

Excerpts from: **ABORIGINAL STUDIES 10**

# **Aboriginal Perspectives: The Oral Tradition**

## AS YOU READ

Pages 38–43 introduce you to the foundation of First Nations and Inuit cultures: the oral tradition. Within this tradition, storytelling is the primary means of passing on culture from generation to generation. As you read this section, create a list or concept map in your notes that conveys the significance of 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

For traditional First Nations and Inuit peoples, the oral tradition was like a library of knowledge. It contained everything people needed to know to live a good life. Today the oral tradition continues to teach new generations. Here teacher Rhoda Ungalaq (centre) teaches her students about the qulluliq, a traditional lamp used by Inuit people for cooking and warmth.

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 was the primary means of cultural

transmission for First Nations and Inuit peoples. **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 *âtayobkewin*. An *âcimostakewin* is a regular story or tale that captures everyday events, news accounts, or personal experiences.

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

Within the *âtayobkewina*, *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.

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*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.

First Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy call their oral tradition *âkaitapiitsinikssiitsi*, which literally means “stories from the people who lived before us” or “ancestral stories.” A Blackfoot storyteller normally indicates what type of *âkaitapiitsinikssiitsi* 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 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

## THE TEACHER-CREATOR

He goes by many names in North America and has many shapes: Coyote, Whiskey Jack, Blue Jay, Raven, Mink, and Spider. The Anishinabé call him Nanabozho or Nanabush, the Great Hare; the Blackfoot call him Naapi, or Old Man; to the Nakoda he is Iktomi, the Trickster; and to the Cree, he is Wîsahkecâhk. Half spirit and half human, the Teacher-Creator is often a central character in First Nations oral traditions. Although the specifics of this character vary from culture to culture, he tends to play a similar role.

The Teacher-Creator has extraordinary powers, the ability to create and change things, and many contradictory ways. Sometimes he helps; sometimes he hinders. He transforms himself from shape to shape, male to female, world to world, and even life to death and back to life. Sometimes wise, sometimes foolish, sometimes heroic, and sometimes dishonest and sneaky, the Teacher-Creator is a complicated cultural figure.

Yet trickster tendencies are only one side of this complex character. For example, although many Cree stories show Wîsahkecâhk in his trickster role, he also has a far more serious side. Wîsahkecâhk is an important part of sacred Cree spiritual practices.



This collage, called *The Trickster*, was created by Leah Fontaine, an art instructor working with schools throughout Canada teaching Aboriginal culture through art and theatre. How is her choice of collage an appropriate one for the Trickster?

### REFLECTION

Choose a Teacher-Creator figure from a specific culture and create a collage or other artwork that represents his nature.





## PERSONAL STORIES

Many stories relate experiences that are more personal than communal. The Plains Cree call these kinds of stories *âcimostakewina*. Such stories may still teach listeners and they may still be passed to new generations, but they are not surrounded by as many protective cultural restrictions about who can tell them and when they can be told. The text that follows, about a Cree Elder in northern Alberta, is an example of this kind of story.

*Katy [Sanderson] is a very capable hunter and trapper. At the age of seventy-nine (1991) she remains interested in trapping but prefers a friend or relative to go with her on any treks*



*Katy Sanderson is seen here picking high bush cranberries, a common fruit in the north.*

*away from the immediate area of her main trap line home. Her hunting capabilities are well known. For example, in 1975, at the age of sixty-three, she hunted and shot a moose on the shore of the Athabasca River near Fort McMurray. It was a big moose, weighing approximately 500 kilograms. It floundered and fell into shallow water about 1 metre deep. Katy waded into the water and managed to pull the floating animal to where it*

*grounded in 0.7 metres of water. It was late September, and the water was cool. Katy, as quickly as she could, removed its internal organs. If a moose has foraged just before the hunt, its loaded stomach alone can be too heavy for one person to carry. Then she removed the head, cut each leg at the knee joint, and severed each hind and each front quarter from the rib cage. She dragged each piece to the shore. After that she walked back to her home base, approximately 6 kilometres, where she asked other members of her family to return with her to complete the job of skinning-out the carcass and carrying it home.*

— Terry Garvin, *Bush Land People*

Cree *mamâhtaw âcimôna* are called *tonbt' onb 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 a 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 *Omakkitapii*, in Cree *Kibteyaya*, in Dené 'Tha' *Detye*, 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.

## COMMUNAL STORIES

All First Nations have some stories that are, as the Blackfoot say, *ákaitapiitsinikssiistsi* — stories from the ancestors. This oral tradition is part of a First Nation's **collective** inheritance, like the land. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* describes these kinds of stories as "truths too deep to be contained in a literal account." As a class discuss what this phrase means. How does it help explain that stories, such as the Tsuu T'ina story of separation below, are held to be true?

