First Nations, Métis, and Inuit

Language and Terminology – Reviewed/Approved by PIAC v.2.1 (2025-05-05)

FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, and INUIT TERMINOLOGY

Aboriginal Peoples

An umbrella term used by the Canadian government to describe the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples within Canada in the *Constitution Act, 1982*. This terminology was not chosen by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit within Canada and instead was taken from the Australian context as an umbrella term that does not accurately reflect the diverse and distinct communities of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The term itself has problematic interpretations, such that it can be translated to be "not original" which implies a lack of pre-existing histories or presence before European colonization. This term should only be used in reference to the *Constitution Act, 1982*, and related legislation.

Band

A self-governed First Nations community on reserve as defined in the *Indian Act*. There are over 600 recognized bands in Canada.

Band council/First Nation council

The governing body of a band or First Nation, including the Chief, who is elected according to the *Indian Act* or through other means determined by the band. This term should only be used to describe leadership operating under the *Indian Act*.

Bill C-31

The pre-legislation name of the 1985 *Act to Amend the Indian Act*. The bill aimed to eliminate all discriminatory provisions against First Nations from the *Indian Act* and had three goals: address gender inequality, restore Indian status, and pave a path for self-government.

Blood memory

A term used by some Indigenous communities to refer to memories and experiences that are stored in one's body and passed down through generations. Blood memories can be described as an ancestral or genetic connection to language, songs, ceremonies, land, and teachings.

Decolonization

Decolonization is the process of breaking down or deconstructing colonial systems and ways of thinking. At the individual level (personal decolonization) it is consciously and critically questioning the ways we have been influenced by colonialism and creating space for Indigenous perspectives in everyday life. At the institutional level (institutional decolonization) it is the process of making space for and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems; and dismantling systems that devalue, minimize, or subjugate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. At the highest level, decolonization can involve colonizers withdrawing from the colonized territory or acknowledging the sovereignty rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Elders

Recognized and respected members of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities who pass down traditional teachings. Elder, as a title, should be capitalized to acknowledge the importance and significance of the role within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Note that Elders do not identify themselves as such, and instead are identified by their communities. While it is common for Elders to be part of older generations, younger people have also been identified as Elders in some Nations.

Enfranchisement

The removal of one's Indian status as legally identified in the *Indian Act*. This took place in Canada until 1985, prior to the passing of Bill C-31, where individuals with First Nations identities were stripped of their legal Indian status through attending university, joining the military, being away from their reserve, or, in the case of women, marrying a man without Indian status.

First Nation

One of the 3 recognized Indigenous Peoples within Canada. First Nations replaced the label "Indian", which is offensive and inaccurate. In Canada, there are over 630 First Nation communities and over 50 languages.

Indian

A term that was used inaccurately to collectively and legally identify First Nations Peoples under the *Indian Act*. This term should not be used except for discussions around the *Indian Act*, or when referring to Indian status.

- **Non-status Indian:** First Nations individuals who have had their status under the *Indian Act* taken away or are descendants of those who had status taken away.
- **Status Indian:** First Nations People registered under the *Indian Act*.
- **Treaty Indian:** First Nations individuals with Indian status who belong to a Nation that signed one of the historic treaties with Canada through the Crown.

Indian Act

Canadian legislation that was passed in 1876 with the intent of assimilating First Nations Peoples into the dominant Euro-Canadian society. The *Indian Act* was used to identify who could be "Indian", establish reserves, and mandate residential school attendance for First Nations children.

Indigenization

The process of normalizing and promoting Indigenous knowledge systems (connected to Indigenous land, culture, and community) alongside Western knowledge. Indigenization is not just adding Indigenous content to courses, but instead meaningfully integrating Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and practices into systems as well as ensuring there is Indigenous leadership and voices at all levels of governing systems.

Indigenous

Globally, Indigenous Peoples refers to the people who have occupied specific lands since time immemorial. Within Canada, Indigenous Peoples are identified as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit and this should not be reduced to the acronym FNMI because it obscures the meaning and does not demonstrate respect to the communities.

Intergenerational trauma

The trauma experienced and inherited through generations. Research has found that trauma can be passed down genetically through changes in DNA expression, socially through traumatic events affecting social interactions, or structurally through the continued marginalization of traumatized groups. Intergenerational trauma has been found to affect the families of Holocaust survivors, residential school survivors, refugees, and other groups who experienced traumatic events. Intergenerational trauma can also be associated with the First Nations concept of **blood memory**, which includes both positive and negative experiences and knowledge, passed through generations.

