

Manoomin: Wild Rice Harvesting of the Ojibwe and its Link to their Worldview

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Abstract

The Ojibwe (also known as Chippewa or Anishinaabe) are a tribe of Native Americans in the Great Lakes region including Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. The worldview of the Ojibwe is unlike that of many other peoples, and this causes them to view things differently. This is especially true for their view of nature, and plants in particular. Plants have been an important part of the Native American culture for hundreds of years, and they are used as food, medicines, and tools. The Ojibwe are reverent of all plants, but manoomin, or wild rice, is a staple of the Ojibwe diet. The rice is important not only as foodstuff but it is also important culturally, economically, and spiritually. The purpose of this study is twofold. First, I look at how the rice harvest has changed over time, including present day concerns of the Ojibwe affecting this practice. Secondly, I examine the worldview of the Ojibwe and determine how this affects the way that they relate to and use plants, specifically wild rice or manoomin. I performed interviews with 8 Ojibwe tribal members of the Lac Vieux Desert and Lac du Flambeau reservations. Through these interviews, I learned that wild rice is extremely important in the Ojibwe culture, and many Ojibwe are dedicated to the protection of it. Their respect for wild rice in the ethos held by the Ojibwe can be seen in the way they respect plants, specifically in the way that they relate to and use wild rice.

Introduction

In recent past, concerns regarding environmental conservation have become widespread in the United States. To Native Americans, though, the protection of the environment has been important for hundreds of years. As a Native American myself, I have been taught to respect and protect nature. I have always learned that we as humans

are only one small part of nature, and that every plant and animal deserves to be respected. My elders have taught me that we need to prevent as much damage to nature as possible.

Just as I was taught about my past through stories, many Native Americans pass on their history and culture through stories, and this is also the method used to teach younger generations about values and morals. Native American's great love and respect for nature can be best seen through these stories. In the Ojibwe creation story, the creator dreamt of the universe, and he thought it was so beautiful that he decided to bring it to life. He first created physical materials including rocks, water, and fire. Then he made plants and he arranged them in a way that would be most beneficial to all of creation. He then created the animals, giving them each purpose and reason for being. Last of all, least in the order of dependence, and weakest in bodily powers he made man and gave him the greatest gift—the power to dream (Peacock and Wisuri 2002, Johnston 1990). This story explains how the Ojibwe see all of creation as being interconnected, which explains why they would want to protect it.

The way that Native peoples view nature is very different than the way that many non-Native people view it. A study by Ross et al (2007) shows that there is a difference in the way that Natives relate to their environment compared to Euro-Americans that lived only one county away. The study asked both Native Americans and Euro-Americans to rate the importance of plants common to the area where they lived. The Natives gave a higher importance rating to plants both in how the plant was important to the forest and how the plant was important to the self. Six of the seventeen Natives that were interviewed gave the most important rating to all of the plants, whereas no Euro-

American did so. Native peoples place this importance on plants because they see that each plant has a role to play in nature and is therefore an important part of nature. While not all Native Americans are concerned with nature, many live out lifestyles that do the most to protect the environment. It is important to continue scientific research, yet we have much to gain by learning more about how this group of people chooses to live out their lives.

The Ojibwe continue the tradition of a close relationship with nature, including plants. Also known as the Chippewa, they live in the great lakes region including Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. However, the Ojibwe have not always lived in the great lakes region. Their stories tell of a dream in which the Great Spirit told them to move west until they found a land where food grows upon the water. The tribe moved west until they found wild rice, which grows upon the lakes and rivers in the great lakes region (Johnston 2001).

Wild rice, known by the Ojibwe as manoomin, has been important to Native Americans not only as a food source, but also economically, culturally, and spiritually. The rice is stored and eaten all year, but it is also given away for funerals and used during festivals (Densmore 1929). The wild rice is at the heart of Ojibwe life and culture, and the Ojibwe are very concerned with the future of the wild rice. As I alluded to earlier, the Ojibwe people view nature differently than the Western world. I want to find how the worldview of the Ojibwe affects their relationship and use of plants; specifically I will look at manoomin as an example of a plant that is valued by the Ojibwe people.

Methods

This study used qualitative methods to address the questions of interest. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, a qualitative approach to social inquiry allows the researcher to develop a more complex understanding of actors. A qualitative approach is well suited for this project because I want to understand the ritual of wild rice harvesting as a meaningful cultural process (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

An ethnographic approach would be ideal for this project, but time constraints did not allow this. As an alternative approach, data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews (Stephens et. al 1998). Essentially, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to develop and ask any interesting or important questions that come to mind during an interview in addition to a preconceived set of questions. This open-ended format allowed the respondent to talk at length about issues or concerns important to him/her. I contacted members from both the Lac Vieux Desert tribe as well as the Lac du Flambeau tribe and conducted a total of 8 interviews; three of the respondents were contacted on multiple occasions, as a result I was able to build strong rapport with the respondents. The sample of interviewees was chosen via a snowball sample, meaning that initial respondents recruited subsequent ones for later interviews (Heckathorn 1997).

