



Makwa  
WAAKAA'IGAN



Indigenous Knowledge  
Systems Lab

# Protocols for Non-Indigenous People Working with Indigenous Knowledge



This is the compost of many failed projects, interventions and sustainable development adventures.

Written in 2024 by Indigenous scholars from IKS Labs at Algoma (Canada) and Deakin (Australia) Universities, in conjunction with Indigenous thinkers from AIME and the Indigenous Commons, under the auspices of the Indigenous Systems Knowledge Collective.

Illustrations by Stephanie Beck

# Setting Circle



Indigenous Knowledge, resources and ceremony shared in service of our custodial obligations as humans may be grounded in connective and collective story from the sacred sites we share in the sky lands. The maps and narratives of compatible Lore must be found through ceremony in the liminal places of sacred flux, the relational space of dynamic interface between forces and entities. This is where regenerative pairings are reformed and reinstated in place of oppositional binaries. At the sites of embassy between north and south, land and sea, earth and sky, centre and margin, the Lore of two constellations in particular hold the greatest potential for finding common purpose in regenerative, symbiotic relationships. They have many names, but in the lingua franca of the current global economic system they are known as Orion and Pleiades. On every continent that humans call home, there are people who know Orion as a hunter or warrior, and the Pleiades as Seven Sisters, even though there are more than seven stars there, and the Hunter is just a rectangle with a few dots in the middle. At some stage in our history, humans have clearly shared these stories with each other across oceans, or else have received the stories from the stars themselves. Cultural embassy is a behaviour deeply embedded in the evolutionary patterns of our species. There is usually tension between the two constellations in the story, and often the Seven Sisters Lore involves pursuit, transgressive sexual encounters and consequences, a body of water, ascension, and the youngest sister left behind on earth to return periodically in stellar cycles.

In addition to connective meaning-making across hemispheres, these two constellations offer the potential of embassy between gendered groupings and the power imbalances that have recently become polarized through narratives of rigid dichotomy, coercion and control. Those two need to make embassy in body and spirit, and the fluid agents inhabiting the dynamic space between them must be honoured for their sacred role in this ceremony. In the commons reclaimed by the Peoples of the land and sea, the diverse narratives of these entities embodied in our shared star maps can guide us all in ceremonial embassy as we retrieve ancient processes, modify those of the present and co-create those of the future to restore the customary regenerative behaviours and habitats required for the survival of our species and the living world that is in our care.

# Coming Alongside



Protocols are the norms and procedures that allow for proper governance and right relations. In Indigenous communities, protocols can take different forms and vary across diverse biocultural contexts. They are held within and between Indigenous cultures from different bioregions, which are connected by flows of air, water, matter, migratory species, spirit, trade goods, marriage, adoption, ceremony and knowledge, within the narrative patterns, or Lore, of these flows.

Our Lore facilitates deep, collective, systemic analysis and design processes, to maintain commons of knowledge and resources held within (and across) boundary protocols. These protocols are fluid rather than defensive, protecting and nurturing relatedness in regenerative exchange across diverse biocultural systems, while maintaining the integrity of distinct identities. This process gives rise to shared meta-languages and macro-narratives, to allow for commoning amongst compatible systems. Most Indigenous cultures have protocols of ‘embassy’ which are borderwork behaviours that facilitate the negotiation of norms of access with other Indigenous groups, and travellers both human and non-human.

However, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, ontologies are not compatible in this way, so processes of negotiating access and regulating relations must be different. In these situations the definition of ‘protocol’ is more like the way that term is used in computing, as a mechanism to mediate and translate functions for operability between otherwise incompatible systems. In this interface, there are also firewalls to protect the health of Indigenous systems. These can include avoidance behaviours, malicious compliance, pretence of goodwill, false agreement, harsh criticism, sabotage and even displays of aggression. These often cause frustration and conflict for those seeking to include Indigenous Knowledge in their projects and portfolios.

