

# Promoting an Indigenous presence in the university in a sincere effort for reconciliation



## GUIDE TO INVITING INDIGENOUS ELDERS AND KNOWLEDGE KEEPERS AND MAKING LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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First of all, we'd like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the 13 Elders and Knowledge Keepers who honoured us by sharing their words, experiences and wisdom with us. Those conversations were invaluable. We hope that, in return, this guide will do justice to their words. Tiawenhk inenh!

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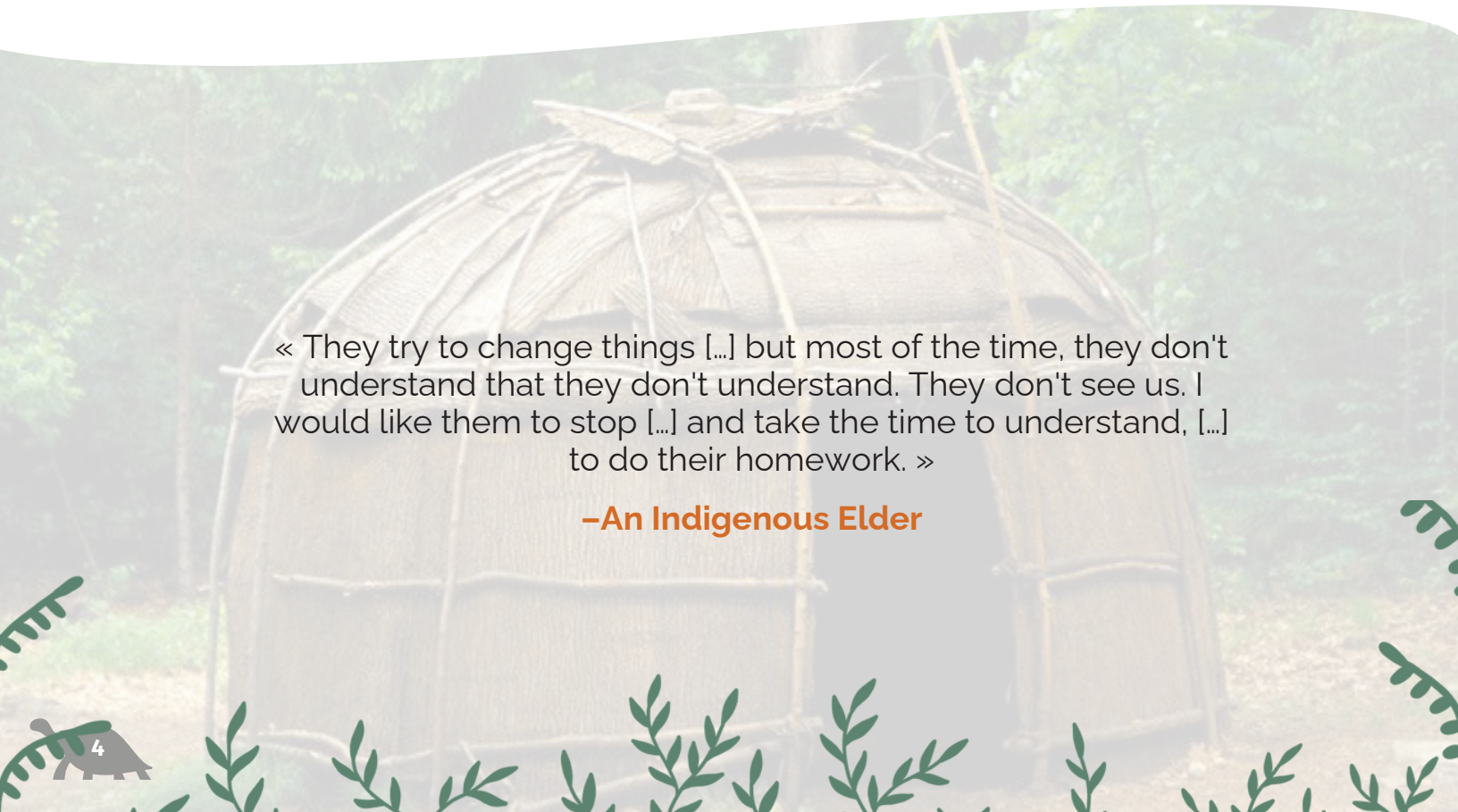
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# INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report tabled in 2015, more and more institutions such as universities are making land acknowledgements and inviting Elders and Knowledge Keepers to their events. But while welcoming and honouring Indigenous heritage and the presence of Indigenous people has become the norm in academia, true reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds requires more than reciting a land acknowledgement or being able to say that an event was officially introduced by an Elder. It takes more than ticking the boxes. As many of the Elders consulted for this project pointed out, the sincerity of the process is a decisive factor. This requires knowledge and awareness of what it means to engage in these decolonization and reconciliation efforts.



« They try to change things [...] but most of the time, they don't understand that they don't understand. They don't see us. I would like them to stop [...] and take the time to understand, [...] to do their homework. »

**–An Indigenous Elder**

**What does the word  
«Reconciliation» mean and how  
should it be used?**

«Reconciliation» is a tricky word to many Indigenous people, for the terrible harm done by colonialism continues to this day. Apologies and an expressed desire for «Reconciliation» are not enough to heal such deep wounds.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission defined reconciliation as **«an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships.»** It involves **“repairing damaged trust and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change.»** (Final Report, Vol. VI, 2015, p. 16).

**An ally must therefore speak of «reconciliation» with humility, awareness of the length of the road that must be travelled, and deference to Indigenous people, leaving them to judge for themselves whether progress is being made towards Peace.**

The purpose of this guide is to provide a brief introduction to the basic organizational, ethical and legal considerations that must be taken into account when making land acknowledgements and hosting Indigenous Elders at institutions of higher learning. The principles it outlines can also be applied to practices at other institutions in Quebec and the rest of Canada. The process was developed in collaboration with the Montreal Indigenous Community Network, a partner of CRI-JaDE. It was made possible by the generosity of Elders and Knowledge Keepers from various Quebec nations who shared their experiences with us. We analyzed the state of knowledge and best practices at universities in Quebec and across Canada, and we engaged in an in-depth reflection, informed by the knowledge that was shared with us and our survey of the literature and the case law on the essential ethical / legal issues and considerations that must be taken into account in activities aimed at reconciliation with First Peoples. (The term «First Peoples» covers First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada but should not be interpreted as essentializing or dismissing the specific characteristics of each nation and community.)

A land acknowledgement is a protocol of Indigenous origin that was traditionally used to express gratitude to the people living on land being visited, and to honour the First Peoples who lived there or were its stewards. It honours each person’s unique role and relationship with the Earth. A land acknowledgement is not trivial; some of the Elders we consulted noted a danger of loss of meaning, of empty words, when a land acknowledgement is recited at the start of an event.

## How to be an ally

It can take time to become an ally. Follow this simple, accessible educational pathway, designed *by* and *for* Indigenous people:

### The Decolonial Toolbox

The Decolonial Toolbox was produced through a partnership between Concordia University's Office of Community Engagement, Mikana and the Montreal Indigenous Community Network.

Access the Toolbox here: [https://www.mikana.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FR\\_Parcours\\_educatif\\_final\\_juin2022\\_V2.pdf](https://www.mikana.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FR_Parcours_educatif_final_juin2022_V2.pdf)

Similarly, the voices of Indigenous Elders should be welcomed and encouraged in academic settings. However, when the context in which the Elder is speaking is not properly understood, or the host institution is not adequately prepared to welcome the Elder's wisdom, culture or spirituality, ethical and legal issues can arise. There is even a risk of eroding already fragile relationships with the communities or leaving the Elder with a negative experience.

