

## **Terminology**

Indigenous peoples have been named by their colonizers and have had derogatory descriptors applied to them as a result of racism and stereotyping. This process is part of colonial control and contributes to chronic trauma through the erasure of Indigenous identities. Accurate language empowers Indigenous peoples and validates their experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and histories. Using appropriate terminology also avoids the misunderstandings that can arise from inaccurate word usage.

There is no single vocabulary to refer to Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Usage varies from country to country, region to region, and among Indigenous peoples themselves. In Canada, the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are both used, although “Aboriginal” is now used less often and “Indigenous” is more common. In the United States, “American Indian” and “Native American” are used. Terms that originated as legal definitions – such as “status Indian” – are still necessary in Canada because that is the language used in legislation, government policy, and courts of law. Whenever possible, identify people by their specific nations, for example, “Cree painter Allen Sapp” or “Mohawk athlete Waneek Horn-Miller.” Try whenever possible to identify Indigenous nations by the names they use in their own languages, as many Indigenous peoples now prefer those designations – for example, Kanienkehaka [gah-nee-en-geh-aga] instead of Mohawk, or Nehiyaw [neh-hee-yo] instead of Cree.

In Canada, three distinct peoples are recognized in the Constitution Act, 1982: Indians, Métis, and Inuit.

### **Indian**

“Indian” refers to:

- status Indians, who are registered with the federal government and are entitled to rights and benefits under the Indian Act
- non-status Indians, who are First Nations people not recognized by the government for a variety of reasons, including:
  - enfranchisement (a series of historical legal processes through which Indians lost status, such as entering the Armed Forces)
  - the rejection of treaty with the Crown (such as the Aseniwuche Winewak/Rocky Mountain Cree, who still exist as a people but are not recognized as a band)
  - the loss of status through discriminatory practices (such as First Nations women losing their status when they married white men)
- treaty Indians, who are status Indians belonging to a First Nation that signed a treaty with the Crown

Do not be confused if you hear an Indigenous person using the term “Indian.” Indigenous peoples sometimes use the term among themselves. Many older Indigenous people still use the term. It is also used by artists, writers, and intellectuals to refer to a stereotypical identity created by the dominant society. When non-Indigenous people use the term “Indian,” however, it is considered offensive.

### **Métis**

“Métis” refers to the descendants of Indigenous women and fur traders (Scottish or French), who have become a distinct people and nation. Although there is diversity within Métis communities, the Métis have a shared history, common culture, traditional territory, unique language (Michif), and unique way of life. The term “Métis” is not a synonym for people of mixed Indigenous–European ancestry. Métis organizations have differing criteria as to who qualifies as Métis.

### **Inuit**

Inuit are people who are indigenous to the Arctic. In Canada, they live mainly in Nunavut, the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories), Nunavik (northern Quebec), and Nunatsiavut (Labrador). There are also large urban Inuit populations in cities such as Montreal and Ottawa, and a growing urban Inuit community in Toronto. Inuit means “people” in the Inuktitut language, and is used to refer to more than one person. When referring to a single person, use the term “Inuk,” which means “person.” Inuit are sometimes still referred to as “Eskimo” in the United States (when they’re not referred to as “Alaska Natives”), but “Eskimo” is considered offensive in Canada as it comes from a derogatory term in the Nehiyawak language. Note: the Inuit are not to be confused with the Innu, who are Algonkian-speaking First Nations people living in Quebec and Labrador.

### **Aboriginal and Indigenous**

Aboriginal/Indigenous peoples are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the Americas. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the adjective “aboriginal” dates from the 1660s, with the noun dating from 1767, and it means “first, earliest,” especially in reference to lands colonized by Europeans. The word originates from the Latin “Aborigines,” meaning “the first ancestors of the Romans; the first inhabitants,” from “ab origine,” literally “from the beginning.” The term “Indigenous” is defined as “originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native.” It dates from the mid-17th century, and is taken from the Latin “indigena,” or “a native.”

Both “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous” are umbrella terms that refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, without regard to specific identities. Therefore, these terms should not be used when referring to specific communities/people or specific rights, responsibilities, policies, or programs. For example, it is incorrect to say that “Indigenous peoples” are eligible for health benefits through the federal government, as band-administered funding through the federal government is applicable only to status Indians and Inuit recognized by the Inuit Land Claim (and not to Métis, non-status Indigenous people, and other Inuit). The federal government was also incorrect when it rebranded Indian and Northern Affairs as “Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada” in 2011 and as “Indigenous and Northern Affairs” in 2015, because that implies that this federal department is responsible for all Indigenous peoples in Canada, when in fact that department deals only with status Indians and some Inuit. “Aboriginal” is the term used in Canada’s Constitution Act, 1982.

### **First Nation**

This word can be used to describe both status Indians and non-status Indigenous peoples, and can also refer to bands (for example, “First Nations people in the Lake Superior region” and “the Curve Lake First Nation”). The term does not include Inuit or Métis.

### **Band**

A group for whom land and funding are set aside by the federal government. A band is composed of status Indians who may also be treaty Indians. Many people now prefer the term “First Nation.” A band might be a First Nation, but several bands can also live in one First Nations community (for example, the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation has 13 bands).

### **Band Council**

The governing body of a band set up under the requirements of the federal Indian Act, used to administer federal policies and funding. Band councils are colonial structures that were imposed on First Nations. They are not the same as traditional governance structures, and are not self-government. At the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory and in many Indigenous nations in British Columbia, for example, there is an elected band council and a pre-colonial longhouse government. In other nations, there are hereditary chiefs based on pre-colonial systems and an elected band council. The government of Canada chooses to deal only with elected band councils.

