa Indians admit, "we don't use *Dodems* any more," and others try to claim so-called Indian Clans on their maternal line, through their great-grandmothers. These Chippewa Indians know that they have White fathers or grandfathers.

My patrilineal ancestors have lived on the shores of Red Lake for millennia. According to the birchbark scrolls and stone inscriptions of my people, this land has been the land of my ancestors since the beginning of humanity about a million years ago—long before Adam and Eve were conceived of, before Eden, before the Pyramids, before Christianity. My daughter, Nee-gah-nee-benais-êke, has a spear point made by her ancestors here. By Euro-Americans' own scientific documentation, this spear point was made more than 150,000 years ago.

The seven birchbark longhouses on the south shore of Red Lake, mentioned by an early English explorer, were those of the Bear *Dodem* of Be-kwa-kwan. These people are my great-grandfather's family.

My great-grandfather was known by his *Midé* title, Bah-se-nos, which cannot be translated precisely into English. Bah-se-nos was born about 1819 or 1820 at Red Lake. He was a spiritual man and spokesman for the Bear *Dodem*. He spoke the consensus of our family, the people of the Bear *Dodem*. The other *Dodems* (families) had their own spokesperson. He did not tell anybody what to do, because personal Sovereignty, respect for others, and good manners are an inherent part of *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* values. The Western Europeans did not know how to deal with our egalitarian society, so they created Blood Quantum Indians

and appointed hierarchical Indian Chiefs, and put their Indians under Trusteeship in order to keep them under control.

My great-grandmother, Bah-se-nos' wife, was Nay-bah-ne-cumig-oke, born about 1820. It is against *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* religion, and it is considered incest, to marry anyone who is even remotely related, either by blood or through the *Dodem*s. *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* men traditionally brought their wives from someplace else, because of the kinship ties within the local community. Nay-bah-ne-cumig-oke was born into another *Dodem*, but because of her marriage to my great-grandfather, she became a Clan Mother of the Bear *Dodem*.

Bah-wah-we-nind, the son of Bah-se-nos and Nay-bah-ne-cumig-oke, was my grandfather. He was born about 1857, and was also a *Midé* religious and spiritual man of the Bear *Dodem*. Bah-wah-we-nind never touched alcohol, and refused to speak English. I spent most of my formative years with my grandfather, until he died in 1935.⁴ He was six feet six inches tall in his moccasins, and embodied the Traditional *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* values. He lived his religion in every moment of his life. I never saw him raise his hand in violence, and never heard him raise his voice in anger. He lived an active life until he was more than eighty years old, and on his death-bed he sang with his *Dodemian* in the spirit world, the whole day before he died. His Death Song is a part of *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* religion and philosophy, our understanding that life and death are part of the same harmonious reality.

My grandmother was Ke-niew-e-gwon-ay-beak, born about 1848, baptized Catherine. She came from Leech Lake, and like my grandfather, had lost earlier families to the Europeans' diseases. She died when she was about seventy-two years old, before I was born. My father was born in 1903, a change-of-life baby born when his mother was in her fifties, and was her only child with Bah-wah-we-nind. My father, along with his older half-sister, was randomly assigned the surname Blake, in order to civilize them. My English name is Francis Blake, Jr., and I am the second generation with an English surname.

INTRODUCTION

WE, THE AHNISHINAHBÆÓ'JIBWAY AND THE EURO-AMERICANS: CHIPPEWA INDIANS

My patrilineal great-grandfather, Bah-se-nos, died in 1901, when he was in his eighties. Although millions of our people had died from the White man's diseases during the preceding three centuries, when Bah-se-nos was a young man in the early 19th century, the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* *Dodemian* at Red Lake still had a comparatively intact community. At that time, at least ten of our thirty-two *Dodem*s still survived. We lived our traditional life, and our permacultural subsistence base was unbroken. The wood buffalo, southern caribou, moose, deer, elk, bears, panthers, wolves, waterfowl and passenger pigeons abounded in our old-growth forests, swamps and meadows, and during the spawning seasons the rivers were so thick with fish that the water looked like it was boiling. Hunting and fishing have always been an integral part of *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* culture, and the carefully tended abundance of fish, game, and carnivores was a part of our traditional economic system.

