Métis People of Canada
Author: Dr. Chantal Fiola

Métis Origins

The Métis are a post-contact Indigenous people whose birth is tied to the fur trade. Despite the French term, Métis which means “mixed,” being Métis is more than biology and ancestry. Being Métis means sharing a specific geography, history, culture, and nationhood.

European explorers traded metal pots, tools, weapons, and beads for furs with Indigenous peoples who had been living on Turtle Island (North America) since time immemorial. As the fur trade expanded, the settlers moved further inland and intermarriages became common particularly among French settlers who were officially encouraged by the North West Company (NWC) to marry Indigenous women and foster relationships with Indigenous communities (especially Anishinaabe/Ojibwe and Nêhiyaw/Cree). (British settlers also intermarried but the Hudson’s Bay Company officially discouraged this; their children were encouraged to assimilate into British culture.) Children from such intermarriages grew in numbers in the Great Lakes region; some scholars call them “proto-metis” to distinguish from the Métis who would emerge as a distinct people further inland.

Métis Culture and Nationhood

Nêhiyaw, Nakota (Assiniboine), and Anishinaabe (Saulteaux) lived in what would become Manitoba long before communities formed from intermarriages (above) arose there – especially where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers converge (now called “The Forks” in Winnipeg). Later, in 1812, the first group of settlers arrived to establish the Red River Colony – a colonizing project initiated by Thomas Douglas, the fifth Earl of Selkirk.

These communities had begun to think of themselves as a distinct people – different from their Indigenous and European parent cultures but Indigenous nonetheless. Blending aspects from their parent cultures and expressing them in unique ways, they birthed a distinct culture. The Métis were a Plains bison culture with bison hunt governance like the Nêhiyaw. They spoke Michif (Cree/Ojibwe verbs, French nouns) and Bungi (Cree/Ojibwe, Gaelic English). They became known for Red River carts, floral beadwork, their combination of Indigenous and European-style clothing
(including the sash/ceinture fléchée), fiddle and jig music, and their entrepreneurial spirit.

The Métis helped the Selkirk Settlers survive their first winters and avoid starvation by gifting them bison meat. Despite this, their governor, Miles Macdonell, issued the Pemmican Proclamation (1814) forbidding export of bison products (including pemmican/bison jerky, a key food source that Métis became known for producing) from the colony for a year. The Métis disregarded this foreign attempt to interfere with their livelihood and tensions between the two groups continued until they erupted into the Battle of Seven Oaks (1816) – a decisive Métis victory. The Métis carried their infinity flag into this battle and their victory song would become their national anthem. Others began recognizing the Métis as a distinct people.

The Métis were establishing their nation: they had a distinct land base, languages, attire, flag, national anthem, food, victory in battle, and were resisting foreign threats to their self-determination.

**Confederation of Manitoba**

Another step in solidifying Métis nationhood was the political organizing triggered by the HBC’s sale of Rupert’s Land to the Dominion of Canada in 1869. Canada sent surveyors to divide the Red River region into plots to be sold to white farmers. Fearing this influx of white settlers and the theft of their land, the Métis (who had not been consulted) created political organizations seeking protection for their lands and rights. This resistance came to be known as the Red River Resistance. Louis Riel Jr. became president of the Provisional Government, which drafted a Bill of Rights and successfully negotiated with Ottawa for the confederation of the Province of Manitoba. Sections 31 and 32 of the Manitoba Act (1870) safeguarded Métis land (and protected established white farmers in the region); the former reserved 1.4 million acres for the Métis in the province. The Métis had legally secured rights to a land base, the homeland of the Métis Nation, and protected the future of their people.

