Kinship
Traditional Social Organization

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta

TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
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TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

All societies have some form of political, economic, and social organization. They may be written down or they may be just understood by everyone; they may be based on tradition and cultural beliefs or they may be based on simple necessity or efficiency. No society, large or small, could survive if there were not rules or some shared understanding about how to work together and get along with each other. Social structures answer questions such as, How should food be acquired and distributed? Who should make decisions? How should conflict be resolved?

Traditional First Nations and Inuit social organizations revealed a high degree of cooperation and mutual support because individuals relied on the people around them for all of their needs. Kinship was the glue that maintained the bonds between people. Communities were held together through trust and the closeness of family relationships. A large extended family was necessary in order to perform all the work necessary for day-to-day life, including taking care of shelter, food, transportation, and defense needs.

Each branch in a kinship system, such as the bond between an aunt and niece, carried with it particular roles and obligations. These involved responsibilities to share resources, to educate, and to offer mutual support in times of hardship. Such responsibilities ensured that everyone was cared for, because everyone had family.

Family ties extended to adopted individuals and their relations. The Blackfoot expression *nitohkoikso'kowaiksi*, which means "my newly acquired relatives" included such adoptions. Adopted individuals became part of their new family with their own set of roles and responsibilities.

Some adoptions did not mean a person would necessarily live with their adopted family. A woman might, for example, adopt a young man who reminded her of a lost son. Other adoptions might occur between important individuals in different First Nations. These kinds of adoptions forged bonds between different groups. Because of these ties and their obligations, kinship bonds helped make political and trading alliances between nations.

The primary living group of most First Nations varied with the season. People living in the area now called Alberta, for example, usually lived in extended family groups during the winter and larger groups at certain points during the summer. Group size was not based on a specific number or family size limit, but instead on the practical requirements of the people. Groups had to be big enough to provide for themselves, but not so big that they had to struggle.

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EXTENDED FAMILY AND CLAN

Traditionally, the Plains and Woodland Cree's basic social unit was the extended family. This group included uncles and aunts from both the father's and mother's sides. All children in a group were cousins. Grandfathers and grandmothers could include both the parents of an individual's parents, and the brothers and sisters of the grandparents. Often families would adopt children or older people that did not have a family of their own.

Kinship ties were so fundamental to Plains Cree social relationships that even strangers would establish some kind of kinship bond with each other, even if it were only through a distant ancestor. Strangers might be addressed as *nîstâw* (if spoken by a man) or *nîtim* (if spoken by a woman) which means "brother–in–law." Another form of address is as *niciwâm*, meaning "parallel cousin." Through such ties, newcomers would soon have roles and responsibilities in the family.

Among nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the basic social unit was traditionally the clan. The Blackfoot clan was similar in size and function to the Cree extended family. A clan was generally made up of a chief, his brothers and parents, and others who were not necessarily related. Clan memberships were flexible and individuals were free to join other clans. During hard times, a clan could split up and join with other clans. Among the Piikani, such living groups could include 80 to 240 people, depending on the season.

Beyond the basic social unit of the extended family or clan, First Nations had a variety of social structures. Each family group was generally linked to wider groups sharing common ancestors, language, and other ties. These wider relationships could include societies, nations, alliances, and confederacies.

Clan systems among Eastern Woodlands and Pacific Northwest First Nations were slightly different. For these nations, clans were kinship associations that went beyond the extended family. Families were often so large and so dispersed over a territory that individuals would not necessarily know all their relatives. Clan memberships simplified kinship connections. Strangers could introduce themselves to a group by identifying their clan and the group could immediately recognize them as a relative, or if not, then most likely as a relative of someone they knew.

All clans had strict rules and traditions, but the specific customs varied from nation to nation. All had marriage rules to ensure that closely related individuals would not marry and have children. Clan members were connected by stories about a common spiritual origin and important ancestors. Most clans identified themselves with a symbol or totem. The Anishinabé living in the Eastern Woodlands, for example, believed that the Creator had given Earth's people seven clans. Each clan had an animal symbol and each was known for particular kinds of gifts. For example, members of the Bird clan were known as spiritual leaders, while those of the Fish clan were seen as intellectuals or teachers.

Some social groups followed a patrilineal system, which meant a daughter would normally leave her family to live with her husband's family. In patrilineal systems, people received their clan identity from their father. Among the Blackfoot, clan lineage was traced primarily through paternal lines, but in some cases was traced through the maternal side if children were descended from a mother from an influential family.

In a matrilineal system, sons generally moved away from their families to marry a woman some distance away. Women in these unions retained their family lineage and the men

sometimes maintained their own along with their wife's.

SOCIETIES

Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy had many societies with responsibilities that covered the confederacy's spiritual and administrative functions. Societies included members from all clans so that decisions would have a wide base of consensus. Most of the societies were male oriented and age graded, meaning that as a boy got older, his responsibilities grew more complex. The societies at the top of this order were responsible for the spiritual aspects of traditional Blackfoot life.

