

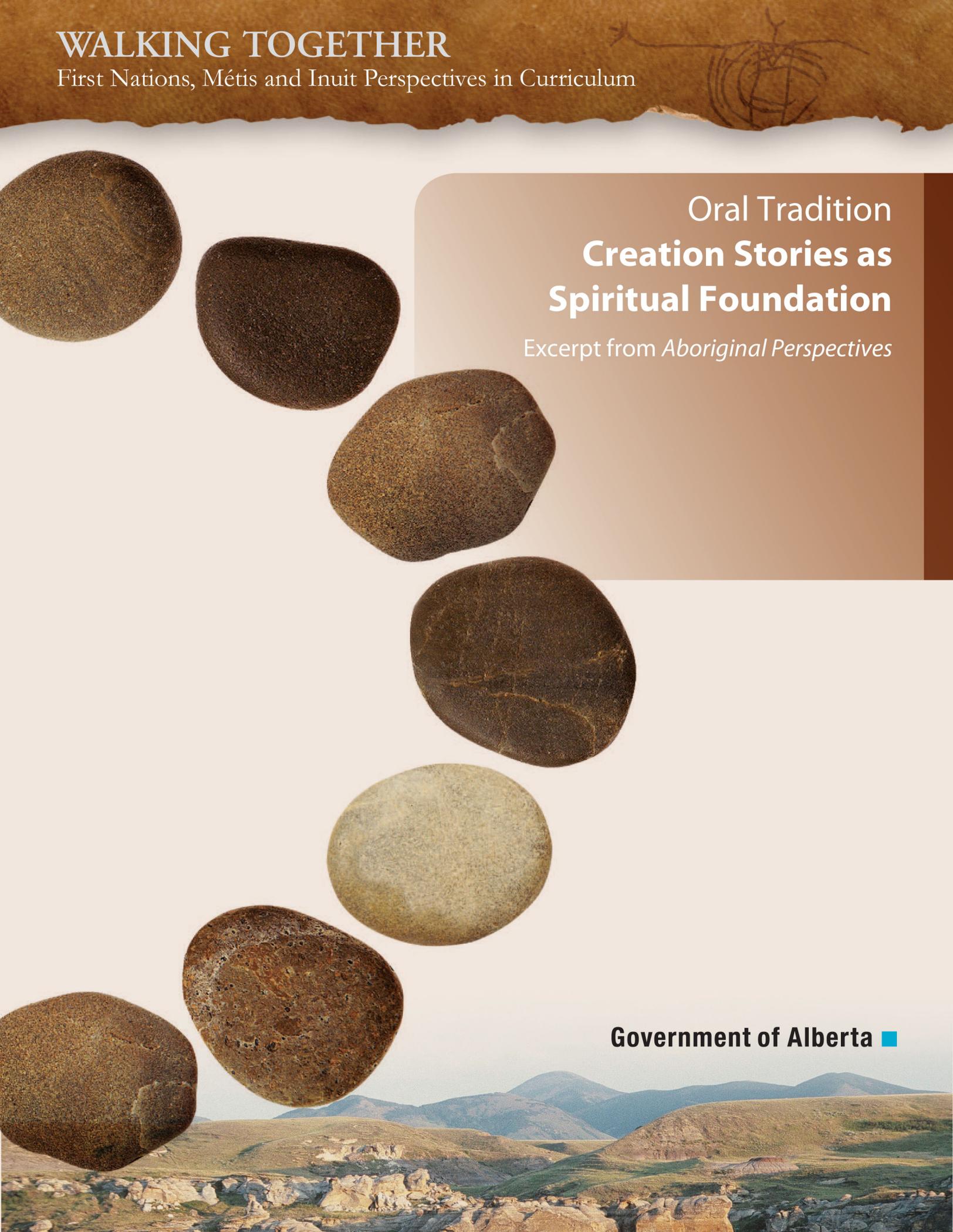
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Oral Tradition Creation Stories as Spiritual Foundation

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





CREATION STORIES AS SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

CREATION STORIES AS SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION

More than one thousand nations lived in North America when the first Europeans arrived. Each had its own culture with particular rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs that tied them to the land the people called home. Creation stories explain how the world and all of its parts began. This explanation for the origin of the world can help people understand and accept things that cannot be seen or touched, including their own identity, purpose, and place in the world. An individual's understanding of their place and purpose in the world is their spirituality. The traditional spirituality of First Nations and Inuit peoples is a way of life in fused with the belief that existence includes both a physical world and a spiritual world. The physical world can be seen and touched. It is the humans, plants, water, and earth itself.

