WALKING TOGETHER
First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

FNMI Worldviews
The Métis People
Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Government of Alberta

THE MÉTIS PEOPLE
Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

THE MÉTIS PEOPLE

As the fur trade flourished and cultures evolved and adapted, a new culture and a new people emerged — the Métis people.

Métis people came from cross-cultural First Nations and European families. They embody the cultural mixing that took place after First Nations and Europeans came into contact.

It is no accident that Métis use a French word to describe themselves. The French established the first European settlements in North America. They also became the first Europeans to have families with First Nations people. *Métis* is an old French term that meant *mixed*. For many years after European contact, no one thought of First Nations–European children as Métis with a capital *M*. In other words, they were not seen as a distinct people with a unique cultural identity. At first, they were just *métis* — people of both First Nations and European descent.

Historians find it hard to identify the first Métis people born in North America because their parents described them as either First Nations people or as Europeans. The Métis people — capital *M* — emerged when they themselves recognized their unique, common heritage.

The Métis people emerged partly as a result of a deliberate French policy. During the early years of the fur trade, France encouraged marriages between French and First Nations people as a way to consolidate alliances. The French also hoped these marriages would encourage First Nations to adopt French culture.

However, Métis people did not "become French." After seeing the independent Métis culture begin to emerge in the I700s, France began to discourage French men from marrying First Nations women. In response, many Métis families left the French settlements in eastern North America and moved west. Some established small settlements around the Great Lakes. This marked the first of many western movements made by the Métis people.

Métis families also emerged for less political reasons. For example, young men from French trading posts ventured into the interior looking for new opportunities in the fur trade. They became known as *coureurs des bois*, or "runners of the woods." Often the coureurs were gone for years at a time. They lived with First Nations people and, in many cases, married First Nations women.

British traders, who often came from Scotland, also married First Nations people — usually in spite of opposition from their churches and governments. Métis families began to emerge around British trading posts on Hudson Bay.

Most Europeans who first arrived in North America were men, whether French or Scottish, so the first Métis people had European fathers and First Nations mothers. This became important in the family structure — the composition of the fundamental group in a society — of

----

This excerpt on Métis people ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Peoples and Cultural Change,* Toronto, ON, 2005, pp. 22–25.

Métis people. For a majority of Métis families, women were the transmitters of culture and the way these families tracked their lineage. Métis families often adopted the religion of the European men.

Métis culture was distinct — neither First Nations nor European, but with elements of both. Many Métis people made their living in the fur trade. They worked as traders, interpreters, guides, freighters, or suppliers. They spoke First Nations languages, as well as French or English, and also spoke a language of their own — Michif. Their music and clothing reflected their combined heritage. For trade and their own livelihood, many, like First Nations of the Great Plains, relied on the buffalo hunt. Like their European ancestors, many lived in permanent villages.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s, Métis people established a settlement along the Red River, near present-day Winnipeg. At the time, the Red River Valley lay at the geographic centre of the fur trade. Métis people became the Métis Nation — a distinct people whose sense of common identity and culture had evolved over many generations.

Métis history is unique in Canada. It is a story of a resilient people poised between two cultures.

MÉTIS: A WORD WITH MANY DEFINITIONS

The word *Métis* is one of the many words used as early as the 1600s to describe the children of First Nations and European unions. Historically, it was used to label descendants of the early French and First Nations marriages.

Samuel de Champlain reportedly told First Nations people that "Our young men will marry your daughters and we shall be one people." The Métis people of New France were hard to identify because some of them remained with their First Nations families, while others were baptized and became French Canadians. By 1820, the Hudson's Bay Company and the early Canadian government referred to the children of First Nations–European marriages as *half-breeds*, a term that is now considered offensive.

Early references to Métis people show the term coming into use. A 1778 map shows the Île de Mettise on the Saint John River in New Brunswick. In the early 1800s, La Riviere Mitis was the name of a river that flowed into the St. Lawrence. Although the people of Red River have been referred to as *Métis* by many historians, there is insufficient evidence to confirm that the term was used by the people themselves.

The Manitoba Act of 1870 recognized the Métis people as a separate group or nation with distinct rights. Federal government documents used the term *half-breed* when referring to Métis in English, but these same documents in French used the word *Métis*. In 1932, L'Association des Métis de l'Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-ouest was formed to address the concerns of the Métis people in Alberta and what was then the Northwest Territories. Their original definition of Métis was as follows:

"Anyone with any degree of Indian ancestry who lives the life ordinarily associated with the Métis."

In 1934, the Alberta government appointed a commission of inquiry chaired by Justice Albert Ewing. From that report, the Alberta government redefined *Métis* in the Métis Betterment Act of 1938 as follows:

"a person of mixed white and Indian ancestry having not less than one quarter Indian blood not including either Status Indians or non-Status Indians as defined in the Indian Act."

In 1940, L'Association des Métis de l'Alberta et les Territories du Nord-ouest changed its title to the Métis Association of Alberta and updated the definition to include those who consider themselves Métis and who are accepted by the community as such.

In 1983, the newly established Métis National Council included the following criteria to determine Métis heritage:

1. The Métis are:
   - an Aboriginal people distinct from Indian and Inuit;
   - descendants of the historical Métis who evolved in what is now western Canada as a people with a common political will;
   - descendants of those Aboriginal peoples who have been absorbed by the historical Métis.
2. The Métis community comprises members of the above who share a common cultural identity and political will.

There are two different legislated definitions of Métis. The Métis Settlements Act of Alberta defined Métis for the purpose of establishing eligibility for membership in a Métis Settlement in Alberta. The act states a Métis is

" ... a person of Aboriginal ancestry who identifies with the Métis history and culture."

A regulation under the federal Fisheries Act contains the second definition:

" Métis means a person of mixed white and Indian blood having not less than one quarter Indian blood but does not include an Indian."

Alberta is the only province that recognizes and accepts an obligation to the Métis people at the provincial level. Other provinces hold that the Métis people fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government. However, the federal government does not recognize Métis under its jurisdiction and will not legislate for them.

The Constitution Act of 1982 included Métis in the category of Aboriginal peoples of Canada along with First Nations and Inuit peoples, but did not define the term *Métis* or their existing Aboriginal and treaty rights. Section 35 of the Constitution Act states

35(1)   The existing Aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.

35(2)   In this Act, "Aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

To date, there is no standard definition for *Métis* that everyone accepts, and there is no uniform method for dealing with the protection of their collective identity as an Aboriginal people.

Today, many historians, researchers, and Aboriginal people still seek one common and well-established definition for Métis. Some people suggest that the only way to define *Métis* is to recognize the many different peoples that could be included in the community of Métis.

THE MÉTIS PEOPLE cont.
Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Walking Together

Page 4 of 4

The Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) has its own definition of *Métis*. It is as follows: "Métis means a person who self-identifies as a *Métis*, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry, and is accepted by the Métis Nation."

Implicit in this definition are three components: self-identification, ancestral connection, and community acceptance. Visit the MNA website at www.albertametis.ca to find out more about these three components.