

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Symbolism and Tradition **Cultural Traditions**

Excerpt from *Education Is Our Buffalo*

Government of Alberta ■





CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Excerpt from *Education Is Our Buffalo*

CULTURAL TRADITIONS

Handing Down Cultural Traditions

The acquisition of cultural knowledge is important to all peoples. Before the arrival of Europeans and the imposition of a foreign colonial educational system, First Nations, Métis and Inuit had their own oral educational system, which ensured that children learned the cultural values and history of the tribe, and they had a foundational principle— respect others and live in harmony with the environment.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures are not monolithic, and talking about one Aboriginal culture would be similar to talking about one Asian, European or African culture—each of these cultures includes a wide variety of nations, customs, traditions, languages and outlooks. It would be misleading to suggest that a list of common cultural traits could describe the richness and diversity of Aboriginal cultures. With 46 First Nations, 8 Métis Settlements and many urban Aboriginal communities including Inuit, Alberta’s Aboriginal communities are diverse (Alberta Education 2005).

While each Aboriginal group has unique beliefs, customs and practices, there are some common general beliefs and teachings—all live in communities that define their relationships with each other, and such relationships define individual roles and responsibilities. In many Aboriginal communities the individual is identified by the family and where the family lives or comes from (Alberta Education 2005).

Both in the past and in the present, Aboriginal parents and grandparents, extended family members and elders have been responsible for passing knowledge to children. Aboriginal cultures are oral, so knowledge is passed down through stories. Children learn about the world around them and about the relationships between human beings and all other living and non-living things. Early in life they learn the importance of knowing who their relatives are and the value of the kinship system. They also learn manners and respect, and become acquainted with virtues and positive, humanistic qualities, such as love, kindness, honour, generosity and sharing, which they are made to practice throughout childhood.

Children are taken to social and spiritual ceremonies to observe and learn their people’s customs and practices, often taking part in the ceremonies themselves. During certain ceremonies,

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children are formally introduced and may be given a First Nations name or dance at their first powwow. Community members conduct the ceremonies, passing along additional knowledge about cultural practices. Often children who are musically talented learn the ceremonial songs and the correct drumming techniques and are recruited as valued members of singing groups.

Traditionally, hunting skills had to be learned. The duty of teaching hunting techniques fell first to the father or to a member of the community who was a great hunter. Boys learned to correctly use their hunting equipment. They were also taught about wild game, the natural world and where animals could be found. Becoming a good hunter depended on the amount of training one received and could take a long time. Proficient hunters were highly valued members of the community. These teachings continue today in many communities.

Mothers and other female members of the community passed homemaking and sewing skills down to the girls. Girls learned how to make clothing and other home products from animals, birds and plants, the raw materials of Mother Earth. They were taught the duties, roles and responsibilities expected of women. Women are important members of the community and often function as advisors, healers and providers. Women have important positions in some of the spiritual societies in the community.

Knowledge is passed down orally by other members of the community: historians, healers, those responsible for meting out justice, individuals with special knowledge of the environment, leaders of the social and spiritual societies, and storytellers, especially those familiar with important legends about each nation's mythological helper to the Creator, Weesakichak (Cree), Naapi (Blackfoot) and Nanaboosh (Ojibwa), whose earthly exploits had moral messages. In other words, education in First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures was seen as a community responsibility.

Blackfoot Protocol

A verbal thank you is a social gesture or norm practised by the larger non-Native society. In some First Nations languages, such as Blackfoot, there is no word for thank you. Gratitude is expressed through kind words or acts of kindness. But that it is not to say every First Nations person adheres to his or her own cultural customs. The point is that all cultural groups respect other people's customs. For example, when one is on someone else's turf in their home, on their reserve, in their city or even country—it is respectful to abide by their customs. I always taught my First Nations students to say thank you in my classroom. I also explained the cultural differences and expectations to them and the importance of learning and practising others' cultural customs and norms. This taught them to be respectful and to function appropriately in any culture.

—*Josy Russell-Pakes*

Today, traditional Aboriginal cultures have been largely displaced by modern North American culture. The impact of the change has been so powerful that today many First Nations parents do not know how to speak their traditional languages. The main reason for this is that traditional

cultural knowledge was almost lost when children were removed from their homes and placed in residential schools. School authorities strongly discouraged and punished students for using their language and practising their cultural traditions.

