

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Indigenous History & Culture in Canada is a brand- new title from Grey House Publishing Canada, examining the history and culture of Indigenous peoples in Canada—tracing their history from precontact through colonial times to the present day, where efforts of truth and reconciliation are underway. This book includes 139 essays chronicling Indigenous traditions, important historical documents, prominent individuals, modern cultural touchstones, and social issues that continue to affect the Indigenous population across the country. Categories include Precontact Indigenous Traditions and History, Historical Context and Documents, Prominent Indigenous Figures, Modern Culture and Issues, and Indigenous Nations of Canada, guiding the reader through the vast history of Indigenous nations and culture in what became Canada, all the way through to the modern era, and the struggles that endure.

Each category forms a narrative of the topic at hand, and the editor has endeavored to place each essay as logically as possible. Numerous images appear throughout the text, illustrating the topics and figures and providing visual reference points such as maps of Indigenous populations and languages across the country.

The book concludes with four appendices:

- Indigenous Population Statistics
- Treaty Territories Map and Summaries
- Language Family Maps and Distribution
- Chronological Maps of Territorial Change

Following those, readers will find a Bibliography collecting all the sources listed in each essay, and an easy-to-use Subject Index of important terms, concepts, and individuals mentioned throughout the text.

ESSAY LENGTH AND FORMAT

The essays in this title vary in length from approximately 1,500 words to 3,000 words, depending on the scope of the topic being discussed. Each essay begins with a clearly stated title, an introductory passage, and a series of subheads taking the reader more in-depth about the topic. Essays conclude with a bibliography of sources, and a “See Also” section of cross-references to other relevant essays in the volume, allowing readers to follow common threads.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This volume includes over 100 photographs and other images, including maps, historical paintings, portraits, and official documents.

Grey House Publishing Canada would like to sincerely thank author and editor Steven Danver for his tireless efforts in writing and compiling this valuable collection of essays on Indigenous history and culture in Canada, at a time when the nation has become acutely aware of Indigenous rights and the need for continued reconciliation efforts. His knowledge of the subject, and the care with which he conveys it, has led to an informative and respectful volume on the many Indigenous nations who have inhabited this land for thousands of years.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The act of assembling an encyclopedia devoted to the Indigenous peoples of Canada is both an intellectual undertaking and an ethical commitment. To survey the breadth of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis histories, cultures, and contemporary experiences is to acknowledge that Canada has always been, and remains, Indigenous land. It is also to recognize the ways in which colonialism has shaped every aspect of Canadian life, even as Indigenous peoples continue to assert sovereignty, maintain traditions, and build futures rooted in self-determination. This introduction is meant to orient readers to the scope and purpose of *Indigenous History & Culture of Canada*. It also reflects my own journey as a scholar and editor of reference works on Indigenous topics. Over the course of my career, I have worked on encyclopedias on Native peoples globally, on treaties and sovereignty in North America, and on the broader historical context of American Indian experiences. Each of these projects provided lessons about scope, methodology, and responsibility. But this Canadian encyclopedia represents something distinct—an effort to bring together a comprehensive overview of the histories and cultures of Indigenous peoples in Canada, framed by the ongoing realities of reconciliation, resurgence, and cultural continuity.

A SCHOLARLY JOURNEY

When I first began studying Native religions in the American West as a graduate student, my interests were driven largely by curiosity about cultural differences. A pivotal encounter with the Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr., however, reshaped my outlook. Deloria challenged me to consider not only what topics I studied, but why. His challenge was clear: non-Native scholars have a responsibility to choose topics that matter to Native communities, not simply subjects that satisfy intellectual interest. That conversation led me to consider the connections between academic work and contemporary struggles, between historical scholarship and living communities. As a historian and an editor, I have tried to honour that challenge by curating works that do more than present facts. The goal has been to assemble collections that give context, highlight Indigenous agency, and show how historical forces remain active in the present. I was fortunate to work with Barry Pritzker and Bruce Johanssen on their *Encyclopedia of American Indian History*, which provided a structured survey of the histories of Native nations in the United States. Shortly after, I was privileged to work with one of my mentors, Native historian Donald Fixico on his *Treaties with American Indians*, which offered detailed exploration of agreements that continue to shape law and sov-

ereignty. My own *Native Peoples of the World*, published in 2013, brought together contributions on Indigenous communities across every continent.

Those projects taught me two lessons that carry into this volume. First, no encyclopedia can be exhaustive. Choices must be made about which nations, events, and themes to highlight. Second, breadth must never come at the expense of depth. Even brief entries must provide historical and cultural context, so that readers see not just isolated facts but patterns, processes, and meanings.

WHY CANADA? WHY NOW?

The Canadian context demands an encyclopedia of Indigenous history and culture at this moment. Since the release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015, Canada has been engaged in a national reckoning. Residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, forced enfranchisement, and the pass system are no longer topics known only to specialists; they are now part of public conversations about justice and reconciliation. At the same time, Indigenous languages are being revitalized through immersion schools and digital initiatives. Indigenous leaders are shaping political debates, while Indigenous artists and filmmakers are transforming Canadian cultural life. Movements such as Idle No More, the Wet'suwet'en land defence, and the ongoing Land Back struggle highlight that Indigenous sovereignty is not a matter of the past but a pressing reality of the present.

An encyclopedia cannot solve the challenges of reconciliation. What it can do is provide context, accuracy, and accessibility. It can equip students, educators, and community members with the tools to understand both the deep roots of Indigenous histories and the complexities of current debates. In a time when misinformation spreads easily and caricatures persist, a reference work that prioritizes clarity, depth, and respect is a valuable resource.

PRECONTACT TRADITIONS AND HISTORIES

The first section of this encyclopedia explores the immense diversity of Indigenous societies before European contact. Long before the arrival of French or English colonists, the territories now called Canada were home to hundreds of nations, speaking dozens of language families and adapting to distinct ecological zones. From the Inuit of the Arctic to the Haudenosaunee of the Great Lakes, from the Dene of the Subarctic to the Nuu-chah-nulth of the Pacific Coast, Indigenous peoples developed complex social, political, and spiritual systems. This section highlights the centrality

of oral traditions, storytelling, and cosmology in shaping worldviews. It describes seasonal cycles of subsistence, material technologies, and regional cultural patterns. It explores spiritual practices such as the Sun Dance, potlatch, and vision quest, all of which encode relationships with land, community, and the sacred. It examines governance structures ranging from the Mi'kmaq Grand Council to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, demonstrating the depth of Indigenous political thought.

