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Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Diverse Histories and Modern Issues

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Introduction

Canadians celebrated the 150th birthday of their nation in 2017. Confederation in 1867 involved the formal union of three British colonies to bring Canada into being. Over time, additional portions of British North America were incorporated into the Canadian state, resulting in the modern national borders. Of course, the Indigenous peoples of those lands have a much more ancient history, extending back at least 13,000 years and possibly considerably more. Archaeological research and Indigenous oral histories both document this lengthy occupation. When Europeans first arrived, all of this vast land had long been settled. A legacy of colonialism means that many of Canada's Indigenous peoples feel that they have little to celebrate on this occasion and the official Canada 150 celebrations prompted some Indigenous protests. The Canadian government continues the lengthy and difficult negotiation of Indigenous rights and title within traditional homelands and with reconciliation following a history of colonialism. This paper briefly examines Indigenous diversity within Canada and summarizes some of the major issues shared by all such groups, before turning to Canada's western province, British Columbia, for more detailed examples.

Canada's Diverse Indigenous Peoples

Canada's constitution specifies three "Aboriginal Peoples"—Indians, Inuit, and Métis—although the preferred collective term today is "Indigenous." The word "Indian" is rarely used in Canada today, being almost entirely supplanted with "First Nations" as a much more accurate and appropriate term. "Indian" remains only in a legal context, such as in the provisions of the Indian Act. This is by far the largest and

most diverse category of Indigenous peoples, inhabiting all the regions of Canada except the far north. Almost a million people are legally recognized as “Indians” by the Canadian government,⁽¹⁾ consisting almost entirely of those registered as members of individual First Nations. The Inuit, once known to some as “Eskimos,” are a separate people whose traditional territories extend across the Arctic region in the far north, from Alaska to Greenland and Labrador. Many Canadian Inuit today live in the self-governing territory of Nunavut, in the central Arctic. Unlike the others, who have an ancient history in Canada, the Métis emerged as traders and bison hunters on the open plains during the historic fur trade period, largely through intermarriage between European men and First Nations women. Although lacking the land base and historic treaties of most First Nations, the Métis have distinct legal rights through their constitutional recognition as Indigenous People. This paper is restricted to the largest category, the First Nations of Canada.

The term “First Nations” acknowledges that many separate independent Indigenous groups occupied this vast territory. This diversity is particularly evident in the numerous Indigenous languages. Perhaps 53 distinct languages, some in widely varying dialects, were spoken in Canada at first contact with Europeans. Related languages can be classified into families, of which there are 11 in Canada.⁽²⁾ Some language families, such as Algonkian, encompass multiple separate languages spread across much of the country, while others are isolates, restricted to small areas. For example, the language of the Haida people, spoken only on the islands offshore from northern British Columbia, is unrelated to any other language in the world.

Canada’s vast lands contain a wide range of different environments, from northern forests and tundra to warmer southern lands where crops could be grown. Diverse First Nations developed very different cultures and economies in these different environments. Northern hunters of the Subarctic lived in small mobile bands while pursuing a variety of game animals. The people of the Plains developed a way of life highly focused on hunting bison, living in easily moveable tipis while following the herds. In southern Ontario, the Iroquoian peoples grew maize (corn), beans, and squash while living in large palisaded villages of bark-covered longhouses. The complex fishing-hunting societies of the west coast had large villages of permanent wooden houses and marked social distinctions, including hereditary chiefs. Even within these very different examples, considerable linguistic and cultural variability existed.

Today there are over 600 First Nations in Canada,⁽³⁾ varying greatly in population size, historic background, reserve size, and modern economy. Although some have substantial populations, many are very small. Some smaller related groups have formed tribal councils for greater political and economic power while retaining their independent status. At the national level, all groups are represented by the Assembly of First Nations. However, this organization must contend with internal differences and competing interests, separating treaty and non-treaty groups, reserve and urban populations, and communities within different provinces and territories. Most important negotiations take place directly between the federal government and individual First Nations.

Impact of Contact and Colonization

Through their early contact with arrivals from Europe, beginning in the 16th century along the east coast, Indigenous peoples were exposed to new diseases that took a terrible toll, greatly reducing populations. Outsiders settled across large portions of Indigenous lands, disrupting traditional ways of life. Participation in the fur trade with Europeans brought valued new goods but led to significant cultural changes. Colonial governments, and later the early federal government, sought to develop policies to deal with these reduced populations while opening up most of the land for non-Indigenous settlement and commerce.

