

Over the centuries and decades, the terminology used to refer to Indigenous Peoples in Canada has evolved. These changes were motivated by Indigenous community leaders, governing bodies, and the need to be respectful in whichever language is utilized. Since the 1980's, the term 'Aboriginal' was the most appropriate and accepted term used to refer to the Indigenous Peoples in Canada. More recently, this term has been replaced with Indigenous, indicating a shift in mentality and relationships between non-Indigenous Canadians and Indigenous Peoples in Canada. While it can seem as though the terms are interchangeable, it is important to understand the distinction between the terms.

Historically, the term Aboriginal encompassed the first inhabitants of Canada. This included First Nations, Inuits, and Métis peoples. However, when examining the history of the word itself, Aboriginal fails to encompass the historical origins of the Indigenous Peoples in relation to the land due to the 'ab' in Aboriginal translating to 'away from' or 'not'¹ which falls short of acknowledging the presence of Indigenous Peoples on the land prior to European settlers. In addition, many leaders and Elders of Indigenous communities felt that the term failed to fully recognize the diversity of Indigenous communities². In contrast, the word 'Indigenous' originates from the Latin word 'indigena'¹, which translates to 'sprung from the land' which highlights the Indigenous Peoples connection to their land and emphasizes the legality Indigenous Peoples' land claims, autonomy, rights and treatment.

Despite this, the term 'Aboriginal' held legal value due to its mention in Section 35 of the 1982 Canadian Constitution¹. However, in 2007, the United Nations recognized the inability of the term to recognize the legal and human rights of the Indigenous Peoples. In turn, this led to the creation of the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)³. Years later, the Canadian government followed suit and recognized the importance of using the term 'Indigenous' rather than 'Aboriginal'. One example of this change was the renaming of the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) in 2015².

While Indigenous is the most culturally appropriate blanket term currently, Indigenous groups, like the Mi'kmaq (L'un'k) or Wolastoqivik by their own term based on their languages. Therefore, if it is in reference to a specific Nation, it is recommended to use their specific name. As we become more aware of a specific Nation's language and protocol, it is most respectful to follow their lead in how they would prefer to be called. If one does not know, it is highly encouraged to ask a member of that nation (John R Sylliboy, personal communication, April 7, 2021).

¹ Joseph, B. (2016, September 21). Indigenous or Aboriginal: Which is correct? *CBC*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-aboriginal-which-is-correct-1.3771433>

² Indigenous Innovation. (2020 June 17). Why we say "Indigenous" instead of "Aboriginal".

<https://www.animikii.com/news/why-we-say-indigenous-instead-of-aboriginal>

³ United Nations. (2007 September 13). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf