Lesson Plan 1: Aboriginal Communities

Generalization
People maintain their customs and traditions in similar ways

Rationale
Across Alberta there are numerous reserves and Aboriginal communities which serve as a collective force in passing down knowledge of traditional ways. Spiritual ceremonies would not exist if there communities did not exist. Students will be introduced to two Blackfoot communities and the ways in which they collectively pass down spiritual ceremonies, stories and traditions.

Objectives:

Knowledge
- Recognize the role of Elders in the Aboriginal community as keepers of traditions, values and teachings.
- Comprehend that there the diversity among Aboriginal People
- Identify and interpret how key values are transmitted through stories.
- Become aware that stories were passed down from generation to generation
- Recognize the importance of land, language, religious beliefs, values and the environment among Aboriginal People

Skill
- Interpret traditional information about Blackfoot spirituality and make connections with own beliefs and values
- Compare and contrast two different Blackfoot communities
- Reflect on how oral teachings pass on values and knowledge

Attitude
- Recognize the importance of spirituality among Aboriginal People
- Respect the cultural differences among Aboriginal Peoples

Teacher Information
The Blackfoot Confederacy is composed of three nations that are politically independent, but culturally and linguistically homogeneous. They are the Blackfoot or Siksika, the Bloods or Kainai, and the Peigan or Pikanii. They are all apart of the Algonquian language family. The Blackfoot have a rich and unique view of life. Their stories about the origin of the world, human beings, religious practices and the beginning of the Blackfoot as a people have been passed on from generation to generation.
The people of the Blackfoot Confederacy are Plains Aboriginals whose vast territory extended eastward from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains to the valley of the Mississippi River. From central Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba the Plains stretch south almost to the Gulf of Mexico.

There are many stories as to the origin of the Blackfoot people. One story tells of how the Blackfoot split into three groups to protect their territory from enemies. One group went north to protect their land from the Cree, another went to the southwest to fight, and the last group when to the southeast to fight the Crow, Assiniboine and Sioux.

Students will focus on two groups from the Blackfoot confederacy – the Blood and Peigan Nations.

The Bloods
The Blood nation received their name from the Cree, Mih-kwee-ye-ne-week, which means ‘Blood People’ or ‘Red People’. They received this name from the Cree because they used red paint as decoration when they were preparing for special occasions. The Blood people refer to themselves as Kai-nai, which means ‘Many Chiefs’.

The Blood people were nomadic hunters who relied on the buffalo to provide a large part of their diet, utensils, tools and building materials. As well as hunting buffalo, the Blood people hunted antelope and deer. They ate many wild berries such as saskatoons, chokecherries and wild strawberries. Blood women made pemmican and dried meat for the whole family to eat over the winter when it was difficult to hunt and find fresh meat.

The Blood people used the Buffalo Jump method of stampeding or chasing the buffalo over a steep cliff in order to kill large numbers of the herd. The men and older boys would hide and wait for the buffalo behind large piles of rocks, known as cairns, constructed in a “V” shape. One brave man would cover himself in a buffalo hide and pretend to be a buffalo in order to lure the animals into the “V” configuration. When the animals were close enough, they would jump out and scare the buffalo causing them to stampede over the cliff.

Like many Plains Aboriginal groups, the Blood people lived in tipis made from buffalo hides that were sewn together and stretched around tall poles. An opening at the top allowed for smoke from the indoor fire to escape. Blood people often decorate tipis with unique designs belonging only to the owner.

The extended family is an important aspect of Aboriginal culture. For the Blood people, it was crucial that children received guidance and knowledge from many other people in addition to their parents. Therefore, children learnt the names of relatives very early in life. Children received a name when they were born, but were often given two or three names as they grew up. These names would depend on their actions or appearance.

The Peigan
The Peigan Nation is the smallest of the three comprising the Blackfoot confederacy.
The buffalo was the most important animal to the Peigan people. Nomadic hunters, they also used the method of the buffalo jump to hunt and kill buffalo. The beaver, fox and ermine were sacred animals that the Peigan used in sacred bundles or to adorn clothing. They set up permanent summer camps in which they prepared for the coming winter and moved during the fall to a permanent winter camp.

The Peigan relied on the dog travois to transport materials and possessions from camp to camp as they followed the buffalo. A dog travois is simple in construction made of two long poles that are fastened at one end to the dog’s harness, while the other end dragged along the ground. After the introduction of the horse, the Peigan modified the travois to suit the horse. By transporting goods by horse, people were able to collect more personal possessions. The horse also allowed Peigan hunters to travel further and at a more rapid pace in searching for buffalo.

