

## Exploring Indigenous Data Sovereignty Through the Wampum Belt

After centuries of exploitation, misrepresentation, and lack of transparency, reciprocity, or stewardship, there has been a growing global effort for Indigenous Peoples to reclaim their Knowledges and data. The path to Indigenous Data Sovereignty involves First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples owning and controlling data that is created with or about their communities. Sovereignty asserts that Indigenous Peoples are stewards of their own data, and works to move Indigenous folks from the roles of participant or subject into the roles of partner and co-researcher (Centre for Indigenous Studies, 2023). Data sovereignty is crucial due to the opposing Indigenous and Western views of knowledge creation and sharing; this opposition is exemplified by the Western rejection of traditional Haudenosaunee Wampum Belts as a valid data source. The dynamic, relational nature of the Wampum Belt data system is an important example of Indigenous Data Sovereignty in practice.

To contextualise the Wampum Belt system and the accompanying Western perspective, we will first describe the difference between Western and Indigenous worldviews -- particularly with regards to how knowledge is recorded and shared. In the Western worldview, knowledge is gained through observation and experimentation (the scientific process) (Indigenous Innovation Initiative, 2021). Western knowledge is produced in specific, controlled environments, yet also hinges upon generalizability to other contexts. Western ways of knowing also reinforce the idea that knowledge obtained outside this experimental framework is less valid.

On the other hand, Indigenous Knowledges are unique to local contexts and communities, though there are similar worldviews that are held globally. These Knowledges are relational and run deep within communities, with each member responsible for sharing and applying the information for the improvement of all of Creation. Indigenous data exists in diverse forms --

regalia, songs, art, ceremonies, oral traditions, etc. -- and a critical part of Indigenous Data Sovereignty is accepting data that exists outside of Western definitions and parameters (Indigenous Innovation Initiative, 2021). One such data source that has been met with particular Western scrutiny has been the Haudenosaunee Wampum Belts.

Wampum Belts are intricate beaded artworks made out of shells, and are thought of as a living record of the Haudenosaunee (Onondaga Nation, n.d.). Wampum can symbolise many different things, from titles, technological innovations, treaties, and much more. The belts are often used as a guide to share oral traditions or as part of public demonstrations.

One of the most famous Wampum Belts is the Two Row Wampum, or Kaswentha (Gaswéñdah), representing a treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch in 1613. This Wampum is made from purple quahog shells and white whelk snail shells, and depicts two purple horizontal lines. One purple line represents the Haudenosaunee canoe, and the other the Dutch tall ship. Between the purple lines is a row of white shells representing the River of Life, upon which the canoe and tall ship are both travelling. The two purple rows run in parallel, never crossing or intersecting. This represents an agreement for respectful coexistence between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch. Both communities were to maintain sovereignty as well as interdependence (Onondaga Nation, n.d.).



The Two-Row Wampum Belt (Onondaga Nation)

At the time of the treaty's genesis, the Haudenosaunee did not use paper to record their history. As such, there is no original paper-based documentation of the treaty -- which has caused some Western scholars to question its legitimacy (Odato, 2013). Wampum Belts and their accompanying oral histories exist outside the Western constraints of what data can be, and as a result are often dismissed entirely.

Wampum Belts form a resilient data system unlike any Western method. After Chief Deskaheh toured Europe to garner global support for Haudenosaunee sovereignty in 1923, the Canadian government ordered the RCMP to overthrow the Confederacy and destroy the Wampum Belts (Animikii Indigenous Technology, 2019). However, Wampum Belts and their accompanying oral histories are a living, dynamic database -- meaning that destruction did not result in missing data. With the help of Indigenous Knowledge Holders, the belts were able to be remade and the database persists. Wampum Belts do not store data in a server or a spreadsheet, but instead store information in the community.

The interconnectedness of Wampum Belts with the community epitomises the Indigenous worldview of knowledge creation and sharing. Given how ruinous colonial forces were and are, we must consider that the Indigenous worldview and data methods like the Wampum Belt may

be more resilient than Western methods. As such, the Wampum Belt system exemplifies the necessity of Indigenous Data Sovereignty. Further, the system elucidates that it is crucial for Western scholars to be open-minded when exploring different data sources. Whether it be from Indigenous communities or other backgrounds, there is no one way to gather information. Perhaps the best methods lie at the intersection of two worldviews.

## References

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