



## Rekindling the Fire

Keep a few embers from the fire that used to burn in your village, some day go back so all can gather again and rekindle a new flame, for a new life in a changed world.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Finding Common Ground Between Cultures

**THROUGH FREQUENT AND ELOQUENT** statements about the importance of culture and identity, Aboriginal people made abundantly clear to us their determination to sustain distinctive cultures, to revitalize the aspects of culture eroded by colonial practices, and to maintain their identities as Aboriginal people into the future. It became evident that if the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Canada are to share a future characterized by peace and creativity, that shared future must accommodate openly and generously the cultures and values that Aboriginal people are determined to retain. Anything less will be a continuation of the oppressive practices of the colonial past.

Standing in the way of this accommodation are stereotypes and erroneous assumptions held by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people about each other's cultures. While Aboriginal people are confronted daily with the majority culture, non-Aboriginal people have few of the opportunities commissioners have had to share the world view of diverse Aboriginal peoples and nations. And even among the diverse peoples encompassed by the term 'Aboriginal', there are vast differences and problems of communication.

As part of our goal of extending the ground of intercultural respect and cooperation, it seemed important, therefore, to convey something of what we have come to understand about what Aboriginal people mean when they

say that they want to retain their cultures, that they want institutions of governance to reflect their traditional ways, and that human services, to be effective, must be culturally appropriate.

In the following pages we introduce briefly the distinct peoples — First Nations, Métis and Inuit — who together constitute the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. We spend some time exploring the distinct modes of communication of Aboriginal people and the importance of first-hand experience and stories rich in metaphor for communicating Aboriginal meaning. We turn often to stories to share the understandings we have gained of Aboriginal cultures. Some of the stories concern spiritual matters; some are about land and environment and the ceremonies and symbols through which world view was instilled in successive generations. Still others illustrate the ethical systems that traditionally provided structure in social, economic and political relations. The relevance of traditions to meeting the challenges of contemporary life is the focus of the concluding section.

Reflecting on the descriptions of Aboriginal life, philosophy and spiritual practices presented to us, commissioners came to a number of conclusions. We arrived at a shared conviction that there is an Aboriginal world view that assumes different features among different peoples and in different locales but that is consistent in important ways among Aboriginal peoples across Canada. We became convinced that distinctively Aboriginal ways of apprehending reality and governing collective and individual behaviour are relevant to the demands of survival in a post-industrial society. And we concluded that this heritage must be made more accessible to all Canadians.

It would be presumptuous to suggest that we have come to understand Aboriginal world view, or that we could adequately represent in these pages the complexity and diversity of Aboriginal cultures. What we do undertake is to select elements of Aboriginal experience and philosophy as they were described to us, principally by Aboriginal people, and to interpret these in light of our experience.<sup>2</sup> Our interpretations reflect the judgement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commissioners and the perceptions and advice of the interveners and advisers who assisted us. Our words reflect truth as we see it, but they are far from definitive. As a contemporary Aboriginal writer has noted about history, the recounting of many personal

involvements provides the truest picture. "The versions are many and varied; all are true."<sup>3</sup>

It may be helpful at this point to clarify how we use certain terms that recur in our discussion:

Culture we understand to be the whole way of life of a people. We focus particularly on the aspects of culture that have been under assault historically by non-Aboriginal institutions: Aboriginal languages, relationship with the land, spirituality, and the ethics or rules of behaviour by which Aboriginal peoples maintained order in their families, clans, communities, nations and confederacies.

Spirituality, in Aboriginal discourse, is not a system of beliefs that can be defined like a religion; it is a way of life in which people acknowledge that every element of the material world is in some sense infused with spirit, and all human behaviour is affected by, and in turn has an effect in, a non-material, spiritual realm.

Ethics, or rules guiding the conduct of human beings toward one another and with other creatures and elements of the world, are more than rational codes that can be applied or ignored. The rules are embedded in the way things are; they are enforced, inescapably, by the whole order of life, through movement and response in the physical world and in the spiritual realm.<sup>4</sup>

The interconnectedness of these elements — culture, spirituality and ethics — is summarized in a few words from an Anishnabe presenter who spoke at our hearings:

Culture to us means a whole way of life — our beliefs, language, and how we live with one another and creation.

Vernon Roote, Deputy Grand Chief  
Union of Ontario Indians  
North Bay, Ontario, 10 May 1993

## **2. Diverse Peoples, Common Goals**

Across the breadth of this land commissioners heard Aboriginal voices speaking with confidence about the renewal of their cultures and the value of their traditions in charting a course for the future. The language used to speak of culture differed from region to region and again for First Nations, Inuit and Métis witnesses.

From First Nations persons we heard that prophecies foretell a dark night when teachings given at the foundation of the world will be almost forgotten, when the elders who are the keepers of wisdom will fall asleep, thinking that there is no longer anyone to listen to their counsel.

In our history it tells us of a prophecy of the seventh fire, fire representing time, eras. In that prophecy, it says that in the time of seventh fire a new people will emerge to retrace the steps of our grandfathers, to retrieve the things that were lost but not of our own accord. There was time in the history of Anishnabe people we nearly lost all of these things that we once had as a people, and that road narrowed...But today we strive to remind our people of our stories once again, to pick up that work that we as Anishnabe people know. It is our work and we ask no one to do that work, for it is our responsibility to maintain those teachings for our people.

Charles Nelson  
Roseau River, Manitoba, 8 December 1992

Métis speakers talked more often about gaining recognition for their unique identity as a people who have inherited cultural traits from both their Aboriginal and their European forebears and who have synthesized those characteristics in a distinctive way. They have formed communities where that distinctiveness can be expressed and supported. Their history has been marked by resistance to displacement by colonial society and governments' insistence that they choose between identifying themselves with their First Nations relations or disappearing into settler communities.

In research done for the Commission that brought together small groups of Aboriginal people living in urban areas to explore questions of culture and identity, Métis participants spoke of the pressure they experience to suppress their identity and the modest gains they have made as a people in correcting distorted representations of the role of Métis people in history:

When I was going to school people would say: 'It's written right here in the books.' And I'd say: 'Well that's not what my father told me' or 'My grandfather didn't say that's right and I'm going by word of mouth.'

And then my father would tell me to just believe what they said at school. He wanted me to finish school so I had to go by what they were saying...

Though this man was able to express his cultural identity freely within his family [the authors explain], others were not. Members of the Métis circle often alluded to the family 'secrets' about having Métis heritage, or spoke about how they finally 'admitted' their Métis identity...

Another example is the pardon of Louis Riel. We didn't ask for a pardon; we asked for total exoneration! And it is just those things we are continually faced with all the time. It's continual survival, an ongoing battle.<sup>5</sup>

Ollie Ittinuar, chairman of the board of the Inuit Cultural Institute in Rankin Inlet, who was 70 years old at the time of his presentation, described how the work of articulating and documenting Inuit culture from an Inuit perspective is still in its infancy:

I have been working for a number of years in terms of the Inuit tradition. I keep trying to keep the tradition and culture alive...we don't want to lose it. ...no doubt the elders, in the next few years, they are going to be gone and while they are still alive, we are trying to work as hard as we can. Those who have seen...what they used to do, and what they remember from what they have learned from their parents and grandparents, we are working hard on this, so that once we are gone it will be known in the future and it can be recorded and documented.

Ollie Ittinuar  
Rankin Inlet, Northwest Territories  
19 November 1992

Inuit are concerned not so much about retrieving a remembered culture as creating space to practise knowledge that is fully functional among their elders.

To gain greater insight into the way cultural traditions shape behaviour and

how they are regarded in the present, the Commission undertook to document life histories of Aboriginal people in various parts of the country. The stories told by Paulus Maggo of Labrador give substance to the qualities of character he says were and are still valued among Inuit:

One important lesson I learned from my father and Martin Martin [a well known and respected figure in Labrador Inuit communities] is how to treat people with respect and handle crews at outside camps. I tried to show respect, to be trustworthy, to be fair to one and all in the same way that [my father and Martin Martin] were everywhere they went and in anything they did. Everything collectively they taught me was important but respect for each other was especially valuable....

There was a rule relating to the treatment of one another in the community and at various camps that said people should live in peace, understanding and goodwill. There was a lot of respect for those who promoted that rule by their actions and how they treated their fellow Inuit.<sup>6</sup>

The determination of Aboriginal people to retain their cultures goes beyond nostalgia for an historical way of life. It is expressed in a deep appreciation of timeless human values and a sense of obligation to continue to represent those values for the sake of future generations.

In our language we call ourselves *ongwehonwe*. Some people say it means real people. I heard one man explain it in this way: It says that we are the ones that are living on the earth today, right at this time. We are the ones that are carrying the responsibility of our nations, of our spirituality, of our relationship with the Creator, on our shoulders. We have the mandate to carry that today, at this moment in time.

Our languages, our spirituality and everything that we are was given to us and was carried before us by our ancestors, our grandparents who have passed on.

When they couldn't carry it any longer and they went to join that spirit world, they handed it to us and they said: 'Now you are the real ones. You have to carry it.' Now they are in the spirit world. They are our past.

Now we have a responsibility to carry that because we hear seven

generations in the future. They are our future. They are the ones that are not yet born.

Charlie Patton  
Mohawk Trail Longhouse  
Kahnawake, Quebec, 6 May 1993

As we saw in our exploration of intercultural relations since explorers and settlers first arrived on this soil, the Aboriginal vision of their future is one that easily accommodates new relationships and new elements of culture. Their vision also holds tenaciously to the wisdom they have received from their grandfathers and grandmothers.

Many First Nations people anticipate that the time is at hand, as foretold in prophecies, when their special gifts will be recognized and their role in the family of humankind will be affirmed. The Métis emerged as a people at the meeting point of two cultures. They have never relinquished their commitment to bicultural dialogue. Inuit are applying their well-honed skills of adaptability to synthesize the best of the old and the new cultures in which they live. With evidence of readiness on the part of Canadian society to seek a just reconciliation, the path to renewed intercultural relations is clearer than it has been for several generations.

### **3. Words Are Not Enough**

Fundamental to any attempt at intercultural understanding is the need to find a common language. While commissioners communicate principally in English or French, we had the benefit of interpreters at our hearings where Aboriginal people spoke in their own languages. Still, the challenges of communication go beyond those of technical translation and diligent interpretation. The very nature of Aboriginal languages and the characteristic modes of transmitting knowledge in an oral culture make a direct transfer of meaning problematic (see also Volume 4, Chapter 3).

At a Commission hearing in Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaq educator, gave an introduction to the structure of the Mi'kmaq language, in which verbs and nouns figure quite differently than they do in English or French:

The [Mi'kmaq] language is built around relationships, and the relationships of people to each other are more important than anything else... [The Mi'kmaq language] is not a noun-based language like English, in which it is very easy to connect two nouns or to turn a thing that is happening into a noun by adding 't-i-o-n'. In Mi'kmaq everything operates from the basis of verbs, and verbs are complicated [because they show] relationships [to] all the other elements around them.

Marie Battiste  
Eskasoni, Nova Scotia  
7 May 1992

In an article published in 1994, Leroy Little Bear makes a similar assertion about the Blackfoot language, which, like the Mi'kmaq language, is part of the Algonkian language family, the most widespread Aboriginal linguistic group in Canada. Little Bear goes on to draw an analogy between the Blackfoot language and the language of quantum physics. He describes the transition from Newtonian physics, which conceives of particles as the basic building blocks of matter, to quantum physics, which proposes that the basic stuff of the universe is energy moving in a wave-like pattern, and he observes:

Constant motion is inherent in the Native thought process, and consequently many Native languages, such as Blackfoot, are very action- or verb-oriented. We've always thought in terms of energy, energy fields and constant motion.<sup>7</sup>

Aboriginal languages, and therefore the reality they describe and represent, are not made up of separate things with fixed characteristics. The focus is on relations between things or persons, and the nature of the thing or person can be defined by the relationship between the speaker and the object. Battiste refers to the Mi'kmaq language's distinctions between animate and inanimate things:

The objects around us with which we have an intimate relationship are animate and those things with which we don't have a relationship are inanimate. It has nothing to do with being alive or dead.

Marie Battiste



Eskasoni, Nova Scotia  
7 May 1992

Irving Hallowell, an anthropologist specializing in studies of the Ojibwa, made the following report:

Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, 'No! But *some* are.'<sup>8</sup>

The Aboriginal reality reflected in these quotations is intensely dynamic and fluid, requiring each person to pay attention to how he or she approaches each new situation, in order to adopt the appropriate attitude, to create the desired relationship.

Even in such a brief excursion into Aboriginal languages, we begin to see the difficulty of translating concepts from one culture to another. Through the medium of language an Aboriginal child is taught from birth to perceive the world in particular ways. These perceptions are conditioned not only by *what* is said but also by *how* it is said.

A further problem in cross-cultural communication derives from the differences between a predominantly oral culture and a culture that relies predominantly on the written word, as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies in Canada can be described today.

Transmission of knowledge about living, or just plain information, in an oral culture requires personal contact — or at least it did until the advent of radio and television. This personal communication therefore takes place in a context that is shared by speaker and listener, and many of the spaces in the verbal content can be filled in by the context.

Much of the traditional knowledge whose loss was lamented by elders and youth in our hearings was normally transmitted during the practice of land-based activities, often involving ritual.<sup>9</sup> With the loss of land and these land-based activities, the knowledge itself is at risk of being lost, because there are no verbal formulas to take the place of the experience that supports aural (heard) teachings. The reinstatement of sweat lodges, naming ceremonies and talking circles in contemporary Aboriginal communities

demonstrates how a context for certain teachings can be re-created in an urbanized community, a prison yard or a college campus. Other teachings are intertwined so intimately with particular activities and environments that they can be transmitted effectively only in the original setting.

Matthew Coon Come, a Cree leader who spent a number of years at residential school and was later university-educated, described in a *Maclean's* interview his confrontation with the limitations of the literate education and intellectual fervour he brought home on his return to Mistissini, in the James Bay region of Quebec. Having asked his father, Alfred, to teach him about the land of his ancestors, he arrived in the bush with a topographical map of the territory they were about to explore.

The first thing my Dad did was tear that map into tiny little pieces. He said I was committing the white man's mistake, making plans for the land without ever setting foot on it, without ever getting a feel for it.<sup>10</sup>

The need to walk on the land in order to know it is a different approach to knowledge than the one-dimensional, literate approach to knowing. Persons schooled in a literate culture are accustomed to having all the context they need to understand a communication embedded in the text before them. This is partly what is meant by 'clear writing', which is urged upon children as soon as they begin communicating practical or academic content. Persons taught to use all their senses — to absorb every clue to interpreting a complex, dynamic reality — may well smile at the illusion that words alone, stripped of complementary sound and colour and texture, can convey meaning adequately.