Like almost all Aboriginal groups, the Peigan relied on oral history to share legends and stories about their history, important events, spirituality, and way of life.

Peigan children were taught to respect people who were older than them, especially Elders as they were the keepers of great knowledge and wisdom. Fathers and mothers each had special skills to pass on to the children as well as aunts and uncles. Older siblings and cousins helped the young ones learn the ways of becoming a proper man or woman. Together, the extended family was very important to the survival of the family unit and the community as a whole.

Today many Peigan live on a reserve in Southern Alberta that was established in 1882 after the signing of Treaty 7. The Oldman River flows through the Peigan reserve.

**Introductory Activity**

Introduce the concept of community to the students by writing the word in the middle of the board. What does community mean to the students? What different types of communities are there? i.e. church community, neighborhood, school, sports, rural, urban, ethnic, etc. What kinds of values does each community teach? Is community an important aspect of allowing certain activities to happen? Could you have a church service if there was no church community as an example?

Students should start a section in their notes titled “Communities” where they can list answers to the above questions.

Students should then title a new page “Aboriginal Communities”. In this section they will study both the Peigan and Blood Aboriginal communities.

**Main Lesson**

Using the information presented in the ‘Teacher Information’ section, create a worksheet that highlights points about the Blackfoot Confederacy as a whole, the Blood nation, and the Peigan nation.
Distribute this sheet and discuss how community is important to both groups.

In their notebooks, students should write down Blood nation and Peigan nation in two individual columns at the top of the page. Underneath have them record similarities and differences amongst the groups. This activity can be done individually, in small groups or as a whole class.

Look at the issue of spirituality within the Blackfoot confederacy. How did it relate to daily life?

**Supplementary Lesson**
Oral tradition has been a way of passing down knowledge for many Aboriginal groups. Elders would pass this knowledge to the people teaching of the history, spirituality, ceremonies, knowledge, values and beliefs of the community. The stories told about the land, spiritual world, environment, self and interactions with other societies. Within the stories were teachings and moral lessons for the people.

The Blackfoot people had many sacred ceremonies and traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation. The ceremonies often had a special purpose or intention for those that were participating. The ceremonies also guided the individual on how to present themselves or engage in certain behaviors. Much of Blackfoot spirituality stems from beliefs set forth by the Creator and Mother Earth. The earth is held to be sacred as it provides everything the Blackfoot people need to survive.

Ideally, it would be best to invite a Blackfoot Elder into the classroom to discuss Blackfoot spirituality and ceremonies with the students. However, if this is not possible, discuss with students the following elements of Blackfoot spirituality, which are general in nature.

**The Sundance Ceremony**
One of the most sacred ceremonies to all Plains Aboriginal groups, the Sundance ceremony was generally performed in the summer months, since this was the time when the berries needed to perform the ceremony were available. Often many different Aboriginal groups would come together to celebrate the Sundance. The Sundance is sacred to Aboriginal People and is an opportunity for an individual to make a personal vow in the form of a sacrifice. It is not deemed proper to discuss specific events and details. One of the sacrifices of the ceremony was to pierce the chest (this was done only by men). Every family gave offerings such as crosses covered with cloth and adorned in sage. By giving offerings and sacrifices, Aboriginal People believed that good fortune and spiritual strength would be blessed upon the individuals in the coming seasons. The ceremony provided people with a sense of peace and harmony.

**Sacred Items**
The pipe is the most sacred item used in spiritual ceremonies. It symbolizes honour, respect, and sacredness, and cleanses the body and mind of negative spirits. Sweetgrass is another essential element to a spiritual ceremony. Burning Sweet grass symbolizes a personal blessing and respect for the Creator. Sage was also used to purify the mind and body. Sage was laid near sacred objects and used as decoration for ceremonies. Red Ochre paint was used on the face and body as well as on sacred objects associated with spiritual ceremonies. Red reflects the earthly prayers
for inner strength in overcoming negative influences. Together the pipe, sweetgrass, sage and red ochre paint could be used in a ceremony, however sometimes just certain elements are used within a ceremony.

Ask students to think of similar events and objects from their own cultures that are as important to them as the above mentioned are to Blackfoot people. Students should create another chart in their note books that compares their own culture with that of the Blackfoot.