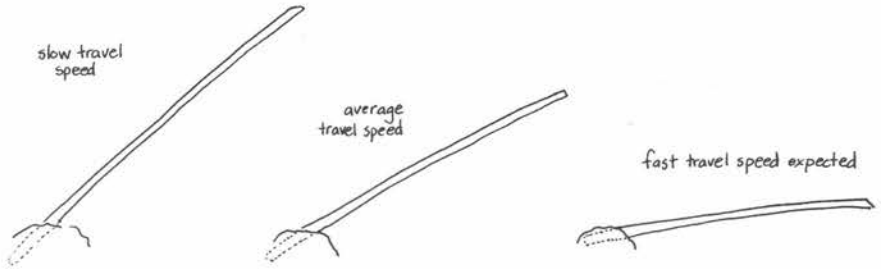
by Zabe MacEachern

Akiagun (Aki-a-gun) is an ancient form of communication adapted for winter travel conditions in the northwoods region. It allows basic messages to be conveyed to travelers using simple, convenient means well adapted to winter weather conditions. Craig MacDonald has written detailed descriptions of Akiagun for the Ministry of Natural Resources, but I learned how to truly hear the messages of Akiagun from two Anishinabe elders who spoke to me about how to track and listen to the land. I had the privilege of working with Robert Wayash and Fred Majors one summer in northwestern Ontario. In the winter of 1998, Robert Wayash passed away during an ice travel accident. During the night of his wake, I felt like I was continually being asked to write about Akiagun; to write about it in the way Robert had explained it to me. Below I try to honor the trapping and hunting skills of Robert Wayash by sharing some of the reading skills he shared with me. Of course, Robert might have just referred to all of this knowledge as common sense in the bush—listening to the tracks and tracking knowledge.

On frozen winter lakes, paper messages are hard to write with un-mitted shivering fingers, not to mention frozen ball point pens. Letters carved in the snow are quickly buried and easily covered over by drifting snow. On the other hand, Akiagun is readily seen from a distance on a lake, lasts months (yet is organic and decomposable), and can be quickly and easily formed using just a knife or hatchet. The messages of Akiagun are placed on the main traveled routes of winter snowshoe trails and convey the fundamental messages of winter travel communication.

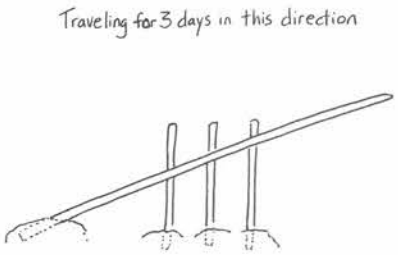
To most people who are accustomed to a phonetic alphabet, the signs and symbols of Akiagun may seem complex and require memorization. But Akiagun messages were once 'heard' because they were 'felt' by an aware winter traveler. Akiagun is heard when the simple representations used in its telling resonate with a personal feeling. For instance:

Artwork by Zabe MacEachern



The direction and speed of travel is quickly and easily read in Akiagun. A stick placed in the snow points in the direction of travel. The stick is always placed and read in the snow from the direction it grows, base to tip. The angle at which the stick is placed in the snow indicates the speed of travel. An expected slow speed of travel due to slushy conditions, a heavy load to be hauled, or a chosen easy pace due to side hunting forages, can be indicated by a stick angled up high as if travel progress is similar to the slow climbing of a hill. A fast rate of travel is indicated by a low angled stick reminiscent of the quicker travel speeds obtained on a smooth, flat terrain.

Akiagun originated in a time before watches and clocks, so the sun was a more frequently used timepiece. Anishinabe children for example, played games which involved the keeping of time. They simply placed a stick vertically in the ground and laid another flat so that the first stick's shadow would match the stick on the ground when the designated time had passed. Like sun dials, watching the shadow move from one side of a stick to the other side represents a period of sunlight occurring during one day. In Akiagun, each upright stick represents the distance that could be traveled during one winter's day of light.