The perception of the world as ever changing, ever requiring the human being to be alert to the requirements of proper relations, means that views from every vantage point are valuable in making decisions. While older persons are generally thought to be wiser by virtue of their longer experience, the perceptions of children and young people are not discounted. The roles of teacher and learner in an Aboriginal world can be interchangeable, depending on the context.

Conditioned by language and experience in early life to comprehend the world in culturally defined ways, Aboriginal people internalize this distinctive world view and carry it with them, even if they have adopted English or

French as a working language, even if they have been transplanted to the city. Further, child-rearing practices maintain cultural traits by socializing successive generations into seeing and responding to the world in particular ways. Clare Brant, a Mohawk psychiatrist, wrote and lectured extensively on Aboriginal ethics and behaviours that persist in contemporary Aboriginal populations even when the conditions that contributed to forming those behaviours have disappeared.<sup>11</sup>

For Aboriginal people who retrace the path to their traditions as adults, their practice of cultural ways may reflect a conscious decision to resist pressure from the surrounding society to abandon an identity based on tradition. If the circumstances in which Aboriginal people express their world view are controlled by persons with a different view of reality, and if those in control are unwilling to acknowledge or accommodate Aboriginal ways, the scene is set for conflict or suppression of difference.

#### **4. Meeting on the Trickster's Ground**

Having said that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people tend to see the world differently and that differing constructions of language and modes of communication make it difficult to bridge the divide, is intercultural communication possible? While politicians and policy makers representative of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal world views have seldom been successful in coming to one mind, artists have had considerably more success in representing Aboriginal experience in ways that tickle the imagination of non-Aboriginal people and evoke in them awareness of the otherness and the sameness of Aboriginal reality.

Literature provides telling insights into the character and ways of a people. One of the most popular figures in the oral traditions of Aboriginal people (which are now being transcribed by Aboriginal authors as well as anthropologists) is a character often referred to as the Trickster. He appears in differing guises in the traditions of various nations across Canada — as Coyote, Hare, Nanabush, Old Man, Raven, Wesakychak, Kluskap.

## Butterflies

In the beginning, the animals took care of the first Anishnabe children. The animals provided everything for these babies — food, warmth and companionship. While the larger animals guarded the children and kept them safe and warm, the smaller animals played with the children, kept them happy and made them laugh.

The children in return imitated the animals, their protectors and playmates, and crawled around on all fours. In fact, the children neither knew of nor tried other ways to get around.

One day, Nanabush watched these children laugh, roll and tumble with their friends. He knew it was time for the children to know who they were, to know that they were Anishnabe, to grow up. Nanabush scooped up a handful of pebbles and cast them into the air.

The pebbles turned into butterflies — butterflies of all sizes, of all colours, fluttering here and there. The children looked up and saw the beautiful celestial winged creatures. And for the first time, they stood up on their legs and ran laughing, chasing the butterflies.

*Source:* Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "The Trickster: Running for the People, Carrying Fire for the People", research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

Trickster is half spirit and half human. He is creator and spoiler, hero and clown, capable of noble deeds and gross self-indulgence. He is unpredictable, one minute inspiring awe for his creativity, the next moment provoking laughter at his foolishness. The profusion of stories and the repetition of themes involving this character are often referred to as The Trickster Cycle. The stories told here display the contradictory characteristics that reside in this complex personality.

One story, of how Coyote brought fire to the people, shows Trickster as a role model caring for the people, mobilizing the animals with their various gifts to co-operate in life-enhancing service.

Other Trickster stories show him indulging his appetite for sexual pleasure

or excessive amounts of food, usually with an ending that demonstrates the self-defeating nature of this behaviour. The moral teachings are laced with humour and an easy acceptance of the truth that nobility and foolishness can reside in the same person — and you can never predict which face will show itself next.

The themes of good and evil, health and illness, hunger and plenty, appear in other legends as well, the opposites kept in precarious balance by the power of a good mind or shamanic knowledge. In Iroquois legend the evil twin who would destroy life is kept in check by the power of the good twin. In Inuit legends, Sedna, the sea spirit from whose severed finger joints the sea animals were formed, rules the movements of those animals from her dwelling beneath the sea. When Inuit hunters are unsuccessful and food is scarce, shamans exercise their spirit powers to travel to the undersea world to persuade Sedna to release the animals so that the people may live.<sup>12</sup>

### **Wesakychak and the Little Birds**

One day Wesakychak was walking through the woods when he came upon a nest of little birds. He saw they were defenceless and threw shit on them. Then he continued down the path and came upon a big stream. Two times he made a big run to jump over the stream and chickened out before he jumped. The third time he ran fast and jumped and then in the middle of the stream the parents of the little birds flew out and scared Wesakychak and he fell splat into the water! The moral of the story is: don't throw shit on little birds for one day they will grow up and could scare you.

*Source: Sharon Boucher, in *Stories My Granny Told Me: Stories, Tales, Legends, Poems, Collected by the Young People of Fort McKay* (Fort McKay, Alberta: 1980), p. 11.*

Aboriginal people are reclaiming their stories, just as they are reclaiming their ancestral lands and waters. These stories of ancient origin, grown familiar through frequent retelling, revealed Aboriginal people to themselves, depicted the moral struggles and dilemmas that plague all humankind, and assured them that among their cultural treasures was the knowledge that could maintain a balance between positive and negative forces struggling for dominance in a realm not accessible to ordinary vision.

## **Coyote Brings Fire to the People**

The people are cold and freezing, and beg Coyote to get fire for them. Coyote reaches the fire-keepers' camp at the top of a great mountain. After surveying the area, he cannot figure out how to get the fire from the fire-keepers. So, he has to ask his blueberry sisters. They tell him he needs the assistance of the animals to accomplish his task, because it has to be done in relay. Each animal, because of its particular attributes, runs a particular part of the terrain: cougar carries the fire down the mountain side, fox through the tall trees, squirrel through the tree tops, antelope over the plains, and finally, frog through the water. Angry fire-keepers chase each animal. Finally, the last ember of the stolen fire is coughed up by frog and falls onto a piece of wood where it disappears. The fire-keepers having returned to their mountain top, Coyote then shows the people how to get the fire out of wood by friction: that is the twirling of a stick against a piece of wood.

*Source: Barry Holstun Lopez, *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with His Daughter Coyote Builds North America* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1977), p. 11.*

The yearning and tentativeness of an awakening generation's quest for mythological instruction and instructors is captured in Lenore Keeshig-Tobias' poem, "Running on the North Wind", written in 1981, early in her career as a writer and storyteller.

By mythology we mean not stories that are made up or untrue. Rather, a people's myths are stories that convey truths too deep to be contained in a literal account of singular experience. They tell of experience so significant that the story of it has been preserved in narrative and drama and song, from generation to generation, passing through so many storytellers that the contours of detail have been worn smooth, leaving it to the listener to fill in the context, to give the story life and meaning, to turn it into a teaching for today.

Attesting to the power of performance to move listeners today, Taxwok (James Morrison), a Gitksan chief, said of the memorial song reaching back

"many thousands of years" and sung at the ceremony where he acquired his chiefly name:

I can still feel it today while I'm sitting here, I can hear the brook, I can hear the river run....You can feel the air of the mountain. This is what the memorial song is. To bring your memory back into that territory.<sup>13</sup>

In a slightly different vein, Jose Kusugak said, at the Commission's round table on education:

With the oral history in mind, I started a program with CBC some years ago called *Siniraksautit* which means 'bedtime stories' in Inuktitut. I like to call them the blind man's movies because, when you are listening to that radio, you can close your eyes and the Inuit way of telling stories about their lives and legends...is so vivid that, when you close your eyes, you can actually see it just like the real movie.

Jose Kusugak  
Ottawa, Ontario  
6 July 1993

Stories with the power to capture the imagination are like a library of scripts that people can play with; they can try on different identities and roles, without the costs and the risks that accompany choices in ordinary reality. Stories foster character development by offering patterns that people can use as models or reject. They can also provide criteria for self-examination.<sup>14</sup>

When Aboriginal people speak of culture loss they are speaking, in large part, about loss of the stories that instructed them in how to be human in a particular cultural environment. 'Loss' is not quite the correct term, as we have seen, particularly in the history of residential schools presented in Chapter 10; it would be more accurate to say, 'when culture and the stories that convey it were suppressed by the interventions of church and state'.

## Running on the North Wind

*by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias*

I

i have talked to you in the twilight before sleep but never for very long  
i have wondered about you despairingly but never for very long  
knowing you to be a trickster  
i have  
been cautious and yet this morning i dreamed of you you were  
running on the wind going north in disguise

II

the others said  
LOOK there

goes Santa Claus that's not Santa Claus i said that's Nanabush you  
wore a long serge coat bound with a most colourful sash, but i knew it  
was you i saw your glinting eyes brown face and long black hair but  
the others didn't seem to care the card game and table talk were too  
involving

III

i hurried to the door Nanabush i said calling where are you going?  
you stopped and huddled in the snow neath a prickly bush Nanabush  
i said why don't you visit you looked back at me were you goading  
me?

IV

then i held you you cuddly old teddy bear rabbit i said things to you  
and tried not to frighten you where are you going Nanabush where  
are you going why haven't you come this way before?

V



i held you cuddly old teddy bear rabbit then let you go north  
somewhere don't forget to come back i called don't forget to come  
back we need you Nanabush

VI

i dreamed of you passing through my dreams heading north this  
morning were you goading me?

VII

so, Nanabush where have you been all these years down south  
somewhere  
in some Peruvian mountain village maybe i wondered about where  
you had gone thought maybe you had died rather than just faded  
away like some dusty old robe but ah ha i caught you trying to slip  
through my dream unnoticed Nanabush where have you been all  
these years Machu Picchu? the women there, i hear, weave such  
colourful sashes

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Reclaiming their stories is essential for Aboriginal people's self-knowledge. Retold in the context of contemporary lives, stories might well serve non-Aboriginal people too, as an introduction to Aboriginal world view. And who can tell; perhaps the Trickster would have something to say to Canadian youth who have never had a playful, unpredictable, good/bad teacher who always has to learn the folly of his ways in the school of hard knocks.

The stories recounted in this chapter do not fit easily into separate categories. The themes often merge or overlap, reminding us that life cannot be carved up into separate compartments; it must be experienced and understood holistically, because *everything is related*.

## 5. Spirituality

The fundamental feature of Aboriginal world view was, and continues to be,

that all of life is a manifestation of spiritual reality. We come from spirit; we live and move surrounded by spirit; and when we leave this life we return to a spirit world. All perceptions are conditioned by spiritual forces, and all actions have repercussions in a spiritual reality. Actions initiated in a spiritual realm affect physical reality; conversely, human actions set off consequences in a spiritual realm. These consequences in turn become manifest in the physical realm. All these interactions must be taken into account as surely as considerations of what to eat or how to keep warm in winter.

Historian Olive Dickason describes this pervasive world view in the following words:

[B]elief in the unity of all living things is central to Amerindian and Inuit myths, despite a large and complicated cast of characters who experience an endless series of adventures. Of utmost importance was harmony, the maintenance of which was by no means automatic, as the demands of life could make it necessary to break the rules; hence the importance in Native legend and myth of the trickster, who could be an individual but who could also be an aspect of the Creator or world force. As well, peaceful co-operation could be shattered by violent confrontations with malevolent, destructive powers....

Amerindians and Inuit perceived the universe as an intricate meshing of personalized powers great and small, beneficial and dangerous, whose equilibrium was based on reciprocity. While humans could not control the system, they could influence particular manifestations through alliances with spiritual powers, combined with their knowledge of how these powers worked. Such alliances had to be approached judiciously, as some spirits were more powerful than others, just as some were beneficent and others malevolent; every force had a counterforce. Things were not always what they seemed at first sight; as with stones, even apparently inanimate objects could have unexpected hidden attributes. Keeping the cosmos in tune and staying in tune with the cosmos called for ceremonies, rituals, and taboos that had to be properly observed or performed if they were to be effective.... Even the construction of dwellings and the layout of villages and encampments...reflected this sense of spiritual order....

Some (but not all) tribes recognized an all-powerful spirit, but the important

ones to deal with were those who were directly connected with needs such as food, health, and fertility....Whatever the form of their particular societies, Amerindians led full and satisfying social lives within the framework of complex cosmologies, despite the simplicity of their tools.<sup>15</sup>

Exploration of Aboriginal belief systems demonstrates that for diverse peoples, their world was filled with mystery, but there were rules and personal guides, in the form of wisdom handed down from ancestors and spirit helpers who were available, if properly approached, to aid them in pursuit of a good life. It was the responsibility of every person to learn the rules, to acquire the measure of spiritual power appropriate to his or her situation, and to exercise that power in accordance with the ethical system given to the whole society as 'wisdom'.<sup>16</sup> Failure to do so would have repercussions not only for the individual; his or her transgressions of spiritual law could cause hardship for family members and associates in the community.

Aboriginal spirituality therefore had both private and public dimensions. Responsibility for observing the requirements of natural and spiritual law rested with the individual, but misfortune in the family or the interdependent community was considered evidence of a failure of morality or an offended spirit. Setting the problem right was a concern of the whole community, and ceremonialists, medicine persons or shamans were the agents called upon to diagnose the problem and restore balance on behalf of the community.

The interaction of self-disciplined observance of rules of behaviour and resort to shamans in public ceremonies to maintain order is spelled out in a conversation between Knud Rasmussen and Qaqortingneq, an old camp leader of the Netsilik Inuit, recorded in 1931 in Rasmussen's account of encounters during an expedition to the central Arctic. Rasmussen asked Qaqortingneq what he desired most in life, and the old Inuk replied,

I would like at all times to have the food I require, that is to say animals enough, and then the clothes that can shield me from wind and weather and cold.

I would like to live without sadness and without pain, I mean without suffering of any kind, without sickness.

And as a man I wish to be so close to all kinds of animals that in the hunt and at all kinds of sports I can excel over my countrymen.

All that I desire for myself I desire also for those who through relationship are near to me in this life.

*What will you do to attain all this?*

I must never offend Nuliajuk [the Sea Spirit] or Narssuk [the Weather Spirit]. I must never offend the souls of animals or a tonraq [personal protective spirit] so that it will strike me with sickness. When hunting and wandering inland I must as often as I can make offerings to animals that I hunt, or to the dead who can help me, or to lifeless things, especially stones or rocks, that are to have offerings for some reason or other.

I must make my own soul as strong as I can, and for the rest seek strength and support in all the power that lies in the name.<sup>17</sup>

I must observe my forefathers' rules of life in hunting customs and taboo....I must gain special abilities or qualities through amulets. I must try to get hold of magic words or magic songs that either give hunting luck or are protective.