Before the coming of the White man, the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* saw our Aboriginal Indigenous land as beautiful, abundant, conveniently accessible from three major river systems and near the center of this Continent. From an Euro-American perspective, however, we were at the periphery: beyond the Mississippi River Basin, at the far reaches of the Hudson's Bay watershed on the north slope of the continental divide. From their point of view, our powerfully invigorating winters were brutal and bitterly cold, and the awakening and rebirth of our lush verdant summers were punctuated by hordes of ravenous black flies and mosquitos. Hunting and fishing are not a part of traditional European or Euro-American mercantile culture, and the bounty-

ful fish and game inherent in our permaculture were not coveted by the immigrant peoples as economically valuable. They were interested in other of our resources: fur and later timber, but these are not unique to Red Lake. From the White man's point of view, Red Lake was an unpleasant, swampy backwater of the hinterland—this is why *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* have survived.

When my great-grandfather was young, the only Europeans within three days travel of Red Lake were several families of French and French Métis associated with the fur trade. During Bah-se-nos' lifetime, the United States Government gradually moved into the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* Nation, using the French people who were here as intermediaries, and also as a justification for further Euro-American incursions. As a part of this process, the United States Government lumped both *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* and French Métis into the hypothetical category of "Chippewa Indians." By putting two entirely different groups of people into one abstractly homogeneous category, they hoped to make the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* disappear. They used the French Métis Indians—European subject people with whom the Anglo-Americans had warred and won, as their rationale to occupy the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* non-violence is one of the fundamental precepts of our *Midé* religion.

The United States Government followed classical Western European occupation tactics: ¹ exploiting us economically, banning the use of our language, forcing us to change our names to English-language names, and outlawing our religion.

Bah-se-nos never gave up the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway Midé* religion, which was forced underground in the 1880's, and remains underground. He spoke powerfully in defense of the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*, and against the liquor which was being introduced into our community as a means of destroying our people. Bah-se-nos was an Aboriginal Indigenous person, not one of the Europeans' appointed Indian Chiefs. He is mentioned in Indian and White histories as an old "pagan" living in a "bark hut,"² which was the historians' derogatory way of describing

his traditional longhouse. My great-grandfather was knowledgeable about *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* medicines and herbs, but was inaccurately labelled by the Europeans as a "grand medicine man."³ Many of the things said and written about Bah-se-nos are not true, and were used to discredit him and other *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*.

Bah-se-nos was at the treaty negotiations of 1863, at the place called the Old Crossing on the French Pembina oxcart trail, between Thief River Falls and Red Lake. At that time, many Frenchmen were working as teamsters, hauling freight between the mostly French settlements at Pembina, North Dakota, and Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Old Crossing was a place where these people regularly stopped en route, analogous to a truck stop. This junction of two rivers had also been used for many thousands of years by the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* as a gathering place for giving thanks, autumn celebrations and socializing with neighboring Aboriginal Indigenous people. The United States Government held the treaty negotiations in the fall to coincide with the time that *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* would already be there. Along with the other *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* men, Bah-se-nos could not and did not sign the so-called treaty between the French Métis, whom the U.S. put into the persona of Chippewa Indians, and the English-Americans purporting to sell *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* land.

The unilateral Western European treaty of 1863 was not used by the Euro-Americans to claim eminent domain over *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* land. That claim had been made in 1481 by Pope Sixtus the 4th, in the Papal Bull of *Æterni Regis*, which unilaterally granted dominion of Christian nation-states over all land not owned by Christian Kings and Princes; and was reasserted in reference to this Continent in 1496 by the King of England, two hundred and forty-one years before Red Lake was mapped by any Europeans;⁴ and was reaffirmed by the United States Supreme Court in 1823:⁵

[T]he rights of the original inhabitants were . . . to a consider-

able extent, impaired. Their rights to complete sovereignty, as independent nations, were necessarily diminished, . . . denied by the original fundamental principle, that discovery gave exclusive title to those [European Christians] who made it.

While the different nations of Europe respected the rights of the natives, as occupants, they asserted the ultimate dominion to be in themselves; and claimed and exercised, as a consequence of their ultimate dominion, a power to grant the soil, while yet in possession of the Indian right of occupancy. . . . So early as the year 1496, her [England's] monarch granted a commission to the Cabots, to discover countries then unknown to *Christian people*, and to take possession of them in the name of England. Two years afterwards, Cabot proceeded on this voyage, and discovered the continent of North America, along which he sailed as far south as Virginia. To this discovery the English trace their title. . . .

Thus has our whole country been granted by the crown while in the occupation of the Indians. These grants purport to convey the soil as well as the right of dominion to the grantees. . . .