In Akiagun, all the activities of camp life are represented in one simple feature. Setting up a permanent winter camp which will be used for some time involves the act of gathering, preparing, and making camp. Firewood collection and shelter crafting are two basic activities necessary at any camp. The simple act of gathering and attaching some sticks to the top of a vertical stick (used to represent days traveled) tells the distance from a permanent camp.

In Roman times tree trunks used as pillars were purposely turned upside down because people believed this would inhibit the tree's spirit from re-rooting in the building, causing structural damage. In the Anishinabe culture turning a tree upside down is considered disrespectful to the trees. As a result, when trees are cut down for lumber their bottom ends are marked so that after sawing, the lumber can be placed in a structure with its correct end up. As every tree planter knows, only a few minutes of a tree's roots exposed to air can easily kill a plant. To a winter traveler on a frozen lake a tree placed on the ice upside down can be quickly noticed as 'unnatural' and 'disrespectful'. Such a sign draws attention from the eyes used to seeking and noticing the messages given by subtle features of a landscape. It can be heard to say 'something very unfortunate must have happened for someone to have created such a sign'. An evergreen tree placed upside down means that a death has occurred.

Hunters are often well aware of the availability of food resources for other animals. Deer or moose usually graze by eating and moving continually, taking only a few bites from each bush or tree unless the winter snow conditions are harsh and travel is impeded, difficult, or confined. In such cases, a shoreline may be heavily grazed as a hoofed animal seeks to conserve energy by traveling little. Heavily grazed shorelines are like a track left on the land by a harsh winter. Snowshoe travelers may be eating the meat of deer and rabbit, but this meat was created by the grazing of deer and rabbit on evergreens and buds. Thus to a hunter a thick, densely branched evergreen tree placed next to a sign for where a camp is means their is plenty of food available and all is well. In the Anishinabe culture, it is likened to an open door policy, inviting passers-by to visit, share stories, and feast upon the offerings from the land. A tree which looks heavily grazed, because a traveler has removed most of the limbs, imitates an animal confined to an overgrazed area. Hunger and starvation may be occurring in the camp near this sign, beckoning those with food to come and share. A dead tree indicates no food and starvation — death may be coming.

Evergreen trees with broken dangling branches bent upwards, or only removed from one side, indicate that there is an injury or someone is too ill to travel. In Akiagun a very simple yet beautiful representation occurs; the health of a person is told by comparing them to the health of a tree.

While a phonetic alphabet, such as used in the English language, uses abstract symbols in the form of letters to represent sounds, the messages sent through Akiagun seem only one step removed from the winter landscape they are written upon. They are not based upon a representation of a representation of a representation (as a letter symbol is for a sound written on a page, which links it to a syllable, which forms part of a word, which may have numerous definitions in various distant contexts). Reading Akiagun is like tracking; it conveys the messages of how the two footed creatures are living upon the land. To hear the messages of Akiagun, one must have some understanding of the stories told by past generations, stories which serve as a guide for a traveler's sense of awareness and inform her of the subtleties of the land in winter. To this knowledge the present context of a message must be added. The past and present are both necessary to hear Akiagun.

Unlike a text written on pages created from the trees of one region, and possibly conveying a message about the trees in another region, Akiagun is always dependent upon the local winter context. It cannot be removed from the snowy terrain it is written upon. Akiagun does not make sense in the rain forest. It is designed for northwoods travelers, those who have journeyed far on snowshoes. In the spring, Akiagun melts into the depths of lakes and the ancient time of passage. The survival of Akiagun is dependent upon winter travelers in the northwoods who remember how to hear the voice of the snowy terrain, seek the wood from the local forest, remain aware of the messages told in winters' tales, and choose to use this ancient form of telling.

* Notes:

Photographs of Akiagun, and a reference to it in a historical travel journal, is available in the first edition of *Needle to the North*, by Arthur Twoney, Ottawa, Oberon Press 1942.

Macdonald, Craig. AKI-A-GUN, in Nastawgan 1985 #3 pg. 10-12.