

Yukon First  
Nations  
Traditional  
Governance



Grade

5





# Yukon First Nations Traditional Governance

First Nation Programs and Partnerships Unit  
Yukon Department of Education  
Yukon First Nation Curriculum Working Group  
Queens Printer - August 2007

ISBN: 1-55362-333-9

© 2007. All rights reserved.

No part of this book covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, unless written permission is received from the publisher.

**HEADER: Caribou Hide on Building, YTG photo; Duquette graduation, Duquette Collection; Salmon Drying, Alice Hager and Mary Hager in Mayo 1937, Claude and Mary Tidd Fonds #7504; Dakwakada Dancers, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations; Chief Jim Boss Ceremonial Shirt worn while meeting the Governor General in 1943, displayed at MacBride Museum, Art Johns, Elder, Carcross Tagish First Nation, YTG Photos**





Acknowledgements

Curriculum Working Group Members  
by language group 2006/07

- Gwich'in:**  
Mabel Tetlich  
(Garry Njootli)
- Hän:**  
Georgette McLeod  
(Madeline deRepentigny)
- Kaska:**  
Dorothy Smith  
(David Dickson)
- Northern Tutchone:**  
Melanie Tourangeau  
Liz Hall
- Southern Tutchone:**  
Paul Birckel  
(Hazel Bunbury)
- Tagish:**  
Georgianna Low  
(Ida Calmegane)
- Tlingit:**  
Sam Johnston  
(Jane Smarch)
- Upper Tanana:**  
Doris Johns

Technical Team

- Director of First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit:**  
Tina Jules
- First Nations Curriculum Coordinator:**  
Shereen Hill
- Cultural Inclusion Consultant:**  
Sharon Shadow
- First Nations Partnerships Coordinator:**  
Janet McDonald
- Intermediate Programs Consultant:**  
Terry Markley

Project Team

- Grade Level Editor:**  
Louise Shelly
- Copy Editor:**  
Patricia Halladay
- Cultural Editor:**  
Ingrid Johnson
- Design and Layout:**  
Leaf Marketing & Coordination  
Solutions Ltd.
- Writers:**  
Alyce Johnson, Tina Jules and  
Sharon Shadow
- Special thanks to the following people  
who contributed to the project:**  
Sandy Anderson, Cathie Findlay-Brook,  
Barbara Hobbis, Emma Sam, Sofie Maurice,  
Dawna Davey, Corrine Kendall-Carvill,  
Norma Shorty, and Marnie Buyck
- Special thanks to the following  
contributors:**  
Yukon Chiefs Committee on Education,  
Yukon First Nations Education Advisory  
Committee and the Yukon Native Language  
Centre

CONTENTS

TRADITIONAL WAYS OF GOVERNANCE

Title page	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Elders Page	1
You Will Learn About	2
A. Yukon First Nations Governance	3
B. Yukon First Nations Leadership	3
C. Inland Tlingit Leadership	4
D. Gwitchin Leadership	4
E. Traditional First Nations Justice	5
F. Traditional First Nations Education	5
G. Traditional First Nations Economy	6
H. Traditional First Nations Technology	7
I. Traditional First Nations Health	8
J. Summary	9
Sharing Circle	10
Check What You Have Learned	11
Glossary	12





# TRADITIONAL WAYS OF GOVERNANCE

“Our people have many deep feelings about our land.”  
*from Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*



Amos Dick, Elder, Ross River Dena Council



Leda Jules, Liard First Nation, preparing fish for smoking at Simpson Creek culture camp 2006.  
Photographer Jeanette McCrie



Grace (Grady) Tom, Elder,  
Ross River Dena Council

## You Will Learn About

- the meaning of governance
- the traditional Yukon First Nations governance system
- traditional Yukon First Nations justice system
- traditional Yukon First Nations education
- traditional Yukon First Nations economy
- traditional Yukon First Nations technology
- traditional Yukon First Nations health



John Tizya and Moses Lord, Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, George Adamson Collection



## A. YUKON FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE

Yukon First Nations have always had a **governance system** and have governed with dignity. First Nations leaders followed **traditional laws** and **values**. There was a **justice system** to help everyone obey the **laws**. Many traditional laws and values are still followed today.

