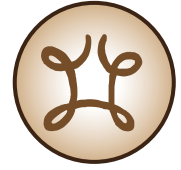


FAMILY, CULTURE, COMMUNITY



In this section, learners will explore Mi'kmaq culture and community through a diverse set of learning experiences. This content is fundamental to many of the learning experiences that follow in this resource. While there is a great deal to share about Mi'kmaq culture and community, the learning experiences here focus on cultural values, orality, the centrality of the family, and the practice of sharing that has endured through many generations. This section will assist learners in making sense of Mi'kmaq decision-making during the treaty-making period and beyond. Importantly, these learning experiences lay the foundation for learners to be able to identify and reflect on misconceptions of the Mi'kmaq that are widespread across society.

Oral Traditions

Cultural values and Mi'kmaq worldviews come together in the culture's oral traditions: the stories, practices, and histories passed on through the language from generation to generation. Stories and memory are at the heart of Mi'kmaq culture. Oral traditions reflect community life and practice. Stories involve animals as family members, tricksters and friends. They mark places to gather resources such as plants and toolstones, and remind people who they are and have been.

The heart of Mi'kmaq oral tradition is the language. The language is rich with unique teachings, humour and worldviews. Complexities in the usage of sound or utterance can determine the meaning of emotions inherent in words such as love, disappointment, or humour. Language is sacred. Healing, for example, was supported by Mi'kmaq chants and songs. An oral culture uses many strategies to facilitate memory across the nation, including songs, stories, places, and repeated practices. In one learning experience, students will be asked to use these strategies to sustain their own memories. Most of Mi'kmaq communication has been oral, but hieroglyphics, petroglyphs, and wampum also assisted with communications.

The Mi'kmaq language is distinguished from many others for being verb-based—meaning that language emphasizes an active or transitional state of being and existence. So, what would be understood as a noun in

English, in Mi'kmaq, would be described for what it *does* rather than what it *is*. For example, the word for caribou is *qalipu*, meaning to shovel. The word emphasizes what the animal does, which is shoveling snow to get at mosses and plants underneath. Fun fact: The English name, caribou, *comes from* the word *qalipu*!

ORAL TRADITIONS: STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

Oral traditional societies use many strategies to create memories within and through generations. These are some that the Mi'kmaq have used since time immemorial:

- As in any culture, stories are narratives that may be historical or more imaginary; they might be event driven or more legendary; but they always reflect the culture. Mi'kmaq stories are diverse and endless. Some stories act as maps of the landscape of Mi'kma'ki.
- Songs or chants are a key strategy for memory—music is a mnemonic device and, for many, a spiritual practice.
- The Putu's is a member of the Santé Mawio'mi (or Grand Council) who assists the nation with remembering key events and agreements.
- Wampum was used by the Putu's as well as others to record events in a symbolic mnemonic, which was then "read" or interpreted when necessary.
- Places can be used as mnemonic devices as well through naming features of landscape or simply by associating certain knowledge with them.
- Petroglyphs are images etched into rock such as along the Bedford Barrens.
- Hieroglyphics are images that depict ideas or words and can be combined and recombined into new meanings.

Sometimes, people think of oral histories as fragile or changeable. But, as students will learn, there would be no treaty rights without Mi'kmaw oral histories. Linked to language and place, oral histories are what have allowed the Mi'kmaq to maintain identity and community through many generations as well as centuries of colonialism.

Values

Cultural values inform all aspects of life and interactions and are embedded in the language. Sometimes these values are easily recognizable, other times they are more difficult to identify. The values discussed below are not all encompassing, but they do represent some of the primary values that guide many Mi'kmaw decisions and practices. Rather than seeing these values as standards, it would be more appropriate to see them as pathways to understanding Mi'kmaw life and history. Often understanding the values that inform decision-making helps all learners to build empathy and comprehension at a deeper level.

Sharing is at the heart of the culture

Sharing is one of the most important Mi'kmaw values and extends from food, to childcare, to land, and to resources. Sharing is an extension of the interdependence of life and the respect for all things. The concept of reciprocity is linked to sharing: when people share it is within a cultural commitment to reciprocity. The cultural expectation is everyone will share when they can, so no one owes anyone anything.



Act through consensus

Consensus has been the dominant mode of decision-making for Mi'kmaw communities for generations. Beginning at the family level and extending to the governance districts of the Santé Mawio'mi (Grand Council), people seek consensus rather than majority rule whenever possible.