Nevertheless, there is cause for hope for the survival and revitalization of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and languages today. There are pockets of the Aboriginal population that still have a sophisticated traditional knowledge base. It is through them and a renewed interest in traditional language and culture that a new order will be achieved. For example, some traditional languages and culture are being taught in First Nations schools on reserves and in some public schools. Elders and community members are being involved to ensure that there is local content in the curriculum. The last section of this resource provides information on Aboriginal programs for students and teachers currently available in Alberta.

First Nations Symbols and Their Meanings

First Nations people from many different nations adopted ancestral symbols that represented ideas, beliefs, dreams or reality. Very often symbols represented figures in nature, such as important animals or birds, like the buffalo and the eagle. Sometimes the symbols represented the spirit world and spiritual helpers, like the thunderbird. Some symbols identified nations or clans, while others depicted celestial bodies, such as the sun, the moon and the stars. These last symbols are often seen on teepees and clothing and carved into jewellery.

Symbols take many forms. Some are beaded on clothing and others are painted on entire hides and tell a story of the history of a tribe or nation. A number of symbols are thousands of years old, and their meanings have been lost. The petroglyphs at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park in southern Alberta are an example of this.

First Nations people who believe in the traditional ways wear symbols that give them strength or identity. Following are some major First Nations symbols:

The **eagle** is a symbol of truth, power and freedom as it roams the sky. Its wings represent the balance between male and female, each dependent upon the strengths and abilities of the other. When one holds the eagle feather, one must speak the truth as positively as one can, for the ear of the Creator is that much closer to the feather of the eagle. Therefore, First Nations people honour the feather of the eagle with great care, showing it respect and honesty at all times. To be given an eagle feather is the highest honour that can be awarded within First Nations culture.



The **bear** symbolizes strength, endurance, intelligence and loyalty.



The **buffalo** symbolizes subsistence, strength and the ability to survive.



The **rock** symbolizes strength and endurance, and it holds the spirits of the ancestors.

The **drum** is a powerful symbol of Aboriginal identity and represents the heartbeat of Mother Earth.



MÉTIS SYMBOLS

Important symbols of Métis culture are listed below.

The **infinity sign** (∞) symbolizes two cultures together and the continuity of the Métis culture.



The **Red River cart** is a well-known and ingeniously designed symbol of Métis identity. It can be used as a cart or as a raft when the wheels are removed.

The **Métis sash** symbolizes present-day Métis identity but had many uses in the early days, often functioning as a rope or a belt. Much like the Scottish kilt, Métis use traditional woven patterns and colours in sashes to represent their community.



The **buffalo** symbolizes subsistence, strength and the ability to survive.

The **fiddle** is a favourite musical instrument of the Métis used for traditional songs and dances such as the Red River jig.

INUIT TRADITIONS, VALUES AND LANGUAGES

To survive in Canada's Arctic required that the people willingly cooperate and share—primary values of Inuit life both then and now. The sharing of food best illustrates how these values tied the Inuit community together socially. When animals were killed, the meat and skin were shared among the community. Formal rules evolved that established how food would be distributed. For example, specific parts went to the hunter who killed the animal, other parts went to the helpers and other parts went to women. Leftover meat was divided among everyone, ensuring that everyone got an equal share. When Inuit were in need, they looked after each other.

Before people lived in the larger permanent communities of today, the values, traditions, skills and knowledge that defined the culture were expressed differently. The elders still speak of times when their lives were in sync with the seasons and, though life was somewhat nomadic, the people returned to the same places year after year. The nomadic movements provided opportunities to exploit seasonal resources and establish family hunting territories. This pattern did not imply that anyone owned the land or had exclusive hunting rights. It did, however, identify a group's territory and established localized social systems and patterns of land use. Again the principles of sharing and cooperation were central to life and to survival.

The Inuit have a long-standing code of behavior based on time-honoured values and practice. Their values are communicated to children early in life through stories, legends, songs and direct modelling of behaviour. In addition to sharing and cooperating, children are instilled with values based on connecting with others (respect, generosity, love, equality, significance and trust); work (observation, practice, mastery, teamwork, unity, consensus and conservation) and coping (patience, endurance, improvisation, strength, adaptability, resilience, resourcefulness, survival, interconnectedness and honesty).



photo courtesy of amoudla Sataa

Within their network of social relationships, they placed equal status on men and women even though they had different roles within the family and community. Women were usually keepers of information of family trees and storytellers. Women had certain patterns on their clothing and may have had tattoos on their faces. Women and young girls tended to qulliqs (seal oil lamps) and used ulus to prepare skins and then sewed them into clothing.

