

VOICES

Origin stories say a great deal about how people understand their place in the universe and their relationship to other living things. I have been taught by Anishnaabeg Elders that all Creation stories are true. There is not one story which can be true for all peoples of the world. But each peoples' understandings and traditions of their beginning is their truth. Origin stories require the utmost respect. No people outside that tradition should question it or try to impose their own story.

— Darlene Johnston, Chippewas of Nawash First Nation

SHAPING CANADA TODAY

On page 26, you will learn about some of the reasons why some First Nations are known by more than one name. A First Nation may also have different spellings for its name (e.g., Anishinaabe, Anishinabe, or the plural Anishnaabeg, as seen on this page). When quoting individuals or communities, this book uses the spelling they choose for themselves.

CREATION STORIES

Creation stories—stories that tell of the beginning of the world or a community—are as varied as First Peoples' cultures. Like other aspects of culture, a community's creation stories reflect the environment in which the people lived. Most importantly, creation stories show that the community is indigenous to the land: the people come from the land and are part of it. The stories give reasons for the community's identity, purpose, ceremonies, and beliefs. Stories are passed down from generation to generation and serve a variety of purposes. Creation stories express a people's understanding of the world and their place in it. They provide historians with insight into First Peoples' traditional lives and cultures.

Learning a community's creation story usually means approaching an Elder from the community using correct protocols. Each community has its own protocols, which often include bringing the Elder a gift. Creation stories are often considered a community's most significant cultural property and may be shared only under certain circumstances.

THE CREATION OF TURTLE ISLAND (NORTH AMERICA)

Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Saulteaux) peoples' traditional territory encircled the Great Lakes and stretched into southeastern Manitoba. The story that follows features Kitchi-Manitou, the Creator, a central figure in many stories from the Anishinaabe oral tradition. This story is shared by the Grand Council of Treaty Three, a political organization of twenty-eight First Nations in Ontario and Manitoba.

Long ago, after the Great Mystery, or Kitchi-Manitou, first peopled the earth, the Anishinaabe, or Original People, strayed from their harmonious ways and began to argue and fight with one another. Brother turned against brother and soon the Anishinaabe were killing one another over hunting grounds and other disagreements. Seeing that harmony, brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect for all living things no longer prevailed on Earth, Kitchi-Manitou decided to purify the Earth. He did this with water.

The water came in the form of a great flood, or *mush-ko'-be-wun'*, upon the Earth, destroying the Anishinaabe people and most of the animals as well. Only Nanaboozhoo, the central figure in many of the Anishinaabe oral traditions, was able to survive the flood; along with a few animals and birds who managed to swim and fly. Nanaboozhoo floated on a huge log searching for land, but none was to be found as the Earth was now covered by the great flood. Nanaboozhoo allowed the remaining animals and birds to take turns resting on the log as well. Finally, Nanaboozhoo spoke.

"I am going to do something," he said. "I am going to swim to the bottom of this water and grab a handful of Earth. With this small bit of Earth, I believe we can create a new land for us to live on with the help of the Four Winds and Kitchi-Manitou."

So Nanaboozhoo dove into the water and was gone for a long time. Finally he surfaced, and short of breath told the animals that the water was too deep for him to swim to the bottom. All were silent. Finally, Mahng, the Loon, spoke up. "I can dive under the water for a long way: that is how I catch my food. I will try to make it to the bottom and return with some Earth in my beak."

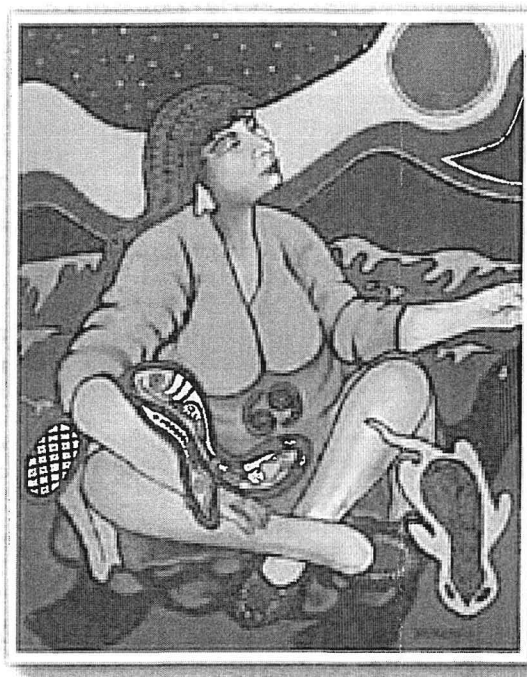
The Loon disappeared and was gone for a very long time. Surely, thought the others, the Loon must have drowned. Then they saw him float to the surface, weak and nearly unconscious. "I couldn't make it, there must be no bottom to this water," he gasped.

Many more animals tried. All failed and it seemed as though there was no way to get the much-needed Earth from the bottom. Then a soft muffled voice was heard. "I can do it," it spoke softly. At first no one could see who it was that spoke up. Then, the little Wa-zhushk (muskrat) stepped forward. "I'll try," he repeated. Some of the other, bigger, more powerful animals laughed at muskrat. Nanaboozhoo spoke up. "Only Kitchi-Manitou can place judgment on others. If muskrat wants to try, he should be allowed to."

So, muskrat dove into the water. He was gone much longer than any of the others who tried to reach the bottom. After a while Nanaboozhoo and the other animals were certain that muskrat had given his life trying to reach the bottom. Then one of the animals spotted muskrat as he floated to the surface. Nanaboozhoo pulled him up onto the log. "Brothers and sisters," Nanaboozhoo said, "muskrat went too long without air: he is dead." A song of mourning and praise was heard across the water as muskrat's spirit passed on to the spirit world. Suddenly Nanaboozhoo exclaimed, "Look, there is something in his paw!" Nanaboozhoo carefully opened the tiny paw. All the animals gathered close to see what was held so tightly there. Muskrat's paw opened and revealed a small ball of Earth. The animals all shouted with joy. Muskrat sacrificed his life so that life on Earth could begin anew.

Nanaboozhoo took the piece of Earth from Muskrat's paw. Just then, the turtle swam forward and said, "Use my back to bear the weight of this piece of Earth. With the help of Kitchi-Manitou, we can make a new Earth." Nanaboozhoo put the piece of Earth on the turtle's back. Suddenly, the wind blew from each of the Four Directions. The tiny piece of Earth on the turtle's back began to grow until it formed an island in the water. The island grew larger and larger, but still the turtle bore the weight of the Earth on his back. Nanaboozhoo and the animals all sang and danced in a widening circle on the growing island. After a while, the Four Winds ceased to blow and the waters became still. A huge island sat in the middle of the water, and today that island is known as North America.

Figure 1-8 *Creation of Turtle Island*, by Nokomis, an Ojibwe artist and storyteller, 2003–2004.



11 Imagine that you are a member of an Anishinaabe community back in time before the arrival of Europeans and that an Elder is telling you this story. How would the story help you understand yourself and your people?