



*1990: As the Manitoba Legislature moved to vote on the issue of constitutional reform, the honourable member Elijah Harper sat stoically holding an eagle feather and steadfastly refused to give the Manitoba Legislature the vote it needed.*



*In March 1997, Melissa Labrador, a Mi'kmaq girl from Nova Scotia, was removed from the House of Commons because she carried an eagle feather. The security guard who escorted her from the House thought the feather might be a weapon.*

## Chapter Two

# Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> Spirituality

**Examine the photos and captions on the opposite page and read the introductory text below. Answer the following questions:**

1. What evidence is there that the eagle feather is considered important by Aboriginal peoples?
2. Describe the symbolism of the eagle feather. Identify a symbol that you use in your life to represent connections to other things. Why did you choose this symbol?
3. Write a headline that captures what happened to Melissa Labrador, the Mi'kmaq girl from Nova Scotia, when she visited the House of Commons in Ottawa.

### Introduction

The eagle feather, a symbol of strength, gives the holder the power to represent others. It is often presented as recognition to someone who defends, fights for, or negotiates on behalf of **Aboriginal** peoples or people of native ancestry.

Some believe that because the eagle flies closest to the Creator, it can see over all the land. When the eagle is flying overhead, it means that Mother Earth will prosper. Some Aboriginal peoples believe that the Creator loves the eagle the most because it symbolizes the duality, or contradictions, of life—man and woman, light and darkness, summer and winter. Even its feathers are divided in two parts—light and dark—reminding humans of the duality of life. Some **elders**, or respected members of the community, describe the eagle feather as a symbol of healthy relationships. The spine of the feather holds relationships together. It is widest at the bottom symbolizing a relationship's beginning, a time when learning is greatest.

# Learning Goals

**At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:**

- understand the differing views on the origins of Aboriginal peoples
- compare and contrast beliefs, practices, and rituals among Canada's Aboriginal cultural groups
- identify influential figures in the development of Aboriginal spirituality and explain their contributions
- identify key passages from The Great Law and the Code of Handsome Lake, and explain their meaning
- understand the role and influence of Indigenous oral teachings on Aboriginal spirituality
- identify and interpret important oral stories in Aboriginal spirituality
- examine the role and significance of symbols in Aboriginal spirituality
- understand and interpret the meaning of the supernatural in Aboriginal spirituality
- identify the origin and importance of Aboriginal practices, rituals, and festivals
- demonstrate an understanding of meditation, prayer, and fasting in Aboriginal spirituality
- examine the impact of key events in the development of Aboriginal spirituality
- interpret Aboriginal works of art
- use primary documents effectively
- communicate effectively through oral presentations



- Many Aboriginal peoples contend that they have always inhabited North America and offer a range of creation stories

• **35 000–15 000 BCE**

Scientists theorize that people migrated from Asia to North America over the Bering land bridge

• **1800 CE** The code of Handsome Lake is developed

• **1815 CE** Handsome Lake dies, Aug. 10

• **1000 CE** The first recorded meeting between Europeans (Norse) and Aboriginal peoples in Newfoundland

• **1830s CE** Creation of residential school system

• **1784 CE** Under the leadership of Joseph Brant, Mohawks settle on the Grand River after being displaced following the American Revolution



Woodland Cultural Centre



• **1999 CE** The new territory of Nunavut is created

• **1996 CE** National Aboriginal Day is instituted on June 21

• **1998 CE** Canadian government expresses profound regret to Canada's Aboriginal peoples for past mistreatment and issues Statement of Reconciliation

• **1990 CE** Elijah Harper stops Meech Lake Accord process

• **1990 CE** The Oka Crisis explodes when plans for a golf course clash with Aboriginal sacred burial grounds



• **1970 CE** A residential school is turned into the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario

• **1884 CE** Potlatch ceremonies are banned by the federal government

• **1876 CE** Indian Act is passed

# Timeline

# Aboriginal Spirituality

## ORIGINS

It is impossible to pinpoint an origin or a founder of Aboriginal spirituality. Occasionally, a significant person rises to the forefront during a crisis and renews the faith, but there is no single founder.



**Figure 2.1**

*This wampum of parallel purple and white shells is made from Atlantic seashells. Used by many different Aboriginal nations, it has been used to record history and sacred agreements dating back 400 years.*



**Figure 2.2**

*Pictographs on rock outcrops depict Aboriginal beliefs and practices.*

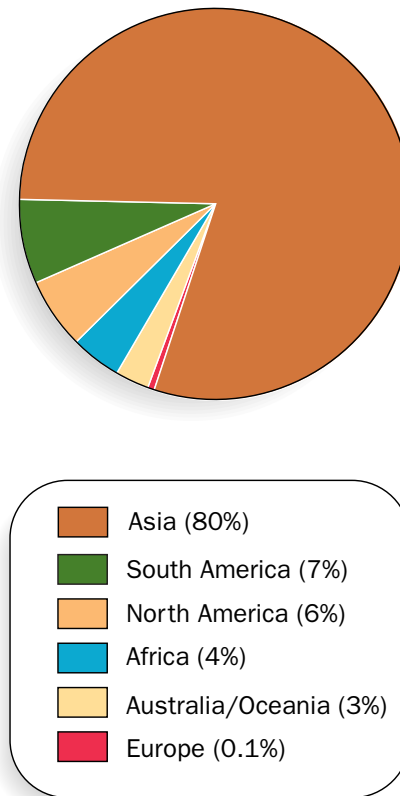
Aboriginal spirituality around the world has a long history. Some **Indigenous** peoples, or Aboriginal inhabitants of a region, believe that they “came out of this ground,” a theory that essentially means their origins are ancient beyond record. While there exists considerable disagreement on origin, some archaeological evidence supports a second theory that Aboriginal peoples migrated from Asia to North and South America by crossing a land bridge over the Bering Strait (situated between Alaska and Russia) approximately 35 000 years ago.

Regardless of theory, Aboriginal peoples have clearly been in the Americas longer than anyone else. Archaeologists, who study human history, have found Aboriginal artifacts dating back beyond 10 000 years. They have discovered **wampum**, or beaded belts (Figure 2.1), animal paintings on rock outcrops (Figure 2.2), bones representing different burial rites, and wooden carvings all attesting to Aboriginal spiritual practices and beliefs from centuries ago. Aboriginal traditional stories about **genesis**, or origins, carry a great deal of spiritual power. These creation stories are important vehicles for conveying Aboriginal beliefs.

### Aboriginal Spirituality Around the World

Although we will be focusing in this chapter on North America, specifically Canada, it is important to note that there exists a huge diversity of Aboriginal spirituality throughout the modern world. Indigenous peoples live in virtually every area of the globe. Some are well known, such as the Aboriginal groups of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, or the Guarani of Paraguay, who were featured in the film *The Mission*. Although some groups are now extinct, such as the Beothuks of Atlantic Canada, or the Caribs of the Caribbean Islands, millions in the world still claim Indigenous status, even though they do not necessarily practise their Indigenous religion. Today, 80 per cent of the world's approximately 300 million Aboriginal peoples live in Asia, while 13 per cent live in North and South America (Figure 2.3).

Anthropologists, who study societies and customs, estimate that at the time of Columbus about 100 million Indigenous peoples inhabited the Americas, which in 1500 CE would have accounted for one-fifth of the human race. Some lived in huge cities (present-day Mexico City had 250 000), and others were farmers, or nomadic hunters. To this day, twelve million still speak Quechua, the language of the Incas of South America. In Central America, there are six million who speak the ancestral language of the Maya, comparable to the number of French speakers in Canada. Currently, over 800 000 Aboriginal people live in Canada, some in every province.