Inuit Symbols and Their Meanings

The term *Inuksuk* (the singular of *Inuksuit*) means “to act in the capacity of a human.” It is an extension of an Inuk, a human being. These Inuksuit were designed to be messages fixed in time and space. Others may have been personal notes or grief marking where a loved one perished. Some Inuksuit were never approached and were avoided because of their power; some were sources of good fortune, cures and protection.

In addition to their earthly functions, certain muksuk–like figures had spiritual connotations and were objects of veneration, often marking the threshold of the spiritual landscape of the Inummarit, which means “the people who knew how to survive on the land living in a traditional way.”

Cultural Protocols

In Alberta, each Aboriginal community has its own cultural and social traditions that translate into protocols that should be carefully respected. Although regional and nation-specific protocols

have evolved over time, there are many similarities and common themes that are important to remember.

Using proper protocol means following the customs of the people or community. Because protocol varies between communities and individuals, it is important to ask an informed community member about the proper protocol for any given situation. Generally, people respect those who are considerate enough to ask.

Each Aboriginal community has its own protocols, which can change in a community without notice (for example, when a new chief and council are elected). Protocols also change depending on whether a situation is informal or formal.

As noted in *Our Words, Our Ways* (Alberta Education 2005), protocols exist to

- build trusting, honest relationships;
- show respect for Aboriginal cultures, values and beliefs;
- allow others to speak in the voice and style of their cultural group;
- create balance in the consultation and negotiation process;
- open people's minds to different attitudes; and
- improve relations with Aboriginal communities.

Elders

Elders are men and women regarded as the keepers and teachers of an Aboriginal nation's oral traditions and knowledge. Different elders hold different gifts. They can make significant contributions by bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings into the school and classroom; providing advice to parents, students, teachers and school administrators; providing information about Aboriginal communities; and acting as a bridge between the school and the community.



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Elders are considered vital to the survival of Aboriginal cultures, and the transmission of cultural knowledge is an essential part of the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and their protocols. Elders are always to be treated with great respect and honour. The roles of elders vary greatly from community to community, as do the protocols and traditions they teach. As noted in *Our Words, Our Ways* (Alberta Education 2005), elders often perform such services as

- giving prayers before meetings,
- describing or performing traditional ceremonies,
- sharing traditional knowledge,
- giving spiritual advice to individuals,
- demonstrating traditional crafts and practices, and
- teaching the community's protocols.

Approaching an Elder

The best way to contact an elder and learn the proper protocols is to ask contacts in the community, such as Aboriginal liaisons in the school system, parents or Friendship Centre staff. Community members will provide the names of respected elders and can help teachers determine which elders would be appropriate visitors to the school or classroom.

When approaching a First Nations or Métis elder, protocol usually requires an offering of tobacco, a traditional sacred plant that is used to open the door to consult with elders. An Aboriginal liaison worker or elder’s helper can guide you in the appropriate protocol for your community.

First Nations Powwow

Powwows, also called Indian Days or Indian Celebrations, are usually held during July and August on reserves throughout Canada and the United States. Powwows have become a pan-Indian cultural movement throughout North America, and people travel hundreds of miles to attend. Those who travel from one powwow to another all summer long—usually traditional families or champion dancers—are said to be “on the powwow trail.”

Powwows bring together many different First Nations to celebrate their traditional heritage during three days of song and dance. The traditional powwow is conducive to reinforcing social bonds, spiritual beliefs and a common cultural heritage. The powwow setting is usually a huge encampment of tents, trailers and teepees around a main area called an arbor where food and craft booths are set up and where all the activities take place. Dance competitions, special dance demonstrations, naming ceremonies, feasts and giveaways take place each day following a sunrise ceremony. On the last day, the host nation or powwow committee shows gratitude to its visitors by conducting a giveaway.