A Tsuu T'ina story tells of the time when the tribe split from the Athapaskan-speaking tribes.

The people were crossing a large body of water that was frozen. There was a large horn sticking up from the ice, and an old lady's grandson cried to have this antler. As most Tsuu T'ina grandmothers do, she gave in to her grandson's tantrum. So the Elder proceeded to chop at the antler, for it was frozen in the ice.

In doing so, the old lady disturbed a large serpent from whose head the horn was growing. The large serpent roared, and the people scattered in

panic. Unfortunately, the ice crumbled and broke all the way down the lake. The people who were nearest the serpent, in the middle of the lake, perished in the ice-cold water. The people who were nearest the north shore turned back and reached their destination safely, and the people nearest the south shore ran just as quickly to reach safety.

The tribe could not regroup because of the large lake that divided them. So the southern group continued to travel south. They (Tsuu T'ina) adopted the Plains Native way.

— Tsuu T'ina Nation

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*The Tsuu T'ina oral tradition lives on in new generations. Here a Tsuu T'ina mother wears traditional clothing as she holds her child at an event in Alberta in 2002. (Names of those pictured are not available.)*



*Tsiinaaki (Rosie Red Crow)*

## TSIINAAKI (MRS. ROSIE RED CROW)

Kainai First Nation

At eighty-seven years, Rosie Red Crow is one of the busiest Elders of the Kainai First Nation in southern Alberta.

On this day she is off to an all-night ceremony, having recently returned from a Montana conference. She is a member of the Red Crow College Elders Advisory Council, which meets every month, and she is

called upon constantly for her knowledge of Kainai culture.

“As long as people will have me, I’ll go and share what I can,” Red Crow insists. “As an Elder, it’s my duty to talk to the young people. Some of them listen to me, some don’t. But I keep talking to them so they will be proud of who they are.”

Red Crow takes delight in sharing stories her Elders handed down to her when she was young. In them, she finds the very spirit of what it means to be Kainai. “The Blackfoot language is also important, because it embodies the way we believe and express ourselves,” she adds.

According to Marie Marule, who heads up Red Crow College “Rosie is just a treasure. She is our matriarch; she’s bright, delightful, and very astute. And active! She bakes bread, pies, and picks berries. Most of all, she’s a cultural expert.”

Red Crow knows the oral history of the Kainai nation and has been a member of the Horn, Brave Dog, and Buffalo women’s societies. She has been a bundle keeper and is a grandparent to those who enter these spiritual societies.

Like other Elders of her generation, Red Crow is heartbroken by the fast lives many young people lead.

“Every weekend there’s an accident or suicide. We really have a lot of respect for each other, especially us Elders, so we feel the loss when something happens.”

**My grandfather Askaota’siwa (Owns Many Horses) was one of our chiefs.**

People would approach him saying, “Aakaota’s, I am on foot. Would you lend me a team of horses?” He would say to the person, “There are two over there who look alike. Why don’t you break them?” When the person came back later to report that the horses were broken in, Aakaota’s would give the horses to that person. This was sharing and helping each other.

— Tsiinaaki (Rosie Red Crow),  
*Kipaitapiiwahsimooni:*

*Alcohol and Drug Abuse Education Program*

## REFLECTION

Rosie Red Crow describes sharing knowledge as part of her role as an Elder. How might her story about her grandfather relate to this role? In your journal, write your understanding of the term *Elder*. As a class, discuss how a person becomes recognized by their peers as an Elder.

What are your roles in your family, school, and community? Consider how a person’s roles change as they grow older. In your journal, describe your roles now and how you see those evolving in the future.



The story below was adapted from *Those Who Know: Profiles of Alberta's Elders*, by Dianne Meili. What does Ella Paul's story about Mary Mae Strawberry tell you about Elders and their teachings? What did Paul learn from her experience?

Ella Paul, from the Alexander Reserve, describes an experience of spending time with Elder Mary Mae Strawberry on the O'Chiese Reserve. Ella explains that she felt anxious about spending the night in the bush with Mary Mae after seeing a bear track in the dirt. Mary Mae said calmly "Don't worry. We're in the hands of the Creator. Whatever happens will happen. The Creator balances all things in his Hands and watches over them." Ella tried to stay calm, but spent a rough night hearing the sound of wolves howling around her. In the morning, as the two women left the bush to return to Mary Mae's home, they saw a fresh bear carcass.

Says Ella, "I realized then about the balance Mary Mae talked about. That bear had come into our little circle to distract the wolves so they wouldn't bother us. Even though I was scared of the bear, he was really our helper because the wolves eventually fed on him. He balanced off the circle. If I'd been scared, maybe I would have upset the balance. I needed to act naturally and have the faith that Mary Mae has. She told me, 'We're just like animals so we blend in. Don't be worried.' She was right all along."