The close cousins of humility and humour

Humility and humour are related and important. In accepting one's own fallibility as well as the challenging aspects of a difficult history, Mi'kmaq value laughing at themselves and laughing with others. Both aspects are essential in dealing with situations that might seem hopeless—helping people to either accept them or to transform them into something positive.

Mi'kmaw language is sacred

The Mi'kmaw language contains knowledge and meaning that is difficult to understand when translated into other languages. The language gives speakers and thinkers essential insights into Mi'kmaw culture and history.

Spirit is present in everything

Spirit is present in all of nature, in all of existence. This belief reflects the interdependence of life and the harmony all beings seek to maintain in the world.

Individuals do not interfere

Rather than speaking directly to poor decisions or disagreements, many Mi'kmaq choose to teach through observation and metaphors. Sharing a comparative situation is often the preferred teaching strategy.

Respect everyone

All beings and all things deserve respect. Respect is learned and sustained through acknowledging and understanding the interdependence of everything—the plants, the water, the birds, the animals and people. Elders are held in highest esteem because they are assumed to understand best this interdependence and a person's place within it.

Sweetgrass is sacred

Sweetgrass is considered an offering to the spirits. Woven into the fabric of daily life through ceremonies like smudging and the arts like baskets, it honours spirits all around us.



Care of children is everyone's duty

Children are visible everywhere in Mi'kmaw communities. All adults are seen as caretakers of children, and people depend on family and community relationships to raise young people.

Three Key Concepts

The following three concepts will assist both learners and teachers to anchor their understanding of Mi'kmaq experience and worldview. They are used frequently in this resource and are foundational to many of the included learning experiences.

Netukulimk

Netukulimk is the Mi'kmaq concept that integrates how one makes a living with the responsibilities of making that living. It is the term used for hunting and gathering, but in the present-day it also extends to mean any kind of economic activity. However, the concept includes not only the *what* (economic activity) but the *how* (ensuring economic activity is performed in a sustainable way through traditional governance practices). People are responsible to the environment while undertaking that economic activity—the modern concept of sustainability is inherent to netukulimk. The definition of netukulimk provided by the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources explains it best:

“Netukulimk is the use of the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the community. Netukulimk is achieving adequate standards of community nutrition and economic well-being without jeopardizing the integrity, diversity, or productivity of our environment.”

As Mi'kmaq, we have an inherent right to access and use our resources and we have a responsibility to use those resources in a sustainable way. The Mi'kmaq way of resource management includes a spiritual element that ties together people, plants, animals, and the environment. UINR's strength is in our ability to integrate scientific research with Mi'kmaq knowledge acquisition, utilization, and storage.

In one learning experience offered here, students will work with age appropriate definitions of netukulimk and of msit no'kmaq. The concepts show up in other learning experiences as well. They are essential for understanding treaty education.

Msit No'kmaq

Msit No'kmaq is a Mi'kmaq concept that refers to all living things being related. At its core is an acknowledgement of the relatedness of creation, animals, plants, water and earth. It is also a phrase used for honouring and thanking the Creator during ceremonies and other occasions. When Mi'kmaq people say msit no'kmaq it is a way of saying “I understand that we are all related and I am grateful to be tied together in spirit with animals, plants, and all living beings.” Msit No'kmaq helps us understand that we as humans are part of the natural world as opposed to being outside of it. It is also a foundational pillar of the concept of netukulimk.

Weji-sqalia'tiek

The term weji-sqalia'tiek comes from a letter Mi'kmaq saqmaq (chiefs) sent to Governor Edward Cornwallis in the fall of 1749. The letter stated their position regarding land and expressed concerns about how the British were living in Mi'kma'ki. The term weji-sqalia'tiek has been translated by Mi'kmaq linguist, Bernie Francis, to mean “we sprouted from” Mi'kma'ki. It is an important and powerful idea: the language, culture and people emerged from the landscapes and seascapes of the region—its plants, animals, seasons, and cycles. It is what defines being Mi'kmaq: being indigenous to Mi'kma'ki.

Think for a minute what it means for generations and generations of people to live in a place—to grow up from a place. One Elder explains this idea as an exchange of elements. Ancestors go back to the land and the waterways, feed the plants and animals, and then become the nutrients of the soil, slowly moving through the ecosystem generation after generation. We not only sprout from here, but we give back to others so that they can sprout, too.

As you can see, the three concepts of netukulimk, msit no'kmaq and weji-sqalia'tiek all relate to one other!