With growing awareness of the potential of Indigenous principles to inform regenerative systems design, a plethora of organisations have emerged in philanthropy, social justice, environmental and sustainable development sectors seeking to include Indigenous Knowledge in their projects. Often in this space, outsiders are speaking and acting for Indigenous people with little or no consultation - sometimes they deal only with amenable individuals, and sometimes they run something past an Indigenous consultant at the very last minute, seeking approval and endorsement. It has been widely noted that when challenged on this issue, they often behave aggressively, or cease communication, or position themselves as victims, while still retaining claims to indigenised concepts or content.

# Protocol Bundle

Indigenous Knowledge Systems Labs in Algoma University, Canada, and Deakin University, Australia, offer this bundle of general cultural protocols for engaging with the regulatory mechanisms of Indigenous Peoples when working with traditional knowledge and practice. This open-source document should be shared widely and local Indigenous groups should be encouraged to adapt it to suit their specific bio-cultural contexts and purposes. It may be repurposed as a ritual agreement between parties. It contains broad guidelines for outsider behaviour during all stages and contingencies of a cooperative relationship between local and non-local groups, encompassing a wide range of situations, from collaboration and connection to conflict and separation.

The protocol bundle is designed to facilitate norms of access for respectful relations grounded in an awareness of Indigenous border work. There are five sections that can carry short lists of protocols in each, which can be represented as images carved, painted or woven, as ritual objects signifying binding agreements, such as belts or message sticks or whatever is appropriate to a particular community.

**The categories of ritual objects for each section are:**

1. Container
2. Ornamentation
3. Tool
4. Protective Device
5. Weapon



These represent phases of Relation, Access, Making, Tension and Accounting.

The first two represent Indigenous regulatory signals of ‘calling in’, while the last two may signal ‘calling out’. The third, in the centre, signifies how outsiders must manage their behaviours during their work in association with Indigenous groups, maintaining good relations with awareness of the tension between potential inclusion and exclusion at the discretion of those groups.

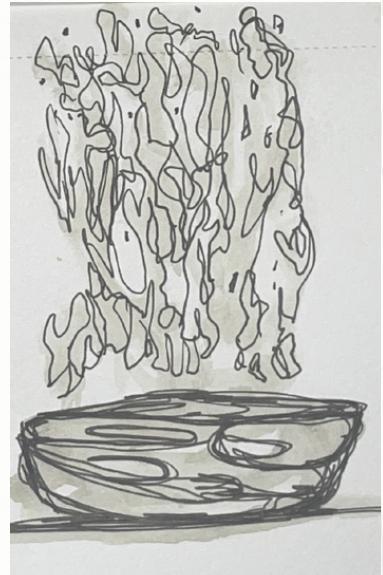
Ideally, there should always be opportunities for a return to ‘calling in’ processes, in the event that ‘calling out’ processes become necessary. However, outsiders must also be prepared to move into a state of graceful acceptance of change if projects are ended, altered or diverted by communities. For individuals feeling wounded or attacked, these protocols offer respectful strategies as alternatives to complaint, gossip, tantrums, avoidance or coercion.

This document is read-only for non-Indigenous people, but open-source and alterable for Indigenous groups. Although it would be inappropriate for non-Indigenous people to modify this framework or present it as their own work or expertise, we recommend that a good way for groups to engage with it, when Indigenous people are not present and leading the learning, could be an ‘un-workshop’ activity. For this, people might be encouraged to read the document, then bring five objects from their home-world culture or ancestral identity that align with each of the ritual object categories. They might then share their stories and understandings of working across cultures and discuss the protocols together, to inform their work coming alongside Indigenous groups and knowledges.

# 1. Ritual Object: Container (Basket, cup, bowl, bag)

The relation: Being welcomed and nourished.

