

Gashkibidaaganag: Ojibwe Bandolier Bags

by Linda Pocan Laffler

We all have things that we treasure, that give us remembrance, reassurance, status or identity.

We value these items highly.

Sadly, however, treasured objects sometimes fall victim to evil. Native people of this continent have had much taken from them, in the worst ways. Anger over stolen objects almost pales beside stolen and nearly destroyed lifestyles, histories and entire cultures. Genocide against native peoples was practiced throughout North and South America in the last few centuries, encouraged by land-hungry settlers and immigrants, and condoned by newly created governments pursuing economic growth as the expense of ethics.

We cherish ancestral European historic districts, log cabin lifestyles and our various cultural roots. Yet, seldom do we seek to experience or archive or recreate or preserve actual Native American ancient lifestyles, which blossomed originally on the continent. The Ojibweg, known as Ojibwe/Ojibwa/Ojibway/Chippewa/Saulteaux are an Anishinaabe people of Canada and the United States, residing in the North American Great Lakes vicinity and American West, and are one of the most numerous indigenous peoples north of the Rio Grande. For centuries they treasured their bandolier bags, which they created, and imbued with religious and cultural significance.

Who are the Ojibweg, the people who endured for thousands of years where we now live? White historians think these ancient people crossed the Bering Land Bridge (from what is now Asia to Alaska) an estimated 20,000 years ago and then migrated south to establish their new homelands

on the US east coast and then what is now southern Canada and the Great Lakes area, dwelling successfully for 12,000 years according to collective tribal memory, before being victimized by greedy European immigrants. However, Louise Erdrich explains in her book “Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country” that the tribe believes that they have lived in the Lake of the Woods in Ontario and Minnesota forever. Their basis for this conviction is “mazinibaganjigan, or dental pictographs made on birchbark, perhaps the first books made in North America..... 2000 B.C. is only the date of the oldest archaeological evidence found in the area.” Ojibwe believe they did not cross the land bridge, instead resided in this area originally. They moved around the area seasonally, due to warfare with other tribes and then with incursion of whites. The Ojibwe language, Ojibwemowin, is based on pictographs like the ancient markings on the landscape, which can still be understood by native speakers. Ojibwemowin is entered in the Guinness Book of World Records as one of the most difficult languages to learn, Erdrich also notes. “The great hurdle to learning resides in the manifold use of verbs- a stammer-inducing complex. Two thirds of the words are verbs, and for each verb there are countless forms. It is a language of action and human relationships.” It is still widely spoken, although the number of fluent speakers has declined sharply, and currently elders are the fluent speakers. Since the early 21st century there is a growing movement to revitalize the language, and restore its strength as a central part of Ojibwe culture, according to Wikipedia.

Carefully, through the care and foresight of the Ojibway people, a material object/icon that represents tribal honor and displays a badge of esteemed office has survived the ravages of time and oppression. Bandolier bags date back over 1,000 years according to cumulative tribal memory and have been long admired and sought by other tribes and Europeans. A vaguely

similar circumstance has occurred with Navajo blankets/rugs, in terms of trading value over time. Today gashkibidaagan are rare, and perhaps luckily found at high end art auctions, displayed in museums and private collections, and of course, carefully collected and preserved by the Ojibweg. They are distinct and beautiful, and each one has a story.

The story of each bag is subtle and layered, constructed by cultural definitions of their physical and spiritual environment. Red, blue, green and white are the colors of the directions, which Louise Erdrich cites in her book “The Round House”. Ojibwemowin is based on ancient symbols and shapes representing the sky, sun, people and animals. Clan affiliations, with drawings, serve as identity markers for individuals, direct and define their actions and life styles. Medicinal plants can refer to illness, location, history, health.... Thus, the design that a non-Ojibwe sees on a bandolier bag probably has no resemblance to what is being communicated to a tribal member. Incorporating all this symbolism in designs, apparent simplicity belies depths of complexity.

Gashkibidaaganag is the Ojibwe name for bandolier bags. According to Michael G. Johnson in his book “Ojibwa People of Forests and Plains”, they were also known as friendship bags, often given away at tribal and intertribal gatherings. He speculates that they were modeled after the 18th century colonial soldiers’ bullet pouches, and decorated with quillwork and later, beads, becoming an item of ceremonial dress worn first by man and later by some women also. However, he thinks it is likely that non-Indians began using this term because gashkibidaaganag are worn similarly to military ammunition bags from as early as the 16th century, which had the strap over one shoulder and pocket resting on the opposite hip. Ojibwe bags never had any association with weapons.” According to Ojibwe belief, they were anciently used to gather life

saving medicinal plants. The bag strap crosses over a person's heart so that good intentions go into the bags to symbolically empower the wearer, and by custom the bags do not leave the tribal community unintentionally.

