

# Labels in Indigenous Studies

There are many different terms that you will encounter when exploring the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and the Crown (Canada). What do these terms mean, and when is it appropriate to use them?

**Indigenous People and Indigenous Civilizations:** *Indigenous Peoples* has gained prominence as a term in an international context through the increasing visibility of international Indigenous rights movements. *Indigenous People* may be considered by some to be the most inclusive term of all, since it identifies peoples in similar circumstances without respect to national boundaries or local conventions, but it is, for some, a contentious term, since it defines groups primarily in relation to their colonizers.

It is worth noting, however, that the term *Indigenous Person* did not derive from an Indigenous traditional practice or language, though it is very much a term that Indigenous people have adopted and worked hard to define.<sup>1</sup>

**First Nation:** In recent decades in Canada, the term “First Nation” has gained considerable currency. More recently, “First Nations” has shifted towards a more restrictive usage based upon identification with legally recognized reserve communities, and in that sense it refers specifically to people who are recognized members of them.<sup>2</sup>

**Métis:** The advent of the fur trade in west central North America during the 18th century was accompanied by a growing number of offspring born of Indigenous women and European fur traders. As this population established distinct communities separate from those of Indigenous and European Nations, a new identity emerged: the Métis people.

Distinct Métis communities with their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood developed along the routes of the fur trade and across the Northwest within the Métis Nation Homeland. This Homeland includes the three Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta), as well as, parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories and the Northern United States.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from The Métis Nation website on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

**Inuit:** (from the Royal Canadian Geographic Society's *Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada*:

Inuit means “the people” in Inuktut, the Inuit language. The singular of Inuit is Inuk, meaning person.

Inuit are an Indigenous circumpolar people found across the North. Inuit primarily live in the Inuit Nunangat — the Inuit homeland. The majority of the Inuit population lives in 53 communities spread over two provinces and two territories. Inuit have lived in this homeland since time immemorial.

**Aboriginal People:** For the last few decades, the term *Aboriginal* was used to identify Indigenous people – a label that gained significant currency with its use in the repatriated Canadian Constitution Act (1982). The Constitution itself was a site of struggle for Native rights in Canada, and in the negotiations leading to the inclusion of section 35, which acknowledged Aboriginal rights. In the Constitution, “Aboriginal” is used to include three groups previously defined by earlier categories: *Indian*, *Inuit*, and *Métis*.<sup>4</sup>

In general, this term is no longer used outside of the provincial and federal government of Canada.

**Native Person:** *Native* is a general term that refers to a person or thing that has originated from a particular place. The term does not denote a specific Indigenous identity.<sup>5</sup> It is a very general, overarching term, it does not account for any distinctiveness between various Indigenous Nations. *If you are referencing a specific group, it is generally considered more respectful to use another term that more specifically denotes which peoples you are referring to.*

**Indian:** The origins of this term links all the way to Cristobal Colon's (Christopher Columbus) encounter with the Taíno Peoples in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Thinking he was in India (the collective term used by Europeans for lands to the east of Europe such as India, China and Japan was *Indies*), Colon used the term *Indios* (originally, “person from the Indus valley”) to refer to the Taíno and other civilizations encountered in the Caribbean. Overtime, the term was applied to all Indigenous Peoples of the Western Hemisphere.

In Canada, *Indian* remains a legal description applied to Indigenous Peoples (including Métis and Inuit) by the Indian Act (1876).

---

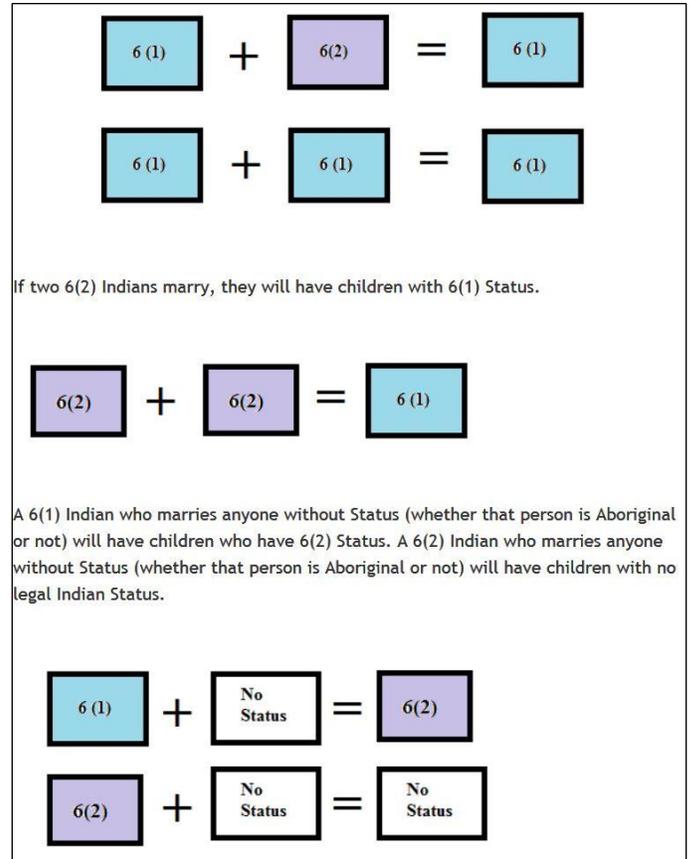
<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