### **Tribal Council**

A group of several First Nations who work together to represent and/or advocate for their common interests. A Tribal Council may also administer government funding to member communities.

### **Tribe**

Many people consider “tribe” a pejorative term because it promotes misleading stereotypes in which “tribal” often implies “savage” or “primitive.” The term “tribe” is also based upon misleading historical and cultural assumptions applied by the colonizer, reflecting 19th-century European social theory in which Indigenous societies were viewed as evolving along a sequence of organizational stages that started with hunting and proceeded through herding, agriculture, and mechanical industry. In this model, city-building is considered the root of civilization, and all forms of social organization and government that preceded this stage were considered tribal. In fact, many ancient Indigenous nations were urban civilizations. These theories of social evolution became intertwined with racial theories, and were used to justify the latter stages of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonial rule. Contemporary uses of the term “tribe” developed during the 19th-century rise of evolutionary and racist theories also designate non-white peoples as inferior or less civilized (white people have ethnic or nationality-group loyalties; Indigenous peoples have tribes). Indigenous peoples in Canada are commonly recognized as belonging to self-governing nations, not tribes. Note: the Blood Tribe in southern Alberta is reclaiming its pre-colonial name as the Kainai Nation, but the colonial name still exists, and is used by the federal government and elected band council.

### **Reserve**

A reserve is land owned by the Crown and set aside for the use of a First Nation or band. A reserve is not always one continuous piece of land. Some First Nations have several reserves that are separated by privately held land and/or non-Indigenous communities. Note that the traditional territories of Indigenous nations usually do not conform to the boundaries of the reserve. For that reason, elected band councils do not have jurisdiction over traditional territories – they only have jurisdiction over reserve land. Note: “reservation” is an American term, and is not used in Canada.

### **Off-Reserve**

Anything that relates to First Nations – people, services, or objects – but not located on a reserve.

### **General Guidelines and Problematic Terms**

Other general guidelines relating to terminology include:

- Do not use language that implies ownership, such as “Canada’s Indigenous peoples” or “our First Nations.” Indigenous peoples do not belong to anyone; they are autonomous, self-determining nations, not children or wards of the state. If you wouldn’t say “our Ukrainians,” don’t say “our Indigenous peoples.” The use of “our” reflects a paternalistic attitude.
- The term “custom” is used to describe cultural practices, such as marriage or child-rearing, and should not be used to imply that these practices are less developed, or backward, or only applicable to the past.
- The term “traditional” is problematic and should be avoided, for the following reasons:
  - “Traditional” is defined as “based on a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by the people in a particular group, family, society, etc., for a long time” – but Indigenous cultures change, and so do traditions. Describing Indigenous cultural practices as “traditional” tends to position Indigenous cultures as stopped in time, unchanging, or non-innovative.
  - “Traditional” is also defined as “typical or normal for something or someone” – but what is typical of one Indigenous group (or one family) is not typical for another Indigenous group/family. This portrays Indigenous cultures as monolithic and uniform, and it does not reflect the cultural diversity of Indigenous communities across the country.
  - “Traditional” should never be used to mean “pre-colonial,” as it implies that everything that has come after colonization is not reflective of “true” or “pure” Indigenous cultures.
- The term “pre-history” should be avoided, for the following reasons:
  - “Pre-history” is defined as “the period of time in the past before people could write” or “the time before history was written down.” This prioritizes

European culture and its belief that written sources are “true” or “proven,” which delegitimizes the non-written texts/literacies of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous oral tradition.

- “Pre-history” is also defined as “the time and events that came before and led to the development of something,” which implies that Indigenous cultures are not equal to European/settler cultures, and need to be “developed.”
  - Locating the story of the Americas within a framework of “pre-history” and “history” marginalizes Indigenous narrative and oral tradition, as it begins the historical timeline with settler colonization instead of Indigenous time immemorial.
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- Terms such as “huts” and “camps” should be avoided – this implies that Indigenous peoples do not have homes and communities that are equal to, or as permanent as, European homes and communities. Many Indigenous nations were migratory, and communities were often based upon seasonal occupation, but to call them “camps” reduces them in meaning and importance. A community based upon seasonal occupation is still a community – and a tipi or pit house is still a home.
  - Avoid using terms such as “scattered” or “roaming” to describe Indigenous peoples, as this implies a bias toward communities or peoples that are not settled in the same way as European communities or peoples.
  - When speaking about Indigenous stories, avoid using the terms “myth” and “legend.” The Oxford Dictionary defines “myth” as “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events,” which would seem applicable to Indigenous stories. But the term is fraught with other understandings, including “a widely held but false belief or idea,” “a misrepresentation of the truth,” “a fictitious or imaginary person or thing,” and “an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing.” These other understandings are all problematic when the story in question might be a Trickster story that conveys appropriate social behaviour (so not a misrepresentation of the truth or a false belief) or a revered figure in Indigenous history, such as the Haundenosaunee Peacemaker (so not imaginary or idealized). The Oxford Dictionary defines “legend” as “a traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated.” This is problematic because it implies that Indigenous stories and historical figures are not believable and are in need of authentication by outsiders. When speaking about Indigenous stories and oral tradition, it is better to refer to “stories” and “literatures,” which equates Indigenous stories and literatures with European stories and literatures.
  - Do not use the term “costume” to describe traditional dress, as this implies that Indigenous clothing is something that can be worn by anyone. Dance outfits and regalia are considered sacred. They are expressions of inherent Indigenous identity.