**Figure 2.3**  
World Distribution of Indigenous Peoples. China, India, Mexico, Peru, Pakistan, and the Philippines all have Indigenous populations over five million.

Not all, but many Aboriginal peoples around the world still believe in and practise aspects of their traditional religions. Aboriginal people of the Canadian Arctic, who in their language call themselves Inuit, share a cultural identity with two other large populations in Alaska and Greenland. Although most of the over 100 000 Inuit in these three jurisdictions practise Christianity, a growing number are returning to their religious and cultural heritage. For example, the drumming and chanting with ancient prayers that once accompanied official occasions experienced a comeback in the recent celebrations surrounding the proclamation of Nunavut, Canada's new territory.

Whether Aboriginal peoples migrated from Asia to the Americas and developed as **First Nations**, or were here from the earliest of times, the fact remains that they developed into several large cultural groups in North America. The geographical environment in which they lived defined them. Canada has at least six distinct cultural groups of Aboriginal peoples:

- Northeast Woodlands
- Great Plains
- Northwest Pacific Coast
- Plateau
- Subarctic
- Arctic

Each culture has several nations in it. As a group they have similar aspects of belief, although different practices of form represent those beliefs. For example, each culture has familial clans represented by animals who protect them, such as the Raven or Wolf, but the animals vary and have different regional significance. Furthermore, a cultural group may share common characteristics that identify it with a specific environment, but there is often great diversity among nations within that large cultural environment. The Northeast Woodlands, for example, is divided into two linguistic groups, Algonquin and Iroquois. The Algonquin and Iroquois nations differ according to their religious beliefs and practices.

### The Subarctic

The Subarctic region runs the breadth of Canada and includes the thick forests and mountains in the East, the Canadian Shield of rock and swamp, and the sparsely-wooded northern Prairies with their many lakes and rivers. The Innu, the Montaignais, the James Bay Cree, and the Dene

were nomadic hunters of deer and caribou.

In the 1990s, Cree Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come was instrumental in persuading Quebec to cancel plans for James Bay Project 2 after he witnessed the harmful environmental effects of Quebec's James Bay Project 1. Coon Come is currently the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

### The Plateau

The Aboriginal peoples of the Plateau live in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, separate from the Plains and Pacific Coast nations. The Kootenay mountain chain takes its name from one of the many Plateau nations. The Plateau were once nomadic hunters of elk, bear, and caribou.

In 1995, at Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia, several campers used ranch land for a sun dance ceremony. When the owner asked the campers to leave, they refused, saying the land was unceded, no treaty had been signed, and it was a sacred site. After a four-month period, the standoff ended with a negotiated settlement led by an Alberta medicine man.

**Figure 2.4**

*Aboriginal Cultural Groups in Canada*

### The Northwest Pacific Coast

For generations, Haida, Tlingit, and Salish nations depended on the sea and lived in cedar plank houses on the beaches. They harpooned whale and trapped salmon. They used the cedar to make houses, baskets, and dugout canoes that could carry up to seventy people.

The Northwest Pacific Coast culture carved several **totems** in one long pole, commonly known as a **totem pole**. A totem is a protective entity, often in the form of an animal, that is associated with a cultural group or nation. Today, magnificent examples of totem artwork can be seen in parks and museums throughout British Columbia.

In 1998, the Nisga'a, a First Nation living in northwestern British Columbia, signed an historic agreement with the British Columbia and federal governments. The Nisga'a Treaty was the first land claims treaty in British Columbia since 1871. It granted land, a financial settlement, and a model for self-government to the Nisga'a nation.

### Cultural Areas

- ARCTIC
- SUBARCTIC
- NORTHWEST PACIFIC COAST
- PLATEAU
- GREAT PLAINS
- NORTHEAST WOODLANDS

### The Arctic

The Inuit, which means “the people,” live in a region above the treeline that is snow covered for eight months of the year. For generations, nations, including the Mackenzie, Labrador, and Caribou, hunted and depended on the seal. Seal skin provided boots, bags, kayaks, igloo linings, and clothing. Seal oil was used for heating, cooking, and light.

Today, many people in these groups live in a modern world, connected globally through technology and educated in schools. Some Inuit refer to their traditional ways using the past tense.

### The Great Plains

There are seven distinct languages and over thirty nations of the Great Plains including the Sioux, the Cree, and the Siksika, or Blackfoot. In the past, these people generally depended on the buffalo. In fact, when the buffalo numbered in the millions, they

were used for almost everything. The hide provided coverings for moccasin soles, for shields, and for their homes, which were cone-shaped tents called **tipis**. The buffalo ribs became sled runners. The skull was used for the Sun Dance altar—a ceremony that involves chants and purification, which is still practised today.

### Northeast Woodlands

The Iroquois live along the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes, and were once farmer-hunters. They lived in **longhouses** in villages of approximately 1500 people and farmed corn, squash, and beans, which they named “the Three Sisters.” A typical Iroquois longhouse was cigar-shaped, about fifty metres long and ten metres wide, and would hold several related families.

The Iroquois formed a confederacy of Six Nations, including the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations. Displaced after the American Revolution, the Six Nations, under the leadership of Joseph Brant, relocated to a reserve southwest of Brantford, Ontario. Other well-known reserves are at Kanesatake, near Oka, northwest of Montreal, and Akwesasne, near Cornwall, Ontario.

Today, the Iroquois practise the **Longhouse** religion in a building that replicates a traditional longhouse. **Faithkeepers** are community members selected to maintain the spiritual traditions of the Iroquois.

The Algonquin of this region were nomadic hunters who depended on the forests, rivers, and sea for their livelihood. The forests, in particular, played an important role in their survival. They used the needles of the white pine to make a tea that prevented scurvy and relieved colds. They made another tea from dandelion roots and leaves to treat heartburn.

Animals were an important resource for the maintenance of physical and spiritual needs. In many communities, clans (family groupings) were defined by the attributes of their associated animal.

The Algonquin nations include the Beothuk who are now extinct, Mi'kmaq, Ottawa, Cree, and Ojibwa. Collectively, there were no identifiable spiritual movements. Instead, some nations such as the Ojibwa were spiritually united with the Grand Medicine Society (Midewinin). Spiritualism within Algonquin communities was deeply personal and was defined by the individual community.

Today, the connection to their natural environment continues to be a source of their spiritualism.



# Profile:

## *The Peacemaker*

The nations of each North American cultural group have their own interpretation of how to live their lives. For some, the Creator gives directions for a better way of life. The Iroquois of the Northeast Woodlands tell the story of the Peacemaker, a central figure to their culture and religion. Members of the Iroquois nation believe one should never say the Peacemaker's name, Dekanawida, until the end of the world when his name will be called.