Following Canadian Confederation, all “Indians” became wards of the federal government, to be administered directly from Ottawa. This separated them from all other Canadians, who receive most of their services from the provinces. When the Indian Act was passed in 1876, First Nations people became the only Canadians to be governed under special federal legislation. Although revised many times over the years, many aspects of First Nations lives are still governed by this 19th century legislation. From the beginning, it created a division between those who are registered with the federal government as “status Indians” and others who may have Indigenous heritage but lack such official recognition. Although Canada has made recent efforts to “decolonize” this system and transfer powers to the individual First Nations, no agreement has yet been reached on the future of the Indian Act.

After Confederation, small pockets of land known as “Indian reserves” were laid out across the country for the exclusive use of First Nations, although title and control remained with the federal government. Agents appointed by the government to administer the reserves sought to suppress traditional practices and integrate First Nations into Euro-Canadian ways of life. Missionaries, intent on converting Indigenous people to Christianity, advocated similar programs of cultural change. Together, the Canadian government and various Christian denominations established the residential schools, which removed Indigenous children from their families and cultural roots to forcefully promote Christian, Euro-Canadian values and practices. Residential schools, which persisted in many areas until relatively recently, were a major factor in the loss of languages and culture. Only three Indigenous languages in Canada are considered healthy today,⁽⁴⁾ while all the rest are endangered, with some nearing extinction. Persistent social problems in some communities, including family violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and high suicide rates, are also part of the sad legacy of the residential schools.

Some First Nations reserves today are located near major urban centres or in other locations suitable for economic development. In such fortunate cases, communities operate a wide range of businesses to provide a financial base and employment opportunities. Many other reserves, however, particularly across the north, are isolated, lack road access, and provide few economic possibilities. These are often characterized by poverty, poor housing, and lack of services. Although reserve populations continue to increase, many people have moved to the cities to seek employment and a better standard of living. Today, almost half the First Nations population lives off-reserve, most in urban centres. In some Canadian cities, particularly in the prairie provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Indigenous people make up a significant portion of the total urban population. As government agencies are set up primarily to deal directly with elected councils on the reserves, tensions can exist with the urban segment of the population.

Following Confederation, Canada entered into a series of treaties with First Nations. The need to open the land to new arrivals for agriculture and settlement required agreements with First Nations. This first wave of treaty-making involved surrender of Indigenous title to the land in return for reserves and other small benefits. Although the federal government was largely concerned with removing Indigenous claims to the land, First Nations saw these treaties as recognition of their sovereign status and want that spirit of the treaties maintained. More recently,

a series of agreements across Canada's north, beginning with the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in 1975, has been finalized between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government. Although they also include surrender of Indigenous title to the land, these more modern treaties involve substantial compensation, a large land base, and provisions for self-government in their territories. However, large areas of Canada, including most of the east and west coasts, remain without any agreements between government and Indigenous peoples, ensuring continuing legal and political battles.

First Nations in British Columbia

The First Nations of British Columbia, particularly along the west coast, share in most of the historic developments that have affected Indigenous people across the country, yet are in many ways distinct. This is the area of greatest linguistic and political diversity in Canada. Almost 200 separate First Nations live in the province, a third of the total for all of Canada (although they tend to be smaller than the Canadian average).⁽⁵⁾ About 32 Indigenous languages, in eight distinct language families, were spoken, often only in very small areas.⁽⁶⁾ A few individual languages, such as Haida and Kutenai, have no known relatives. Many communities today are making concerted efforts to revitalize their languages, all of which are endangered, through educational programs. English, however, has become the dominant or exclusive language on reserves throughout the province.

The west coast had the densest population of any region in Canada prior to the historic epidemics. Large villages once stood in favoured locations all along the coast and inland along the major salmon rivers. Large plank-covered houses sheltered several related families and also included slaves owned by the house chief. Prominent monumental artworks, in northern villages including the famed totem poles, displayed the crests owned by the house chief that identified his family and its history. Household utensils, such as carved wooden feast dishes and storage boxes, might also be embellished with animal images that were the crests of the chief. Today many are proudly displayed in museums around the world.

Along the beach in front of the houses were the large, sea-going canoes. These

elegant seaworthy craft, fashioned from the large cedar trees of the coastal rainforest, were essential to a way of life based on the sea. They ranged from small fishing canoes to large trading or voyaging vessels. Almost all travel was by sea as people moved around their rugged homelands, or set out on lengthy voyages to attend feasts in distant villages or to raid their enemies.

