



## THE ORAL TRADITION

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

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### THE ORAL TRADITION

The cultures of First Nations and Inuit peoples are rooted in their oral tradition. An oral tradition is a culture's collection of spoken words that have been handed down for generations. The words of the oral tradition are the inheritance of an entire cultural group. This tradition may include epic poems, prayers, speeches, spiritual teachings, songs, stories, and histories.

Repetition is a central part of the oral tradition. The words are heard many times throughout a person's life. Stories are told and retold. Eventually they become an integral part of an individual's sense of identity and everyday life. The words are then passed on to younger generations in the same fashion. Traditionally, the oral tradition is the primary means of cultural transmission. Cultural transmission is when a society's culture is passed on to individuals, who adopt the values and perspectives of the culture as their own.

Today the oral tradition continues in the lives of many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Traditional stories and songs are a vibrant part of many communities and many people's understanding of themselves, their culture, and the world.

It can be difficult to describe the significance of a specific First Nation's oral tradition outside its original language. The English word story does not adequately convey the significance of the stories that are part of a culture's oral tradition.

For example, the Plains Cree describe stories as either *âcimostakewin* or *âtayohkewin*. An *âcimostakewin* is a regular story or tale that captures everyday events, news accounts, or personal experiences.

*Âtayohkewina* are sacred stories, sometimes called legends passed down orally through generations. *Âtayohkewina* provide spiritual messages and sacred teachings.

Within the *âtayohkewina*, *mamâhtaw âcimôna* are stories that relate a miracle or extraordinary experience. These stories often relate to a time long ago when the world was different from the world as it is known today. In these stories, animals can talk, characters can sometimes change their shape at will, die and come back to life, and be many things at once.

*Opwanîw âcimona* are a second type of *âtayohkewin*. *Opwanîw âcimona* refer to sacred stories that emerge through a spiritual quest. This type of story is seen as direct communication with the Creator or spirit world. As such, it is highly sacred and is normally only shared under special circumstances.

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First Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy call their oral tradition *ákaitapiitsinikssiisti*, which literally means “ stories from the people who lived before us” or “ ancestral stories.” A Blackfoot storyteller normally indicates what type of *ákaitapiitsinikssiisti* is going to be told before beginning the story. This lets the audience know what to expect. Some stories might explain how sacred bundles were given to the people, others about armed conflict and bravery, while many are spirit stories, or about Naapi. The latter kind of story often means that something humorous or racy is going to be told.

Among the Dené Tha’, all stories are called *wodih*, which means “ stories, lectures, or news.” This includes recent events, personal stories, prophecies, and ancient stories. A class of stories that might be compared to the Cree *mamâhtaw âcimôna* are called *tonht’ onh wodihé*, which translates as “stories of long ago.”

Some stories in the oral tradition, such as those about creation or the reasons for spiritual ceremonies, are passed on with scrupulous exactness. These old stories contain essential cultural teachings. Some stories are a method of prayer. Certain sacred stories are traditionally never told to a person from outside one’s own group. Someone might, for example, relate some part of a First Nation’s history to an outsider but refuse to share a story about a sacred ceremony.

Traditionally, these special stories were told in the winter. Words were considered so powerful that even speaking of a spirit at the wrong time was believed to cause hardship for an individual or community. Some First Nations people believed that spirits were asleep in the winter, so it was safe to speak of them at that time of year.

This custom of restricting storytelling to the winter was also practical. Spring, summer, and fall were busy times for most First Nations as they hunted, harvested, and prepared for the winter. In most regions across Canada, winter meant individuals spent long periods of time in shelters with their families. Winter was an important time for reinforcing community bonds and values.

Of course, not all stories were told in the winter. Some stories were told only during other seasons of the year or were restricted to certain types of ceremonies and gatherings.

## ELDERS AND THE ORAL TRADITION

Those responsible for passing on the stories and keeping the oral tradition alive are the Elders. In Blackfoot, they are *Omahkitapii*, in Cree *Kihteyaya*, in Dené Tha’ *Detjye*, and in Nakoda *Ishaween*. In all Aboriginal cultures, Elders are those who are sought after for their spiritual and cultural leadership. They have learned the traditional ways and have been asked by the community to teach this knowledge. An Elder does not have to be old or elderly. Sometimes relatively young people are recognized as cultural advisors because of their special knowledge, gifts, or experience.

The Anishinabé say someone is speaking the truth with the term *w’daebawae*. This means they are telling the truth as far as their words and experience can take them. Elders’ experiences make them people who know the truth in this sense of the word. It does not mean they know the one truth and that all others are incorrect.

Elders are the living memory of their community. Past generations depend upon Elders to pass along their stories, and future generations depend on the young to learn and remember the Elders’ knowledge. Each generation is like a link in a chain that connects past to future.

