

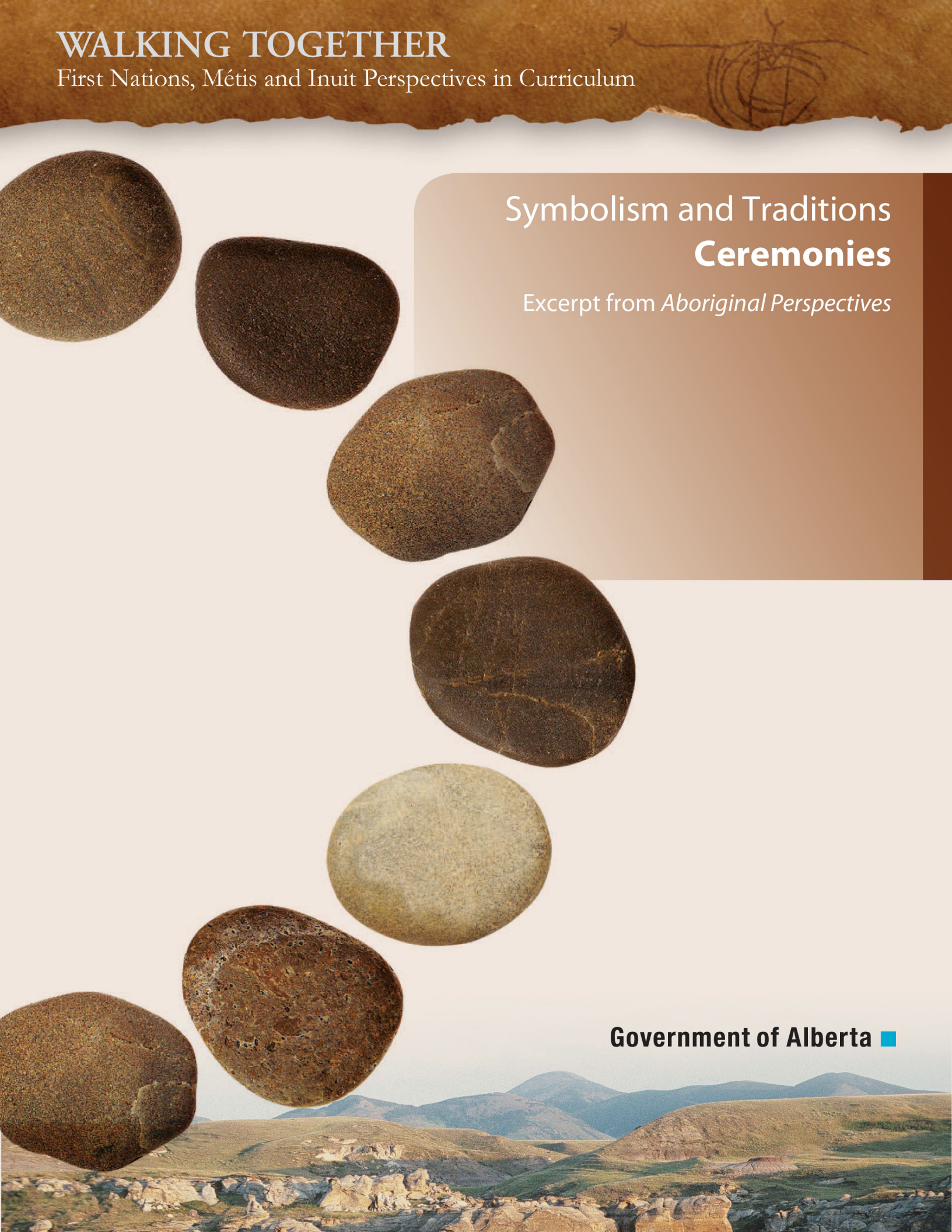
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Symbolism and Traditions Ceremonies

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





CEREMONIES

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

CEREMONIES

Many traditional First Nations and Inuit practices demonstrate respect and gratitude for the gifts of the physical and spiritual world. Such practices maintain harmony and balance between humankind and the rest of creation.

First Nations and Inuit peoples from across the continent share a tradition of regularly giving thanks, through everyday acts, through rituals, and through ceremonies. A ceremony is a formal act or series of acts performed as prescribed by custom, law, or other authority.

Ceremonies can be simple or elaborate solemn occasions or forms of celebration. First Nations celebrations are often a means of thanking everyone in the community for their contributions.

Ceremonial gatherings remain at the heart of First Nations spiritual and cultural practices today. The significance of these ceremonial practices remains true to sacred teachings that go back to the beginning of time.

