

3 Aboriginal World View

FOCUS



This section will help you understand

- a. how Aboriginal people have traditionally viewed the universe
- b. how this world view still has value and influence today.

From Past to Present

Most Aboriginal people today live in modern ways but many are rediscovering and preserving aspects of their traditional cultures and making them part of their daily lives. They feel that their traditional stories, rituals, and spiritual beliefs are important parts of who they are and have value in their modern lives.

Aboriginal peoples have different beliefs. Traditionally, however, they have shared some common views about the nature of the world and the place of humans in it. These common beliefs, or world view, affected how Aboriginal peoples saw events in the world and how they behaved and interacted. Some of these common beliefs include:

- ▶ everything in the world, both living and non-living, is connected,
- ▶ unseen spiritual powers exist and affect all things,
- ▶ everything in the world constantly changes in recurring cycles, and
- ▶ humans need to be in harmony with each other and with nature.

Humans and Nature

For some Aboriginal peoples, humans are one with nature or Creation. They are not separate from it and do not have a special or dominant place in it. Therefore, all people have a responsibility to respect other humans, animals, birds, plants, and inanimate objects—or in the words of the great Oglala Sioux spiritual elder Black Elk, the two-leggeds, four-leggeds, wingeds, and standing people (plants). Everything in the world, living or non-living, has a spirit and should be honoured. Even human-made objects have a spirit.

Many Aboriginal creation and recreation stories reflect this relationship between humans and the natural world. In many of these stories, animals cooperate in the creation of the world and the first peoples. For example, in a recreation story in the Ojibwa tradition, the earth was once covered with water in a great flood. Several water animals and birds (the beaver, marten, fisher and loon) tried to bring some mud to the surface of the water.

Primary Source

We know that we are related and are one with all things of the heavens and the earth, and we know that all the things that move are a people as we. We all wish to live and increase in a holy manner ... May we be continually aware of this relationship which exists between the four-leggeds, the two-leggeds, and the wingeds. May we all rejoice and live in peace!

—Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, quoted in *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, ed. Joseph Epes Brown (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), p. 97.

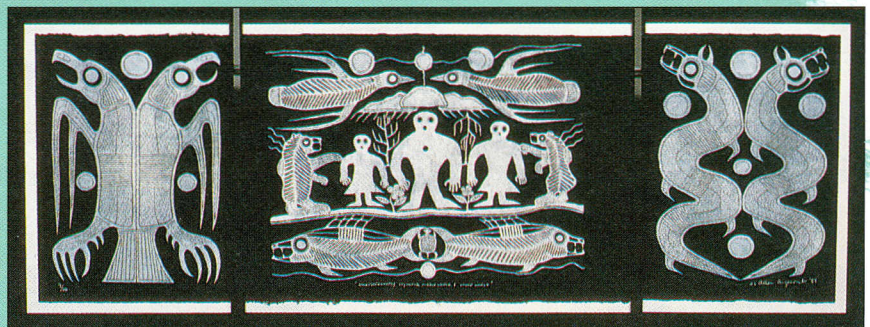


Figure 3-1 Some Aboriginal peoples believe in the interdependence of all creatures who live in the sky, on earth, and in the water. This print, *Skyworld, Middle World and Underworld* is by Ahmoo Angecone from the Lac Seul First Nation.



Figure 3-2 In *Birth of the Earth* by Onondaga artist Arnold Jacobs, a divine woman falls from the sky and with the help of the animals creates the earth. This painting reflects the belief that humans are not separate from nature.

Eventually, a muskrat succeeded. Sky Woman then spread the mud on the back of a turtle and created Turtle Island, the Ojibwa name for North America. In Haida legend, it is the Raven, alone in the world, who coaxes the original people out from a clamshell on a beach. The original Haida thus came from the sea, which has remained a key element in their livelihood and culture.

Harmony and Balance

For many Aboriginal peoples, everything in creation follows a cycle of change. The seasons change regularly, and animals and plants have yearly cycles of migration and birth. Human life also follows a cycle. Humans are born, mature, and die and then pass on into the spirit world. The circle is a central symbol in many Aboriginal cultures, reflecting these cycles. The circle also represents the connection of all things.

Despite the changing world, humans must live in harmony with the natural order. Each culture has its own songs, rituals, ceremonies and dances to keep in

Primary Source

ANIMALS IN OJIBWA LEGENDS

In Ojibwa legends, animals not only helped create the Earth, they also helped the original humans. Ojibwa legends say that bears played a particularly important part in the survival of the first humans.

For all their needs the spirit woman and her children depended on the care and goodwill of the animals. The bears, wolves, foxes, deer and beaver brought food and drink; the squirrels, weasels, racoons, and cats offered toys and games; the robins, sparrows, chickadees, and loons sang and danced in the air; the butterflies, bees, and dragonflies made the children smile... The bear, fearing the death of the infants, offered himself that they might live.