Although the social structure differed considerably along the coast, these societies were hierarchical, with hereditary chiefs holding power and coordinating village activities. Chiefly status had to be prominently displayed and regularly reinforced through ceremonies. Great quantities of goods were distributed to guests at events generally known today as potlatches. Chiefs provided lavish feasts, ensuring their guests received great quantities of food. High-ranking visitors, often from distant villages, were presented with valuable gifts, but all in attendance shared in a general distribution of payments for being witnesses to the host chief's wealth and his claims to hereditary rights. A common feature of such public events involved performances of masked dancers representing supernatural beings. This brought the spiritual world into the human realm and enlivened the long dark winter days. Keeping time with the beat of a plank drum, skilled dancers swirled around the fire, with beaks clacking, whistles blowing, and the masks occasionally opening to reveal an inner being, thus showing the supernatural presence through transformation. The masks and regalia used in these dance performances are some of the finest treasures of Indigenous art in Canada today.

These complex cultures and large populations were supported by a rich abundance of resources from the land, rivers, and sea. Salmon, halibut, herring, and a wide range of other fish were taken in great numbers. Seals and sea lions were hunted, with one group, the Nuu-chah-nulth, venturing out onto the open ocean in pursuit of whales. Clams, mussels, and various other intertidal foods were collected, as were a wide range of berries, roots, and other plant foods. Large quantities were dried or otherwise preserved to last through the lean winter months. Enough food had to be stored not to just survive through the winter but to be able to feast guests on ceremonial occasions. Chiefs coordinated the economic activities, which involved active management of resources. Large fish traps, clam beaches, root gardens, and berry patches were carefully tended to increase yields and ensure future supplies.

Contact with outsiders was much later on the west coast than in the east, beginning only in the late 18th century. Particularly notable was the arrival of the British expedition under Captain James Cook at Nootka Sound in 1778. In the

following decades, ships from several European nations and the newly established United States of America converged on the coast, many in pursuit of a lucrative fur trade focused on the soft pelts of the sea otter. Chiefs eagerly participated in this trade as there were significant gains for them as well. However, as elsewhere in North America, new diseases brought by the outsiders swept through Indigenous villages, killing large numbers. Over the next century, successive waves of epidemics greatly reduced the coastal populations, with groups such as the Haida suffering losses that may have reached 90 percent.⁽⁷⁾ As settlers displaced Indigenous groups from the most productive lands, government agents and missionaries launched such programs of assimilation as the residential school system, removing children from their villages and culture. Under missionary influence, the large chiefly plank houses with their totem poles were discontinued in favour of Western-style single family homes, with no indications of ranking or other social distinctions. In 1884, potlatches were made illegal under the Indian Act, undermining the power of chiefs and the traditional social system. This legal assault on Indigenous ceremonies stayed in effect until the Indian Act was revised in 1951.

In recent decades, there has been a great resurgence of traditional dances and ceremonies. Potlatches once again feature prominently in village social life along the coast. Some communities have constructed traditional-style “big houses” to hold such events. Several villages have demanded return of the potlatch treasures that were confiscated during the period of repression and have constructed museums to house and display them.⁽⁸⁾ They have also negotiated with major outside museums to repatriate important Indigenous items to the communities where they were made. First Nations artists are again producing magnificent art pieces, both for use in their own ceremonies and for sale to outside museums and collectors.

One aspect in which British Columbia differs from most of Canada is in the lack of historic treaties. Except for a few small colonial treaties on Vancouver Island and a broad federal treaty that extends into the northeast corner, much of the province was never legally surrendered by Indigenous people. This has become a major issue in recent decades, with some groups pursuing their claims through lengthy and expensive legal cases. Most, however, are negotiating with the governments of Canada and British Columbia through a treaty commission. The process is slow and only a few final treaties have been achieved, although many others are ongoing. The completed agreements vary considerably but involve withdrawal from the Indian Act and establishment of Indigenous self-governments, with responsibility

for education, health services, economic development, and social and cultural programs within the First Nation. New centres of Indigenous government have been constructed in some communities. These final agreements also provide for First Nation lands and financial compensation for lands lost from their traditional territory. They may also include the return of Indigenous heritage objects removed from the communities in the past, both for on-reserve museums and for use in revived ceremonial life.

Role of Non-Indigenous Academics

Although treaty negotiations and economic development are directed and controlled by First Nations councils, they may draw on the expertise of non-Indigenous specialists, including anthropologists and archaeologists. For example, I have testified in a court case regarding Indigenous fishing rights and have prepared documents demonstrating traditional use of claimed lands for treaty negotiations. But my most extensive experience has been in directing archaeological research with several Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations on western Vancouver Island. This has been cooperative work, often involving First Nations funding, with the community directly involved in all decision making. We have investigated a number of ancient, but no longer occupied, village sites, extending their history back in time as much as 5,000 years. People from the communities, including groups of students, made up part of the excavation teams. Each season an excursion was organized to allow community members to see the results of research where their ancestors once lived.