In the past all First Nations people helped with education. **Elders** and adults taught children and youth. The children were expected to **respect** the **wisdom** passed on to them.

The land provided Yukon First Nations with everything they needed. The land provided **resources** for food, medicine, shelter, clothing and tools. People made tools from things they could find on the land. For example, they used parts of animals, birds and fish. They also used stones and tree roots.

First Nations traded with other nations for different resources.

### Did you know?

Governance is the way leaders take care of a nation of people. These leaders make up a part of government. All people make up the government.

## B. YUKON FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP

Today, as in the past, leaders speak wisely and work hard to lead through example while not taking sides. Leaders need to be good role models. They need to be patient and they need to be excellent listeners. They should be good hunters and providers. Leaders know traditional teachings and stories and speak with a strong voice.

In the past, good leaders had to be able to negotiate effectively with other First Nations and with Russian, British, American and Canadian traders.

**Community** members should respect what leaders have to say. Good leaders find out what their people want. They listen for the wisdom of the Elders and the people. Elders help to guide everyone; they are the keepers and teachers of First Nations laws and values.

Both men and women are leaders in First Nations communities. The Wolf and the Crow clans both have clan leaders. **Medicine men** and women are special types of spiritual leaders and healers.

**Consensus** is a traditional First Nations practice. Leaders follow the consensus of the group. They listen to everyone. Everyone has the right to **express** a point of view. When everyone agrees, there is consensus.

Good leaders speak respectfully. They work to keep peace and **harmony** in the communities.



John Dickson, Elder, Liard First Nation  
(1990) YTG photo

## C. INLAND TŁINGIT LEADERSHIP

An example of Yukon First Nation leadership:

At one time each Tlingit clan house had a clan chief. The clan chief represented all the people who lived in the clan house. A clan chief spoke for all the clan. All the members of the clan house supported and respected the clan chief.

Now each **Inland Tlingit** community has their own chief and clan leaders for each of their clans. Inland Tlingit clan leaders are **hereditary**. This means that leadership is handed down from one **generation** to the next. As clan leaders get older they work with a younger person to teach him. When the clan leader dies, the younger man becomes the leader. His family or group trained him.

### Did you know?

A woman's council has the same value as the main council?

## D. GWITCHIN LEADERSHIP

An example of Yukon First Nation leadership:



Alice Frost, (nee Njootli) Father Jean-Marie Mouchet,  
fonds, 91/51R, #82, Yukon Archives

Long ago the Gwitchin used a hereditary system of leadership. A leader was trained right from birth. His family or group trained him or her.

**Chief Peter Moses** was the last traditional leader, governing from 1936-1954. In the past there were no female leaders. That was a Gwitchin law. This law has changed. **Alice Frost** was the first female Chief of Old Crow, governing from 1985-1988.

Today the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation elect a Chief and Council as leaders for Old Crow.

### Did you know?

Matriarch: the oldest women in a clan. Matriarchs are the advisors behind the clan leaders.



## E. TRADITIONAL FIRST NATIONS JUSTICE

Long ago, Yukon First Nations leaders knew the traditional laws and values. The laws and values helped them lead their people. There were laws and values about potlatches and **ceremonies**. Other laws and values were about stories, songs, dances and clan symbols.

Sometimes people would hold a potlatch to help people get along better. They would hold it for the person, family or community that had been hurt. If someone had stolen something the people might hold a potlatch. The potlatch would be a way to apologize for the theft. Potlatches helped the families get along.

Long ago some laws were **severe**. A person could be **banned** from the community for certain crimes.

Sometimes wars would break out when trading partners were dishonest.

A good justice **system** keeps peace between individuals, families and clans.

Yukon First Nations still follow their traditional laws to the best of their abilities.