From an *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* perspective, neither the King of England nor any other Christian sovereign had right or reason to do this anywhere in the world. The Europeans have never had any business stealing others' land. Although both Jewish rabbinical law and the Christian Bible exhort the faithful, "Thou Shalt Not Steal," this "was not intended to apply outside the community of the faithful."⁶ Many Euro-Americans have told me, "that all happened a long time ago. I'm not responsible for what my ancestors did." This may be so, but these people are still living here in disharmony, and they continue to define themselves, and their relationship to this land and to Aboriginal Indigenous people, in terms of this obsolete European medieval bigotry.

The foundation of the Indian treaties was explained by legal scholar Felix S. Cohen in 1942:⁷

[O]ur Indian Law originated, and can still be most closely grasped, as a branch of International law, and . . . in the field of international law the basic concepts of modern doctrine were all

hammered out by the Spanish theological jurists of the 16th and 17th centuries. . . .

The Western Europeans' ethnocentric understanding of property was not explained to the *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* at the Old Crossing. The United States used their unilateral Indian treaty to claim fee patent of our *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* land, opening most of it to White settlement as so-called public domain, and claiming the balance as being under their jurisdiction as an Indian reservation, which was synonymous with P.O.W. camp. When Bah-se-nos was in his forties, and his son—my grandfather Bah-wah-we-nind—was young, the United States Army began forcing both French Métis and *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* onto the Reservations at gunpoint, killing those who remained outside the boundaries unilaterally established by the U.S.A. At that time, the State of Minnesota paid a bounty on what they called Indian scalps.

Bah-se-nos was about seventy when the Minnesota Chippewa Commission held meetings in July, 1889 at Red Lake. He listened to the Commissioner's presentation of the U.S. Congress' Act of January 14, 1889, also known as the Nelson Act. This unilateral United States statute mandated dividing up *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* land, selling most of it to White settlers, and breaking up the rest by issuing parcels of land to French Indians as allotments under U.S. trusteeship. Bah-se-nos told the Commissioners that the *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* could not and would not sell our land,⁸ but the Chippewa Creole in which the meetings were being interpreted was a hierarchical trade pidgin in which it was impossible to communicate *Ahnishinahbæō'jibway* concepts. Grandmother Earth, and Grandfather *Midē* are our identity: where we come from, who we are, where we go back to, our philosophy, everything that relates to us, connected together in harmony. We cannot sell our philosophy or our religion, our identity or our relations who share the Earth with us. We cannot sell land; the idea was sacrilegious then and it still is now.

The Commissioners for the Minnesota Chippewa Commission wrote Bah-se-nos' name on the Signature Rolls, forged his "X"

mark, and recorded their Métis interpreters' mistranslation of his name as "Brushing Off Flies."

The Métis people referred to themselves until recently, as French Canadians, or sometimes as Chippewa Indians. Most of these people came into *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* country during the time of the French fur trade, some as fur company employees and some as refugees from European violence.

Some Métis were employed by the United States Government as scouts and interpreters, although they only understood French, broken English, and the pidgin Creole⁹ language called Chippewa. The Métis interpreters called Bah-se-nos a "Blanket-Ass Indian," which they considered a derogatory term, but now these Métis' grandchildren are trying to steal my grandfather as their own.¹⁰ In part because of the ethnocentric way in which the Euro-Americans claimed eminent domain and land title on this Continent, the United States Government wanted the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* to assimilate into the European culture—as Indians, and they also wanted the Métis to assimilate into the Indian culture which the Europeans had created. Many of the leading French Métis families have been paid for a century by the U.S. Government to be Indians, and have accepted this personally damaging duplicity rather than being who they really are.

The United States Government built a log house for my great-grandfather, Bah-se-nos, saying that this was to civilize him. They cut down the forests which were a part of his religion, in order to build the log house. They told him, "be civilized like us . . . assimilate," but they invited neither the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* nor the White man's blood relatives, the Chippewa Indians, into their social class. The missionaries of civilization have not explained what they really mean by assimilation, and the Euro-Americans have never clearly defined what they mean by their designation, Indian.¹¹ *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* saw what the Whites were advocating as pure nonsense, foolishness motivated by greed.

Bah-se-nos lived in his birchbark longhouse his whole life.

When he died the U.S. Government burned his longhouse. Bah-se-nos died in the 1901 smallpox epidemic at Red Lake (the Europeans developed a vaccine for smallpox in 1792, and were immunizing many of their own people). The Catholic Priest, Father Thomas, claimed to have "baptized the old Pagan"¹² as he lay dying in his longhouse, which is false. Bah-se-nos was buried in the Bear Dodem family graveyard by my grandfather's house in Be-kwa-kwan. If my great-grandfather had been an Indian, and had not the *Midé* as his source of identity and strength, the Christians would have been able to baptize him, and they would have buried him in the Catholic cemetery. The Catholics told me, "you have to be baptized a Catholic to be buried in this hallowed ground," although they had stolen *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* sacred land to make their cemetery. We see the irony of such contradictions, from an *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* perspective. The Catholics misrepresented the date and cause of his death,¹³ in part because Bah-se-nos is alleged to have signed a 1902 land cession document after he was already dead.