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 direct forms of advice. Listeners have a personal responsibility to think about the stories and form their own decisions and plans of action.

### LOOKING BACK

Before starting the next section, be sure you can answer the following questions: What is an oral tradition? What are different kinds of stories within an oral tradition? Why might a specific story have a restriction upon who and when it can be told? How are Elders a part of the oral tradition?

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*Connections between older generations and younger generations are fundamental to the oral tradition. Here Dan Cardinal, an Elder from the Sucker Creek First Nation, is shown with a child in 1998.*



### AS YOU READ

From the beginning of time, people from all cultures have wondered about their place in the world: Who am I and why am I here? What is my purpose in life? How did my people come to be? Where do people go when they die? Why are things the way they are?

Creation stories answer these types of questions and provide people with an understanding of themselves and the relationship between all things in the universe, both seen and unseen. As you read pages 44–49, think about your own answers to these questions. What experiences, stories, or other information influence your ideas about your place in the world?

**M**ORE 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 part of their **spirituality**. The traditional spirituality of First Nations

The crow was the most beautiful of birds; they say he had a lovely voice and sang better than all the rest. But he was proud and was always strutting about while he sang, despising the other birds. One day, they say, a big bird, tired of the sight and sound of him, contrived to seize him by the neck. Then, they say, he rolled him in charcoal and squeezed him so tight that the crow, half strangled, could only cry "Caw! Caw!" That is why he is now black all over and can't sing any more.

— Dene Suliné oral history from *Inkonze: The Stones of Traditional Knowledge*

and Inuit peoples is a way of life infused 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 the earth itself 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.

Creation stories are normally considered sacred stories. People who want to hear one should issue their request using proper protocol for the community involved.

Creation stories affirm that 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 beliefs.

## 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 Sahtú 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 Sahtú 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 gratitude.

*Many stories look to the natural world and its laws as guides to human behaviour. A Blackfoot story tells how wolves showed the first people how to cooperate with one another to hunt buffalo. The wolves then disappeared but can be seen in the sky as makóyoohsokoyi (the Wolf Trail or Milky Way). The stars are a reminder of how people should live together.*



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## 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 quarrelled. 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

*Lloyd Pinay, a Cree artist from northwest of Saskatoon, made this sculpture, called Re-creating Turtle Island, to welcome visitors to the First Nations gallery at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. His sculpture combines elements of Cree, Anishinabé, Nakoda, and Dene oral traditions. In some creation stories, Earth is formed on the back of a turtle, which is why some First Nations call North America Turtle Island.*



from the Pacific Northwest, Raven makes the first people from sea-shells, 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, 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. Many First Nations people continue to feel this connection today.

In addition, creation stories teach that human actions in their surroundings have to be respectful. It is 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. The land is both birthplace and birthright.

There is a hill coming up from the north side of Lake Athabasca called Beaver Lodge. There were once two giant beavers living there. A giant came and chopped their beaver lodge. If you see the beaver lodge, you will see it is split in half. One of these two beavers that lived there hid, and the other one swam south across Lake Athabasca. The giant chased this one across Lake Athabasca and killed him. That beaver kicked the trees south of Lake Athabasca and created the Sand Dunes.

— Trace Deranger, *Inkonze: The Stones of Traditional Knowledge*

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### Naapi and the Rock

*Noomi Napiiwa ihtapawawahkawa. Ikskaisistsikowa; itsitohkitsikopi ami ohkotoki. Itohkotsiawai omaayi. Itotstoyi. Matsitsiskotoyi ami maayi. Ama ohkotoka itsitokiitaki kitomapoksisaiskoyi Napiiyi. litanistsiyikh oomiksiiya pist'toiks kiyahkitapakspommakihpowaw. Ki itai'statsiyaihkia'wa ommi ohkotoki ki ai'aitsin'nanitohpat'tsistoyiyihkiaw. Mii Ohkotokskoi itotaiksi nahk ohkotokahk.*

(One day Naapi was out walking. He was very tired so he rested on a big rock. Then he gave his robe to the rock as a gift. It got cold, so he took his robe back. The rock got angry and chased Naapi all over the place. Naapi asked some nightingales for help and they dive-bombed the rock with their droppings until it broke apart. You can see that rock by Okotoks.)

— The Siksika Nation, *Aakaitapitsinniksiists (Siksika Old Stories)*

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*Okotoks, the name of a town just south of Calgary, Alberta, is an anglicized version of the Blackfoot word Ohkotokiksi, which is the Blackfoot name for this rock outside the town.*





*This map shows the route scientists believe First Nations took as they migrated from Asia to North America between 30 000 and 11 000 years ago. Research what the environment would have been like at this time in North America and other parts of the world. Use your research to write a short story about a group of people making this journey.*

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 kilometres.

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 a 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.