Liz Hall, Elder,  
Selkirk First Nation speaking at an education  
meeting, 2007. Photographer Shereen Hill

## F. TRADITIONAL FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION

In the past, Yukon First Nations children grew up on the land. They traveled everywhere with their parents and learned the skills they needed to survive on the land. They learned how to hunt, fish, trap and gather plants and berries, as well as how to make clothing and tools and build shelters. The children learned by watching and practising. Afterwards, they could do what they needed on their own.

The people on the mother's side of the family helped teach her children. It was their **responsibility**. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and other members of the mother's clan helped. In many First Nations, aunts and uncles were especially important. Children were taught the ways of their mother's family. They were expected to follow her **traditions**.

If a child belonged to the **Crow Clan**, all the clan would help with his or her education. **Wolf Clan** members taught children from the Wolf Clan. Everyone in the community was thought of as a teacher. The whole community raised a child.



Mrs. Winnie Atlin of the Carcross Tagish First  
Nation, Ishkitàn clan. Picture taken at Ghùch Tlá  
Community School. Photographer Brian Shanahan

A mother and her sisters taught the girls and the small children. Her brothers taught her sons. A father was responsible for his mother's and sister's families. He taught his brothers and his nephews because they were in the same clan as he was.

The traditional education system taught children the ways of their clan. Children learned about their clan's beliefs. They were taught **history**, songs, dances, stories and artwork. They also learned how to hunt, fish, trap and gather.

Each clan had their own **version** of stories, dances and songs. Traditional education made sure each clan taught their laws and values to the children. Some Yukon First Nations families continue to follow this **tradition** today.

## G. TRADITIONAL FIRST NATIONS ECONOMY

Yukon First Nations made their living from the land. It was important that they related well to the land. When they treated the land and its resources well they **prospered**.

Yukon First Nations traded with other First Nations people. They traded their **surplus** goods for things they wanted.

First Nations had to be able to communicate well. When a First Nations person could communicate well he could **negotiate** and **barter**.

The Tlingit traded with the Russians and other coastal people. The Tlingit then traveled **inland** to trade with other Yukon First Nations.

In order to trade, First Nations people had to get permission from other First Nations to cross their boundaries. It was important to do this in a respectful way.



Bonnie Jean Joe, Kluane  
First Nation, teaching  
student at Cultural Days  
at Hidden Valley School



H. TRADITIONAL FIRST NATIONS TECHNOLOGY

Yukon First Nations people used logs, brush and animal hides to build **shelters**. The shelters provided warmth during the cold season.

Yukon First Nations people **harvested** what they needed from the land. They used animal skins and bones to make many things. They tanned the hides of moose, caribou and sheep to make clothing, bedding, transport and shelters. They made dolls for the children.

Animal and fish bones were used to make tools, including hide **scrapers**, knives, spears, arrowheads, fishhooks, sewing needles and containers. People sewed with **babiche** (a kind of string made from **sinew**). Rabbit and gopher skins were made into blankets and clothing.

The women would tan moose and caribou hides for clothing such as mukluks, mitts, hats, coats and pants. Girls had to develop sewing skills at a young age. The boys had to develop their skills as hunters and providers.

Yukon First Nations harvested a range of animals, birds, fish and plants throughout the seasonal cycle to keep healthy. All parts of the animals, birds and fish were used. Nothing was ever wasted.



Stone Arrowheads



Stone Blades



Stone scrapers, YTG photos



Hand crafted items and tools of Paddy Jim, Elder, Champagne and Aishihik First Nations.  
L to R: Scraper tool from caribou legs, knife scraper tool for moose hide, fleshing tool to remove meat from moose skin, babiche sinew, and skin boat model

I. TRADITIONAL FIRST NATIONS HEALTH

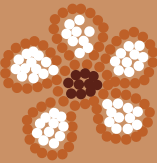
In order for Yukon First Nations to live, they had to move to the food supply. They didn't want their food sources to be **depleted**.

Yukon First Nations made their **seasonal rounds** to make sure that families could gather enough food for the winter ahead. From the land, they gathered plants for medicines and food. They planned to make sure that families gathered enough to keep them healthy.

Elders are an important part of a community. Elders provided advice to the younger adults and children. They traveled with their group, and sometimes had to remain in camps if the trails were too **treacherous** or travel difficult. They had ample supplies of food and wood to keep them healthy.

