Métis Identity and Nationhood

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Métis identity and Nationhood are often discussed together, but are best understood as two closely related, yet separate and distinct concepts. Métis identity refers to the ways in which a person identifies as Métis, and the practices, beliefs, and history that make up this identity. Métis identity is an intensely personal experience, and as such, the way it is understood can vary greatly from one person to the next. Métis Nationhood, on the other hand, is the result of very specific historical events, and in modern times, is the basis for the political relationship certain Métis organizations share with the federal and provincial governments in Canada. While there are differing views on the subject, this discussion will focus on the Red River Métis who have continuously occupied their traditional territory on the prairies, and who developed a distinct language, culture, and political structure which rose to prominence during the 19th century.

Métis Nationhood

The story of the Métis Nation predates the confederation of Canada by at least a century. Throughout what is now known as the Prairie Provinces, early European settlers intermarried with women from primarily Cree, Ojibway, and Nakota groups as the fur trade spread throughout the continent. Many of the children from these unions learned the cultures of both parents, and as a result, they became very active in the fur trade as interpreters, voyageurs, buffalo hunters, and trading post factors. A number of significant historical events led Métis people to develop a robust political awareness, and to understand themselves as a nation rather than simply as a ‘cultural group.’ During the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, Métis fighters were the first to fly the infinity flag that is still used as a national symbol today. The Métis were also members of an all-Indigenous political alliance known as the Iron Confederacy which was active in the mid to late 1800s on the central plains. The Iron Confederacy included Cree, Nakota, Assiniboine and other Indigenous groups who negotiated treaties among themselves, and fought together to defend their land and resources which were increasingly threatened by European settlement. The Métis, however, are best known for the events which led to the Red River Resistance in 1869 and the Battle of Batoche in 1885. During these conflicts, the Métis established a provisional government, elected Louis Riel as their representative into the House of Commons, negotiated Manitoba into Confederation, and consistently refused to be governed by the new Canadian Federal Government and its laws.
The history of the Métis Nation, and all its conflicts, victories and adventures spans centuries, and is the subject of much debate and study. It cannot be denied, however, that Métis people organized themselves politically long before Canada became a country. Their governance style and political structure evolved during the great buffalo hunts of the nineteenth century. At their peak, these hunts consisted of over a thousand Red River carts, included hunters and families from several different Indigenous groups, and were strictly regulated by distinct laws. At the time, there was no other political organization that even came close to bringing together such a large and diverse group in such a cohesive way. Before each hunt, the hunters elected a chief, several captains, and discussed their travel route until a consensus was reached. Upon their return, the chief and captains would step down from their positions, and the whole process would begin anew at the outset of each hunt. This allowed for a very fluid, and democratic approach to leadership and governance. Indeed, political organizing was an integral part of Métis culture long before confederation.

During the Red River Resistance, the Métis negotiated with the federal government—not as a special interest group, or as Canadian citizens—but as a distinct nation, with its own representative body, political structure, and territory. Today, the Métis continue to hold a unique space in Canadian politics, and have been successful in having their rights recognized through a number of landmark court cases.

There are currently five provincial, and one national political organization which represent the interests of Métis people. They are: the Métis Nation of Ontario, the Manitoba Métis Federation, Métis Nation—Saskatchewan, the Métis Nation of Alberta and the Métis Nation British Columbia. Each of these is represented at the national level by the Métis National Council. Membership requirements are determined by each organization, but generally follow similar protocols. The Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF), for example, requires individuals to self-identify as Métis, to show an ancestral connection to a historic Métis community, and to be accepted by the contemporary Manitoba Métis Community. Citizens of the Manitoba Métis Federation benefit from training and employment programs, harvesting rights, funding for education and small businesses, and other services managed by the MMF.

One of main differences between historic and contemporary expressions of Métis Nationhood is that while Métis people historically fought for independence from the Canadian state, today, the Métis Nation exists as a part of Canada, and many Métis people consider themselves to be Canadian citizens.
Métis Identity

Contemporary Métis identity isn’t so easily defined, or understood. Seeking membership in one of the provincial representative organizations is an easy first step for many individuals, but while this provides a political identity, it does little for those of us who seek a deeper understanding of what it means to be a proud Métis person in today’s world.

Our ancestors benefitted from a vibrant and intensely unique culture. Among other characteristics, their clothes, their skill at buffalo hunting, their beading patterns, and the languages they spoke, gave early Métis people a deep sense of pride, and a distinct identity. However, the Métis experienced severe hardships and discrimination during the colonization of Canada and well into the twentieth century. Generations grew up either ashamed of being Métis, or completely unaware of their cultural heritage. Some would argue that Métis still have not fully recovered from the many injustices they endured. In 1885, Louis Riel prophesized that his people would sleep for a hundred years, but would then be reawakened by our artists, and begin to feel pride again. In many ways, his prophecy has come to pass. But our journey has not been easy.

Many people understand the term Métis as a racial characteristic; a way of describing people of mixed ancestry. Unfortunately, however, contemporary Métis people in Canada often have difficulty getting out from under this outdated racial stereotype. This is due, in part, to long-standing federal policies which have sought to discourage the Métis from asserting rights, or defending land claims as Indigenous peoples. A Métis person is often asked; “which one of your parents is Indigenous,” or “how much Indian are you? Half? A quarter? An eighth?” Questions like these set up two points of reference: white or European on one end; and Indigenous on the other. Métis identity becomes an awkward space that is stuck somewhere in between these two points. This obsession with race—and the associated stigmas of skin colour and racial ‘purity’—is a pathology we have inherited from our colonial past. It was not that long ago that the Métis were simply known as Half-Breeds. The mixed race stereotype automatically suggests that someone is ‘less than,’ not fully one or the other. What many Métis people today are now realizing is that their racial make-up doesn’t tell them much about who they are. Métis identity simply cannot be measured through blood quantum, or by counting how many Indigenous relatives we have in our family trees. These issues lead to some very complex questions. If we no longer live in the cultural environment our ancestors lived in, and if our distinct histories and political affiliations are only small parts of what makes us who we are; then what, exactly, makes a person Métis?

To some, a Métis person is someone who displays certain cultural traits—they wear sashes, dance the Red River Jig, play the fiddle, and participate in events like the Festival
du Voyageur. But these are only external symbols representative of much deeper experiences. An Elder once said that trying to understand Métis identity is like trying to catch a moving train. Métis people in Canada today are constantly recreating their identities in new and powerful ways.

Many of us are rebuilding relationships with our First Nations relatives, and acknowledging the destructive impact colonization has had on our families. Others are building vibrant connections to their ancestry by learning an Indigenous language, or by participating in traditional ceremonies. Genealogical research also serves as a strong foundation for building Métis identity. It is not uncommon to discover that one or several of our direct ancestors participated in the great buffalo hunts, fought with Louis Riel, or founded one of the many Métis communities still in existence today. The challenge is to find creative ways to express our traditional understandings and worldviews in modern contexts. As contemporary Métis people, we must do more than inherit the legacy of our diverse and complex history; we must also contribute to this legacy by constantly renewing and re-envisioning our identities.

In this sense, it is best not to think of Métis identity as a fixed set of characteristics as laid out by political or legal definitions. Métis people are here today because of the strength, and resolve of our ancestors who fought to protect their way of life for their grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. In many ways, we too are now engaged in a struggle. Métis identity must be defined by the people who live by it, not by the organizations who represent us, or the colonies that have sprung up around us. This is what we, in turn, will pass on to our children, to ensure that they too will be proud to call themselves Métis for generations to come.
References


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