

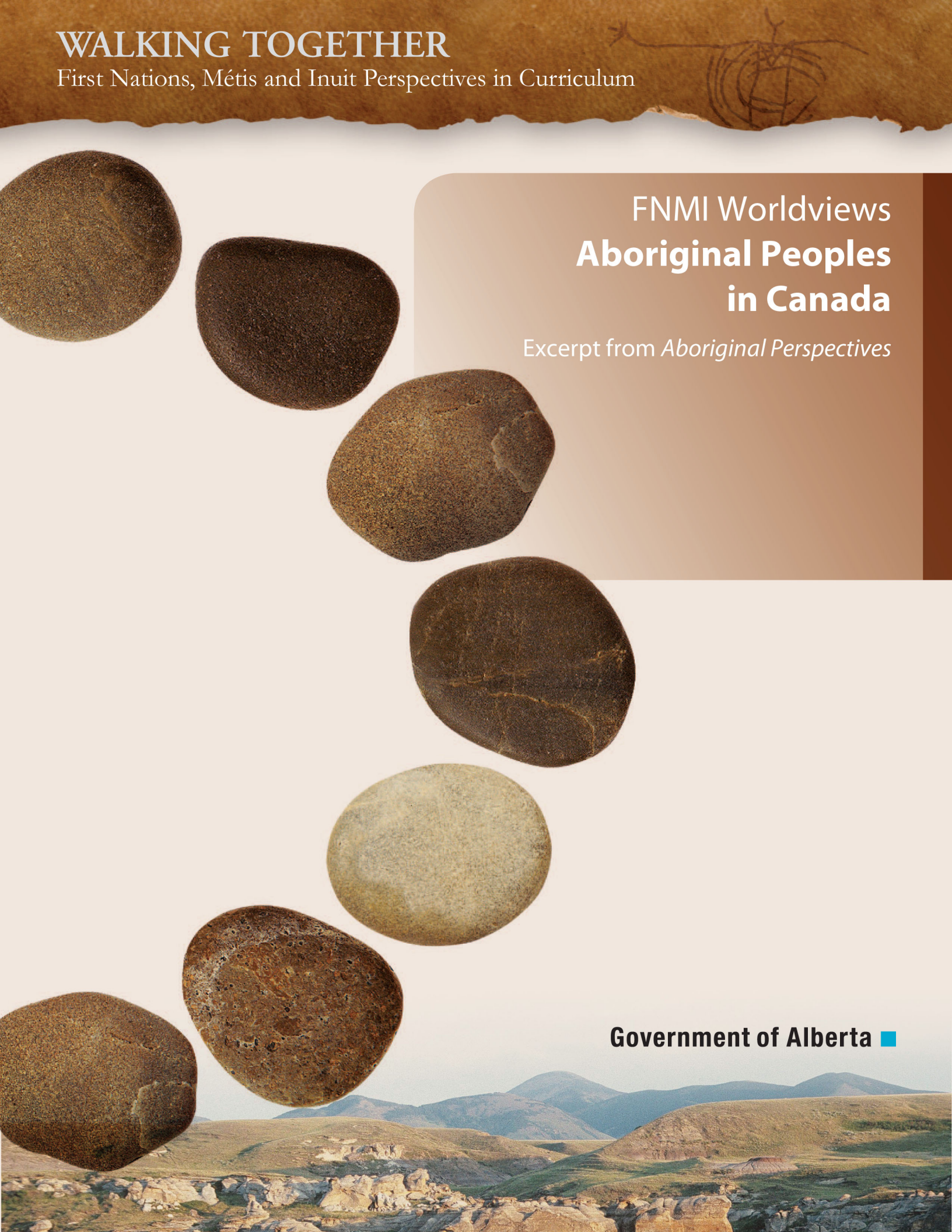
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

FNMI Worldviews Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA

Every society or group of people has a culture. A culture is the collection of hereditary beliefs, values, and shared knowledge of a group of people. This collection of ideas and attitudes gives individuals a common perspective or point of view. This perspective helps shape the customs, routines, roles, and rituals that make that group of people distinct from others. A cultural group is a number of physically or historically related people with a common culture.

In its broadest sense, *Aboriginal peoples* refers to all people who are descended from the original inhabitants of North America. International organizations such as the United Nations use the term *indigenous peoples* to refer to a land's original people. Their entire cultural history takes place on this landscape.

In 1982, the Canadian constitution recognized three groups of Aboriginal peoples: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Each of these groups has a unique history, set of languages and variants (often called dialects), and range of cultural practices.

First Nations has more than one meaning. It often refers to a cultural group or nation of indigenous peoples, such as the Kainai, Cree, Anishinabé, or Mi'kmaq. First Nations people were once known by the name *Indians*. However, *Indians* is considered offensive to many people today, partly because the name does not reflect the true position of First Nations as indigenous peoples of Canada. This textbook uses names preferred by Aboriginal groups, unless quoting federal government legislation, where the term *Indian* is still common.

Canada's First Nations are diverse historically, culturally, and linguistically. The term *First Nation* can also refer to the government of a group of First Nations people. There are over 630 First Nations governments today, each representing the interests of a distinct group of people.

Inuit people are from Arctic areas of North America, as well as other countries with polar regions. *Inuit* means "the people" in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. Inuit peoples also have diverse cultural traits that vary across the huge Arctic region. Six variants of Inuktitut are spoken in Canada.

Inuit people are also indigenous to Canada, although they are culturally different from First Nations.

The term *métis* comes from a French word that refers to a person of mixed heritage. It first came into use in the sixteenth century, when the French began to visit North America regularly. *Métis* became a name used to describe the heritage of children born of French fur traders and First Nations women.

As the fur trade developed through the next 300 years, the name Métis gradually became more specific. Métis increasingly referred to a culturally distinct nation of people with First Nations–French ancestry. Many of these people lived in the Red River area of what is now Manitoba.

In the twentieth century, the term became broader, often including people with a English– or Scottish–First Nations heritage who were also from Red River. Today, political organizations such as the Métis Nation of Alberta define the Métis Nation as a group of individuals who are associated with a recognized Métis family or community and who self-identify as Métis people.

SELF-IDENTITY

None of the definitions offered so far will fit all people who consider themselves to be Aboriginal. For example, many individuals of mixed heritage identify themselves as Canadian, or First Nations, or sometimes as more than one group, depending on the situation. How a person identifies is a significant part of having an Aboriginal cultural identity.

Despite this simple fact, some people are classified into groups by government or political organizations, no matter how they identify themselves. How this situation came to be has a long history that you will begin to explore in this textbook.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The map on page 6 shows the major Aboriginal language families in Canada today. Most of these language families include diverse cultural groups. Indicating that several languages are in the same language family does not mean that the languages are the same. For example, English, Russian, and Hindi are all classified in the same language family — the IndoEuropean language family. Most people would not consider these languages to be similar. The same principle applies to Aboriginal languages and cultures.

Language families indicate groups of languages that are distantly related. They may indicate groups of people that were once, long ago, living in the same region or having regular contact with one another.

Linguistic groups are more useful in understanding cultural connections. A linguistic group is composed of groups of people who speak the same basic language, although different variations may exist. For example, the Cree linguistic group has five major variants across Canada. One Cree person speaking to another in an unfamiliar variant could likely make himself or herself understood. However, a Cree person speaking to a Blackfoot speaker will not be understood, even though Cree and Blackfoot are part of the same language family. Blackfoot is its own linguistic group.

Individual communities within one linguistic group can also show many cultural differences from each other.