By presenting these traditions as vibrant and adaptive, rather than static or "prehistoric," the encyclopedia counters older narratives that framed Indigenous peoples as living fossils. Precontact societies were dynamic, trading across vast networks, innovating technologies, and adapting to environmental changes. These histories remind readers that the Indigenous presence in Canada is not measured in centuries, but in millennia.

COLONIALISM, TREATIES, AND RESISTANCE

The arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries initiated profound upheavals. Epidemics devastated populations, while fur trade alliances entangled Indigenous nations in global markets and imperial rivalries. Missionaries sought conversions, often undermining Indigenous spiritual systems. Colonial authorities increasingly sought land and resources, setting the stage for centuries of conflict and negotiation. Treaties form a central thread in this history. From early peace and friendship agreements to the numbered treaties of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, treaties were meant to establish mutual obligations and frameworks for coexistence. For Indigenous peoples, they represented nation-to-nation agreements rooted in diplomacy and kinship. For colonial authorities, they often became tools for land cession and control. The legacy of these treaties remains contested: they are simultaneously symbols of broken promises and foundations for ongoing legal and political claims. Colonial policies such as the Indian Act, enfranchisement measures, and the pass system sought to dismantle Indigenous governance and assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society. Yet Indigenous resistance persisted. The Red River and Northwest Rebellions led by Louis Riel and other leaders were expressions of Métis and First Nations determination to defend land and culture. The twentieth century to the present witnessed continued activism, from the formation of national Indigenous organizations to the protests at Oka and beyond.

This encyclopedia's historical entries trace these developments with attention to both the oppressive structures of colonialism and the resilient responses of Indigenous peoples. They show how policies intended to erase Indigenous identity instead provoked renewed assertions of sovereignty and cultural survival.

CULTURAL REVITALIZATION AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

While colonialism inflicted deep harms, Indigenous peoples have never ceased to practise, adapt, and revitalize their cultures. Many ceremonies once banned by law have returned as vibrant expressions of identity. Languages once suppressed in residential schools are being taught to new generations. Art, music, and literature by Indigenous creators now shape Canadian culture at large, from the paintings of Norval Morrisseau and Kent Monkman to the films of Alanis Obomsawin. Contemporary issues addressed in this encyclopedia include health and wellness, education, urban Indigenous experiences, and environmental advocacy. They also include the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, an ongoing national tragedy that underscores the intersections of colonial violence, racism, and gender.

Entries on modern political movements demonstrate how Indigenous peoples are reshaping Canada. Idle No More, the assertion of water rights, and the mobilization around the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) all show that Indigenous activism is not marginal but central to national debates. Economic development, entrepreneurship, and digital media initiatives reveal the creative ways Indigenous communities are building futures grounded in tradition and innovation.

ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

The encyclopedia is organized into five substantive sections plus appendices. The first, on precontact traditions, emphasizes cultural and ecological diversity. The second, on historical contexts and documents, examines treaties, policies, court cases, and episodes of resistance. The third, on prominent figures, highlights leaders, activists, artists, and intellectuals. The fourth, on contemporary issues and culture, addresses the challenges and opportunities facing Indigenous peoples today. Finally, a fifth section provides concise profiles of Indigenous nations across Canada, offering readers a quick reference to their histories and status. Each entry follows a consistent structure: an overview, a detailed narrative, a discussion of lasting impact, a bibliography, and see also references. This format allows readers to move easily between topics, compare themes, and pursue further study. The goal is to provide both accessibility for general readers and depth for students and researchers.

EDITORIAL PHILOSOPHY

Editing a work of this scale requires constant negotiation between breadth and depth, inclusivity, and focus. It is not possible to include every community, event, or individual in the detail they deserve. What can be done is to provide a frame-

PRECONTACT INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS AND HISTORY

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES OF CANADA

Indigenous languages are foundational to the cultural, historical, and political identities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada. Before European contact, hundreds of distinct languages were spoken across the land, reflecting thousands of years of adaptation, trade, migration, and cultural development. These languages, organized into several major families such as Algonquian, Iroquoian, Dene (Athabaskan), Siouan, Wakashan, Salishan, Tsimshianic, Ktunaxa, and Inuit-Yupik-Unangan (Eskimo-Aleut), encode unique worldviews and store extensive ecological, spiritual, and historical knowledge. Colonization—including the imposition of English and French through education, governance, and law—precipitated severe language loss. Residential schools punished Indigenous children for speaking their mother tongues, leading to intergenerational language disruption. Today, while many Indigenous languages are critically endangered, others remain vibrant through community-based initiatives, immersion schools, legislation, and technology-driven revitalization. The status of Indigenous languages has become a focal point in reconciliation efforts, cultural resurgence, and the assertion of Indigenous rights under instruments such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