Inuit

Inuit are a group of similar peoples inhabiting the Arctic circle and Subarctic regions in Canada, Russia, Greenland, and Alaska. In Canada, Inuit live from the Labrador coast in the east to the waters in the Mackenzie Delta in the west, and up to the islands of the High Arctic. Because Inuit translates as "the people", it is inappropriate to add the words "people" or "peoples" after Inuit (since that would make it say "people people"). Additionally, Inuit is plural so to speak about one Inuit person the term Inuk should be used. It is also not appropriate to use the term Eskimo to refer to Inuit as this is a pejorative word and not a term that Inuit have used to name themselves.

Jordan's Principle

A child-first initiative that is named in honour of Jordan River Anderson, a member of Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba who died in hospital care and never was able to live in his home community, with his siblings and family, because of the province and the federal government fighting over who would pay for the home care expenses required for his health needs. Jordan's passing highlighted the inequities experienced by First Nations children with disabilities, who have not received the same care and treatment as non-Indigenous children in Canadian health systems. In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal issued a non-compliance order to the Canadian government for failing to address the needs of First Nations children. Jordan's Principle provides funding for First Nations children who have health, educational, and/or social needs that are not being met by the services available to them.

Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is a symbol used as a representation of beliefs, values, and concepts by some First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. Interpretations and uses vary across communities and cultures.

Métis

Métis Peoples are recognized under the *Constitution Act, 1982*, as a distinct nation in Canada. A common misconception is that Métis refers broadly to individuals who have blended First Nations

and European parentage, but to be Métis means having a distinct culture, language, history, and traditions, distinct from either First Nations or European cultures and developing out of the fur trade era in what is now North America. Métis citizenship requires individuals to (a) self-identify as Métis, (b) have ancestral connection to an historic Métis community (usually confirmed through genealogical records), and (c) be accepted as a member of a contemporary Métis community.

- The **Metis Settlements General Council** (MSGC) represents the eight lands set aside as protected lands for Metis in Alberta. Not all Metis live in settlements but those that do will be registered with the Metis Settlements General Council. The accent is not used when speak about the Metis Settlements General Council.
- The **Métis Nation of Alberta** (MNA) also known as the **Otipemisiwak Métis Government** is a government within Alberta recognized by the Government of Canada that pursues the socio-economic and cultural well being of Métis in Alberta.
- Métis in Alberta may be members of a Metis Settlement, the Métis Nation of Alberta, or both.

Missing, Murdered, and Exploited Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirited

A human rights crisis in which disproportionate rates of violence, abduction, exploitation, and murder are experienced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, girls, and two-spirited North America. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls established in its 2019 report, *Reclaiming Power and Place*, that this issue is the result of generations of government legislation, policies, and practices that eroded traditional family and community roles and relationships and that it constitutes a cultural genocide. This phrase should not be reduced to an acronym as it is considered disrespectful to the survivors and family left behind by this epidemic.

Native

The term may be used by those who self-identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit but should be avoided by non-Indigenous people unless speaking about plants or animals that are indigenous to an area (e.g., the grizzly bear is native to the north-western regions of North America).

Oral Traditions

The verbal passing down of histories, teachings, and stories from generation to generation. Each community has its own practices and protocols related to Oral Traditions that can include limitations on when information is shared, who it is shared to, and where it can be shared.

Pow Wow

A large social event or celebration where people meet to dance, sing, visit family and friends, and celebrate First Nations and Métis communities and cultures. Use of the word powwow to describe meetings should be avoided.

Reconciliation

In the Canadian context, Reconciliation refers to the intentional efforts made by individuals, groups, institutions, and governments to acknowledge past and ongoing effects of colonization on

First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and actions to establish and maintain respectful relationships between First Nations, Métis and Inuit and non-Indigenous communities. Reconciliation is an ongoing process that requires truth-sharing through testimony, addressing past harms, and returning power to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

Residential schools

Government-mandated and church-run institutions established to attempt to convert First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth and assimilate them into Euro-Canadian society. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were forcibly taken away from their families, communities, traditions, cultures, and languages, and put into the residential schools where they experienced malnutrition, abuse, neglect, and, in some cases, experimentation which caused long-term harm to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, their families, and their communities. The last residential school closed in 1996.

Smudging

A cultural and spiritual practice of some First Nations and Métis communities with medicinal and ceremonial purposes. The traditions and meanings behind smudging vary across communities and cultures.

Time immemorial

A phrase used by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit to describe their connection with ancestral lands to a time beyond dating.

Traditional territory

The geographic area that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit or their ancestors traditionally occupied prior to colonization.

Unceded territory

Traditional territory that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit never agreed to surrender or leave.