With more and more people engaging in these kinds of activities, it is important to provide guidance based on the values and the socio-historical context that should underpin and inform the process. If inviting Elders and making land acknowledgements are to achieve the goal of bringing communities together in peace and mutual understanding, it must be realized that colonialism is not a thing of the past.

The University is a colonial institution that not only occupies unceded territory but is also founded on an organizational culture and a way of understanding the world that differs from that of indigenous cultures. Each of us is therefore called upon to become aware of the history that led to our occupation of this land and of the culture or cultures that have shaped our way of seeing the world.

Doing a land acknowledgement or inviting Elders or Knowledge Keepers to a university setting can play a significant role—positive or negative—in the institution's decolonization and reconciliation processes. It is therefore essential to lay the necessary foundations for understanding, reflecting on and guiding these *activities carried out as part of a process of reconciliation*. In this guide, we will often refer to «activities carried out as part of a process of reconciliation» in general, as the principles discussed here are broadly applicable to a wider range of activities aimed at reconciliation in an academic setting. So, whatever the activity may be, anyone embarking on a process of reconciliation should bear these principles in mind to ensure that they are acting in a respectful manner. It is through activities aimed at reconciliation that the institution can contribute to promoting **cultural safety**:

«The idea is to create secure and welcoming settings for the Indigenous population with respect to health, education, justice, environment and employability. It encourages the deployment of services, practices and initiatives consistent with ways of providing assistance in preventive and curative care, social transactions and understanding of the Indigenous world, ways **grounded in Indigenous value and knowledge systems**. This movement also reflects a **collective and community desire for social transformation and innovation on the part of the Indigenous peoples**, since it is aimed at reducing inequalities, is based on the cornerstone principle of social justice, and above all, is part of a clear and legitimate affirmation of identity politics and Indigenous governance.» (Professor Carole Lévesque, cited in Viens Commission Final Report, p. 368)

This guide is therefore intended to support the development of practices involving land acknowledgement and invitations to Elders in order to make the institution **more just, welcoming and culturally safe**. It outlines the relevant historical context as well as the fundamental principles in which the essential, shared elements of the worldview of Indigenous communities are grounded. It goes on to consider the role of persons initiating reconciliation activities in achieving their objectives and examines the types of participation that are possible and desirable. Finally, this guide presents principles and practical tools for carrying out these activities.

In 2019, the Commission of Inquiry into relations between Indigenous people and certain public services in Quebec (Viens Commission) and its commissioner Jacques Viens once again highlighted the existence of **systemic discrimination within a number of public institutions** and the need for concrete changes to ensure the **cultural safety** of Indigenous people.

Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Beadwork





# METHODOLOGY

In March 2023, 13 Elders and Knowledge Keepers were interviewed individually and collectively to learn more about their practices and beliefs, their experiences with reconciliation-related activities, and to better understand the conditions required to invite Elders to institutional settings. These people come from a number of First Nations and live in Tiohtià:ke and elsewhere in Quebec. Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow us to gather the views of northern Indigenous communities.

Most of the participants did not wish to be named individually in the Guide, and the group deferred to the consensus. We would therefore like to express our heartfelt thanks for their *collective* invaluable contribution to the development of the guide's contents.

In addition, a review of Elder hosting and land acknowledgement protocols at all Quebec universities and several universities elsewhere in Canada was carried out (see Appendix 1 for summary table). The relevant literature and case law was also reviewed to identify the legal and constitutional parameters governing a number of issues that could arise during reconciliation activities.

## What's the difference between an Elder and a Knowledge Keeper?

Knowledge Keepers are recognized within their communities as possessing significant knowledge and a deep understanding of the culture, rituals and customs. As such, they are empowered to share this knowledge. Elders, whatever their age, are recognized for their wisdom and their ability to advise their community on issues and problems, in accordance with rites and customs.

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Indigenous policy were to eliminate Indigenous governments; ignore Indigenous rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Indigenous peoples to cease to exist<sup>1</sup>. Among other things, residential schools were established to break children's link to their culture and identity.<sup>2</sup> In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, then deputy minister of the Department of Indian Affairs (now the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs), stated: «Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada who has not been absorbed into the body politic.»<sup>3</sup>

Passed in 1876, in the wake of other pieces of legislation with the same genocidal objective, the *Indian Act*<sup>4</sup> was designed to force First Nations peoples to abandon their cultures and assimilate into the Euro-Canadian way of life. To achieve this, multiple strategies were deployed: for example, the reserve system was established, Indigenous ceremonies and languages were prohibited, Indigenous people were forbidden to pursue higher education and become lawyers or doctors (they risked losing their status if they attempted to do so), and they were forced to change their names to «European» ones. This system was reinforced by often-severe punishments.<sup>5</sup> The Act has been amended several times in recent years but remains in force today.

Released in 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report documented the experiences of some 150,000 students who attended residential schools in Canada. It shed light on the facts of Canada's cultural genocide:

«States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the matter at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next.» (Final Report, p. 1)

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1 Government of Canada, *Residential Schools in Canada: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 1.

2 *Ibid.*, p.2.

3 *Ibid.*, p.3.

4 *Loi sur les Indiens*, L.R.C. (1985), c. 1-5.

5 Joseph, B (2018), *21 things you may not know about the Indian Act*, Indigenous Relation Press.

In recent years, searches have uncovered hundreds of unmarked graves near former residential schools in locations such as Kamloops in British Columbia, Grayson in southern Saskatchewan (Marieval Residential School) and Kamsack, also in Saskatchewan.

The search for the truth continues, and many events are helping to raise collective awareness, from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls to the tragic death of Joyce Echaquan, a victim of systemic discrimination in the Quebec healthcare system.

Over the last few years, land acknowledgements have become commonplace as acts of respect at official meetings, conferences and public events<sup>6</sup>. The purpose is to acknowledge the past and present existence of First Peoples on the land where we stand and to pay tribute both to First Peoples and to the land itself<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers are increasingly present within colonial institutions, in recognition of the fact that they are respected and play a critical role in their communities. As living links with the past, they make a crucial contribution to cultural continuity. They provide advice and teachings based on their own experience and knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

#### Did you know?

While the **Indian Act** is still in force today, some sections have been amended in the relatively recent past.

For example, until the early 1960s, it was forbidden for Indigenous people to speak their language. Those who failed to comply could be subject to punishments ranging from mouth-washing with soap to tongue piercing with sewing needles. (Joseph, B. (2018), *21 things you may not know about the Indian Act*, Indigenous Relation Press, p. 65)



<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.caut.ca/content/guide-acknowledging-first-peoples-traditional-territory>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/fr/article/indigenous-elders-in-canada>