Gift-giving is an important part of many First Nations ceremonial gatherings. People traditionally offer their best and most valuable goods to sacrifice or distribute to guests or members of their community. Such gifts are recognition that resources are meant to be shared. They are also thought to encourage the spiritual world to be as generous.

Traditionally, giving a gift created a relationship of reciprocity between giver and receiver. If the recipient of a gift could not respond with gifts in kind, the recipient might offer loyalty or service.

Many gifts were given and then re-given. Even today, it is the act of giving that is most significant, not the gift itself. Generous individuals gain status and are thought to receive blessings from the spirits.

Traditionally, the *Mâhtâhitowin* or “Give-Away Dance,” was held by the Plains Cree in fall or early winter. It was an important ceremony in which communities would pray for good hunts and long lives. It was no coincidence that the ceremony was held just before winter. The feasts and generous exchange of gifts were thought to ward off starvation or other hardships during the long winter.

The Give-Away Dance is new among the Blackfoot nations. At the end of this dance is a distribution of blankets, money, horses, and anything else that the sponsor wants to give away. The dance strengthens social bonds and is also a way to welcome visitors.

At the heart of every ceremony is gratitude to the Creator for the gift of life. Giving gifts honours this greatest gift of all.

Specific ceremonies address the protocol for use of the land’s resources. Some traditional rituals helped communities ensure an ongoing food supply, under the belief that the spirits of

respectfully treated animals or plants return to replenish the earth. When a First Nations hunter offered part of an animal back to the natural world, this symbolized respect, honour, and thanks for the animal's gift of life to the human community.

Many First Nations and Inuit peoples continue to honour such ceremonial practices today.

Traditional First Nations and Inuit ceremonial gatherings are tied to a seasonal time frame rather than specific dates. In the Pacific Northwest, First Nations held various ceremonies to celebrate the gift of salmon when the first fish of the year was caught. Similarly, eastern First Nations had regular ceremonies to show gratitude for the plants that fed them, with celebrations for green corn, strawberries, and the maple tree, for example.

Many ceremonies use sacred and symbolic objects. For example, to the Dene Tha', the drum is not simply a musical instrument. It is a symbol of identity, a spiritual instrument for singing prayers, communicating with the Creator, and honouring Elders, mothers, children, and nature. Different cultures consider different items, such as the pipe, tobacco, specific kinds of rocks, water, birds, and many animals, to be symbolic of values and beliefs important to the culture.

Sacred objects are seen to have a life, spirit, and power of their own. Symbolic objects are normally considered animate in most First Nations languages. For example, the Cree word *pesowew* or *petâw* means "bring it" — *pesowew* (for animate items) and *petâw* (for inanimate). When Cree people refer to the pipe, they use an animate term — *pesowewospwâkan*. Their language reflects a belief that the pipe is a direct link to the Creator.

A ceremonial pipe used with tobacco represents communication with the Creator – a form of prayer. Ceremonial pipe tobacco is traditionally not for recreational or everyday use. For many First Nations cultures, tobacco represents honesty that is carried in one's heart when words are spoken between people. The smoke represents one's visible thoughts; tobacco travels ahead of the words so that honesty will be received in a kind and respectful way.

Plants in general symbolize transformation. Many First Nations use tobacco, sage, sweet grass, or cedar for ceremonial, healing, and purification purposes. Each plant symbolizes different things to different nations, but specific prayers and rituals always prescribe collection, preparation, and use of the plant.

First Nations and Inuit spirituality is action oriented, involving the senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch. Dancing is an important part of many ceremonial gatherings. For many people, dancing is a spiritual act, a way of praying that connects mind, body, and emotions to the spiritual world. First Nations have many dances, each with a specific purpose.

Singing performs a similar spiritual purpose, and songs exist for almost every type of ceremony. Songs are particularly important to Inuit peoples and are a major component of their oral tradition. Inuit songs can be spiritual or secular, which means they deal with topics from day-to-day life. Among traditional Inuit societies, every Inuk was a poet and singer, but songs from people regarded as prophets and spiritual leaders were especially powerful. From these people, songs were believed to heal or even work miracles.

COMMUNAL CEREMONIES

If rites of passage celebrate an individual's transition from one phase of life to another, then communal ceremonies celebrate and reinforce social and spiritual relationships.

Among the Plains Cree, traditional communal ceremonies included the Sundance, Shaking Tipi Ceremony, Masked Dance, Prairie-Chicken Dance, Pipestem Bundle Dance, Round Dance, and Medicine Society Dance.

Major Plains Cree dances were traditionally sponsored by an individual. Such sponsorship was an enormous project for that person and for that person's relatives. Some dances would require many months of preparation by the whole extended family. Families supported one another in these preparations, which drew kin together and reinforced systems of kinship Responsibilities.

