

# Original People - Chapter One

## We Get Our Living Like Milk From the Land

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The original people of the Okanagan are known as the syilx speaking people. They have been here since the beginning of people on this land.

The original people of the Okanagan were wished her by <k<sup>w</sup>lencuten,> the Creator of oneself, Creator and arranger of the world.

The **syilx** people know history, passed on from one person to another, from generation to generation, as a record called <cepcaptik<sup>w</sup>l.> It is a history of the meaning of being **syilx**, rather than a history of dates. The **meanings** in the <cepcaptik<sup>w</sup>l.> are formed through story. They are the truths and knowledge of the natural laws made active through story.

In the <cepcaptik<sup>w</sup>l we are told the <k<sup>w</sup>lencuten,> created and sent <senk'lip,> Coyote, to help change things so that our people might survive on the earth. Coyote's travels across the land are a record of the natural laws our people learned in order to survive.

Learning and teaching the natural laws on the land is necessary for humans to love and to continue on. Humans don't have instinct to know how to live in nature's laws. They were given memory instead. Understanding the living land and teaching how to be part of that is the only way we, **the syilx**, have survived.

<St'elsqilx<sup>w</sup>> was the beginning of people on this land. < St'elsqilx<sup>w</sup>> slowly changed to become the **sqilx<sup>w</sup>**, the original people of this land. They became changed through learning to live on the land. The <cepcaptik<sup>w</sup>l.> tell of four stages of learning that they went through. All our laws come from these four stages of learning.

The first law is to understand and to live in balance with the natural world. This first law has been put into the meanings in the < cepcaptik<sup>w</sup>l.>

The other laws are for people to get along with each other in a healthy way and for passing on ways which are respectful to all creation. We govern ourselves by these laws. These are the four stages.

1. **st'elsqilx<sup>w</sup>** (torn from the earth **sqilx<sup>w</sup>**) life form of first people without natural instincts to survive
2. **xatma?sqilx<sup>w</sup>** (in front of us **sqilx<sup>w</sup>**) first thinking people who learned the natural law to survive
3. **sqilx<sup>w</sup>** (dreaming ones, bound together, of the land) original people who learned to live together on the land in peace
4. **?awtma?sqilx<sup>w</sup>** (to struggle and/or come after **sqilx<sup>w</sup>**) today's **sqilx<sup>w</sup>** after the arrival of newcomers

(note. These interpretations are based on root words meanings in the syllables of each word)

The language which arose from our learning about the land is called the **syilx** language. All who speak it are called the **syilx** because the language carries the teachings of a very old civilization with thousands of years of knowledge of healthy living on this land. The laws are always taught by telling the stories each child and to any adults who need reminding.

The land forms in the stories are teachings and are reminders to each generation, that the land is at the center of how we are to behave. The destruction of the story landmarks and natural land forms are like tearing pages out of a history book to the **syilx**. Without land knowledge we are endangered as a life form on that land and we in turn endanger other life forms there.

The **syilx** speaking people's lands lie on both sides of the Okanagan River, east to the Selkirk range, west to the Cascades summit, south into Washington bounded by the Columbia River and Lake Chelan and north up to Salmon River.

The **syilx** Territory had eight organized districts. All speak **syilx** and have the same customs and stories. They are one Nation and are now commonly called the Okanagan.

These are:

Southern Okanagan or **senq'a?tik<sup>w</sup>**

Northern Okanagan or **suknaqinx**

San Poil or **senp?<sup>w</sup>ilx**

Colville/Kettle or **senx<sup>w</sup>ya?lpitk<sup>w</sup>**

Arrow Lakes or **s?alt'ik'<sup>w</sup>et**

Slocan or **sen?ickstx**

Similkameen/Methow or **smelqmix**

ORIGINAL OKANAGAN TERRITORY

(Approximate Boundary)

The Northern Okanagan, **suknaqinx**, occupy the lands in the Okanagan Valley

north of Oroville and include the Douglas Lake area. The **senx<sup>w</sup>ya?lpitk<sup>w</sup>**, Kettle, occupy the Kettle Valley to the Great Kettle Falls. The **sen?ickstx**, Slocan, occupy the Slocan down to Chewelah. The **smelqmix** occupy the Similkameen Valley from Princeton to the south bordered by the Methow. The San Poil, **senp?<sup>w</sup>ilx**, occupying the San Poil River to where it meets with the Columbia river. The Southern Okanagan, **senq'a?itk<sup>w</sup>**, occupy the lands surrounding the Okanagan River to where it meets with Columbia.