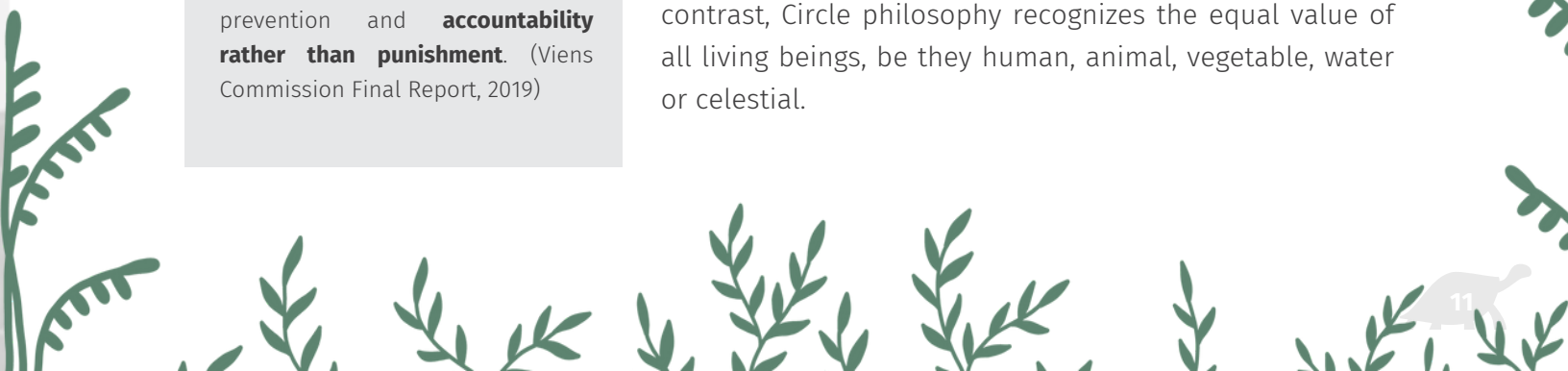
# UNDERSTANDING INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS AND KEY PRINCIPLES IN ORDER TO ENGAGE CONSCIENTIOUSLY AND RESPECTFULLY



## Did you know?

Indigenous circular thinking is shaping contemporary ways of thinking about **governance** and the way many issues are addressed in institutional contexts. **Education** will be understood as an **egalitarian participatory process** emphasizing sharing and reciprocity. **Health** will be **conceived within a more holistic vision of overall well-being**, focusing on preventing rather than merely treating ailments and illnesses. The **law, inseparable from justice**, will once again focus on prevention and **accountability rather than punishment**. (Viens Commission Final Report, 2019)

The way we approach the world, the way we live in it, and the way we conceive of our relationships with all beings around us are deeply conditioned and rooted in our vision of this world. While each nation and community has its own rich history and culture, there are certain commonalities that significantly distinguish global Indigenous thinking from **Western thought**. As Wendat historian and philosopher Georges Sioui explains, everything done by an Indigenous person or community is thought of in a Circle. In contrast, Western thought is overwhelmingly linear and based on the assumption that «progress» will prevail over traditional ways of seeing the world, which is now understood through the lens of a hierarchy of power. Western thinking is also largely based on liberalism, which emphasizes individual rights and freedoms and property (including appropriation). By contrast, Circle philosophy recognizes the equal value of all living beings, be they human, animal, vegetable, water or celestial.



This is why women have never been subordinate to men in Indigenous thought and why it is impossible to appropriate land in order to dispose of it; instead, people have a responsibility to the land (Sioui, *Les Hurons-Wendat : L'héritage du Cercle*).

Mother Earth, or the land, is considered an integral part of identity and plays a spiritual and symbolic role. It is not just about having a physical link to the land; Mother Earth teaches us how to *be*, exist and *relate* to the world.

The way in which the importance of the land manifests itself will vary according to community, age and whether people grew up in urban areas or on traditional lands far from the big cities. That said, the process of decolonization and the collective awareness of the disconnection from the land caused by colonialism are generating an enthusiastic return to the land and the culture among the younger generation. It would be wrong to think that urban youth have no need of the land or that the process of colonization and acculturation is irreversible. Indeed, a return to the land and the community close to it is at the heart of new family and criminal justice policies aimed at *healing* the destructive effects of policies that tear people away from the land and their communities.

In short, a sincere process of reconciliation should be thought through holistically, according the philosophy of the Circle, with an awareness of the fundamental distinctions between the colonial worldview imposed on First Peoples and their own way of being in the world. Firstly, as a precursor to reconciliation, *decolonization* involves identifying colonial ways of thinking and deconstructing them to make way for more egalitarian and respectful relationships with Indigenous people. Secondly, moving toward *reconciliation* means acting on this awareness and transforming institutional processes before giving equal place to Indigenous worldviews and cultures.



## The importance of individual and social positioning in the reconciliation process

Each person's approach to reconciliation will be different. For example, a non-Indigenous person would probably not consider a land acknowledgement in the same way as an Indigenous person would, since their worldview and relationship with the First Peoples will be different and will condition their relationship with reconciliation. Thus, engaging in an activity aimed at reconciliation in a sincere manner requires the individual to reflect on their positionality and on their own relationship with the First Peoples.

Because of their socially assigned personal characteristics, people always find themselves in a relative position of power/privilege or marginalization/oppression, and sometimes in both at the same time.

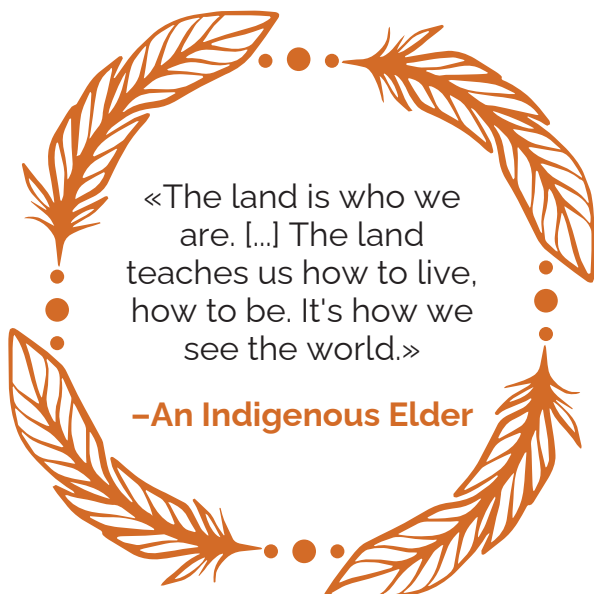
While characteristics such as age, sex or gender identity may seem personal at first glance, they can embed the person within a power relationship. Think of the relationship between a child and an adult; by virtue of their age, the adult has power over the child.

### Did you know?

**Positionality** refers to a person's values and beliefs as well as their socially assigned personal characteristics (age, race, Indigenous identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, gender identity, etc.).

**Intersectionality** recognizes the interweaving and interaction of social positions and the way in which this interweaving can give a person a position of relative privilege or oppression.

So traits such as age, race, sexual orientation, Indigenous identity and disability that appear to be individual characteristics are also social, since they position individuals in different social groups. Not everyone has the same experience of colonial history. Reflecting on one's positionality and taking intersectionality into account helps us understand how socially assigned personal characteristics can interact and affect the way we understand reconciliation and how the other person understands our actions.



“To me, reading and rereading a specific text has no value. A person should go through a process before making a land acknowledgement. The person also needs to think about how an Indigenous person in the room might experience the acknowledgement. You have to think about why you're making the statement and why you're thanking the land.”

- An Indigenous Elder

Reflecting on positionality helps us understand why a land acknowledgement by an Indigenous person may be different from one by a non-Indigenous person who has never had any real contact with First Nations people. The concept of intersectionality also helps us understand why an Indigenous person, even an Elder, who has been separated from their culture and community may have a very different perspective on a land acknowledgement than a younger person from the same nation who grew up in his or her community. Moreover, positionality comprises multiple dimensions that affect both the perspective a person may have on an activity aimed at reconciliation and the perception of that activity by the Other. Being aware of this before engaging in any reconciliation activity can help invest it with more meaning and make it more meaningful for participants.

Art by Lynn Taylor (Haudenosaunee/Iroquois Artist)



## **A THOUGHT EXERCISE**

### **Determining your personal and social position**

Before engaging in an activity as part of a reconciliation process, such as (i) a land acknowledgement activity, including what seems to you to be a «simple reading» of such an acknowledgement, or (ii) inviting Elders, Knowledge Keepers, or other Indigenous people, ask yourself:

(1) What is my position (social, identity, cultural, family, hereditary, etc.) in relation to First Peoples? Am I an Indigenous person myself? An ally? How does my social positioning affect my perspective on the activity I'm undertaking? Are there aspects of my life experience that can help me understand Indigenous realities?

