

BACKGROUND**5. Traditional Leadership**

Each First Nation has words in its own language to describe the leadership positions and roles in their Nation. In English, the word “Chief” is commonly used. However, this word conceals the diversity of different types of leadership roles that were held in a community, and the cultural nuances carried by the words in their own language.

Hereditary Leadership

In some First Nations, a hereditary system is used to select leaders. The position is usually inherited from either the mother’s side of the family (matrilineal descent) or the father’s side (patrilineal descent).

With the inherited position, the leader usually takes the name of the previous leader, along with the rights and responsibilities associated with managing the group’s lands and resources.

First Nations with hereditary leadership were typically highly structured. People were ranked on a social scale, and those with higher ranks generally formed the leadership.

These ranked societies developed on the coast where the wealth of resources including salmon and cedar brought about highly ordered societies. They have a complex system of clans and subclans, all oriented to managing the resources of their individual territories.

Consensual Leadership

Other societies select leaders by consensus. They were usually more egalitarian societies, located in the interior and north of the province. In these societies, if a person worked hard and earned the respect of the community they could achieve a position of

leadership. In some cases the entire community selected the leader. In others a council of advisors chose a new leader through consensus.

Leadership Qualities

However the leadership was structured, there were some general characteristics of leaders that were expected.

In most societies, leaders were not considered to be above the rest of the community. They were responsible to and acted on behalf of the community.

Leaders modelled the qualities and behaviours that were expected of others. These included humility, hard work and respect for the land. In fact, managing the resources to keep a balance between natural laws and survival of the community was a main responsibility.

Role of Advisors, Elders and Matriarchs

In traditional governments, leaders did not act alone. They usually had a council of advisors to help make decisions. These could be Elders or heads of extended families.

Communities depended on certain people who were authorities and custodians of the legal customs and traditions. Usually this was the role of Elders who were trained to share and pass on their knowledge.

Traditionally, leaders were usually men. However, matriarchs were an important influence in the community’s decision making. They held great respect, and in many ways acted in the same way as leaders. They advised the community and helped managed the land and resources.