

Background Information

Teacher note: The purpose of this excerpt is to provide background information to support *Examining Cross-cultural Observations* MT. It is intended for use within the context of the *Modelling the Tools* resource only. Terminology found in the excerpt must be considered within the context of the historical time period.

The following excerpt is intended to help students recognize that anthropological accounts are culturally sensitive and, as such, may reflect elements of cultural superiority, ethnocentrism and stereotyping. This account offers a European perspective on the importance of dreams to the spiritual life of First Nations people.

Dreams

Like the French in the 16th and 17th centuries, many First Nations people were deeply spiritual. Although each culture had difficulty even recognizing the other's spirituality or religion, the practices of each were not a separate part of their life, but influenced all aspects of their lives. While European missionaries listened to their God, many Europeans believed that dreams provided First Nations people with guidance about aspects of spiritual and everyday life. French recognition of the importance of dreams was an early example of French acceptance that First Nations people did indeed have a religion.

Their dreams are to them instead of Prophecy, Inspiration, Laws, Commandments, and Rules, in all their Enterprizes, in War, Peace, Commerce and Hunting: They regard them as Oracles. The Opinion they have of their Dreams draws them into a kin of necessity to be ruled by them; for they think 'tis an Universal Spirit, that inspires them by Dreams, and adviseth them what to do; And they carry this so far that if their Dream orders them to kill a Person, or commit any other wicked Action, they presently execute it, and make satisfaction for it afterwards . . . The Parents dream for their Children, the Captains for their Village. There are some among them that take upon them to interpret Dreams and explain them after their own fancy or inclination, and if their Interpretations don't prove true, they are not lookt upon as Cheats ere the more for that.

Louis Hennepin [Récollet missionary], *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America* (London, 1698), vol. II, p. 66.

Adapted from Ruth Sandwell et al. *Early Contact and Settlement in New France* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002), pp. 33–60. Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.