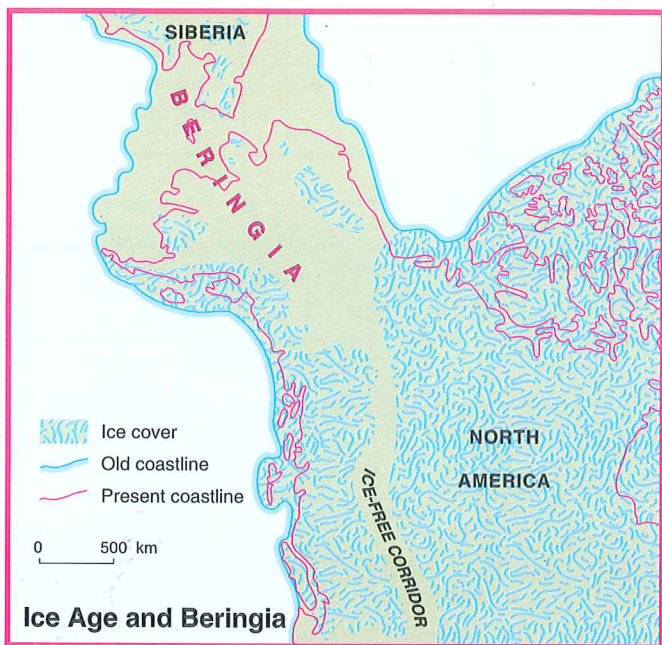


Origins

Who were the First People? How did they get to the Americas? Many possible explanations or theories have been advanced to clear up this mystery.

The Beringia theory suggests that ocean levels dropped about 65 to 138 metres during the ice age that occurred in the last million years. This lower water level exposed large masses of land and created a continent-sized land bridge joining Siberia and North America. Scientists have named this land bridge Beringia.

Some scientists and scholars believe that nomadic Asian people began to follow animals across Beringia and down the central ice-free corridor to pastures in North America. These Beringian pioneers could later have spread across the continent to become the ancestors of the Native peoples.

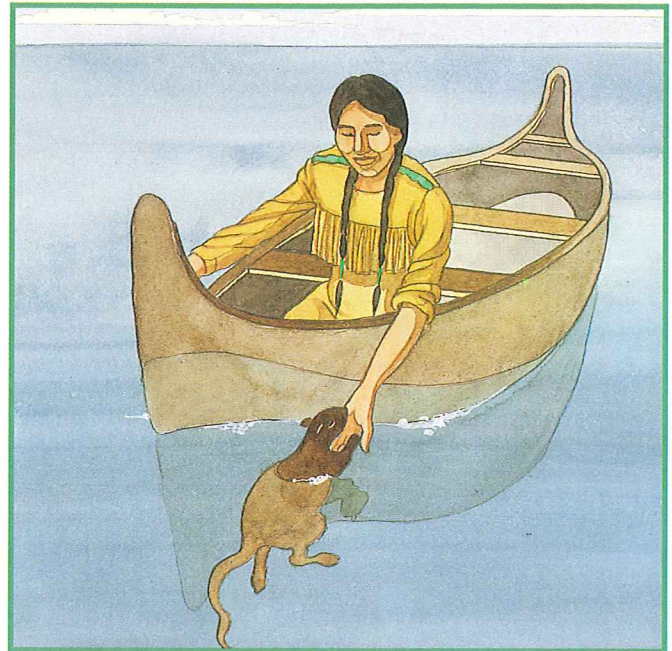


Many Native people do not agree with the scientists who advance the Beringia theory. Many **traditional** Native people believe that the First People were created in North America by the Creator. The elders pass Native history from one generation to another through their stories. The first woman and the Trickster—identified as the Old Man in the following legend—figure prominently in this Native version of the creation of the world.

On the great waste of waters created by Manitou, Old Man was sitting. Nearby was the first woman, whom Manitou had just finished making. They were trying to decide what substance Manitou used to hold up the water.*

"I will send down one of these creatures to find out," declared the woman.

First of all she sent one of the fishes, but it soon forgot



why it had been sent, and swam off in another direction. Then the woman sent an otter, but being a timid animal, it lost its courage and sank to the bottom. Next, the woman allowed the boastful wolf to try, because he was a conceited fellow, and was always telling the other animals what to do. Before he got wholly immersed in the cold water, his boastfulness was gone and he was glad to cling to the side of the boat. Last of all the woman sent the muskrat. The muskrat stayed below water for so long a time that the others gave him up for dead. At last his round wet head reappeared and in his forepaw he clutched the sticky brown substance which lay below all the waters. It was mud.

When the woman rolled it about in her hands, it grew larger. Presently it grew so large that she could not hold it, so she cast it into the water. It quickly spread over a wide area and formed an island.