## REFLECTION

As a class, discuss the differences between beliefs and scientific theories. What are the strengths and limitations of each form of explanation?



## COMPARING CREATION STORIES

Indigenous cultures around the world use creation stories to understand how the world and human life came to be. Animals and nature, and their relationship to human beings, are common themes. Each group's creation story is unique, however, because it reflects the specific environment in which the group lives.

What roles do animals and nature play in creation stories?

### WHAT TO DO

1. Select two groups of indigenous peoples that come from different geographic locations. You might select one group from Alberta and another group from a place that you have visited or would like to visit. If you prefer, you might choose two groups from places far apart in the world, such as Canada and Australia.
2. Using literature anthologies, the Internet, or community Elders if possible, find creation stories from the two groups you want to compare. If you approach Elders from your community, be sure to consult with your teacher first about using the proper protocol in your request.
3. Using an atlas, geography textbook, magazines, or the Internet, make point-form notes about the geography of the stories' locations. Consider, for example, what the land looks like, whether there is water nearby, what types of animals live there, and the climate.
4. Make a table to organize the similarities and differences between the stories and the geographic locations. Read the stories carefully and complete your table as thoroughly as you can.
5. Use the information you've found for a creative project. Some ideas include:
  - an educational poster that communicates the information from your table
  - a painting or sculpture that illustrates one of the stories
  - an audio guide for a tour bus that is driving through the landscape involved in the story.

Once you have an idea, clear your project with your teacher before beginning.



### Thinking About Your Project

As a class, discuss how geography influences creation stories. Why might indigenous peoples living in different parts of the world sometimes have similar creation stories?

### LOOKING BACK

Discuss the following questions with a small group and make your own notes from the discussion. What are creation stories? What kind of questions do they answer? How are creation stories a part of First Nations and Inuit cultures?

## AS YOU READ

In the last section, you learned how creation stories provide a spiritual foundation for First Nations and Inuit cultures. Many of these stories also pass on values, skills, and knowledge because traditional spirituality was inseparable from the way people lived their day-to-day lives. You will learn more about spirituality in Chapter Three. In this section, you will begin to learn about the many ways the oral tradition functioned in traditional First Nations and Inuit societies. Among many communities, this tradition continues. As you read, make a list of the ways the oral tradition functioned and the kinds of values it passed on.

THROUGH THEIR ORAL TRADITIONS, 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

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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 idea.

I've learned a lot of lessons about life from stories.

When I was a boy, whenever I asked "Why?" my grandmother and the old people would answer by telling stories. These stories related the marvelous exploits of many wondrous creatures and beings. All the stories had a moral lesson. They taught me how to behave, and they taught me about nature and life on Mother Earth. As I became older, the stories got more serious, for they contained spiritual teachings. I had to listen closely or I would lose the whole meaning of the story.

After my old people died, I forgot these stories. Now, I am returning to them. My art is one way that I am reconnecting with the teachings of these stories.

— Dale Stonechild,  
Plains Cree-Dakota

*The Royal Saskatchewan Museum commissioned this mural, called The Story Teller, from artist Dale Stonechild. What is your interpretation of Stonechild's work? Discuss your ideas with a partner.*



## THE ART OF STORYTELLING

Do you remember people telling you stories when you were a young child? Most children love hearing stories, especially when the storyteller mimics the characters through voice and body language. Storytelling is an art that First Nations and Inuit peoples have used for centuries as a way to entertain, convey information, resolve conflicts, and teach important values.

Good storytellers structured their story for their specific audience and get them involved. Some have the audience sing a particular song at appropriate points or respond with a “Ho!” to the storyteller’s “Hey!” at regular intervals. In old times, such techniques would both keep listeners awake as they sat by the fire and ensure that they stayed involved in the story.

Oral cultures depend entirely upon memory. Storytellers, therefore, have the responsibility to make their stories memorable and listeners have the responsibility to pay attention.

In First Nations and Inuit oral traditions, both speaker and listener are active participants in the exchange of knowledge. Being a listener does not mean being a passive receiver of words. It means responding to the speaker with mind, body, and spirit.

### Your Project

- Using appropriate protocol under your teacher’s guidance, invite a storyteller to come to your class. With your teacher’s help, locate someone who is recognized by a local First Nations or Métis community as a talented storyteller. Let this person know that your class would like to learn about the art of storytelling.
- During the visit, observe the storyteller and make note of voice, body language, eye contact, and gestures that are used. Also pay attention to pauses and silences. Sometimes these carry as much meaning as the words themselves.
- After the visit, make notes about any techniques you noticed the storyteller using to make the story interesting.
- Select a First Nations or Inuit story that you think would appeal to young children. With your teacher, make arrangements to present your story to a class or group of younger children. If that is not possible, present your story to your classmates.
- Practise your story so that you can present it without the use of a book or notes.
- Keep the following points in mind:
  - You do not have to present the story word for word, but you need to capture the sentiment.
  - Make use of your voice, body language, and eye contact to bring your story to life.
  - Prepare a dramatic opening to grab your listeners’ attention.