If I cannot manage in spite of all these precautions, and suffer want or sickness, I must seek help from the shamans whose mission it is to be the protectors of mankind against all the hidden forces and dangers of life.<sup>18</sup>

Children in Aboriginal cultures are prepared from birth to learn and respect teachings about spiritual reality and the responsibilities of human beings to maintain the order of the universe. The obligation of human beings to adapt to the natural order is put into perspective by the observation that human beings were the last to emerge in the order of creation, and they are the most dependent of all creatures on the sacrifice of plant and animal life for their survival. It is proper, therefore, that they should behave with humility and thankfulness toward the earth, which nourishes them like a mother, and other beings that give up their lives for human sustenance.

The obligation of all Aboriginal people to reflect on their responsibilities is reinforced by stories, particularly stories of the Creation. Jacob (Jake) Thomas, a hereditary chief of the Cayuga Nation and a ceremonialist

among the Six Nations of the Iroquois in both Canada and the United States, explained:

Since the time of Creation the population of the Onkwehonweh were instructed. That's why we always go back to the time of Creation. We were always instructed from that time: Where did we come from? And what's our purpose in being here? And how did that tradition come about? We talk about the clan system. That's where it originated, from the Creation.

Chief Jacob Thomas  
Iroquois Confederacy  
Akwesasne, Ontario, 3 May 1993

In the Yukon and elsewhere we heard people reflecting on the fundamental question of what it means to be human and saw them turning to their elders for enlightenment:

Who am I? Being of Tlingit ancestry and [knowing] that 'Tlingit' means 'human being'...how do you be a human being? Talking to some of the elders on things like that, they look at different approaches. Being a human being, you have certain rights, obligations and responsibilities. One is that you have an obligation to treat all people and all things with respect. You have the obligation and the right and the responsibility to share with all people, all things, all beings. You have a right and an obligation to the education of children, the education of yourself, of your family or your nation. You have a right and obligation to maintain economies.

...when we look at this, this doesn't differ around the globe because all human beings have certain rights. The question of how we express those rights becomes important.

Mark Wedge  
Yukon Indian Development Corporation  
Whitehorse, Yukon, 18 November 1992

All human beings share common rights, but the way these are expressed by Aboriginal people across Canada takes on a particular shape, joining them with extraordinary consistency in kinship with the land and all the creatures and elements with which they share life.

## 6. The Land That Supports Us

When Aboriginal people speak of the land they mean not only the ground that supports their feet; they also include waters, plants, animals, fish, birds, air, seasons — all the beings, elements and processes encompassed by the term 'biosphere'.

The many nations that occupy ancestral homelands describe their presence in those locations as having been ordained by the Creator. Will Basque says of the Mi'kmaq,

When Chief Membertou entered into this agreement with the Jesuits and with the Church [1712 Concordat with the Holy See in Rome] he emphasized that we will keep our language and that we will always be able to talk to God in our language. Of course, He understands Mi'kmaq. He gave us the language. He made us Mi'kmaq people from Mi'kmaq earth, just as the Bible says "from dust to dust".

Will Basque  
Eskasoni, Nova Scotia  
6 May 1992

Chief Edmund Metatawabin of Fort Albany on James Bay conveyed a similar conception, emphasizing the responsibility that came with the gift of land and life:

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 Community  
Timmins, Ontario, 5 November 1992

The proper way to discharge responsibility to the land and the animals that give up their lives is set out in legends and traditional teachings, such as

the Mi'kmaq legend of Kluskap:

[Kluskap] called upon an animal that was swimming in the river. This animal was the marten...He asked the marten to come ashore and offer his life so that Kluskap and Grandmother could continue to exist. And sure enough, the animal lowered its head and Grandmother snapped its neck and laid it on the ground. Kluskap felt so bad about taking the life of another animal that he asked the Great Spirit to give back life to his brothers and sisters so that they would be around, so that he, and the rest of the Mi'kmaq nations could rely on their animals for their existence. So marten came back to life and another animal lay in its place.

Stephen Augustine  
Big Cove, New Brunswick  
20 May 1992

This theme of renewal of life, accomplished through prayer and proper behaviour, is repeated in the oral traditions of all Aboriginal nations. It is often referred to as 'maintaining a balance'. We referred to it in Chapter 4 of this volume, with respect to the ceremonial observances of the Mi'kmaq, the Blackfoot and the nations of the Pacific coast. Roger Jones, a traditional teacher from Shawanaga First Nation in Ontario, described how traditional understandings and practices continue today:

When we were placed here on Turtle Island,<sup>19</sup> the Creator promised us forever life and love. He promised us all of those things that we would ever need.... Everything you will ever need is there for you. If you get sick, your medicines are there. Your food is there with those animals, with the fish, with the bird life, those trees, those rocks, that water that gives all life. The life blood of our Mother, the Earth, flows in the rivers, lakes and streams and brooks and creeks. That is our life blood. You will nourish from that. All life nourishes from that.

And if you take all of those things and live in harmony and in peace, and show the respect of that life, because each one of those things has a spirit you have no right to take life. And when we take life, we offer our tobacco.

If we are going to take a deer, we ask that deer if we can take its life so that we can sustain our own life and provide food and clothing for our family.

And when that deer gives us that life, we again give our tobacco and say Miigwetch [thank you]. Thank you very much for giving your life for us. And that is the same with all of the things around us.

Roger Jones, Councillor and Elder  
Shawanaga First Nation  
Sudbury, Ontario, 1 June 1993

We said earlier that Aboriginal people have a sense of kinship with other creatures and elements of the biosphere. It is clear that the traditions of the various nations also teach that people who were put down in particular places have a sacred contract with the Creator to maintain the balance in concert with their other-than-human relations.

For many Aboriginal people, enduring confidence in this sacred contract makes the contention that they relinquished the land to imperial or Canadian governments completely untenable. Pointing to a written document that purports to have their forebears' marks of endorsement does not change the Aboriginal reality. No one can own the land, so no one could possibly sign it away. What is described as a compact with the Creator is a compact with life itself, and to violate the agreement would not be simply trading one kind of material security for another: it would be abandoning one's place in the natural order and risking retribution from which no government could provide protection.

According to oral tradition, treaties were entirely consistent with the Aboriginal relationship to the land, because they were instruments to include newcomers in the circle of relations with whom the original stewards were required to share life. The sacredness and durability of the historical agreements is beyond dispute for Aboriginal participants, observers and later historians of the oral tradition. The sacred pipe was smoked, the wampum belt was woven, the medicine bundles were opened, expanding the compacts beyond the people actually present at the ceremony, to include as witnesses and participants the grandparents who had already gone to the spirit world and the children not yet born, whose well-being would depend on the decisions taken.

Elders say that the sickness that plagues so many Aboriginal communities and the threat to the sustenance of life on Turtle Island posed by



environmental degradation result from the violation of natural law. Human beings were not given a mandate to take from the earth without limit. Ignoring that there is a balance to be preserved not only invites dire consequences, but also ensures that misfortune will follow and afflict all those who depend on the generosity of the land, which nourishes us like a mother. Aboriginal people listen to the prophetic messages that they have a responsibility to fulfil — bringing all peoples to an appreciation of their place in the natural order. For them, the prophecies are not relics of the past; they are beacons for the future.

The illustrations contributing to our perceptions of Aboriginal world view have so far been drawn predominantly from First Nations, so it is appropriate here to consider how generalizations about Aboriginal cultures relate to Métis people and Inuit.

## **7. Métis and Inuit Cultures**

Métis culture and identity take diverse forms in different locations, as we detail in Volume 4, Chapter 5. Métis persons are the descendants of the union of First Nations or Inuit women and European men, but clearly not all the children of such unions identify themselves as Métis. Those who integrated into First Nations or Inuit communities, or into colonial society, were likely to take on the identity of the residential or cultural community they chose. Olive Dickason contends that the historical record of settlement in eastern Canada has regularly neglected and denied the fact of widespread intermarriage between First Nations women and Europeans.<sup>20</sup> Where a collectivity to support Métis identity is lacking, individuals of mixed cultural and biological origins may find themselves hard pressed to defend the distinctiveness of their dual inheritance.

It is evident that mixed heritage alone is not sufficient to result in a distinctive identity as a people. The conditions that fostered the emergence of a new people with a collective identity, first in the Great Lakes region and then at the Red River Colony (now Winnipeg), were the emergence of communities whose members reinforced one another in synthesizing their dual heritage in a distinct way of life; relative stability in political relations, which made frequent intermingling possible and avoided the need to choose sides for the sake of safety; and the opportunity to occupy an economic niche that reinforced shared experience and networks of

relationships within the new group and established an identity relative to outsiders.<sup>21</sup>

Scholarly study of the history and culture of Métis populations in Canada and the United States has emerged only during the past 50 years and has concentrated on the Métis of the north-west and their role in the fur trade. The preoccupation with political and economic history has overshadowed the documentation of Métis social life. Little attention has been accorded the oral history of Métis people, and as the elder generations die and ways of life change, the picture of Métis life as perceived by Métis people is in danger of being lost. As historian John E. Foster observes,

With the exception of the Riel Papers and a few other documentary collections, little material authored by members of métis communities has survived; however, recent efforts to record and to collect this material offer some promise. It is from these various folk histories that a sense of the métis view of their historical experience emerges. As with all people's perceptions of the past, the material must be approached with caution, in terms of both factual record and interpretive comment; but, as a vehicle for sustaining values and attitudes that span generations, folk history accounts can be extremely useful. Taken together, folk accounts, data amenable to quantitative analysis, and familiar impressionistic records suggest the possibility that a far more precise and exact understanding of the origins of the métis can be realized.<sup>22</sup>

Members of the Métis Nation, concentrated in the prairie provinces, trace their roots to the fur trade era and the emergence of distinct Métis settlements practising a mixed economy of hunting, agriculture, trading and freighting. Métis people in this region, even when they have lived in urban society for most of their lives, share a dream of homelands where their culture and history are honoured and where the tensions generated by rejection for being neither 'Indian' nor 'white' give way to recognition that they are a people with a history and a culture, springing from the encounter between Aboriginal and European peoples.

As documentation of Métis history and culture proceeds, there may well be other regional communities that assert, with justification, their identity as Métis. The Métis Association of Labrador points to their coastal communities, some of which originated in the late 1700s, with inland

settlements being established subsequent to that period. As the children and grandchildren of mixed unions began to form distinct communities with distinct ways of life, the Métis population of Labrador emerged. The people of these communities have perceived themselves, and have been regarded by others, as collectivities that were distinguishable from the Inuit and Innu of adjoining territories, as well as from non-Aboriginal people. Their livelihood has depended heavily on seasonal harvesting of the sea and the land, in ways adapted from those of their Aboriginal ancestors.<sup>23</sup>

The Métis of Labrador are now asserting their identity as Métis people:

We say to you that we are not 'Livyers', we are not 'settlers', we are the Métis — the progeny of Indians and/or Inuit and European settlers who, long ago, settled this harsh and beautiful land when others considered Labrador to be 'the land God gave to Cain'.<sup>24</sup>

Particularly in eastern Canada, some Métis people trace their descent from pre-Confederation treaty signatories and claim recognition of their treaty status. A presenter from the Métis Nation of Quebec pointed to these historical connections:

So if my grandfather Humbus Saint-Aubin, who signed the 1750 treaties, were here, he would tell you so very clearly, even though over the years Claude was forced to take on an identity that was not linked to the Maliseet Nation, he is nevertheless the holder of a treaty and of treaty rights.  
[translation]

Claude Aubin  
Métis Nation of Quebec  
Montreal, Quebec, 28 May 1993

In the Northwest Territories and the Yukon, where people of mixed heritage might live in communities intermingled with First Nations people and Inuit, where life on the land and the world view generated by that way of life are commonly shared, and where treatment accorded under the *Indian Act* has not been so rigid or divisive, there has been less need for Métis people to coalesce into political units with clear boundaries. Even here, however, the historical role of the Métis as the people in between is a cherished aspect of Métis identity.

Métis history has been subject to at least two significant distortions. First, as indicated in the passage from the Métis learning circle quoted earlier, Métis versions of history, transmitted from generation to generation in an oral tradition, have been distrusted by the academic mainstream, particularly in the schools that act as gatekeepers for knowledge in our society. Like other forms of Aboriginal knowledge, Métis versions of history have been dismissed in part because they have only the authority of an oral tradition in a society that relies on the printed word; in part because Métis perspectives diverge from official versions of history; and in part because resistance to displacement from their homes and way of life by Métis in the west has attracted negative stereotyping that works against respect for their identity and their world view.

The second prevailing distortion of Métis history and culture, particularly with respect to the fur trade, arises from the nature of the written sources documenting it: the records of traders and administrators concentrate on the activities of men, and they leave the impression that the world of Métis women is of minor consequence. The fur trade is indeed a central fact in the emergence of the Métis people in the northwest, but the complementary roles and relationships within families other than those of well-placed traders who kept diaries and wrote letters, between men and women and between women and women, remain largely in the shadow.<sup>25</sup>

Despite regional differences, the aspect of culture shared by all Métis people is that they embrace both sides of their heritage. They reject the notion that they should choose either an Aboriginal or a non-Aboriginal identity, and they resist measuring degrees of affiliation with either side, a strategy others might wish to use to categorize them as something other than Métis.

Louis Riel, who is honoured by many Métis as both a political leader and a philosopher, emphasized that Métis identity is not defined in terms of race or, as some would have it, blood quantum:

It is true that our Native roots are humble, but it is right for us to honour our mothers as well as our fathers. Why should we concern ourselves with the extent of our European blood or our Indian blood? If we have any sense of appreciation or filial devotion to our parents, are we not obliged to say, "We

are Métis."? [translation]<sup>26</sup>

Inuit, who share the designation 'Aboriginal' with Métis and First Nations people, are a distinct people with their own language, history and cultural characteristics, as described in Chapter 4. There is convergence in many respects between the way of life on the land practised by Inuit and the way of life of historical and some contemporary First Nations. Similarly, the values and ethics guiding social relations that have been influenced by those ways of life close to the land bear many similarities.

Because of the massive changes that Inuit society has undergone in the past 50 years, Inuit are keenly aware of the need to articulate and adapt the aspects of traditional culture that will serve them well and sustain Inuit identity in the future. Pauktuutit, the Inuit women's organization, has published a booklet entitled *The Inuit Way: A Guide to Inuit Culture*, describing the challenges facing contemporary Inuit and the priorities Inuit have set for the future:

Inuit have undergone incredible changes in a very short period of time. A brief forty years ago, the vast majority of Inuit were living a traditional lifestyle centred around nomadic hunting, fishing and trapping. While they were in regular contact with Qallunaat [non-Aboriginal people] and their institutions, the Inuit culture remained largely intact.

When they lived on the land, Inuit survived by working together, having an intimate knowledge of their environment and by being able to adapt to that environment. These skills have proven to be no less valuable today in modern settlements.

