



KBIC & Ojibwe History

Ojibwe Clans

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According to Ojibwe tradition, the way the Ojibwe people organized themselves into grand families, called dodem or clans, is very important. In the *History of the Ojibwe Nation*, William Warren explains the beginning of the Ojibwe clan system. According to Ojibwe tradition, there were originally six human beings that came out of the sea to live among Ojibwe. These six beings, which were Wawaazisii (Bullhead), Ajejauk (Crane), Makwa (Bear), Moosance (Little Moose), Waabizheshi (Marten), and Bineshii (Thunderbird), created the original clans. One of the original beings, the Thunderbird, always covered his eyes, because when he looked at the Anishinabeg, they died. The other five beings urged Thunderbird to return to the sea because his powers were so strong. That is why the Anishinabeg do not have a Thunderbird clan today.

Warren recorded at least 20 offshoots of the original clans. Clan symbols are still used today. For example, when members are buried, their clan symbols appear on their graves to mark their lineage. Also clan symbols appear in birch bark scrolls and treaty documents.

The clan system operated as a form of government, a method of organizing work, and a way of defining the responsibilities of each community member. Working together, the clans attended to the physical,

intellectual, psychological, and spiritual needs of the community. Each was known by its totem (animal emblem).

While each clan differs, all are considered equal. Following are some common clans and their distinct characteristics.

The largest clan was the Bear (Makwa) clan. Bear clan members were war chiefs and warriors were known for their thick black hair that never whitened even in old age. The Bear Clan members were the strong and steady police and legal guardians. Bear Clan members spent a lot of time patrolling the land surrounding the village, and in so doing, they learned which roots, bark, and plants could be used for medicines to treat the ailments of their people.

The Fish (Giigo) clans - Bullhead (Wawaazisiig), Sturgeon (Namewug), Catfish (Maanamegwug), Northern Pike (Ginoozhez), Whitefish (Adikamegwug), Merman/Mermaid (Memegwesiwug), and Sucker (Namebinug) - were known for long life and baldness in old age. Fish clan members claim that their ancestors were the first to appear out of the sea. The people of the Fish Clan were the teachers and scholars. They helped children develop skills and healthy spirits. They also drew on their knowledge to solve disputes between the leaders of the Crane and Loon Clans.

Crane (Ajejauk) clan members were known for their loud and clear voices and recognized as famous speakers. The Crane and the Loon Clans were given the power of Chieftainship. By working together, these two clans gave the people a balanced government with each serving as a check on the other.

The Wolf (Maiingan) clan produced scouts. Wolf clan members lived mostly around Mille Lacs and St. Croix.

Members of the Martin (Waabizheski) clan served as pipe bearers and message carriers for the chiefs. The people of the Martin Clan were hunters, food gathers and warriors of the Ojibway. Long ago, warriors fought to defend their village or hunting territory. They became known as master strategists in planning the defense of their people.

Waubojeeg or White Fisher was the leader of the Caribou (Adik) clan.

The Bird Clan represented the spiritual leaders of the people and gave the nation its vision of well-being and its highest development of the spirit. The people of the Bird Clan were said to possess the characteristics of the eagle, the head of their clan, in that they pursued the highest

elevations of the mind just as the eagle pursues the highest elevations of the sky.

In the age-old tradition, clan members of the same clan respectfully acknowledged each other with the greeting "Aaniin (hello!) Dodem."

Traditionally, Ojibwe people have had very close, extended family relationships. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins were all parts of a family unit. Besides having many relatives, a person was also a member of a dodem, or clan. Clan identity is passed through the father.

Members of the same clan, no matter how many miles apart, were one's brothers and sisters and were expected to extend hospitality, food and lodging to each other.

Ojibwe people belong to a tribe (band) and to the Ojibwe Nation. Clan relationships help unite the various Ojibwe bands as one nation. However, just like language dialects, community clan systems may vary slightly.

In addition to the information from [The History of the Ojibwe Nation](#) by William Warren, some of the above information also came from [The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway](#), Benton, Banai, Edward. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Indian Country Press, Inc. 1981

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