### Thinking About Your Project

Today electronic media, such as television, radio, and the Internet, can relate oral stories without the presence of a storyteller. Can First Nations and Inuit communities use electronic technology to maintain their oral traditions? What issues or problems do you see with the use of this kind of media? As an extension project, use a Web site design program to create a Web site that makes use of your class’s best ideas.

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*Storyteller Mida Donnessey is one of many Yukon Elders who have performed at the annual Yukon International Storytelling Festival. The festival encourages storytellers to use their first language, with a summary provided in English. Storytellers from across Canada and around the world attend.*





*Traditionally, some Inuit peoples resolved differences by carrying out musical duels. Singers would face off against each other, inventing lyrics designed to poke fun at the other and persuade the audience that he or she should be proclaimed the victor in the dispute. Here Anda Kuitsi and Robert Umeerinneq from East Greenland perform a duel song in 1998.*

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 oral traditions 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 teach about the natural world or they 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,





*In some communities, land-based activities, such as skinning an animal, still offer opportunities for traditional communication styles in the oral tradition.*

but also show the perils of allowing vanity to control behaviour. 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 forms of 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

The following story was published in the *Regina Leader Post* in 1956. It was written by Eleanor Brass, who was born on the Peepeekisis Reserve in Saskatchewan. It is one example of hundreds of teaching stories told by First Nations. Describe an experience you've had that is similar to the one Brass describes, or write a story about someone who experiences the truth of a traditional story in contemporary society.

### **The Legend of the Saskatoons**

The Saulteaux tribe who dwelt mostly among the waterways have many legends of a water serpent.

During saskatoon season, a young woman with a baby laced in a mossbag attached to a board, called a cradle, went out picking. She leaned the cradle against a tree in plain view of the berry patch. In peering deeper into the bushes she saw larger berries and went after them and repeated this performance until in her greed she got out of view of the baby. When all her containers were brimming full, she emerged from the bluff remembering her baby, who was not where she had left [the cradle]. In looking around the tree where she stood the cradle, she heard [the baby's] cry down by the lakeshore. On arriving on the lakeshore the cry seemed to be coming over the water from the middle of the lake, and then she knew it was the water serpent that took her baby into the lake and she would never see it again. This was now her punishment for thinking more of saskatoons than the safety of her baby. For generations the cry of this infant was heard on the lake by the Saulteaux Indians to remind them that they must not indulge in greed.

I was picking saskatoons in the Qu'Appelle valley along Ketepwa, where there were a lot of good berries on the bushes. In penetrating deeper into the bluff, finding better and better ones, I was thinking of the Saulteaux woman's legend and was greedily plucking berries for my already overfilled pail, when I was attacked by large ants whose bites were like fire. I hastily retreated, wondering if the old legend had a message still.

— Eleanor Brass, *I Walk in Two Worlds*

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*Saskatoon berries were once a staple in the diet of many Plains First Nations, such as the Nakoda, who called the low-growing bush wabasoka, which means literally "tree spreads out."*



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 obvious. 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.

### The Teaching of Tsɛli (Tselly)

The teaching of Tselly... I guess a long time ago in the prehistoric times, the people they got careless, they say, and they got sloppy, filthy. ...They didn't take care of Mother Earth. So the frogs started coming out of the water. And it didn't matter how many they killed; it seemed like there were more and more frogs coming, and they didn't know why. So the leader asked the Medicine Man "Try to find out what is happening. Why are all these frogs invading our camps?" So the Medicine Man somehow communicated with these frogs and the frogs told him "Your people are filthy... and all the garbage you create is going into that water and... we have to live in that water. As long as you don't clean up... us frogs are going to be here. No matter what you do, there is going to be more and more frogs living amongst your people. But if you clean it up, all the frogs will go back into the water again. From this day forward, every evening before the sun goes down we are going to talk to you again, to let you know to keep this earth clean, to remind you to keep yourselves clean."

— Harvey Scanie, *Inkonze: The Stones of Traditional Knowledge*



## FINDING INSPIRATION THROUGH THE ORAL TRADITION

Many stories from the oral tradition contain an inspirational message about rising above challenges. Common themes for these kinds of stories include:

- recognizing talents and strengths in ourselves or in others
- overcoming obstacles
- enduring difficult situations
- reaching goals
- virtuous characteristics (e.g., patience)
- positive values (e.g., equality).

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What important values or lessons do stories from the oral tradition offer?