Yukon First Nations prepared for the season ahead.

Taneshia and Autum Jules, at a fish camp located by Johnson's Crossing, traditionally an Eagle Clan (Dakh'awèdi) fish camp



Did you know?

Long ago Yukon First Nations had a traditional **economy**. They didn't use money. When people needed things they didn't have, they traded for them.

The Coast Tlingit began trading furs with the Russians in the late 1700s. The Russians brought guns, metal knives, cloth, tobacco and tea.





J. SUMMARY

Yukon First Nations are proud of their ways of governance. First Nations have always had a traditional governance system. Traditional leaders were responsible for education, justice, resources, economy, **technology** and health. They knew the clan **traditions** and laws and values.

Good leaders were wise in the ways of the land and the environment. They listened to the Elders and all the people in their group. Decisions were made through consensus.

Yukon First Nations have always been **caretakers of the land**. In the past they followed a seasonal round of hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering. They used the land carefully. The land gave them clothing, tools, medicine and shelter. They worked hard to have enough food and supplies for each season.

The Yukon First Nations governed their land with care and respect.



Scene near Dawson City



Stephen Frost Sr., Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, skinning caribou



Faye Chamberlain, cleaning fish, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Hän Nation

**Let's talk about governance**

Can you explain governance?

Do you know the names of the Yukon First Nations leaders in your community?

Compare traditional First Nations governance to modern governance.

What makes a person a good leader?

Do you ever trade things with your friends?

How do you trade? Do you ever barter?

Try to reach consensus on these questions:

Should everyone have to go outside at recess?

Should everyone be made to wear a uniform to school?

What happened when someone broke a law long ago?

Is that the same or different from today?

What things do you learn from your parents and grandparents?

Do you know an Elder who teaches you many things?

Imagine you had to live on the land without going to a store for anything you needed. What would your life be like?

How did the ancestors of the First Nations make sure their resources were not depleted?

What can we learn from them today?

What does it mean to be a steward of the land?

Gauntlets 1987.10.2 and Mukluks, 1987.10.1, McBride Museum Collection, YTG Photos; Moccasins, Irene Smith, Elder, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council.



# Check What You Have Learned

- ☐ Governance is the way leaders take care of their people.
- ☐ Traditional governance looked after everyone’s needs: education, justice, economic, resources, technology, health and trade.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations leaders guided their people by following traditional laws and values and continue to follow these today
- ☐ Everyone was part of the Yukon First Nations traditional governance system: leaders, elders, adults, youth and children.
- ☐ The land provided resources during all seasons.
- ☐ There was trade among different First Nations.
- ☐ Good leaders listen carefully, speak wisely and hunt and provide for their people.
- ☐ Traditional leaders were strong traders.
- ☐ Good leaders look for the wisdom of the Elders and the people.
- ☐ Elders know traditional laws and values and speak up to guide everyone.
- ☐ Consensus is a traditional First Nations practice.
- ☐ Good leaders worked to keep peace and harmony in the communities.
- ☐ Now each Inland Tlingit Community has their own chief and every clan has a hereditary clan leader.
- ☐ Traditional Gwitchin leadership used a hereditary system of leadership.
- ☐ Alice Frost was the first female Chief of Old Crow.
- ☐ Today the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation elect a Chief and Council.
- ☐ The traditional justice system was based on laws and values that everyone had to follow.
- ☐ Potlatches were held for many reasons.
- ☐ A good justice system keeps peace and harmony.
- ☐ In traditional times, Yukon First Nations children grew up on the land.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations children learned the ways of their mother’s clan.
- ☐ Each clan has their unique ways of doing things.
- ☐ The land provided Yukon First Nations with their living. It was the basis of their economy.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations bartered with other First Nations people for things they needed.
- ☐ First Nations people had to get permission to cross First Nations’ boundaries.
- ☐ Traditional technology used the resources from the land, water and wildlife.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations lived a healthy lifestyle on the land when they followed their seasonal round.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations took good care of their Elders.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations worked hard to prepare and harvest for the next season.
- ☐ Yukon First Nations govern their land with care and respect.