Outsiders may be invited into Indigenous circles, or may seek invitation, but cannot invite themselves. It is best to be invited but otherwise if seeking invitation it is best to do so through a common affiliate, who might make introductions, or who may at least be mentioned during first communications. The steps below are the ways an outsider may behave during approach and welcome to community, but every place and people have different protocols, so it is best to listen, observe and be responsive. Most places will seek to establish norms of access at the boundaries of community, knowledge and land, and will usually be trying to ensure safety and good relation for all parties. Hosting newcomers often involves rituals of care, nourishment, protection and warmth. Note that you will be observed closely; you will be communicating non-verbally whether you intend it or not, so make sure your heart is clear.



1. Signal your presence and desire to meet.
2. If you are accepted, prepare the stories, knowledge and items you will bring to share in first meetings.
3. Don't be pushy about timing and attendance, or express frustration at delays. Some or all of the participants might not show up, so it may take time to be known, establish trust and be welcomed.
4. Declare positionality, affiliation, knowledge status (expertise), place and identity.
5. State true intention and motivations, both personal and professional.
6. If you are promising resources, support and time, make sure you will be able to deliver. A lot of people waste our time and use us as free labour, gambling on being able to secure funding at a later date.
7. Acknowledge place, borders and connections - existing relations/links.
8. Declare historical and personal baggage, conflicts, issues, special needs.
9. Share story, cultural practice and food/drink. Be real, not performative.
10. Discuss protocols, norms, roles, and connections.



## 2. Ritual Object: Ornament (adornment, sculpture, image)

The access: Being permitted and gifted.



This stage will flow on from the first, or may even be part of the welcoming process. Know that permissions only last as long as relationships are well-maintained. You can't hold them alone, forever. Permissions held in good relation allow you the agency to act in many kinds of making - kin-making, meaning-making, sense-making, change-making. (Ways of relating, being, knowing, doing.) But if you are change-making in ways that might impact or alter local systems, then you must ask permission again, and then check again by listening to somebody else as well, preferably an Elder or group of Elders. Sometimes people will say yes when they should say no, and you will still be responsible for the changes you make. (Points hereafter are not steps in sequence, but general advice on negotiating protocols.)

1. When you receive a gift, be aware that it is connecting you in spirit to the giver.
2. When you give a gift, it should be something that is not easy to part with; you are letting go of a belonging, then coming into true belonging. You are symbolically divesting, ritually denouncing the dominant culture law of private ownership and coming under our Law.
3. Gift exchange is an agreement on a relationship, not a contract on work or property.
4. Some meanings and emotions will be unspoken, so you must be attuned to notice physical, contextual and non-verbal cues.
5. If you are given ceremonial practice, names or roles to use and do in that context, it is not something you are being permitted to take away and use or perform in other places, for other people. And if it is, this will not be appreciated by other Indigenous groups.
6. You will be sharing your theory of change and vision of a better world. People will honour your values and knowledge as you come alongside, but be aware from the start that their hopes and plans will be different from yours.



### 3. Ritual Object: Tool (utensil, instrument, fire-starter)

#### The making: Being embodied and entangled

The reason for doing any work or activity in Indigenous communities is always to increase relatedness and the health of biocultural systems. Every action should be weighed against the questions, “Is this action in service of enriching relationships, or is it to enrich particular persons or organisations? Is this action improving systems health?” The things you are making in good relation then - resources, documents, content, structures, bodies - these must also embody those Indigenous motivations. There may be tension with the relationships you have with other outsiders who support or have authority over your work, and you will need to advocate for Indigenous people in these situations and balance your competing obligations. Ownership and authority of what you make must be shared fairly with Indigenous knowledge sources, which must be acknowledged.