*The Peacemaker was born of a virgin Huron maiden. His grandmother was ashamed because there appeared to be no father, so she ordered her daughter to drown the baby in icy water. The girl could not. When the grandmother herself tried to kill him without success, she realized he was special and would grow to be a great man. The Huron people abused the young boy. They beat him, kept him in isolation, and ridiculed him. As foretold in a dream, he went to live with another Iroquois nation, the Mohawk.*

*The Iroquois nations were constantly feuding, and the evil wizard, Tadodaho, seemed to be the instigator of the lawlessness. The Peacemaker chanted songs of peace before the lodge of the crooked, snake-haired sorcerer. The moment the Peacemaker was able to touch Tadodaho, the wizard's body became straight and his mind healthy. With evil overcome, the Peacemaker gathered the Five Nations and planted the Tree of Peace in the Onondaga nation. He said its roots would go north, south, east, and west. At the top he placed an eagle that would see afar and warn the*

*nations of danger. He then delivered to them a message called "The Great Law of Peace," and the warring nations were reconciled. The message included one hundred laws governing funerals, clans, adoption, and emigration, among other things. One law said that the rites and festivals of each nation shall remain undisturbed "...for they were given by the people of old times as useful and necessary for the good of men."*

The Peacemaker's message can be broken down into three main parts. He said to the woman, Jigonsaseh, or New Face, who was the first to accept what he proclaimed, "The message has three parts: Righteousness, Health, and Power. Righteousness means justice, Health means soundness of mind and body, and Power means the authority of law and custom, and religion, for justice enforced is the will of the Holder of the Heavens."

### QUESTIONS

1. What contributions did the Peacemaker make to the Five Nations?
2. Describe how the message of "righteousness, health, and power" is a good rule by which to live one's life.
3. Is the story of the Peacemaker similar to other stories you have been told? Explain.

## Check Your Understanding

1. Explain the disagreement concerning the origins of Aboriginal peoples.
2. Describe the six cultural groups in Canada and their connection to their environment.
3. List three things you learned about the traditional culture of Aboriginal peoples. Choose the one that impressed you the most and explain why.

## BELIEFS

### Animism

Many adherents of Aboriginal spirituality believe that everything in the world is alive. All living things reside in close connection and harmony with one another, and move in cycles (Figure 2.5). Even in afterlife, their spirits return to the environment. Aboriginal peoples recognize the powers around them: in the heavens, in human ghosts and spirits, in animals and plants, and in the weather.

Aboriginal spirituality expresses a belief in **animism**, which holds that all things, human and non-human, have spirits or souls, and that the person or animal lives on after death through the presence of that spirit.

Some observers have claimed that Aboriginal spirituality is **polytheistic**, believing in many gods, rather than **monotheistic**, believing in one. Most Aboriginal peoples believe in a supreme Creator. However, power in the universe is also given to other per-

sonified spirits who are less powerful than the Creator, but also guide human activity. The Inuit call the sea “Sea Woman”; the Iroquois call the sky “Sky Woman”; and the Algonquin call the sky “Grandfather.”

Aboriginal spirituality turns to many spirits because Aboriginal people believe they have more than one specific need in nature or in life. For example, a fisher strives to be on good terms with the spirit of the sea; a farmer wishes to please the spirit of the rain or the sun. A faith in supernatural and natural forces that connect human beings to all other living things permeates the life of almost all Aboriginal societies.

Black Elk, born in 1863, was a Sioux holy man from the Great Plains (Figure 2.6). He said, “We know that we all are related and are one with all things of the heavens and the earth...May we be continually aware of this relationship which exists between the four-leggeds, the two-leggeds, and the wingeds...”

**Figure 2.5**

Thunder Bay Art Gallery houses a collection of Aboriginal art as well as creations like masks, baskets, and other natural artifacts. Relationship to Nature, this painting by Ojibwa artist Roy Thomas, shows the interconnection of humans to the environment. Note that it overlays several animals in an “x-ray” style around a human figure. Can you identify the birds, fish, bear, beaver, and tipis? Explain animism in the painting.

**Figure 2.6**

Black Elk, spiritual elder of the Sioux, 1863–1950

**Figure 2.7**

Birth of the Earth by Arnold Jacobs, an Onondaga artist. In this painting, a woman falls from the sky and creates the earth, with the assistance of the animals. It depicts the Aboriginal belief that humans and nature are connected.



## Creation Stories

Creation stories, which were often oral, play an important role in Aboriginal cultures by offering a response to questions of existence, such as where we come from, why certain things in the environment are the way they are, and where we go when we die.

Each cultural group has their own identity and creation stories. Some believe that they were born from a clam and were helped by the Raven or some other animal. Many recount a legend of a person falling from the sky (Figure 2.7).

### The Northeast Woodlands

One Aboriginal creation story is “Turtle Island” (Figure 2.8). The people of the Northeast Woodlands believe that after a great flood, water covered the Earth. Several water animals and birds tried to bring some mud to the surface of the water. Eventually, a muskrat succeeded. Sky Woman then spread the mud on the back of a turtle and created North America, or Turtle Island.

### The Northwest Pacific Coast

A renowned Haida artist, Bill Reid, depicted his culture’s creation story of the Raven coaxing the original people out of a clamshell onto the land (Figure 2.9). The famous carving is at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.

### Death and the Afterlife

A basic element of most religions is the belief in the afterlife. Many Aboriginal legends recount stories of **reincarnation**, or rebirth. The Sioux of the Great Plains believe that four souls depart from a person at death. One of them journeys along the “spirit path,” and it is judged by an old woman. She determines whether the spirit should carry on to reconnect with its ancestors or return to Earth as a ghost. The other souls enter fetuses and are reborn into new bodies. In the Northeast Woodlands, the Iroquois believe that souls or spirits can enter man-made objects like fishing nets or spears. Other groups believe the souls inhabit the many stars of the Milky Way.

### The Arctic

The Inuit pay homage to the souls of killed animals by facing the animal in the direction from which it came so that its soul can return. Upon killing a seal they give it a drink of water so that its spirit can re-enter the sea. During an annual festival, the Inuit collect all the seal bladders caught the previous year and throw them back to the sea, so that the seals can reproduce.

### Totems

**Totems** link Aboriginal peoples to their mythical ancestors. Totems are protective entities—plant, animal, or mythological being—of a clan or individual. The Ojibwa identify each totem group by the name of a bird, fish, animal, or reptile. Persons of the same totem are considered to be close relatives and may not marry.



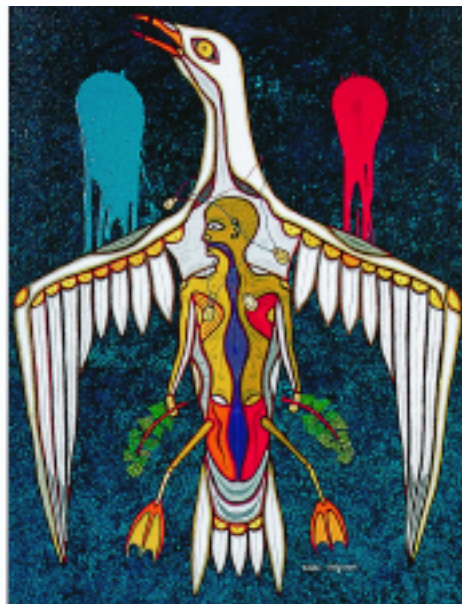
**Figure 2.8**

*Turtle Island by Stanley R. Hill, a Mohawk artist. This wooden sculpture depicts the creation of the world and features the sacred Tree of Peace. Notice the eagle, representing strength and power, is at the top of the tree.*



**Figure 2.9**

*The Raven and the First Men by Bill Reid*



**Figure 2.10**

*Peace Doe-dem (totem) by Blake Debassige. The Anishnawbek have different totems to which families belong. One of these is the seagull, which is the symbol of peace.*

## Check Your Understanding

1. Explain animism in the following sentence: “Some believed they should walk on soft shoes or no shoes at all during the spring because Mother Earth is pregnant and they must not harm her body.”
2. Recount one story about creation or the afterlife that reflects the Aboriginal view of boundaries easily crossed between the human and supernatural worlds.
3. Although there is tremendous variety among Aboriginal cultures, describe three common beliefs in their religions.
4. Explain the importance of totems in Aboriginal spirituality.