Sometimes a bag is sold to raise money for an important purpose. Erdrich's character, Nanapush, in her book "Tracks" sells his 'beaded bandolier bag' to raise cash to retain their land. Nanapush is wise in his idiocy, an enduring old man who refused to betray his mother, Akiwe, Earth Woman, when the tribe was starving in winter, having been forced onto reservation. In Ojibwe mythology Nanapush carries out the wishes of the Great Spirit, Kitche Manitou.

Anderson says "No one knows when American Indians, and more specifically the Ojibwe of Minnesota, first began creating gashkibidaaganag. Eastern tribes made utility bags before Columbus arrived in 1492 and in the Minnesota region they predate French traders in the 1720's." (However, French traders were in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the 1600s, so perhaps documentation is lacking.) "Smaller related bag forms with straps, decorated originally with quillwork bands and later with glass beads, existed among the Ojibwe, Dakota, Delaware, Creek, Micmac, Meskwaki, Potawatomi, Montagnais, Seminole and other Woodland Indian cultures." These could have evolved into medicinal and then bandolier bags. During their seasonal migrations, the Ojibwe mixed with and traded with many cultures for thousands of years across the continent. The use and trade of copper across the continent proves a large trading network for thousands of years, back to the Hopewell tradition. Exchanges of ideas and information would have contributed to the evolution of the specific gashkibidaaganag structure and purpose.

Designs on the bags typically show medicinal plants, to mirror and honor their woodland environment, which grow in the area of the bag maker. Older bandolier bags also featured the X design representing a thunderbird. Thunderbirds in Ojibwe mythology are giant birds who lived atop Thunder Bay's Mount McKay located on the sacred site Fort William First Nation, overlooking the city and Lake Superior. Thunderbirds are supernatural, powerful Manitous (spirits) and can create rain, wind and violent thunderstorms with their wings and eyes, according to an article published in Northern Wilds Magazine, online. The giant birds protect the Ojibwe, whose mythology says they were created by Nanabozho to fight underwater creatures and protect humans against evil spirits. They arrived in spring and headed south in the fall. As 'spirits of the sky realm', thunderbirds were believed to be links between the spirit and physical world; they are revered and considered sacred.

Other tribes, including the Sioux, Hopi, Lakota and Apache, have different designs which refer to and symbolize their environments and lifestyles. Some tribes make similar bags, but with their own design motifs. The Navaho indicate water by a narrow horizontal zigzag line. Hopi design for mountains is high peaked inverted Vs.

Clans originated from godlike beings in an Eden-like place who came to teach the people the Midway of life. Clans or 'doodems', form and define the social fabric of Anishinaabe life. Based on animals which are an interwoven necessity and complement in their lives, clans provided identity, purpose, social structure and standing, marital rules and intertribal relations within the tribe. Ancient beliefs defined five tribes, and today six are the accepted framework. The number of clans and their purposes has varied due to circumstances of the tribe. Historically,

William Whipple Warren recorded at least twenty-one Ojibwe doodems/totems in all. Wikipedia explains that currently “The crane and the loon are the chiefs, responsible for over-seeing and leading the people. The fish are the scholars and thinkers and are responsible for solving disputes between the crane and loon. The bear is both the physician and the police. The martins are the warriors. The moose are craftsman and artists. Clans are both a means of acquiring and retaining knowledge for the Anishinaabe. Knowledge gained through experience and interactions with the Spirits and other clan members is passed down and built upon through generations.” Ojibwe communities have a strong history of political and social activism. While Europeans and Asians have maintained class and caste systems to assign individuals places and roles in the larger society, the Anishinaabe mythology created clans for a system of government and division of labor, whose mission is probably more benevolent than their counterparts across the oceans. Ojibwe dealings with the white U.S. government were diplomatic, establishing many treaties over centuries, rather than warfare. Shamefully, provisions of the treaties were often not fulfilled by government agents, who enriched themselves while the Ojibweg starved and died.