1. When you report on your work to others, remember you do not speak for the Indigenous knowledge or principles embedded in the work. When you speak and think in our ways, it must be about them or from them, not for them. You don't claim these things for yourself.
2. Seek to establish Indigenous leadership of your project. You do not select the leader, the community or elders must. They will not be precisely aligned with your vision and you must be prepared to accept this.
3. When you work with Indigenous people, continually measure and reflect on your impact on relational and biocultural systems health. This is best done in relationship with an adept local who can advise you.
4. If your actions or intentions are not bettering the health of relations or overall systems, and if you notice this, seek permission to pause or step aside for a while, or seek support to come back into alignment. You will face hard truths about yourself, your assumptions and behaviour patterns. Learn and grow.
5. If you perceive Indigenous people to be in error, or misaligned with your vision, be careful. It is not your place to call them out, especially in public. Speak to them privately of your perception, but do not press them on it. Avoid judgement and personal criticism. Under no circumstances should you gossip or seek to rally others against them.
6. If your actions or intentions are not aligned with us, and you do not notice this, you may be ‘called in’ first to be re-grounded in protocol, and if this fails and you continue to be damaging or disrupting things, you may be ‘called out’. This is very different from being called out on social media. The following two objects offer pathways for this.

## 4. Ritual Object: Protective device (shield, amulet, boundary marker)

The tension: Being turned or stopped.

Levels of protection afforded to relationships between people, places or sacred objects are contingent on the value that is attributed to them. The level of value attributed to a relationship is determined by the degree of impact in the system if the relationship is conflicted, compromised, eroded, or destroyed. Or there may be hidden criteria that will seem arbitrary to you. Outsiders are expected to uphold the integrity of relationships by accepting direction and decisions, and being attentive to signals and warnings provided by human, non-human, and more-than-human kin relations. If the outsider is not listening or not noticing that they have fallen into wrong relation, then they may be surprised by Indigenous expressions of anger that seem to come out of nowhere. They may find the criticism irrational or inaccurate. Correcting or arguing with this is not a good idea. Listen and wait. Only act if asked to do so.



1. It may be that you have been carried away with your work and broken protocol without noticing, and you may be halted and asked to wait, while you face the choice to start again or repair your work and relationships.
2. It is never acceptable for you to leave at this stage and keep what has been co-created for your own use in the world. Ask yourself what is more important to you: pride in the work you have done, or the relationships that have made the work possible?
3. Never direct us to writings or other content explaining our dysfunction or undesirable behaviour to us, even if it has been written by Indigenous people. Don't tell us we are taking on the dominance behaviours of the coloniser as we attempt to regain self-determination.
4. It is not acceptable for you to call a meeting over a dispute, open or lead a ritual to deal with conflict, or distribute public communications airing your grievances. Community leaders will decide if (and when) a meeting, ritual or group correspondence is needed.
5. Protection from, protection against, and protection with are all dimensions of care, and responses will vary based on situation and context. Support, permissions, plans and responsibilities can shift, alter, or transfer at short notice.
6. When Indigenous people speak of their experience of colonisation or domination by outsiders, even if it is about you directly, it is not acceptable for you to proclaim your own perceived marginalisation and victimhood and erase their experience of oppression.
7. Protect yourself also. Like all humans, we can be cheeky, opportunistic and downright spiteful. You might be regarded by some as a resource to drain dry, or even as a punching bag to express trauma from colonial violence. These actions are understandable, but you will have to establish limits and boundaries that you are comfortable with. However, there is a fine line between self-defence and defensiveness.

## 5. Ritual Object: Weapon (blade, projectile, club, spear)

The accounting: Being wounded or terminated.