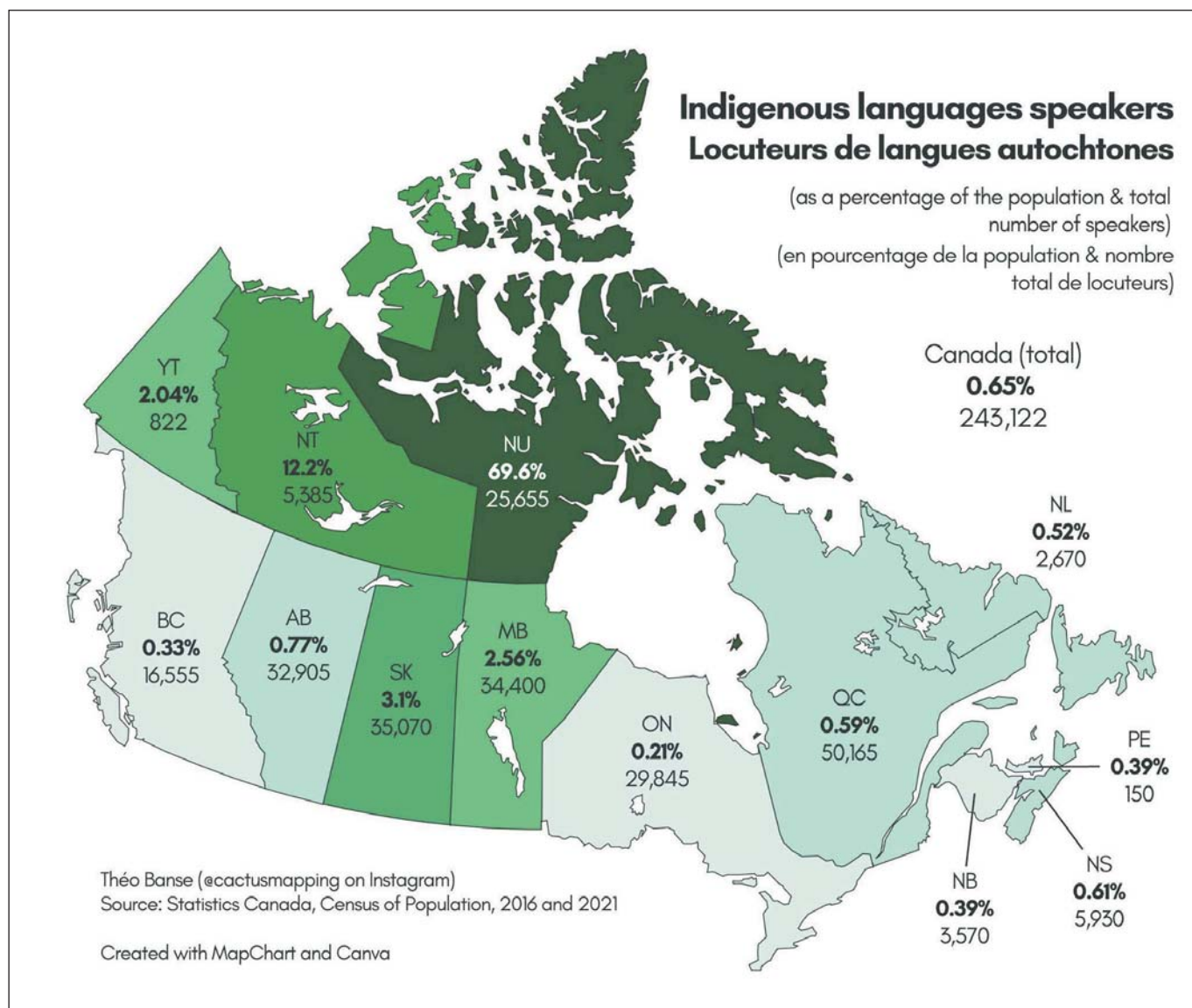
PRECONTACT LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Prior to European arrival, the land now known as Canada was home to an extraordinary mosaic of Indigenous languages, shaped over millennia by cultural exchange, migration, intermarriage, and adaptation to diverse environments. Linguists estimate that more than sixty distinct languages, organized into at least a dozen language families and several isolates, were spoken across the continent north of the 49th

parallel. This diversity reflected both the deep time depth of Indigenous presence in the region and the complex networks of interaction—trade routes, ceremonial gatherings, and alliances—that linked communities while preserving distinct linguistic identities.

The Algonquian family, covering vast territories of the eastern woodlands, Subarctic, and Plains, included languages such as Cree, Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin), Innu-aimun, Mi'kmaw, and Blackfoot. These languages were spoken from the Atlantic coast to the Rocky Mountains, with dialects adapted to regional ecologies and trade networks. In the lower Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley, Iroquoian languages—Mohawk (Kanien'kéha), Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, and Huron-Wendat—were spoken by agricultural societies whose longhouses, clan systems, and confederacies were tightly bound to their languages. Across the vast western Subarctic, Dene (Athabaskan) languages, including those of the Dene, Tlcho, and Gwich'in, reflected the mobility and seasonal hunting cycles of northern life, extending into the Mackenzie Basin and the Yukon.

Along the Pacific coast, where some of the highest precontact population densities in North America were found, linguistic diversity was especially pronounced. Wakashan languages such as Nuu-chah-nulth, Kwak'waka, and Heiltsuk, Salishan languages including Halkomelem, Secwepemctsin, and Nlaka'pamux, and the four languages of the Tsimshianic family were rooted in the social, ceremonial, and ecological systems of rich marine and forest environments. In the Arctic, the Inuit-Yupik-Unangan family—represented in Canada by Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, and Inuvialuktun—formed the communicative backbone of communities whose sophisticated vocabularies reflected deep, practical knowledge of sea ice, snow, weather patterns, and wildlife behaviour. Elsewhere, languages such as Ktunaxa



Indigenous language speakers in Canada. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

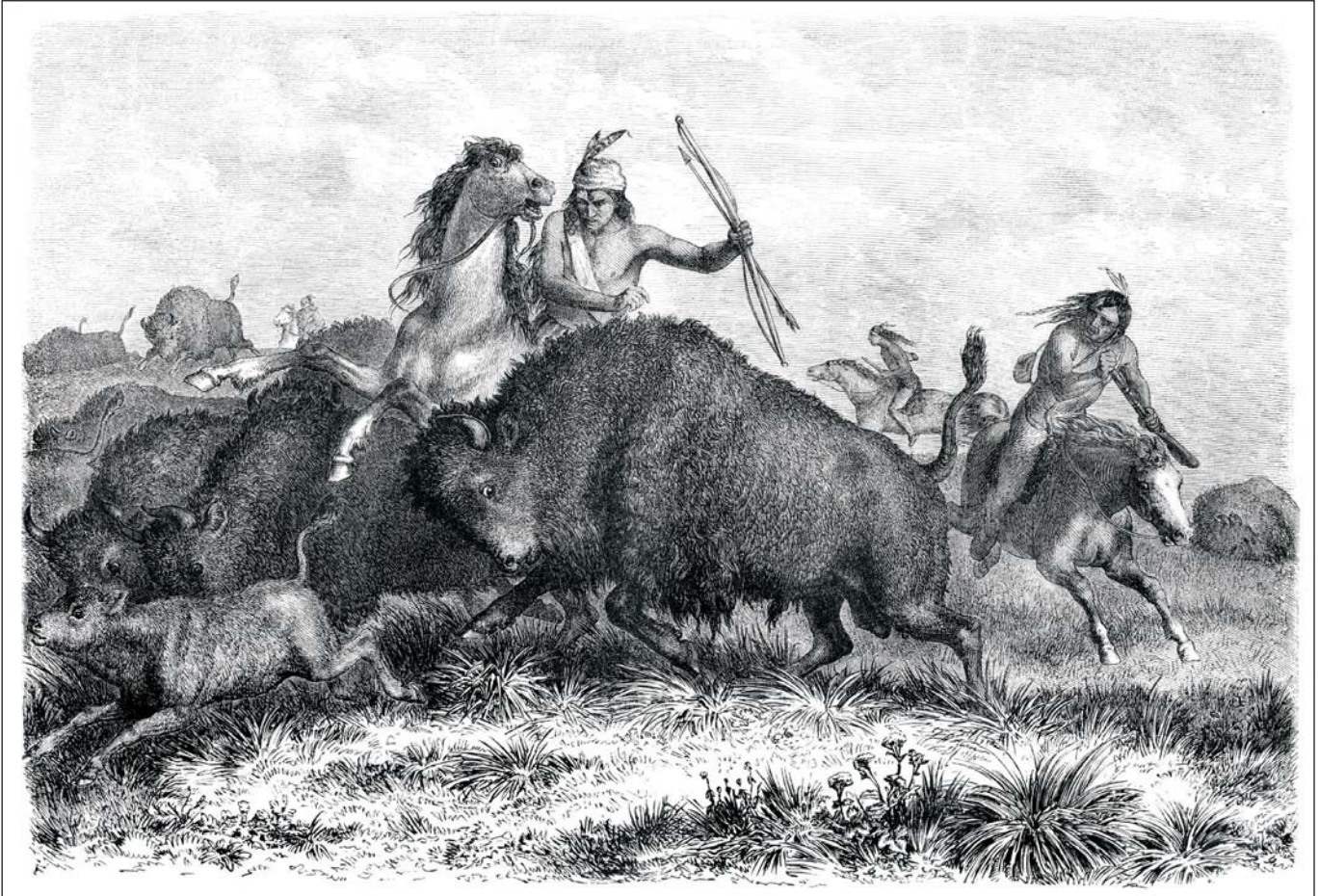
were isolates, unrelated to any other known language and carrying unique grammatical and phonological systems that attest to their ancient, independent origins.