The field notes were analyzed as individual cases. Data from the cases were compared against one another in order to triangulate responses from various sources. In addition, cases were treated on their own accord as accounts that, in aggregate, illuminate multiple viewpoints from which ricing is viewed or practiced.

Results

Wild rice, *Zizania palustris*, is a type of grass that grows in the water in lakes and streams (Warwick and Aiken 1986). It only grows in shallow water in which there is a

small amount of current that delivers nutrients to the growing plant. The rice naturally reseeds itself when the seeds fall into the water where a barbed end anchors it in the muddy bottom of the lake. The seed germinates in spring, and continues to grow until the rice is ready for harvest in August or September (Vennum 1988).

Prior to being assimilated into the money economy, Great Lakes Ojibwe were dependent upon natural resources for survival, and manoomin was an important source of nutrition that was found in abundance in what has been referred to as the “wild rice district” (Jenks 1900). They were a semi-nomadic culture with bands traveling along familiar routes each year in search of resources (Danziger 1938). In the winter, especially during the fur trading days, the tribes would focus primarily on trapping as this was the time of the year when hides were fit for the market place. Traditionally, the warmer months were spent fishing and gathering. In the spring, for example, they would move into sugar camps in order to make maple syrup and maple sugar, a practice that is still carried out by some tribal members such as one of the interviewees. In order to sustain themselves, they would preserve all of their supplies so that they could survive the harsh winters. Often times, according to one interviewee, they would bury caches of food for future returns to the camps; others have documented this typical practice (Bokern 1987). The summer was a time of planting potatoes, corn, beans, and squash as well as collecting berries. According to one woman, the summer would be a time to prepare for entering the ricing camps by collecting materials to construct and repair, among other things, canoes and containers for the upcoming harvest and subsequent storage of the rice. For instance, I was shown the traditional practice of gathering *outer* bark from a birch tree while leaving the inner bark intact, thereby allowing the tree to

live; a well-known practice that contradicts Densmore's (1929) report that the trees were felled to remove the bark. Birch bark canoes were patched by spreading pine pitch over holes and seams, a practice that went away as tribal members transitioned to using commercially manufactured canoes. Canvas canoes, and subsequently aluminum ones, replaced traditional birch bark canoes. Commercial canoes are still used today. Recently, though, some tribal members began constructing flat-bottomed canoes specifically designed for ricing.

Manoomin, the good (mano) seed (min), has been a staple of the Ojibwe culture since the tribe moved to the great lakes region in the 1400s. Traditionally, ricing was a communal process in which the whole tribe would move into ricing camps in the fall to harvest enough rice to last them through the entire year. Once set up at the ricing camps, each person of the family had a job that they had to fulfill. The women would often harvest the rice, while men, women, and children would be involved in processing the rice. While the women were harvesting, the men would be "harvesting" the waterfowl that lived in the rice (Mason 1988; Hilger 1951). One elder informed me that not everyone would be involved in harvesting and processing wild rice. Other people would be out hunting, fishing, gathering berries, making baskets or drying food to prepare the tribe for the winter. She told me that no one was unhappy to do their chores because they were all things that were necessary for the tribe to survive through the winter; there was sense of community in the camps.

The Ojibwe have many traditions that they follow when ricing to ensure that the rice is protected for future generations. I was told in an interview that in the old days, the tribe had a rice chief that would observe the rice and tell the rest of the tribe when the rice

is ready to harvest. The other tribal members could not go out on the rice beds until the rice chief allowed them to or else they would be told to leave and would have their canoe taken away. This practice prevented people from damaging the crop by harvesting it too early. When you harvest rice that is ripe enough, it not only is easier to knock, but some of the rice falls back into the water, and this ensures that the rice continues to grow year after year.

The rice chief was also the first person in the tribe that would go out on the lake to harvest the rice. There would be a ceremony before the harvest in which all the harvesters would offer tobacco and an article of clothing to tell the spirits that they appreciate them. The rice chief would go out and harvest some rice, and would come back and it would be processed and everyone would eat the rice, but before they ate it, some of the rice would be offered up to the spirits. The rice chief was also responsible for determining how much rice could be taken from each lake to ensure that not too much was taken (Valliere 2004, Vennum 1988). There was some discrepancy among the respondents about whether rice chiefs still exist. There are still tribal members designated as “rice chiefs” that are in charge of overseeing the cultivation and conservation of manoomin. However, off-reservation conservation practices, where much of the ricing is done, are lead by an intertribal agency.