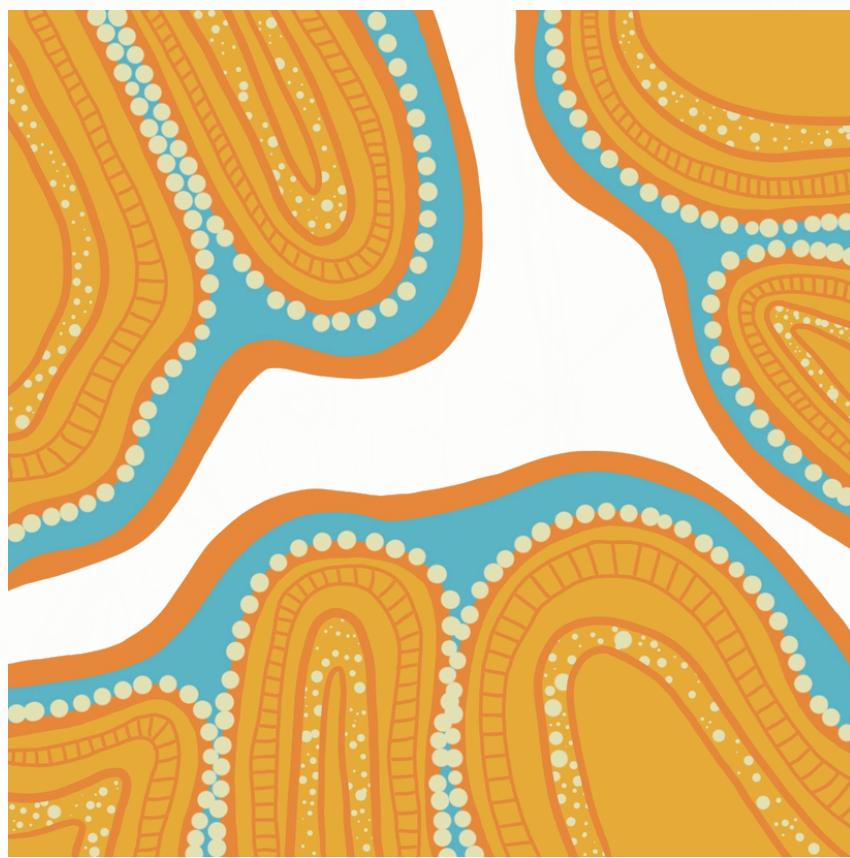
When you make a mess or mistake that alters things in the society, culture or biology of a place, then you become responsible for ensuring the disturbance is managed by you to become a regenerative one, for as long as it exists. It may be that even this is not possible. Well-meaning attitudes and good intentions are not as important as impact and unintended consequences. Nobody will care about your complaints and justifications, so don't offer them. You will experience shaming, but often in Indigenous contexts this is not like guilt or being cancelled as an individual. Shame is borne collectively, and those you are in relation with will carry it too. Being responsible for a permanent unwanted disruption is not about atoning for the problem, but owning it. Your new task is an honourable one - to carry the cautionary tale of your transgression far and wide so that others can learn from it as well. You are now a keeper of knowledge about the protocols that you broke, and this is a role that will increase your trust and status if you do it well.



1. The safety and security of all members of a community is stored in shared power relations. Where power is wielded in ways that exploit or extort other members, a 'calling out' process may ensue that seeks to navigate and leverage tensions to return the system to balance. You do not initiate or avoid this.
2. Exile, withdrawal, or termination of a relationship or partnership is a last resort based on the extent of the harm caused, usually performed in relation to measures that promote community healing, justice and wellbeing. The length of the separation is dependent on the impact of any wrongdoing and strength of feeling about it, and extent of work to repair relational systems.
3. Your CV in the Indigenous world is not a written one, and it is not made by you. How you respond to being 'let go' can enhance or diminish your reputation.
4. You may not be informed at all that your work or role has been terminated. People may seem to lose interest, or fail to participate as before, or may be suddenly absent while continuing to be in polite agreement with you. But it is finished. Seek feedback and reflect on it for next time around.
5. People may be smiling, warm and full of praise on the surface, but your work is finished and will go nowhere, unless you are invited to start over.
6. Sometimes everybody is fully invested in a project and it just fails. It may be that everybody blames you for this, fairly or unfairly. Don't complain about the injustice of this in public or blame community for the failure.
7. Always remember - you are the one who gets to go home someplace else after the project is done. (Unless you become a permanent member of the community, in which case, please don't be that guy who writes a book about it and starts running corporate rewilding retreats.)