The island was empty until the woman got tired of the troublesome and quarrelsome wolf. She scolded him roundly and flung him onto the island. He ran up and down in the soft mud, and wherever he went his tracks made deep lines. When he stopped to paw the ground, he made a hole that filled with water. These were the beginnings of the rivers and lakes.

Traditional—believers of the old ways: the old customs and traditions

*The First People do not all use the same name for their Creator. There were many names for the Creator or Great Spirit, including Manitou and Ihtsipaitapiyo'pa.

This legend has been adapted from: Mabel Burkholder, *Before White Man Came* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923) 289–93.

Ways of Life

Heterogeneous Cultures

The Native cultures were heterogeneous or dissimilar. Native peoples lived in all of Canada's different regions and were well adapted to their environments. Some groups lived in different areas at different times of the year. Groups that settled near the oceans became fishers. Other groups made use of the good agricultural land and became farmers. Over the course of thousands of years, complex and distinct cultures developed. The First People were made up of different nations with different ways of life. These people are often referred to as the First Nations.



Nation

A nation is a group of people who:

- live in a certain area
- generally speak the same language
- have the same way of life
- have the same system of decision-making (government)
- are usually made up of a number of tribes or groups that are the same.

Homogeneous Cultures

While it is dangerous to overgeneralize and think that all of the First Nations were the same (homogeneous), the First People did share some characteristics:

- Native cultures were complex and varied. Traditions, customs, and history were handed down orally from the elders to the children. Elders were highly respected because of their important role in society.
- Native spiritual beliefs centred on living in harmony with nature. Spiritual beliefs touched every facet of ordinary life. The physical and spiritual worlds were considered to be inseparable. Hunters and gatherers respected nature. Dreams and visions formed a very important part of the spiritual beliefs.
- Most Native cultures emphasized the well-being of the group over individual gain. Thus, sharing and co-operation were more important than accumulating personal wealth.
- Wealth generally meant good health, good friends, and well-being for the First People. It was not always measured by possessions.
- Native cultures were based on a family unit and kinship. Some tribes were matrilineal: they traced their relationships through their mothers. Other tribes were patrilineal: they traced their relationships through their fathers.



Jules by Carl Fontaine. This painting shows a man of Cree and Ojibwa descent.

First People

The following chart divides the First People into seven groups and lists some of the groupings found in each.

You will notice that some of the names are words from Native languages, and others are from English or French. We have tried to use the word that each group uses in referring to itself. Because some names are still changing, you may find that this book has not always caught up with current use.

Boundaries did not exist for the First People and groups ranged widely in order to obtain enough food. For centuries the various First People had been trading with each other to obtain the goods they desired. These trading patterns were very complex and often involved travelling long distances over well-known waterways.

The boundaries on the map at the bottom of this page indicate the general territorial areas of these groups. Different cultures developed depending on the resources available.

Plains

- Siksika (Blackfoot)
- Assiniboine
- Sioux
- Atsina (Gros Ventre)
- Pikani (Peigan)
- Secwepemc (Shuswap)
- Tsúu Tina (Sarcee)
- Kainai (Blood)
- Nehiyawak (Plains Cree)

Iroquoian Nations

- Mohawk
- Oneida
- Onondaga
- Cayuga
- Seneca
- Tuscarora
- Huron
- Tobacco/Petun
- Neutral

Northern Hunters

- Chipewyan
- Dunne-za (Beaver)
- Dene-thah (Slavey)
- Yellowknife
- Dogrib
- Hare
- Sekani
- Tutchone
- Kutchin
- Kaska, Dena

Northwest Coast

- Nuuchah-nulth, Dididaht, Pacheedaht (Nootka)
- Nuxalk (Bella Coola)
- Lingit (Tlinkit)
- Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl)
- Haisla, Oweekeno, Heiltsuk (Northern Kwakiutl)
- Gitksan, Nisga'a (Gitksan-Nass)
- Haida
- Tsimishian
- Klahoose
- Qualicum
- Sne-Nay-Muxw
- Quwutsun'
- Somlahmoo
- T'sou-ke
- Songhees
- Tagish
- Tsawwassen
- Xaadas
- Homalco
- Silammon
- Se'shalt
- Squamish
- Sto:lo
- Musqueam
- Esquimalt
- Saanich
- Burrard

Algonkian Nations

- Ojibwa/Chippewa
- Algonquin
- Cree
- Montagnais
- Naskapi
- Erie
- Malecite
- Micmac
- Beothuk

Plateau

- Ktunaxa (Kootenay)
- Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin)
- Nat'ooten, Wet'suwet'en (Western Carrier)
- Dakelhne (Central and Southern Carrier)
- Tahltn
- Nlaka'pamux (Thompson, Nicola-Similkameen)
- Okanagan
- Stl'atl'imx (Lillooet)

Arctic

- Inuit

