



The collective
knowledge
of Kokom

K8e kakina! Hello!

I am *Kokom*, and it is I who will have the pleasure of accompanying you throughout your virtual journey to meet the First Nations and Inuit of the ancestral territories that make up *Kwebek*.



Kokom means "grandmother" in Anicinabemowin, the ancestral language of my Anishinabe nation. Several other nations whose linguistic family is Algonquian also use the word *Kokom* to speak of our grandmothers. Spelling varies from nation to nation. Nations whose linguistic families are Iroquoian or Eskaleut (Arctic languages) will use other words to designate our grandmothers.

If you see my talking stick appear, it means I have something to share with you. Click on the stick to access the content. I invite you to consult the **Transmission** page to learn more about the creation of "Voices from the Land".

On my head, I'm wearing what's known as a *Kokom* scarf! According to oral tradition, these scarves were worn by the first Ukrainian immigrants to Canada in the early 1890s. These scarves are often imprinted with brightly coloured floral motifs. Traditionally, they symbolize sharing, friendship and solidarity that continue to exist between Indigenous and Ukrainian women. As the name suggests, these scarves are worn by Elders.

You can see I'm wearing a ribbon skirt, but do you know the message it shares? It's a sacred traditional element, a work of art for Indigenous women. We take great pride in wearing the ribbon skirt to ceremonies, gatherings and demonstrations which defend our rights. Handcrafted with love, the choice of colour, fabric and the position of the ribbons represent various symbolism and medicines, such as guardian animals or elements of nature. Non-Indigenous women who are allies to our causes can also wear a ribbon skirt in recognition of their commitment if they have received one as a gift or if they have an Indigenous friend who agrees to make one for them!



Mino Madji8in! We consider everything to be interconnected, forming one entity! We are part of Mother Earth, interdependent of her and all the realms that inhabit her: animal, plant and mineral. Our ancestors and dreams, the invisible worlds, are also a part of this entity. The state of wellbeing involves seeking a balance between head, body, heart and soul. It is both individual and collective, and a lifelong process. This is the basis of our education, which is founded on a holistic vision of learning! That's what we think leads to success!

11 First Nations and Inuit are spread across 55 communities in what is now Quebec. Although there are many similarities among us, especially in our fundamental beliefs and values, such as our connection to Mother Earth, each nation and community has its own history, language, distinct cultural traditions and realities associated to its ancestral territory. Since each nation harbours unique riches that are well worth knowing, we must therefore avoid generalizing or, as the saying goes, lumping us all together!

For First Nations and Inuit, elders are the guardians of ancestral knowledge, the respected elders have the responsibility to pass on to future generations. They carry the memory of origins, of the founding myths of the creation of the universe and of humanity. Their voice is listened to and respected with reverence. Within my nation, I have the honor of being recognized as an elder, which also comes with the duty to share the traditional teachings that I have received throughout my life, as I do with you today.

With every decision we make and every action we take, we always consider the 7 generations that came before us and the 7 generations that follow. We want to offer them the best possible living conditions, and that's why we rely on the know-how developed by our ancestors. If everyone did like us, Mother Earth and all her children would be better off!

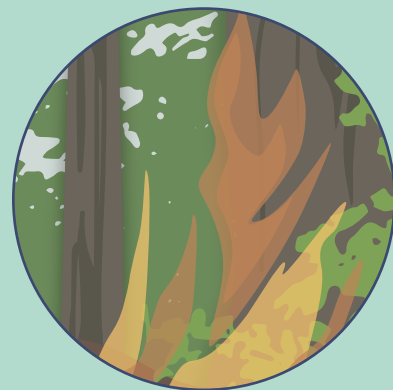
During cultural encounters, take care to understand what distinguishes each of our nations historically, socially, politically, linguistically, artistically and spiritually. After all, we're all very different, even though we are united by certain fundamental values, such as respect for Mother Earth!

It's also essential to know that our cultures are still very much alive and developing. Therefore, it's important to avoid a purely folkloric representation of us, one that's stuck in the past. Folklorization refers to preserving cultural elements that are interesting, spectacular or picturesque, for the purpose of entertainment, consumerism or tourist attraction.

The *teueikan* is an animated object that is very sacred to our nations. It's almost always present at our ceremonies and accompanies us into the realm of dreams. Those who manipulate it are chosen for their wisdom and are highly respected. It possesses healing powers and powers of connection with natural and invisible realms! For example, the Teueikan helps the Innu locate caribou herds on the territory.

We believe that *Shkode*, the sacred fire, represents the center of the circle, the heart of the community. Most of our ceremonies take place around the fire. Associated to Grandfather Sun, our universal fire, *Shkode*, symbolizes the strength of life, willpower and passion. We need to care for it and nourish it so that it keeps burning, but we also need to keep an eye on it so that we don't get burned!

For many of us, especially young people, it can be very difficult to come to terms with our history and all the injustices it entails. It's hard to understand one's roots and determine one's cultural identity in this tension between traditional values and the modern world that constantly requires us to adapt. It's overwhelming, it disrupts our stability and impairs our well-being.



