

# The role and place of atikamekw women in the governance of land and natural resources



Photo: Christian Cocco, 2012

Suzy Basile's thesis focuses on identifying the role of Atikamekw women on the land: THEIR PLACE in local and territorial governance, THEIR PERCEPTIONS related to the state of the land and THEIR CONCERNs regarding knowledge transmission.

This research has shed light on the importance of making room for women in governance and decision-making in order to build on their knowledge to maintain and reinforce the strong connection between the Atikamekw nation and the land.

This document summarizes the research and aims at raising the awareness of all members of the Atikamekw nation about the role of women in the future of the land.

*“Atikamekw women want to be heard, consulted, and actively participate in all decision-making on territorial issues. All of this is quite possible. Moreover, many women are already involved in the process. We only need to ensure that their own realities and needs are taken into account.”*

— Suzy Basile, Ph.D.



# FIRST FINDING }

In order to communicate their knowledge, to express their feelings, Atikamekw women need to establish trust through the co-development of a consent form.

No less than 32 interviews were conducted, of which 15 in the Atikamekw language, as well as 5 meetings with Atikamekw women to validate the results.

Before asking these Atikamekw women about how they envisioned their place in the governance of land and natural resources, we wanted to involve them *in advance* of the research, that is, to consult them on the very content of the consent form and interview guide.

This desire to involve them allowed us to understand to what extent our research **methodology** would be critical in ensuring that the interviews provide us with a wealth of relevant information.

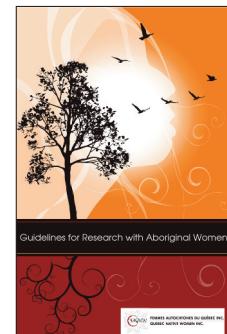
## MORE THAN A CONSENT FORM

The consent form is not only an administrative formality. It establishes a bond of trust with the Atikamekw women who will be asked to share their knowledge and their true feelings. Therefore, they needed to be involved in the drafting of this form. In this case, the form includes many notions:

- ❖ The possibility of expressing themselves in their mother tongue since language and identity are indissociable;
- ❖ The possibility of conducting interviews in the forest, all the more since the study focuses on the land;
- ❖ The duty to discuss findings with the interviewees, in order to obtain their validation of the content and of the way of presenting it.

The consent form and the interview guide have been developed in collaboration with some of the interviewed women. In addition to enriching our research, this approach should have direct impacts on all other studies conducted with Indigenous Peoples.

This research is inspired by the *Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal Women* published in 2012 by the Quebec Native Women's Association.

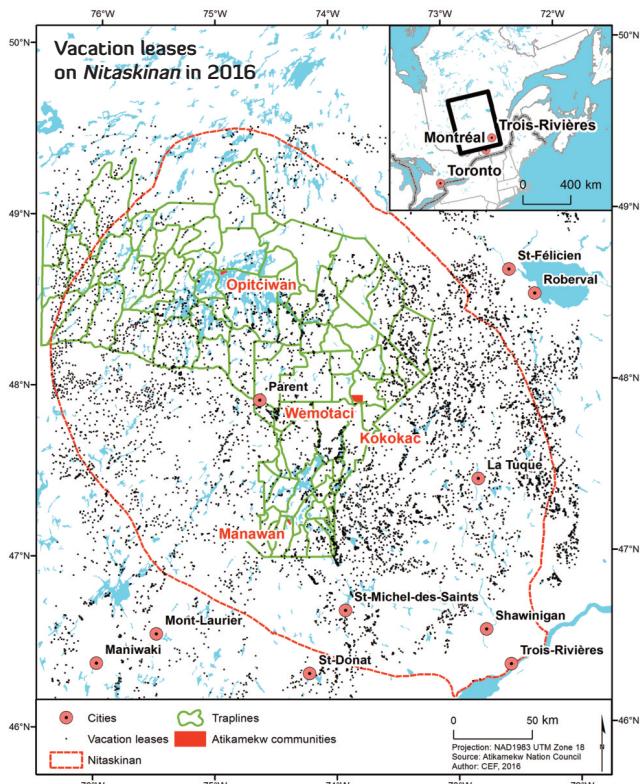


**"Very little, or nothing at all, is known about the history of Atikamekw women; their place within their society rarely documented and their role in territorial governance essentially ignored"**

# SECOND FINDING

Atikamekw women are deeply concerned about the “loss” of knowledge, know-how and practices caused by multiples transformations of ancestral land. They want to build on the know-how they have preserved to protect the land so intimately connected to their culture.