Each Indigenous language embodied a unique conceptual framework, worldview, and relationship to the land. Vocabulary often reflected ecological specificity—for instance, Inuit languages contain extensive terminology for types of sea ice and snow conditions; Salishan languages employ complex kinship terminology that encodes obligations, responsibilities, and social bonds; and Plains Cree uses verb morphology to convey animacy, expressing nuanced relationships between people, animals, plants, and the environment. Oral traditions—myths, histories, songs, and ceremonial narratives—were inseparable from their linguistic form. Meaning was

embedded not only in words but also in rhythm, cadence, metaphor, and performance. In this way, language served as both a repository and a living vehicle of culture, ensuring the transmission of identity, law, governance, and ecological stewardship from generation to generation.

COLONIAL DISRUPTION

European colonization profoundly disrupted Indigenous language transmission in Canada. Early encounters with missionaries and colonial administrators brought the introduction of written orthographies for some Indigenous languages, often adapted from Latin scripts. While these writing systems occasionally facilitated limited literacy in Indigenous languages, they were more commonly intended as tools for



On the Plains, the bison hunt was a collective endeavour requiring coordination and specialized knowledge of animal behaviour. Image via iStock/ Grafissimo. [Used under license.]

fore and after hunts, ceremonies honoured the bison as a sacred being who gave itself for the people's survival.

In the Subarctic, where long winters and vast boreal forests dominated the landscape, Dene and Cree communities developed subsistence cycles that balanced winter trapping of beaver, marten, and fox with summer fishing and gathering. These patterns followed the migration of caribou and the spawning of fish, and required intricate knowledge of waterways, weather patterns, and animal behaviour. Seasonal travel routes were maintained over generations, and navigation skills—using stars, river currents, and landmarks—were passed down through oral instruction.

In the Eastern Woodlands, the Anishinaabe and Mi'kmaq adapted to mixed forest and freshwater environments, combining fishing, maple sugaring, and agriculture. The "Three Sisters" planting of corn, beans, and squash exemplified agricultural knowledge that sustained communities nutritionally and ecologically. Among the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy), a sophisticated agricultural economy sup-

ported dense populations and complex political systems. The matrilineal clan structure—symbolized by animal totems such as Turtle, Wolf, and Bear—bound members across multiple nations and provided the foundation for the Great Law of Peace, a constitution that balanced local autonomy with confederate unity.

Inuit societies in the Arctic organized around seasonal hunting of seals, whales, walrus, and caribou. The extreme environment demanded specialized technologies, such as the *qajaq* (kayak) for summer hunting and the *qamutiik* (sled) for winter travel. Kinship was both biological and adoptive, ensuring that no child was left without a family. Naming practices linked children to deceased relatives or respected community members, carrying forward their spiritual qualities and reinforcing a sense of continuity across generations.

Across these varied regions, kinship was the central organizing principle of social life. Extended family networks determined responsibility for child-rearing, resource sharing, and political decision-making. Alliances formed through

The nineteenth-century decline of the bison, along with military and colonial expansion, brought profound changes. Nations adapted by shifting to horse-based trade, trapping, and agriculture, while maintaining ceremonial life and political structures. Today, Plains Indigenous peoples continue to draw on ancestral traditions—both mobile and sedentary—to assert sovereignty, revitalize languages, and protect grassland ecosystems.

ENVIRONMENT AND PEOPLES

The Canadian Plains are part of a larger North American grassland system that stretches from the Arctic tree line to central Texas. In Canada, the northern Plains transition gradually into aspen parkland and boreal forest, creating a mosaic of ecological zones that allowed for seasonal foraging beyond the open prairie. The climate is characterized by cold winters, hot summers, and periodic droughts, with few natural barriers to travel.

The northern Plains, home to the Blackfoot Confederacy and Plains Cree, were dominated by shortgrass prairie and open river valleys. To the east, the Assiniboine, Saulteaux, and Dakota occupied mixed prairie and parkland, exploiting both grassland and woodland resources. In the transitional Plains of southern Manitoba and eastern Saskatchewan, Nakota and other groups combined bison hunting with fishing, trapping, and small-scale horticulture, reflecting closer ties to Subarctic and Eastern Woodlands lifeways.

While all Plains peoples relied heavily on bison, the diversity of their territories meant that hunting strategies, seasonal movements, and ceremonial emphases varied across the region.

SUBSISTENCE AND SEASONAL CYCLES

The bison hunt was the economic and spiritual centre of Plains life. Hunts were timed to the animals' seasonal movements: in late spring and early summer for fresh meat and hides for tipis, and in late summer or early fall for fattier meat and thicker hides for winter clothing. Large-scale communal hunts required extensive planning, with leaders coordinating scouting parties, drivers, and butchers. Methods included driving herds into coulees, over jumps, or into corrals (pounds) for efficient killing. Every part of the animal was used—meat dried into pemmican, hides tanned for tipis and clothing, sinew for thread, and bones for tools.

Plant foods supplemented the diet and provided important trade goods. Prairie turnips, chokecherries, and wild plums



Stumickosúcks of the Kainai Plains Indians. George Catlin, 1832. Image via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

were gathered in season, while berries were dried for winter use. River valleys offered fishing opportunities, particularly in transitional zones.

The introduction of the horse in the eighteenth century revolutionized Plains subsistence. Horses increased mobility, expanded the range of hunting, and facilitated larger communal gatherings. They also became a form of wealth and a critical element in trade and warfare.

