

# **W8banaki Cultural Policy**

**2016-2021**

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## **Word from the Cultural Advisor**

Kwaï mziwi,

We have finally arrived at the finish line in drafting our Cultural Policy! After several months of meetings, exchanges, interviews and data collection, we can say: mission accomplished!

Hundreds of people of all ages have expressed their vision of our Nation's culture, which will better guide our future actions in the preservation, protection and dissemination of our cultural traditions. Together, through this collective reflection process, we have rediscovered the key elements and foundations, but most importantly, our cultural richness.

Our culture cannot be defined in a single personal ideology, because it is part of our Nation's collective memory, which has been preserved over time thanks to our ancestors who were committed to transmitting and safeguarding our culture. We are now taking this approach to maintain a connection and honour our ancestors by showing pride in our origins and heritage. It is now our duty to do the same for future generations. Let's be proud of our distinct cultural identity. Let us embrace this policy so that all can participate in its implementation and ensure it remains alive and well.

I invite you to read this document, which is not an end in itself, but rather a continuity of what we have been and what we have become. Just like our culture, this policy shall remain alive; it will evolve over time while remaining true to our needs and desires. This principle shall flourish so long as we maintain a strong link with our practices, our traditions and our knowledge. Let us give it the place it deserves in our families, our relationships, our meetings and our community actions.

I would like to thank all those who participated and contributed directly and indirectly to the realization of this policy, especially the members of the Cultural Policy Development Committee: Luc, Michel, Élise, Thérèse, Jean-Paul, Mandi, Jennifer, Sylvain, Steve. Kchi wliwni for having devoted your time and effort, thereby contributing to the success of this long process.

Kchi wliwni!

Mathieu O'Bomsawin-Gauthier

## **Word from the President of the Cultural Committee**

For several years now, the Abenakis of Odanak Band Council has been working at developing a cultural policy. In February 2015, an Abenaki Cultural Policy Development Committee, made up of representatives from several business sectors, was formed and endeavoured to gather the members' specific interests which helped determine the policy's main axes of development. I would like to thank the members of the committee and all those who worked directly or indirectly on the development of this cultural policy for their efforts and interest in safeguarding and perpetuating our unique culture.

Adopting a cultural policy is a necessary exercise in a constantly changing world in order to preserve our heritage and perpetuate it over time, while remaining an active community in this modern chess game. The communities of Odanak and Wôlinak therefore joined the committee to gain a better understanding of the interests of all of our communities.

What makes this work even more exciting and important is that, historically, our communities were made up of families from several nations forming the Abenaki Confederacy and as such, we have one of the richest, most varied and colourful First Nations. We have a unique character which merits safeguarding and joining a more modern development. Much remains to be done to identify our people, our locations, but I am convinced that this cultural policy will help us succeed in creating a vast inventory of our know-how and life skills and that we will distinguish ourselves from our congeners.

We must be proud of who we are, who we have been and share this culture with the world. The enthusiasm of our members is reflected in the number and quality of responses we were able to gather during our private, group and community meetings as well as the impressive number of questionnaires returned. Supported by such a cultural policy, I am convinced we will not only be able to safeguard this wealth, but also perpetuate it over time and transmit it to our future generations, thus refuting the historians who predicted our culture's extinction and the disappearance of our people.

*Luc O'Bomsawin*

Chair of the Abenaki Cultural Policy Development Committee

## **Background**

For several years, the Abenaki Nation, more specifically the Odanak community, has sought to produce a document to help them direct their efforts to safeguard, transmit and disseminate their distinctive culture. In April 2015, the mandate to draft an Abenaki cultural policy was given to Isabelle Picard, ethno-museology consultant, to develop this policy, in collaboration with the Odanak cultural committee.

The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework for future cultural actions, to recognize what exists and to allow people to assert themselves as Abenakis, for the development of the entire Nation.

## **Methodology**

In order for this cultural policy to become a democratic process allowing all members of the Abenaki Nation to express themselves, several measures have been implemented:

- Design and distribution of a written questionnaire to all members of the Nation, on and off reserve; *120 questionnaires were returned and reviewed;*
- Around a dozen individual interviews were conducted (in Odanak, Wôlinak and by telephone);
- Four group interviews were conducted (artists and artisans, elders, youth, Musée des Abénakis);
- A public forum was held in Odanak;
- Several books and documents were consulted (see bibliography).

Subsequently, a detailed analysis of all the data collected was conducted, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Groupings were made and we were able to distinguish four main axes, which we will identify as orientations.

### **1- Safeguarding and preservation**

- 2- Transmission, education and accessibility
- 3- Support, development and promotion
- 4- Valorization

Finally, specific objectives were linked to each of these orientations, based on the results from the analyses related to the consultations.

### **Nature of a cultural policy**

A cultural policy is a democratic, political and public gesture of recognition of the importance of culture in a given community. It is the backbone of the community's strategy for safeguarding, transmitting and disseminating culture to ensure greater integration and planning throughout all the community's activities and sectors.

### **The foundations of culture**

The 1982 UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies defines culture as follows:

*“Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”*

### **Abenaki culture: an evolving culture**

*“The Abenaki culture is both a culture that is alive and fragile, proud and respectful; a culture which combines the values, heritage, customs and traditions passed down by the ancestors, as well as the continuous evolution of a current, open and modern culture which is reflected in its unique cultural practices.”*

## **Current situation**

In the space of a few decades, like many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, the Abenaki culture has changed considerably. In the early sixties, the Abenaki language was still spoken but it no longer is outside songs or language courses given on occasion. Ash basket manufacturing used to be a flourishing industry and one of the community's economic drivers, but activities have diversified over the years. Miscegenation, globalization, urban geographic situations, external prejudices, education outside the community, the fact that a majority of members live off-reserve and the lack of human and financial resources have contributed to the impoverishment of the Abenaki culture.

