
EDUCATION NEWS

Where History is Shared and Stories Continue

Kunoopeam Netompaûog, Welcome Friends!

We are under the light of Corn Moon, the time when corn is edible. Have you taken the time to look up in the dark of the night and see its fullness. Let your mind travel back in time to this place when the Indigenous people of these lands, the Nahahigansek (Narragansett) would see this moon, feel the change in the air, and take notice of the beginning changes in the environment. Animals are gathering and storing, leaves are beginning to change color slightly, water temperatures are at their warmest,... it's time to prepare for harvest. First will be the harvest of

the corn. Many ears will be picked and shucked leaving the husks attached and braided, then hung to dry. Once dried, many of the kernels will be dislodged and stored in seed pots made from the natural clay deposits that exist along the shores, river beds, bogs and other bodies of waters.

Those kernels will be used during next year's planting moon! Many ears of corn will be placed in baskets and stored underground in storage pits known as caches lined and covered first with cattail

mats then with Nukhasahkee (Mother Earth) forming numerous mounds conveniently placed, yet hidden, for access during the cold months to come. Today we still pay respect to a life way that allowed our people to



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endure throughout the changes and we preserve this knowledge for the future generations. The lessons and skills of our ancestors will guide us into the future. They have prepared us to face the many challenges which exist now and are yet to come. Close observation and communication with our plant relatives have provided the knowledge passed down from generation to generation of which plants to select, gather, what parts to use, and how to prepare the plant for any particular use. This includes making dyes, medicine, fertilizer, containers, cordage, shelter and of course food. In addition, oral stories have accompanied the knowledge of these plants. Some of these stories are still being shared today.



FROM TOMAQUAG'S EDUCATION DEPARTMENT...

Ewáchimineash (corn) was a main food staple for many Native American peoples in the pre-colonization years and there were many varieties and colors of this food grown by Indigenous communities all across this nation. In fact, it was the stores of corn beneath the ground that those early colonists dug up that helped to save their lives from starvation. So where did corn come from? Among the Narragansett is the traditional story that corn came to the Indigenous people along this eastern region as a gift from Kautántowwit, the God of the Southwest, from where life begins to where the souls of the departed return at life's end. Oral traditions taught us that one severe winter, despite all the harvest and preparation by the people, there was not enough food and they began to starve. When Kautántowwit saw, he told the people to send their mightiest warrior to Him in the Southwest for a gift. The warrior journeyed there but could not return. So Kautántowwit sent crow back to the people with a kernel of corn. Crow delivered the kernel to the circle where he danced, hopping on each foot, shaking the seeds out of his ears where they planted in the ground

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and took root. The people were thankful to Kautántowwit for this gift which would preserve their lives for future generations to come.

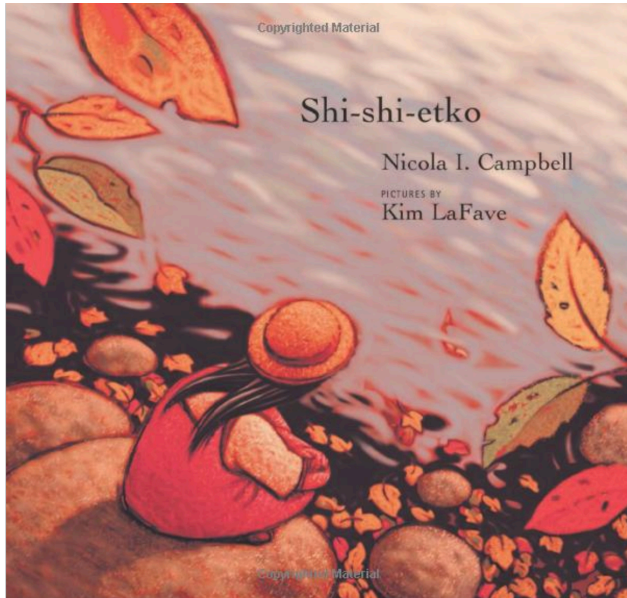
Traditional stories such as these existed long before “scientific discoveries” were made and were the way in which many Indigenous communities understood and explained the gifts Creator provided. In 2009 the National Science Foundation published a [news release](#) regarding the archaeological evidence supporting the knowledge that Indigenous peoples of the Southwest living in what is now Mexico over 8,000 years ago first cultivated from a native grass called Balsas teonsinte (named for the place of origin) what we know as maize or corn, In addition, study done by the Smithsonian Institute and shared in a 2020 [news release](#) further supports this knowledge using ancient DNA to fill in some gaps. I believe it is fair to say that despite all this scientific knowledge, the Indigenous peoples of America had no question as to where this gift came from, namely, our Creator. And giving thanks to Creator for this life sustaining food source has filled the oral traditions and stories of Native peoples all across this nation.