Practice of Harvesting Rice

The wild rice harvest, although it has seen some changes over the years, is largely the same as it was hundreds of years ago. In the old days, the each family had a plot of rice that would be marked off with stakes. About three weeks before the rice would be ready; the women would go out and tie the rice into bundles using the inner bark of the

basswood tree (Densmore 1974). This tying of the rice would not only designate ownership of the rice, but it also makes the rice less susceptible to being lost in bad weather or eaten by an animal (Vennum 1988). When they wanted to harvest the rice, they would take a canoe through the rice, untie the bundles and shake the rice into the canoe. Tied rice was heavier, and they were able to harvest almost all of the rice at one time. This meant that the rice would have to be planted to ensure that the rice would grow the next year. As the interviewees told us, tying of the rice is no longer practiced, likely due to the amount of time it takes.

The rice is harvested by pushing a canoe through the rice fields and knocking the kernels into the boat, a traditional practice that continues to this day. One person uses a long pole with a fork on the end to push the canoe through the rice fields, while another person sits in the boat harvesting the rice. This method is used because it prevents damaging the rice. The person in the boat uses two long, cedar ricing sticks to knock the kernels into the boat. They use one of the sticks to bend the rice over the canoe, and they lightly hit the rice with the other stick, causing the rice to fall into the boat. They continue to do this on both sides of the canoe until the boat is full of rice. According to all those interviewed, this process is hard work, and it is very dirty; people typically come back from ricing covered in rice chaff, dirt, and rice worms. They could harvest as much as 700 pounds of rice in one day, but after a long day of ricing the rice must be processed before it can be stored and eaten (The Wild Rice Harvest, Vennum 1988).

Processing the Rice

The processing starts by drying the rice in the sun on large tarps. While the rice is drying, it is constantly being turned and cleaned to pick out any stones or insects or

leaves that may be in the rice. After the rice is sun dried, it must be parched by roasting it in a big kettle over a fire. The rice must be stirred constantly while being parched; I was told that parching continues until the rice smells like it is done. After parching, the rice is danced to remove the chaff from the seeds. This is done by placing the rice in a pit in the ground lined with an animal hide, and someone dances on the rice while wearing a pair of moccasins. To remove the chaff from the seeds, the rice is then winnowed, or placed in a birch bark basket and tossed up in the air and caught again in the basket. The wind catches the chaff and blows it away, leaving only clean rice to fall back into the basket. Only a few pounds of rice are processed at one time, so this time consuming process would continue all day long (Vennum 1988).

Although many ricing traditions are still an important part of the Ojibwe culture today, processing of the rice has changed over the years. Because of time constraints, little of the processing is done by hand. Often times people make/use machines to do part or all of the processing. For instance, one respondent uses a commercial grade popcorn maker to parch the rice. Others take their rice to large processors, called “thrashers”, and pay in a percentage of rice; as of last year, ricers must give up 3 pounds of every 10 harvested to the owner of the machine. Although some of the traditional ricers think that it should be completed in a traditional manner, most of today’s ricers have no problem with processing mechanically because it saves time. Traditional ricing camps intended to enliven historical practices, however, still use old processing methods. Once the rice is processed, it can be stored indefinitely as long as it is stored correctly; some of the respondents have rice that has been in storage for a number of years.

Also because of time constraints, camps are much shorter than in the past. Recent ricing camps of those respondents that still rice ranged from 2 to 7 days. As social gatherings, they are much smaller than in the past. In many instances, camps are done in pairs or ricing is done as a daily activity. The social function that traditional ricing camps had in creating cohesiveness within and among families is non-existent today.

Values of Manoomin

As I alluded to earlier, manoomin is valued for different reasons. There were 5 distinct categories that emerged in which wild rice is or has been valued by Ojibwe people: socially, economically, spiritually, nutritionally, and aesthetically.

Although the gathering of wild rice was hard, intense labor, the wild rice camps were a joyous place where people were able to catch up on all the happenings of the year (Kerfoot 1994, Vennum 1988). According to two of the elders interviewed, when they began ricing in the 1930s camps would last 3 to 4 weeks, similar to camps before their time. In the evenings everyone would sit around the fire and tell stories. One elder remembers the adults singing and dancing through the night, a memory she obviously enjoyed reminiscing about. To her and her relatives, the social aspect of ricing was just as important any other part of it. A similar sentiment can be seen in a previous account that tells of a family who ceased ricing after it became centered more around its economic value than its social value as tribal members were bussed in by commercial enterprises driven solely by profit (Kerfoot 1994).