On the other hand, many cultural aspects remain alive and strong, demonstrating the strength, resilience and pride of the Abenaki people. Indeed, crafts, songs, dances, hunting, fishing, pow-wows and annual festivals are still very present activities. Certain institutions also stand out such as the Musée des Abénakis, the La Commune walking trail and the family hall to only name a few. The presence of the Abenaki people on the territory is also a significant element that certainly influences the cultural portrait of the Abenakis and which guides the actions to come.

While the Abenaki culture is still strong in certain families, it is not so in others. The challenge is for people to have access to their culture and thus share their knowledge and know-how for the survival of a rich, unique and authentic culture.

## **Assets**

- ***Musée des Abénakis***
- ***La Commune trail***
- ***Odanak and Wôlinak Pow wow***
- ***Several cultural practices still alive (songs, dances, crafts, stories and legends, etc.)***

- *Celebrations – non-recurring – (National Aboriginal Day, camping on Ile Ronde, corn day, etc.)*
- *Customary activities (hunting, fishing, gathering)*
- *Non-recurring classes and workshops (dance, language, crafts)*
- *Women's drum group*
- *Audio documents (songs)*
- *Written documents – sometimes incomplete – (language, history, medicinal plants)*
- *FNHS Program (including early childhood cultural workshops)*

## **Orientations**

### **1. Safeguarding and preservation**

#### ***Objectives***

- 1.1 Document and conduct scientific research on Abenaki history, culture, language and heritage;
- 1.2 Standardize the Abenaki language;
- 1.3 Support Musée des Abénakis activities in the respect of its own mission;
- 1.4 Establish agreements with various authorities for the preservation, recognition, respect and development of the Abenaki territory and sacred sites;
- 1.5 Identify, conserve and protect Abenaki artefacts and cultural heritage;
- 1.6 Promote respect for Abenaki cultural authenticity;

1.7 Implement means facilitating the free exercise of customary practices (fishing, hunting, trapping and gathering) in order to protect and respect the environment;

## **2. Transmission, education and accessibility**

### ***Objectives***

2.1 Promote better knowledge and access to Abenaki history and culture, on and off reserve;

2.2 Recognize the importance of transmitting Abenaki knowledge and know-how to younger generations;

2.3 Make Abenaki culture more accessible to all. Democratize and decolonize Abenaki culture;

2.4 Promote community and family cultural activities;

2.5 Collaborate with neighbouring schools to promote Abenaki history and culture;

2.6 Support the creation of a community location for documentation, research, development, transmission and dissemination of Abenaki culture;

2.7 Develop educational tools to promote access to authentic cultural content;

2.8 Promote opportunities for intergenerational cultural exchange and sharing;

2.9 Support the development of Abenaki culture training programs, courses and workshops;

2.10 Promote cultural and community gatherings on the Abenaki territory;

2.11 Provide a varied, harmonized, accessible and recurring annual cultural programming.

### **3. Support, development and promotion**

#### ***Objectives***

3.1 Synchronize the cultural actions from different sectors and organizations to ensure consistency and variety;

3.2 Further promote classes, workshops and other cultural activities (on and off reserve);

3.3 Solicit the hiring of a resource dedicated to culture and its development;

3.4 Develop a five-year cultural action plan;

3.5 Support the actions of emerging and recognized artists and artisans;

3.6 Promote artists, artisans and bearers of Abenaki traditions;

3.7 Maintain, update and promote a directory of artists, artisans and bearers of Abenaki traditions;

3.8 Support community, cultural and artistic gatherings.

#### 4. **Valorization**

##### ***Objectives***

4.1 Further promote the Abenaki language, customs, traditions and history;

4.2 Recognize and apply Abenaki community cultural values of mutual aid, sharing, respect, etc.;

4.3 Foster opportunities for cultural development and identity building for all Abenaki people;

4.4 Promote Abenaki language, culture, traditions and history at all times and in all situations;

4.5 Develop means to spread Abenaki culture to members and non-members;

4.6 Advocate and share Abenaki history and culture;

4.7 Encourage the purchase and promotion of works of art by Abenaki artists and artisans.

## **Conclusion**

The Abenaki Nation is seeking to become a confederacy composed of many different nations. The Abenaki culture can only be tinged with this historical fact. Based on the legacy of its ancestors, but also firmly rooted in 2015, the Abenaki culture is varied, rich, flourishing, evolving, but also fragile and uncertain, sometimes influenced by other Aboriginal and non-native cultures, since a majority of Abenaki people live off-reserve. Nevertheless, the Abenakis possess all the documents, artefacts, oral history and other assets to allow them to define their own authentic history and culture, and to transmit and disseminate it.

To achieve this, the sharing of responsibilities is an essential factor. While the Abenakis Council can certainly provide the facilities, funding and human resources necessary for the Nation's development and cultural affirmation, knowledge and know-how are found in the population. It becomes everyone's responsibility, in particular the elders, artists, artisans, and tradition bearers, to share their knowledge and transmit their culture to all. The same is true for the survival of the unique cultural character of the Abenakis.

By practicing one or more of the Abenaki cultural activities, by residing on and using the territory, in day-to-day activities and exchanges, the Abenaki Nation shall assert itself, identify itself, enrich itself and recognize itself ... for generations to come.