**Figure 2.11**  
**Powwows**, Algonquin for cultural gatherings, are currently experiencing a revival. Attendees eat food of Sioux, Iroquois, or Haida origin. They witness traditional dancing, drumming, and chanting, all integral parts of many Aboriginal practices and rituals.



## PRACTICES, RITUALS, SYMBOLS, AND FESTIVALS

### Practices and Rituals

Today, Aboriginal peoples are keeping their spiritualism alive by participating in traditional festivals and by depicting their beliefs through their art and symbols. The willingness to relearn the ancestral beliefs and practices illustrates the strength and pride Aboriginal peoples gain from their cultural revival.

Some religious practices, although regional, over time have become common to all Aboriginal peoples. Many of the rituals of the Great Plains people have crossed cultural boundaries and been adopted into Aboriginal spirituality. These practices provide a means by which all cultural groups can demonstrate their connectedness in spiritual ways.

**Figure 2.12**  
Aboriginal cultures communicate and tell stories through dance. Many dances interpret events or customs from the past. Today, Aboriginal peoples use dance to rediscover their past, and share with the world their knowledge and their culture.



### The Morning Dance

Every spring, the Ojibwa of southern Ontario perform the Morning Dance, also known as the Wabeno. The dance pays homage to the “tree of the universe.” All the participants fast and cleanse themselves beforehand, then a male elder plays a drum and leads the dance in a clearing around the selected tree. Children, adults, and the elderly dance from dawn to noon. As each dancer passes the tree, the drummer signals the dancer to touch the trunk to give thanks. At midday, a huge feast of meat and fish is served.

### The Sun Dance

The Great Plains nations hold an important summer festival that takes place over a period of eight to sixteen days and includes the Sun Dance (Figure 2.13). This festival of the Great Plains is so powerful, and the dance so symbolic a ritual, that the Canadian government banned it in the late 1880s.

The ceremony identifies the circle as an important symbol, and acknowledges and respects the sun as the giver of life. Performed in early summer, the participants dance for long periods around a central cottonwood pole, or “tree of the universe.” They face the sun and pay homage to the sun’s life-giving powers. During the ceremony some of the dancers embed sharp wooden hooks deep into their chest, then connect the skewers to leather thongs that trail from the top of the cottonwood pole. As they dance, they pull back on the thongs and tear their flesh. The resulting scars bear witness to their faith. The dancers

perform this ritual because they believe that the body is the only thing they control and can offer as a sacrifice to the Creator. They believe that by enduring pain, others will not have to suffer famine, war, or disease. During the Sun Dance, prayers are said for all peoples and vows are made to the Great Spirit.

This celebration of renewal and reconnection with all creation, including the piercing dance, once again is practised today.



**Figure 2.13**

Sun Dance on the Reserve  
by Allen Sapp

### The Potlatch Ceremony

The Northwest Pacific Coast nations practise the Potlatch ceremony (Figure 2.14), which the Canadian government made illegal in 1884. Government officials thought that the Potlatch contributed to idleness and seemed “backward” and wasteful. The government lifted the ban in 1951.

Feasting, distributing wealth, and sharing songs and dances are all part of a Potlatch. The host gives a feast to celebrate an important event, such as a marriage, the naming of an heir, or to atone for a humiliation. The more wealth the host gives away, the more that person gains in status and great-

ness. Thus, the hosting clan grows in prestige. Songs and dances are performed to honour the Great Spirit.

Many of the early Potlatch traditions, including dancing and singing, continue today.



**Figure 2.14**

*The potlatch ceremony, an important spiritual practice among Aboriginal peoples, was banned in 1884. The Canadian government lifted the ban in 1951.*

### The Sweat Lodge

The sweat lodge ceremony, common among the Great Plains nations renews the soul and helps to regain focus. The sweat lodge cleanses both the physical and spiritual body. Under the direction of a **shaman**, who is both a medicine man and spiritual leader, the participants make a sauna-like construction, called a sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is a dome made of saplings. A covering of animal skins, cedar, or a tarpaulin make it dark and airtight. Heated stones are placed in the centre of the interior, and water is

sprinkled on the stones. The participants crouch and crowd around the stones in the confined space. The intense heat and steam cause them to perspire profusely, thus cleansing the body both physically and spiritually. Usually prayers and a sacred pipe are shared. An elder or a shaman assists by coordinating the ceremony.

### The Shaking Tent

The shaking tent a ritual used by Aboriginal groups from the subarctic to the Great Lakes region, represents the beliefs and values of some Aboriginal people about the supernatural world and its close relationship to the living. Through the shaking tent, one can communicate with the spirits. It is constructed using four to eight poles, which are placed deep in the soil to form a circle about a meter in diameter. A wooden hoop encircles the poles at the top and sometimes at the bottom. The cylindrical shape, left open to the sky to allow the spirits to enter, is wrapped in birch bark or hide. The individuals who have requested the ceremony make a trade with the shaman. He enters the tent and intercedes with the spirits. He asks the spirits to solve problems such as finding a lost object, communicating with an ancestor, locating a missing person, or predicting the outcome of an event. The ceremony always takes place at night.

# Symbols and Icons

## The Tree of Peace



Figure 2.15

A central symbol for some Aboriginal religions is the tree, connecting Earth to Heaven. It is integral to some practices like the Sun Dance. The dance centres around a cottonwood pole to which the dancers attach themselves with leather thongs.

The white pine is a key symbol for the Iroquois. The hero, Peacemaker, said that whenever the Iroquois gathered by the Great Tree, they "...shall offer thanks to the earth...to the streams of waters...to the maize and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees, to the animals that serve as food and give their pelts for clothing...to the messengers of the Creator who reveal his wishes and to the Great Creator...ruler of health and life."

For West Coast groups, the cedar tree is an important carrier of symbols since it is used in the creation of totem poles.

### QUESTIONS

1. The tree is a common global symbol. Academics call this the *axis mundi*, or core of the world. Describe the attributes of the tree that make it an appropriate global symbol.
2. How does the tree reflect the central beliefs of some Aboriginal peoples?
3. Describe the role of the tree in any other religions of which you are aware.

### Festivals



Figure 2.16

The Northeast Woodlands Iroquois have a series of Ceremonies connected to the agricultural cycle: The Mid-winter Ceremony held in January; The Maple Syrup and Seed Planting Rituals held in April; The Strawberry, Bean, and Green Corn Celebrations held in summer; and The Thanksgiving or Harvest Festival held one day in November.

Pictured here are flint corn and squash, foods associated with The Thanksgiving Festival. Iroquois regard the harvest and food as gifts from the Creator.



# Profile:

## Faithkeepers



**Figure 2.17**  
Dorothy Green

*"The Creator is watching and listening and the people are looking to you for help and guidance."*

Traditionally, the Iroquois women have had great power in society. They lived in a matrilineal society where the mother had control. The matriarch's extended family lived in the longhouse, and she nominated **sachems**, or clan chiefs. Other clan mothers, or mothers of the same family group, would confirm the sachem's appointment.

Today the Longhouse clan mothers still appoint faithkeepers—three men and three women—to assist with their ceremonies. The faithkeeper preserves and passes on the spiritual belief system by conducting the ritual ceremonies. Usually one man and one woman are chosen for their leadership and their public-speaking ability. A chosen faithkeeper of a Longhouse must accept the appointment.