**Status Indian:** A person who is registered as an Indian under the *Indian Act*. The act sets out the requirements [based on blood quantum] for determining who is an Indian for the purposes of the *Indian Act*.<sup>6</sup>

*From the Indigenous Foundations at University of British Columbia:*

Not all people who might identify as “Indian” have status. Prior to 1961, for instance, an “Indian” who acquired an education could be forcibly “enfranchised,” becoming a Canadian citizen, but losing status as an “Indian.” Prior to 1985, an Indian woman who married a non-Indian man also lost status. This meant that legally, she ceased to be an “Indian,” as did all of her children. Conversely, a non-Indian woman who married a status Indian man gained status and became an “Indian,” even though she had no ancestral relation to any Indian community. The restoration of status to Indian women and their descendants by Bill C-31 was not without controversy, since the corresponding legal increase in community membership was not accompanied by a matching increase in resources.



In addition, throughout the 20th century, residential schools and policies of forced adoption, such as the “60s Scoop” during the 1960s, in addition to general patterns of migration to cities and intermarriage, resulted in the alienation of many people from their communities of ancestral origin. People might well know that they had Indian ancestry, but not know their community background and not be able to demonstrate their “status.” Identity for people in this situation is often far from simple, and that legacy of ambiguity and uncertainty has often been passed to their descendants. And even though many Indigenous people viewed the entire system of government-conferred status with wide skepticism as a colonial incursion into Indigenous identity, possession of a status card, ironically, is still often the ultimate arbiter in identity debates and challenges.

The complexities of this system and its many amendments and other provisions are described further on our Indian Act page.

<sup>6</sup> Taken directly from the Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs website on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016.

Although the question of access to certain rights remains, the general recognition that there are “Indian” people who are both “status” and “non-status” (and both “treaty” and “non-treaty”) is now common in both community discussions and in government policy. The spectrum of Indian identity, however, remains wide and complex, and affected by many determinants.

It is most critical to recognize that this system of the regulation of “Indian identity” by the Canadian state formed a separate system, over-layering and at many points over-writing community practice, and participating, in a more general sense, in a system designed, at times very explicitly, to supersede and undermine community traditions. Because of its association with punitive laws and state control, the term “Indian” is now often regarded as having very negative connotations when used in any setting invoking government policy or involving interactions with people or entities outside of communities. “Indian,” therefore, is not a term that should be used for people who would not use it to refer to themselves. It is also worth noting, however, that at least for people in older generations, “Indian” is still a term that people use to refer to each other or themselves within community contexts, and that it can be used in these contexts with some level of affection. And in the US, given a different social and regulatory history, “Indian” or “American Indian” is still a preferred term, though “Native American,” a term deriving from the US civil rights era, is also widely used. In the US, terms such as “Aboriginal” are not recognized at all. More generally, though, dissatisfaction with this history and with terms that are sometimes associated with older, racist discourses (such as “Indian” and “Native”), is part of what has led to the ascendancy of “Aboriginal” as a preferred term in Canada.

### **So, how do you know which term to use?**

- Ask the person how they identify themselves.
- If they are a member of a Nation (i.e., Seneca, Odawa, Songhees, etc.), that is term you should use before anything else.
- If you are afraid to mispronounce a word, ask for help (learn to pronounce it properly).
- If you are unable to ask, the preferred term is Indigenous Person. Avoid using the possessive *Canada's Indigenous Peoples* – Canada does not possess Indigenous Peoples or their Nations.