



Ojibwa

The Ojibwa, often referred to as the Chippewas, have always referred to themselves as "Anishinabe (A-nish-in-ah-bay)", a word, which may be translated as "a person" or "one of the first people". This perception of themselves as the original man has tremendous significance in how people within the tribe relate to one another and in how they view the world. A deeply religious people, with a daily spirituality and ritual, the creator and creation were honored and respected in ceremony and in everyday life. Over time, with the coming of Christianity and the resurgence of traditional religious practice, the spirituality of the Ojibwa remains strong and is an important aspect of Indian life.

At one time, the Ojibwas had a vast territory and population of which there were four clans. The southeastern Ojibwa lived in Lower Michigan and part of Ohio, while the plains Ojibwa lived in the northern part of North Dakota and in Canada as Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The north Ojibwa lived at Ontario, Canada and the ones who referred to themselves as Chippewas lived in upper Michigan, the northern half of Wisconsin and the northern part of Minnesota.

Although the Ojibwa were a woodland people, this meant more than simply living in the forest. They lived with the forest and with the many other creatures who shared their forest homes. They knew what many people of today have forgotten, that man is part of nature, and were keenly aware of the forest around them. They studied closely all the plants and learned the habits of every bird, beast, and fish. Their knowledge was not written in books, but was handed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. They had a great skill in teaching the young and taught every child whatever he would need to know in order to survive and live in harmony with nature.

Of utmost importance to Ojibwa Life were the children and the elders. Traditional educational practices were aimed at teaching the child the religious, economic and political practices as well as the moral standards of the tribe. All members of the household were involved in this educational process. The respected older people received a great deal of attention and their advice was heeded. They were and are the source of wisdom about medicine, religious ceremonies, education of youth and the tribal traditions.

Family life followed an annual cycle of economic activity. Survival was paramount and often depended on others. The cooperative spirit was both an ideal and an obligation. Sharing of material goods and of the burdens and pleasures of life were ingrained.

For the Ojibwa people, each part of the year brought new tasks. In the winter, their home was the wigwam. It was the custom, during the winter, for the Ojibwa man to hunt in a large stretch of woods, and the women to make jackets, leggings, moccasins, and other clothing for the family, using the hides they had tanned during the summer. Also in the winter, in order to pass away the time, they told stories. Their favorite legend was about the adventures of Winabojo

(Win-a-bo-zhoo), a spiritual being who stood for all life--human, animal and plant.

In the spring, they looked forward to making maple syrup and sugar cakes. The Ojibwa families carried nearly all their belongings with them when they moved to the sugar bush. Since they returned to the same area for the same season every year, they left the pole frames of their wigwams. In the spring, when the bark of birch trees was the strongest and could be stripped from the trunk, they began making canoes, upon which they worked all summer.

At the beginning of summer, they traveled to their summer villages to plant corn, pumpkin, squash, and wild potatoes. As fall approached, they traveled by canoe to the rice lakes to harvest wild rice. They also hunted for ducks and geese.

The first fruits of every season, whether fish, maple sugar, fruits or game, were offered to Gichimanido (Gee-chi-monee-do). This great spirit of sharing among the Ojibwa is perhaps best summed up in the following:

"Never pass by any poor person without giving him something to eat. The spirit that sees you, will bless you. When the opportunity offers, call the aged together and provide for them, venison properly cooked and give them a hearty welcome, then the Gods, that favor them, will be your friends. "