People use many different words when referring to us. We used to be called savages, then Indians and Amerindians. It's now quite obvious that we're neither savages nor American Indians! We are the First Inhabitants of these territories, the Indigenous Peoples, the First Peoples! The key is to ask a person how they want to be designated, rather than deciding for them.

It is Noodin, the wind of our ancestors, who blew into our ears the legends which carry the memories of our people. Passed down orally from generation to generation, these stories help us teach our children the knowledge and values that are important to us. Each nation has its own legends transmitted in its ancestral language. Traditionally, it is the elders who share the legends around the fire, especially during the long winter nights, in the wigwam or under the shaputuan. Animals, elements of nature and invisible worlds are very present in our legends. They carry powerful medicines and share immense wisdom, but they can also teach lessons or set an example of what not to do! Hee! hee! Do you know any traditional legends? I invite you to discover some here: <https://www.legende-tshakapesh.com/>. Open your eyes, ears and hearts wide!



You probably know that many of our children unfortunately never returned from "Indian" residential schools. The children who returned experienced a lot of abuse and left with serious trauma that is perpetuated from generation to generation. We call this intergenerational trauma. Since 2021, September 30th marks the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, also called Orange Shirt Day. It aims to raise awareness, to recognize the history and consequences of "Indian" residential schools, to pay tribute to the children who stayed there without ever returning home as well as to honor the resilience of the people who survived them, as well as their families and communities. Do you know what the orange T-shirt means? I invite you to discover the story of Phyllis Webstad: <https://orangeshirtday.org/phyllis-story/>

Celebrations of the solstices and equinoxes have a long history, and they are present in many First Nations and Inuit cultures around the world. They are often associated with special traditions, festivities and rituals that highlight the connection with nature. They include dances, songs and prayers in a desire to celebrate the cycles of the seasons and life, the abundance that Mother Earth offers us. These celebrations thus offer an opportunity for community gathering, joy and connection with the territory. National Indigenous Peoples Day takes place on the summer solstice, June 21. This official day is one of celebrations that aim to recognize and honor the heritage, cultures and valuable contributions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit to Canadian society. The date of June 21 was chosen because it coincides with the arrival of the summer season, which has an important symbolic character, linked to our spirituality. In Quebec, each First Nation and Inuit community celebrates in its own way this special day which announces the summer season symbolized by the peak of brightness on Mother Earth. Gratitude for the Grandfather Sun constitutes a central and unifying element of the solstice ceremonies which often take place around the sacred fire.

For the Algonquian nation, like Atikamekw Nehirowisin, who were mostly nomadic or semi-nomadic, time for trapping, hunting, fishing and gathering remained important and marked the rhythm of life. Some community schools are closed in the fall and spring to allow families to go goose hunting in their territory.



Four medicinal plants are considered sacred plants of the medicine wheel by the Mi'gmaq nation, and other nations. First, to the east, is TOBACCO, used as the main offering for gratitude in all ceremonies. To the south, SWEETGRASS is the sacred hair of Mother Earth. Its sweet fragrance brings sweetness, love and goodness. To the west, SAGE is used to cleanse negativity and prepare space and people for ceremonies. CEDAR, with its many medicinal virtues, sits to the north. When cedar is added to a fire, it crackles, attracting the attention of spirits. Its purpose is to protect, purify and heal. I love a good cedar bath!

The 7 sacred teachings, also known as the 7 grandfather teachings, are a set of teachings that embody traditional values and guide community life.

The BEAVER teaches WISDOM

The EAGLE teaches LOVE

The BEAR teaches COURAGE

The BUFFALO teaches RESPECT

The SABLE (mythical giant) teaches HONESTY

The WOLF teaches HUMILITY

The TURTLE teaches TRUTH

The goose, commonly called the bustard, is a very important bird for many of our nations. It even constitutes the symbol of the Eeyou nation, since goose hunting is an important traditional practice. Due to the formation of its migratory flight, which allows a relay of energy based on sharing, the geese represents the union, mutual aid and endurance that characterize our relationships. My friend, the magnificent and inspiring Innu artist Joséphine Bacon, wrote this magnificent poem that I share with you: Grandmother bustard Nishk tshin nukum / You look at me Tshitshitapamin / I look at you Tshitshitapamatin / You are lost Tshunishin / Same as me Yum nin / When I am in the city Utenat e taiani / I no longer hear the river Apu petaman shipu e pimikut — *UIESH / SOMEWHERE*, p. 110-111.



Serge Bouchard called the Innu "the Laughing People"! This is another characteristic we have in common! We like to laugh, make jokes and play tricks, but sometimes we look serious! It's the best way for us to learn!