The psychology of giving a gift to an esteemed person is interesting. The bags are beautiful and are a labor of love. They represent the tribe’s spiritual health from the earth; thus bestowing that symbol on a person is very meaningful. Everyone in the tribe recognizes this significance, and the wearer is highly respected, making the bag a badge of office, Gashkibidaaganag also have religious significance, representing spiritual health. Traditionally, the Ojibweg were highly superstitious, acknowledging supernatural powers around them and acutely aware of the need to acquire the protection of personal guardian Manitous (spirits) to protect them. Both men and women were expected to have visionary experiences through isolation, fasts and deprivations.

Visions guided their lives, with rituals. The decorations were regarded as imbued with the Manitous guardian power. Hence, the sacred value of the bandolier bags to the tribe. Ruth Landes in *The Ojibwa Woman* writes that “the cultural keystone is individualism”, with pride and shame and personal health being paramount in importance to an Ojibwa person. Visionary understanding of the supernatural was vital. It had to be acquired, developed, and of course, was part of the gift. The Ojibweg sought to understand their world to the extent of the most subtle senses, and dwell in health and harmony with the forces surrounding them.

Native American peoples had vast and complex trade networks. They traveled great distances, had defined routes and bartered. Marcia G. Anderson in “A Bag Worth A Pony” writes “By the 1870’s and 1880’s the bags were in use as a form of currency, exchanged with the Dakota and other Plains nations for a pony. While the bags no longer served this particular form of exchange by the early twentieth century, their symbolic embodiment of status, gratitude, respect and leadership remained.” Anderson quotes Gilfillan’s “Ojibways in Minnesota”: Indian ponies received hard/starvation treatment in winters. Gilfillan explains, “One would wonder that, with the continual hard treatment every winter (when the people themselves had little or no food) and the great numbers that starve, there are any ponies left; but the explanation is that they get a fresh supply of ponies every summer from the Sioux, who abound in ponies. Most of the Ojibway men have their women make quantities of their beautiful bead-work every winter and store it up. When summer comes, the husband carries it to the Sioux country, and brings back as many ponies as he had tobacco pouches (kashkibitagunug). One of the bead-work pouches is the great ornament of an Ojibway, and any person wearing it is considered to be in full dress; it is worth a pony among the Sioux. Thus the stock of horses is every summer replenished. The Ojibways

are not horse Indians; naturally they have no horses, excepting those they get from the Sioux.” Animals were vital to the tribe’s existence, and they tended to live in small groups so hunting, fishing, gathering and preparation of food was very important. Johnson states “Feasts, songs and prayers were addressed to Nahahbozhoo or Nanabush for the gifts of food (game they caught) and failure to make offerings could lead to starvation. The bear was treated with special respect.” The Ojibwe hunted bears, using dogs for assistance.

Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha” in 1855 publicized the Ojibwe culture.

Johnson states that the many bags made in the late 19th century by the southern Ojibwa were first made in woven beadwork. Later with the availability of easily obtainable cloth, appliqué beadwork done by hand, for each bead was sewn onto red or black cloth or velvet, with borders around the lower panels. Some bandoliers at this time even lacked the opening, or had a small slit called a mailbox instead of an attached bag. And some bags had décor that showed X motif which was a symbolized thunderbird, an emblem of the tribe, with religious protection overtones. Gash kibidaaganag have tassels at the bottom, which is a practical finish for weaving but no doubt has symbolic value. The number of tassels varies, as do the designs on the tabs or tassels.

The Ojibweg utilized various types of bags and pouches in their daily life, including panel bags, octopus bags, fire bags, tobacco bags and pipe bags. Fire bag is also another of the many names for gashkibidaaganag. All were decorated with colorful quillwork and later, beadwork, in motifs symbolic of the maker’s intentions. The book “A Bag Worth a Pony” by Marcia G. Anderson

explains that “For generations the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes moved seasonally for trapping, hunting, fishing, berry picking, wild ricing, trading copper which they had mined, and making maple sugar. Their homes were conical-shaped teepees or ‘round houses’ made from ancient mythological instruction when Nanapush sheltered from a winter storm in the carcass of a female buffalo who had given her life to save the starving tribe in winter. Louis Erdrich recounts the story in her book “The Round House”: ‘Your people were brought together by us buffalo once. You knew how to hunt and use us. Your clans gave you laws. You had many rules by which you operated. Rules that respected us and forced you to work together. Now we are gone, but as you once have sheltered in my body, so now you understand. The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart. It will be the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way. As your mother is intent on her baby’s life, so your people should think of their children.’ (Erdrich’s round house also symbolizes a cherished part of Ojibwe tradition, one that has been somewhat destroyed by whites.)The poles were then covered with bark. Contemporary buildings have wooden shingles, for the same purpose. R. Buckminster Fuller advocated the geodesic dome much later in history, for its strength and utility, but perhaps it was not entirely his idea.