With the bear's sweet flesh, the infants survived. The death of the bear encompassed life for the new beings. Thereafter, the other animals sacrificed their lives for the good of men. When the infants grew to manhood and womanhood, they bore a special love for the bear and honoured him in their ceremonies. In gratitude and fondness they dedicated a prayer to the other animals, "I had need." Men and women survive and live because of the death of their elder brothers.

—Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers, and Legends of the Ojibway* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1976), p. 16.

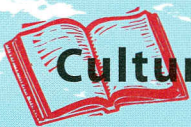


Figure 3-3 The bear is a sacred animal in Ojibwa legends. This painting is called *Bear Feeding* by Blake Debassige. Debassige's artwork interprets the Ojibwa way of life.

touch with the spiritual world and to honour the spirits. Aboriginal people try to consider the effect of their actions seven generations into the future. They are also taught to honour and respect the animals they hunt. If the proper respect for animals was not shown, Aboriginal people believed they would not respond to a hunter's request for "good hunting." To the Cree, for example, this means not pointing at an animal or walking in its tracks when hunting it. As well, the hunters are restrained in their celebration of the kill. They display the animal's carcass respectfully in their home and dispose of the bones with care. The Cree, like many other First Nations, also express a strong belief in their responsibility to protect and preserve the land. All people are connected to the spirit of the land. It provides life, knowledge, healing, and a connection to all Creation.



Figure 3-4 Cree hunters show great respect for the animals they hunt and dispose of the bones with care. A set of caribou horns sits on a raised platform near a hunting camp. The skulls of smaller animals are also placed there to show respect.



CultureLink

TRADITIONAL VALUES OF THE OJIBWA (ANISHINABE) PEOPLE

According to the Sacred Teachings of the Midewiwin Spiritual Way, the Ojibwa should practise the Seven Gifts of the Grandfathers. These gifts describe basic values of the Ojibwa people.

1. To cherish knowledge is to know **wisdom**.
2. To know **love** is to know peace.
3. To honour all of creation is to have **respect**.
4. **Bravery** is to face the foe with integrity.
5. **Honesty** is facing a situation is to be brave.
6. **Humility** is to know yourself as a sacred part of creation.
7. **Truth** is to know all these things.

Source: James Dumont quoted in Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, (Ottawa: Minister of Supply Services, 1993), p. 45.

Traditional Knowledge Today

In the Northwest Territories, regulations require government officials to recognize the traditional knowledge that Aboriginal peoples have about animals and the land. When decisions are made about

resource development and wildlife management, government officials must consult with Aboriginal peoples about the possible impact on the natural environment.

In other cases, First Nations have not been consulted about development projects and are actively opposing them. The Cree Nation, for example, has opposed any expansion or further development by Hydro-Québec in the North for many years. They believe the original James Bay project caused massive destruction to the environment. They are concerned about further damage and they want their claims to the lands recognized.

In many ways, the Aboriginal view reflects current concerns about **ecology** and the environment. For example, many scientists acknowledge that the traditional Inuit classification of animals in the North will help advance the understanding of Arctic **ecosystems**. The views of scientists and Aboriginal peoples do not always agree, however. Scientists and Inuit clash over the hunting of some whale species in the North, which scientists consider endangered.



CROSSFIRE

Read the following reactions to proposed hydro development projects in northern Quebec.

My people are determined to stand up against any project having to do with the destruction of the land, water and other resources that have sustained us as a people since time immemorial... No amount of money in the world can replace the type of destruction that took place at La Grande, and this is not going to happen here... Lake Bienville is a sacred area. It is the heart of the land. Its huge water area contains all kinds of fish that has sustained the Eeyouch (Cree people). It is the central calving ground for the inland caribou. Birds and animals of all kinds have used and continue to use this area as a sanctuary. It just cannot be touched by man. Any alteration to it will bring bad luck to the perpetrator because it is a sacred area.

—Chief Matthew Mukash, leader of the Cree community of Great Whale River, *Canada News Wire*, July 31, 1997
www.newswire.ca

“Hydro-Québec is not a diviner, but we still have a responsibility to meet the needs of our customers.” In its \$400-million feasibility study [for the proposed Great Whale project], Hydro-Québec argued that the power was needed to fulfill Quebec’s rising energy needs after the year 2000, largely driven by demand from New England. It also argued that the project would create 66 700 direct and indirect jobs over 10 years, generating \$10.7 million in annual spinoffs for the region. Native people, for their part, would receive some \$130 million in compensation.

—Editorial published in *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 22, 1994, p. A22.

The Crees’ position is clear. The Crees’ position is that diversion projects are unacceptable. We want to look at alternatives to any projects that are announced. We would certainly want a public debate on an energy policy. We would want it to look at more than the economics of projects. It should examine the social, environmental and cultural impacts. We are still concerned about the environmental audit to be done on the past impacts.

—Cree Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come in an interview with *The Nation*, December 5, 1997.

RECONNECT



1. Write a paragraph explaining your reactions to the Aboriginal world view. Be sure to discuss each of the four common beliefs mentioned on page 10.
2. How is the Aboriginal world view influencing environmental issues today?