## GLOSSARY

### Alice Frost

- first female chief of Old Crow. (from 1985-1988)  
*Alice Frost was the first female Chief of Old Crow starting in 1985.*

### Banned

- not allowed  
*A person would be banned from the community if they took someone’s life.*

### Barter

- trade goods without using money.  
*Yukon First Nations bartered furs for goods they wanted at the trading posts.*

### Caretakers of the land

- people who keep the land clean and healthy  
*All Yukon First Nations are caretakers of the land. They take only what they need from the land.*

### Ceremony

- a formal way to mark an important event  
For example: weddings and graduations are ceremonies.  
*There will be a name giving ceremony at the potlatch.*

### Chief

- a person who is elected or appointed as the leader of a First Nation  
*Andy Carvill is the Grand Chief of the Council of Yukon First Nations.*

### Clan

- a large of group of people from the same family
- a group of people who have a common ancestor
- a moiety  
*I belong to the Wolf clan because my mother is from the Wolf clan.*

### Communicate

- share information with others
- share ideas and feelings with others  
*The Sharing Circle is a good way for our class to communicate.*  
*I use e-mail to communicate with my friends.*

### Community

- a group of people who live in the same area
- a group of people who have an interest in common  
*Many people in our community like to fish in the summer.*  
*Our school community wants to make school safe for all the children.*

### Consensus

- agreement among all the members of a group  
*It was hard to decide where to build the new hall. The Chief and Council talked for many hours before they reached a consensus.*

### Crow Clan

- one of the two main Yukon First Nation clans  
*The Crow Clan is hosting a potlatch. The Wolf Clan is hosting a Potlatch.*

### Deplete

- use something until most of it is gone  
*We only hunt a few bison every year. We don’t want to deplete the herd.*

### Dignity

- pride, self-respect  
*My grandfather is proud of everything he has done for our family. He walks with great dignity.*

### Economy

- the way a group of people earns and uses money  
*My brother has gone to work in Alberta. There are lots of jobs there because the economy is very good.*

### Elders

- cultural leaders in a community  
*It is important to help our Elders with work that is hard for them to do.*

### Elect

- choose a leader by voting  
*It is time to elect a new chief. My parents will vote tomorrow.*

### Express

- show your thoughts and feelings
- to tell your thoughts and feelings  
*When I hug my grandmother, I express my love and respect for her.*  
*When we have a circle discussion, I express my ideas.*

### First Nation

- a community of people who have First Nations ancestry  
*The Selkirk First Nation is in Pelly Crossing.*

### First Nations

- The first people to occupy and live on the lands of Canada  
*There were First Nations in the Yukon over 30,000 years ago.*

### First Nations citizen

- a person who belongs to a First Nation  
*All First Nations citizens have land their family uses and takes cares of.*



Generation

- all the people who were born around the same time  
*My parents’ generation loved Rock and Roll music. My generation loves Hip – hop.*

Governance

- the systems and rules that organize a nation of people
- the way leaders take care of a nation of people  
*Each Yukon First Nation has a governance system for the people of their nation.*

Governance system

- the way leaders organize a nation of people  
*Most First Nations have similar governance systems.*

Government

- the leadership of a community, province, or nation  
*Chief and council lead First Nation governments.*

Harmony

- when it is pleasant for everyone
- when everyone is working together  
*Please be kind to one another. Then we will have harmony in our classroom.*

Harvest

- gather plants and berries for food  
*After we harvest the blueberries my mother is going to make jam.*

Hereditary

- coming from your ancestors  
*This is our clan’s hereditary crest. All our ancestors used it.*

History

- everything that has happened in the past  
*I can learn about the history of Burwash from my Grandfather.*

Inland

- the part of the land that is away from the coast  
*The hunting party traveled inland to search for moose.*

Inland Tlingit

- Tlingit people that live in the Yukon whose ancestors came from the coast  
*My Grandmother lives in Carcross. She is an Inland Tlingit*