Seasonal cycles often involved wintering in sheltered river valleys, spring hunts for smaller game, summer bison hunts combined with large intertribal gatherings, and fall hunts followed by dispersal into smaller bands to conserve resources.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Plains social structures were flexible, accommodating seasonal mobility and variable resource availability.

Bands—extended family groups numbering a few dozen to a few hundred people—formed the primary political units, led by chiefs chosen for hunting skill, generosity, and diplomacy. Leadership was situational, with war leaders, hunt



Photo via iStock/andreybl. [Used under license.]

paintings and carvings tied to narratives of transformers and spirit beings. These sites were sacred, marking places where the spiritual and physical worlds intersected.

ARCTIC ART AND SYMBOLISM

Inuit peoples developed a distinctive artistic tradition rooted in their Arctic environment. Carvings in ivory, bone, antler, and stone represented animals such as seals, whales, polar bears, and birds, often in stylized forms that emphasized spiritual qualities rather than literal appearance. These carvings were not simply decorative but carried amuletic power, ensuring hunting success or spiritual protection. Miniature carvings of tools or animals were given to children as teaching aids and as charms.

Mask-making was also central to Arctic art. Wooden masks, sometimes painted and adorned with feathers or fur, were used in ceremonial dances that invoked spirits or commemorated mythic events. Symbolism was embedded in every detail: the shape of a mask might represent a spirit-being, while its colours conveyed its power. Clothing, too, carried

symbolic meaning. Parkas and boots were decorated with patterns and fringes that identified families, communities, and spiritual affiliations.

SUBARCTIC TRADITIONS

In the Subarctic, Cree, Dene, and Innu peoples incorporated art and symbolism into clothing, tools, and ceremonial objects. Quillwork, created from porcupine quills dyed in natural colours and sewn into hides, produced intricate geometric and floral designs. These patterns often symbolized connections to the natural world, embodying teachings about balance and reciprocity. Clothing decorated with quillwork or beadwork (after contact) identified family ties and community affiliation.

Drums, carved and painted with symbolic motifs, were used in ceremonies to communicate with spirits. Rattles, amulets, and medicine bundles embodied spiritual power, often decorated with feathers, fur, or painted designs. Subarctic art was closely tied to hunting and healing, reinforcing the interdependence of humans and animals.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND DOCUMENTS

COLONIAL COMPETITION FOR EMPIRE

The history of colonial competition for empire in North America profoundly shaped the destinies of Indigenous nations in what became Canada. From the sixteenth century through the nineteenth, European powers—including France, Britain, Spain, and later the United States—vied for territory, resources, and strategic advantage across the continent. This competition unfolded through exploration, trade, missionary activity, diplomacy, and warfare. For Indigenous peoples, it meant both opportunity and peril: opportunities to form alliances, expand trade networks, and exert political influence, but also exposure to disease, displacement, and the erosion of sovereignty.

Indigenous nations were never passive bystanders in this competition. They played active roles as allies, traders, and diplomats, shaping the outcomes of imperial rivalries. The Mi'kmaq and Wabanaki Confederacy aligned with the French in the Maritimes; the Haudenosaunee Confederacy skillfully negotiated alliances with both French and British powers; and Plains and Subarctic nations navigated shifting trade and military landscapes as European empires expanded westward. Indigenous strategies emphasized autonomy, reciprocity, and the defence of land and lifeways, though the intensifying scale of colonial conflict ultimately eroded their independence.

By the eighteenth century, Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War brought French colonial ambitions in Canada to an end, establishing British dominance. Yet competition for empire did not cease. The American Revolution and the expansion of the United States introduced new pressures, while the fur trade drew Indigenous nations into rivalries between the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC). For Indigenous peoples, the long history of imperial competition left legacies of disrupted territories, altered political land-

scapes, and new forms of colonial governance. Yet it also affirmed their resilience, diplomacy, and enduring sovereignty amid the clash of empires.

EARLY EUROPEAN INTRUSIONS

The earliest phase of colonial competition for empire began with exploration and the establishment of trade networks in the sixteenth century. French explorers such as Jacques Cartier, arriving in the St. Lawrence River region in the 1530s, encountered powerful Indigenous nations including the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, Mi'kmaq, and Innu. These encounters were marked by exchanges of goods and information, but also by misunderstandings and violence. English and Basque fishermen along the Atlantic Coast engaged in seasonal exchanges with Mi'kmaq and Beothuk communities, trading metal tools for furs and food.

Although these early contacts were intermittent, they established patterns that would define later competition. Indigenous peoples recognized the value of European goods—iron knives, copper kettles, and textiles—while Europeans depended on Indigenous knowledge of navigation, subsistence, and diplomacy. The fur trade quickly became central, with beaver pelts sought for European fashion markets. From the beginning, Indigenous nations shaped the terms of exchange, integrating European goods into existing systems of trade and reciprocity.

FRENCH IMPERIAL AMBITIONS

France emerged as one of the most ambitious imperial powers in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Motivated by both economic and religious goals, the French Crown envisioned New France as a continental empire stretching from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Mississippi Valley. Yet unlike the British, whose empire was characterized by waves of settler colonization, France's colonial ambitions depended on a relatively small European

PROMINENT INDIGENOUS FIGURES

BIG BEAR (MISTAHIMASKWA)

Big Bear (Mistahimaskwa, 1825–1888) was a Plains Cree chief whose leadership during the late nineteenth century exemplified the struggle of Indigenous peoples to maintain autonomy, dignity, and sovereignty in the face of Canadian expansion. Known for his eloquence, vision, and determination, he resisted pressure to sign early Numbered Treaties, warning that the promises of the Crown would not be honoured. Unlike many leaders who saw treaties as a necessary survival strategy during the collapse of the buffalo economy, Big Bear sought collective bargaining by all Cree nations to secure better terms.

Though he eventually signed Treaty No. 6 under duress in 1882, Big Bear remained critical of Canadian policies and worked tirelessly to protect his people's independence. During the North-West Resistance of 1885, his band became associated with violence at Frog Lake, though he had argued consistently against bloodshed. Convicted of treason and sentenced to prison, Big Bear was released early due to ill health and died in 1888, a broken man but remembered by his people as a leader who had sought peace and justice.

