

Who Are the Metis?

The answer to this question depends largely on whom you ask and when. A “metis” was once simply a person of mixed European and Aboriginal ancestry. More recently, the term “Metis” has been used to refer to unique and identifiable contemporary populations of mixed ancestry who can trace their origins to the fur and robe trade as practised in the West and Northwest between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the words of the Metis National Council:

Written with a small “m,” metis is a racial term for anyone of mixed Indian and European ancestry. Written with a capital “M,” Metis is a socio-cultural or political term for those originally of mixed ancestry who evolved into a distinct indigenous people during a certain historical period in a certain region of Canada. (Peterson and Brown 1985:6)

Although this definition is also problematic, it distinguishes between the different historical experiences of metis/Metis peoples.

In Recent years, however, we have come to understand that ethnicity defined only through biological and cultural traits is incomplete and therefore inaccurate. Ethnicity at the grassroots level is determined by three criteria operating simultaneously: biological ancestry (“race”), a person’s own perception of their ethnicity, and what other individuals and collectivities (such as government bodies) see that person’s ethnicity to be.

Naming the Other – Aboriginal Terms for Metis

We know when Metis people began to be seen as separate and distinct people: when there is a record of these nascent collectivities being ascribed a separate identity – a name – by others. These Aboriginal names served to describe not only the physical characteristics of these new people but also the unique cultural values that set them apart. Naming is an important diagnostic characteristic for defining ethnic separateness, as is the development of a distinctive language.

Perhaps the earliest distinctive name for mixed-race people refers to physical characteristic. *Les Bois-Brule* – “the scorched-wood people” was a term referring to Metis skin colour, tan as opposed to brown.

Aboriginal terms for Metis often referred to their unique occupational status. The Nehiyawak (Cree) referred to them as *otipaymisiwak* – “their own boss,” or “the people who own themselves” in reference to their tendency to work independently rather than as employees of fur-trade companies. The Dakota (Sioux) referred to Plains Metis as *Slota* (“Grease People”), possibly in reference to pemmican production, a major nineteenth-century economic activity which brought them into conflict with Dakota over bison hunting territories. Of the Northern Metis of Great Slave Lake, Father Petitot noted that their Dene nickname was *Banlay* roughly “he to whom the land belongs,” in reference to their dominant position in local trade, transport, and provisioning (1891:78).

What is Michif?

Language is culturally important for any group. And Michif, the language of the Metis, is truly unique. Today it is endangered, numbering approximately 1,000 speakers in western Canada and the northern United States, though three times this number once spoke it. This mixed language (and it is a language, having formal linguistic structures) is made up primarily of French noun phrases and Cree verb phrases. Unlike most hybrid languages which have a very simplified grammar, these noun and verb phrases retain very complex patterns of agreement from both parent languages. This strongly suggests that it was created by people fully functional in both languages.

Contemporary Metis Identity

The “markers” of a national consciousness include two important aspects of cultural identity:

The first has to do with the content; the “what” of the “we” that which anthropologists generally call culture. The second concerns the more abstract dimension of collective identity, the question of nationality, that sense of common origin and common destiny felt even between strangers who live many miles apart. (Thomas 1985:245)

How do Metis people, scattered over thousands of kilometres, in hundreds of communities, retain that sense of the “common origin and destiny” essential to nationhood without having sovereign territory, also a hallmark of nationhood?

Certainly, the reality – rather than merely the sense – of common origin has much to do with it. Commonly, modern Metis people can find relatives in almost any western Canadian community with fur-trade origins, be they Indian or non-Indian. Because of Metis marital practices, a strong underpinning of kinship unites them and provides a solid foundation for sustaining their culture.

Because of *Powley*, the importance of identifying and enumerating Metis people has new significance. The task of constructing family trees out of government, fur-trade, and religious records is now a widespread Metis pastime. What once was a hobby has become part of providing evidence required by the federal government to identify Metis families, to document their communities, and to track their movements.

Metis organizations also see the importance of recognizing the iconic leaders and events which have shaped the shared past. Louis Riel, the charismatic and controversial leader in two uprisings, and Gabriel

Dumont, a famed buffalo hunter and scout and Riel's lieutenant, are honoured across Canada. A holiday recognizing Riel's contribution to Canada is observed in Manitoba. Numerous organizations, public buildings and streets bear his name, as well as Dumont's. In Saskatchewan, the Battle of Batoche is recognized annually at a community festival and at the National Historic Site. Metis from across North America come to Batoche to remember 1885, to participate in cultural activities, to reconnect with friends and relatives, and to celebrate being Metis.

Metis cultural activities are also resurgent. Jigging and fiddling continue to be popular, along with other fine and performing arts. Beadwork and leather clothing manufacture, cookery and other traditional home-crafts are being taught to new generations. Activities once part of daily employment – hunting, guiding, raising horses, running sled dogs, canoeing, transporting goods (activities essential to physical and cultural survival in the past) continue to be practised for subsistence, for enjoyment, and to demonstrate that Metis culture continues.

And Metis continue to occupy the role of cultural broker in Canadian communities. Metis professionals can be found in various capacities where knowledge of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lifeways is required – in hospitals, schools, and universities, legislative assemblies and government departments, the military and the police forces, and the recreation and hospitality industries.

In recent years, the role of the Metis as one of Canada's founding Aboriginal peoples has been incorporated widely into school curricula. At fur-trade sites and museums and interpretive centres across Canada, in television programs, documentary motion pictures, websites and print media, the exploits of the Metis men and women who were instrumental in exploring and settling the country are presented to the public. Since 1985, there has been a florescence in scholarship devoted to Metis history and current affairs. Across Canada, Metis scholars – and scholars of the Metis – are ensuring that never again will they be "Canada's Forgotten People."

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