(2) Given this specific positioning, what is my responsibility in terms of reconciliation? Furthermore, how can I sincerely commit to this process, and what are the limits to this commitment? What can I do to have a positive impact on the process of reconciliation?

These questions enable us to engage in a process of reflection to consider how our positionality may affect the way our actions are understood and interpreted by others, whether they belong to the same social group or not.

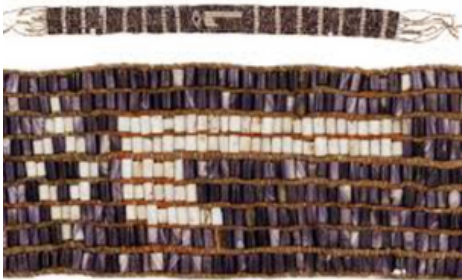
There is no right or wrong answer. What's important is to ask yourself about your positionality and its possible impact on the activity and on the people involved in it. Reflexivity is known to be an effective way of mitigating the possible negative impacts of social positioning on a person and their relationship with the Other.



## Toward a successful reconciliation process: the importance of Indigenous participation

Since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report (2015), many institutions such as the Université de Montréal and its components have developed a variety of strategies to set a reconciliation process in motion. These activities represent a first, small step in the direction of reconciliatory relationships. However, developing respectful relationships and trust requires the establishment of certain minimum conditions. The participation and engagement of individuals and communities are essential to developing such respectful relationships.

Indigenous involvement and participation are vital to any reconciliation process. To help understand the various possible forms of participation and their impact on reconciliation processes, we will examine, in the next few paragraphs, some examples and principles inspired by Arnstein (1969) and her Ladder of Participation. We have chosen to illustrate the different levels (or rungs) of participation with the wampum necklace. For some nations, such as the Onondaga and Haudenosaunee, wampum necklaces represented political or economic agreements between Indigenous nations or between Indigenous and European nations.



They symbolize respect for each nation that is entering into the cooperation agreement with the Other (Lainey, 2004). This vision of collaboration can prove valuable in a reconciliation process aimed at increasing the active participation of First Peoples in processes that concern them.

### The importance of Indigenous participation and involvement in a reconciliation activity

Consultations with Elders in various communities have shown that when they go to an educational or governmental institution to take part in an activity of any kind, they expect to be able to participate fully.

They also shared with us situations where they had gone to participate in an activity and felt their contribution was unappreciated. Some Elders and Knowledge Keepers described experiences that had a negative impact on them.

Imagine a ladder of participation in which the first row of the wampum represents the lowest rung on the ladder. This type of participation is akin to manipulation, involving an individual or a group/community in what can be considered an illusory form of participation. An example would be someone setting up an Indigenous committee to discuss issues and then not taking its input into account in the final report. This kind of participation is a form of tokenism and is



to be avoided: it is highly detrimental to the institution's reconciliation efforts and the development of a bond of trust with First Peoples. The second row (or second rung) of participation is, in a sense, a first step toward Indigenous participation. Indigenous people are consulted for certain activities, and those in charge of the project try as best they can to take their needs into account, but only to the

extent that the needs identified by the Indigenous people meet those of the institution. The participation of Indigenous people is greater than on the lowest rung but is still inadequate. At this level of participation, Indigenous people may be invited to take part in a consultation and be paid, but their needs and ideas are taken into account only to a very limited extent in the final document. There may be a number of reasons for not addressing their needs, ranging from lack of time to institutional constraints, which are never explained to the participants. Power remains in the hands of those who invited Indigenous people to the consultation. This kind of participation is also a form of tokenism, albeit less obvious than the first. It should be avoided.



The third rung on the participation ladder represents an effort to redistribute power. Instead of deciding what should be important to Indigenous stakeholders, there is a recognition of the importance of taking their perspectives into account. One or more Indigenous persons are invited to share their thoughts and contribute to the activity.

However, the entire process remains opaque and the project leaders don't make sure that Indigenous stakeholders understand the process as a whole. Important decisions remain in the hands of the people running the project. After the activity, no further contact is made with those consulted. Recommendations are drafted without the stakeholders, and while their needs and thoughts are incorporated, those drafting the recommendations do not check whether they have correctly interpreted the stakeholders' ideas. At this level of participation, Indigenous people are sometimes in leadership roles, but the structures of the institution do not allow for wider consultation or the adaptation of structures to improve partnering processes with First Peoples. The information needed for decision-making is not passed on, and Indigenous people, although invited and paid for their work, are unable to contribute fully.



The fourth rung on the participation ladder involves a redistribution of power between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people. The involvement of Indigenous people is considered from the outset, and decisions are made with Indigenous upstream. For example, an Indigenous person occupies a leadership role that is flexible and allows them to consult other Indigenous people to ensure that the opinions expressed are shared and accurately represent the voice of the community. Indigenous people involved in the process understand it and are compensated for their participation. The steps in the reimbursement process are clearly explained and sufficient funds are available to compensate stakeholders for their work, travel, etc.

For example, an Elder may be invited to perform the opening ceremony at an event. The person in charge of the event explains the subject of the meeting to them in advance, gives them ample time to ask questions, and gives them an idea of the total duration of the event so as to plan a reasonable length of time for the opening ceremony. In this way, the Elder can determine the parameters of the ceremony himself or herself.

In short, a reconciliation activity should take the participation of Indigenous people into consideration and reflect on ways in which it can be maximized. It is impossible to truly engage in a process of reconciliation, or the «ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships» (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, p. 16), if the people affected by the activity, i.e. Indigenous people, are not fully included in the process.

## Approaches unsuited to indigenous values and realities can produce microaggressions

Understanding Indigenous worldviews, determining one's personal and social positioning, and sincerely engaging in processes of participation and engagement are necessary if land acknowledgements and the presence of Elders are to be genuine steps toward reconciliation. If the approach is not conscious and sincere, this may not only neutralize efforts to increase Indigenous presence at the University but actually push them away, particularly if they are hurt by microaggressions. Mutual trust and respect are as crucial as they are fragile when it comes to building relationships with people and communities who have lived through centuries of colonization and oppression. A single microaggression—even if done «in good faith» —can be enough to undermine the bond between a colonial institution such as the University and members of the First Peoples.<sup>9</sup>

While «microattacks» are conscious, intentional acts that are easier to identify, «microinsults» are often unconscious. Above all, a lack of awareness of experiences that are different from our own and of the specific dynamics of discrimination and racism can lead to «microinvalidations» or comments or behaviours that obscure the experience of people who have been discriminated against (Sue, 2007; UQO).

With its legacy of historical injustices, Canada is fertile ground for microaggressions. For example, microaggressions and gender stereotypes are recurrent in certain male-dominated settings (Trauth et al., 2016; Doutre, 2012), leading in particular to disparities in educational outcomes (Bouchard et al., 1997). On a day-to-day basis, people who experience microaggressions may feel that they do not belong or that they are on hostile and unsafe ground (Houshmand et al., 2019).

### What is a microaggression?

Microaggressions are discriminatory acts that occur in a systemic context of unequal power relations. They are often triggered by prejudice, which is in most cases unconscious, and are liable to wound (McCrindle & Phirangee, 2021; Sue et al., 2007). They can take the form of body language, gestures, comments, remarks and other hurtful acts.

Regardless of the intention behind the person's action, a word or gesture can be experienced as a microaggression. (McCrindle & Phirangee, 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Whether a microaggression is deliberate, conscious or done "in good faith" is irrelevant to determining whether it is discriminatory (S.C.C., Fraser).