Because they traveled through the year to obtain sufficient food, the Ojibwa developed more portable household items than many other indigenous cultures of North America.... Bands, sashes, belts and bags that could be rolled up for easy transport and storage were practical. Women made bags and containers from tanned leather, from birch bark, from the inner bark of basswood, and from stinging nettle fibers twined into cordage. To decorate these objects, Ojibwe women used porcupine quills, bird quills, moose hair, shells, seeds and other materials available

in nature. Natural pigments and minerals were used originally to dye the quills and sometimes to color areas of the surface material. Eventually women adopted glass beads and other materials they acquired from traders. Landes comments in her book that the original natural dyes outlasted dyes that were later introduced, and were brighter and sustained color better. Porcupines were also part of their diet.

Ancient bags were woven on primitive looms consisting of two poles driven into the ground parallel, the distance apart that would be the width of the bag. Natural fibers were then twined around the poles to make a tube the height of the pouch part of the bag, secured at the bottom, and a strap was added or woven at the top in a specified width on each side and connected. An Ojibwe weaving loom is shown on page 15 of Eric Broudy's "The Book of Looms", referenced from "The American Indian" 1917. The Ojibwa loom is a simple frame loom consisting of two parallel poles on a stand or it could be a frame loom. Free warp twining technique is used to weave the bag. Ojibwa weavers have long been skilled in using the twining technique, which is described on page 57 of Verla Birrell's "The Textile Arts". She discusses Bow Belt looms also, which were built upon the same principle as the bow used with arrows. Structure of the loom: "The warp of this particular loom is stretched between two ends of a bent limb or bow, taking the position of the thong of a regular arrow. The natural spring of the bow holds the warp at a high tension, as weaving progresses and the warp tightens, the flexible bends slightly to adjust to this change of tension. On the early primitive bow looms, pieces of heavy leather called warp spreaders, a little wider than the width of the warp, were fastened at the ends of the bow, The warp yarns were sewed through and stretched between them and thus kept properly spaced for weaving. Sometimes two pieces of birch bark, drilled with as many holes as there were warp

threads, were used instead of the leather strap spreaders. Most of the early bow looms did not have heddles; the weft had to be darned into the warp with a finger, a thorn or a needle”: from page 116 of her book.

For decoration/symbolic intent, porcupine quills, bitten off to small widths, preceded beads to decorate gashkibidaaganag in ancient times, before extensive trade networks were established to procure trade beads. Using porcupine quills for decoration involved a great deal of work to prepare the quills: the quills are plucked from a freshly killed porcupine, soaked in water until pliable, flattened with a thumbnail, dipped in dyes and left to dry before being stitched with a bone needle and tendon thread to cured hide garments and moccasins. Ruth Landes, in her book “The Ojibwa Woman”, explains further that quill work had been supplanted by the far simpler beadwork, which was concomitant with the introduction of curvilinear designs. She witnessed geometric designs in quillwork, probably the thunderbird design.

In bags made from cloth rather than entirely woven, final construction of the beadwork was stitched onto red or black fabric or black velvet to cover the front of the pouch. Beadwork could be woven on a bead loom, however, floral designs were always done by hand, maybe using the spot-stitch appliqué process. Contemporary bags are made with calico type cloth and beadwork is attached because cloth became readily available due to the industrial revolution. Before that, “trade cloth” was precious and hard to obtain, like trade beads. The making of a bag was a singular event in the life of the artist, requiring much time and careful work. Designs are thoughtfully and religiously constructed to include specific motifs. Trade beads come from different countries, indicating the business affiliations of the maker, and different clans/totems had bags that symbolized trade relationships with nations. The beadwork in itself is a fine art.

Gashkibidaagan design and workmanship identifies the maker, just as a Rembrandt painting indicates the artist's identity.

In terms of weaving, apart from the bandolier bags, another vital woven article made routinely by Ojibwe women was rabbit robes. Landes explains: “..by trapping rabbits in twine traps set near their living area, to keep away pests, then skinning the rabbit and cutting the fur into a long thin continuous rope which is tied onto another from the fur of another rabbit. One rope is then used in the weaving as warp and the other rope is used as weft. These robes are pretty and warm, and invaluable to hunters.” Part of the utility of the robes is when the fur brushes against a branch as hunters move, it makes no sound, as opposed to a stiff garment, noted in her book “Tracks” by Louise Erdrich.

