

Pre-Contact

platinum
talk



First Nations peoples are the original inhabitants of most of the land now called Canada. First Nations people prefer the name First Nations when referring to the collective. Individual Nations are defined by their own languages, cultural, and spiritual traditions rather than criteria developed or established by settler governments or academics.

First Nations people have been on this land since “time immemorial.” Academics in the Western traditions have theorized that Indigenous people migrated to North America in several waves from northeastern Asia via Siberia and the Bering Strait between 40,000 and 70,000 years ago, and again about 25,000 years ago. Archeological evidence suggests that Indigenous settlement of North America may also have occurred over the Pacific Ocean, by boat from Asia and the Pacific Islands.

By the time Europeans appeared in Canada, the population of First Nations numbered in the millions, living and prospering from coast to coast to coast, with a variety of social, economic, political, spiritual and cultural systems and practices. The appearance and presence of Europeans is generally referred to as the time of “contact.”

This Plain Talk provides a description of First Nations in the land area of Canada prior to colonization and occupation of Canada by Europeans, primarily by English and French in the 1500s. In fact, contact with Europeans started around 1000 CE when the Vikings founded the colony of what is now known as L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. After 1500, English and French persisted in the colonization of this part of North America, resulting in a profound impact on cultural, economic and military influence of First Nations peoples.

First Nations inhabited and controlled their own regions and territories of what was to become Canada, or what the Anishinaabe named Turtle Island, developing sophisticated and intricate ways of living and thriving in their environments and on their lands. The vast country has distinct geographical differences, which had an influence on the cultural customs and practices of the resident First Nations. For convenience, it is possible to identify five groupings of First Nations, each group associated with geographical characteristics and sharing some cultural similarities:

1. Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins First Nations: Dene, people who lived from the resources of the forests, muskeg.
2. Pacific Coast and interior First Nations: Coast Salish, Haida, Carrier Sekani, and Sto:lo, who harvested the red cedar, and abundant salmon.
3. Plains First Nations: Plains Cree, Blackfoot, Dakota, who lived with the buffalo on the prairies and grasslands.
4. Iroquois First Nations: Mohawk and Huron, who cultivated fertile land for corn, beans and squash farming.



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5. Woodland First Nations: Woodland and Swampy Cree, Anishinaabe, Oji-Cree, who lived in harmony with the dense boreal forest (dense, damp, trees like spruce, aspen and birch) of the North.

Before contact, each First Nation had a distinct heritage, history, culture and language, which continue to this day because of the strength, will, and persistence of First Nations.

There are many beliefs, attitudes and behaviours shared by First Nations from coast to coast to coast. Some of these unique and distinctive characteristics are summarized in this Plain Talk.

Relationship to the land

As described in the *Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit*, First Nations had a strong relationship with the land and with nature. First Nations relationships with the land were entirely different from that of the future settlers and colonizers. First Nations people do not consider land to be something that can be bought, sold or traded.

Connection with the traditional lands is and was fundamental to the cultures, identities and economies of First Nations peoples. The land provided shelter and subsistence, and First Nations showed the land and its wildlife enormous respect. When an animal was killed for food, a prayer was made to the Creator, thanking the spirit of the animal for giving its body so that people could live. Hunters took only what was necessary to survive. Every part of the animal was used. Clothing was made from deer hide and decorated with feathers and porcupine quills. Bone was crafted into tools and jewelry. First Nations have always seen themselves as part of the natural world, in a symbiotic relationship with the natural world.

Education

Anne Tenning has described traditional education in First Nations communities:

- Children would be taught by many different members of their family and community;
- Learning was hands-on, experiential, and took place out in the environment or within First Nations cultural practices (such as the potlatch or longhouse systems on the west coast);
- Learning was lifelong and started at birth and ended at death;
- Children were the students and also the teachers: adults and elders could also learn from the wisdom of children;
- Children learned by watching and doing, but they also learned independently through coming of age ceremonies and by spending time alone;

- Children learned through an oral culture, where knowledge was passed down verbally through stories, songs, dances, and artistic representations;
- The education of First Nations children was holistic and children learned how everything was interconnected; everything had a spiritual connection
- At the core of traditional education was the value of respect: respect for oneself, for others, for the Creator, for the environment, for the ancestors, and for the generations to come in the future.

Elders

Elders were community members who had the respect of the people because of their wisdom and knowledge of traditional customs, language and culture, regardless of age or gender. Elders earned this status through their dedication, experience, and understanding of the need to strive for balance and harmony with all living things.

Talking Circles

Talking circles were a striking example of First Nations respect for others. Individuals in a group of people, often sitting in a circle, were given an opportunity to talk about their opinions and feelings without being interrupted. The person talking held an object like a feather, and it was understood by the group that the person speaking should be listened to with courtesy and concern. When the speaker passed the object to another person in the group, it was a signal for that other person to express their thoughts and ideas.