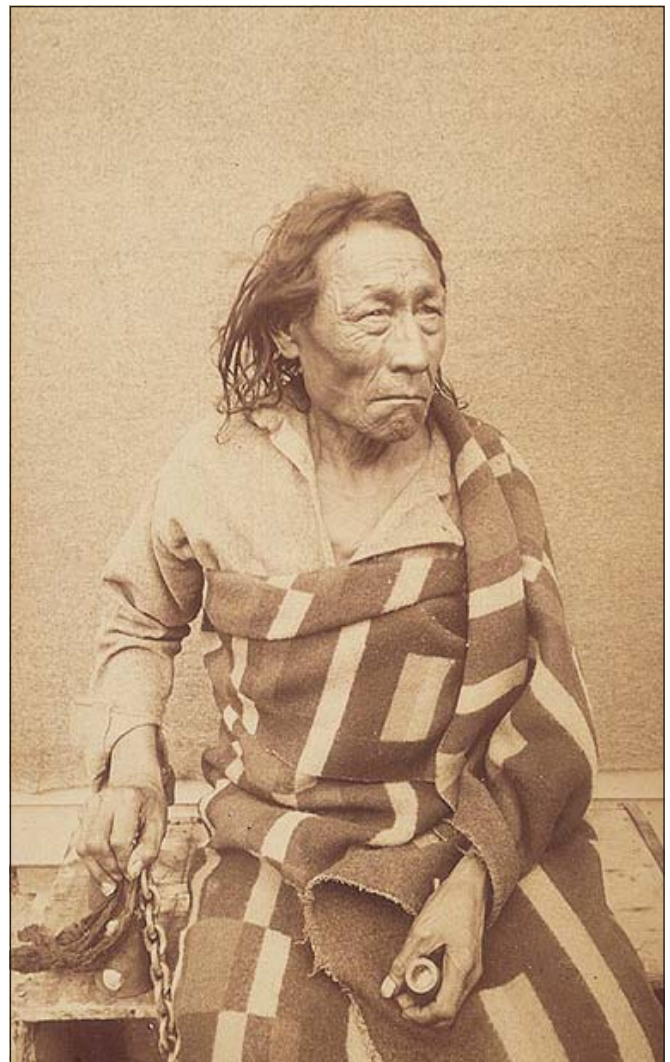
Big Bear's legacy lies in his foresight and his efforts to create unity among the Cree. He is remembered as one of the most important Indigenous leaders of his time, whose resistance to unjust policies and advocacy for collective action anticipated later movements for Indigenous sovereignty.

EARLY LIFE AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Big Bear was born around 1825 in the Plains region of what is now Saskatchewan. His Cree name, Mistahimaskwa, translates as "Big Bear," a name that reflected both his stature and his later reputation for strength and resilience. He grew up during a period when the Cree were adapting to the fur trade economy, relying on hunting, trapping, and trading with Hudson's Bay Company posts. Like many Plains Cree,

his family moved seasonally to follow the buffalo herds, which remained central to subsistence and culture.

As a young man, Big Bear earned respect for his hunting skills, generosity, and leadership in war and diplomacy. Oral traditions describe him as thoughtful, deliberate, and capable of using speech to persuade rather than relying solely on



Big Bear, c. 1885. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

digenous rights, and Indigenous resistance that nonetheless shaped the nation. His martyrdom did not end the Métis struggle but ensured that it would remain at the heart of Canadian identity.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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See also: Gabriel Dumont; Indian Act (1876–present); Indigenous Resistance in the Colonial Era; Métis Scrip System; Policy of Assimilation; The Riel Rebellions; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

Buffy Sainte-Marie (1941–) is a Cree singer-songwriter, educator, activist, and visual artist whose career has spanned more than six decades. Born on the Piapot Cree Nation in Saskatchewan and raised in the United States after being adopted, she rose to prominence in the 1960s folk music scene with songs that combined lyrical innovation, social protest, and Indigenous themes. Sainte-Marie is recognized not only as a groundbreaking artist—blending folk, rock, electronic, and Indigenous musical traditions—but also as a powerful advocate for Indigenous rights, education, and cultural survival.

Her compositions, including “Universal Soldier,” “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,” and “Until It’s Time for You to Go,” became internationally renowned, covered by artists such as Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, and Neil Diamond. In addition to her music, Sainte-Marie pioneered the use of electronic instruments, composed for film and television, and became a cultural educator through her work on Sesame Street and her Cradleboard Teaching Project.

Throughout her career, Sainte-Marie’s advocacy has been as significant as her artistry. Blacklisted by the U.S. government in the 1970s for her activism against the Vietnam War and her outspoken support for Indigenous rights, she none-

theless persisted in using her platform to raise awareness of colonial injustices and to celebrate Indigenous resilience. She remains one of the most important Indigenous cultural figures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a legacy that blends art, activism, and education into a lifelong commitment to justice and creativity.

EARLY LIFE AND ADOPTION

Buffy Sainte-Marie was born Beverly Sainte-Marie on February 20, 1941, on the Piapot Cree Nation in Qu’Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan. As part of the broader displacement and assimilation policies of the mid-twentieth century, she was adopted as an infant and raised in Massachusetts by non-Indigenous parents of Mi’kmaq and French heritage. The details of her early life reflect the disruptions faced by many Indigenous children during this period, often separated from their families and communities.

Though raised outside of her Cree community, Sainte-Marie retained a sense of cultural identity. As a young adult, she reconnected with her birth family and the Piapot Nation, forging lifelong ties that deepened her understanding of her



Buffy Sainte-Marie in 2015. Photo by Drpeterstockdale, via Wikimedia Commons.

MODERN CULTURE AND ISSUES

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OF CANADA (TRC)

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was a landmark national process created to document the history and lasting consequences of the Indian Residential School system for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Functioning from 2008 to 2015, the TRC collected testimony from thousands of survivors and others affected by the schools, examined extensive archival records, and produced a comprehensive, multivolume Final Report. Its work culminated in 94 Calls to Action aimed at redressing the systemic harms of residential schooling and advancing reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

While the TRC emerged in the early twenty-first century, its roots lay in more than a century of colonial policies and decades of survivor activism, litigation, and public education. It was part of the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. The Commission's processes, grounded in survivor experiences and Indigenous cultural protocols, brought a new level of national awareness to Canada's colonial past and its continuing legacies.

THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM AND ASSIMILATION POLICY

From the 1880s until the late twentieth century, the federal government operated—often in partnership with Christian churches—more than 130 residential schools across Canada. These schools were designed explicitly to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture and society.

The policy foundations for this system were embedded in the Indian Act (1876) and in earlier colonial ordinances, which gave the government sweeping authority over Indigenous lives. The Department of Indian Affairs, created in 1880, oversaw the schools in cooperation with church bodies

such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist (later United) Church. Government and church officials justified the system as a civilizing mission, often citing a need to replace Indigenous spiritual beliefs and cultural practices with Christianity and Western education.