Inuit presently maintain a foot in both the traditional world and the modern world. They watch soap operas on T.V., ride skidoos and ATVs, travel internationally, operate sophisticated, successful corporations and argue fine legal details in courts of law. At the same time, Inuit continue to live their lives largely according to traditional values, cherish the time they spend on the land, enjoy visiting relatives and friends and eating country food.

Trying to maintain traditional values while dealing with the modern world can be difficult for any people. Traditional answers to modern problems

may no longer be effective. Problems with alcohol and drug abuse, high unemployment rates, family violence, high suicide rates, and a large gap in understanding between generations are all part of the high price Inuit have paid for their rapid transformation....

Regret for the passing of the 'old ways' and dissatisfaction with many aspects of modern community life continue to keep alive the desire to maintain traditional values for many Inuit. This does not mean that Inuit want to return to their old way of living. They still recall the privations and harshness of that life and have no wish to give up the relative comforts of modern community living. At the same time, there is great respect for people who still maintain a close tie to the land and preserve traditional skills....

[T]he basic values of modern Inuit society find their origin in the past and continue to play an important role in sculpting the modern culture of the Inuit.<sup>27</sup>

## **8. Ceremonies and Symbols**

As Ollie Ittinuar told us in Rankin Inlet, the work of documenting Inuit oral traditions from an Inuit perspective is still in its early stages. The public ceremonies and the rituals of everyday life recorded by ethnographers of an earlier generation have largely fallen into disuse, replaced by Christian practice, which has been intolerant historically of what were termed 'pagan' beliefs and practices.

We know from the experience of First Nations people, whose ceremonies were similarly displaced, that the understanding of the world, the values and attitudes embedded in an ancient culture, survive in people's hearts and minds long after the outward signs of tradition have disappeared. When the traditional language remains strong, as it does in the case of Inuktitut, cultural retention is especially vigorous. In Volume 3, Chapter 6 we examine how public policy can support the efforts of Inuit, Métis and First Nations people to document, maintain, and revitalize their languages and traditions.

Here we consider traditions and ceremonies principally of First Nations,

many of whose people are engaged in concerted efforts to revitalize their culture after years of assimilative interventions from Canadian society.

The power of the land to shape the character of individuals and whole societies is one tenet common to many Aboriginal cultures. Roy Fabian, a Dene from Hay River, quoted an elder to this effect:

One of my elders told me a situation. He said we can get rid of all the Dene people in Denendeh, we can all die off for some reason, but if there was another human being came stumbling along and came to Denendeh, the environment will turn him into a Dene person. It's the environment and the land that makes us Dene people.

Roy Fabian, Executive Director  
Hay River Treatment Centre  
Hay River, Northwest Territories, 17 June 1993

In a closing statement to the British Columbia Supreme Court in the case of *Delgamuukw v. The Queen*, a Wet'suwet'en chief described his people's understanding of the working of natural law:

Now this Court knows I am Gisdaywa, a Wet'suwet'en Chief who has responsibility for the House of Kaiyexwaniits of the Gitdumden. I have explained how my House holds the Biiwenii Ben territory and had the privilege of showing it to you. Long ago my ancestors encountered the spirit of that land and accepted the responsibility to care for it. In return, the land has fed the House members and those whom the Chiefs permitted to harvest its resources. Those who have obeyed the laws of respect and balance have prospered there.<sup>28</sup>

The means by which instructions were conveyed are described consistently as 'sacred gifts' received through dreams and visions, in fasting huts and sweat lodges, as well as from human teachers:

In times of great difficulty, the Creator sent sacred gifts to the people from the spirit world to help them survive. This is how we got our sacred pipe, songs, ceremonies, and different forms of government....

Included in the spiritual laws were the laws of the land. These were

developed through the sacred traditions of each tribe of red nations by the guidance of the spirit world. We each had our sacred traditions of how to look after and use the medicines from the plant, winged and animal kingdoms. The law of use is sacred to traditional people today.

Dennis Thorne  
Oglala Sioux Nation  
Edmonton, Alberta, 11 June 1992

Fundamental to the transmission of these teachings is the practice of ceremonies in which successive generations learn ceremonial protocol and the attitude of expectant waiting that appears to be a requisite for learning to perceive reality with what James Dumont calls "three hundred and sixty degree vision".<sup>29</sup> This all-around vision has several dimensions: ecological, temporal and spiritual.

Recalling our discussion of verb-based languages and the need to gain knowledge of the land by direct experience, Aboriginal cultures condition individuals to see relationships connecting phenomena rather than discrete objects. Consciousness of the interdependencies that connect all life and of human dependence on the harmonious functioning of all elements is fundamental to Aboriginal world views. If individuals are to fulfil their responsibilities in this interdependent order, and thereby live well, they must train their senses to be alert to all the cues in nature that are there to instruct them. The skills to observe and the expertise to describe reality in ecological terms constitute part of the knowledge that elders possess to an exceptional degree and that has begun to find a place in the classification systems of western science only recently (see Volume 4, Chapter 3).

The temporal dimension of vision, which is fostered by ceremonial practice, links past, present and future in a seamless whole. The Gitksan chief who sings a ceremonial song from time immemorial steps into a timeless stream and experiences the actual territory evoked in his consciousness by the song. An Iroquois ceremonialist who recites The Great Law is infused with the same good mind that inspired the founders of the Great Peace and to which the children not yet born will also have access. The grandfathers and grandmothers who have gone to the spirit world and the generations not yet born are present in the ceremonies in a powerful way, and they are even visible to some with highly developed awareness.



The introduction of ceremony and the display or use of ceremonial objects were understood to transform an otherwise ordinary transaction into a sacred, timeless event to which ancestors and descendants were, in a sense, witnesses. Investing an agreement with sacred meaning therefore created immutable obligations. Engaging in ceremony is like opening a door so that the spiritual dimension of reality, which always interweaves with physical reality, is acknowledged and experienced more fully. Clarity of perception through the physical senses intensifies, and a sixth sense — an intuitive way of knowing — comes into play to apprehend the 'gifts' and 'instructions' that may be communicated.

We use the term 'North American intellectual tradition' later in this report to signify the body of knowledge associated with the transmission of culture; but intellect is only one, and not necessarily the most important, part of the process. The straight-ahead vision of the linear, logical mind is highly efficient for some tasks. However, by narrowing the field of perception to gain focus, searching for cause/effect sequences in a time-limited frame, and dismissing the influence of non-material forces, the logical mind may screen out much of the knowledge considered essential by many Aboriginal people for living well.

The ceremonies that pervaded every aspect of Aboriginal life served not only to focus, amplify and reinforce teachings about the nature of reality but also to communicate culturally sanctioned rules of behaviour. Ceremonies marking the transition from one life stage to another were particularly effective in inculcating proper attitudes and norms of behaviour.

Children were introduced to ceremony at birth. Asen Balikci describes a practice among the Netsilik Inuit for naming children. Women experiencing a difficult delivery would call out the names of deceased persons of admirable character. The name being called at the moment of birth was thought to enter the infant's body and help the delivery, and the child would bear that name thereafter.<sup>30</sup>

Naming of children also had spiritual significance among the Labrador Inuit. As reported by Reverend F.W. Peacock,

Most Inuit believed that individuals had three souls. One is the immortal spirit which leaves the body at death and goes to live in the future world.

The second is the vital breath and warmth of the body and ceases to exist at death. The last is the name soul and is not really a soul but that which embodies the traits of a person named and will persist after death through a person who is named for the deceased. In Labrador it was the custom to give a child several names of deceased relatives, later it was decided which of these names would be normally used by the child.<sup>31</sup>

Although beliefs about spirits were downplayed with the adoption of Christianity, some Inuit still name infants for deceased relatives in the belief that the identification will help shape their character.

In various First Nation cultures elders describe the practice of introducing a young child by name to the four directions, so that spirit helpers will recognize the child as one of the circle of relations. The revival of these cultural practices is evident in requests to elders to bestow names on children and the growing number of naming ceremonies involving commitments by extended family and community members to assure a child's cultural education.

For young men and young women making the transition from child to adult, it is important to recognize and assume responsibility for one's own life, to acquire one's own spiritual power and protection. In many Aboriginal cultures the principal ceremony marking the transition to adult responsibility for boys was the vision quest. Around the time of puberty, boys were shown by an older knowledgeable man how to prepare their minds through precise rituals and shed all material comforts and supports as they went 'out on the hill' or into a specially made lodge to fast for a period of two to four days. Preparation for vision questing might start as early as age seven. In contemporary times it is often delayed until much later in life. The purpose of the quest is to gain a vision that will serve as a spiritual and moral compass to guide the individual in making future choices. A spirit often appeared in the form of an animal, which left some token of itself with the seeker as a sign of promised aid and protection. As modern supplicants report, the experience of fasting for a vision often leads the seeker to discover and plumb the depths of his inner self as well as leading him to a new way of perceiving the outer world.

Douglas Cardinal, the renowned Métis architect, has spoken about his experience of fasting as a mature adult. He spent four days and nights in a

small lodge, without water, food or human contact, although the elder supervising the fast came round to close him into the lodge at night. Cardinal spoke of the changes he went through: the discomforts and complaints of the first day; the awakening to his surroundings on the second day and the discovery that ants and butterflies actually responded to his communications; the infusion of strength from a tree, the grass, the clouds, the sun and the earth on the third day; and, on the fourth day, the experience of his strength ebbing from him and the anticipation of imminent death:

I was being more and more pulled out of my body. I just didn't want to go.

All of a sudden my life started rolling back and I could see things I had done. My wife, my children, my parents and my friends. I couldn't go back to say I was sorry. I couldn't go back and say I was stupid. I'd thought I was going to live forever and I had all these loose ends.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the experience Cardinal was enveloped in light. He engaged in dialogue with a person around him, a very positive being, in contrast to the negative being he was experiencing himself to be. In this dialogue he acknowledged that he was arrogant and powerless and that the review of his life left him with the knowledge of what not to do. And then:

I finally went. It seemed like I was a part of everything, and I felt very, very powerful. I just wasn't there.

When the elder called him on the fifth morning, Cardinal was reluctant to return, because "Then I'd be confined and limited and I would screw up and do all the stupid human being things." The elder coaxed him with this invitation:

You have to come back, just to see this day. You've never seen a day like today. There's dew on the grass, and sun shining on the dew and this golden hue is all over everything. The clouds are all red. The sun is brilliant and the sky is blue. It's the most beautiful day. You have to come back and see this beautiful day. It's wonderful to be alive and walk on this earth.

Cardinal came back into his body and acknowledged that it was a beautiful day, a fantastic day, the likes of which he had never seen, because he had

never really looked. The elder asked, "Are you afraid of death?" Cardinal replied, "No. I'm just afraid I ain't gonna live right." The elder said, "Then you're a fearless warrior".

It is unusual to read such a detailed account of fasting and spirit encounters, but it is becoming increasingly common to hear of the effects of such encounters in transforming the consciousness, the moral commitment and the everyday lives of Aboriginal people. The transformation is especially dramatic in those who have pursued a path of rediscovering their roots, starting from a position of alienation from tradition and a sense of loss.

While people simply looking for adventure are discouraged from participating in ceremonies, many elders and ceremonialists take the position that anyone sincerely seeking knowledge should be welcomed into the circle. The Iroquois symbol, the Tree of Peace, with its white roots stretching out to the four directions, potentially guiding any person of any nation to the shelter of the tree of the long leaves, is reflected in the cautious but welcoming stance of traditionalists in many Aboriginal cultures.

The influence of vision experiences continues in successive generations, as was evident in our hearings:<sup>33</sup>

My grandfather tried hard to keep his visions and dreams going in our family. When he was seven, the family left him at the summer camp to explore and know the ways of nature. All his peers were doing the same. He told me during this time he ate berries and squirrels. His communion with the trees started. The spruce provided him with comfort and warmth.

The rocks spoke to him of their resilience and power. The water spoke to him of its reflectivity, purity and power. This was my grandfather's vision. During the summer my grandfather met a bear cub without its mother and they became friends. For 16 years, my grandfather's brother the bear came to live and play with him.

Ron Momogeeshick Peters  
Toronto, Ontario  
2 November 1992

Young women also participated in transition ceremonies celebrating their female nature at the time of their first menstruation. In most Aboriginal cultures it was usual for girls at this time to be isolated from other members of the household and ministered to and instructed by the older women of the family in the significance of what was happening in their bodies and the responsibilities of womanhood. Women might have dreams and visions bestowing power, but because their life force was destined to be expressed in generating new life, their encounter with the spiritual was generally believed to be an inward journey. Teachings specific to women included ritual observances directed particularly to maintaining the health and well-being of their families.

Ceremonies surrounding first menstruation are being revived in many places after years of disuse, partly because of a generally renewed interest in tradition but also because of a specific interest in many communities in restoring reverence on the part of both men and women for the sacred power to generate new life.

The ceremony mentioned with greatest frequency in our hearings, and one that some commissioners had the privilege of experiencing, was the 'sweat'. Sweat ceremonies appear to have been practised widely among First Nations in ancient times. They are referred to in colonial accounts as 'sweat baths' associated with personal hygiene. According to accounts from people of First Nations, however, the primary purpose of the sweat ceremony is cleansing the spirit, to achieve personal awareness, and healing physical ills. It is led by a ceremonialist who, through fasting and apprenticeship with elders, has earned the right to lead others. Those who wish to participate present ritual gifts of tobacco and cloth to the leader. They may also present particular needs for which they desire prayer.

In some cases permanent structures are maintained for sweat ceremonies, but if not, the ceremony begins with preparation of the dome-shaped lodge, framed with willows and covered with canvas, which has replaced the animal hides of former times. A fire is built to heat stones, which are placed in a prepared pit in the centre of the lodge. With participants seated inside, helpers carry the heated stones and water inside the lodge and close canvas flaps over the entry, leaving the interior in total darkness. Songs acquired by the leader or his helpers are sung; tobacco or other aromatic herbs are burned; prayers are offered; and water is poured over the stones,

sending up clouds of steam. In the interview quoted earlier, Douglas Cardinal described how the heat and discomfort intensified his commitment to his purpose in being there and precipitated an awareness of oneness with the elements of earth, air, fire and water that converged in the lodge.

Sweat ceremonies have been introduced in prisons and correctional centres across Canada as a means of reconnecting offenders with their Aboriginal identity and the human community. Sweat lodges are reappearing in diverse First Nations communities, reviving, sometimes in modified form, ceremonial practices that had fallen into disuse.

As described in Chapter 4, the raising up of chiefs and succession to rights to territory were marked by ceremony that, in oral cultures, was essential to confirm the assumption of responsibilities that could influence the safety or well-being of the clan or the whole community. Ceremonies likewise marked the termination of conflicts between nations or confirmed trading alliances. These ceremonies governing public obligations, formalized in protocol and embedded in the spiritual laws that were the context of all relationships, were introduced and adapted in relations with European newcomers. As discussed in Chapter 5, colonial officials participated in ceremonial exchanges and adopted the language of kinship to describe the relationships thus confirmed, but it subsequently became evident that their view of what took place at these meetings differed profoundly from the Aboriginal understanding of events.

