

# ORAL TRADITION & STORIES

## Oral Tradition

First Nations people did not have a writing system based on an alphabet, but they had a strong oral tradition. That means that knowledge of events or matters of historic importance was preserved by passing information from person to person, and generation to generation.

There were usually specific people in the tribe or band who knew their whole history, and related these events to others at special gatherings. Tales of important events were told and retold around the campfire, as stories are told everywhere.

First Nations also had various ways of recording events, to trigger the memory of those relating the events. For example, wampum belts had pictures woven into them to tell a story. Drawings on bark or hide preserved the record of events.

In recent years, many First Nations people have been collecting these old stories from elders, and preserving them on tape, and writing them down.



Figure 1: An example of a wampum belt

## Legends and Stories

Like every human culture in the world, Canada's First Peoples have stories to explain the origins of the earth and its animals and people.

First Peoples' creation stories often contain references to specific landmarks, such as mountains or lakes, that give us good information about the areas that a group of people lived in, and the routes they followed as they migrated over the centuries to the areas they now live in.

Canada's First Peoples also have many other wonderful stories and legends about real or imaginary characters and settings, just as every group of people on earth do.

These stories were not written down, but were passed on through their oral tradition. Stories were told over and over, and everyone learned them. Children grew up, and passed the stories onto their children.

Stories among First Nations peoples serve the same purpose as stories do for other cultures all over the world.

They entertain, they teach listeners how to deal with the world around them, they teach people about good and evil, about bravery and cowardice; they make listeners think about the consequences of their behavior; they scare children with spooky stories so they do not wander away from home, and so on.

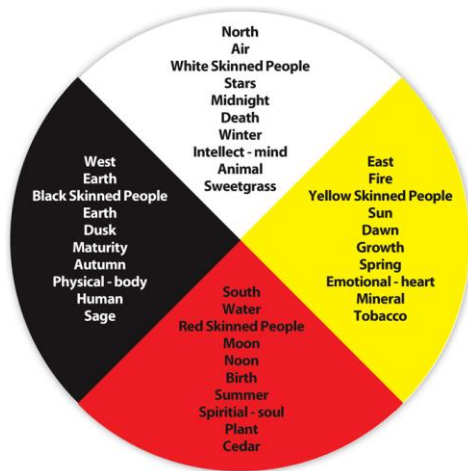


# RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

## Religion

First Nations people were very religious, and respectful of the Great Spirit, and other spirits that they believe inhabited the land and animals all around them.

First Nations people were taught, from the time they were very young, to respect and give thanks to the animals, birds, plants, and the land and water that gave them all the things that they depended on to stay alive.



The Medicine Wheel

## The Sacred Circle of Life

Seasonal migration was a continuous pattern, with each group following the same pattern each year, according to the natural cycles of the plants and animals.

Members of each clan usually came together in a big gathering at least once a year.

Because the regular seasonal pattern of life and movement of the animals and people was a continuous pattern, like a circle with no beginning and no end, the circle became a sacred symbol for First Nations people, the circle of life and renewal.



*The Sacred Circle of Life*  
Represented here on a drum. (Image from [www.blessingways.net](http://www.blessingways.net))

# Spiritual Beliefs



All First Nations believed that their values and traditions were gifts from the Creator. One of the most important and most common teachings was that people should live in harmony with the natural world and all it contained.

In oral stories and legends that Elders passed from one generation to another, First Nations children learned how the world came into being and that they were a part of the whole of creation. People gave thanks to everything in nature, upon which they depended for survival and development as individuals and as members of their communities. First Nations treated all objects in their environment—whether animate or inanimate—with the utmost respect.



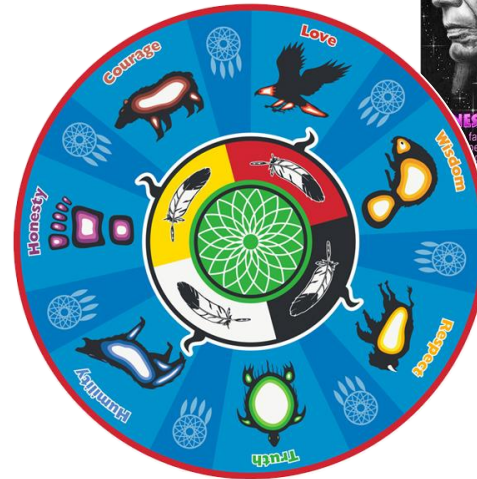
## Examples



This deep respect that First Nations cultivated for everything and every process in the natural world was **reflected in songs, dances, festivals and ceremonies**. Among the Woodland First Nations, for example, a hunter would talk or sing to a bear before it died, thanking the animal for providing the hunter and his family with much-needed food.