### WHAT TO DO

1. With your teacher's help, outline the steps of the proper protocol to use when approaching Elders with a request. The protocol varies among First Nations and Inuit communities, but it always ensures the Elder and his or her knowledge is shown respect. In the Cree and Blackfoot cultures, an offering of tobacco and/or a gift is a common form of invitation.
2. Using correct protocol, invite an Elder to your class to share a story from his or her culture. Request a teaching story from the Elder's culture.
3. Following the Elder's visit, discuss as a class what you think the message of the story is (for example, to help understand the importance of patience, to inspire others who face difficult situations, etc.).
4. Song lyrics, like stories, often express ideas about values or messages about accomplishing important goals. Find a song that you think expresses an inspirational message. As you listen to the song, make notes about lines that help support the main idea of the lyrics.
5. Prepare a presentation for your class that includes the following:
  - a brief explanation of the song and its message
  - a summary of how you feel the song lyrics can be inspirational
  - parts or all of the song used at the beginning, end, or throughout your presentation.
6. As a class, compare how the Elder's story conveyed its message with the techniques used in the song.

### LOOKING BACK

Before moving on to the next section, be sure you can answer the following questions: How does an oral tradition teach values to new generations? What kinds of values are common among First Nations and Inuit peoples? Write a short story, poem, or paragraph that uses your answers to these questions and the ideas you have learned on pages 50–55.



## AS YOU READ

Today words from the past continue to be passed on to younger generations. Many are shared in the traditional way, from old to young through the spoken word. Until recently, people from non-Aboriginal cultures made little effort to understand oral traditions. They tended to evaluate First Nations and Inuit stories according to their own culture's belief systems, which place greater value on the written over the spoken word. In recent years, however, this kind of thinking has declined — even the Supreme Court of Canada has used oral histories in its rulings. As you read, think about the similarities and differences between oral and written literatures. With which form of expression are you most comfortable? Why?



*This petroglyph is at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park in southern Alberta. The name comes from the Blackfoot word Áisinaî'pi, which means "writing on stone." Many First Nations visited this site; it was on a common migration route. Research the kinds of information that were recorded there. Compare its symbols to those of petroglyphs or pictographs from elsewhere in Canada and note the similarities and differences.*

**A**LTHOUGH ALL CULTURES HAVE STORIES, ONLY ORAL CULTURES CONSISTENTLY USE THEM AS THEIR PRIMARY TOOL FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIALIZATION, WHICH IS A LIFELONG PROCESS BY WHICH INDIVIDUALS

- absorb the culture of their society.
- European legends and folk tales
- once served similar functions of
- education and socialization, but

today are viewed as entertainment for children, rather than integral parts of living cultures.

## THE WINTER COUNT

Although the basis of all First Nations and Inuit cultures is the oral tradition, some nations also recorded information in caves or on the sides of mountains. Rather than orthography — a system of written letters — these groups used symbols and figures of animals and people. These symbols are today called pictographs or petroglyphs. Petroglyphs are carvings on stone, while pictographs are made with paint or ochre on stone. The following account describes a Blackfoot system of written history. It is from *Kipaitapiiwahsinnooni: Alcohol and Drug Abuse Education Program* by Makai'stoot (Leo Fox).

The Kainai, Siksika, and Piikani used what has been called the *winter count* to record each year. The winter count depicted the most outstanding event in a particular year and served as a chronological measure of time.

Because there was more than one person who made these recordings, the events could be different from record to record. For example, if one year a solar eclipse took

place and this was considered by one recorder as the outstanding event of the year, then they would record this. In the same year, another historian might have recorded something different, such as many deaths caused by a terrible winter storm. When reference was made to either of these events, the people would realize that they were talking about the same year.



Cultures that primarily transmit information through the written word tend to emphasize authors as creators of original works. Written works are seen as a form of self-expression and are greatly respected. Authors legally own the works they create and have certain rights with respect to how their works are used.

Oral cultures have different ideas about literary creation. Stories of a particular culture are seen as the inheritance of a community, not a specific individual. An individual storyteller might be admired for his or her skill in telling a story, but the stories themselves are a part of the community. The ultimate goal of sharing a story is to bring people together in a sense of belonging.

## THE MÉTIS ORIGIN STORY

Many First Nations and Inuit peoples believe that their ancestors originated in North America and 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.

The Métis Nation, like First Nations and Inuit peoples, also originated in this land, although their story of origin is different from those of other Aboriginal peoples. One difference is that Métis people may trace their history through written records. In contrast, First Nations and Inuit peoples trace their history primarily through oral

Every culture has an oral tradition. Those cultures that now have written histories can trace their stories back to an oral tradition. For example, the stories in the most widely published book in the world, the Bible, are based on oral stories.

Both written and oral stories use rules and conventions that are commonly held and understood by the storyteller's audience. These rules or conventions help audiences understand the storyteller's intentions and can make parts of stories quicker to understand.