My grandfather, Bah-wah-we-nind, lived during the most invasive phase of Euro-American occupation of *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* land, from the mid-nineteenth century into the 1930's. Bah-wah-we-nind was also alleged to have put an "X" on the 1889 Minnesota Chippewa Commission documents, in the same individual's Spencerian handwriting as that asserted to be his father's, with his name spelled as *Paw-waw-we-nind*, an incorrect age, and the mistranslation of "The One that is Mentioned." I spent my formative years with my grandfather, and remember these years in *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* rather than English. Despite what he had experienced in living through more than a half a century of genocide committed against our people and our *Dodemian*, Bah-wah-we-nind was a serene, kind, gentle and strong man. I write of his house as an island of love and harmony, for lack of English words which translate the deeper meanings in *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. Much of this book is the legacy of my grandfather, and is written in his honor. Bah-wah-we-nind is my enduring role model. The people I hope to emu-

late are my grandfather, and my great-grandfather Bah-senos, and Om-be-geshig, my great-uncle. It takes a good man to fill their moccasins.

Ahnishinahbæó'jibway names are religious, given through the *Midé*. Chippewa Indian people have Christian names, European surnames, and genealogies traceable on their patrilines back to Eurasia and North Africa. Because of their White fathers, the Métis and other Chippewas do not have an *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* name, Dodem, and they do not have an *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* name, although they were often listed in the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (B.I.A.) records under Indian pseudonyms. The White man forced European names on the *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. Their Indians, who already had White names, took Indian aliases.¹⁴ The Indian names used by the Chippewa Indian people come from several sources: some of them were stolen, like our language and pieces of our religion, assuming that the Aboriginal Indigenous peoples' objections would never be heard. Some of the Chippewa Indians at Red Lake have told me, "you're right, but—who's going to believe you?"

My father had an *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* name, but the United States Government made him use the name Francis Blake. The *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* men of my father's generation were the ones against whom the United States Government's most concentrated efforts at "Annihilation, Assimilation, and Termination" of Aboriginal Indigenous people were directed. "Pulverize the Tribal Masses"¹⁵ was the U.S. policy advocated by President Theodore Roosevelt. Aboriginal Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in boarding schools. The purpose of the boarding schools was explicitly stated in U.S. Government documents: to destroy Aboriginal Indigenous culture. They were run on a military basis, and discipline was brutal and sometimes lethal.¹⁶

Both the United States Government and the Church-run boarding schools forced the Christian religion and the English language onto the Aboriginal Indigenous children. As a child in

the boarding school, I was appalled at the violence in Christianity as it was told to us: crowning with thorns, whipping and scourging, nailing Jesus to a cross and then putting a spear into his heart, all of the gory details. These are terrible things to tell a little child. The *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* religion is non-violent. The beating, killing and crucifixion of Jesus Christ traumatized me and gave me nightmares.

The threads of violence are interwoven throughout Western European civilization, inseparable from both their Judeo-Christianity and their science. The clear-cutting of our forests is plundering our Cathedral, violently desecrating *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway* hallowed ground. Darwin and Spencer's theory, "survival of the fittest," speaks of each species that goes extinct in a dog-eat-dog world. The Lislakhs¹⁷ do not see the totality in the Circle of Life. When you heedlessly destroy species around you, which are all inter-connected, when does it become your turn for extinction? You need those other species to survive.

Of the nearly eight thousand people presently defined by the United States Government as members of the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, only about two hundred are *Ahnishinahbæó'jibway*. The rest are White and Métis people trapped by the Indian identity. Indians are a mythology created by the White man, who controls the definitions and stereotypes attributed to Indians. Many of the people externally defined as Indians live out the stereotypes and vicious labels of "drunken Indian," "lazy Indian," "dirty Indian," "stupid Indian," "violent savage." The United States Government has not taken responsibility for the damage they have caused to people by defining them as Indians.

The community in Red Lake was in chaos in the early 1900's. The United States Government deliberately brought in, and tacitly condoned, Métis bootleggers. The word was, "Have a drink, Nit-jii, or you're no friend of mine." Drugs are still used in the same way both at Red Lake and in the urban "red ghettos." Drugs and alcohol keep people in a condition of bare survival