

Canada's First Nations: An Introduction

Historical Overview

Canada's First Nations have been in the country we now call Canada for at least 12,000 years, perhaps much longer. For almost all that time, they survived very well in a harsh environment, making everything they needed without polluting the water, or air, and without destroying the land or decimating the animal populations.

Each First Nation had self-government and recognized the sovereignty of other First Nations. They all developed unique systems of government, and complex material cultures (tools, clothing, shelter, transportation, etc.)

Most First Nations of Canada lived mainly from hunting and fishing. They migrated seasonally to get food. They did not wander aimlessly. They moved their camps from season to season to specific places and areas where they knew there would be food. In one season, they would hunt large animals; in another they would fish; in the fall they would gather berries, and so on. The only farming people were the Iroquois and Hurons, and related tribes, in what is now southern Ontario.

The Sacred Circle of Life

Seasonal migration was a continuous pattern, with each group following the same pattern each year, according to the natural cycles of the plants and animals. Members of each clan usually came together in a big gathering at least once a year. Because the regular seasonal pattern of life and movement of the animals and people was a continuous pattern, like a circle with no beginning and no end, the circle became a sacred symbol for First Nations people, the circle of life and renewal.

Major Migrations

There have been many large scale migrations across North America over time because of climate changes, epidemics, changes in the migration routes of animals, one group expanding into another's territories, victory and defeat in warfare, and many other reasons.

These large scale movements are not the same as the seasonal migrations to follow food sources.

Trade

First Peoples had many well established trading patterns and trade alliances throughout North America. Archaeologists have found plenty of evidence of early trade of items such as pottery, silver, and copper tools.

Complex Cultures

Canada's First Peoples developed complex cultures and lived in harmony with their environment. Everything they had was made from the land around them and its plants and animals - food, clothes, shelter, wood, tools, weapons, dyes, decoration, musical instruments, and ceremonial artifacts.

First Nations people created several distinct cultures, each based on adaptation to a different Canadian environment. Each cultural group was made up of several nations with similarities in language, social structure, and similar ways of making a living from the environment they lived in. Each group of people developed distinctive housing, tools, clothing, transportation, tools, and weapons, and ceremonies, and had their own stories about their origins, and how to interpret the world around them. They used many kinds of medicines from plants. Many of the medicines we use today are based on First Nations knowledge of the healing qualities of certain plants.

Government

Canada's First Nations all had complex social systems, with several levels of government based on the family, the band or clan, and the nation or tribe. Their leaders, or Chiefs, were chosen in different ways, but were always people who had special leadership qualities that brought them respect from their people.

In most First Nations, a council of elders advised the Chief, and decisions were made by consensus, which means that the council would discuss a matter of importance, and then would make a decision that the majority agreed on. First Nations recognized each other as sovereign nations, and made friendship treaties, or military alliances with each other. Some nations were traditional enemies, and went through periods of war or peace.

Religion

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

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

Oral Tradition

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

There were usually specific people in the tribe or band who knew their whole history, and related these events to others at special gatherings. Tales of important

events were told and retold around the campfire, as stories are told everywhere.

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

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

Legends and Stories

Like every human culture in the world, Canada's First Peoples have stories to explain the origins of the earth and its animals and people. First Peoples' creation stories often contain references to specific landmarks, such as mountains or lakes, that give us good information about the areas that a group of people lived in, and the routes they followed as they migrated over the centuries to the areas they now live in. Canada's First Peoples also have many other wonderful stories and legends about real or imaginary characters and settings, just as every group of people on earth do. These stories were not written down, but were passed on through their oral tradition. Stories were told over and over, and everyone learned them. Children grew up, and passed the stories onto their children.

Stories among First Nations peoples serve the same purpose as stories do for other cultures all over the world. They entertain, they teach listeners how to deal with the world around them, they teach people about good and evil, about bravery and cowardice; they make listeners think about the consequences of their behavior; they scare children with spooky stories so they do not wander away from home, and so on.