

Métis Language and Culture

Canada has a founding people who once traversed North America's interior in Red River Carts, hunted bison with military precision, danced and jigged to spirited fiddle rhythms, wore brightly adorned embroidered clothing, fur trade sashes or shawls, spoke one of humanity's most unique languages, prayed to the *Le Bon Jeu/Kitchi-Manitou* and to their patron saint, St. Joseph, and even had their own werewolf. These people were the Métis.

"Métis" or "*méstis*" as the word was known at Contact, in French means mixed. From "*méstis*" evolved "*méchif*," "*mitchif*" or "Michif," the name of a language, culture and a people within the Métis Nation. The epistemological roots of the word "Métis" are very important because the word presently denotes a distinct Indigenous nation with a genius for adapting others' cultural traditions and making them their own. Indeed, the Métis have always practiced a culture, which has fused First Nations (Cree, Saulteaux, Dene and Dakota), Euro-Canadian (*Canadien*) and European (Scots/Orkney) parent cultures into a unique, vibrant synthesis.

Language is perhaps the most notable example of this talent for cultural transformation. The Métis were undoubtedly the most multilingual people in the history of Canada. Besides being adept in a wide range of First Nations and European languages, they also invented Michif-Cree, a mixed-language based on Cree (and Saulteaux) verb structures and French nouns/noun phrases; Michif-French, a dialect of Canadian French which uses Algonquian syntax; and Bunjee, a Cree/Scots-Gaelic Creole. However, the Métis are best known for speaking Michif-Cree, which has long been studied by linguists since it has cleverly woven two unrelated languages into a coherent whole with a standardized syntax, verb structure and noun phrases. Michif-Cree is presently spoken around Lebret, Yorkton, Debden, the Battlefords and Ile-à-La Crosse.

Métis Elders or "Old People" have always remitted cultural knowledge to younger generations through the Oral Tradition. From the Oral Tradition emerged a rich storytelling culture that blended various First Nations motifs, such as the tricksters, *Wisahkecahk* and *Nanabush*, with French-Canadian ones, such as *Chi-Jean* (from *Ti-Jean*), *le diable* (the Devil as a dog or handsome stranger) and *le rou garou* (from "*loup garou*," a werewolf), a person who fell out of the Creator's favour. However, *le rou garou* was not just a werewolf since she/he had the attributes of the Cree shape shifter, and could change into a variety of forms. *Rou garou* stories were told to ensure that youth behaved themselves, particularly during Lent. From this storytelling tradition emerged a talent for creating nicknames, many of which often began with "*chi*" or "little," from the French abbreviation of "*petit*" – "*ti*."

Traditionally, the Métis were very spiritual. Most Métis practiced a folk Catholicism that was rooted in veneration of the Virgin, based on pilgrimages

such as those to St. Laurent de Grandin (near present day Duck Lake), holding wakes for departed loved ones, sprinkling holy water during menacing thunderstorms, providing thanks to the Creator by offering tobacco and ensuring that Christmas and Lent were strictly periods of spiritual reflection devoid of celebration or materialism.

Métis culture has always been festive and celebrated with great *joie de vivre*. The Métis dance and jig to fiddle tunes that were very similar to their Celtic and French-Canadian antecedents, but which seamlessly weave faster-paced First Nations footwork and rhythms (such as in traditional drumming). These traditions vary among families and communities. For instance, the “Red River Jig,” the signature fiddle tune and dance of the Métis, has many different versions and step patterns. House parties, focusing on jigging, dancing and fiddle playing, were a constant feature throughout Métis history, with the climax of revelry being *le réveillon* (New Years’ Eve) or the days leading up to or after Lent. During such times of celebration, Métis women prepared a veritable feast, which included *les beignes* (fried bread), *la gallette* (bannock), *les boulettes* (meatballs), *le rababou* (stew) and molasses cakes.

The Métis are also the heirs of a vibrant material culture, which emphasized the floral motif – in bead and quillwork and embroidery. After adapting the design from the Grey Nuns in the 1810s, generations of Métis women produced countless *objets d’art* for their loved ones, animals, for decoration and for sale to non-Aboriginal collectors. Unfortunately, much of the legacy of the “Flower Beadwork People,” as the Métis were once known, has been lost due to institutional mislabeling that called many of these pieces “Plains Cree” or “Ojibwa.” Finding the proper provenance and restoring the voice of their Métis creators has been a concern for academics and the Métis community.

Darren R. Préfontaine,
Gabriel Dumont Institute

Further Reading: Bakker, Peter. *A Language of Our Own: The Genesis of Michif, the Mixed Cree-French Language of the Canadian Métis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; Barkwell, Lawrence J., Dorion, Leah and Préfontaine, Darren R., Editors. *Métis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001; Campbell, Maria. *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Penticton, British Columbia, 1995; Fleury, Norman. *La Lawng Michif Peekishkewin: The Canadian Michif Language Dictionary*. Winnipeg: The Métis Resource Centre, 2000; Troupe, Cheryl. *Expressing Our Heritage: Métis Artistic Designs*. Study Prints and Manual. Saskatoon: The Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2002.