Contemporary ceremonial gatherings preserve ancient teachings and serve important social and spiritual functions, much in the way they always have. Most specific information about ceremonies is considered sacred. In-depth knowledge is a personal understanding that is gained through an individual's experience of ceremonial gatherings. The following touches upon some of the ceremonial gatherings still held in Alberta First Nations communities.

Tea Dance

For Dené Tha' people in Alberta, the *dawots'ethe*, which means simply "dance" in Dené Tha', is the most significant ceremonial gathering. The English name for this ceremony — Tea Dance — comes from the tea served at the gathering, although the beverage itself does not have a particular spiritual significance.

Tea Dances are traditionally held to commemorate a death, mark a change in seasons, or to mark the end of a successful hunt. The purpose of each Tea Dance is revealed to prophets in their dreams. Prophets are spiritual leaders in Dené Tha' communities. A Tea Dance involves prayer, feasting, dancing, socializing, storytelling, and speeches by Elders. *Shin*, which are songs, are the primary means of addressing the spirits.

Round Dance

The Round Dance held by the Woodland Cree is called the *mâskisimowin*. The Plains Cree call it *pîcîcîwin*. It was once held only in the winter, although today it is sometimes held at other times of the year. It is similar in function and form to the Tea Dance.

Sweat Lodge

The Sweat Lodge ceremony involves a physical and spiritual purification. The Cree word for the Sweat Lodge is *matotisân*. There are many types of sweat lodges and they can be used for purposes such as purification, healing, and prayer. Different types of lodges are constructed for different purposes and different First Nations and communities follow different protocols for construction of a lodge and its ceremony.

Often, lodges are constructed with a frame of bent willow branches. The number of branches varies depending on considerations such as the type of lodge being built and the number of people attending the ceremony. Different symbolic meanings are attached to each of the willows. Everything from the entrance to the lodge and which direction it faces, to the

symbolic meanings of the rocks and water used in the ceremony, have symbolic and spiritual significance.

Today many Aboriginal people use the Sweat Lodge to seek spiritual solutions for themselves and their communities.

Sundance

For Plains First Nations, the Sundance is traditionally a celebration of community well-being, world renewal, and thanksgiving. It was and is the most sacred ceremony.

Among the Plains Cree, sponsoring the *Pâhkwesimôwin* (Sundance) was one of the biggest spiritual, social, and economic commitments a person could make. Women could pledge to sponsor the dance, but it was customary for a male member to do it on her behalf.

Today, as in the past, the *Pâhkwesimôwin* is a sacred place to visit people, to fast, purify, be safe, and learn. The dance involves sacrifice as a way to be close to the Creator. People offer gifts to the Creator and commit to important cultural values such as hope, peace, and harmony.

For nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the *Akôka'tssin* (Sundance) was traditionally a time to reaffirm their faith in the Creator and the sun as a major force in the gift of life. Sometimes the *Ookáán*, or “Chaste Woman Ceremony,” was a central feature of the *Akôka'tssin*. It was only held if a qualified woman came forward to sponsor it.

The Blackfoot *Akôka'tssin* was sponsored by a group, such as the Horn Society. The gathering was and continues to be a time for ceremonies to transfer memberships in societies. The *Akôka'tssin* remains one of the most important social activities of the year. Today First Nations people from all over Alberta attend the *Akôka'tssin* on the Kainai Reserve each summer.

Powwow

The powwow is the most popular and far-reaching form of celebration among First Nations communities today. Although many First Nations host these gatherings, the powwow is a contemporary ceremony and not all communities host or participate in them. For those who participate, the event is often a way to reaffirm their cultural heritage.

There are four main types of powwow dances: Traditional, Fancy, Grass, and Jingle-dress. Jingle-dress dancing is derived from the Anishinabé people of northern Ontario, while Traditional, Fancy, and Grass dancing have their roots in Plains culture.

The Cree word for powwow is *pwât'simowin*, which means “Lakota Dancing,” since the Lakota were the originators of what is known as the powwow today. The Blackfoot call it *passkaan* and the Nakoda call it *wagicibi*, which simply means “dancing.”

Today powwows celebrate First Nations traditions through singing, dancing, and drumming. The powwow takes place in a circle, as do many other ceremonies.

Some powwows are competitive, which means they offer prize money for some dances. For example, the Skydome Powwow in Toronto offers \$75 000 in prize money. Some of these powwows are huge gatherings lasting two to three days or longer, with contests in different categories.

During powwow season, from April to October, people of different nations renew old friendships and make new ones. Powwow protocol includes proper procedures for everything from when photographs are allowed to not touching a dancer's regalia without permission.