In light of the pervasive awareness of spiritual reality, preparation of souls for departure from this life and return to a spirit realm was an important aspect of Aboriginal ceremony. People in Aboriginal cultures believed that the spirits of the deceased were reborn in subsequent generations. Death was considered a normal part of life, not something to be ignored or hidden away.

The symbolism of the four directions was very significant in some traditions. Souls were believed to enter life through the 'eastern door' and depart through the 'western door'. Funeral practices often included placing prized possessions on the platform, hut or grave where the body rested. In fact, grave sites are among the richest sources of artifacts for archaeologists to reconstruct cultures that have passed away.

As an example of burial practices, we cite Hugh Dempsey's account of the passing of Crowfoot, a revered chief of the Blackfoot nation in the treaty era. In Crowfoot's final hours,

[he] drifted into that shadow world between life and death. He regained consciousness once during the afternoon and told his wives there should be no severing of fingers and scarring of their flesh when they mourned his passing. The next day, April 25, 1890, at three-thirty in the afternoon, the old chief died.

On the following day, the agency employees built a coffin seven feet long, three feet wide, and three feet deep, into which the chief's body was placed.... The coffin had been made extra large so that the chief's personal possessions could be placed at his side for his trip to the Sand Hills [the empty land where the Blackfoot spirit went after death]. His tobacco, pipe, knife, blankets and other objects all were beside his body as it lay in state....

The Indian agent wanted to bury Crowfoot under the ground like a white man, but the Blackfeet refused; they insisted he be placed above the ground like an Indian. Finally, in a compromise, a grave was dug so that part of the coffin was below the surface and part of it was above, and a small log house was built over it for protection.<sup>34</sup>

It was reported in the *Calgary Daily Herald* that Crowfoot's favourite horse was shot at his death, so that he might ride it in "the happy hunting grounds".

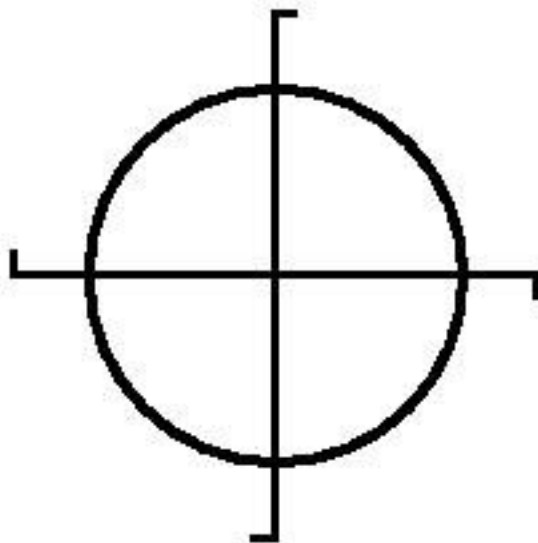
In Chapter 4 we referred to creation stories, events associated with the foundation of particular societies, and symbols incorporated in oral tradition to emphasize the importance of cultural values — the fire and sparks signifying the Creation and the spiritual dimension of life among the Mi'kmaq, the Tree of Peace representing the core values binding the Iroquois Confederacy, the kayak, igloo and traditional clothing symbolizing the resourcefulness of the Inuit. As the material culture of Aboriginal people has changed over centuries of contact, symbols embodying the core of traditional teachings have retained their power to evoke respect and convey meaning to successive generations of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal societies used a variety of instruments to aid accurate recall of important

teachings: notched sticks, wampum belts, birchbark scrolls, pictures etched in rock, bone or ivory or painted on leather, songs handed down within families or circulated throughout camps. We describe a small selection of symbols here to illustrate their richness and variety.

The circle is perhaps the symbol most widespread among Aboriginal cultures. All creatures in the biosphere are conceived of as part of the circle of life. Time is understood as cyclical, returning the daylight and the seasons in a predictable round and carrying human beings inevitably toward a stage of life where they are dependent, like children, on the strength and care of others.

The medicine wheel, a centred and quartered circle, is a teaching device associated mainly with the First Nations of the plains — Cree, Blackfoot, Dakota and others. It has been adopted in recent years by teachers in many First Nations. The medicine wheel represents the circle that encompasses all life and all that is known or knowable, linked together in a whole with no beginning and no end. Human beings have their existence in this circle of life, along with other beings and the unseen forces that give breath and vitality to the inhabitants of the natural world. The lines intersecting at the centre of the circle signify order and balance.

**FIGURE 15.1**  
The Medicine Wheel





They help people examine experience by breaking down complex situations into constituent parts, while reminding them not to forget the whole. The centre of the wheel is the balance point where apparent opposites meet. The flags at the ends of the intersecting lines signify the four winds whose movement is a reminder that nothing is fixed or stagnant, that change is the normal experience and transformation is always possible.

An infinite number of elements of analysis can be inserted in the medicine wheel for teaching purposes. For example, it is often used to describe the life cycle — child, youth, adult and elder. It is acknowledged that the circle represents the whole of a person's life, which does not unfold only in chronological order. Children sometimes have wisdom far beyond their years, characteristic of the elder stage. An adult may carry on the undisciplined behaviour of the youth. Culture heroes in legends often embody the wisdom of mature years without losing the attitude of wonder at new experiences that we usually associate with childhood.

### **The Drum**

It is said that the drum is the Dene culture.

The drum represents unity of self, others, the spiritual world and land.

The Dene must grasp the drum and be in respectful relationship with themselves, with others and with Mother Earth.

To grasp the drum is to maintain integrity and to live life to its fullest.

The drum is the Dene culture.

The drum is the voice and the language of the elders speaking to the Dene.

Two strings, side by side and yet apart, work together like the Dene, to amplify the voice of the elders.

Source: Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, Curriculum Document, Dene Kede (1993, p. xvii).

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The drum is also a circle. Ceremonial drums are constructed in a ritual manner. Their sound is described as the heartbeat of the nation or the heartbeat of the universe. The symbolic meanings of the drum are described in the accompanying extracts from the curriculum guide developed in the Northwest Territories for education on Dene culture.

### **The Drum Dance**

When a Dene dances with the drum, it is a time of reflection and self-evaluation.

To dance the drum dance is to know oneself.

When the Dene dance the drum dance, they are at their closest to the Creator.

When the Dene dance with the drum, they dance separately but together in harmony.

To dance as one requires respectful relationships.

Yet they dance separately respecting the spirit of one another.

There is no desire to control or to have power over another.

The power comes from the voice of the drum.

They dance in a circle, like the drum and like the earth.

To dance as one means survival as a people.

*Source:* Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment, Curriculum Document, *Dene Kede* (1993), p. xviii.

The sacred pipe was referred to in our discussion of the Blackfoot in

Chapter 4. Smoke ceremonies to offer prayers and petitions to the Great Spirit were practised not only in the cultures of plains nations, including Dakota, Cree and Saulteaux, but formed part of Anishnabe (Ojibwa) and Iroquoian ceremonial life as well.

The pipe consisted of a stone bowl, symbolizing the earth, a wooden stem, symbolizing all plant life, and a leather thong or covering securing the parts, symbolizing animal life. At the beginning of its ceremonial use, a hot stone was ritually prepared, and sweetgrass, sage or tobacco was sprinkled on it to make an aromatic smoke. According to Basil Johnston, an Ojibwa ethnologist, the Cree and Saulteaux people of the plains used bearberry leaves or the inner bark of red willow before tobacco was introduced from the east through trade.<sup>35</sup> The pipe and other ceremonial objects were purified in the smoke, which carried prayers to the Great Spirit.

While filling the pipe with sacred tobacco and taking the first puffs, the ceremonialist offered prayers to the sun, which symbolized the Creator, to the earth, which generates all life, and to the four directions. The east is the place of dawning, to which human beings look as the source of light and knowledge and new beginnings. The prayers to the west, where the sun sets, acknowledge the transitory nature of human life. Prayers to the north, whence the cold winds of winter blow, acknowledge that purification of the spirit comes through struggle. The final whiff of smoke, directed to the south, affirms that after winter there is summer, that human beings can hope to realize their aspirations.

### **The Story of Inuksuk**

I am an inuksuk, a lonely figure overlooking a lake. In an ancient time, whose memory has been wiped from young and old, a frail, struggling form in fur picked me up off the ground, placed me here on a rock, and said:

"May you ever point to the fishes under this lake, as long [as] there is winter and summer."

I have lost count of how many people have visited me. As many times as you can count your fingers and toes, people have knelt above me

to con-suit me, to see which way I point to the fishes in the lake below. Many lives have been saved as a result of my faithfulness to the frail man's command.

I have been through the terrors of many blinding snowstorms, but I have kept my post.

*Source:* Mark Kalluak, quoted in Luke Suluk, "Inuksuit", *Inuktitut 76* (Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, 1993), P. 16.

In the smoking ceremony the human being brings together all the knowledge and power of the sun, the earth and the four directions and locates himself at the spiritual centre of the universe.

From the first smoker the sacred pipe is passed on to all those taking part in the ceremony. Each enacts the thanksgiving as each personally makes the petition. Only after everyone has partaken in the smoking and has instilled into his inner being the mood of peace, may other ceremonies commence and receive validation. Such was the pre-eminence of The Pipe of Peace smoking.<sup>36</sup>

Inuksuit are markers constructed by Inuit. Stones are placed on top of one another in particular formations. Traditionally they had many functions: one rock placed atop another formed a directional pointer, indicating the way home; vertical and horizontal stones were arranged to make a 'window' for sighting. Some formations indicated good fishing places; other inuksuit diverted caribou from their original path toward a place where they could be killed in the water. An inuksuk might mark a cache full of meat or signify a place where one seeks help or favour and where tokens of thanks were left. Or a great inuksuk might have been built to show the strength of its builder.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the inuksuit known by Inuit elders have stories behind them, of times when Inuit lived on the land and were saved from starvation by markers indicating wildlife and fishing areas. Some pillars are so massive that it is a mystery how they could have been erected without machinery.

For Inuit, the great stone markers constructed in human form are especially

powerful symbols of their long history in their homelands and the capacity for survival that has shaped their character. The inuksuk symbol is seen with increasing frequency as a marker of Inuit attachment to their culture.

The Métis flag is a symbol of the Métis nation that emerged in the nineteenth century as a distinct cultural and political entity in the Red River region of present-day Manitoba. One of the formative events in Métis Nation history was the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1815, where attempts to restrict fur-trade activity resulted in armed confrontation (see Volume 4, Chapter 5). The flag acquired by the Métis at that time displayed a horizontal figure eight on a red background. The red ground has been replaced by blue in current usage. Contemporary Métis explain the symbolism in the following way:

The blue background is derived from the alliance [of the Métis] with the North West Company, who used blue as a main colour rather than the red of the Hudson's Bay Company. The horizontal eight is an infinity sign, which has two meanings: the joining of two cultures, and existence of a people forever.<sup>38</sup>

The Assomption sash has also been adopted as a symbol of Métis tradition. From the mid-1700s to the 1860s, Métis people wore a distinctive style of dress that combined features of European and Indian handiwork and design. Portraits of the era show Métis men dressed in blue summer coats, held together with a sash, decorated leggings and moccasins, with a colourful pouch for carrying gunshot or tobacco hung on the breast or at the waist. In wintertime, peaked caps were worn with leather coats that were painted, decorated with porcupine quill work and trimmed with fur.<sup>39</sup>

Assomption sashes acquired their name from the community of L'Assomption, near Montreal, where they were made in large numbers for the fur trade. They were woven of wool, in bright colours, using a finger weaving technique and frequently displaying an arrowhead design running the length of the article.

Traditionally, the Métis sash had many uses. It could be as long as 20 feet and was tied around the waist of a coat for warmth. It could also be used as a rope to haul canoes during a long and difficult portage or as an emergency bridle for horses during the buffalo hunt.

In contemporary Métis society the sash is used as a symbol in public events. The Manitoba Metis Federation has established the Order of the Sash; sashes are presented to recognize and honour outstanding individuals and thank them for contributions to the Métis Nation.<sup>40</sup>

At a learning circle of Métis people, convened as part of a Commission research project, a participant described with pride the multi-coloured sash he had designed, which had been accepted by the Manitoba Metis Federation as a contemporary symbol:

The new sash colour represents the following: red is the traditional colour of the Métis sash. Blue and white symbolize the colour of the Métis nation flag.... Green symbolizes fertility, growth and prosperity for the new Métis nation. And black symbolizes the dark period in which the Métis people had endured dispossession and repression...after 1870.<sup>41</sup>

Traditionally, the lives of Aboriginal people, wherever they lived, were surrounded by symbols and enfolded in ceremony from birth to death. Symbols were objects selected or fashioned from the natural environment and invested with special meaning. Ceremonies took their shape from fundamental beliefs about the nature of the universe and the place of human beings in the natural order. They instilled confidence that safety and sustenance were attainable in life. Symbols and ceremonies combined to reinforce values — deeply held beliefs — and ethics — rules of behaviour. Together, values and ethics represent the common understandings that give meaning to individual existence and cohesion to communities. They are the substructure that supports civil behaviour and harmonious community life.

The effectiveness of ethical systems in Aboriginal communities in earlier times and current concerns about the breakdown of order in Aboriginal communities are prompting renewed interest in traditional cultures. We turn now to a discussion of ethical norms and the influence of culture in several areas of community life: social relations, economies and governance.

## **9. Culture and Social Relations**

Presenters at our hearings spoke often of the instructions that came to their people from the spirit of the land, from the Creator at the beginning of time, or as spiritual gifts in fasts and ceremonies. As these instructions were reported, it was evident that they were not random or individual directives, but rather components of a system of ethics in which common themes recurred. In one of the life histories we commissioned, George Blondin, a Dene elder, set out the Yamoria Law of the Dene, which summarizes many of these themes.

Clare Brant, the Mohawk psychiatrist, also identified commonalities in the behaviour of his Aboriginal patients and kin. Brant's observations were based on a lifetime of personal experience, 24 years' practice of medicine and psychiatry with Aboriginal patients, extensive consultative services to professional helpers across Canada, and an extensive review of literature. His observations have been widely quoted and have been elaborated by other professionals, notably practitioners in the field of justice.<sup>42</sup> Brant articulated the "ethic of non-interference", which he described as "a behavioural norm of North American Native tribes that promotes positive inter-personal relations by discouraging coercion of any kind, be it physical, verbal, or psychological."<sup>43</sup> Related to the core ethic of non-interference were the ethics of non-competitiveness, emotional restraint and sharing. Brant also identified four other less influential ethics: a concept of time that emphasizes doing things 'when the time is right' rather than by the clock; shying away from public expressions of praise; ordering social relations by complex but unspoken rules; and teaching by modelling rather than shaping (direct instruction).