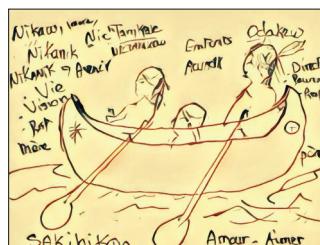
Before 1951, Indigenous women were excluded from public meetings, any decision-making and election of band councils. Yet, they were involved in the decision-making concerning territorial governance because of their deep connection to *Nitaskinan* ("our land"). Since land management was subject to family consensus, women were very much involved in the process.



The multiple transformations of the land (logging, floods, settlement of *Emitcikaciwicak* "white woodcutters", water contamination, loss of sacred sites, etc.) have caused women to lose much of their authority on the land. Today, they find themselves in a situation marked by a sense of powerlessness, of territorial and cultural insecurity. Even if their participation to public life has increased, they consider that there is room for improvement regarding the fostering of well-being, quality of life, harmony, protection of the land and balance in the decision-making of Atikamekw authorities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF “RESTORING BALANCE”

Balance was once a central notion of family organisation. Balance within the family, therefore within the nation. This balance was symbolised by *Tciman* (canoe), with the mother, the



Atikamekw women want to restore this balance in order to guide the strategies and choices regarding land management.

**"I've always heard my mother-in-law about the land with her husband. She took part in all decision-making and her decisions were respected."**

**“Yes, I’ve seen the flooding, I’ve seen earth floating on the waters. Over here, there was a point of land, and on the other side, there was a river, that’s what my grandmother told me. The land has changed, the trees, the lakes and the rivers have disappeared to make way for the Gouin Reservoir.”**

## THIRD CONSTAT }

For Atikamekw women,  
the land is the primary place of transmission  
of knowledge and values.

Atikamekw women identify the land as the place of cultural transmission. They are intimately connected. Yet, the transformation of the land has accelerated the settlement process and drastically changed their lifestyles. As a result, the preservation of knowledge has been greatly affected, especially the one passed down by grandmothers, often acquired by the careful observation of this land.

The re-appropriation of the land is even more critical when we consider it as the primary place of transmission of all of their values and in all areas where women are very active, including social organisation, pregnancy and childbirth, children's education, traditional medicine, etc.

- ❖ Childbirths on the land have become temporal and spatial markers.
- ❖ Midwives would travel all over the land and pass down their knowledge from generation to generation.

- ❖ Burying the placenta at the foot of a tree was a sacred act.
- ❖ The place of birth was associated to the land one came from, the place of origin being an integral part of one's self-identity.

These few examples demonstrate that the Atikamekw people, as most Indigenous peoples, have an intimate, holistic and undeniable relationship with the land. Atikamekw knowledge, practices and beliefs are connected to the land, still shaped today by their symbiotic and long-standing relationship to it.

Despite the changes to their land, despite the residential school era, Atikamekw women still maintain a deep connection with the land. An increased participation in land management appears as an absolute necessity, not only environmentally, but also for the preservation of culture and identity.



After completing a bachelor's and master's degree in anthropology, Suzy Basile became the first Indigenous student to receive a PhD from the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) as well as the first member of the Atikamekw nation to be awarded this degree. In the wake of her PhD in environmental sciences, she will lead the newly created Research Laboratory on Indigenous Women Issues – Mikwatsiu.

First Peoples Pavillon, Val-d'Or  
Tel. : 819 874-8728 # 6336 • [suzy.basile@uqat.ca](mailto:suzy.basile@uqat.ca)

*Mikwatsiu*