Indigenous people are victims of many microaggressions, particularly in academic and institutional contexts. For example, Indigenous university students are at risk of spontaneous mockery, cultural appropriation, caricatures and categorization of their identity, and gross misrepresentation of Indigenous issues (Clair & Winter, 2016). Indigenous people also have to deal with presumptions of under-qualification (Anderson DeCoteau, 2017), being mistaken for another race (Desjarlais, 2020) and homogenization of Indigenous cultures, invalidating their own culture. These microaggressions contribute to the systemic discrimination experienced particularly in legal environments, job searches and hospital and healthcare settings (Viens Commission 2019).

# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IN INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS IN TIOHTIÀ:KE/MONTREAL

## What is a land acknowledgement and why do it?

A land acknowledgement is a traditional Indigenous practice for showing respect and **giving thanks** to a nation that welcomes one as a visitor. The land acknowledgements made today by institutions such as universities involve **recognizing the pre-existing sovereignty of First Peoples and the presence of certain Indigenous nations, or their role as stewards of the land, particularly on the land occupied by the University**, a colonial institution. They are carried out in a spirit of **reconciliation**.

A land acknowledgement serves to **convey respect and to recognize the presence, rights and identity** of Indigenous people, communities and nations and their **spiritual bond** to the land. The practice **raises awareness** of the fact that the University, as a colonial institution, occupies a place that has a longer and richer history than that of the University itself (Whitmore & Carlson, 2022).

#### Food for thought

Thinking back to your social positioning, how could you make a land acknowledgement that conveys the necessary respect? Should your acknowledgement be the same if there are Indigenous people in the room?

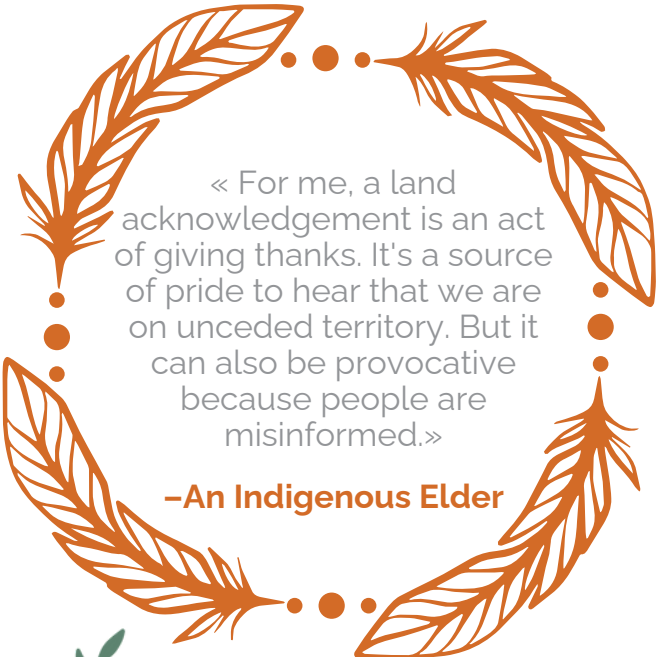
## Acknowledgement, affirmation, prayer and giving thanks: Who says what?

🔪 **Land acknowledgement:** Although the action and relational practice in which land acknowledgements originate are traditional for Indigenous nations, the contemporary concept of «land acknowledgement» is based on the encounter between this custom and the Western worldview captured in colonial languages. In French, it is called a «reconnaissance territoriale.» The verb «reconnaître» is transitive and means «to accept something, to hold it as true or real, to admit it, to acknowledge it», «to admit someone in such and such a capacity» or «to consider a state, an institution, as legitimate.»<sup>10</sup> In English, «to acknowledge» means «to recognize the rights, authority, or status of,» «to recognize as genuine or valid,» and «to express gratitude or obligation for.»<sup>11</sup>

In the context of encounters between different nations and respect for ancestral lands and for the role of the stewards of the land, acknowledging can therefore refer as much to the land itself as to the people and nations who play a role and have specific rights with regard to the land.

<sup>10</sup> « Reconnaître » in *Dictionnaire Larousse* (online: <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/reconna%C3%A9tre/67118>)

<sup>11</sup> « Acknowledge » in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acknowledge>)



« For me, a land acknowledgement is an act of giving thanks. It's a source of pride to hear that we are on unceded territory. But it can also be provocative because people are misinformed.»

—An Indigenous Elder

A land acknowledgement can thus be made by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, depending on the context. Elders explain that it is customary to «acknowledge» that they have been invited onto the ancestral lands of another Indigenous nation and to thank them for their hospitality. However, an Indigenous person cannot be asked to «acknowledge» that they are on their own ancestral lands. In a university or other institutional context, it is up to non-Indigenous people to make a land acknowledgement.

✦ **The land and «prayer» or «giving thanks»:** For the Elder, a land acknowledgement is often referred to as «prayer» or «giving thanks.» The core objective is the same: to pay tribute to the land. This is why these three terms are sometimes used indiscriminately by Indigenous people. However, unlike a land acknowledgement, a prayer or giving thanks can only be uttered by an Indigenous person, since it has a significant cultural and spiritual dimension. It is also important to understand that, although the term «prayer» is sometimes used, it is not a religious act or gesture. The Creator is thanked but this is not a god. Rather, this is an act of giving thanks to Mother Earth.

✦ **Land affirmation:** A land affirmation is more likely to be made by Indigenous people with respect to the land with which they themselves have a physical, spiritual, identity-based or legal bond. The aim is to assert, declare or make manifest this bond or status through words or gestures; the mere presence of Indigenous people can sometimes act as an act of affirmation.

✦ **Thanks:** A land acknowledgement is itself a way of thanking a nation for welcoming others to its ancestral lands, for example, and it should be made in a spirit of reconciliation. That said, it is also common for Elders or other Indigenous people to want to thank the Creator and all the beings with whom they interact.

## Land acknowledgement issues in Tiohtià:ke/ Montréal

Land acknowledgement in Tiohtià:ke / Montréal poses a number of unique challenges because of its diverse Indigenous social fabric and history.

## About email signatures

It is becoming increasingly common to include land acknowledgements in email signatures. As with any land acknowledgements, it is important to think about the reasons for adding it.

*«An email signature that acknowledges unceded territory just for the sake of it is not the right way to go about it. The signature can serve to send a signal that Indigenous people will be well received. So if the sender puts a land acknowledgement in their email signature, the sender and their community must at least be prepared to welcome an Indigenous person. Otherwise, it could be damaging to reconciliation.»*

– An Indigenous Elder

True to its traditional Kanien'kehá name, which means «where boats and rivers meet», the unceded territory of Tiohtià:ke is inhabited today by a mosaic of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people from elsewhere in Canada.

Together, families, students, artists, Knowledge Keepers, Elders and all members of Indigenous communities have a wide range of languages, cultures and experiences. The Indigenous languages spoken in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal include Inuktitut, Cree, Kanien'kehá, Northeast Cree, Southeast Cree, Innu, Mi'kmaq, Algonquin, Atikamekw and many others.<sup>12</sup>

Today, there are 46,000 Indigenous people living in the greater Tiohtià:ke metropolitan area, representing 1% of the region's population and 22% of Quebec's total Indigenous population (Belzile, 2022). Often living far from their communities of origin, their ancestral lands and nature, Indigenous people have been uprooted, and this can have a significant impact on their identity and spirituality. Urban Indigenous people tend to connect and group together to form their own Indigenous community. This is the goal, for example, of the Montreal Indigenous Community Network.

This modern social fabric overlays a rich history: before colonization, many peoples lived on or passed through the **unceded territory** of Tiohtià:ke. It is important to honour this history, to understand the **multidimensional importance of the land** to Indigenous people, and to recognize the **diverse bonds between the land and Indigenous nations**, some of whom are **stewards of the land** while others have **more transient and symbolic ties** to it.