Elders are called upon to conduct and oversee important rituals such as healing ceremonies, spiritual quests, Sweat Lodges, and Sundances. They are the people who know, remember, and live the teachings that were handed down to them from previous generations.

They also mediate or resolve differences between individuals, communities, and organizations using their knowledge of traditional customs. This means they help restore balance and harmony within communities. Elders are able to counsel people and help them see their place in the community. They reinforce the importance of keeping harmony in one's own life, with the community, and with the environment. Yet their teachings are often indirect and metaphoric, rather than based on experience rather than direct forms of advice. Listeners have a personal responsibility to think about the stories and form their own decisions and plans of action.

### **TEACHING STORIES**

Through the oral tradition, First Nations and Inuit peoples pass on their history, customs, and values. Oral traditions also teach practical skills, such as house building, hunting, collection and preparation of medicinal plants, healing ceremonies, and knowledge of fishing spots and migratory routes. The sharing in this knowledge traditionally bound individuals and families together with a common understanding of life and how it should be properly lived.

Oral teachings are very much a social experience. Oral communication normally requires at least two people, one to speak and another to listen. In the oral tradition, members of the community, most often the old and young, must spend time together. The oral tradition therefore reinforces interpersonal relationships, or social bonds, at many levels. For example, a story might communicate the importance of relationships while the process of sharing a story reinforces the same value.

Much oral communication traditionally took place during land-based activities or rituals. Sometimes specific oral communication required a particular activity in order to convey its full meaning. For example, the sights, sounds, smells, and physical experience of digging up a particular root at a specific time of year, in combination with observation of spiritual prayers or rituals surrounding the activity, teach much more than a description of what to do. Much of the wisdom from the oral tradition involves this kind of sensory, experiential knowledge.

### **THEMES AND VALUES**

Most stories from the oral tradition are entertaining. Many use humour — in one Wakanabi legend, a man chooses the ability to make a marvelous sound that rings through the hills whenever he belches or passes wind — but, it is a story's underlying message that is most important. Stories often illustrate central values, such as truth, love, and respect. A value is a principle, standard, or quality that is considered worthwhile or desirable. The values of a story are rarely stated outright; listeners have to think about and consider the consequences of the characters' behaviour.

Stories are traditionally told over and over. A child's understanding of a specific story might differ from that of a young adult or adult. Children might appreciate the entertainment. Adults might appreciate the spiritual teachings. The same story might offer something to listeners of all ages. Listeners are expected to learn from their experiences and to use stories to guide their decisions throughout life. The Dené Tha', for example, call oral storytelling

*emot'li*, which means “ words to live by.”

The Haudenosaunee tell a story about Opossum, who is conceited about his lovely, bushy tail and is tricked into shaving it. This story and many others explain the origin of particular animal characteristics, but also show the perils of allowing vanity to control behavior. Trickster characters often appear in such cautionary stories.

Many stories warn of the consequences of unkind or disrespectful behaviour. Creatures who refuse to get along often meet an unhappy ending. As in *The Legend of the Saskatoons*, as told by Eleanor Brass on this page, greed and other selfishness are seldom unpunished.

Teaching by negative example is often tied to humour. Characters in stories are made to look foolish as a way of warning listeners not to bring the same consequences on themselves.

Teaching stories often use negative behaviour as examples, but not always. Inuit oral tradition tells of a hunter who is rewarded by Nunam-shua, the Woman Who Dwells in the Earth, for his respectful ways — taking only what he needs, avoiding females with calves, being thankful, and remembering that the grass is sacred when the caribou migrate.

Some stories demonstrate that even small creatures have power and deserve respect. Many stories explain natural phenomena, such as why deciduous trees lose their leaves in the fall. Stories about food sources vary from region to region — the coming of corn, the gift of buffalo, how salmon originated, and why berries ripen at certain times of the year. The stories explain why something happens as it does, but they also teach listeners valuable knowledge about the environment and its resources.

Other common topics include the changing seasons, the four elements of nature (earth, water, fire, and air), and celebrations of bravery and good deeds.

Whatever a story's subject, it often carries a message about values such as cooperation, compromise, sharing, and pride in the success of the community. Connections between the personal and the planetary illustrate the interdependence between all things and the importance of establishing nurturing, respectful relationships with oneself, other people, and everything in the world.

Some stories centre on dreams or visions; others predict the future. Most show that the visible world is only the surface. Sometimes a story's message is blatant. Other times listeners might have to think about it over time. Most often the natural world provides answers.

First Nations oral traditions have always related how living and non-living parts of Earth are one. Today mainstream science recognizes this truth. The science of ecology — the study of relationships between living things and their environment — circles back to truths First Nations have known and taught for generations.