Gift-giving

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 the community. Such gifts are a recognition that resources are meant to be shared. They are also thought to encourage the spiritual world to be as generous. (Kainai Board of Education et al. 2005, 91)

Grand Entry

This beautiful parade of pride and colour starts off the powwow and each subsequent session of dancing. Preceded by the eagle staff, invited dignitaries and various categories of dancers join in the grand entry and dance to a special song rendered by the drum groups, following the path of the sun through the sky. The lineup is as follows: eagle staff; invited dignitaries; flag-bearers; dignitaries and princesses; men's traditional, jingle and fancy dancers; women's traditional, jingle and fancy dancers; and youth and children in categorical order. Spectators should always stand and remove caps and hats during the grand entry, flag songs and invocation.

Honour Songs

As its name indicates, an honour song honours particular individuals for such things as respect for someone who has passed away, the return of a child to health after an illness or respect for an aged relative. Spectators should always stand and remove caps and hats when an honour song is performed.



Grand Entry

The Dances

It is believed that most of the dances now being performed at modern celebrations evolved from a dance called the grass dance proper, which might have originated among the Pawnee or Ponca nations of the south central Great Plains. The dance was part of a series of dances connected to a three- and four-day ceremony honouring warriors for valour in victorious military excursions.

The most common dances are the grass dance and the crow hop, which originated among the Crow Nation of Montana; the chicken dance, which comes from the Blackfoot Nation; and the hoop dance, which is a specialty dance that originated in the southwestern United States. The hoop dance used to be danced only by males but is now also being danced by females. The eagle and buffalo dances are also specialty dances.

It is only within the last 80 years that women have taken an active part in the grass dance. Traditional women's dances include women's traditional, women's fancy and women's fancy shawl. Women have also adopted an Ojibwa-inspired healing dance known as the jingle dress dance.

Group dancing has also come into vogue and someday may be a main part of these celebrations. All the dances are continually evolving, but dancers try to keep them true to their original form.

Grass Dance

The grass dance proper was given to the Omaha nation, which in turn passed it on to the Sioux, who called it the Omaha. The different Sioux nations are credited with dispersing the dance widely to other First Nations living on the Great Plains of North America. When the Plains Cree acquired the dance, they called it the Sioux dance or *pwatsimoowin* (a Cree term meaning "Sioux dance"). Many of the ceremonial aspects of the grass dance proper are no longer performed because they are known to only a few nations. Songs from the original ceremony are still known and sung today, though new songs are developed year by year. The grass dance has evolved into different dances that are now performed at modern-day celebrations: the traditional, the grass dance and the fancy dance (for male dancers).

Round Dance

The common round dance is performed by everyone at powwows and other social events. The traditional round dance practised by the Cree in Alberta and Saskatchewan usually occurs during a one-day communal event. It is a part of a memorial for a deceased relative and is held one year after his or her death. Round dances are now used to celebrate a birthday or marriage anniversary. The occasion includes a feast, giftgiving and round dances. Everyone sits on the floor during the feast to be as near to Mother Earth as possible. Teachers should be aware of the importance of this dance and should know that, for many First Nations parents, attendance at a round dance is a legitimate excuse for absence from school.

Prairie Chicken Dance (Pihewisimowin)

Pihewisimowin is a ceremonial dance that originated in Alberta and Saskatchewan Cree communities. It is considered to have a strong spiritual meaning and follows other important ceremonies at powwow events. The dance depicts the life of the prairie chicken. During the dance, males move in circles while imitating the movements of the male prairie chicken during mating season. Dancers wear regalia that includes bustles and headdresses made of prairie chicken feathers. In place of the feather headdress, the men also adorn their heads with the roache headpiece. The ankles are decorated with prairie chicken feathers or fur and bells. Dancers move to singing and the sound of rattles. It is often followed by feasting.



Métis Culture

Métis cultural and linguistic traditions reflect a blend of their First Nations, French, English and/or Scottish predecessors. As with most other Aboriginal groups, the traditions that live today had their origins in practices that ensured the survival of the group. Often these included life on the land for some of the year.

Unique Métis languages emerged, such as Bungi, Patois and Michif. Bungi is a mixture of Orkney Scottish and Cree. Patois is classified as a French variant and is considered to be French with a First Nations influence. Michif is considered a language on its own, a mixture of French, Cree, Anishinabé and English (Kainai Board of Education et al 2005, 147).

The most common dance, the Red River jig originated in early times when groups and families met at summer and winter camps where they sang, told stories and danced. The Red River jig combines the fancy footwork of the First Nations dancing with the music of the European reels and square dances. These dances are usually accompanied by lively fiddle music.