

Labels in Indigenous Studies

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

Labels remove identity

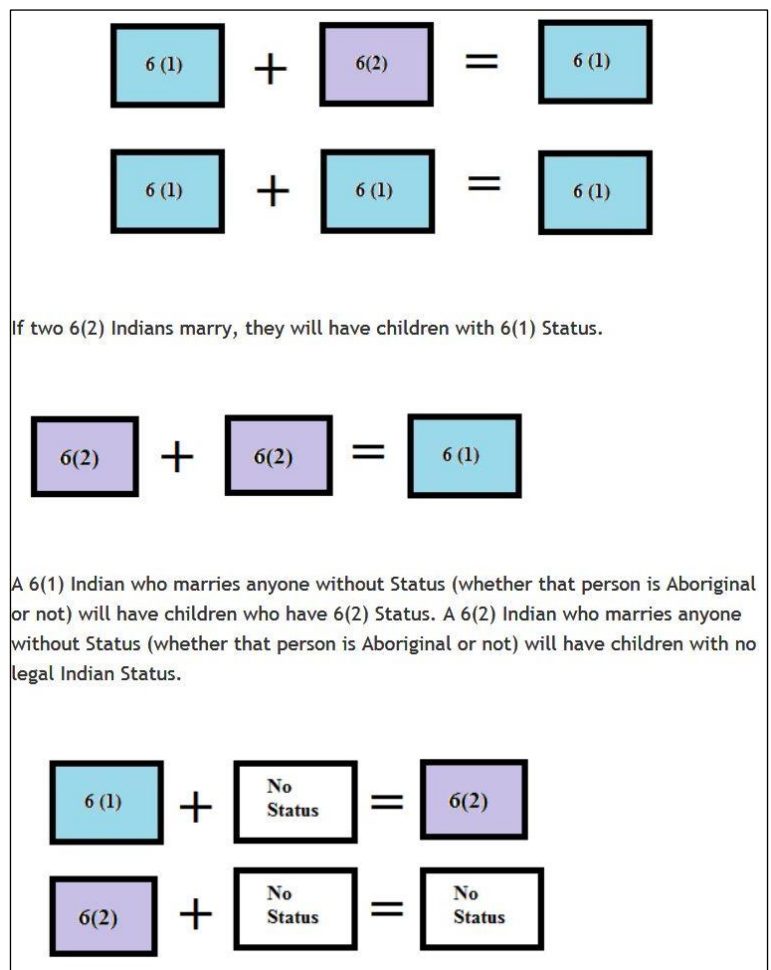
- Tyler Alexis

Indian: This term links all the way to Cristobal Colon's encounter with the Taíno Peoples in the 15th century. Colon, thinking he was in India, misidentified the Taíno as "Indians," and the label soon 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).

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.¹

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.



¹ Taken directly from the Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs website on February 3rd, 2016.

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. 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.

Native: A generic term applied to Indigenous Peoples around the world.

First Nation: In recent decades in Canada, the term “First Nations” has gained considerable currency. At times, it has had something of the broad usage now accorded to “Aboriginal,” and has appeared to be a more respectful successor to “Indian” (as “Native American” did in the US). 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.²

² Taken directly from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 3rd, 2016.

Aboriginal People: For the last few decades the most inclusive term in general usage in Canada has been “Aboriginal,” a term that gained significant currency with its use in the repatriated Canadian Constitution of 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 acknowledges Aboriginal rights, “Aboriginal” became the mutually accepted term. In the Constitution, “Aboriginal” is used to include three groups previously defined by earlier categories: “Indian,” “Inuit,” and “Métis.”³

Indigenous People: “Indigenous,” has gained prominence as a term to describe Aboriginal peoples in an international context through the increasing visibility of international Indigenous rights movements. “Indigenous” 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 “Indigenous,” like “Aboriginal” or even “Indian,” is not itself an “Indigenous” term in the sense of deriving from an Indigenous traditional practice or language, though it is very much a term that Indigenous people have worked hard to define.⁴

Métis: The advent of the fur trade in west central North America during the 18th century was accompanied by a growing number of mixed offspring of Indian women and European fur traders. As this population established distinct communities separate from those of Indians and Europeans and married among themselves, a new Aboriginal people emerged - the Métis people – with their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood.

Distinct Métis communities 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.⁵

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.
- If you are unable to ask, the preferred term is Indigenous - avoid others such as Indian and Native.

³ Taken directly from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 3rd, 2016.

⁴ Taken directly from the Indigenous Foundations (University of British Columbia) website on February 3rd, 2016.

⁵ Taken directly from The Métis Nation website on February 3rd, 2016.