The sweat lodge is a purification and healing ceremony practiced throughout Turtle Island, but also practiced by other First Peoples of the world. The Innu call it Matetushan. It's viewed as a return to the womb of Mother Earth allowing for a rebirth. Sacred fire heats stones which are introduced into the opaque dome-shaped lodge. Sacred water is then poured over the stones, which releases very hot steam. Several prayers are part of this powerful ritual. I can't reveal much more because it's a very sacred ceremony involving teachings that are passed down orally. Since sweat lodges and many other of our ceremonies were prohibited during colonization, we remain vigilant about sharing our most precious traditions. If you practice spiritual humility, perhaps one day this wonderful medicine will be shared with you.

In Quebec, about half of First Nations people live in communities, formerly known as reserves. The other half now live in urban areas, where they study and work. The Inuit prefer to use the term "villages".

Before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous languages were solely oral! Nations further north wrote their language using symbols. This writing system involved a syllabic alphabet which, as its name suggests, relates to syllables.



Nibi, which means water, represents life! As women, we carry water, we give life. We have a responsibility to care for Mother Earth's sacred waters, to pray for her, to sing for her, to walk for her. *Nibi Wabo*, the water that flows from the rivers, is like the blood in our veins. Many Indigenous women of my nation, the Anishinaabeg, have walked thousands of kilometers to defend water rights and teach the importance of protecting it. Have you heard of Nokomis Joséphine Mandamin? This children's book tells her story: <https://birchbarkbooks.com/products/the-water-walker>

Did you know that the Hodeñošauṇe nations, like the Kanien'kehá:ka and Wendat nations, are experts in permaculture? Indeed, the three sisters: squash, beans and corn, are traditionally planted together, increasing their respective quality and productivity. Traditional tales tell the story of the three sisters, invoking the values of mutual aid and friendship that they convey. Traditional agricultural management also involved crop rotations to maintain a fertile soil.

Many of our nations, refer to North America as Turtle Island. The creation myth of the Wendat and Kanien'kehá:ka nations share this narrative. For many nations, the turtle is intrinsically linked to the myth of the world's creation. The turtle also represents the lunar calendar, with its 13 large central scales and an outer ring of 28 small scales. The 28 small scales represent the 28 days of the lunar cycle, the time it takes for the Moon to circle the Earth. The 13 central scales represent the number of revolutions the Moon makes around the Earth in a year. The 13 moons have symbolic names representing elements of nature that can be observed in different territories and seasons.



Do you know Atik the caribou? This animal is of great importance to the First Peoples, particularly the Naskapi, Innu and Inuit. The caribou represents their livelihood, providing food, clothing and cultural identity for thousands of years. Unfortunately, as a result of climate change, the survival of arctic and woodland caribou is now threatened. We should all be aware of this so that a solution can be found. We must follow in the footsteps of the caribou, for they know how to walk respectfully throughout the territory. Here is how Éric Kanapé, an Innu biologist from Pessamit, explains it: "Caribou and the territory are the core of our culture. They structure our thoughts, shape our being, our values and our spirituality. Without them, we no longer exist". Source:

[Mémoire_Conseil_des_Innus_de_Pessamit.pdf](#)

Basketry is an ancestral art that involves weaving plant fibers to create useful and decorative objects. In Kwepek, several First Nations, including the W8banakiak, Mi'gmaq and Wolastoqiyik Wahsipekuk, practice the art of basketry using threshed black ash. In fact, basketry was one of their main means of subsistence, thanks to barter with other nations and then later, trade. With patience and skill, beautiful works of art are crafted! Basketry is not practiced as much today because of the invasive insect, the emerald ash borer, known for attacking ash trees, precious to many nations. In their creation story, the W8banakiak are born from black ash. I hope these traditions will never be lost. Stephen Jerome, from the Mi'gmaq nation, is a great guardian of this ancestral knowledge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdeX6WdTKGQ>

The Wolastoqiyik nation suffered a true exile which led it to desert its territory due to its geographical position on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River. Fortunately, ties with other Wolastoqiyik communities in the Maritimes have enabled them to preserve and foster their heritage.





For several nations, the medicine wheel (or Circle of Life) is the symbol of a holistic world view. Although it varies from nation to nation, it represents the cardinal directions (east, south, west, north), the four races of humanity (Indigenous, European, African, Asian), the seasons of the year (spring, summer, fall, winter), the elements of nature (water, earth, air, fire), the stages of life (early childhood, adolescence, adulthood, elders), the dimensions of human beings (mind, body, heart, spirit), the parts of day (morning, afternoon, evening, night), the four sacred plants (sage, tobacco, sweetgrass, cedar), the spirit keepers (eagle, wolf, bear, buffalo). Human beings must seek balance and harmony of all these elements in all relationships and in every aspect of life. There's a lot more to say about the medicine wheel, but I think I've already said enough given that its teaching, which is passed down orally, is highly sacred to us.

During each sunrise of *Mokom Kîzîs*, Grandfather Sun, I thank *Kitchi Manitou*, the creator, for giving me the awareness to appreciate the beauty of Mother Earth, *Aki Ishkwe*, and all the living beings, both animate and inanimate, that she carries on her great turtle back. At night, I give thanks to *Nokomis Tibikîzîs*, Grandmother Moon, for her protection and guidance in the invisible world of dreams.

Kichi Migwetch



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