Wild rice became significantly valued economically beginning with the fur trade. Fur traders regularly bartered with tribal members for supplies of rice (Bokern 1987). As the Ojibwe assimilated into the money economy, as I allude to above, the economic value

of wild rice became more important. With increases in large-scale farming of *Zizania palustris* in the 1980s, its market value declined. Recently, though, distinctions being made between “authentic wild rice” and “paddy rice” have increased the market value of rice harvested by the Ojibwe. One respondent helped to broker a deal between a tribe and a restaurant for 12,000 pounds at a price much greater than market rate for paddy rice. Some respondents claim that authentic wild rice cooks more consistently than paddy rice, and that had processed rice has a different, distinct flavor.

Spiritually, the Ojibwe value manoomin immensely. Many stories that are passed down through generations involve wild rice. Still today it is used in ceremonies as a sacred object. Some of the respondents harvest a portion of their rice to be used in these ceremonies. Another respondent sells a portion of his harvest every year to other tribal members for similar ceremonies.

The wild rice was the only significant form of carbohydrates that the Indians had before their exposure to Europeans, and it was a necessary staple of their diets. The rice is extremely nutritious, especially compared to other types of rice. One serving contains seven grams of protein, along with several vitamins and minerals including iron, potassium, phosphorus, thiamine riboflavin, and niacin (Great Lakes Brochure). In addition to its nutritional value, tribal members value manoomin as a quality food. All the respondents enjoy the taste of the rice.

Enemies of the Rice

Although the Ojibwe have relied on the rice for food, it is vulnerable at every stage of its growth. The plant can be attacked by fungi, out competed by natural or invasive plants, or eaten by animals and insects (Vennum 1988). The rice can also be

ravaged by even a strong wind or rain storm which can knock down the stalks or kernels of the rice so that it cannot be harvested. One of the interviewees recalled going out to see a lake in which the rice was destroyed by weather. He said that he cried because it was like looking at a town that had been torn down.

Although these are problems facing the rice, the most common enemy of the rice is changing water levels. The rice needs a certain depth of water, and a change of only a few inches can devastate a wild rice field. Much of the changes in water levels have come from humans damming the rivers for logging and power. This changes the level of the water in the lakes and streams, and also changes the currents that are necessary for the plant to grow (Vennum 1988).

Although the rice is important to the Native Americans that harvest it, not everyone appreciates it. Many lakefront property owners do not enjoy having rice on their lakes because it can grow thickly in the water preventing the movement of boats or taking up potential recreational areas of the lake. Some property owners even want to eradicate the rice (McComas 2000).

Fighting for the Rice

Several things are being done to try and protect the rice in the Great Lakes region. First, some tribes are fighting to preserve the correct conditions for rice in their lakes. Near the Lac Vieux Desert tribal grounds, a dam was built on the lake first for logging and now for power, causing a major increase in water level and a decrease in the amount of wild rice on the lake. The tribe went to court to fight to get the water level lowered, and they won ten years to lower the water level to determine if the rice recovers. Many of the lakefront property owners do not like to have the water level decreased because of

where their docks are build and where their recreational areas and fishing areas are. The Indians are fighting for what they think is best for the harmony of nature, especially wild rice, but I was told that they feel that everyone else only thinks of what it will monetarily cost them.

In addition to the efforts of individual tribes, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) is working to protect the wild rice. GLIFWC is an organization set up to help the Indians in the Great Lakes area to ensure their treaty rights. GLIFWC performs harvest and abundance surveys to study the amount of rice from year to year, and they have found that huge amounts of rice have been lost. They are also performing a restoration project in which they buy green rice from the ricers and they plant it in areas that have the correct conditions for rice production. GLIFWC is also involved in education programs that are aimed at non-tribal members that teach them the importance of the wild rice for the Ojibwe in the hope that other people will learn to protect the rice as well. Although the tribes have traditional knowledge of the rice, GLIFWC is providing a more large-scale scientific approach to assist the tribes in preserving their practice of harvesting wild rice.

Declines in the number of ricers

Many Ojibwe still rely on the rice for food, yet the number of ricers has steadily decreased over the years. Young people especially are not as likely to go out ricing. In my interviews I heard many reasons that may explain this trend, and most likely they all had an impact on the ricing. First, ricing is very time and labor intensive, and many people just do not want to spend the time and energy to harvest rice when they can just buy food at the supermarket. I heard some people say that people have become lazy, and

whether this is true or not the Ojibwe are just not as dependent on the rice as they once were.