Dorothy Green is the oldest member of the Onondaga Longhouse and served as a Cayuga faithkeeper for many years. She is also a member of the Turtle clan. As a faithkeeper, she attended all the ceremonies, singing the songs and dancing the dances, until arthritis stopped her. She keeps busy today making moccasins, jackets, and leggings. She is called Kiduwitu, which means "Walking in Gardens."

### QUESTION

1. Describe three ways in which Dorothy Green helps to keep her religion meaningful for the people.

## Check Your Understanding

1. Explain the procedure and the significance of the Sun Dance and the Morning Dance.
2. What are some “cyclical” festivals that you share with the Iroquois? Compare and contrast one festival.

## MILESTONES

### The Vision Quest

The rite of passage to adulthood, often ritualized in a coming-of-age ceremony, includes the **vision quest**, or dream. The vision quest is a ceremony common to most Aboriginal religions.

The seeker of the vision quest is first purified, which involves a confession, or at least a desire to atone. This usually occurs at a sweat lodge (Figure 2.18). The medicine man then

instructs the youth to go to a place far from the camp. The youth prays, fasts from food and water, and endures the elements for several days while awaiting a “vision.” At the end of a period of fasting and prayer, the seeker of the vision hopes to receive a message from a guardian spirit, who may appear in an animal, object, or other natural form. However, the person might not see the vision, and would have to try again. Often the shaman helps to interpret the vision and its message.



**Figure 2.18**  
An Aboriginal youth participates in a sweat lodge ceremony.

John Fire Lane Deer (1903–1976), a Sioux holy man, described the vision quest he had as a young man. The dream solidified the beliefs and values of his religion, as well as confirmed for him the balance and harmony between Heaven and Earth.

*The old man left me on the top of the hill. He had been with me in the sweat lodge and prayed, “Oh holy rocks, we receive your white breath, the steam. It is the breath of life. Let this young boy inhale it. Make him strong.” I was still lightheaded from the purifying sweat bath and my skin tingled. It seemed to make my head empty but maybe that was good...plenty of room for the vision. Sounds came through the night but suddenly I became aware of a huge bird flying around me. I could hear its cries and feel its feathers. All at once I was up in the sky with the bird. I heard a voice say, “We are the fowl people, the winged ones, the eagles and the owls. You shall be our brother. You are going to understand us whenever you come to this hill to seek a vision. You will learn about herbs and roots and heal people. A man’s life is short. Make yours a worthy one.”*

*I felt that the voices were good and I was no longer afraid. I lost all sense of time. Then I saw a person coming out of the darkness and swirling fog. It was my great-grandfather who had been shot by a white*

*soldier. I saw the blood dripping from his chest. Then I understood that he wanted me to take his name, Lane Deer, and it made me extremely happy. I felt my soul within me, and a power surge through me like a flood. I knew then that I would become a medicine man and I wept with happiness.*

*Finally the old man was gently shaking me. He said I had been on the hill for four days and nights. He gave me water and food and I told him what I heard and saw. He told me I was no longer a boy but that I had become a man. Now I was Lane Deer.*

### Check Your Understanding

1. What is the role of purification in preparing for a vision quest?
2. Why is it important to have an elder or shaman involved in a vision quest?
3. Who would you select to accompany you if you participated in a vision quest?

## SACRED WRITINGS

### Oral Teachings

In Aboriginal cultures, prayers are passed to new generations by the telling and retelling of events. Members, such as elders or shamans, memorize the stories and become the keepers who pass on the words. They communicate their stories and lessons by speaking fluently, listening, and understanding, an ability known as **oracy**. Sometimes the speaker uses an aid, like a necklace of beads or wampum, or even a totem pole, to help retell the event.

An effort was made in the early part of the twentieth century to record the Aboriginal oral stories. Handsome Lake, an Iroquois prophet, told six members of his nation about his “Good Message,” or Gaiwiio. The six holders memorized what Handsome Lake had taught them and twice a year would recite the message to their people. It took three days to recite all of the Gaiwiio. In 1912, A.C. Parker, an archaeologist, listened to a holder and transmitted the words to text.

### Handsome Lake (1735-1815)

The life of an Iroquois holy man of the Seneca nation, Handsome Lake, coincided with the decline of Iroquoian power after the American Revolution. He had been a warrior in the Turtle clan but, after losing his homeland in New York in 1783, he suffered from several debilitating illnesses and became an alcoholic. In 1799, he swore off alcohol and returned to his sick bed. In June of that year, a remorseful Handsome Lake experienced death and was revived. Upon recovery, he explained that he had seen visions and had received a Good Message, called the Gaiwiio. It resulted in a reforming movement, with a renewed moral code designed to reverse the social decline of the remaining Iroquois, who had dwindled to approximately 4000.

Handsome Lake reported seeing four heavenly messengers from the Creator who said: “...four words tell a great story of wrong, and the Creator is sad because of the trouble they bring, so go and tell your people.” The four words were alcohol, witchcraft, black magic, and abortion. Other evils he attacked were adultery, child and wife abuse, and desertion.

# Sacred Text

## **The Code of Handsome Lake**

Handsome Lake's teachings were recorded forty years after his death by his brother Cornplanter, who in 1905 told them to a nephew, A.C. Parker.

The Good Message has two main themes. The first part contains a prophecy of impending disaster if people do not mend their ways. The second part states that only those who do not repent and change will suffer and perish and go to the House of the Punisher, who is the brother of the Creator. There are over 130 "messages."

*The first word is one'ga (whiskey). It seems that you never have known that this word stands for a great and monstrous evil and has reared a high mound of bones. Alas many are too fond of it. So now all must now say, "I will use it never-more. I now stop." So must all say when they hear the message.*

*Section 1, The Code of Handsome Lake*

*The Creator has ordered that man and wife should rear their children well, love them and keep them in health. This is the Creator's rule.*

*Section 7, The Code of Handsome Lake*

*Now another message to tell your people. The married often live well together for a while. Then a man becomes ugly in temper and abuses his wife. It seems to afford him pleasure. Now because of such things the Creator is very sad. So he bids us to tell you that such evils must stop. Neither man nor woman must strike each other.*

*Section 10, The Code of Handsome Lake*

## QUESTIONS

1. What message could you follow according to the Code of Handsome Lake, and where would you find difficulty? Explain your answer to a peer.
2. Do you think a code of ethics is good for all time or should it be revised to change with the times?
3. If you had to select four words that would be basic to your personal code of ethics, what would they be?

# Holy Places

## Sour Springs Longhouse

Sour Springs, situated on the Six Nations Reserve, near Brantford, Ontario, received its name because of the sulphurous taste in the water. The old squared-log construction has been a ceremonial centre since 1855. The followers practise the teachings of Handsome Lake, and their ceremonies are conducted according to his influence.

The concept of “duality” guides the strict organization of the Longhouse and represents a symbolic view of the universe. There are two main clan groupings: the Turtle and the Wolf. Those within a clan are brothers and sisters, and those of the other clan are called cousins. When entering the longhouse, the members of the Wolf clan go in through the west door, and the members of the Turtle clan enter by the east. Seating changes according to the ceremony and depending on the longhouse. In one setting, the women sit on one side opposite their clan men. Each side, or clan, then participates in the longhouse ceremony. For instance, a speaker of one clan may open the proceedings and a speaker of the other clan may close, thus both contribute to the community of the longhouse.

### QUESTIONS

1. Explain the meaning of duality in the universe. How does the longhouse represent the concept of duality?
2. Describe how the ceremonies of Sour Springs Longhouse reflect the concept of community.