<sup>12</sup> «Tiohtià:ke: The island of (re)concili-Action!», Montreal Indigenous Community Network [On line: <https://reseauimtnetwork.com/en/tiohtiake/our-community/>] (consulted on April 27, 2023)



## 🦋 Understanding the multilayered significance of the land

As we have seen, in the Indigenous worldview, land is not merely a geographical concept; it is a multidimensional concept that is meaningful in terms of identity and possesses a spiritual, symbolic and relational significance that transcends the tangible. It is important to grasp the special significance of the history of the land, including the relations between colonizers and Indigenous people, as well as the treaties between them (Wilkes et al., 2017; Leaflet on land acknowledgment in the Quebec university context, 2021). Accordingly, a land acknowledgement in the spirit of reconciliation is not a statement based on a narrow concept of land *possession, ownership or occupation*.

A land acknowledgement is not a simple declaration that can be made without **awareness of its meaning**. Both the *content and manner of communication* of the message must be informed by the multilayered nature of the relationship to the land. A person who is preparing to make a land acknowledgement must focus on a sense of allyship, not possession; they must recognize that Indigenous peoples are the stewards of the land, and learn about the history and peoples of the land in question (Whitmore & Carlson, 2022).

## 🦋 Tiohtià:ke, territory that is unceded and cannot be ceded

Some people mistakenly believe there is an argument about whether institutions on Tiohtià:ke territory are in fact located on *unceded* territory of the First Peoples. A case in point is the controversy surrounding the land acknowledgement of the Montreal Canadiens, which recognized Tiohtià:ke as unceded territory of which the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) people are the stewards. The majority view was that this political recognition was an «error» that belies historical facts (Noakes, 2021).

This «debate» among some historians can be situated within the framework of the colonial, Eurocentric worldview. While it is widely accepted that Jacques Cartier was welcomed by the Indigenous inhabitants of Hochelaga in 1535 while exploring Turtle Island, some claim that Champlain and Maisonneuve «found» an «uninhabited» land, in 1603 and 1642 respectively. That contention is contradicted by several historical facts. For one thing, nomadic peoples also frequented the territory. For another, the temporary absence of inhabitants in some places was due to the ravages of diseases transmitted by the colonizers themselves (Trigger, 1990).

But the basic reason why it cannot be said that the territory was «ceded» is that Indigenous peoples do not share the Western worldview in which land is a *possession*, an *appropriable* object. In the Indigenous worldview, *inhabiting* land does not mean *owning* it but rather maintaining a *connected relationship* with it and living in harmony with all the beings that live on it. For the communities that had a *relationship* with the Tiohtià:ke land before the settlers arrived, the territory is clearly «unceded» (Noakes, 2021; Fennario, 2018).

### 🔪 Different forms of Indigenous presence in Tiohtià:ke: stewards of the land, transient attachment to the land, symbolic attachment to the land

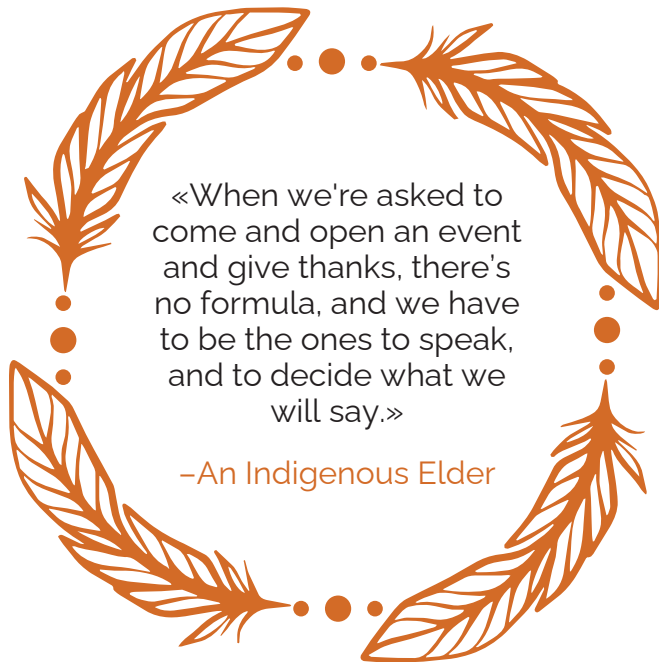
While Tiohtià:ke/Montreal was a gathering place for many peoples and nations, the Haudenosaunee, and more specifically the Kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk) nation, are generally recognized as the stewards of the land. Some historians maintain that the Anishinaabe community of the Outaouais also had a more significant presence here. In any case, the debate over whether Montreal was a stopping-off point or a dwelling place for these nations is a question for the nations themselves; the answer cannot be found in a history that is, unfortunately, too tainted by the vision of European colonizers and erases that of the First Peoples (Ledoux, 2021).

It is the Kanien'kehà:ka nation that had the strongest presence on the land and has for generations been protecting and caring for the lands and waters that Tiohtià:ke enjoys today (Concordia University, 2017). This is reinforced by the proximity of Kahnawà:ke and Kanehsaté:ke, two Kanien'kehà:ka communities near Montreal. As the stewards of the land, Mohawks have played a central role in the history of the territory of Montreal and they must be accorded an important place in any land acknowledgement as well as in the selection of Indigenous guests in a university setting in Tiohtià:ke.



Tiohtià:ke/Montreal is also a place that is richly symbolic for many Indigenous peoples because of the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701. It might be worth mentioning that Montreal was a territory where many Indigenous peoples lived side by side as well as the site of the Great Peace of Montreal, which ended conflicts between nations and was an important event in their histories.

As noted earlier, the land and their relationship to it is an essential part of the identity of Indigenous peoples, both for the stewards of the land and for other nations for whom the Tiohtià:ke territory has special meaning. Land acknowledgements are a way for them to preserve this identity and cultural attachment.



In conclusion, no matter how you deal with the territorial issue in a land acknowledgement, it is crucial to do it from the perspective of First Peoples if it is to be a genuine step towards reconciliation. Imposing a Eurocentric reading of history is a form of colonialism. Recognizing Tiohtià:ke as unceded territory and valuing the presence of the Indigenous stewards and occupants of the land is a first small step towards more respectful relationships with First Peoples.



Quebec and Lake Saint-John Railway, Canada

# INVITING INDIGENOUS ELDERS

More and more institutions are hosting Indigenous Elders as part of their efforts for reconciliation.

## Speaking time for Elders. Rethinking our habits

When planning an event, it's not uncommon for each speaker's time to be scheduled in advance. This should never be done with an Indigenous Elder. Allotting a very short and/or strict time limit for the Elder to speak is even worse:

*«When we're told we have only five minutes to speak, the message is clear: we've been invited only to tick all the boxes, to be able to say it's been done. It's not respectful.»*

### -An Indigenous Elder

It is advisable instead to:

- Inform the Elder in advance of the total length of the event and of each segment, such as the performances and speeches, so they can determine how long it would be appropriate for them to speak;
- Never interrupt an Elder while they are speaking or indicate that they should hurry up;
- Ideally, the Elder should be invited to open and close the event — or to remain present if they so choose.

In this section, we discuss guidelines for inviting Elders into institutional settings. Although there is no specific protocol that applies uniformly to all nations in all situations, there is a consensus on some basic principles, which should serve as a guide.

## Who is considered an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, and how to decide whom to invite?

The Elders who were consulted described Elders and Knowledge Keepers as follows:

**Indigenous Elder:** An Elder is a person who is considered wise and is recognized as such by the community. An Indigenous Elder is not necessarily very aged, and not all aged people are Elders.