Sacred Medicines

Sweetgrass, sage, cedar and tobacco are sacred plants that have traditional healing, ceremonial and spiritual meanings and applications. These sacred medicines are used individually or mixed together and burned, in a process called smudging, to produce smoke that cleanses and purifies the mind, body, and spirit. First Nations Teachings & Practices describes this use of the sacred medicines:

They are used to smudge the mind so you can think clearly, your ears so you can hear the good things in life of others and of yourself; your mouth so you can speak of good things and say kind words to one another; your heart so you can feel good about yourself and others; and lastly you smudge your whole self so you can be blessed for the day.

Potlatch

The potlatch is an important ceremony in the culture of many Pacific Northwest First Nations. The host family of a potlatch would give away much of its accumulated wealth and materials goods as a gesture of goodwill, and to demonstrate social status. Events like singing, dancing and spiritual ceremonies could take place during a potlatch.



Sweat Lodge Ceremonies

Sweat Lodges, usually dome-shaped and round structures, are a place for spiritual, mental and physical renewal. People enter a Sweat Lodge according to certain rituals and customs. Inside, water is poured on hot rocks to produce steam and high temperatures, and additional rituals could be performed to help people inside the Sweat Lodge undergo purification and cleansing.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a significant channel for connecting individuals to their past, their legends, their history, their identity, and their culture. Every First Nation has its own stories that reflect and reinforce the society and its values. And there are stories that are at the very foundation of the society. A vivid example is the story of The Peacemaker, as described and adapted from Onondaga Nation: People of the Hills.

The Creator, saddened because the Mohawk, Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oneida people were continuously engaged in war against each other, sent a messenger called the Great Peacemaker, a prophet and spiritual leader, to talk to the five First Nations. The Peacemaker, traveling in a stone canoe to show that his words are true, sought out the warring leaders of the warring Nations. A person named Hiawatha decided to help Hiawatha to spread the good words of the Creator. However, an evil Onondaga man tried to stop the spread of the words of peace by killing Hiawatha's daughter. Overwhelmed by grief, Hiawatha found a way to console others who had lost loved ones. To remember and pass on these consoling words, he strung together purple and white fresh water clamshells together on strings. This became the first wampum. Strengthened by his adversity, Hiawatha and the Peacemaker spread the message of peace and earned the support of leaders of all of the five Nations. They symbolized this union of peace by uprooting a great white pine tree and threw their weapons of war into the hole. They replanted the tree and the Peacemaker placed an eagle on top to warn the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, of any dangers to this great peace. The Hiawatha Belt was made as a record that the Five Nations joined together in peace.

The Hiawatha Belt is made of white and purple beads. The purple represents the universe, and the white represents purity, good thoughts forgiveness, and understanding. The white open squares represent the Nations united by peace and are connected by a white band that has no beginning or end, representing forever. The white band does not cross through the centre of each Nation, confirming that the nations are supported and unified by a common bond, and that each Nation is separate in its identity. The tree in the centre is the Tree of Peace.



United under the Great Law of Peace, the Nations formed the Haudenosaunee Confederacy of the Five Nations. Later, with the adoption of the Tuscarora Nation, this union became the Confederacy of the Six Nations. The Chiefs of the Confederacy agreed to always think of the future when making their decisions.

Wampum Belts

First Nations used no written language. However, some First Nations devised creative ways to record significant events and provide a means of remembering the details surrounding the event. One innovative device is the Wampum Belt. A Wampum Belt is a visual record, but not a form of writing. Wampum belts are visual symbols that help trigger and stimulate a “reader’s” memory of the significance and meaning of the details woven into the belt. Wampum Belts served many purposes: they commemorated events and agreements with other nations, told stories, and described customs, histories or laws. The Hiawatha Belt was described above. Another Wampum Belt, the Two Row Wampum Belt, is described in Plain Talk 4: Treaties.

Totem poles

The Indigenous First Nations of the Pacific Northwest created totem poles, huge sculptures carved out of large cedar trees. Totem poles served many purposes. They tell stories, myths and legends of the community, recorded significant events of the past or present, and were painted with colours important to the First Nation and its heritage. The arrangement of symbols in a totem pole tells the story embedded in the pole. Many different animal figures were used to tell a story. The most common animals figures are listed below. The interpretation of each figure or symbol was distinctive to the carver’s First Nation.



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Thunderbird: A mythical bird that creates the sound of thunder by beating its wings, and lightning by blinking its eyes.

Raven: A trickster, curious and mischievous.

Eagle: An intelligent and resourceful being who rules the sky.

Offer: A symbol of laughter, curiosity, and grace.

Salmon: A symbol of persistence and determination

Spirituality

Belief in the Creator was central to all First Nations values, traditions and activities. Elders told stories that recounted and reinforced the connection between all members and the natural world. All objects, whether animate or inanimate, were to be treated with honour and respect. Many First Nations peoples share the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishinaabe Peoples—the Values of Truth, Respect, Wisdom, Honesty, Love, Humility, and Bravery.