The spiritual world is normally unseen, but is nevertheless present everywhere and in everything. All humans, animals, plants, water, and earth have spiritual aspects along with physical presence.

The two worlds are inseparable. Every part of the physical world is connected to the spiritual realm. In turn, the spiritual realm is affected by events, decisions, and actions in the physical world. This sense of connection between the physical and spiritual has a central role in the oral tradition and especially in creation stories.

Because of their sacred nature, procuring such stories normally requires following a certain protocol before storytellers will agree to share their knowledge.

Creation is not a matter of the past — it is an ongoing process that is constantly in a state of renewal through the continuation of life.

Creation stories describe the origin of and the reason for the rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual beliefs that celebrate the renewal of creation. In Chapter Three, you will learn about some of these ceremonies and celebrations.

PURPOSE AND ORDER

Because the world is a complicated place, creation stories are sometimes long and have many parts — how the world was formed; when people arrived; the origin of important cultural objects such as the ceremonial pipe; how there came to be light, fire, the moon, and wind; why the animals and plants look and act as they do. For example, various stories explain how the chipmunk got its black stripes, why owls have big eyes, and why the bobcat has a flat nose and long tail.

Common in these stories is the idea that nothing is by chance. The Creator has a purpose for each part of the natural world. Creation stories reveal that the Creator's touch is everywhere.

Creation stories set forth the relationship between all things of the world — animals, birds, plants, insects, rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, oceans, and humans — and the role each of them has in maintaining balance and the cycle of creation. Nothing is too small or insignificant to play a part. A message common in many creation stories is that everything and everyone has a gift to give that should be accepted with gratitude and respect.

Creation stories reveal the important position animals hold in First Nations and Inuit cultures. In many First Nations origin stories, the world was shaped and formed by the thoughts and wishes of an animal. The Secwepemc (Shuswap), for example, tell how Coyote saves the world from darkness and long winters by creating day and night and the four seasons.

Humans are not separate from the land, but part of it. In many creation stories, humans are the last to be created. "When the world was new," as the Sahtu Dene say in many stories, animals were different from the way they are now. They were animal-people with special powers, and all spoke the same language. In traditional Sahtu Dene stories, humans are the only creatures that no other animal or plant depends on for survival. Because of this, people are meant to be respectful and humble in their relationship to nature and the land. The attributes of the land are gifts meant to be used and enjoyed with respect.

FLOODS, EARTH, AND THE SKY WORLD

Creation stories are among the world's oldest stories — they exist in all cultures. There are often similarities in the stories of different cultures. For example, many tell of a great flood — of a long—ago time when the entire world was covered by water.

In one version of the Cree creation story, the Creator made all the animals and the first people; then he told Wîsahkecâhk to teach them how to live. But Wîsahkecâhk did not obey, and the people quarreled. The Creator was displeased and sent a great flood. Everything was drowned except Wîsahkecâhk, Otter, Beaver, and Muskrat. They needed somewhere to live, so Wîsahkecâhk asked the others to dive down and bring up a bit of earth so he could make an island. Each one tried, but only Muskrat succeeded. Using the powers given to him by the Creator, Wîsahkecâhk expanded the bit of earth into an island by blowing on it.

The story of the earth diver is told not only by many First Nations, but also by indigenous peoples in Australia, Africa, and parts of Asia.

Other creation stories are quite different. First peoples living in the southern United States, such as the Apache, Navajo, and Hopi, were said to have climbed out of Earth, passing through different worlds before reaching the surface where they live today.