Treaty

Treaties are living agreements made between sovereign nations that First Nations and Inuit made between different communities and the lands since time immemorial. In the Canadian context, treaties refer to both historical and contemporary treaties between European Nations and First Nations, Métis, or Inuit Nations to establish peaceful relations and ongoing obligations regarding land, resources, and governance rights. Treaty rights vary greatly between treaties but may include fishing and hunting, land occupation, and the extent of self-governance. Many of the rights and obligations established in historic treaties have not been upheld by the Crown and the Canadian government, leading to the creation of modern treaties and land claims.

- **Historic treaties**
  70 treaties signed between 1701 and 1923 between First Nations and the Crown acting for Canada. The historic treaties include the Treaties of Peace and Neutrality, Peace and Friendship Treaties, Upper Canada Land Surrenders and the Williams Treaties,

Robinson Treaties and Douglas Treaties, and the Numbered Treaties. When writing about a specific treaty, the t should be capitalized.

- **Numbered treaties**
  11 treaties signed by the Crown and First Nations between 1871 and 1921. These treaties cover a large area of Canada, from northeastern British Columbia, north into parts of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, through the prairie provinces, and into parts of northern Ontario for the purpose of extending the reach of Canada into the west and north. Many of the agreements made within the Numbered Treaties were not upheld by the Canadian government or not written into the written form of the Treaties. The creation of several provinces and territories, including Alberta, are dependent on the establishment of the Numbered Treaties which allowed for further westward settlement of Europeans in what is now Canada.

- **Modern treaties (land claims)**
  Treaties negotiated between Indigenous communities and the government of Canada from 1975 to the present. Modern treaties address government failures to meet historical treaty rights and responsibilities and establish agreements with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities that were not included in historical treaty-making.
  - **Comprehensive claims**
    Modern treaties involving lands not covered by the historic treaties and based on the inherent rights of the First Nations, Métis, or Inuit who have traditionally lived in those lands. For example, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (1993) established the Nunavut territory as of 1999.
  - **Specific claims**
    In lands where historic treaties have been signed, specific claims involve addressing treaty obligations that have not been met, or where reserve land has been appropriated by the Crown without agreement. For example, in Alberta, Lubicon Lake Band, and Bigstone Cree Nation have both had specific claim settlements where terms of the historic treaties were not met by the Canadian government.

Tribe

A term that was used to refer to First Nations communities. While this term is still commonly used in the United States, it has become outdated in Canada and replaced by the term “nation”. Use of the word tribe to describe groups of people in general (e.g., a group of friends or a group of colleagues) should be avoided.

Turtle Island

Turtle Island is the name used by some First Nations to refer to the continent of North America. This name is based on creation stories, passed down through oral tradition, that describe the role of a turtle in the formation of the land. Many versions of this story exist, and not all include a turtle.

FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS, and INUIT WRITING GUIDE

Additional considerations when writing for, with, or about First Nations, Métis, or Inuit include:

- **Capitalize** Indigenous identifies, governments, institutions, specific agreements, significant roles, and rights (i.e., as we do with other cultural groups). E.g., Capitalize Elder, Chief, Indigenous, Treaty 6, Knowledge Keeper.
- Whenever known, **use the name of the Nation** they use for themselves. E.g., Use Dene instead of Chipewyan.
- Watch out if you are using **singular** or **plural** language. There are hundreds of First Nations across Canada, numerous Métis Nations, and several unique Inuit communities. They do not have the same beliefs, practices, languages, or characteristics. E.g., Use "Some First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures use medicine wheels to represent harmony and relationality" instead of "First Nations, Métis, and Inuit culture uses medicine wheels to represent harmony and relationality".
- Use **strengths-based language** to demonstrate support for the empowerment of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. E.g., Use "survivor" instead of "victim".
- Use active language when discussing First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. E.g., Use "Métis resisted settler expansion into their lands." Instead of "New settlers displaced Métis from their lands."
- Use **present tense** unless speaking about something that no longer is practiced or exists. E.g., Use "First Nations **practice** a variety of traditions." instead of "First Nations **practiced** a variety of traditions."
- Avoid **possessive terminology** that suggests that Indigenous Peoples are owned. E.g., Do not use "Our Indigenous students" or "Alberta's First Nations".
- Avoid the use of **acronyms** where using an acronym will obfuscate the meaning.
- Avoid language that does not **demonstrate** an **awareness** of or **respect** for Indigenous practices, histories, or worldviews. E.g., Avoid use of "pow wow" when you mean "meeting", "low man on the totem pole" to indicate rank (i.e., totem poles do not represent ranks), "stakeholders" (i.e., "partners" is preferred), and "Columbus discovered the new world" (i.e., given the existence of millions of Indigenous Peoples in what we now call the Americas, it was neither new nor discovered at that point).