# **Indigenous Knowledge Keeper:** Knowledge Keepers are recognized by their communities as having a deep understanding of the culture, rituals and knowledge, which authorizes them to share their knowledge with others.

In the past few years, the media have reported on a number of controversies about the inclusion of Elders in activities and positions reserved for Indigenous people. When inviting an Elder to your institution, it's important to make sure the person is recognized as such by their community. To verify the person's status as an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, you can contact the Councils of Nations, the Workforce Development Centres, or Indigenous community organizations in your area. Some nations also have Elders' Circles, or Longhouses among Iroquoian peoples. These organizations and agencies can advise you on potential guests.

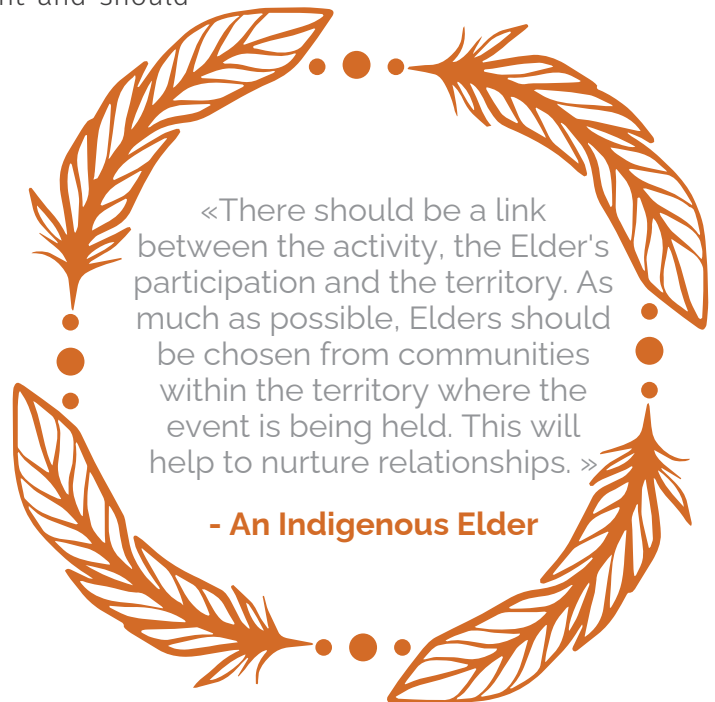
If your organization has a person responsible for relations with First Peoples, it's best to go through them in order to be sure that the right people are contacted

## How do you prepare to host an Elder or Knowledge Keeper?

The Elders we met with during our consultations all mentioned how important it is to be well-prepared before inviting an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to your institution. The section on Indigenous participation in reconciliation activities is important and should be reviewed before extending any invitations.

«When I go to an event, it's important for me not to feel like a token Indigenous person.»

-An Indigenous Elder



Thus, several factors need to be considered before, during and after the event in order to build the relationship of trust necessary for reconciliation. The next few paragraphs highlight key considerations.

### **# Reasons for inviting an Elder**

Before you decide to extend an invitation to an Elder or Knowledge Keeper, it's important to think about your motivation. Consider the purpose of the event and why you want to invite an Elder. Is it to advance the reconciliation process? Is it because this is a popular practice these days? Indigenous Elders are sought after for their wisdom and counsel. If you invite an Elder to take part in an activity, your reasons should be consistent with the reconciliation process.

It's also important to bear in mind the Ladder of Participation discussed earlier when considering your reasons for inviting an Elder. To ensure that the invitation and the visit serve to foster reconciliation, the invited guest should be able to participate fully in the process and made to feel that their views are treated with respect and taken seriously. It is therefore essential to foster a spirit of social inclusion of Elders in order to create a healthy, safe and welcoming environment.

### **# Choosing an Elder**

When you are thinking about inviting an Elder to attend an event, it's important to consider a few basic points:

#### ***The invited guest's relationship to the territory***

It's a good idea to choose an Elder who lives near your institution. You should also remember that some Elders may live off-reserve, so don't assume that an Elder lives in their community of origin. They may be recognized as an Elder by the urban community in which they live, or by a local Indigenous organization. It's often better to invite people who live nearby, not only because it's easier for them to get there but also because of their connection to the territory.


And whether the invited guest lives in a remote area or closer to home, you need to consider transportation to and from the event.

### ***The Indigenous person's preferred language***

Being able to express oneself in the language of one's choosing is considered essential to protecting one's cultural identity and transmitting it to one's family and community. Thus, language plays a vital role in preserving cultural and traditional teachings in Indigenous communities, in addition to being a source of pride and identity.

The use of French could be an important issue for some institutions that are committed to promoting French. Bear in mind that both English and French are colonial languages. The Elders we consulted told us that it's important for them to be able to express themselves in their own language. At the same time, their message needs to be understood; otherwise there's little point in inviting them.

According to the Elders we consulted, translation can be important to ensure the speaker's message is understood. If the invited guest can only speak one language, ask them if they would like simultaneous translation of their remarks, which would be provided in a non-disturbing way. If the Elder speaks in their own language, there are a number of ways to make sure the audience can understand the message (e.g. using a PowerPoint presentation, having a professional interpreter, having a family member translate, etc.).



« A 'prayer' to give thanks to nature, the land and the world around us has nothing to do with praying to a god. Even when we speak of the Creator, it's not a god; in our culture, it's our way of expressing gratitude to the Circle of Life.»

– An Indigenous Elder



### Did you know?

In *Servatius v. Alberni School District No. 70* 2022 BCCA 421, an evangelical Protestant mother alleged that the public school attended by her two children had violated her religious freedom by arranging demonstrations of two Indigenous cultural practices: a smudging ceremony, which was held in a classroom, and a hoop dance during which the dancer said a prayer. The British Columbia Court of Appeal ruled that merely being present at these events did not amount to compelled participation in a religious ceremony, and that the school had not breached its duty of neutrality:

**«The Indigenous practices that could be introduced in public schools [...] such as smudging and hoop dances, are public practices for the purpose of community building and individual attention to gratitude and reciprocity. [...] From my perspective, what we choose to share publicly are not “religious” practices [...] as that term is understood in the western world».** (par. 58 and 61, quoting Dr. Williams, member of the Lil'wat Nation and Professor Emeritus at the University of Victoria)

Thus, when an Elder or Knowledge Keeper performs a ceremony or gives thanks to Mother Earth, this does not infringe on the freedom of religion of those in attendance or the secular character of the host establishment. Those present are therefore expected to show respect and a spirit of openness to the gift being presented by the Indigenous guest.

«Elders should be able to speak in the language in which they are most comfortable, whether it's a colonial or Indigenous language. Respecting this choice is part of the process of accepting the other.»

### – An Indigenous Elder

Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Beadwork



## What to consider when extending an invitation to an Elder

Based on our meetings with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, we have drawn up a list of principles accompanied by examples of what to say and what not to say when extending an invitation.

	Principles	Do's	Don'ts
<b>Choosing an Elder</b>	Choose an Elder based on their connection to the territory and, secondarily, the language they speak, if translation is not possible.	Try to invite an Elder who has a close relationship with the territory and find ways to allow the person to speak in the language of their choice while ensuring that they are understood by the audience.	Don't insist that the Elder communicate in a colonial language during the event.
<b>Motivation</b>	The person organizing the event should invite an Elder to participate only if it is part of an effort for reconciliation.	Ensure that the person feels included, respected and safe.	Don't invite an Elder to open an event just because this is what the institution expects.
<b>Content</b>	Elders should be allowed to express themselves freely. An Elder is considered a wise person, so we must respect their wisdom and trust that what they have to say will be suitable for the event.	Give the Elder an idea of the nature of the event, and what will be discussed after they open the proceedings.  Make sure the Elder can contact you if they have any questions between the invitation and the event.	Don't ask the Elder to address a given topic or emphasize a particular point.
<b>Time to prepare</b>	Elders are often busy and need sufficient time to prepare for the event	Extend the invitation at least one month in advance.	Don't ask an Elder to open an event on short notice.



