

SECONDARY
CURRICULUM

CLANS OF THE ANISHINABE

NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBES OF WISCONSIN



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I. Enduring Knowledge:

An appreciation for traditional Native American ways is the basis for understanding how different groups have chosen to organize and govern themselves over time.

Learning Targets:

Students will know the beliefs about the origins of clans and the purposes they served in traditional Native American culture.

Students will appreciate the role of animals and their symbolic representations in the earliest formation of clans.

Students will know what a **totem** (“dodame” in native Ojibwa language) is and what its purpose was (and is) in native culture.

II. Teacher Background Materials:

Stories dealing with the origins of clans differ somewhat according to the oral traditions of various tribes. Most tribes, however, share numerous and sometimes nearly identical accounts of certain spiritual topics and theories of creation. Symbolic representations were often commonly shared among tribes.

Traditionally, the Ojibwa Indians believed the creator granted certain intellectual and physical skills to animals, who were often considered teachers, especially when dealing with issues concerning the environment. It was the animals who taught the ancient Ojibwa how to hunt and fish. Their hides and meat provided clothing, food, and shelter. The Ojibwa considered animals and man equal beings in the *Circle of Life*. As a result, animals were highly revered by the Anishinabe and were believed to possess cleverness, wisdom and exceptional physical ability.

In stories dealing with life’s lessons, comparisons were often made between certain animal behavior patterns and the conduct of the person the story was about. Just as the comparison of animal behavior to certain people was customary in storytelling, the Anishinabe projected many human characteristics onto animals. It is natural that the clans came to be represented by certain animals. To the Ojibwa the word “clan” means the same as “totem,” which originated from the Ojibwa word “dodame.” The most familiar idea linking clans and totems is found in the Northwest United States in the form of totem poles. But other totems, such as carved objects, regalia, and other objects are commonly found among many Native American groups.

Originally clans played a very important role in the resolution of conflicts, the managing of tribal norms (such as whom one can marry), and in the governance of the tribe. Today the clans remain primarily related to the identification of family groups, often by designated surnames. In some European cultures, surnames also serve this purpose, sometimes reflecting the occupation of early family members (such as sawyers, carpenters, millers, etc.), which would have traditionally been passed by fathers to their sons through their given surname.

Clans gradually disappeared as important features of Native American life as pressure to assimilate by the Europeans grew. Today a rejuvenation of traditional beliefs and customs are becoming more evident as the Anishinabe realize the importance of their ancestral teachings. Clan symbols are also beginning to reappear in traditional celebrations.

III. Prior Knowledge:

Ask students if they can identify what their surnames mean. Ask them if they have seen totem poles or other animal representations related to Native American culture. *[Some students may have attended pow-wows and seen the regalia of some of the dancers which represented animals.]*

Vocabulary:

Using the Teacher Notes above, explain to the students the background and function of clans in Native American culture. Add the following vocabulary to assure understanding.

1. **clan:** a group of people tracing descent from a common ancestor
2. **totem:** a visual and artistic representation of clans. An object (as an animal or plant) serving as the emblem of a family or clan and often as a reminder of its ancestry, could be a carved or painted representation of such an object.
3. **Circle of Life:** The belief that humans are part of a circle which puts them on an equal footing with all other natural objects. Contrast with the Western idea of humans being the center of all life. This belief often informs how humans use natural resources in their culture.
4. **oral tradition:** the handing down of oral histories, legends, stories, and knowledge. Contrasts with written tradition which depends upon the written word to transmit culture and information.
5. **Anishinabe:** The original people. Refers to the first people to inhabit a particular place. Native Americans are considered Anishinabe because they have resided in North America, for example, for thousands of years and are believed to have been the first humans to live here. Contrasts with immigrants or colonists.

IV. Viewing Guide:

Note: *Bolded words are found on the vocabulary list.*

- A. Write the following animal names for **clans** on the board or handout. Have the students listen for characteristics of that particular clan.

Bear: *[war chiefs and warriors, known for their thick black hair that never whitened in old age. Caretakers of the earth's medicines.]*

Fish: *[believed to be the first to appear out of the sea. Known for their loud and clear voices and recognized as famous speakers.]*

Wolf: *[a brother and partner to the Ojibwa; their paths and fates were intertwined]*

Turtle: *[has the responsibility of the shifting of the Earth and cycles of the moon. The turtle clan's obligation is to look after our environment.]*

Deer: *[known as the clan of gentle people; poets.]*

Bird: *[represented the spiritual leaders of the people. They pursued the higher elevations of the mind, just like the eagle pursued the higher elevations of the sky.]*

- B. As they view the video, ask students to list some of the features of clan membership.
*[Guidelines regarding whom you could marry, political succession, inheritance and property rights. Membership is automatic at birth and follows the father's lineage. According to Ojibwa **oral traditions**, while the clan system was in power, the Ojibwa suffered no famine, sickness, or epidemics, and the clan system was built around equal justice, voice, law, and order. It was a sacred way of life.]*

V. Discussion Guide:

Go over the material that students recorded on their sheets about clans.

Have students discuss how clan organization contrasts with other ways in which societies are organized. For example, what impact does family affiliation have as an influence in contemporary American life? How important do they think it might have been in earlier times? For example, among feudal states (kings, nobility, serfs, etc.). What parts of the world today are dominated by tribal (familial) organization? [Afghanistan, et al]

VI. Evaluation:

Students can continue to develop their understanding of this topic in several ways.

Suggestions for extended learning:

1. Have the students research representations of **totems** among different tribes and groups. Ask them to design symbols that might identify contemporary people as members of a particular family or group.
2. Have students create a family totem pole representing family traits and relate them to the symbols.
3. Have students research some of the famous totem poles of the Northwest Native American tribes.