Children were frequently removed from their homes—sometimes forcibly—and sent to schools hundreds of kilometres away. Once there, they were forbidden to speak their Indigenous languages or practise cultural traditions. Instruction emphasized agricultural and domestic training over academic achievement, reflecting assumptions about the limited roles Indigenous people could play in Canadian society.

EARLY CHALLENGES AND SURVIVOR ADVOCACY

Numerous historical studies and survivor accounts describe chronic underfunding, overcrowding, inadequate food, and poor medical care in residential schools. Physical punishment was common, and many children suffered sexual abuse at the hands of staff. High mortality rates from disease, malnutrition, and accidents were a grim feature of the system's early decades. The emotional and psychological trauma of separation from family, combined with systemic cultural suppression, had lasting intergenerational effects, contributing to social disruption, loss of language, and cycles of poverty and abuse.

By the mid-twentieth century, Indigenous leaders, journalists, and some church officials began to speak publicly about the harmful effects of residential schooling. The Hawthorn Report of the 1960s identified Indigenous peoples as “citizens plus” who retained inherent rights, but government policy continued to push assimilation. In 1969, the federal “White Paper” proposed dismantling the Indian Act and ending special status for Indigenous peoples—a proposal met with widespread Indigenous opposition and a growing wave of political activism.

INDIGENOUS NATIONS OF CANADA

ABENAKI

The Abenaki are one of the Indigenous peoples of northeastern North America, historically occupying territories that extend across what is now Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and southern Quebec. They are part of the larger Wabanaki Confederacy, a political and cultural alliance of Algonquian-speaking peoples whose name, *Abenaki*, means “people of the dawn.” The Abenaki maintained complex seasonal subsistence cycles based on agriculture, hunting, and fishing, and were well known for their birchbark canoes, maple sugar production, and woven basketry. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Abenaki communities faced intense pressures from European colonization, including epidemics, wars with British settlers, and missionary efforts by the French. Many migrated north to mission settlements in Quebec, while others remained in the United States and endured centuries of displacement, assimilationist policies, and discrimination. In Canada, the Abenaki are represented by two federally recognized First Nations, Odanak and Wolinak, both in Quebec. In the United States, state recognition has been achieved in Vermont, though federal recognition has not been granted. Today, Abenaki communities are engaged in cultural resurgence, language revitalization, and environmental stewardship, reasserting their place within the larger Indigenous landscape of northeastern North America.

HOMELANDS AND EARLY LIFE

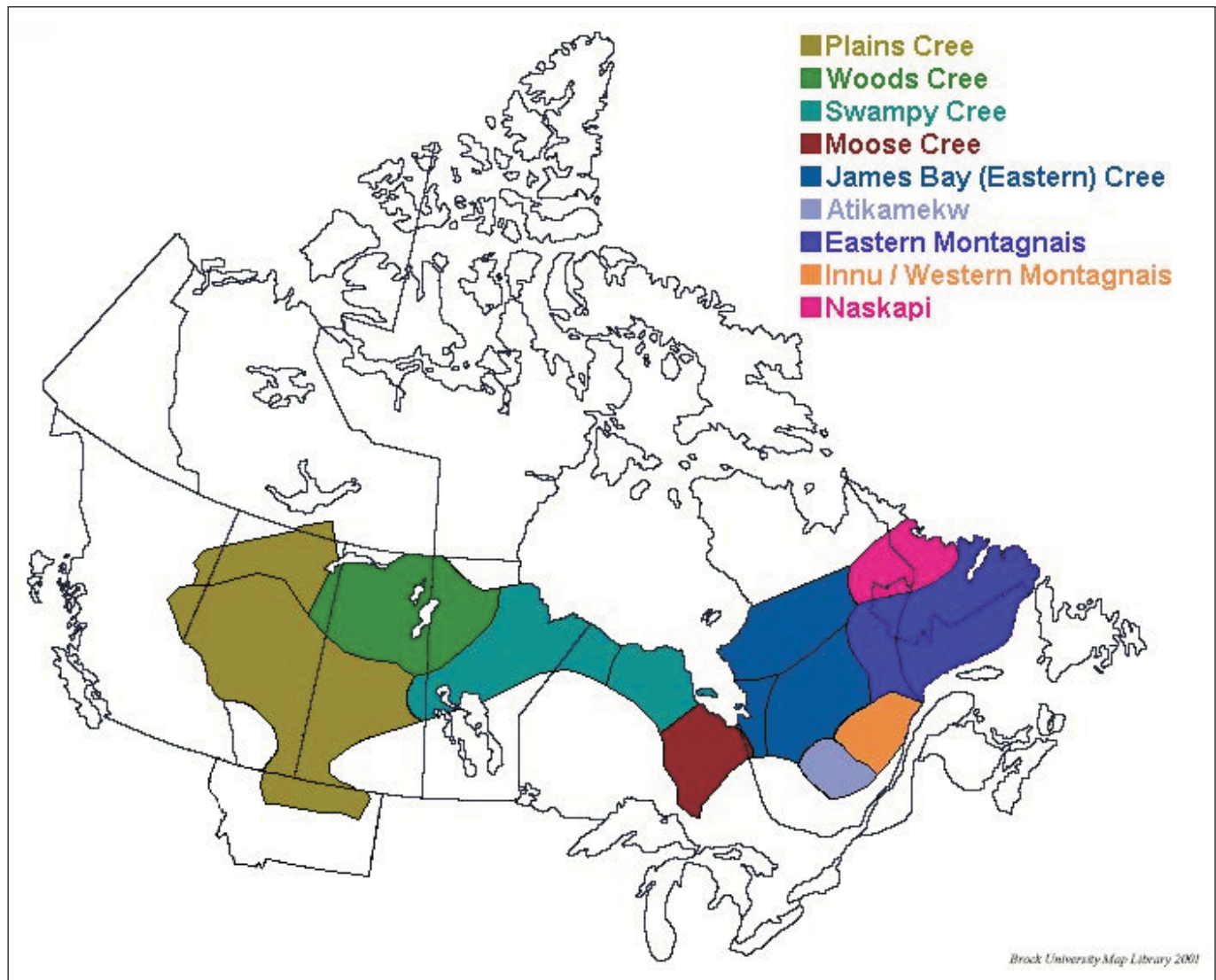
The history of the Abenaki people extends back to time immemorial. Oral traditions locate their origins in the northeastern woodlands, where their identity as “people of the dawn” links them to the rising sun over the Atlantic. Archaeological evidence indicates thousands of years of continuous occupation in the Connecticut River Valley, Lake Champlain Basin, and along the St. Lawrence River. The precontact period saw Abenaki societies organized around village-based

communities that practised agriculture, particularly the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, complemented by hunting, fishing, and gathering. Their material culture reflected the rich resources of their homeland, with birchbark canoes and wigwams, dugout canoes for riverine travel, and finely woven baskets for storage and trade.