### **The Yamoria Law of the Dene**

#### *Law Number One*

Share all big game you kill.

Share fish if you catch more than you need.

Help Elders with wood and other heavy work.

Help sick people in need — such as bringing wood, hunting and

fishing — or gather for support.

If the head of the family dies, everybody is to help the widow and children with everything they need.

Love thy neighbour strongly.

Orphans are to go to the closest kin of the one who dies or, by agreement, to another close kin.

Leaders of the tribe should help travellers if they have hard times far from their homeland.

These eight branches are one law. Sharing is the umbrella to all branches.

*Law Number Two*

Do not run around when Elders are eating, sit still until they are finished.

*Law Number Three*

Do not run around and laugh loudly when it gets dark; everybody should sleep when daylight is gone.

*Law Number Four*

Be polite, don't anger anybody, love each other.

*Law Number Five*

Young girls are not to make fun of young males or even older men, especially strangers.

*Law Number Six*

Love your neighbour and do not harm anyone by your voice or



actions.

*Law Number Seven*

All Elders are to tell stories about the past every day.

*Law Number Eight*

Be happy at all times because mother earth will take care of you.

*Source:* George Blondin, "My Life in the Sahtu", research study prepared for RCAP (1993).

Brant's clinical and personal observations were made in interactions with Cree, Ojibwa and Iroquoian people, principally in Ontario, but Aboriginal people and professionals in other regions have welcomed his analysis as shedding light on behaviours often encountered in Aboriginal people that can be quite bewildering to non-Aboriginal people. Brant did not endorse the practice of these ethics uncritically; he observed that these interrelated behaviours served to suppress conflict in small societies where a high degree of co-operation was required for survival. If an individual's social environment changed, however, and success or survival came to depend on competitive achievement, holding on to the old conflict-avoidance behaviours could put a person at a serious disadvantage.

Even within Aboriginal society, some counterbalancing negative outcomes could be observed. Brant pointed out that in the absence of direct instructions on how to behave, teasing or shaming by the community were used as means of social control. If a child was left to solve problems without interference or direction, and the problems were beyond the child's repertoire of solutions, the prospect of failure or the embarrassment of actual failure could be quite overwhelming, even when the genesis and the solution of the problem were beyond the child's control. In a rapidly changing environment, where old solutions often have to be adapted, the ethic of non-interference has the potential to leave young people in a very vulnerable situation, fearful about the prospect of failure and reluctant to try new behaviours.

While parents could avoid threatening or controlling their children directly,

there were nevertheless situations in which children had to be warned. Such warnings were couched in terms of enemies or 'bogey-men' lurking outside the house or beyond the edge of the clearing, or stories about practitioners of 'bad medicine' who could not be identified by their appearance alone. The mechanism at work here is projection — the assumption that the source of evil or frustration lies outside of ourselves and our own circle. Brant comments:

[T]he notion that all frustration is due to causes outside the group generates feelings of powerlessness over and resignation to evil forces that, in reality, are merely the darker side of one's own nature and that of others. Projection relieves the individual and his society of responsibility.<sup>44</sup>

The inference is that rules of behaviour that have evolved in one cultural milieu may have to be modified as circumstances change. We also believe, however, that within Aboriginal cultures there are fundamental values that continue to have relevance in changing circumstances.

In our view, the ethics described in Brant's article are the natural outgrowth of values flowing from the spiritual world view and relationship to the land described earlier in this chapter. The values or beliefs fundamental to this world view include the belief that there is a natural law that cannot be altered by human action and to which human beings must adapt; the obligation to maintain harmonious relationships with the natural world and those to whom you are related; personal responsibility to adhere to strict behavioural codes; and an ethic of sharing, which involves returning gifts to human and other-than-human relations to sustain the balance of the natural order.

George Courchene, an elder from Manitoba, spoke to us about the need to bring forward traditional teachings for young people and summarized the central teachings he had received from an elder who "lived for forty years in the mountains by himself to learn about this land":

When the Creator made two people at the beginning of time the Creator gave them Indian law to follow. He gave them four directions. He gave them sweetgrass, the tree, the animal and the rock. The sweetgrass represents kindness; the tree represents honesty; the animal, sharing; and the rock is strength.

Elder George Courchene  
Sagkeeng First Nation  
Fort Alexander, Manitoba, 30 October 1992

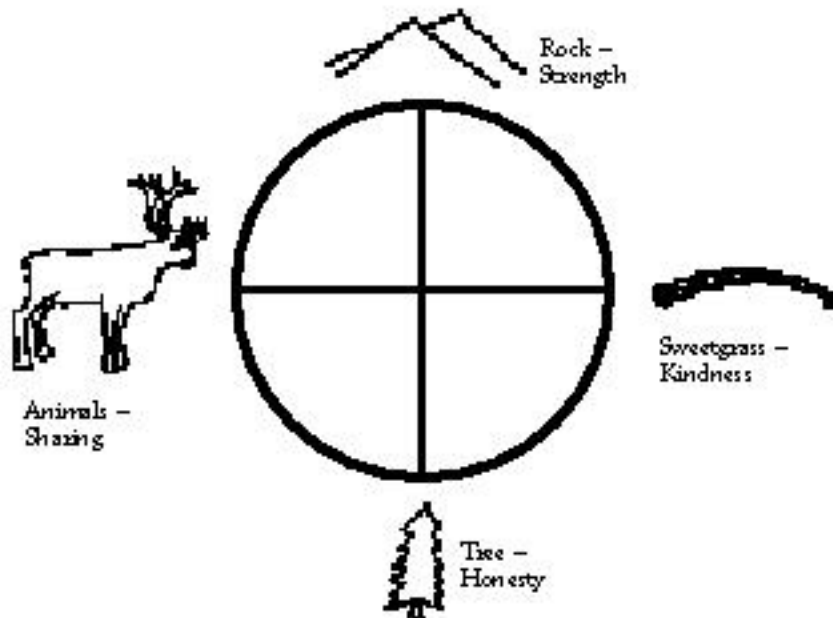
In the transmission of oral traditions, these four symbols are often presented graphically in the context of a medicine wheel (see Figure 15.2).

In our report on suicide among Aboriginal people, *Choosing Life*, we wrote of the role played by culture stress and the erosion of ethical values in the genesis of suicidal behaviours. Merle Beedie, an elder who lived through successive placements in four residential schools, confirmed from her own experience that reclaiming traditions was a source of self-confidence and self-esteem:

When I talk about the changing attitudes of some — the evidence is already happening in our communities, changing the attitudes about what we want to do just by us following the Anishnabe road. Some of us are beginning to realize what good people we are. I'm becoming a better person because I'm following some of our traditional values. As we learn more and more of these things we become stronger and stronger.

Merle Assance-Beedie  
Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle  
Orillia, Ontario, 14 May 1993

**FIGURE 15.2**  
**Anishnaabe Teachings**



## 10. Culture and Economy

In Chapter 3 we described in some detail the economic practices of several Aboriginal cultures in the pre-contact and early contact periods. Here the focus is on two ethics or rules of behaviour that are woven through those economic practices. The first is that the land and its gifts are to be enjoyed in common by the group placed in a particular territory. The second is that the nation or collective organizes the use of the territory by the members of the group and defends the integrity of the territory from outside intrusions.

Chief Frank Beardy of Muskrat Dam in northern Ontario spoke of the understanding of his grandfathers when they signed the 1929 adhesion to Treaty 9.

They didn't say anything about the land being taken. They agreed to share the land. How Native people look at the land is that no one person owns that land. The Creator owns that land. How can our forefathers, our grandfathers, give away something that they didn't own in the first place?

The spirit and intent of the treaty from which we want to work with the two levels of government is based on how our elders wanted to base that treaty. That is to live in peaceful co-existence with the white man and to share the bountiful gifts of the Creator.

Chief Frank Beard  
Muskrat Dam First Nation  
Big Trout Lake, Ontario, 4 December 1992

Chief Jake Thomas, a ceremonialist and oral historian, explained the connection between territory, generosity to visitors and common property. He did not place a date on the origin of the practices sanctioned by the Creator and the Great Law, except to say that they existed long before the arrival of Europeans. Each of the five nations of the Iroquois had its own territory but the words used in Iroquoian languages to describe the territory "means where they live — Mohawk — the territory where they live", but it did not mean that the Mohawk owned the land, "because it was made by the Creator. We can use it as long as we live".<sup>45</sup> Visitors from allied nations could be given names and privileges, but these were put on "like a necklace", not displacing the legitimate occupants.

The boundaries between the hunting grounds of different nations and villages were geographic: watersheds and rivers were likely the most frequent, since they were both logical and easily recognized. Although the boundaries were known, and were provided for in the law, the peace created by the Great Law did away with conflicts over hunting for food:

We shall only have one dish (or bowl) in which will be placed one beaver's tail, and we shall all have coequal right to it, and there shall be no knife in it, for if there be a knife in it, there would be danger that it might cut some one and blood would thereby be shed. This one dish or bowl signified that they will make their hunting grounds one common tract and all have a coequal right to hunt in it. The knife being prohibited from being placed into the dish or bowl signifies that all danger would be removed from shedding blood by the people of these different nations of the Confederacy caused by differences of the right of these hunting grounds.<sup>46</sup>

The dish with one spoon referred to in this provision of the Great Law

appears often in councils between the Haudenosaunee and other indigenous nations, as well as in relations with Europeans. It refers to the hunting grounds. As the dish of beaver tail stew is shared between the chiefs, the land is like a bowl to feed all the people. The wampum belt preserving this principle is white, with a round purple area as the bowl.

The concept of the dish with one spoon spread gradually, as the Great White Roots of Peace spread to other nations. After the coming of the Great Law, a Mohawk could hunt not only in the hunting grounds of his village and nation, but also in the territory of the other nations of the Confederacy. Even though he would acknowledge, for example, that going west of a certain watershed meant passing from 'Mohawk territory' into 'Oneida territory', he would still have the right to hunt for food in peace. As treaties enshrining that principle were made with other nations, hunters would be able to use ever larger territories.

Territories were delimited by the names of mountains, rivers and landmarks and the location of historical events. Elders like Chief William George, speaking at Stoney Creek, B.C., from the vantage point of 86 years' experience, still maintains intimate and authoritative knowledge of the features of his nation's land, the wealth it encompasses, and the names whose bearers were entitled to benefit from the lands:

When the people made their own living in their own areas, their own housing in their own village, that is the way I was brought up. The hunting, all the game and fishing around the area there, we looked at that just like our money. It was our money, because that is our food, that is where we were brought up, on our food. I know how the Indians survived in that area there.

I know all the names of the mountains and the rivers, like Ominiga where I was born, the next river we call the Moselinka river. The next one was Mayselinka. The next one was Ingenika and I come from that area there. The Sekani nation was biggest nation a long time ago. The way we were raised around that area is we got all the names of the mountains and the lakes and we had a lot of Indian trails all over in the area there and we got all different kinds of game and fish, what we survived on. I know all our chiefs around that area there, like Mitsegala and Kotada, Watsheshta and Mitsagali. My name in that area is Derihas. That is my name, the one who

is talking to you right now.

Chief William George  
Sekani Nation  
Stoney Creek, British Columbia, 18 June 1992

Brenda Gedeon Miller of the Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation, speaking at our hearings in Restigouche, Quebec, provided details on the seasonal movement of the Mi'kmaq community between the mouth of the Restigouche River, where they harvested fish and other seafood and plants and medicines in milder seasons, and the deep forest along the Restigouche River system and the Notre Dame Mountains, where they moved in winter for better shelter and proximity to fuel and fur-bearing animals. The winter sites to be occupied by various families would have been predetermined at council meetings in the summer and early fall months. Miller emphasized that the notions that the Mi'kmaq wandered from place to place and that their 'home' could be defined as a single restricted reserve site were contradicted by their history and patterns of mobility, which persisted until the 1950s, when enforcement of game laws and introduction of massive wood cutting interfered.

The economic relations embedded in traditional cultures emphasized conservation of renewable resources, limiting harvesting on the basis of need, and distributing resources equitably within the community, normally through family networks. Since families and clans owned rights to resources, and since everyone was connected in a family, no one was destitute and no one was unemployed.<sup>47</sup> If hardship struck because of bad weather or fluctuations in the supply of animals, everyone suffered equally. Even on the Pacific coast, where a wealth of resources was available and accumulation of surplus was a feature of the culture, the obligation to show generosity dictated that surpluses were accumulated in order to be given away.

Along with a spirit of generosity, a spirit of self-reliance was highly valued. Elders such as Juliette Duncan, an 88-year-old who addressed the Commission at Big Trout Lake, exemplify the will and the competence that continue to garner the highest respect in Aboriginal communities:

Our great-grandfathers were not carried or looked after by any outside

government. The power came from within. That is how we survived. That is what was taught to us and this is what we know from what we learn from the past for those of us that still exist....I still remember everything that my grandfathers and grandmothers taught me. I still know how to trap even today. I can still kill rabbit for my own food. I still have a gun. I still carry my gun around everyday. I go hunting occasionally to at least get a partridge for a meal.

I came here with this delegation and travelled with ten people, and I still go out skidooing, go into the bush and make a campfire for myself and do a little bit of trapping and hunting. I had trapped a few fur-bearing animals but I had to come here and I didn't skin them yet. From what I learned I still practise everything that I learned back then.

Elder Juliette Duncan  
Muskrat Dam First Nation  
Big Trout Lake, Ontario, 4 December 1992

## **11. Culture and Government**

The forms of leadership, decision making and government practised among Aboriginal people varied widely, but as in their economies, it is possible to discern the influence of fundamental values flowing from their relationship with the land and the spiritual order.

First, there was a strong ethic of personal responsibility, fostered by child-rearing practices that taught children from an early age to think for themselves even while they acted to enhance the common good. The personal autonomy necessary to discover and exercise one's unique gifts and maintain balance in a dynamic, spiritually influenced universe was not compatible with bowing to authority.

Second, because everyone had equal access to the necessities of life and a strong ethic of sharing prevailed, no one could control essential resources as a means of exercising power over others. Thus, even where more formal and permanent structures of leadership and government prevailed, leaders led by influence rather than authority.

Within small, mobile hunting groups, leadership was determined by the



situation, on the basis of known competence. This is illustrated in the recollections of Paulus Maggo, the Labrador Inuk quoted earlier:

I didn't mind telling or showing those with whom I was well acquainted or those with whom I regularly hunted how to build an igloo. I was by no means clever at everything about hunting inland when travelling by dog team was the only means of getting into the country.

I'll say though that when the weather got stormy or when we had to travel at night, they would ask for my assistance when they no longer knew what to do or where to go. They would come to me because I was familiar with that part of the country.