	Principles	Do's	Don'ts
<b>Speaking time</b>	Elders think seriously about the messages they want to convey. They are sensitive to time constraints.	Indicate roughly how long the event and its components will last. You could also propose an approximate speaking time, but remain open to the Elder's suggestions.	Don't tell the Elder they have 10 minutes to speak and can't go over.
<b>Language of communication within the institution</b>	Elders prefer to speak in their chosen language. They also want their message to be clearly understood.	Tell them if the audience will be more comfortable in French or in English, and indicate which colonial language is mainly used at the institution. Talk to the Elder about different options for making sure that everyone understands their message.	Don't dictate which language the Elder should use.
<b>Land acknowledgements</b>	Elders don't all feel the same way about land acknowledgements at the beginning of an event.	Ask the Elder if they would like someone to make a land acknowledgement before they begin speaking.	Don't go ahead with the land acknowledgement without asking the Elder how they feel about it.

«Before I agree to come and take part in an activity, I want to be sure that the person understands that it is important to us, that the invitation is sincere, and that the conditions will be right for my message to be heard.»

–An Indigenous Elder

	Principles	Do's	Don'ts
<b>Smudging (burning sage or tobacco)</b>	Some Elders may wish to burn sage or tobacco during their speech.	<p>Ask the person if they are considering performing this rite.</p> <p>Find out if this is allowed in the room you will be using. If it is not, let the Elder know in advance so that they don't prepare to perform the ceremony.</p>	<p>Don't assume that the Elder won't want to perform a smudging ceremony without discussing it with them.</p> <p>This could damage the relationship and may cause problems, especially if the room is connected to a central alarm system.</p>
<b>Transportation and accommodations</b>	Elders may have specific transportation and accommodation needs. They must be helped with arrangements and the costs must be covered by the institution.	<p>When you contact the Elder, discuss their needs and plan accordingly.</p> <p>Make provisions for their return trip. Plan on paying certain expenses in advance or on the day of the event (e.g. a taxi).</p>	Don't neglect to discuss these needs; it could cause problems on the day of the event and may prevent the Elder from being able to attend.
<b>Support</b>	Elders may wish to be accompanied. They are often accustomed to being accompanied by a particular person. The companion's accommodation and transportation costs should be covered and they should also receive financial compensation and customary gifts.	Discuss needs and preferences when contacting the Elder. Arrange for them to be accompanied by the person of their choice or assisted by someone within the institution, if necessary.	Don't keep the Elder from receiving suitable support; it may make it hard for them to attend or participate in the event, in addition to being perceived as a lack of respect.

## How to prepare for hosting the Elder on the day before and the day of the event

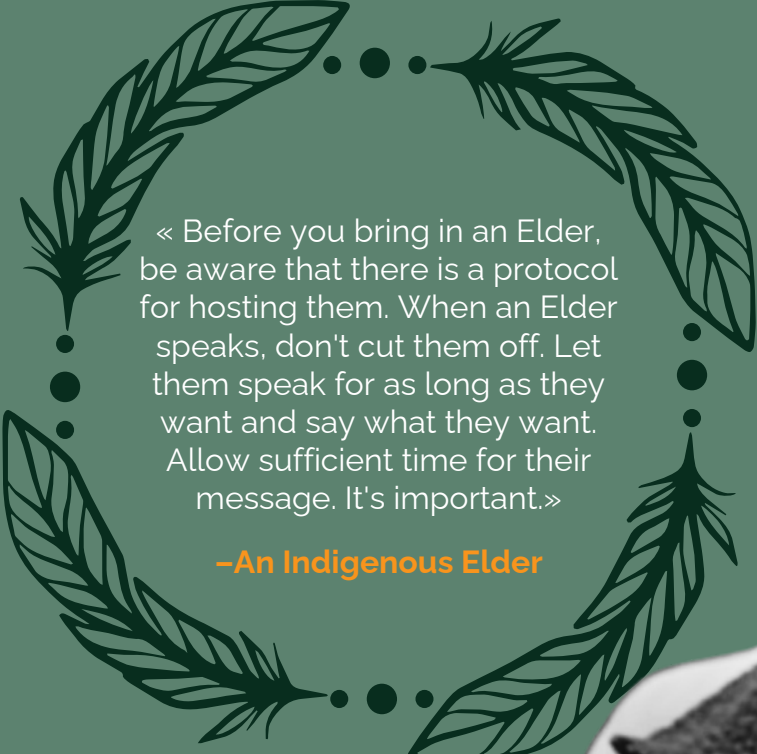
Consider the following, depending on the circumstances:

### *The day before or the day of the event*

- Arrange for transportation and accommodations if necessary.
- Make sure the event is accessible.
- To put the Elder at ease, make sure they are greeted by an Indigenous person, if possible.
- Make sure the Elder knows whom to contact if they have any questions during or after the event.
- Fill out the necessary forms for financial compensation.
- Consider a thank-you gift. It's customary to give tobacco in a small red pouch.

### *During the event*

- Make sure the Elder is seated close to the podium or lectern.
- Make sure there is someone close by at all times to attend to their needs (water, help with moving around, etc.).
- Listen attentively to their message.
- After their speech, thank them and invite them to stay for the rest of the event.
- At all times, make sure the Elder is comfortable and able to leave if they wish.



« Before you bring in an Elder, be aware that there is a protocol for hosting them. When an Elder speaks, don't cut them off. Let them speak for as long as they want and say what they want. Allow sufficient time for their message. It's important.»

**–An Indigenous Elder**



## After the event

After the event, you can thank the person and give them what you've prepared as a token of your appreciation (tobacco or another symbolic gift). If they need to fill out forms for reimbursement/honorarium, you should have these on hand so that everything is settled before they leave.

Stay with them until their transportation arrives, unless they tell you they would prefer to wait alone.

### **«Financial compensation»: Honorariums and «gifts» for Elders and Knowledge Keepers**

Elders and Knowledge Keepers give us a great gift by sharing their experience, wisdom and traditional knowledge with us. Giving of themselves in this way can be personally demanding. In Indigenous cultures, this is not regarded as «work» done in exchange for «compensation», but as a «gift» that should be honoured and acknowledged with another «gift», which has two parts:

- (1) *Honorarium*: The amount of this financial compensation will depend on the financial means of the host institution and the cost of living in the local area; it could be comparable to what is given by other nearby universities.
- (2) *Tobacco and other symbolic gifts*: It's also customary to offer tobacco, often wrapped in red cloth. This is an ancestral expression of gratitude and a mark of respect.

The tobacco for the offering is usually grown from heirloom seeds, not store-bought. It isn't always possible to find ceremonial tobacco but you should try to get it from an Indigenous community.

### **Other reimbursable expenses**

- Reasonable travel, accommodation and meal expenses.
- Travel, meals and accommodations for the accompanying person, if required.



# CONCLUSION

Whether you are hosting an Elder, making a land acknowledgement at the beginning of an event, or organizing any other activity involving Indigenous people, it is important to be well-prepared so that everyone involved feels respected and to promote a genuine process of reconciliation. Reflection, thinking about your motivations and considering the Ladder of Participation are essential to making choices that are consonant with the goal of reconciliation. Each well-planned activity will contribute to building Indigenous peoples' trust in institutions such as the University, little by little, and to fostering real dialogue. Only when these two conditions are met will we be able to make real progress towards genuine *reconciliation* with Indigenous peoples.

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