## The Third Way Fallacy

Where two streams meet, there is a sacred place that draws them together. A third stream emerges. We understand that these are all distinct and sovereign entities, with flows from the junction being regulated and regenerated through ceremony. Outsiders often misinterpret this and seek to replace both their stream and ours with an illusion of a universal third stream that erases what they do not wish to face, about themselves and about us. There is shared understanding about this though – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people regard middle-ground reasoning as fallacious. In Latin, it is called argumentum ad temperantum. It is not what we mean when we talk about ‘two-way strong’, or ‘two-eyed seeing’. We’re not interested in being washed away downstream, along with all the history and ongoing criminality others would prefer to ignore or forget.



We understand that you want to make change and build a new world. Please remember that your predecessors similarly sought to create utopian systems in our lands, which they also called ‘The New World’. It didn’t work out very well for us and we are not eager to help you make the same mistakes again, now that you have become dissatisfied with the life that was created for you out of the blood and ashes of our ancestors and land. Some of us would like to help you avoid those mistakes again. However, some of us are not ready for that thankless task, being still quite upset about all the other interventions and projects that came with the ages of discovery and reason.

Please don’t judge us by the rules of the new enlightenment you have imagined. It does not exist and there is no Lore for it yet.

## Closing Circle

Everywhere in the land and sea, ancient entities of Lore keep stories of long-ago battles, crimes, dramas and disasters. They all hold cautionary tales and the responsibility of abiding in the stories of wrong doing and calamity, for the benefit of all. They are respected and revered for this, even the ones who committed unspeakable crimes, as they must forever keep the Law for us, informing the ways we negotiate our boundaries and protocols for right conduct and right relation. These must be maintained in times of conflict and pain, when it is far more difficult to act with integrity than it is in times of peace and love.



*Do Hansel and Gretel still follow trails of white stones in your maps of memory? Is there still a lady dwelling in your lake and a king to sing about the folly of hubris and hierarchy? Do witches poison your princesses and giants sit upon mountains to empty the stones from their boots? Do prophets and saints sing of tolerance and care, or offer stories of their fanatical actions as a warning against asserting values that exclude and eradicate others? Do dragons teach you how to use your treasures for the prosperity of family and community? Does Oden hang on a tree and lose an eye to demonstrate the value of knowledge and the cost of attaining it? Most importantly, is that goose that laid all those golden eggs still honking to you about the Lore of maintaining living systems and sharing their abundance for the benefit of all life?*

In constellations seen by all, in the night skies of both northern and southern hemispheres, we can all observe the Hunter pursuing the Sisters in an eternal drama of transgression and consequence. Everyone has different stories for them, but still the chase goes on. They hold themselves in this traumatic cycle for all eternity, to keep the Lore for us all and help us see our own transgressions, while mitigating the damage from transgressions against us. Even in the face of irreconcilable differences, we all sit under that same sky, and the same Law of the earth.

## Anungokaa (there are many stars)

Let us ground  
You  
in connective,  
collective,  
storying  
where...  
Sacred flux  
and  
relationality  
swirl within  
the  
Sky World  
between  
the  
Warrior  
and 7 sisters  
sit among  
who  
anungokaa.

Let us help you move from  
Akozi  
To the hands  
we humbly place  
before you  
to  
steady,  
balance,  
right,  
you  
as you begin  
your journey  
among us.

A journey  
beginning  
with the maps of  
stars  
to shine  
a path to  
our ways of being,  
knowing,  
doing.

But we must caution  
You  
about the bumps  
and  
uncomfortable feelings  
that will surely  
prod your spirit to  
shift  
and fidget  
in what  
You do not  
know you need to know.

It is okay to be.

You  
might not understand  
Are you afraid?  
protocols,  
ceremony,  
Indigenous principles,  
boundaries,  
You.



All is not lost. Do not wander off. Bekaa (wait). Maadanaamo (start breathing). For when you let go of your systems, what you think you know, biases, ego, that is when the bumps, bruises will subside and we can drink tea with our hearts under the stars.

By: Zhaa Ankwad Kwe (Yellow Cloud Womyn) Aka Carrianne Agawa.