



First People's and Saskatchewan Museums Committee Elders Protocol

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Knowledge Exchange:

Every nation, every culture is unique and cannot be viewed as generic. Therefore, these protocols are offered as suggestions; at no time is it claimed that we are in any way experts or that we know all the answers.

Within First Nation protocols, people earn the right to relay knowledge. Certain stories are told about certain things. Storytellers purchase the right to be able to tell stories or were given the right to tell certain stories. Often, the currency to exchange knowledge has been tobacco. Certain knowledge has been earned; therefore, to gain or exchange that knowledge, a gift of tobacco is offered.

Elders are considered the knowledge-keepers and, depending upon the community protocols, they are to be approached with tobacco when seeking knowledge. If you are uncertain as to the customs when seeking knowledge, it becomes important to ASK.

In some communities it is acceptable to give a pinch of tobacco; in others a cigarette or perhaps a tin - it depends on what you are asking. One must not assume because a pinch of tobacco was exchanged that an Elder or Oskapeweous/Oskhapewis is obliged to do everything you ask them to do. If tobacco is refused, it is because the person has the right to refuse tobacco. In some communities, special teas are exchanged, or perhaps gifts.

The museums should appoint one Elder as the HEAD ELDER, and they will determine what is needed. The Head Elder will determine how things must be done, according to their protocols and practices. Ceremonies are to be done at certain times and one must follow the directions of the Head Elder in determining the protocols for any ceremonies you wish conducted.





Who is an Elder?

The following is from Annette J. Cyr and used with her permission:

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People 1999 stated: "In First Nations culture, not all old people are Elders and not all Elders are old people."

Elder: An elderly person who by his or her life experience has wisdom, and guidance for the younger generation. (Traditional Teacher and/or Counsellor)

Spiritual Elder: A person knowledgeable in the traditional ways of First Nations people and who holds the right to conduct ceremonies. (Sweat Lodge Keeper, Spiritual Counsellors)

Spiritual Leader: An Elder who is highly respected and revered by the First Nations community and is extremely knowledgeable regarding spiritual ways of First Nations people. A Spiritual Leader is an Elder who has the gift and knowledge to lead specialized ceremonies.

Elder Helpers: Helpers are younger people who assist the above Elders and others, sometimes referred to as Elders in Training. They are also sometimes called apprentices - in Cree, Oskapewewos/Oskhapewis.

Seeking an Elder

Within every culture, within every First Nation and Métis community, there are specific protocols that are adhered to. Various organizations and Treaty Councils have various Elders they use for various reasons. Often these lists are guarded and kept close to the person who has developed the list. Lists are developed through personal knowledge and acceptance of an Elder. These lists are often not transferable, because a person establishes a rapport with the Elders, and is able to determine which Elders are needed for specific events. It is best to ask the local communities situated near you for names of Elders who would be able to assist you. Tobacco, once accepted, is akin to an RSVP or notification of attendance.

Time Frames

Prior to contact, time was very different. The clock did not measure time; rather time was measured by the four times of day: dawn, high noon, dusk, and night. Ceremonies will last as long as they are meant to and things will start when they begin. The measurement of time is thus different from mainstream, but it is an integral part of the culture. This becomes difficult when one is trying to make plans and follow schedules. Working with Elders, one must gain understanding of the circumstances they face; if an Elder is asked to attend certain ceremonies, they may take precedence over the events you have planned. Flexibility is very important.

Take what you need and leave the rest...

First Nation and Métis Elders have been trained by their own Elders and have been chosen by their communities. Often a person can take what they need from the teachings that relate to their life, and what they don't require they leave. This is a challenge for mainstream society, which may believe that there is only one way of doing things and that everything is black and white, with no shades of gray in between. Each Elder has a method of teaching and there are no EXPERTS within the culture. Each person, each nation, has a way of doing things, and those differences must be respected.

Payment for Services

The traditional method of payment has been "pay what it is worth to you". Yet how does one determine what the knowledge of an Elder is worth? Some Elders have been taken advantage of by this methodology, and others have done quite well. It has taken years for the Elder to be given the right to do certain ceremonies or to gain knowledge; therefore, that wisdom is worth recognition and monetary payment. Treaty Four has given a day rate of \$150 a day plus mileage, meals and accommodations if necessary. Treaty Six has given the day rate of \$200 a day plus mileage, meals, and accommodations if necessary. These are guidelines and can be used in determining payment for services.

Another guideline for payment is "Pay what you can afford without leaving yourself short or without." Basically larger institutions would be able to afford larger amounts than smaller institutions.



Recognizing Cultural Differences

There are many nations that make up the First Nations of Saskatchewan, each with their unique beliefs. The Métis Nation is unique as well. One cannot expect or demand that there be a "one-size-fits-all" generic culture; this is not going to happen. Mindsets must be altered to embrace the Aboriginal way of doing things.

Respect

Sometimes it becomes difficult to bridge diverse cultures and to understand concepts around protocols, yet it becomes important to ensure that even if you do not understand why certain things are done certain ways, respect that this is how things are done.



Photo - Evelyn Tom and Stanley Bird