*Figure 2.19*

## Check Your Understanding

1. What are the four words from the messengers? Select one and explain how Handsome Lake addresses it in his Code.
2. Describe the development of the Code of Handsome Lake.
3. Explain the term “oracy.”
4. How can a wampum or totem pole aid a speaker in retelling an event?

## GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

### Elders

*“Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks...”*

Luther Standing Bear

**Figure 2.20**  
Today in Aboriginal communities, elders are helping young people connect with their heritage.



An elder is a man or woman who is recognized by his or her community to be a wise person, full of knowledge and experience (Figure 2.20). Elders pass on practical, daily knowledge, and are also the keepers of tradition. They tell the stories of their religion, and act as spiritual guides. For example, an elder might teach animism by telling a young child not to kick an animal, even if it is dead, because it is food and must be given respect. They might instruct young people about natural herbs and medicines. Elders are important touchstones to the past. They impart knowledge and skills for the present and future, and are highly valued in their communities.

### Elders Today

In Aboriginal communities, the role of the elder is experiencing a cultural rebirth. To meet the challenge of the future, many Aboriginal people are looking back to their past and to the leadership, wisdom, and knowledge of elders. The following demonstrates the heightened interest in elders:

- Traditional Knowledge, the knowledge of the elders, is now taught at many Aboriginal schools and con-

- sulted by governments in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories when politicians make important decisions;
- In many communities, elders act as counsellors and teachers to Aboriginal youths coping with the challenges of contemporary society. In Toronto, councils of elders serve as courts for small-time offenders. These councils are concerned with healing, not just punishment;
  - The Assembly of First Nations, a powerful political organization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, is advised and guided by a council of elders;
  - Many Canadians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, engage in the preservation of teachings of Aboriginal elders. They are busily taping, filming and recording elders' stories and advice.

### The False Face Society

The False Face Society is a respected Iroquois group whose members are knowledgeable in the natural powers of herbs, and who perform ritual prayers. They are named "False Faces" because the members wear

quizzical and grimacing masks that have been carved from living trees. The masks represent powerful beings that live in the forest. Many of the masks have bent noses, which reflect a legend in which the Creator causes the Great False Face to break his nose after a contest.

*The man-like being, Hadui, challenged the Creator to see who could move a mountain. Hadui did move it a little. Then it was the Creator's turn. Hadui heard rumbling behind him and when he turned, he hit his face into the mountain, thus breaking his nose. The Creator had more power and moved the mountain that fast and far. "I am beaten...but I still have great power. I do not want to be banished from this earth. If you let me stay, I promise to help the people who are still to come. Your people will carve masks in my likeness to remind them of this occasion and of my promise to cure the sick and drive out evil spirits."*

## Web Quest

If you are interested in reading more teachings of the elders, the Internet is a modern vehicle to access the teachings of the past. Visit Virtual Circle at <http://www.vcircle.com/elders> and click on "Current Elders Teachings." Consider how relevant these teachings are for your life today.



# Community Study

## The Woodland Cultural Centre



**Figure 2.21**

*A wall mural created by Six Nations artist, Bill Powless, for the Woodland Cultural Centre. This scene depicts an elder (right) leading Aboriginal peoples who have fallen away from their traditions into a never ending circle where all are equal.*

The Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario displays Aboriginal art by well-known artists, such as Tom Hill and Norval Morriseau. When one looks at the logo of the Centre with the two eagles reaching for the star (see page 29), it is evident that animism and spiritualism are still strongly present in Aboriginal values.

The Woodland Cultural Centre, located on reserve land, was once a residential school. Since 1972, it has followed its mandate to preserve and promote the cultural heritage of both the Algonquian and Iroquoian nations. Visitors learn about the history and heritage of the First Nations, contemporary lifestyles, and social and cultural issues of local and national First Nations. The museum displays include an Iroquoian village, a mystical evening forest showing the typical environment of the Northeast Woodlands, and the interior of a nineteenth century longhouse. The research library currently maintains over 6000 volumes.

Today, elders and speakers of the language work diligently on projects that

reflect the renaissance of the Northeast Woodlands cultures. Indeed, "...the Centre is the bridge from the past to today and poses questions for the directions of the future which will provide for the 'Seventh Generation,' or those who will follow our generation's generation; in other words, the future for our children... The Centre validates the past, celebrates the present, and seeks answers for the future from Elders and our children."

### QUESTIONS

1. Explain what the Woodland Cultural Centre's logo means for spiritualism and animism.
2. Describe three ways the Woodland Cultural Centre is maintaining Aboriginal heritage and religion.
3. The "Seventh Generation" refers to those generations that follow us. "What we do in our lives should reflect our responsibility to future generations." Do you agree with this? What are you doing to practise this belief?

# Living My Religion

## Chris Warner and Courtney Thomas



Figure 2.22

L.E. Rath, an American educator who studied values and beliefs, said there are four steps or phases in the process of believing. In the first stage, we are “aware,” and we know our beliefs; in the second stage we “prize” our beliefs; in the third stage, we “choose” them from among several others; and in the fourth stage we “act” on them consistently and with integration.

Two Aboriginal students at Pauline Johnson Collegiate and Vocational School in Brantford, Ontario, clearly have moved through Rath’s four stages. Courtney Thomas (19) and Chris Warner (20) attend Longhouse ceremonies regularly on the Six Nations Reserve. They go to school in the city, but try to maintain their religion, language, and culture on and off the reserve. Courtney belongs to the Turtle clan, and Chris to the Wolf. They both say that members of the clans are their teachers and protectors.

Members of the same clan do not intermarry. They believe that three or four guardian spirits, usually ancestors, watch over them. Keeping clan connec-

tions is very important. Strict traditions rule the Longhouse religion, like which door to enter, and where to sit.

The beliefs and values spoken at the longhouse are the ones of the Peacekeeper and Handsome Lake. But the longhouse is also the place for community socials such as weddings, funerals, raising money for a special event, or sending someone off on a dance or drum competition. The Longhouse offers support during rites of passage. Humour, as well as a sense of community, provide guidance. At puberty, the community might warn the boy not to swim or whistle, or his voice will never change. When a girl first menstruates, there are those to help with the “healing time.” One custom requires the girl to wash her hands in ashes to connect with the fireplace so she can still cook. Chris is learning his language—Cayuga—so he can pray and chant properly when, and if, he burns tobacco. Courtney has learned that food must be covered to protect it and keep its nourishment. Their sense of spiritualism and animism is strong.

When asked what they get from their Aboriginal religion, both say they get strength and energy. When they go to the longhouse, they must think good thoughts, which purifies them. They certainly feel that it is easier to communicate with fellow adherents, and that there is a bonding. If they didn’t have the religion and community of the Longhouse, they both feel their traditions would be lost, their language would suffer, and their identity would disap-

## QUESTIONS

1. Identify three ways Courtney and Chris have integrated traditional beliefs and values into their daily lives.
2. Explain which of Rath’s four stages Courtney and Chris would be in with regard to their beliefs.
3. Describe a spiritual belief you have, and explain how Rath’s stages apply to you and your belief.

# Web Quest

If you are interested in reading more about the Woodland Cultural Centre visit [www.woodland-centre.on.ca](http://www.woodland-centre.on.ca) Click on “What’s Cool” to find out about upcoming events.

## Check Your Understanding

1. Are museums and galleries important factors in keeping Aboriginal spirituality alive? Explain.
2. Describe the importance of elders and shamans in Aboriginal spirituality.
3. How important are elders in your social group?