In keeping with their farming culture, the Haudenosaunee held **six to eight festivals a year relating to the cultivation of the soil and ripening of fruits and berries**. There was a seven-day festival to give thanks when corn was planted, for example, and another when it was green. A third festival was held when corn was harvested.

First Nations of the Pacific Coast had **many rituals to give thanks and celebrate the annual salmon run**. These rituals included a welcoming ceremony and offerings to the first salmon of the year.



## Value Systems

For the principles that guided their day-to-day conduct, many First Nations shared value systems similar to the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Anishnaabe peoples. These teachings stressed Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth as the values that enable people to live in a way that promotes harmony and balance with everyone and everything in creation.

# TRADE AND ECONOMY



What do you think this could have been used for?

## Trade

First Peoples had many well established trading patterns and trade alliances throughout North America.

Archaeologists have found plenty of evidence of early trade of items such as pottery, silver, and copper tools.



## Needs and Wants

In the past, the First Nations and Inuit depended on the land and natural resources for survival.

**The economy was based on the natural resources of the area they lived in.** For example, seal, caribou, moose, fish, birch, etc.

## Production

- Goods were made by hand using stone or bone tools. People became very skilled at using resources in the most efficient ways. The Innu used all parts of the caribou and very little went to waste.
- People traveled depending on the season to areas where the greatest resources could be found.
- Men and women often did different jobs (men would hunt and women would prepare meat and hides).
- Everyone helped with production and shared equally in what was produced.
- The land was everything, so being able to hunt, fish, and gather over a large area was very important. Some nations had clearly defined boundaries, others could come and go freely.

## Distribution

- The First Nations also had trade networks, trading goods for other things that they could not find or make.
- No one owned the land: no private ownership. To them, thinking a person could own the land was like saying someone could own the air.



## Grease Trails

The most researched trail system in British Columbia is the system of grease trails that existed to move eulachon oil from the coastal areas into the mountainous interior of British Columbia. The most famous example of a grease trail is the Mackenzie Heritage Trail, which links Bella Coola to Quesnel. This trail was the original link between the Nuxalk, Chilcotin, and Carrier people.



Eulachon (a type of fish) were an important part of many First Nations diets. Eulachon were also processed for their rich oil. The usual process was to allow the fish to decompose for a week or more in a pit in the ground, then add boiling water and skim off the oil, which would rise to the surface. Eulachon oil (also known as "grease") was the most important product traded into the interior; as a result, the trails over which the trade was conducted came to be known as grease trails.



# GOVERNMENT

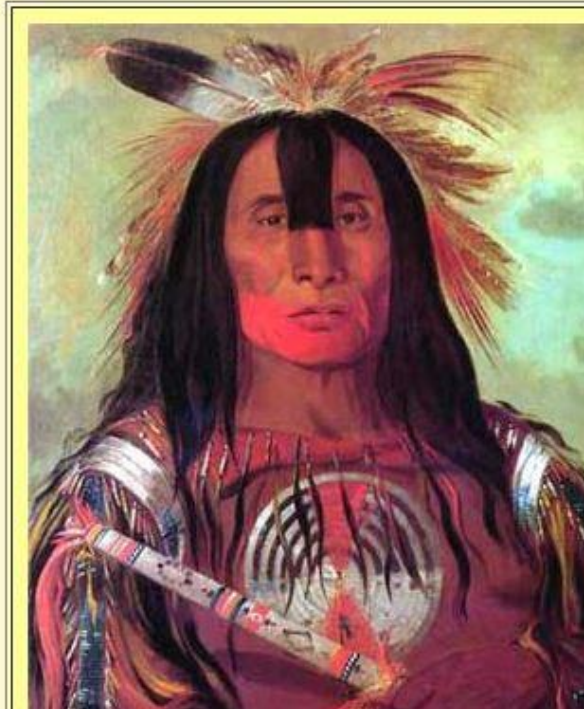
## Government

Canada's First Nations all had complex social systems, with several levels of government based on the family, the band or clan, and the nation or tribe.

Their leaders, or Chiefs, were chosen in different ways, but were always people who had special leadership qualities that brought them respect from their people.