I knew the land well so I didn't mind taking charge of a hunting party and did it to the best of my ability. I was always able to take them back to home base in the dark or through stormy weather as long as it didn't get too stormy, and we were able to keep on moving as long as I could see the stars at night. I've even taken hunters back through fog and drizzle when nothing could be seen. Although I was not the most clever hunter, they'd always pick me as leader. I guess it was because I had the most experience travelling in the country.<sup>48</sup>

Maggo also described the passing on of leadership from an older hunter who was accustomed to taking charge. After many trips together the older man started asking Maggo questions about where to go, where and when to stop. Maggo comments, "Me? Instructing the one who once was always my leader?" Anthropologists have commented on the modesty he displays as a common trait among members of hunting bands, where choosing leaders is a very informal and fluid process. Among Inuit, some accounts suggest that a camp leader, once acknowledged as the decision maker, would not be challenged. Other accounts emphasize that the leader maintained his position by consulting and gaining agreement before making a decision.

Paulus Maggo's experience is instructive in understanding how harmony was maintained. His leadership abilities, developed on the land, were subsequently recognized in his selection as leader of commercial sealing and fishing camps. Referring to the expectations about how members should treat each other, Maggo said, "Anyone who did not respect the rule

at my sealing or fishing camps was encouraged to conform, and anyone not willing to do so was encouraged to leave."

Chiefs were selected in various ways. In a paper presented at the Commission's round table on justice, James Dumont described the role of Anishnabe leaders selected by their clan members in deliberations at seasonal councils. Since marriage partners had to be selected from outside the clan, this meant that every family was connected to several clans and had multiple avenues to contribute to decision making.

Among the Iroquois, elder women, or matriarchs, were responsible for consulting within their clans on the selection of chiefs. The candidate's character from childhood, in family settings and among his peers, was examined thoroughly. Nominations were then put before councils of the nations or the Confederacy, involving both men and women, and everyone present was invited to declare whether they knew of any impediments to investing the nominee with responsibility for the welfare of the people. As with the Tsimshian, described in Chapter 4, every member of the nation had an obligation to assure the integrity of persons put forward as leaders and the validity of the representations made in support of those nominations. Although the appointments were for life, the Iroquois women who nominated the chiefs had the power to remove them from office if they failed to fulfil the responsibilities of their positions and repeatedly neglected the warnings of their kin.

Among the Tsimshian and other nations of the west coast, chiefly names and rights were passed on in clans, but the selection of successors was not determined solely by birth. The fulfilment of chiefly responsibilities required economic skills to accumulate goods for distribution and the ability to influence clan members and fellow chiefs. Accession to leadership was thus a result of both family origins and personal accomplishment.

At our Whitehorse hearings, Johnny Smith explained how the clans functioned to protect their members, settle disputes and discipline the behaviour of members. If a member of the Crow clan offended a member of the Wolf clan, the latter would ask the Crows what they were going to do to make reparation. The clan of the offender would contribute money to make a payment to settle the matter. All of this history would then come into play when decisions were being made about clan leadership — whether a

candidate could work with people, whether he could inspire loyalty, whether someone would stand in his place if he should die. Smith was clear about the advantages of the "Indian way to go ahead":

So, like here, they talk together and make the law and then they agree with it and go ahead. So that's the way it is when you appoint somebody by the Indian way, not vote like the white man. If you vote like the white man you vote in the wrong people, you don't get the right people. So if you go the Indian way you are going to see who is the best, who can do the work and you know what kind of life he has. You know what he is; he's a good Indian and he's got a good council and a good chief. Then the elders will talk about it and a bunch of elders have a big meeting about it, and they finally decide to appoint you. You are going to look after us, you are going to stand for us, you are going to die for us. So that's how the chief is appointed.

Johnny Smith  
Tlingit Nation  
Whitehorse, Yukon, 18 November 1992

Among the nations of the plains, including the Blackfoot and the Métis, leaders were selected entirely for their personal qualities. Some of the most charismatic leaders of the past came from these nations: Riel, Crowfoot, Sitting Bull, Big Bear. In traditional times, spiritual power was thought to go hand in hand with success in war, both of which were requirements for instilling confidence and loyalty in communities of several hundred people. Skill in oratory was another requirement. As we saw in the description of Blackfoot culture in Chapter 4, responsibility for educating younger generations to their role in society, maintaining order in the camp, managing the buffalo hunt, and engaging with enemies was distributed among clans and societies, which crossed kinship lines. It was not unusual for young men to chafe under the leadership of more senior men, but the ultimate solution was for the dissident to form a separate community with others of like mind, rather than for the recognized leader to enforce submission. Those who lived within a community were expected to conform to the rules of sharing and maintaining harmonious relationships.

Just as individuals in a community exercised personal autonomy within the framework of community ethics, communities exercised considerable autonomy within the larger networks of what were termed tribes or nations

in the vocabulary of colonial society. Nations were demarcated on the basis of language, or dialect, and territory. Relationships within the nation were usually knit together by clan membership, which went beyond immediate ties of blood and marriage. Clan members were linked by common origins affirmed by stories stretching into the mythical past and reinforced by legends of the exploits of remembered forebears.

The size of communities varied. Seasonal hunting groups among Inuit or Anishnabe typically numbered between fifteen and twenty members and were made up of a single family or hunting partnerships linking more than one family. Summer was a time when small, mobile groups came together around river mouths or favourite lakes and hunting grounds to socialize and contract marriages, to participate in ceremonies and councils. Nations of the northwest coast, many of which moved to fishing camps in the summer, took up residence in their permanent villages during the winter months, the time when elaborate cycles of dance ceremonials were performed. In regions where there was a rich and stable food supply, such as the whaling villages of the Mackenzie Inuit or the agricultural villages of the Iroquois, permanent villages and towns of 300 to 1,000 inhabitants were maintained.

Within a region several nations might carry on trade and friendly relations. The Tlingit, the Tsimshian and the Kwakwa ka'wakw of the northwest coast had distinct identities and territories but they traded, exchanged cultural practices and intermarried. Each of the seven branches of the Mi'kmaq managed its own community life and territories and selected local leaders, or *Sagimaw*, who came together to confer on business affecting the whole Mi'kmaq nation.

Oral histories abound with stories of conflicts at the boundaries between distinct nations: Inuit and Dene of the barren grounds west of Hudson Bay, the Dakota (Sioux) and the Anishnabe in the Great Lakes region, the Blackfoot and the Cree of the plains, the Huron and the Five Nations, who shared Iroquoian roots.

Alongside these histories of border conflict are numerous stories of peace treaties and trade alliances that permitted nations to extend the range of goods to which they regularly had access and facilitated the diffusion of new technology. Evidence of these transactions is found in excavations of ancient settlements of every region, as well as in the oral histories of

various nations.

Sometimes relations between nations went beyond informal agreements to respect each other's territory or treaties of friendship sealed with sacred ceremony. Confederacies linking adjacent nations were formed in the east among the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot nations and, at an earlier time, between the Abenakis and Kennebec nations;<sup>49</sup> among the Five, later Six Nations of the Iroquois; and, in the west, among the Blackfoot, Peigan and Blood nations of the plains (discussed in Chapter 4). The purpose of organizing in confederacies was to maintain peaceful relations among neighbouring nations and to protect their territories from intrusion by outsiders. Confederate councils did not regulate the internal affairs of the nations. Although confederacy councils might appoint head chiefs as among the Blackfoot, or have traditions assigning protocol responsibilities to particular title holders, as among the Five Nations, these confederacy chiefs had no enforceable authority over nation chiefs or clan or village leaders.

## **12. Charting the Future with Insights From the Past**

My father always told me that when I travelled by dog team to always look back and study where I had come from before losing sight of the area. Knowing where you came from will ensure that you can get back to known and familiar grounds.<sup>50</sup>

It says in that treaty, that this relationship will hold firm until the sun will stop shining, the waters will stop flowing and the grass will stop growing. In our minds, in the minds of the people, if you look outside, the sun is just as strong today as it was when that treaty was made and the grass is just as green as it was then. Unfortunately, the water is not as clean, but it still flows. So in our minds, if we are looking towards a future where we can have peace in this land, the mechanism is there, and that is the Two Row Wampum and those relationships of friendship.

Charlie Patton  
Mohawk Trail Longhouse  
Kahnawake, Quebec, 6 May 1993

When I hear people say 'We've lost this; we've lost that', I do not believe

that. We have not lost anything, we have just forgotten....we are coming out of a big sleep....We are waking up, and it's a beautiful thing, to wake up and see we are alive, we are still here.

Elder Vern Harper  
Toronto, Ontario  
25 June 1992

When Aboriginal people talk about returning to their traditions, the response of non-Aboriginal people is often incredulous, because they associate First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures with buckskin, igloos and buffalo. It is not well known that being Aboriginal is a matter of mind, that the stories that teach Aboriginal people how to live with each other and with creation — how to be fully human — are loaded with symbols that transcend time and the particular circumstances in which they originated.

Even some Aboriginal people have difficulty comprehending the symbolism in Aboriginal teachings. Jake Thomas told of a conversation with an Iroquois person about the eagle that sits atop the great white pine tree, the central symbol of the Iroquois Confederacy, ready to sound the alarm when danger approaches that might threaten the peace. The individual said:

"I've been waiting all these years. Since I was young I've been hearing about that. I've been wondering when that eagle is going to howl. I never heard it yet."

I said, "You must have a different understanding. That tree where the eagle sits, that's symbolic."

Chief Jacob Thomas  
Iroquois Confederacy  
Akwesasne, Ontario, 3 May 1993

In the present circumstances of Aboriginal people in Canada, numerous impediments stand in the way of acquiring traditional wisdom and practising traditional ways. Central among these is the interruption of relationship and communication that has resulted from disruption of family relationships and loss of language.

Laws that, in the past, outlawed ceremonies and, in the present, restrict possession of animal parts needed for ceremonies are other barriers. The deterioration of the environment, which provides medicines, and the appropriation of sacred sites for alternative uses, add to the difficulties of practising certain aspects of traditional cultures. Nevertheless, Aboriginal people are finding their way back. We present here some stories of individuals who have re-established connection with their cultures.

Sylvia Maracle is a Mohawk woman whose mother died in childbirth when Sylvia was six. She was placed in foster care and maintained contact with her grandparents and other relatives. As a youth she began seeking a better understanding of where she came from. In a published interview she speaks of her first encounter, in her late teens, with an elder Iroquois woman on the Six Nations reserve at Brantford, to whom her grandparents sent her with a gift of tobacco.

The old woman was apparently expecting her, offered her tea and burned the offering of tobacco in the stove. She agreed to help as best she could, but instead of sitting down and talking, she set the young woman to moving a woodpile. When the task was finished she had Sylvia move it again. By the end of the weekend Sylvia was tired and disappointed. When the old woman asked why she was upset, Sylvia blurted out, "I came here to learn who I was, and all I've been is a slave all weekend, moving your wood around." Sylvia describes the outcome this way:

The old woman reached across the table, took my hand and said: "You have had the most magnificent teachers in the world. The earth has watched everything that you have done. The wind has come to check on you and what's going on. The sun has shone and mixed his powers with yours so that there can be life. The birds have serenaded you and other animals, some so very small, have come around as well...".

She talked so eloquently, and made me feel so special that I felt awful for complaining that she hadn't paid attention to me. She went on: "All those creatures are so much wiser than I am. I only know a little bit, but if you want to come back and spend time I'll teach you the little that I know." And she did.<sup>51</sup>

Sylvia has applied the teachings, which she began to learn in earnest at

that time, in her work as a manager, spokesperson and negotiator on behalf of Aboriginal people living in urban areas.

Edna Manitowabi, an Anishnabe (Ojibwa) woman, now a ceremonialist among her people and a teacher of language at Trent University, tells of the power of ceremonies to heal the trauma of past abuse:

The first time I heard that big drum, it was like coaxing your heart, because it sounded like your own heartbeat, and it felt so good. I just wanted to dance....

I had taken some Laurentian University students to Marquette, Michigan in 1974 to attend a Native Awareness seminar but when we arrived we found that we had the dates confused and the conference was over. On a bulletin board I saw a little card with a picture of a water drum<sup>52</sup> announcing that Ojibway ceremonies were being held at Irons, which was a two-hour drive south of Marquette. There was a strong pull, and even on the way there you just felt something, like you were on the threshold of something.

That night when we got there, I heard the sound of the water drum, the Little Boy water drum. It wasn't so much the heartbeat, it was more release. It was like that Little Boy water drum made me cry and cry and I didn't know why I was crying. It took me back to my dream experience,<sup>53</sup> when I just sobbed and sobbed. Every time that drum sounded, tears would come, and I would go out of control. I think it was years and years of stuff that I held in, all the sadness, the loneliness, even the rage was just coming out. Whenever I heard the sound of the water drum, there was a feeling that I had come home.

After that I started to listen to those teachings that Little Boy gave, and things really started to change for me. All the things about womanhood, Anishnabe way, started to emerge then.

After that I sought out the Grandmothers, the elders. Grandmothers were very strong. They were waiting for someone to come and ask: What about this? I found those old women and they began to talk. It was like I was a little girl going to Grandma. In their sharing of their knowledge I began to feel life. Their words nurtured and nourished my spirit.



An old man said to me once: 'You're a part of all of life, all of Creation.

You're connected to all things. You're connected to all people.' After the experience in Michigan I started to fast, to meditate on those things, to find out about Creation, about the Earth.<sup>54</sup>

Frank Brown, a young Heiltsuk man from Bella Bella, B.C., has collaborated with the National Film Board and others in the First Nations community to produce a video documentary of his emergence from a violent and self-destructive phase of his life, through re-connection with his culture.<sup>55</sup> His father was an alcoholic who died when Frank was eight years old. He became rebellious, and by the time he reached his teen years he was the leader of a violent gang. The most severe in a series of offences was administering a beating to a bootlegger, inflicting injuries that required hospitalization.

Frank's mother had placed him in the care of his uncle, hoping that a man's influence would help to control his behaviour, and the uncle interceded before the court when the assault charge was being heard. The uncle recommended that instead of being sent again to an institution for young offenders, a traditional therapy should be tried. Frank was placed alone on an island that is part of Heiltsuk territory and was left there for eight months, isolated from human contact, though his family checked periodically to ensure he had enough to eat.

Frank describes himself as 'out of control', hiding his hurt behind an attitude that he didn't care about anything. When he was left on his own, he no longer had people and rules to push against. On the beach and in the forest and in the dark of his tent he finally confronted his own fears and met visible manifestations of the angry, anti-social spirit that had taken over his life. He came to understand that his culture offered the means of taming such forces.

When he came out of exile he was ready to re-connect with his family and his culture. The video documents the potlatch he gave, with his family's help, to wipe away all the pain and the shame of the past and confirm that he was making a new start. The video was made in 1993, when Frank's transformation had already been a reality for some years. He is a youth counsellor and is recognized in his own community and beyond as a role

model.