## CULTURAL IMPACT

### The Europeans and the Aboriginal Peoples

There can be no question that the Europeans and the Aboriginal peoples had both positive and negative impacts on each other. The Aboriginal peoples exposed the early explorers to new agricultural techniques and new ways of coping with the challenges of survival, while the Europeans provided tools that fostered the development of Aboriginal culture.

In 1755, the British created the first Indian Department of Canada. Its purpose was to maintain good relations with the Aboriginal peoples and to secure their support of Britain. Their allegiance was crucial during the years when Britain was fighting against the French, or the Americans. By 1900, however, Indigenous cultures had suffered near extinction because of the many years of warfare and disease. Often smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis carried away the old and the young—the past and the future.

Before the Europeans’ arrival in North America, the Aboriginal peo-

ples were self-governed. Over the centuries, their government has been weakened through policies of control and assimilation. The Indian Acts in both 1876 and 1895 encouraged Aboriginal peoples to give up their culture and adopt “white ways.” Policies that established reservations or encouraged assimilation have had mixed results.

### Residential Schools

By the mid 1800s, the Canadian government was funding a residential school system for the Aboriginal peoples. Children were removed from their reserves and were placed, often far away from their communities, in boarding schools run mainly by Catholic, United, and Anglican religious orders. From the turn of the century to the 1960s, Aboriginal children in Canada were often taught that it was wrong to practise their cultural ways. Sometimes the punishments for trying to maintain traditional ways were severe, such as having a needle stuck in the tongue for speaking their Aboriginal language, or making a boy wear a dress if he tried to contact a

female relative. The residential schools broke the connection between children, parents, and their culture. Many children, isolated for years and instructed to forget their traditional ways, often rejected their past.

The Assembly of First Nations report, *Breaking the Silence*, claimed there were seventy-seven residential schools in 1909, and that sixty were still open in the 1960s. The Mohawk Institute, which is now the Woodland Cultural Centre, closed its doors in 1970. In 1996, the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples pointed to residential schools as the major factor in the high rates of substance abuse and suicide. At that time, however, many students had already begun the healing process by rediscovering their Aboriginal culture and traditional spirituality.

Throughout the 1990s, many important changes occurred for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The decade began with a lands claim standoff and ended with the birth of the new Inuit territory and homeland, Nunavut.

### Standoff at Oka

Sometimes, the cultural impact of mainstream society on Aboriginal life erupts into violence. Where the Ottawa River joins the Lake of Two Mountains and the St. Lawrence, there is a Mohawk reserve called Kanehsatake, which borders the resort town of Oka. At the edge of town, in the woods called the Pines, some Oka businessmen acquired title to the land and in 1959 built a nine-hole golf course. In 1989, they wanted to expand the golf course to eighteen



**Figure 2.23**

*Oka, 1990: a Mohawk and a Canadian soldier stand face-to-face during a tense stand-off.*

holes. The land they wanted was the ancestral burial grounds, considered sacred by the Mohawks. The courts, however, had rejected the Mohawks' claim. The Mohawks decided not to stand by and let the land be taken. They erected a barricade across the road, and the eleven-week armed standoff began. During the standoff, the Mohawks drummed and sang around a sacred fire in order to gain strength from the ritual power of False Faces. One of the Mohawk protesters showed how Aboriginal spirituality was involved: "...We had medicine pouches that we wore around our necks: the ashes from the sacred fire. The guns were nothing. We didn't have enough ammunition to stand off the army for ten minutes. It was all symbolic."

### National Aboriginal Day

Indigenous cultural revival is growing, and the surviving elements of Aboriginal religions play an important role. In 1996, Canada declared June 21 to be National Aboriginal Day. Each year, Aboriginal people celebrate their past and future together in pan-Aboriginal activities.

### Reconciliation

In 1998, the Canadian government acknowledged its role in the cultural and spiritual impact on Aboriginal cultures. It issued the “Statement of Reconciliation,” in which it formally expressed its profound regret for past actions. It also included an action plan to help with healing for residential school students, to improve health conditions, and to speed up land claims. In recent years, Christian Churches have also accepted some of the guilt and have made attempts to reconcile with Aboriginal communities.

### Nunavut

For some Aboriginal groups, one way to protect their heritage and religious values is through self-government. With control over their own lands and laws, Aboriginal societies might have a better hope of protecting and preserving traditional values. On April 1, 1999, Canada established its most

recent territorial government in the eastern half of the region formerly part of the Northwest Territories (Figure 2.24). Nunavut is home to a population of over 27 000 which is 80 to 85 per cent Inuit. It spreads over almost two million square kilometres of Arctic wilderness, passes through three time zones, and is larger than any other territory or province in Canada. In Inuktitut, the Inuit language, “Nunavut” means “Our Land.” The residents of Nunavut hope that by controlling their own affairs they can modernize their society while at the same time maintaining the essential values of their Aboriginal culture. The government pledged to respect and apply IQ (Inuit Qaujim-ajatuqanig), or traditional Inuit knowledge—the knowledge of the elders. In fact, in the legislature, unelected elders have seats right behind the elected leaders of the government.

**Figure 2.24**  
Performers and Inuit Junior Rangers carry the flags of Canada's ten provinces and three territories at the inaugural celebration in Iqaluit, Nunavut on April 1, 1999.



# Exploring Issues:

## Smudging Ceremony



**Figure 2.25** A Métis woman conducts a smudging ceremony.

A teacher who had invited two guest speakers to his Aboriginal Studies class worried when the guests took out some sweet grass and a smudge pot, and invited the class to participate in a **smudging ceremony**. There were explicit rules about no smoking on school property and yet this was a cultural ceremony of purification and symbol of unity. (At a university in 1999, five students were banned\* when it was discovered that they gathered weekly to purify themselves in the smoke of sage and sweet grass. School officials thought they were using marijuana or causing a fire hazard, and therefore banned it.) Clearly the teacher

was allowing a law to be broken in favour of allowing a ritual practice to occur.

The two guests put some tobacco and sweet grass into a small bowl, lit the contents, blew gently on it until fragrant smoke began wafting in the room. They explained that this was a religious belief and practice that they wanted to conduct before they began telling their stories. They invited Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to “smudge” by taking the bowl and with one hand, drawing the smoke over their faces and bodies, and inhaling the smoke. There was some nervousness about breaking the rules, but students said afterwards that they felt peaceful, more empathetic to the speakers, and more unified with their classmates than ever before.

\* The students at the university fought their suspension, used the hearing to educate the officials about the beliefs and symbolism behind smudging, and got their ban overturned.

**AT ISSUE: Should a “smudging ceremony,” which is an Aboriginal purification ritual, be banned from schools?**

Purification of the mind and spirit plays an important role in Aboriginal spirituality. Burning sweet grass and tobacco in a smudge pot and drawing the smoke ritually over one’s face, head, arms, and torso, and inhaling the smoke, is all part of a smudging ceremony of cleansing. Tobacco is considered a sacred plant and the smoke is a spiritual way to clear one’s thoughts, to wash away impurities, to help focus on the task with freshness and with renewed zeal, and to bond with co-smudgers. Although the sweet grass ceremony and smudging is a Great Plains cultural and religious act connected to the vision quest, many Aboriginal peoples have adopted the practice.

Every institution has rules of health and safety. Schools are no different. There are anti-smoking

bylaws that state there can be no smoking on school property. Also, smoking poses a problem of addiction and health that educators and governments are trying to address. Students can be suspended for smoking on school property and certainly for starting fires, especially in classrooms. It is both a health issue and a fire hazard. School administrators and teachers are liable by law if they allow smoking or fires of any kind in schools.