In most First Nations, a council of elders advised the Chief, and decisions were made by consensus, which means that the council would discuss a matter of importance, and then would make a decision that the majority agreed on.

First Nations recognized each other as sovereign nations, and made friendship treaties, or military alliances with each other. Some nations were traditional enemies, and went through periods of war or peace.



## Different Types of Government

(Depending on land and availability of resources)

### Complex Democracy

Lots of food supplies made it possible for the **Iroquois** to have permanent communities, so they had more time to develop complex systems of government based on democracy (everyone has a say).



### Example

The Huron-Wendat had a 3-level political system with village councils, tribal councils and the confederacy council. **They all made decisions on a consensus basis, which means that everyone has to agree to the decision.**

## Aristocratic Class



The Pacific Coast First Nations had a well-defined **aristocratic class** (ruling class/wealthy class) that was regarded as superior by birth. The basic social unit for all First Nations in this part of the country was the extended family (lineage) whose members claimed descent from a common ancestor. Most lineages had their own **crests**, featuring representations of animal or supernatural beings that were believed to be their founders. The most famous method of crest display was the totem pole consisting of all the ancestral symbols that belonged to a lineage.



## Family Units

As was true of most First Nations across the country, those of the Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins were primarily occupied with day-to-day survival. As such, First Nations were divided into several independent groups made up of **different family units** who worked together. Each group hunted a separate territory, with individual boundaries defined by tradition and use. **A group leader was selected according to the group's needs at a particular time.** On a caribou hunt, for example, the most proficient hunter would be chosen leader.



# FOOD & SUBSISTENCE

Most First Nations of Canada lived mainly from hunting and fishing. They migrated seasonally to get food. They did not wander aimlessly.

They moved their camps from season to season to specific places and areas where they knew there would be food. In one season, they would hunt large animals; in another they would fish; in the fall they would gather berries, and so on.

The only farming people were the Iroquois and Hurons, and related tribes, in what is now southern Ontario.



All First Nations across the country hunted and gathered plants for both food and medicinal purposes. The actual percentage of meat, fish and plants in any First Nation's diet depended on what was available in the local environment.

Agriculture (farming) = higher population (more people)

Hunting, fishing & gathering = lower population (less people)

***What they ate depended on what was available in the area that the particular group lived in.***

## Woodland First Nations



The Woodland First Nations (and all First Nations in the northern regions) hunted game animals with spears and bows and arrows. These First Nations also used traps and snares, or routing fences to stampede animals in to the area with snares. To provide for times of hardship, the people dried large stores of meat, fish and berries during the summer.

Even though the Haudenosaunee had plenty of meat, fish and fowl available to them in the wild, they lived mainly on their own crops—corn, beans and squash.

## Coastal First Nations

The vast food resources of the ocean—salmon, shellfish, octopus, herring, crabs, whale and seaweed—made it possible for Pacific Coast First Nations to settle in permanent locations. Like Plateau First Nations, those of the Pacific Coast dried most of their salmon in smokehouses so that it could be stored and eaten later. Fish oil also played an important part in people's diet, serving as a condiment with dried fish during the winter months.

The Coast Tsimshian, Haida and Nuu-chah-nulth all hunted sea lion and sea otter, going out into the ocean with harpoons in slim dugout canoes. They also hunted whales with harpoons



## Plains First Nations

Because the buffalo was the main object of their hunt, Plains First Nations had a hunting culture that was highly developed over thousands of years. Communal hunts took place in June, July and August when the buffalo were fat, their meat prime and their hides easily dressed.

A single buffalo provided a lot of meat, with bulls averaging about 700 kilograms. Eaten fresh, the meat was roasted on a spit or boiled in a skin bag with hot stones, a process that produced a rich, nutritious soup. Just as common was the dried buffalo meat known as jerky, which could be stored for a long time in rawhide bags. Women also prepared high-protein pemmican—dried meat pounded into a powder, which was then mixed with hot, melted buffalo fat and berries.



## Plateau First Nations

Salmon was the primary food source for the First Nations of the Plateau. People used dip nets and built weirs in the shallows of swift waters to trap schools of fish. Of the thousands of salmon caught each year, a very small proportion was eaten fresh. The remainder was cleaned, smoked and stored for winter in underground pits lined with birch bark. Wild vegetable foods—chiefly roots and berries—also formed an important part of the diet of the Plateau First Nations.