With the growth of the agricultural systems still in use today, population increase, industry changes, etc., scientists have worked to genetically modify corn and it has been used all over the world not just as a food source for humans and livestock but as a biofuel and crude material in industry among other things. Corn is [mass produced](#) in order to be used in [these](#) ways. Acres and acres of land are needed to produce the volumes needed to meet industry demand. Herbicides and Pesticides have been sprayed from heights above to cover these vast fields of this crop. These changes have brought a whole new form of challenges to the environment. Oh how far we’ve come, but is it for the better? Corn is a gift to us all. It was shared by Indigenous people with the newcomers settling here four hundred years ago for their survival and it is still being shared today. This knowledge is part of our history, past, present, and future. We must respect the gifts we are given, care for them responsibly, use them honorably and pass these teachings on to future generations. In her book Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us of this in her chapter entitled “The Honorable Harvest” (p. 183) in this way, *“Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them. Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life. Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer. Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need. Take only that which is given. Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm. Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share. Give thanks for what you have been given. Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.”*

~Chrystal Mars Baker for September 2023

FOR THE CHILDREN:

It's Corn Moon and time to return to school. But historically, for Native children, school has not always been a pleasant experience. At one time it was a traumatic separation from home and family for a very long period of time.



Nicola I. Campbell, author of *Shi-shi-etko* is Interior Salish and Métis, and she grew up in British Columbia's Nicola Valley. The author writes about a school experience in this introduction to her story:

“This story is about a little native girl named Shi-shi-etko, which means “she loves to play in the water.” Shi-shi-etko’s people have always lived in North America, hunting, fishing and gathering traditional foods and medicines, making their own clothing and building their own houses, making their own rules and taking care of their traditional territories, telling stories, singing and dancing. Native children were loved so much that the whole community raised them together — parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins and elders. But now Shi-shi-etko has to go to Indian Residential School. It is the law. The school is far away from her home, and she will have to travel for a couple of days to get there. Once she arrives at school she won’t see her parents for many months or even years, she will lose her

traditional name, and she will be forced to speak English - a language she doesn’t know. “

Residential and boarding schools like the one in the book no longer exist in North America. In Canada the last one closed in 1996. In the United States, they closed years earlier in 1978 after the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). It is good that they closed. Since then most Native children attend public school, private schools or are home schooled. There are still challenges but Native children persevere and have become college graduates, leaders, and even government officials helping to make positive changes in education!

Since school starts during the Corn Moon, which is the time when corn is ready to eat and there are so many varieties of corn, let's celebrate change, difference, and the beauty of a culture that persists despite all the challenges faced (as in the story). Let's make beaded corn varieties! This is a very simple craft requiring only a couple supplies — 2-4 pipe cleaners (color(s) of your choosing) and pony beads (color(s) of your choosing). Here's a picture of what your corn may look like. The instructions are [here!](#)



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RESOURCES:

At Tomaquag we are continuously doing the work of educating new generations of children as well as the general public about the lives, traditions and life changes of the Indigenous peoples of Rhode Island and neighboring communities. Follow us on our website at tomaquagmuseum.org, [Youtube](#) and [Facebook](#). Check out these resources!

To support Indigenous authors and purchase your own copy of Shi-shi-etko visit this [link](#):

To hear an animated version of Shi-shi-etko aloud visit this [link](#):

For a copy of the book Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer visit this [link](#):