In general, both written and oral stories need an authentic source or an acknowledgement of the story's origins. First Nations storytellers usually begin with an acknowledgement of who told them the story. This gives the story authenticity. Their stories can be traced back through time and generations.

Both kinds of stories sometimes need to provide explanations of concepts, background, or sources of more information. Oral storytellers often pause and refer to another story or incident in a technique that could be described as oral footnoting.

Many other conventions are used in both written and oral literatures. Some of these include plot, a central character or protagonist, some kind of conflict or problem, theme, suspense, and so on. Furthermore, both types of literature include numerous genres, such as history, philosophy, humour, or mystery. Moreover, education of some kind is often the main purpose for writing or telling a story.

Often, when mainstream society thinks of the oral tradition, its scholars and the general public misinterpret the stories and even dismiss them as mere fables. In this way of thinking, the works of Shakespeare or Plato would be seen as fables.

— Billy Joe Laboucan, Little Buffalo, Alberta

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*Billy Joe Laboucan is a Cree-language specialist, educator, and storyteller of Cree-Métis origin. His interest in storytelling began with the stories he heard as a child from his parents and Elders. As an adult, he has spent time with many Elders to hear their stories.*



records, with relatively recent written documentation (over the last four hundred years). Although some Métis people identify with parts of the oral history of their First Nations ancestors, the origin of their own culture took place after European contact.

## PUBLISHING ORAL STORIES

Today many stories from First Nations and Inuit oral traditions can be read online or in books. Even stories about spiritual matters exist in written form. Some people believe sacred stories should not be written or shared outside traditional circles.

One of the problems is that not all published versions are authentic. Some stories have been used by people of other cultures in ways that do not respect the stories' origins and purposes. Many First Nations and Inuit peoples object to this use of their stories as much as they would object to someone taking a sacred object and using it inappropriately.

Other people believe that publishing stories from oral traditions widens the circle of people who can learn from the teachings they contain. Many believe that sharing traditional wisdom helps non-Aboriginal people appreciate and understand First Nations and Inuit cultures.

In addition, many Aboriginal people now live in urban centres or other areas where they might not have opportunities to hear stories told in traditional ways. Some people fear that oral traditions will be lost if they are not written down. These people believe that preserving them in any format should be the priority.

Though much has changed in the world, the stories' lessons on peace, harmony, balance, environmental responsibility, acceptance of differences, cooperation, respect for nature, and the importance of living an honourable life remain relevant to many contemporary problems.

Sacred teachings form the very basis of traditional First Nations, Métis, and Inuit beliefs. Their closest equivalent would be that of the Bible to Christians. Many teachings lose their original meaning when translated into the English language because there are often no words in English to explain them. When a sacred story is taken out of context, shortened, adapted, translated, and written down, the result is often distorted and misunderstood. These beliefs are best taught by people who speak their own language and in the context of their own culture.

— Bernie L'Hirondelle, Barrhead, Alberta

What do you think about writing down stories that were once considered too sacred to share with outsiders? Is this an important transition for First Nations cultures in the contemporary world? Or should First Nations stories only be shared through the oral tradition? Discuss these questions with a small group and then share your ideas in a class discussion.



## ORIGIN OF THE MÉTIS NATION

As you read the section that follows, consider how the Métis Nation's history is both similar to and different from that of First Nations and Inuit peoples. What might be the significance of these similarities and differences today?

When the first Europeans arrived in what is now Canada, they were amazed at the land's thick forests and strong rivers. They wished to own the land and all its riches, especially the luxurious pelts of the fur-bearing animals.

Initially, First Nations welcomed the Europeans. They were willing to help the newcomers, who did not know the ways of the seasons and suffered many hardships during their first winters. The First Nations expected the Europeans who stayed to join them in living a harmonious life as their ancestors and those of other first peoples had done for all time.

For many years, the Europeans and First Nations existed in reasonable harmony, and a mutually beneficial relationship based on trade developed. This was the early era of the fur trade. As the years passed, two groups of Europeans — the French and the British — competed to gather furs, each group striving to obtain as many as possible, and to claim the land as their own. The successful ones among them sought the wisdom and assistance of First Nations people.

Some European traders married First Nations women and they had children. The French government at first actively encouraged these marriages, believing they would eventually help France establish its hold on the continent. The British government discouraged the unions, but could do little to stop them.

By the early eighteenth century, the French began to understand the independence of the Métis peoples and the unique nature of their culture. Even the French then began to discourage

the unions, but Métis communities, especially in the West, were by then firmly established.

These unions — called *mariage à la façon du pays* in French, *country marriages* in English — often combined First Nations and European traditions. The families usually worked in the fur trade. The children learned the ways of both cultures and spoke two languages. As these children grew up, married, and had children of their own, they often carried on the blended culture that they had learned as children. The family units that began as social and economic bonds during the fur trade developed into a distinctive culture.

