
Mi'kmaq Sweat Lodge Ceremonies

The information in this pamphlet is only a small portion of the many Mi'kmaq Teachings that exist. Teachings may vary from Nation to Nation.

We as Mi'kmaq, are a proud people of our traditions and culture, and respect and honor these ways.

It takes time and sacrifice to be recognized as a Traditional teacher.

Unfortunately, there are those who present themselves as Healers and Medicine People who have not earned that title and use the teachings in a wrong way. Please consult with respected Elders to get referrals to recognized Traditional Elders/ Healers.

Special Acknowledgement
To our Elders and Medicine
People who have kept our Culture
Healthy and Alive

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Mi'kmaq Traditional Sweat Lodge

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The sweat lodge ceremony is used by traditional people to cleanse their Spirit of bad spirits and negative forces. A person may use the lodge for purification, understanding, medicine, strength, or peace and harmony.

The sweat lodge, employed by the Mi'kmaq, dates back since time immemorial. In the old days, it was the custom, after returning to the coast from a winter spent in the woods, to dig a shallow hole, put bent sticks over this, each to end thrust into the ground, and make a dome-shaped structure. This was covered with birch bark and animal hides to make it airtight. The structure is called “ na'ganame wog'wom, (sweat lodge).

Cleansing Lodge

In the old days fire was built in it, and stones were heated in the fire. Everything was then removed except the heated stones. Over them were placed hemlock boughs, whereupon three or four men entered, made the entrance airtight, and remained to have a good sweat. No water was employed. This treatment was taken by men of all ages upon returning from winter quarters in the forest, to remove from the system the cold of autumn and winter.

At times women and children also used it.

Healing Sweat

A somewhat different version of the lodge and associated practices is as follows: When the grass begins to sprout and the trees begin to bud, the bark of seven different trees are boiled together until the mixture has the consistency of syrup or molasses.

Poles about seven feet in length are driven into the ground to a depth of about a foot, and are set firmly. Spruce or birch bark is put alternatively in and out along these stakes, so that it is strongly braced and held in position. It is then covered with a blanket and made as nearly airtight as possible.

The stones are heated to a white heat by the fire-keeper, then the stones are brought in by the door-keeper. A large stone is placed in the center, and six stones are placed around it.

The eldest woman enters first, followed by the next eldest, and so on. Next it is the men, at the same order, and sit on the cedar boughs placed there for this purpose. When entering the lodge, one shows respect, by saying “ Mn'sit Nogemaq” (all my relations). The lodge-keeper pours medicine on the stones, and vapor fills the lodge. It goes to lungs and bones.

Each person has a towel with which they rub the back of a person next to them, and is the recipient of similar treatment. The sweat is full of impurities from one's entire system. Before they leave the lodge, each wraps them-

selves in a blanket. Then they go to lay down and cool off gradually.

Cleansing/Healing *

The sweat bath of the seventeenth century was a more strenuous affair, at least in the Gaspé' and Miramichi regions, involving the use of water and a subsequent plunge into the river.

The sweat lodge was built in the form of a small wigwam covered with bark, or with skins of beaver and moose, and so arranged that it has no opening whatever. In the middle thereof the Mi'kmaq place twenty eight hot stones, which heat those inside so much that the water soon starts from all parts of their bodies. They throw water upon those hot stones, whence the steam rises to the top of the wigwam, and then it falls upon their backs, much like a hot and burning rain. This continues until some of them, unable to endure this heat, are obliged to rush out as quickly as they can. Then, rushing quickly from the wigwam, they throw themselves into the river in order to cool off. A meal is served immediately after they have issued from the lodge and the river.

*LeClercq, Gaspesia, pp 296-97,1607