

CLANS

In our culture the oral tradition is important. We learn and are taught through stories. An Anishnawbe teaching on the clan system is an example of this...

A long time ago, before humans inhabited this world, it is said that the clans were already here. Before the humans arrived, the animals, fish and birds were told by the Creator that humans were coming and that these humans wouldn't have anything and would be pitiful. So each of the animals, fish and birds said, "We will take care of them and show them how to live in harmony with all of Creation. We will sacrifice ourselves as food so they won't starve and we will supply them with our skins so they will be warm. We will teach them what medicines and ceremonies to use to heal themselves."

These clans are still with Native people today.

Your clan is with you from the day you are born. It is said that your clan walks with you and looks after you. Your clan takes care of you so that you don't have to go through life without help and protection. The spirit of your clan is for you to use because you are a member of that clan; you always offer tobacco when you ask your clan for help.

The Mohawks' family-oriented culture is based on the clan structure. Within the clan structure of the Six Nations, the clan is passed down through the women. Among the Anishnawbe, the children of

the family are of their father's clan.

The clans of a Nation are often the animals and other creatures that inhabit the region. In the Great Lakes area the wolf, bear, turtle and deer are common clans. The Anishnawbe say that their clans may be almost any animal, fish or bird. Some of the clans of the Six Nations are the Turtle, Bear, Wolf, Rock, Snipe, Pipe of Peace and the Heron.

Within a clan there may be many different types of an animal, bird or fish. For example, the turtle clan includes different types of turtles, such as snapping turtles and painted turtles.

Each clan has its own duties and responsibilities. You can consult the elder clan members for the teachings of your clans.

Among the Anishnawbe, the Crane clan, for example, is involved in leadership and the sharing of knowledge, particularly the teachings. Their role is one of leadership because the cranes were instrumental in establishing the clan system for the Anishnawbe. It is said that the cranes have a loud voice that can be heard for miles. When the crane gives a teaching, it can be heard far away in other parts of the world; people listen and learn when a crane teaches.

The Eagle clan represents the family unit; both parents protect and bring food to the eaglets. The eagle also teaches about respect, hunting, being a warrior and being in balance with the environment.

The Bear clan are like the guardians of

the communities. They are also the protectors and carriers of the medicines.

LEARNING YOUR CLAN

If knowledge of your clan is lost to your family and if your search through family, church, treaty, band or school records does not reveal this information, you can offer tobacco and make the request to know what your clan is to a spiritual person who has the ability to find out what clan is watching over you.

HONOURING YOUR CLAN

To honour your clan is to be a brother, uncle, sister or aunt to all the people who are of your clan. When you meet someone of your clan who is younger than you, they are considered to be your nephew or niece. When you meet someone of your clan who is the same age, they are considered to be your brother or sister. It is your responsibility to take care of the relatives of your clan. When a clan member visits your community, you ensure that this person is taken care of. When you do this, you bring honour to your clan and yourself.

Depending on what clan you belong to, you may feast your clan monthly; once or twice a year; or four times a year at the change of the seasons. Many people will make their food and tobacco offering to their clan by leaving the offering outside on the ground or in the water. For example, a member of the Bullhead Fish clan puts their offering of tobacco and food on a raft which is sent onto the lake. In some communities all the members of a clan may gather to feast their clan and to hold clan ceremonies.

Many people put out a food offering for their clan in the fall, to give their clan strength and energy to survive the winter and in the spring to revitalize their clan's spirit after a hard winter.

Some Bear clan people feed their clan when the bear is going into hibernation and again in the spring when the cubs are born. They might leave a food offering of strawberries, raspberries, salmon and other types of meats and berries a bear would like. Generally, a food offering will consist of any food your clan would eat.

Members of the Bullhead Fish clan, the boss of all fish clans, feed the clan when the ice comes in and goes out.

In the past, clans were painted on warrior shields encircled with medicine bundles. Today clan markers, items which represent your clan such as antlers, skins, skulls, a painting or carving of the clan, may be hung in a respectful manner.

As our awareness and knowledge of our traditions and culture increases, so does our honour and respect for these ways. This has not always been the case in our communities. There are always those who present themselves as Healers, Elders or Medicine People who have not earned that title and may use the teachings and medicines in the wrong way. It is important for everyone, especially young people, to be aware of this and to exercise caution when they seek healing, teachings or advice. It is advisable to consult with people whom you trust to get referrals to respected and recognized Traditional Elders, Healers or Medicine People.

Other pamphlets in this series include:

- C Approaching Healers, Elders and Medicine People
- C Fasting
- C Your Name and Colours
- C Feasts and Give Aways
- C Sweat Lodge
- C Moontime
- C Traditional Healing
- C Four Sacred Medicines
- C Sacred Items and Bundles

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“Native Teachings are about a Way of Life”

The information in this pamphlet is only a small portion of the many and extensive Native Teachings that exist. Teachings vary from First Nation to First Nation and even from one geographic region to another. For more information, please consult with a Traditional Elder, Healer or Medicine Person.

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