There are a number of reasons why First Nations would support such projects. Archaeology and Indigenous traditions are complementary approaches to understanding their past. Oral histories tell of culture heroes and great events while archaeology adds details on everyday life and gives scientific evidence for time depth. Archaeological information has proved useful in documenting past land use for treaty negotiations and court cases. In preparation for self-government, First Nations are interested in such information for educational programs and to take over management of their heritage sites. One First Nation, with a recently completed treaty, is looking for suitable economic development projects, including cultural tourism, to support their new government. They are organizing tours into

one of their heritage sites that still has standing wooden remains from the large traditional houses. This site is too fragile for large-scale archaeological research so we excavated at another village site nearby to provide information and objects for interpretation programs and a future community museum.

A neighbouring First Nation, still in the treaty process, is seeking to reassert themselves in their core territory, which is now part of a National Park. Indigenous history had long been neglected in park interpretation programs, which focused instead on the natural beauty and wildlife, conveying the idea of “wilderness” to park visitors. Rather than “wilderness,” to the Nuu-chah-nulth this is their homeland and they want their story told, as well as to re-establish traditional use of the park area. We excavated at a large village that in their oral traditions was their creation place and the home of famous whaling ancestors. Deep archaeological deposits showed thousands of years of Indigenous presence and abundant evidence of ancient whaling practices, supporting and confirming the oral histories. Following our research, the park moved its campground to protect this location and a newly carved pole representing the first ancestor who came into being there was erected to honour Nuu-chah-nulth heritage. The recent marriage of one of my colleagues provided an opportunity for renewed Nuu-chah-nulth use of this important location, allowing the masked dancers to once again emerge from the forest to the sound of the drums, perhaps for the first time in centuries.

Concluding Comments

Like other Indigenous peoples in Canada, the First Nations of the west coast seek to assert greater control over their own economies and lands, establishing new arrangements with Canada. Some are achieving self-government through treaties or separate negotiations. They seek to re-establish traditional cultural practices and to restore their endangered languages. Considerable progress has been made. As a result of a British Columbia land claim case, courts now consider oral histories presented by Indigenous knowledge keepers on an equal basis with testimony from Western experts such as historians and anthropologists.⁽⁹⁾ An annual canoe festival draws large crowds from Indigenous communities along the British Columbia and Washington coasts to celebrate and revitalize the traditional canoe

culture. First Nations councils regularly reach substantial economic agreements with governments and industries regarding any impacts on their traditional lands. Small and moderate-sized businesses run by Indigenous people are commonplace. First Nations art permeates Canadian life. The Justice Minister in the federal government is a First Nations woman from coastal British Columbia, while other Indigenous people serve as elected members of both the Canadian and British Columbian governments. Despite this, many remain frustrated with legal and bureaucratic barriers to self-sufficiency. Despite major economic successes for some communities, others, particularly in isolated locations, are still plagued with social problems and poverty. Canada's commitment to reconciliation with First Nations on its 150th birthday has had some success, but will remain a work in progress for some time yet.

Notes

- (1) The “registered Indian” population, consisting of those officially enrolled with the federal government, was 936,225 on December 31, 2014 (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, *Statistics and Measurement Directorate* (hereafter cited as *Statistics*), Registered Indian Population by Sex and Residence 2014).
- (2) See, for example, Alan D. McMillan and Eldon Yellowhorn, *First Peoples in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2004), 5-9.
- (3) There were 617 “Indian bands” under the federal system in Canada as of December 31, 2014 (*Statistics*, Registered Indian Population by Sex and Residence 2014).
- (4) The three Indigenous languages considered “healthy” are Inuktitut (the language of the Inuit), Cree, and Ojibwa.
- (5) British Columbia has 198 “Indian bands,” although this number omits the Taku River Tlingit in northern British Columbia, which is administered as a Yukon First Nation (*Statistics*, Registered Indian Population by Sex and Residence 2014).
- (6) See, for example, Robert J. Muckle, *The First Nations of British Columbia: An Anthropological Overview* (3rd edition) (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).
- (7) Robert T. Boyd, *The Coming of the Spirit of Pestilence: Introduced Infectious Diseases and Population Decline among Northwest Coast Indians, 1774-1874* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 264.
- (8) Two examples are the Kwakwaka'wakw communities of Alert Bay and Cape Mudge. Ceremonial items confiscated following a large potlatch in 1921 were returned by several major Canadian institutions after construction of museums in the villages in 1979 and 1980. See Gloria Cranmer Webster, “Kwakiutl Since 1980,” in Wayne Suttles, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol. 7: Northwest Coast* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 387-390.

(9) Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, Supreme Court of Canada, 1997.

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