The Abenaki language belongs to the Eastern Algonquian family, closely related to the languages of neighbouring peoples such as the Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and Maliseet. Within the Abenaki themselves, dialect diversity existed, sometimes marked as Western Abenaki, associated with groups in Vermont and New Hampshire, and Eastern Abenaki, more prominent in coastal Maine. Language served



Abenaki Couple, an 18th-century watercolour by an unknown artist. Courtesy of the City of Montreal Records Management & Archives, Montreal, Canada. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]



Brock University Map Library 2001

Map of Cree and closely related languages. Image by Lilsmuuth, via Wikimedia Commons.

Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC). Their mobility and adaptability allowed them to expand westward, often ahead of European settlement, and to establish relationships with numerous other Indigenous nations. Colonial expansion, however, brought disease, land loss, treaties, and assimilationist policies that disrupted Cree autonomy. The imposition of reserves, residential schools, and the Indian Act in Canada undermined Cree governance and cultural practices, but communities maintained resilience.

Today, Cree First Nations are spread across much of Canada, from James Bay and northern Quebec to Alberta and the Northwest Territories. They continue to revitalize their language and traditions while asserting sovereignty in political and legal arenas. Cree leadership has been prominent in modern Indigenous rights movements, from treaty negotia-

tions to environmental protection, ensuring that the Cree remain a vital force in Canada's Indigenous landscape.

HOMELANDS AND CULTURAL LIFE

The Cree homeland encompasses a vast range of environments. In the west, the Plains Cree (Nehiyawak) occupied the grasslands of Saskatchewan and Alberta, where bison were central to their subsistence and culture. In the boreal forests of northern Manitoba and Ontario, the Swampy Cree (Omushkegowak) adapted to wetlands and rivers, relying on moose, fish, and wildfowl. In Quebec and Labrador, the Woodland Cree (Iyiyiw) thrived in forested regions where hunting, fishing, and canoe travel defined life. This diversity of environments fostered distinct adaptations while reinforcing a shared identity.



Iglulingmiut Inuit women and child in traditional parkas, 1999. Photo by Ansgar Walk, via Wikimedia Commons.

The twentieth century brought greater intervention. Government programs encouraged or forced Inuit to settle in permanent communities, disrupting seasonal mobility. Families were sometimes relocated to unfamiliar regions, often under false promises of better resources. These relocations caused hardship and loss of traditional knowledge tied to specific lands.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS AND CULTURAL SUPPRESSION

Like other Indigenous peoples in Canada, Inuit children were subjected to residential schools and day schools, where they were forbidden to speak Inuktitut and often suffered abuse. The trauma of these schools disrupted cultural transmission and left lasting scars. Efforts to assimilate Inuit

through education, religion, and government policies reflected broader Canadian colonialism.

Inuit families also endured the sled dog slaughter of the 1950s and 1960s, when government and police officials killed thousands of *qimmiit* (sled dogs), undermining transportation and contributing to the decline of traditional hunting. Although framed as public safety measures, these actions are remembered as part of broader colonial efforts to control Inuit life.

INUIT POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND SELF-DETERMINATION

The second half of the twentieth century marked a turning point as Inuit began organizing politically to assert their rights. Organizations such as the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada

INDIGENOUS POPULATION STATISTICS

Indigenous Population of Canada, 2021 Census

	Total - Indigenous identity	Indigenous identity	Single Indigenous responses	First Nations (North American Indian)	Métis	Inuk (Inuit)	Multiple Indigenous responses	Indigenous responses not included elsewhere	Non- Indigenous identity
Newfoundland and Labrador	502,095	46,545	43,095	28,435	7,330	7,330	685	2,765	455,550
Prince Edward Island	150,485	3,385	3,185	2,165	845	180	30	170	147,095
Nova Scotia	955,855	52,430	50,245	28,050	21,090	1,100	885	1,305	903,430
New Brunswick	759,195	33,300	31,810	20,955	10,170	685	490	995	725,895
Quebec	8,308,480	205,010	193,365	116,555	61,010	15,800	3,135	8,510	8,103,465
Ontario	14,031,755	406,585	389,955	251,030	134,615	4,310	7,120	9,520	13,625,165
Manitoba	1,307,190	237,190	232,345	134,890	96,725	730	2,935	1,905	1,069,995
Saskatchewan	1,103,200	187,885	184,430	121,175	62,800	460	2,030	1,425	915,310
Alberta	4,177,720	284,470	276,060	145,640	127,470	2,950	4,780	3,620	3,893,250
British Columbia	4,915,940	290,210	279,670	180,085	97,860	1,720	5,980	4,560	4,625,735
Yukon	39,585	8,810	8,480	6,935	1,285	260	190	140	30,780
Northwest Territories	40,380	20,035	19,355	12,315	2,890	4,155	405	275	20,340
Nunavut	36,600	31,390	31,160	180	120	30,865	195	30	5,210
Canada total	36,328,480	1,807,250	1,743,165	1,048,400	624,220	70,540	28,860	35,225	34,521,230

Statistics Canada. Table 98-10-0292-01 Indigenous identity population by gender and age: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810029201>

Characteristic	Counts		
	Total	Men +	Women +
Indigenous population			
Total - Indigenous identity for the population in private households - 25% sample data ⁴⁴	36,328,480	17,937,165	18,391,315
Indigenous identity ⁴⁵	1,807,250	877,645	929,605
Single Indigenous responses ⁴⁶	1,743,165	847,385	895,785
First Nations (North American Indian)	1,048,405	506,515	541,890
Métis	624,220	306,220	318,000
Inuk (Inuit)	70,540	34,645	35,895
Multiple Indigenous responses ⁴⁷	28,855	13,645	15,215
Indigenous responses not included elsewhere ⁴⁸	35,225	16,620	18,610
Non-Indigenous identity	34,521,230	17,059,520	17,461,710
Total - Registered or Treaty Indian status for the population in private households - 25% sample data ⁴⁴	36,328,480	17,937,165	18,391,315
Registered or Treaty Indian ⁴⁹	831,720	402,310	429,405
Not a Registered or Treaty Indian	35,496,755	17,534,850	17,961,905

The First Nations population data presented here reflects both the historical resilience and the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples across Canada. Population tables help scholars and communities understand demographic growth, geographic distribution, and generational changes. Historically, colonial policies such as forced removals, disease epidemics introduced by Europeans, and assimilationist practices significantly reduced First Nations populations. Yet the table demonstrates recovery and growth, especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as First Nations

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