The *Kanátittsoomitaiksi* "Brave Dog society" or "Police Society" became active at the annual Sundance. They ensured that the orders of the political or war chiefs were enforced. There was also a special women's society, Máóto'kiiksi (Buffalo women's society). The rituals of the older societies were known to initiated members only.

The Plains Cree also had a Police or Warrior society, but it was only active during the summer months when hundreds of families gathered for ceremonies and celebrations. The Warrior society ensured that order was kept in the camp and during the communal buffalo hunt. *Okihcihtâwak* (the young men who were part of the Warrior society) had to show exemplary behaviour and uphold the values of the community. Elders who were heads of societies were held in great esteem and, when necessary, would be supported by younger members of the society.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Traditional First Nations communities had greater social equality than European societies at the time, although individual First Nations varied in the degree of equality. In general, people needed each other to satisfy the requirements of food, clothing, and shelter and to move across large geographic areas. The best way to achieve these objectives was through a culture of sharing and mutual support: Each member of the community contributed something to the other members.

All First Nations and Inuit groups had institutions to ensure that resources were shared fairly. Food was distributed equally, regardless of who had killed the game. Trade and gift-giving were common, and everyone was somehow part of a large family group that had obligations to support and help each other.

No person had noticeably more than anyone else. If they did, it was given away. These practices maintained good relationships. Feelings of envy and greed were reduced and there was little incentive to acquire more material goods than could be used or given to others. All social incentives encouraged sharing, not possession — the most generous individuals were the most admired.

Each member of a social group had roles and responsibilities. People chose roles that complemented and supported each other. Responsibilities were voluntarily accepted and tasks were shared. Every member of the community had a purpose, including Elders and children.

Men were generally hunters, scouts, and defenders. Boys learned skills related to their future roles.

Women organized the camps, cared for the children, and prepared the game that had been killed in the hunt. Girls generally assisted with tasks such as picking berries.

In some nations, women were also considered the primary teachers and moral keepers of the culture. In Métis history, it was primarily the First Nations women who combined First Nations and European dance, music, clothing, and languages. Through their instruction, the Métis Nation was born and raised.

Roles were flexible and sometimes men and women could and would do one another's jobs, especially among small groups.

Although all members of a group would contribute to the success and security of the whole, individual skill was also admired. People were encouraged to specialize — in spiritual activities, hunting, storytelling, art, or other roles — if they showed special ability. Competition existed, but the reward for excellence was recognition and respect rather than material goods. Mastery of a skill was considered more important than competition with other people. Superior skill enabled an individual to better contribute to the community, which was an honour.

EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION

The education system used by traditional First Nations and Inuit communities both taught their culture's worldview and reflected it through example. Often one relative took a child under his or her wing, sharing knowledge about the culture through storytelling.

In traditional education, knowledge was given a practical purpose. Education involved passing on skills, information, and perspectives necessary for spiritual and social balance in the community. The classroom was everyday life, and students understood the relevance of what they learned. Lessons combined learning with laughter, exercise, family, spirituality, and active contribution to the community.

The content of the lessons had been passed on from generation to generation. People would hear the same stories many times throughout their lives. Education was considered an ongoing process, and people were expected to continue learning throughout their lives.

Children often spent time with their aunts, uncles, grandmothers, and grandfathers. During tasks such as picking berries or curing fish, older generations shared stories with younger generations. The stories contained lessons about the natural world and the importance of respect for the land. Stories from the oral tradition taught by offering examples of behaviour — sometimes positive and sometimes negative — but would not dictate what to do. Individuals were guided, but had to make their own decisions.

Children learned a variety of practical skills by observing those around them. For example, in their day–to–day work with others in their community, children learned many ways of sharing and giving to the community and Earth. These practices helped provide for future generations.

Traditional First Nations had a worldview that saw an inherent goodness in all around them. They believed that the Creator made people and everything else in the world with a purpose. They viewed the natural world as generous and giving, as long as humans lived within the natural laws that surrounded them.

Belief in the generosity and good in the world encouraged parents to allow their children the freedom to learn by experience. Each child was seen as having his or her own path to follow — a path given directly by the Creator. It was not up to others, even parents, to change this path.

Every child advanced through his or her own curiosity and need to learn. Children made decisions (and mistakes). Rarely were they physically punished; instead, they experienced the

consequences of their actions. The freedom of this personal autonomy allowed individuals to discover their unique gifts.

Elders played a role in guiding young people towards discovery of their gifts and in identifying their skills to other members of the community. As children grew older, they were recognized for their accomplishments in public ceremonies and with songs or give–aways in their honour.

Yet even while the education system encouraged personal autonomy, it also stressed responsibility to others. Children learned to think for themselves and yet act for the good of all.

Traditional teachings embrace the pursuit of living in harmony with oneself, one's family, and one's community, including the community of the natural world. Individuals were expected to regenerate these cultural teachings through their actions, thoughts, and words. In this respect, education was considered everyone's responsibility.