

Impacts of Contact

plain talk

it's
our
time



Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, economic, social and cultural characteristics, as well as their legal systems, while retaining their rights to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.

Article 4, from Draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.

Marcus Garvey, civil rights activist

The ideal of a single civilization for everyone implicit in the cult of progress and technique impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.

Octavio Paz, Mexican poet

A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people.

Mahatma Gandhi

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Amy Tan

As stated in the *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, and by numerous writers, activists, politicians, poets and Indigenous peoples themselves, a nation's culture is central to its identity and viability. To understand how a culture can be affected by the presence of external forces, it's important to understand the complexity of the word "culture."

Meaning of Culture

Culture can be defined as the totality of the experiences, knowledge, activities, symbols, rituals, beliefs and values shared by a group of people, a society, or a nation. Culture is a way of life that is transmitted by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Thus culture has many dimensions or aspects, including:

- Language
- Spirituality and religion
- Myths and legends
- Cosmology
- Games and recreational activities
- Athletic expressions (sports)



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- Education and learning
- Social organization
- Gender roles
- Relationship to the land
- Health
- Child rearing
- Diet (food and nutrition)
- Governance
- Traditional skills, practices and activities
- Traditional crafts
- Traditional art expressions (music, singing, dancing, etc.)
- Symbols
- Shelter
- Clothing
- Beliefs
- Values

As described in Plain Talk 2 Pre-Contact, before the appearance of Europeans in the land area of what is now Canada, the First Nations inhabited and controlled their own regions and territories and developed sophisticated and intricate ways of living and thriving in their environments and on their lands. The vast country has distinct geographical differences, which had an influence on the cultural customs and practices of the resident First Nations.

Each First Nation had its own distinctive culture. Although First Nations peoples shared some cultural characteristics (for example, a strong relationship with the land and nature), nonetheless each First Nation had its own unique character with respect to the cultural dimensions summarized above.

Contact

Contact—the appearance of Europeans—constituted an assault on the cultures of First Nations. Every cultural dimension was subjected to European pressures that questioned their validity and viability, and threatened the very existence of First Nations cultures. The pressures were many, and introduced at various times and in various ways. It is a testament to the strength, resilience, will, determination, and power of First Nations peoples that they have survived pressures that can only be described as genocidal. (Genocide is the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group.)

One of the driving forces that justified the assault on First Nations cultures was the Doctrine of Discovery, which had a profound influence on the attitudes of European explorers and

settlers toward First Nations. The Doctrine of Discovery was a European Catholic pronouncement that the Catholic nations of Europe had the right to take over lands in the New World and Africa if the lands were occupied by non-Christians. In effect, the Doctrine of Discovery gave Europeans the power to seize “discovered” lands and subjugate their inhabitants. As described in one of the official documents of a Catholic Pope, representatives of Catholic Europe could “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue...pagans...and other enemies of Christ...and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods...and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery...” A number of European countries, including Great Britain and France, used these ideas to advance their own interests and power.

The impacts of contact—the appearance and enduring presence of Europeans on First Nations cultures—took many forms. Prior to contact, First Nations were independent, self-governing nations. After colonization, government policies ignored differences among First Nations, treating all First Nations as a homogeneous group called “Indians.”

The introduction of unfamiliar European diseases like smallpox, typhus, influenza, diphtheria and measles had a devastating impact on First Nations. The absence of immunity to these diseases led to fatal consequences among First Nations communities. It is estimated that up to 90 percent of the First Nations population was destroyed by the diseases imported by Europeans from Europe. Other significant impacts that altered many cultural dimensions involved the introduction of alcohol, horses, guns, and Christianity, and persistent official measures to assimilate First Nations into the mainstream European values and attitudes.

First Nations cultures were profoundly impacted by contact with European powers, policies and worldviews. Contact with First Nations occurred at different times, in different ways, and in different regions as European exploration and settlement spread across the land. The Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit provides a description of the initial contacts between Indigenous people and European explorers.

Encounters between Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal People began to increase in number and complexity in the 1500s. For the most part, Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal people maintained cautious cooperation and saw each other as separate, distinct, independent, and in charge of its own affairs. Early contact unfolded roughly as follows:

- Mutual curiosity and apprehension;
- An exchange of goods, tentative at first, then expanding steadily;
- Barter and trade deals, friendships and intermarriage, creating bonds between individuals and families;
- Military and trade alliances, creating bonds between and among Nations; and
- European newcomers receiving help for the Aboriginal Peoples in surviving the climate and in succeeding in fishing, whaling, and fur trading.



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First Nations Elders recognized the potential damage that could result from European worldviews. This speech by Chief Seattle in 1854 articulates one view of the dangers of European contact.

*Every part of the earth is sacred. Every living pine needle, every sandy shore
every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy.
We are part of the earth and it is part of us.
The white man is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land
whatever he needs.
The earth is not his brother, but his enemy,
and when he has conquered it he moves on.
His appetite will devour the earth, and leave behind only a desert.
All things are connected.
Teach your children that the earth is our mother.
Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth.
This we know: The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth.
This we know.
Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it
Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.*

The impacts of contact were widespread, affecting every dimension of First Nations culture. Some of the major impacts are described below.