Landes mentions floor mats, another woven utility item, made by interweaving long strips of grass and cedar bark. These mats were also stood up against a lodge wall. One is pictured outside, attached to a line from the Ojibwe dwelling - page 13 in Anderson's book.

The elder women of the tribe, who are decision makers, determine who makes the chief's bag. Contemporary bags are made by women, who may be requested to do so. They bestow the bags according to their own judgment. Historically bags were mainly bestowed on men who then carried out the decisions of the women elders. This illustrates the flow of wisdom in the tribe, with its matriarchal base. Men are warriors and workers. Having a stable intellectual base is a very strong asset for a group of people, and the Ojibway are one of the largest North American tribes who have for centuries chronicled their history and customs, produced many prominent

social leaders, and endured the influx of Europeans. Ojibwa were also renowned as warriors, their name meaning “cook/boil until it puckers” which has been attributed to the method for sealing the seams of moccasins (Roy 2008). Warren, a well-respected historian, in 1984 states instead this was a method of torture which the Ojibwa implemented upon their enemies. Erdrich, 2003, explains the meaning of the name as “those who keep records (of a vision), referring to their own form of pictorial writing and pictographs used in Midewiwin rites.” Still another historian, Johnston, 2007, says the word means “those who speak-stiffly”/”those who stammer” referring to how the Ojibwa sounded to the Cree”. Erdrich has another meaning from Ojibwe, “from the verb Ozhibii’ige, which is ‘to write’. Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books.” They have been keeping records for thousands of years. Actually, all the definitions relate to facets of Ojibwe life.

‘Midewiwin, the Great Medicine Society, teachings focused on efforts to deal with physical and mental sicknesses, including personal ethics. The Ojibweg believe healing with plants was learned from observing the animals around them. Teachings govern spiritual beliefs passed through oral tradition, including a creation myth and a recounting of the origins of ceremonies and rituals, which were very important to the Ojibweg because they believed that spirits guided them through life. Birch bark scrolls and petroforms, pictorial writing, on rock were used to pass along knowledge and information, as well as used for ceremonies. The many complex figures on the sacred scrolls communicate much historical, geometrical and mathematical knowledge. Wikipedia says “the use of petroforms, petroglyphs and pictographs was common throughout the Ojibwe traditional territories. Petroforms and medicine wheels were a way to teach the important

concepts of four directions and astronomical observations about the seasons, and to use as a memorizing tool for certain stories and beliefs.” Pictographs were also used for ceremonies’, per the New World Encyclopedia, online. Michael Johnson’s book “Ojibwa, People of the Forests and Prairies” explains that the Grand Medicine Society’s objectives were to promote individual and community success in hunting, good health, wellbeing and long life. Essentially it was tasked with continuity and prosperity of the tribe. The encroaching Jesuits disapproved, of course, because independent, psychologically and physically healthy native peoples did not promote their greedy imperialistic interests.

William H. Warren, an Ojibwa who labored to chronicle an extensive history of the tribe for several hundred years in his book “History of the Ojibway People” explains that there has been intermarriage between the tribe and whites for centuries, and primarily with the French because they lived among and respected Ojibweg culture. The tribe has tended to trade/tolerate/survive the whites rather than outright warfare. Consequently Metis, the children of mixed marriages, comprise a large group, and many have been well educated, socially accomplished and enjoyed high standing in their communities. Metis language is Michif, a blend of Cree, French and English, now an endangered language. Warren states that whites have intermarried with the Ojibway tribe more than any other tribe of the red race. Marcia G. Anderson outlines some biographies of famous Ojibweg.

Contemporary bandolier bags continue to be made, on the reservation and by tribal members living all over the US and Canada. Marcia G. Anderson, in her book “A Bag Worth A Pony”, celebrates contemporary bead artists, collectors, communities and renowned Ojibweg who own

gashkibidaaganag. Collections in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Canada contain beautiful, ancient bandolier bags. The iconic gashkibidaaganag symbolizing “speak for the people” has over the centuries remained a treasure. Bestowed on special individuals recognized as rank specific to the organization of the tribe, its message continues to inspire Ojibweg to endure and revere their identity.

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