Some stories involve a Sky World of spirits. In a creation story told by the Dene people near Great Slave Lake, the world becomes dark and snow falls and blankets Earth. The animals send a delegation up through a trap door to the Sky World to find out why. There the animals work together to retrieve the sun, moon, and stars from Black Bear who was not yet an animal of this world. The animals throw the sun through the trap door and it melts the snow, causing a great flood. After the waters recede, as the story goes, people come and there is never peace on Earth again.

LAND AND IDENTITY

Creation stories of different First Nations reflect their specific environment and give the people a sense of belonging with their surroundings. In the Blackfoot creation story, Naapi marks off a piece of land with a stick and provides the people with many animals and plants. He then tells them to defend their land and its resources from others.

Many stories describe the creation of specific landforms or features of the physical environment. Dene people say the waters of the Great Slave Lake were left behind after the great snowfall melted. In the Haida creation story, the beaches and rocks of Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) are formed after the waters that covered Earth receded. In some stories from the Pacific Northwest, Raven makes the first people from seashells, and in others he leads them from a clamshell. Some Inuit and First Nations tell stories about the origin of the aurora borealis, the northern lights. A stone along the southern shores of Lake Superior is sacred to the Chippewa. This is where Nanabozho stopped to rest and smoke his pipe while he created the world. Everywhere in the Rocky Mountains are sacred places where Naapi walked or slept or hunted can be found.

The stories show that these places, the traditional lands, were home to each group from the beginning, provided to them by the Creator. These lands are where each nation is intended to live. The intimate sense of connection traditional First Nations people felt with their surroundings was a part of their identity as humans.

People understood through stories that their actions in their surroundings had to be respectful. It was here that their ancestors were taught how to hunt, which plants to use for food or medicine, and the importance of balance and harmony with nature. Here, the lessons were learned on how to live as a person, a family, a community, and a nation.

OTHER THEORIES ABOUT ORIGIN

Many First Nations and Inuit peoples believe that their ancestors originated in North America and that the Creator made the land and its inhabitants, including humans, to exist in a delicate state of balance. These beliefs are based on sacred oral teachings that have been passed down for generations.

Scientists propose various theories about the origins of North America's first peoples. Theories are explanations that are not proven, but are scientifically reasonable. Scientific theories are based on the study of artifacts found at archaeological sites across North America. Most theories maintain that the first peoples to live in North America originated elsewhere. These theories propose that the earliest humans on the planet evolved in Africa and then gradually spread to other parts of the world.

Scientists disagree, however, on the exact date and circumstances of humanity's appearance in North and South America. The most widely accepted explanation is known as the Beringia theory, which suggests that First Nations migrated to North America from Asia between 30 000 and 11 000 years ago .

Today Alaska and Siberia are separated by the Bering Strait, a narrow strip of water approximately 88 kilometres wide. During the Ice Age, however, ocean levels were much lower. Vast quantities of moisture were locked in the ice sheets covering North America. Lower ocean levels left a continuous land mass between Asia and North America exposed for several thousand years. Scientists have named this area Beringia. At some point in history, Beringia may have

stretched across 1600 kilometers.

Scientists theorize that ancient hunters from Asia travelled across Beringia in pursuit of large game, such as mammoths, giant bison, antelopes, and mastodons. From there, scientists believe the hunters migrated south, either along the Pacific coastline or as shown on the map on this page, through narrow, ice-free corridor stretching down through what is now Alberta.

The Beringia theory dominated North American archaeology for six decades. Today, other theories compete for acceptance. Some scientists, for example, now believe that the first Americans arrived by boat. Following Asia's coastline, they sailed past Beringia and migrated down the west coast as far as South America. Others believe ancient Europeans may have travelled across the North Atlantic. Still others argue that Polynesian islanders and Australian indigenous peoples arrived by raft or boat from across the Pacific Ocean.

No theory yet explains all evidence. Because these theories are founded on discoveries of physical artifacts, new discoveries can support or change scientific theories rapidly. Debate in the scientific community about this topic continues.