The Indian Act and its Amendments

In 1876, the Parliament of Canada passed the Indian Act, which gave the Canadian federal government exclusive authority over Indians and Lands Reserved for Indians. The Indian Act consolidated a number of previous acts involving control and regulation of all aspects of the lives of First Nations members. Amendments over subsequent years were directed primarily at supporting and expanding the official assimilationist federal policy. The Indian Act has been described, justifiably, as archaic, outdated, colonial, racist, paternalist, and repressive. Shockingly, it is still in effect today!

Quality of Life

Plain Talk 8 First Nations Quality of Life provides a summary of many of the dimensions of cultural impact experienced by First Nations people today. For example, many First Nations communities endure housing conditions that are unacceptable by any criteria. Other categories covered in the Plain Talk include education, cultural connection, family, employment, language, sports, and arts.

Cultural Assimilation

Plain Talk 6 Residential Schools describes the educational programs that were designed to force First Nations to abandon their traditional cultures and replace them with European/Canadian values, behaviours and attitudes. These policies were a profound assault on all dimensions of Indigenous cultures. Traditional languages, pride in heritage, traditional skills and knowledge and parenting skills were significant casualties of the residential school era, with the effects manifested in subsequent generations in what has been termed the intergenerational effect.

Governance

The Canadian government has replaced most traditional First Nations governance systems with the band council system, and continues to pass laws to control First Nations council systems. Increasingly, First Nations are retaining and reclaiming jurisdiction of their communities and territories through self-government agreements. For more information, see Plain Talk 4 Treaties.

Land Relationship

The European concept of the private ownership of land was alien to the worldview of First Nations. Furthermore, there was massive immigration by French and English settlers, a phenomenon that was not anticipated by First Nations. The need for land for colonizing settlers forced First Nations into pockets of land called “reserves” that were inadequate for growth, stability and even subsistence. First Nations with nomadic lifestyles were forced to abandon traditional ways of life.

Suppression and Banning of Traditional Customs

From 1884 to 1951, Canadian law prohibited the potlatch, a festival celebrated by many Pacific Northwest First Nations. The potlatch is a ceremony that reinforces political, social and economic connections among First Nations groups and consolidates relationships. Many other cultural practices were also banned including the Sun Dance, Sweat Lodge Ceremonies, and numerous other traditional practices and rites of passage.

Cultural Appropriation

The phrase cultural appropriation refers to one culture using a dimension, characteristic, or image of another culture entirely out of its original context and significance. The most obvious examples are the use of First Nations names and images by sports teams, or the adoption of cultural characteristics like dream catchers or sweat lodges by non-First Nations people. Uses of First Nations cultural ideas and symbols can be considered offensive by First Nations members, particularly when cultural items are mass produced by non-First Nations businesses for profitable purposes.



Denial of Advocacy

Provisions of the Indian Act forbade First Nations people from forming political organizations, and many First Nation leaders were jailed for trying to organize any form of a political organization.

Spirituality

European nations brought with them the dominant European religion of Christianity as well as demeaning attitudes toward the spirituality and cultures of First Nations peoples. Missionaries associated with the European explorers and settlers made vigorous and successful efforts to convert First Nations to Christianity, which involved diminishing the value and importance of First Nations myths, legends and cosmologies.

Discrimination, Racism and Stereotypes

Because Europeans viewed First Nations as uncivilized and savage, First Nations people have been subjected to various types of discrimination and racism, and the creation and transmission of denigrating stereotypes.

Treaty Abuses

As described in Plain Talk 4 Treaties, the treaties between First Nations and European/Canadian powers are contentious and controversial because of a number of problems, in particular indications that signatories has significantly different understandings of the meanings, content, and scope of the treaties. Treaties were written by colonizers and were worded in ways that were not to the advantage of the First Nations.

Health

Prior to contact, Indigenous peoples lived in harmony with their environment, using their traditional wisdom and knowledge of the land and its resources to maintain health and promote healing. Since contact, a variety of policies, forces and events have led to a more sedentary lifestyle, dietary changes, and contaminated air, water, and land. These conditions have become serious threats to First Nations' psychological, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, resulting in a number of problems, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and addictions.

The impacts of contact continue in First Nations communities today. The Assembly of First Nations and First Nations leaders advocate an approach to improve the condition of First Nations people and work toward reversing centuries of government neglect and interference. Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo offers a brief description of such an approach.

First Nation governments must be enabled to plan and develop their internal governance systems through constitutional development, and oversee all key functions including citizenship, justice, economic development, health, education and social services.

References

Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit. Canadian Labour Congress Anti-Racism and Human Rights Department. 2002. Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress

Wahbung: Our tomorrows. 1971. Manitoba Indian Brotherhood Inc.

*Our fathers gave us many laws.
These laws were good. They told us to treat all people as
they treated us; that we should never be the first to
break a bargain; that is was a disgrace
to tell a lie; that we should speak only the truth.
Chief Joseph, Nez Pierce*