Sylvia Maracle is introducing traditional values as core elements of organizational life in an urban setting; Edna Manitowabi is teaching university students from many Aboriginal traditions and non-Aboriginal backgrounds how to see the world through the lens of Ojibwa language; Frank Brown is searching for ways to help young people establish a firm identity and membership in the human community without going through the alienation he experienced.

Many of the stories of reclaiming culture are about personal transformation. But Aboriginal people are also questioning how to apply these values in community and public life. Mark Wedge of the Yukon Indian Development Corporation shared his reflections with commissioners at Whitehorse:

One of the questions we had regarding the mandate of the organization that I work with is: How do we integrate these traditional values into the contemporary way of doing things, contemporary business components? I think that is the challenge that we have been trying to work with: How do we gain this knowledge and wisdom from the Elders, from the people, and try to incorporate it in a manner that is understandable to European cultures or to the western cultures?

...we have always looked at renewable resources or animals and plants as our livelihood, and the question is: How do we share that livelihood? Often times it is done through Elders saying which one should get which part of the meat... Coming from the European system, what they did is they shared their harvest initially...and then it moves into a tax. As we move into a money society it moves into a tax structure.

...I think it is up to the individual communities and peoples to start defining how they are going to share.

Mark Wedge  
Yukon Indian Development Corporation  
Whitehorse, Yukon, 18 November 1992

Don Sax, an Anglican priest who has spent nine years in the north, emphasized that the particularity of local communities has to be considered

in applying cultural insights to practical problems. He identified with the community effort to find "our way":

The recovery of culture is not so much...a matter of trying to recover the past, but trying to pick up the profound insights from the past and apply them to the future. That is really the way of perceiving reality and responding to the problems of life rather than making snowshoes or something.

...[T]he onus at this stage in history is on the local community. There has to be a concerted effort by local communities to define their own vision of the future. That vision has got to be defined on a clear awareness of what our way is. There has to be a clear definition of the piece of geography that we are talking about. There has to be a profound understanding of the ecological systems currently operating in that homeland.

Then, out of that the community needs to begin to craft the human economic, political and cultural systems that are consistent with or even enhancing to the ecological systems that are already there.

Reverend Don Sax  
Old Crow, Yukon  
17 November 1992

Speaking of economic futures, Sax did not discount the need to come together in larger groupings to achieve common goals. In fact he suggested that for the Gwich'in in the northern Yukon, collective initiatives that cross the boundaries of the Northwest Territories, the Yukon and Alaska make sense.

In later volumes of our report we discuss in more detail how traditional ethics of social relations, economics, government and relationship with the land are being incorporated in Aboriginal visions of the future. We will return to the conception of natural law that still infuses the cultures and priorities of Aboriginal peoples. The values that guide many Aboriginal people in their relations with one another and with non-Aboriginal institutions were summed up in a presentation by Oren Lyons:

Indians are spiritual, religious people, always have been and, hopefully,

always will be, because that is the fundamental law. That's the main law of survival. That is the law of regeneration. Any law that you make you must bind to that spiritual law. If you don't, you're not going to make it, because the spiritual law, the law of reality that is outside here, that says you must drink water to live, that you must eat to survive, that you must build shelter for your children, that you must plant, you must harvest, you must work with the seasons — that law does not change. That's the major law that governs all life on this earth. If nations don't make their law accordingly, they will fail eventually because no human being is capable of changing that particular law.

Oren Lyons  
Akwasasne, Ontario  
3 May 1993

As discussed in Chapter 4, Aboriginal nations brought to their negotiations with colonial powers a long history of national and international diplomacy and well-established protocols for sealing international accords. Differences in world view, culture and language between Aboriginal and colonial parties to those accords have contributed to misunderstandings and discord in relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In the Commission's view, creating more harmonious relations must start with fuller information about cultures, where they diverge and where they share common values. The foregoing discussion of Aboriginal cultures, although brief and selective, may signal to readers the vast and exciting possibilities that exist for exploring Aboriginal history and world view.

Many Aboriginal people came forward in our hearings to take us back in time with their stories of creation. They shared recollections of their lives and the teachings they received from their grandfathers and grandmothers. Elders in particular declared their desire to pass on the wisdom of their traditions, not only to their own youth but to the others they share life with on Turtle Island.

Commissioners had the benefit of meeting and listening to Aboriginal elders and traditionalists. We participated in feasts and ceremonies. We were drawn, however briefly, into the circle of relations where material and spiritual gifts are shared. We experienced the vitality and power of the oral tradition, communicated by people like Mary Lou lahtail, a Cree educator in Moose Factory, Ontario, who said, "I have no written speech. Everything

that I said I have been carrying in my heart, because I have seen it. I have experienced it."

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## Notes:

1 Chief Dan George and Helmut Hirnschall, *My Heart Soars* (Saanichton, B.C.: Hancock House Publishers, Ltd., 1974), p. 60.

2 We wish to acknowledge and thank all those who contributed to our education on cultural matters. We urge readers to explore for themselves the wealth of experience and wisdom contained in the transcripts of our hearings, a sampling of which is presented in this chapter (identified with the name of the presenter and the date and location of the hearing). For more information about transcripts and other Commission publications, see *A Note About Sources*, at the beginning of this volume.

3 Skanu'u (Ardythe Wilson) in Don Monet, *Colonialism on Trial: The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Sovereignty Case and the Struggle for Indigenous Land Rights* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1992), p. 19.

4 The interrelatedness of culture, spirituality and ethics is discussed by James Dumont, professor of Aboriginal studies at

Laurentian University and apprentice in the Anishinabe Midewiwin Society, and by Associate Chief Judge Murray Sinclair, Co-Chair of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, in various publications. See in particular James Dumont, "Justice and Aboriginal People", in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], *Aboriginal Peoples and the Justice System: Report of the National Round Table on Aboriginal Justice Issues* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1993), pp. 42-85; and Murray Sinclair, "Aboriginal Peoples and Euro-Canadians: Two World Views", in *Aboriginal Self-Government in Canada: Current Trends and Issues*, ed. John H. Hylton (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1984), pp. 19-33.

5 Kathleen E. Absolon and Anthony R. Winchester, "Cultural Identity for

Urban Aboriginal People: Learning Circles Synthesis Report”, research study prepared for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] (1994). For information about research studies prepared for RCAP, see *A Note About Sources* at the beginning of this volume.

**6** Carol Brice-Bennett, “Labrador Inuit Life Histories”, research study prepared for RCAP (1994).

**7** Leroy Little Bear, “What’s Einstein Got to Do With It?”, in *Continuing Poundmaker and Riel’s Quest, Presentations Made at a Conference on Aboriginal Peoples and Justice*, comp. Richard Gosse, James Youngblood Henderson, and Roger Carter (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1994), p. 70.

**8** A. Irving Hallowell, “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View”, in *Teachings from the American Earth, Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 147.

**9** See, for example, Andrew Chapeskie, “Land, Landscape and Culturescape: Aboriginal Relationships to Land and the Co-Management of Natural Resources”, research study prepared for RCAP (1995).

**10** Barry Came, “Fighting for the Land”, *Maclean’s* 108/9 (27 February 1995), p. 16.

**11** C.C. Brant, “Native Ethics and Rules of Behaviour”, *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 35/6 (August 1990), pp. 534-547.

**12** See Knud Rasmussen, “A Shaman’s Journey to the Sea Spirit Takánakapsâluk”, in *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos*, volume 7, no. 1 of the *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1929); reprinted in Tedlock and Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth* (cited in note 8), pp. 13-19.

**13** Monet, *Colonialism on Trial* (cited in note 13), p. 89.

**14** Jerome S. Bruner, “Myth and Identity”, in *On Knowing, Essays for the Left Hand* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 36.

**15** Olive Patricia Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples From Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1992), pp. 80-81.

**16** For examples of ethical systems received by human forebears from spiritual sources, see Dumont, "Justice and Aboriginal People" (cited in note 4), p. 76ff; Monet, *Colonialism on Trial* (cited in note 3), p. 181ff; and Paul A.W. Wallace, *White Roots of Peace, The Iroquois Book of Life* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1994).

**17** Asen Balikci, *The Netsilik Eskimo* (Garden City, N.Y.: The Natural History Press, 1970), p. 199: "Personal names were thought among the Netsilik to possess a personality of their own characterized by great power and distinct ability to protect the name bearer from any misfortune." One person might carry several names, which were acquired in a ritual manner.

**18** Knud Rasmussen, *The Netsilik Eskimos, Social Life and Spiritual Culture*, volume 8, no. 1-2 of the *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, 1931), pp. 224-25.

**19** Many First Nations people call North America 'Turtle Island', referring to legends that the land was first formed on the back of a giant turtle.

**20** Olive Patricia Dickason, "From 'One Nation' in the Northeast to 'New Nation' in the Northwest: A look at the emergence of the Métis", in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, ed. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), pp. 19-20 and following. Dickason cites sources in the fields of history and biology, some of which contend that intermarriage between First Nations women and Europeans was almost non-existent in eastern Canada and others that argue that it was extensive and might be traced in as many as 40 per cent of families in some regions. See Jacques Rousseau, interview published in "Perspectives", *La Presse*, 23 May 1970, quoted in Donald B. Smith, *Le 'Sauvage' pendant la période héroïque de la Nouvelle-France* (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH, 1979), p. 116.

**21** See Dickason, "From 'One Nation'", and John E. Foster, "Some

questions and perspectives on the problem of Métis roots”, in Peterson and Brown, *The New Peoples*, p. 77 and following.

**22** Foster, “Some questions and perspectives”, p. 75.

**23** For a fuller description of the Labrador Métis and other Métis groups, see Volume 4, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 in this volume.

**24** Labrador Metis Association, submission to RCAP, 1 September 1993, p. 5.

**25** Foster, “Some questions and perspectives” (cited in note 21), p. 84, points out that “in spite of these difficulties a few works, particularly Van Kirk’s *Many Tender Ties*, provide insights into the world of women associated with the mixed-blood populations that emerged as métis.” See Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer Publishing Ltd., 1980).

**26** *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les écrits complets de Louis Riel*, ed. George F.G. Stanley (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1985), volume 3 (5 June 1884-16 November 1885), ed. Thomas Flanagan, pp. 278-279.

**27** Pauktuutit, *The Inuit Way, A Guide to Inuit Culture* (Ottawa: n.d.), pp. 19, 21.

**28** Monet, *Colonialism on Trial* (cited in note 3), p. 181.

**29** Dumont uses this term in “Journey to Daylight Land: Through Ojibwa Eyes”, *Laurentian University Review* 8/2 (1976). A detailed description of a prayer ceremony for seeking spiritual awareness or ‘vision’ can be found in Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

**30** Balikci, *The Netsilik Eskimo* (cited in note 17), p. 148.

**31** F.W. Peacock, *Labrador Inuit Lore and Legend* (St. John’s,



Newfoundland: Jespersen Press, 1981), p. 16.

**32** “Dancing With Chaos: An interview with Douglas Cardinal”, *Intervox* 8 (1989/90), pp. 27-31, 44-47; reprinted by permission in Dennis H. McPherson and J. Douglas Rabb, *Indian from the Inside: A Study in Ethno-Metaphysics*, Occasional Paper #14 (Thunder Bay: Centre for Northern Studies, Lakehead University, 1993).

**33** For additional examples of the continuing influence of traditional modes of teaching, see Volume 4, Chapter 3.

**34** Hugh A. Dempsey, *Crowfoot: Chief of the Blackfeet* (Halifax: Goodread Biographies, 1988), pp. 213-214.

**35** Basil H. Johnston, “The Ceremony of Peace Pipe Smoking”, *Tawow* 6/1 (1978).

**36** Johnston, “The Ceremony of Peace Pipe Smoking”, p. 23. See also Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (cited in note 29).

**37** The following information on inuksuit is extracted from Luke Suluk, “Inuksuit”, *Inuktitut* 76 (Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, 1993), pp. 10-19.

**38** Calvin Racette, *Flags of the Métis* (Regina: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, 1987), p. 6.

**39** Ted J. Brassler, “In Search of Métis Art”, in Peterson and Brown, *The New Peoples* (cited in note 20).

**40** Audreen Hourie, “The Métis Sash”, fact sheet (Manitoba Metis Federation, 1992).

**41** Absolon and Winchester, “Cultural Identity for Urban Aboriginal People” (cited in note 5).

**42** Manitoba, Public Inquiry into the Administration of Justice and Aboriginal People, *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba, Volume 1: The Justice System and Aboriginal People* (Winnipeg: Queen’s Printer, 1991);

and Rupert A. Ross, *Dancing With a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality* (Markham, Ontario: Octopus Publishing Group, 1992).

**43** Brant, “Native Ethics” (cited in note 11), p. 535.

**44** Brant, “Native Ethics”, p. 538.

**45** Chief Jacob (Jake) Thomas, transcripts of the hearings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [hereafter RCAP transcripts], Akwesasne, Ontario, 3 May 1993.

**46** Paul Williams and Curtis Nelson, “Kaswentha”, research study prepared for RCAP (1995). Williams and Nelson point out that there is no ‘official’ version of the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee. They used several sources for their study. This quotation comes from one compiled by a committee of chiefs æ including Skaniadariio (John A. Gibson), Kanongweya (Jacob Johnson) and Deyonhegwen (John William Elliott) æ at the Grand River Territory in 1907 and published through the efforts of Gawasowane (Arthur C. Parker) in 1916, p. 103.

**47** Northwest coast cultures were known to keep slaves, usually acquired as captives in war, who did not enjoy family status, although they were part of households. See Philip Drucker, *Indians of the Northwest Coast* (Garden City, N.Y.: The Natural History Press, 1963), pp. 130-131.

**48** Paulus Maggo, quoted in Brice-Bennett, “Labrador Inuit Life Histories” (cited in note 6).

**49** For details, see Brenda Gedeon Miller, “Listuguj Mi’gmaq Government”, RCAP transcripts, Restigouche, Quebec, 17 June 1993.

**50** Paulus Maggo, quoted in Brice-Bennett, “Labrador Inuit Life Histories” (cited in note 6).

**51** Sylvia Maracle, quoted in Marlene Brant Castellano and Janice Hill, “First Nations Women: Reclaiming Our Responsibilities”, in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 241.

**52** The water drum is a small, hand-held drum filled with water to modulate the sound. Edna refers to it as “The Little Boy” because in Anishnabe teaching it is associated with the child of prophecy who will call the people back to the wisdom of their grandfathers.

**53** Earlier, Edna had spoken of a vision experienced during a near-death experience.

**54** Edna Manitowabi, quoted in Castellano and Hill, “First Nations Women” (cited in note 51), pp. 240-241.

**55** The video, “Voyage of Rediscovery” (National Film Board, 1993, order number C 9193 005), is part of a series entitled *First Nations, The Circle Unbroken* (order number 193C 9193 003 [four videos and a teacher’s guide]).