Each First Nation holds rituals and ceremonies to give thanks to the Creator and the food and material resources in their environments and to honour their values and traditions.

Every First Nation has its own story of its origins, its own Creation legend. A few are described below.

An Iroquois Creation Story

The first people were the Sky People; they lived beyond the sky because there was no earth beneath. One day the chief's daughter became very ill and no one was able to provide a cure for her sickness. A wise elder was consulted and he told them to dig up a tree and lay the girl beside the hole that remained. The Sky People respected the elder and began to dig up the tree. Suddenly the tree fell down through the hole and dragged the chief's daughter with it. As the girl fell she saw that below was only an ocean of water. Two swans were alarmed by the girl falling and decided she was too beautiful to drown so they swam to catch her. They landed her on the back of the Great Turtle, and all of the animals of the earth gathered. The Great Turtle councils that the Sky Woman is a symbol of good fortune. He orders the animals to find where the Sky World tree had landed in the ocean and to bring it back with its earth-covered roots. The swans lead the animals to the place where the tree had fallen into the ocean. First offer, then muskrat, and then beaver dove in search of the tree. Each animal came back to the surface without the tree and died from exhaustion. Many other animals tried but they also died. An elder woman toad volunteered. She dove and remained below a long time. All of the animals thought she had been lost, when at last she surfaced and before dying managed to spit a mouthful of earth onto the back of the Great Turtle. This earth was magical and contained the power of growth.

The island grew and grew until it was large enough for the Sky Woman to live on. The two swans set the woman upon the island and circled it encouraging it to grow into the world island it is today. Yet the world was dark. Again the Great Turtle called for the animals to gather. They decided to put a great light in the sky. A little turtle volunteered and climbed up to the sky with the help of the other animals' magic. Little turtle climbed into a black cloud and crawled around the sky collecting the lightning as she went. She made a big bright ball from the lightening and threw it into the sky. Then she collected more for a smaller ball, which she also threw, into the sky. The first ball became the sun, the second ball became the moon. Then the Great Turtle commanded the burrowing animals to make holes in the corners of the sky so that the sun and moon could go down through one and climb up again through the other as they circled. So there was day and night. The Sky woman lived on the island on top of the Great Turtle's back. She gave birth to twins, one good called Tharonhiawagon, one evil called Tawiskaron. From the breast of Sky Woman grows three sisters—corn, beans, and squash.

A Haida Creation Story

Long ago no divisions existed between humans, animals and spirits. All things of the earth, sky, and water were connected and all beings could pass freely between them. The Raven was a trickster full of supernatural power. He stole the sun from his grandfather Nsshahkeeyahl and made the moon and stars from it. The Raven created lakes, rivers and filled the lands with trees. He divided night and day, then pulled the tides into a rhythm. He filled the streams with fresh water, scattered the eggs of salmon and trout, and placed animals in the forests. The first human was hiding in a giant clamshell and Raven released them onto the beaches and gave humans fire. Raven disappeared and took with him the power of the spirit world to communicate and connect with humans.

Shelter

The shelter designs of First Nations were intimately related to their environments, resources, and their lifestyles. Some First Nations were migratory, and built portable shelters or shelters that were readily constructed from materials at hand. These shelters consisted on a framework of poles covered with materials like hides of animals or tree bark.

Other First Nations, like the Haudenosaunee, lived in villages dominated by relatively large structures called longhouses, also made of poles and covered in tree bark. Today, the longhouses are the place where ceremonies are conducted.

West coast First Nations built large houses out of the abundant and huge red cedar trees.



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Social Organization

All First Nations belonged to organized societies in which individuals, families and larger groups (clans and tribes) observed their own social, political and economic values and practices. Some First Nations were patrilineal, in which personal identity derived from the father's side of the family. Other First Nations were matrilineal, in which personal identity was inherited from the mother's side.

Geography had an enormous influence on the social organization, diet, and customs of First Nations peoples. For example, because Plains First Nations were blessed with abundant buffalo herds in their environments, they developed a communal hunting culture. The Iroquoian First Nations, on the other hand, were farmers. Because of soil and climate conditions, it was possible for Iroquoian First Nations to grow crops of corn, beans, and squash. The availability of these food staples meant that permanent communities could be established, and formed the basis of their complex, democratic governance systems.

First Nations societies before contact with European colonizers were highly developed and sophisticated cultures with systems that nurtured their members, designed technologies suited to their needs and surroundings, and lived harmoniously with their natural environment. This Plain Talk provides only a small picture of the world of First Nations prior to contact.

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*I do not think the measure of a civilization
is how tall its buildings of concrete are,
But rather how well its people have learned
to relate to their environment
and fellow man.
Sun Bear, Chippewa Tribe*