Justice system

- a way to help everyone obey the laws of a nation  
*Circle sentencing is part of the Yukon justice system.*

Laws

- a set of rules that explain how to live in peace and harmony.  
*Yukon First Nations have many laws that they live by.*

Medicine men

- wise spiritual leaders and healers  
*Medicine men know which plants will help keep us healthy.*

Nation

- a group of people with their own government  
*Canada is very big. It is one of the largest nations in the world.*

Negotiate

- to bargain with another person
- to come to an agreement with another person  
*I negotiated a large beaver pelt and a pocket watch for a wrist watch.*

Peter Moses

- the last traditional leader in Old Crow. (1936 – 1954)  
*Peter Moses was the leader of the Gwitchin from 1936 until 1954.*

Point of view

- an opinion  
*From my point of view, I think that was an excellent story.*

Potlatch

- a clan feast or celebration to honour a person or to signify an important event  
*I am going to a potlatch to remember my grandmother who passed on last year.*

Proud

- feeling pleased about accomplishments
- has self respect
- feels worthy  
*I am proud of my beadwork. I work to do the best I can.*

Prosper

- to live well
- to be successful
- to thrive  
*First Nations prospered on the land long ago. They found everything they needed for food, clothing and shelter on the land.*

Provider

- someone who brings the things a family needs  
*My father is a good provider for our family. He hunts for us every fall.*

Resources

- things that can be used  
*The land provides us with many resources.*

Respect

- to take very good care of
- to show responsibility towards  
*We respect our Elders because they teach us many important things.*

Responsibilities

- things you are expected to do  
*All children have responsibilities to their family. They can help many ways.*

Seasonal rounds

- seasonal travel to hunt, trap, fish and gather food.  
*Seasonal rounds were one way Yukon First Nations looked after the land. People took just what they needed from each place they traveled to. They didn’t use everything up.*

Scrapers

- a tool used for cleaning flesh from a hide and for tanning  
There were many different kinds of scrapers used for different things  
*People made scrapers from bones and stones.*

Severe

- strict
- harsh  
*Being banned from the community is a severe punishment.*

Shelter

- a place that gives protection from weather or danger  
*We had to find shelter before the weather turned very cold.*

Sinew

- tendon
- tough tissue attached to a muscle
- made from the backstrap of the moose or caribou  
*My Grandmother uses sinew when she is sewing moccasins.*

Surplus

- an extra amount.  
*We had surplus meat from our hunt so we gave some to our neighbours.*

System

- a group of related things or parts that work together as a whole  
*The Yukon has a large school system.*

Technology

- knowledge and methods of tools, transportation, communication and navigation  
*Modern technology has changed the way we live today.*

Tradition

- following beliefs and customs that are handed down
- the handing down of beliefs and customs from parents to children  
*In some First Nation communities it is tradition to serve Elders first at a feast. Tradition is very important to Yukon First Nations.*

Traditional laws

- laws from long ago
- laws a group of people follow because it is their custom  
*Yukon First Nations traditional laws teach you to treat one another with respect.*

Traditions

- customs, beliefs and ways of doing things  
*My grandparents teach me many of our family traditions. I want to pass these traditions on to my children.*

Treacherous

- full of danger or risk
- not to be trusted  
*Don’t ski there. That ski trail is very treacherous.*

Unique

- the only one of its kind
- nothing else is the same  
*My aunt made this blanket. It is unique.*

Values

- beliefs
- way of life
- ways of thinking about behaviour  
*We learn our values from our parents and grandparents.*

Version

- a description from one point of view  
*In my grandmother’s version of that story the girl turns into a bear.*

Wise

- having an understanding of what is true or good  
*Our Elders are very wise because they have lived a long time.*

Wisdom

- knowledge
- learning
- a good understanding of what is true and good  
*There is much wisdom in her stories.*

Wolf Clan

- one of the two main Yukon First Nation clans  
*The Wolf clan is holding a potlatch for an elder who has passed on.*





CHAMPAGNE and AISHIHIK First Nations



CARCROSS/TAGISH  
FIRST NATION



TESLIN TLINGIT COUNCIL

Yukon  
Education