

POPULATION IN CANADA:

~1,400,000 or ~4% of Canadians (~700,000 First Nations people, ~420,000 Métis, ~56,000 Inuit and ~210,000 Non-Status Indians)

HISTORY:

Aboriginal peoples are the traditional inhabitants of what we now call Canada. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the 11th century, Aboriginal communities thrived by recognizing their deep partnership with the natural environment.

Sources identify three broad groups: the First Nations who historically lived in North America from the Pacific to the Atlantic, the Inuit who lived along the coast and on the northern islands of Canada, and the Métis who descend from the historical connection between the First Nations communities and the Europeans.

The First Nations, Inuit and Métis have their own distinct histories, cultures, spiritual beliefs and practices based on their traditional geographic region. Within these communities there is rich diversity. For example, some sources categorize the 617 First Nations communities into six groups based on geography: Woodland, Iroquoian, Plains, Plateau, Pacific Coast, and Mackenzie and Yukon River Basins. There are more than 50 Aboriginal languages in Canada; some languages have common roots and therefore are understood by many groups.

In the presence of such diversity, Aboriginal communities are united in their integrated way of living. Spirituality is more a worldview than a set of specific cultural practices. In this worldview, sacredness is interwoven through all dimensions of life; humankind strives for holistic, balanced, harmonious existence. There is no dichotomy between “religion” and regular daily life—it is not seen as separate from the overall human experiences of living, knowing and learning.

Aboriginal spiritual traditions can include mythology and ceremonies. Complex, diverse sets of customs within each community enable members to understand and engage with the sacred and supernatural. Myths (understood as stories that hold perennial truths) can highlight origins of ritual practice, the cosmos, death, ethical action and religious institutions.

In recent history, Aboriginal communities in Canada have experienced profound injustice in the wake of European settlement (including abusive trade relationships, treaties and policies, establishment of residential schools, and forced integration). As a result, many Aboriginal teachings, beliefs and practices have been lost over time. Honouring these teachings is essential for Canada’s future as a pluralistic society.

FORMAL PLACE OF WORSHIP:

None. Practices take place in open air, and also within a longhouse.

SACRED SCRIPTURE(S):

Beliefs and myths are shared as part of an oral tradition.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES:

- Human beings are created to live in harmony with the natural world. The concept of Relationship is integral to Aboriginal spiritual traditions. The natural world is alive, intelligent and integrated with humankind.
- There is a profound interconnectedness among all of creation. All animate and inanimate parts of the environment are endowed with powerful and mysterious spirits, and thus deserve the utmost respect.
- Gratitude is a central concept in Aboriginal traditions—humankind expresses gratitude to the natural world for abundant gifts that ensure survival and flourishing.
- Elders hold crucial roles as teachers and role models within the community. They pass on the traditions, values, rituals and practices to younger generations. Elders and healers are recognized for their vast wisdom.
- Values and traditions of the people are gifts from the Creator. Values such as wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth enable right living and healing.
- Sacred medicines are used within spiritual ceremonies for purification and healing. Some sources describe a medicine wheel with four directions and four corresponding sacred medicines: Sweetgrass in the North, Tobacco in the East, Cedar in the South and Sage in the West. Each of these medicines attends to a different dimension of human experience (spiritual, mental, emotional and physical). Approaches to medicine and healing within Aboriginal Spiritual Traditions are often seen as antithetical to Western medicine, but this is not the case.
- Prayer can be personal and communal. Offerings, such as tobacco, can be made to the spirits.
- Ceremonies and cultural practices can include powwows, sweat lodges, smudging, fasting, singing/chanting and dancing. Such practices are seen as expressions of spirituality within a holistic, balanced and harmonious worldview.

REFERENCES:

- First Nations Pedagogy Online: firstnationspedagogy.ca/index.html
- The Canadian Encyclopedia – Religion of Aboriginal People: thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/religion-of-aboriginal-people
- Statistics Canada: statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/2010001/count-pop-denombrement-eng.htm
- Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada – Aboriginal Peoples and Communities: aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100013785/1304467449155
- University of Ottawa Aboriginal Health – The Medicine Wheel: med.uottawa.ca/sim/data/Aboriginal_medicine_wheel.pdf