One reason given for an earlier decline in the number of ricers is the breakdown of the nuclear families that existed in the old days, beginning with the federal Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Since their contact with Europeans, the Ojibwe have been split up more and more. First it was relocations and the movement to reservations, then it was the boarding schools, next was the move to urban areas in the 1950's, but today the family is not as close as it once was due mostly by the need of the parents to work. Parents may have to work different shifts and kids may have to spend time with a relative or babysitter. Whatever the cause, the break up of the nuclear family means that children are not learning traditional activities such as ricing.

Ricing may also be on the decline due to the inability of people to get enough time off of work in order to harvest substantial amounts of rice. Because it is so time intensive a process, it is hard for people to get enough time to continue the traditional methods of collection. Even if they have enough time, not everyone has a canoe or money to get to the rice beds, and therefore still cannot rice. Although these are seemingly unconnected reasons, they each have played a part in the decline of ricing over the years.

Discussion

One respondent told me about the importance of *creation stories* to the Ojibwe people as he jokingly told me that they have hundreds of creations stories. One creation story identifies manoomin as the reason that the Ojibwe migrated to this region in search of “the food that grows on water”. To the Ojibwe, the wild rice is a sacred medicinal

plant that was given to them by the creator, which of course deserves the respect of all people. When the creator created man, small particles fell from between the creator's fingers, and where these particles fell to earth medicinal plants grow. Because they are made from the same materials as humans, these plants are able to heal people, and they deserve a great respect.

Another story goes as follows. Long ago the Ojibwe thought that they were in control of the land, and they didn't know that they needed to respect the earth and its creatures. They hunted more animals than they could possibly use, and they cut down the plants of the forest. The animals became angry and decided to kill the Ojibwe people for the harm that they were causing, but none of the animals could actually kill the humans. Instead, they had a council in which they told the Ojibwe how they felt and they showed them how to respect the land. From that time on, the Ojibwe have felt that they are protectors of the land and everything on it (Johnson 1990). One way that the Anishinaabe show their respect is by never taking from the land more than they need, and this applies to both plants and animals. Whether they are harvesting birch bark, wild rice, or medicinal plants they never take more than they could use so that there will always be enough for the next generations. One person said that when harvesting plants you never take the first plant that you come to because that could be the last plant and if you destroy it then you won't have the plant to use in the future.

Another ricer told me how he feels the spirits of all of his ancestors on the lake while he is ricing. The eagles that live on the lakes are spirits that can carry messages from the spirits here on earth to those in the sky. He told me that although the ricing is long and tiring, he feels refreshed when he gets done ricing because of his visits with the

spirits while on the lake. The Indians seemed happier and more filled with spirit while ricing than at any other time of the year, one person talked about the feeling that they would get when close to Mother Nature, that made him feel he was touching his roots (Danziger 1938).

The ethos contained within, and espoused by, these stories was evident in my interviews. When asked about why the rice is so important to the Ojibwe people, I received the same answer over and over again. They have a deep “respect” for plants and animals because they feel that each has its own spirit, and the human spirit is not any better than the spirit of the plants. I was told that it was not uncommon for a person to dream that they were married to either a plant or animal. This may suggest that the spirits of the plants and animals are just as important and respected by the Ojibwe as the spirits of the people.

The anishinaabe ask the spirits of the plants to take care of them and provide for them, and the plants give of themselves to sustain the humans. While doing this, as a sign of respect to the spirit of any plant that is to be harvested, the tribal members offer tobacco and say a prayer for the spirit of the plant. The story goes, the spirits had power over all of the land, but within the spirits there was a hole. When the humans were created they were given the gift of tobacco. The tobacco is able to fill the hole that exists within the spirit, so when a person offers tobacco the spirits are willing to provide for the humans. The offering of tobacco to plants and animals is practiced by all those interviewed.

These stories related to me by respondents have a profound effect on the way they view wild rice. In closing, I'd like to paraphrase the sentiments of one respondent that encapsulates a present day link between the Ojibwe ethos and the wild rice.

When an Ojibwe looks out at a lake with rice he sees not just a lake, but he sees water that is life giving, rice and other plants that are medicinal and provide sustenance for people as well as all the animals that live in the rice. He sees muskrat, beaver, fish, waterfowl, and eagles. But most importantly he sees how all of these creatures have a spirit and how they are in harmony and balance. I feel the presence of my ancestors on the lake while he I am ricing. The eagles that live on the lakes are spirits that can carry messages from the spirits here on earth to those in the sky. Although the ricing is a chore, I feel refreshed when I get done ricing because I get a chance to visit with the spirits while on the lake.

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