

A Quick Reference Guide to: Indigenous Terminology

Akomawt Educational Initiative

Native American & American Indian

Generalized labels applied to all of the original inhabitants of the continent we now call America (originally conceived by some tribes as Turtle Island). “American” in both of these terms ascribes a settler-colonial descriptor created by and used for the purpose of the dominant culture in the United States. Often used interchangeably. Preferred term is the specific name of the tribal group or population being referred to.

Native People & Indigenous People

Generalized terms for worldwide populations with long histories connected to specific geographic areas. These terms are not tied to the concept of the United States or America, but do refer to the original inhabitants of the land OR a place. Common current usage in North America is simply “Native”. Preferred term is the specific name of the population being referred to.

Indian

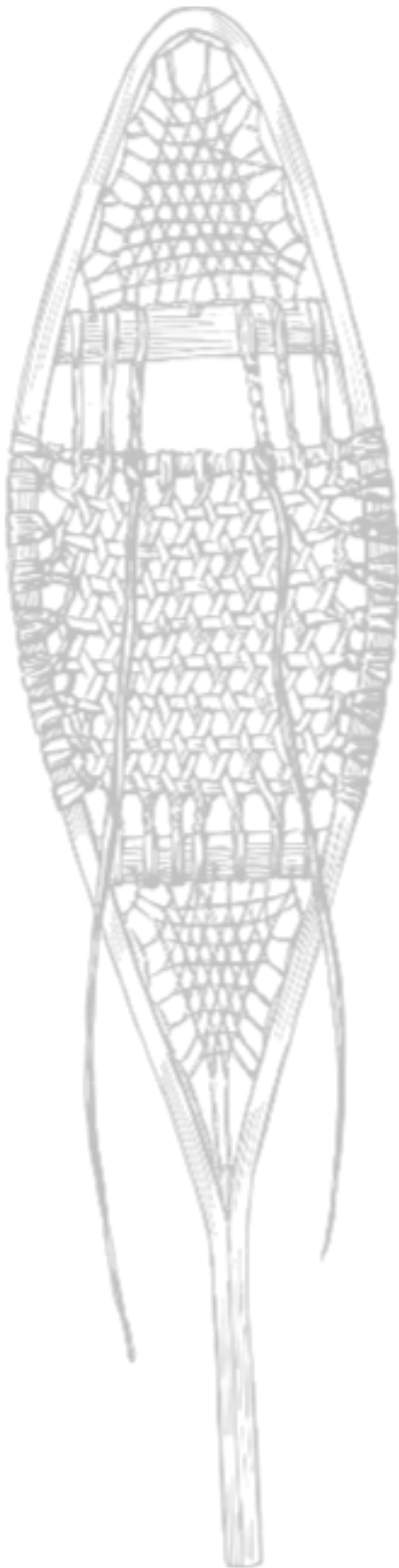
A generalized term misapplied to the original inhabitants of North and South America by explorers who believed they found a sea route to south Asia. During the subsequent 500+ years, this label has been broadly applied by traders, missionaries, colonists, early Americans, etc. to describe individual or group origin, race, and legal status and rights. Also, used in the writing of the Constitution. Federal laws about Indigenous People in America are known as Federal Indian Law. Legal terminology of Native people as one large group, although incorrect, use the term to this day. Because of its broad recognition, it is sometimes used informally within Native communities as well.

Turtle Island

English term for what is commonly referred to as “the Americas”. Is not limited to recent borders and recent nation-states. Comes from Algonquian and Iroquoian origin stories in which the land is formed on the back of a turtle.

Tribe

Anthropology term for a small scale culturally distinct society built on common descent, language and ideology.



Nation

Term adopted by many tribes after the Indian Reorganization Act (1934). Gained popularity in the 1970s after the American Indian Movement in response to the term “tribe”. Gaining popularity amongst Native governments as they reassert sovereignty and self-sufficiency.

Tribal Nation

Term utilized by some tribal governments as a way to include both forms of social and political governance.

Community

Social term for Native People and their families (both 1. Native and 2. non-Native People with kinship or marriage ties to a tribal group) within an immediate geographic area.

Clan

A kinship grouping of families that are organized around and adhere to a code of social, cultural and political norms. Can be determined by a matrilineal or patrilineal system.

Band

A subgroup of a tribal entity that was geographically distinct prior to colonization, or was created during the reservation era as tribes were dispossessed of land and placed on a governmentally determined land base. In Canada this term applies to the basic unit of government for First Nations populations subject to the Indian Act.

First Nation

Commonly used term referring to non-Métis and non-Inuit indigenous populations in Canada. First popularized in the 1970's by Natives in Canada as a response to the incorrect term “Indian”. In the 1980's, it would gain official usage replacing “Indian Band”.

Federally Recognized/Acknowledged Tribe

Legal term for a tribal entity that is recognized/acknowledged as having a government-to-government relationship with the United States. These tribes have certain inherent rights of self-government (i.e., tribal sovereignty) and are entitled to receive certain federal benefits, services, and protections because of their special relationship with the United States. Originally established by treaty, federal recognition is now established by act of congress, federal court ruling, or through the BIA's Office of Federal Acknowledgement. At present, there are 573 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages.

State Recognized Tribe

Legal term for a tribal entity that is recognized by individual states for their various internal state government purposes. However, the United State government does not recognize this group as a political or cultural entity.

Elders Council & Youth Council

Voluntary, appointed or elected entities for citizens/members of a tribe formed specifically to voice the perspectives of two important and honored portions of tribal society.

Tribal Historic Preservation Office/r

Officially designated by a federally-recognized Indian tribe to direct a program approved by the National Park Service. Officer assumes some or all of the functions of State Historic Preservation Officers on Tribal lands.