The culture eventually became stronger than the trade that gave rise to it and today is a source of identity and shared bond for many people.



Many Métis people in Alberta continue to learn Métis cultural traditions. Here members of the Caslan School Dancers, from the Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement, perform at the 2003 Aboriginal Day celebration in Edmonton. (Names of those pictured are not available.)

### A UNIQUE CULTURE

- Though people of mixed ancestry exist worldwide, few form a distinctive culture of blended cultural traits. The Métis Nation is an exception.
- Some historians say the first children of First Nations–European parents were born soon after the first group of European traders set foot on North America's eastern shores in the sixteenth century. The Métis Nation developed a sense of distinct culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Some Métis people are descended from French fur traders who worked for the North West Company. Others have Scottish or English ancestors who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company. Each group had distinctive cultural traits that remain to this day.
- Métis people were officially recognized as one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples in the Canadian constitution of 1982.



## CREATION STORIES IN THE MODERN WORLD

For some First Nations and Inuit peoples, creation stories are as important today as when they were first told. The values the stories carry forward are timeless.

For First Nations asserting claim to a part of their ancestors' traditional territory, creation stories have additional political and economic significance. The Supreme Court has recognized that oral testimony should be given the same consideration in the courts that written evidence is given. Read the statements about creation stories that follow and in your talking circle, consider how creation stories might be significant in a First Nation's claim to a specific territory or land.



*How does a circular seating arrangement emphasize ideas of renewal and continuity?*



*As you share your ideas, consider sharing any experiences you have had with an Elder's teachings.*

Mushkegowuk of James Bay ancestry dating back 10 000 years hold a belief that the Creator put them on this land, this garden, to oversee and take care of it for those that are not yet born. The law of maintenance or just maintaining that garden means taking care of the physical environment. It also means maintaining a harmonious relationship with other people and the animals depended on for survival.

— Chief Edmund Metatawabin,  
Fort Albany First Nation,  
*Report of the Royal Commission on  
Aboriginal Peoples*

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In Aboriginal historical traditions, the particular creation story of each people, although it finds its origins in the past, also, and more importantly, speaks to the present. It invites listeners to participate in the cycle of creation through their understanding that, as parts of a world that is born, dies and is reborn in the observable cycle of days and seasons, they too are part of a natural order, members of a distinct people who share in that order.

— *Report of the Royal Commission on  
Aboriginal Peoples*



Creation is a continuity, and if creation is to continue, then it must be renewed. Renewal ceremonies, songs, and stories are the human's part in the maintenance of the renewal of creation. Hence the Sundance, the societal ceremonies and the unbundling of medicine bundles at certain phases of the year are all interrelated aspects of happenings that take place on and within Mother Earth.

— Leroy Little Bear,  
Kainai First Nation,  
*Report of the Royal  
Commission on  
Aboriginal Peoples*

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The creation of the Raven is an important part of the Creation story. The Raven was created the leader among leaders. It was the most powerful and clever of persons and its knowledge and experience were sought by one and all. But it was also vain and selfish. When the birds were being painted, it insisted that it should be painted better than all the other birds. Its reward was of course to be painted black. The Raven's weakness was that it did not see itself in relationship with others around it. It saw itself as complete and finished. From the Raven story we derive the Dene perspective that we must continually push ourselves to grow rather than remain complacent and smug in what we are or have become.

— Dene Kede Curriculum Document

## REFLECTION

1. Following your talking circle discussion, write or draw your own response to the creation stories you have studied.
2. Find a story that you believe asserts a particular First Nation's claim to a specific territory. How does the story provide evidence for the case?

My people, the Dene, believe that we have always lived in this place, in the North. We don't accept the scientific stories about aboriginal people coming across the Bering Strait land bridge from Siberia. We believe the Creator put us here when the world was new; he put us in this place that Canadians now call the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. It is our place.

I remember well the stories my grandmother, Besiswo, told me. She said the Creator first put animals on the earth and then we humans gradually evolved from them. The stories she told me are thousands of years old and I believe them. These are the stories of my people, even if science says they are legends.

Who are my Dene people? We are people of the land; we see ourselves as no different than the trees, the caribou, and the raven, except we are more complicated. The Creator gave us intelligence to live with and look after the animals and plants on this Mother Earth, and he also gave us free will to do whatever we feel like doing.

— George Blondin, Sahtú Dene,  
*Yamoria the Lawmaker: Stories of the Dene*

## LOOKING BACK

The stories a people tell reveal much about their values. Look back over this chapter and your notes and projects to prepare a list of significant First Nations and Inuit beliefs and values. Use your list as inspiration for a collage, painting, sculpture, or illustration that represents your ideas. In the next chapter, you will learn much more about the values and spirituality of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.