### QUESTIONS

**Which statement would you support? Explain.**

- 1. In a multicultural setting, Aboriginal practices are valid and allowable.**
- 2. Students should be suspended for participating in a smudging ceremony and the ritual should be banned.**

# Skill Path Oral Presentations

The ability to make effective oral presentations is an important skill, particularly in today's workplace, where many jobs involve public speaking and presentations.

Making an effective oral presentation requires planning, organization, knowledge of the subject, and practice. The more presentations you do, the easier this skill will become. If you are prepared and enthusiastic, your audience will show interest and involvement.

The following are some helpful hints to get you started:

## Step 1: Plan your Presentation

- Choose a topic and subtopics. Conduct research to identify issues related to your main topic.
- Create a written plan of the presentation. Start by identifying the main theme. Develop a powerful opening to catch the attention of your audience. Consider using a quotation, a visual, an interesting statistic, or a moving personal experience. Develop each subtopic individually. Your audience will be more interested in your presentation if you provide examples and visuals. Create a summary that reinforces your message. You might use a quote, a question, or an interesting anecdote.
- Consider your audience. Who are they and how many will be in attendance?

## Step 2: Rehearse

- Rehearse your presentation in front of a mirror. Use gestures that come naturally.
- Time your presentation. Leave time for questions or discussion.

- Listen to professional speakers, such as TV announcers, and note their pace and tone of voice. Listen to yourself on tape.
- Use visuals strategically. They can help to control and vary your pace.
- Create cue cards that you can refer to during your presentation.

## Step 3: Deliver the Presentation

### Do

- ✓ Arrive early to organize your presentation and to ensure equipment is available and in good working order.
- ✓ Ensure you have enough handouts for all members of the audience.
- ✓ Be well-rested so you can think on your feet.
- ✓ Have cue cards that you can refer to occasionally.
- ✓ Stand to make your presentation so you can be both seen and heard.
- ✓ Speak clearly and loudly.
- ✓ Establish eye contact with members of the audience so that everyone feels included.
- ✓ Use carefully prepared visuals (graphs, charts, pictures, etc.) to enhance your presentation.
- ✓ Make use of memorization strategies to help you avoid simply reading from your cue cards.
- ✓ Smile and be animated.

### Tips to help you remember

- **Mnemonics is the skill of improving memory by using a formula, code, or associative artifact. One such way is to develop an acronym, where a word or phrase is formed from the first letters of what is to be remembered. For example, in a presentation about the Aboriginal cultural groups in Canada, you might develop an acronym (THEN) to help you remember the order of your subtopics (today, history, environment, nations).**

# Skill Path Oral Presentations

## Don't

- ✓ Arrive late and ask for additional time.
- ✓ Just read your presentation. Look away from your cue cards as much as possible.
- ✓ Look at the teacher throughout. The students are your audience.
- ✓ Speak in a monotonous tone of voice.
- ✓ Display poor posture.
- ✓ Chew gum or eat candies.
- ✓ Simply talk, with no visual references.

## Practise It!

Do some research, and prepare an oral presentation on one of the following:

- one of the six Aboriginal cultural groups in North America
- an Aboriginal creation story, its meaning and significance
- an Aboriginal cultural centre
- The Peacemaker
- Handsome Lake
- developments in Nunavut since its creation
- the Oka Crisis
- the Statement of Reconciliation

## Check Your Understanding

1. Describe one example of cultural conflict related to Aboriginal spirituality.

2. How can Aboriginal religious values play a positive role in the

future development of Canada's Aboriginal peoples?

3. Which elements of Aboriginal spirituality might benefit all Canadians? Explain.



# Activities

## Check Your Understanding

1. Select five terms from the Glossary on page 59 and explain the meaning and importance to Aboriginal spirituality for each.
2. Describe how each of the following contributed to Aboriginal spirituality: Handsome Lake, elders, Elijah Harper, shaman, Lame Deer, The Peacemaker, animism, Melissa Labrador.
3. What were the challenges to Aboriginal spirituality for each of the following: Smudging, Potlatch, Sun Dance?
4. Describe what the following pairs have in common:
  - Handsome Lake–The Peacemaker
  - Sun Dance–Morning Dance

## Think and Communicate

5. Briefly describe one Aboriginal belief or practice that you feel might be essential to a balanced life in today's society.
6. Describe an appropriate way to commemorate June 21, National Aboriginal Day. Give at least three reasons for your decision.
7. Interview or conduct research on one of the following to identify and analyze his or her spiritual beliefs and practices: an elder, someone who attended a residential school, a faithkeeper, Matthew Coon Come. Present your findings to a peer for editing and appraisal.
8. Develop a collage or poster that would represent where and how Aboriginal spirituality fits in today's world.

9. Prepare an announcement or advertisement that promotes the protection of an Aboriginal sacred place, such as a burial ground or disputed land **or** that recognizes a sacred event, such as the death of Handsome Lake.

10. Explain the challenges for someone practising an Aboriginal religion today.

11. Do some research on the medicine wheel and the dream catcher to identify their significance as symbols in Aboriginal spirituality. Present your findings to the class in an oral presentation.

12. Conduct research on other Aboriginal groups, such as the Midewiwin Society, which is an Ojibwa spirituality group.

## Apply Your Learning

13. Adopt an environmental issue, e.g., the protection of an endangered species, the preservation of green space, disposing toxic waste, logging, etc. Research the evidence surrounding the issue. Explain to an environmental group, city council, or Member of Parliament, what action should be taken using at least three Aboriginal spiritual references.

14. Explain how one world problem might be solved by applying an Aboriginal spiritual viewpoint.

15. If you or a friend were feeling “lost” or “depressed,” what Aboriginal beliefs, practices, or values might help you deal with your problems?

# Glossary

**Aboriginal.** Of Native ancestry, inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times and before colonists.

**animism [ANNA mism].** The attribution of a living soul to plants, animals, inanimate objects, and natural phenomena.

**elder.** A person (male or female) venerated for age and wisdom.

**faithkeeper.** Member of a nation selected to maintain the traditional ceremonies and rituals.

**First Nations.** An Aboriginal band, or a community functioning as a band, but not having band status. The term First Nations does not include the Inuit or Métis.

**genesis [GENNA sis].** The origin, the beginnings, the formation of something.

**indigenous [in DIDGE a nus].** Originating naturally in a region, belonging naturally to an environment (of people) born in a region.

**longhouse.** Iroquois home, cigar-shaped, about fifty metres long and ten metres wide, a dwelling shared by several nuclear families.

**Longhouse.** Religion of the Iroquois.

**monotheism [monna THEE ism].** The belief in one God.

**oracy.** The ability to express oneself fluently in speech and to understand a spoken language.

**polytheism [polly THEE ism].** The belief in or worship of more than one god.

**powwow.** A gathering of Aboriginal people with ritual dances, drumming and chanting.

**reincarnation [re in car NAY sh'n].** The belief in the rebirth of a soul in a new body or form.

**sachems [SAY chum].** The supreme chief of a clan.

**shaman [SHAY min].** Medicine man or spiritual leader.

**smudging ceremony.** A purification ritual that includes the burning of sweet grass and drawing smoke ritually over body.

**tipi.** Cone-shaped tent and dwelling found in the nations of the Great Plains.

**totem.** A protective entity in the form of an animal, natural object, or plant.

**totem pole.** A long pole in which several totems are carved, used to recount history.

**vision quest.** The process of purifying and fasting in order to be sensitive to a vision or voices that might guide a person; a sacred ceremony.

**wampum [WOM pum].** A belt of coloured beads used to confirm a treaty, or to help with the skill of oracy.