However, after the Act was passed, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald sent the Red River Expeditionary Forces, a military group led by Colonel Wolseley, to Red River to ensure a peaceful transition from the Provisional Government to a Provincial Government. Instead, they beat Métis men, raped Métis women, prevented participation in our first election, and murdered a few Métis people. This continued with Colonel Wolseley’s and Macdonald’s knowledge for two years before they were stopped. By this time, the damage was done and many Métis had fled the province.
Dispossession and Resistance

Many Métis also left Manitoba due to the corruption of the scrip system – the lottery system that was supposed to distribute the 1.4 million acres promised to the Métis. Significant delays, mismanagement, and fraud meant that most Métis lost their land; many sold for a fraction of its worth because they saw the corruption of the system and the settlers being given land reserved for the Métis. White land speculators and bankers became known as “scrip millionaires,” while Métis became landless and increasingly destitute with few options given the dwindling bison.

Macdonald bribed Riel to leave Canada under voluntary exile after the Manitoba Act was passed. English Canada hated Riel for allowing the execution of one of their own, Thomas Scott, during the Red River Resistance. Hoping to avoid persecution for his people, Riel accepted the money and shared it with his family.

Many dispossessed Métis moved to places like St. Laurent and Batoche (in what would become Saskatchewan) hoping to re-establish a Métis homeland and continue their way of life. With increasing numbers of white settlers arriving in the region, the Métis would again politically organize themselves in the hopes of negotiating with the government of Canada and securing their rights. Local Métis leader, Gabriel Dumont, persuaded Riel to return to Canada to help. The railroad had been built up to this region and soldiers were sent to prevent the Métis from confederating another province. The series of battles that ensued came to be known as the Northwest Resistance (1885). The only decisive victory for Canada was the final battle, the Battle of Batoche. The fallout would nearly destroy the Métis Nation.

Forgotten Years, Forgotten People

Again, the Métis were punished for trying to secure their rights; the dark period of oppression that followed came to be known as the “Forgotten Years.” Riel was hung, as were eight Nêhiyaw warriors, and influential Plains Chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker were imprisoned and died as a result. The Métis were leaderless, landless, and destitute and the bison had nearly become extinct. There was an increase in racism and it became dangerous to be Métis; many Métis fled the region and hid their Indigenous identity, trying to pass as white to escape oppression. Métis became known as the Road Allowance People because the only place left for us to live was on Crown land designated for future roads, the railway, buildings. Every time the construction crew came, the Métis had to move their tents; cohesion as a community became nearly impossible. Many Métis were just trying to survive; during this time, Métis identity went underground and it was difficult to pass on language, culture, and traditions.
Ottawa also punished any First Nations they suspected had helped the Métis during the resistance by cutting their rations even though many were already starving due to broken treaty promises. There was an increase in North-West Mounted Police and Indian agents enforcing amendments to the Indian Act which banned ceremonies and restricted status Indians to their reserves via the pass system. It was also in the years after 1885 that the residential and day school system would indoctrinate thousands of Indigenous children further separating us from our cultures.

**Rebirth, Rights, and Self-Determination**

With the efforts of Indigenous veterans demanding better treatment, First Nations in BC demanding treaties, and the American Indian Movement highlighting these and other issues, the rebirth of Indigenous political organizing and cultural pride was in full swing by the 1960s. Métis provincial and national organizations arose demanding Canada recognize the Métis as Indigenous people with rights. With the help of Harry Daniels and others, this happened in 1982 when the Constitution was repatriated and section 35 identified the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit with Aboriginal and treaty rights that must be honoured.

Recent court victories are bringing hope to the Métis Nation. In 2003, in Powley v. Canada, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized section 35 hunting rights in Sault Ste. Marie, ON. In MMF v. Canada (2013), the Supreme Court of Canada declared that the federal government failed in its constitutional duty when distributing the 1.4 million acres promised to the Métis in the Manitoba Act. In Daniels v. Canada (2016), the Supreme Court of Canada declared that Métis (and non-status Indians) must be considered “Indians” in section 91(24) of the Constitution and thereby fall under federal jurisdiction. These cases did not include remedial action but they open the doors for Métis rights and land claims.

Today, the Métis Nation is strong and working tirelessly toward self-determination to ensure a good future for our people.

Discussion; *passing the talking stick*
References