The **suknaq'inx**, the **sen?ickstx**, the **s?alt'ik'<sup>w</sup>**, and part of the **senx<sup>w</sup>ya?lpitk<sup>w</sup>** and **smelqmix** are traditional districts which are now part of the territory north of the Canada/USA boundary.

Before European invasion, the **syilx** moved freely between the south, north, west, and eastern parts of their territory. The **syilx** people had a very well organized system. They were organized by how the land was used for survival on the **syilx cultural traditions**. The land was used for hunting, fishing, root digging and berry picking. The traditional food gathering areas were shared by all the **syilx**. Some territories were also shared with other friendly tribes.

The **syilx** organized themselves in order to protect and practice our rights. The **right** to live and survive as a **syilx** is where all our rights come from. Living our rights brought us to this time in our history.

Freedom within our territory is a right coming out of having looked after the land for thousands of years without destroying it. The **syilx** preserved the land in its natural healthy state for each generation through knowledge and the practice of natural law. Because of that we are still here. We have the right to live on the bounty which our ancestors passed down to us as pure as when the Creator gave it. It is the same as inheriting a house or money which your parents worked and saved for. No guns, nor foreign laws on paper of other people, who destroyed their own land, can change that truth.

All of **syilx** territory is marked with our signs. The land is understood in how to survive on it. Our people, all carry the right to be **syilx** because of that. Their right is a responsibility to the **future**.

The way the people together carry out their rights, as governing groups, are what the nation, district and village chieftainships were organized for.

It is each person's right to live in any community on the territory as long as the customs and laws are followed by the individual. If a person or family did not follow the laws of a community, they still had the right to live alone on the land and survive.

The right of being a **syilx is a responsibility**, first to know and follow the natural laws to make sure of healthy generations to come, and second to follow the laws of a community for the same reason.

The **syilx** people had good governance through the chieftainship system. The chief represented the will of the people in carrying out the rights of being **syilx**.

The chief represented the guarantee that the **syilx** will continue on. The Chief represented good decisions of the people while protecting the land and the natural laws. It is a responsibility to balance human needs with the natural laws.

The **Protection** of the land natural resources means the protection of the **coming generation**. **This** is always the main responsibility of chieftainship in representing the will of the people. The chief is fully responsible to represent the **rights of future** generations and their health, not just **the rights of each person** living in the village.

The chief is the center of people's strength and was always in emotional, physical, spiritual and mental balance. Most important of all, the chief was a good role model for the youth and all the people.

The **syilx** people had one High Chief who lived in the Northern Okanagan district at **Nkmepelks** and who traveled to visit each district. Each district had a head tribal chief and chiefs for each village. All districts cooperated with each other and shared hunting, fishing and food gathering territory, they also inter-married.

A high chief represented the laws of the whole **syilx** at the nation level to protect the rights of the **syilx**. The high chief chose and gave his title to one that he trained before his death. The high chief family decided among themselves who could continue the responsibility of carrying the right of all the **syilx** forward. They are responsible for protecting the land, the people, the language and the **syilx** ways.

The high chiefs, **p'elk'mula?x<sup>w</sup>**, meaning Earth Turning, and later **Nkwala** and then **Chilheetza** were called "**silwa lh yilmixwem**." They were overseers of our right as the **syilx**. They had the responsibility of territorial protection, inter-nation trading and upheld co-operation with other Nations.

Large districts had a tribal chief. Some large districts had two tribal chiefs. Usually there was the main tribal chief to keep peace between villages and another called a warchief. The warchief was one who watched for enemies from outside their territory. His role was to protect the **syilx** people.

Tribal chiefs like **Whawheyixw**, Little Red Fox, of the Arrow Lakers/Slocan oversaw decisions for food allocation for trading with neighboring friendly tribes, like the Kalispel and the Spokanes. He closely regulated the movement of his villages through the lakes territory because of the constant threat of unfriendly tribes from the east.

Another example is the high salmon chief at Kettle Falls. **Knkannaxwa** (died 1896) was a tribal chief who had the say over how many salmon were to be caught at the falls fishery by all the tribes of the **syilx** people.

A village chief represented village concerns at the extended family level to make sure the laws of the village were peacefully kept. Village chiefs were selected from the (katlh) hereditary family of chiefs. The village chief trained several good-minded sons, nephews, grandsons, or even sons-in-law. One of them gradually took over duties while the old chief was still alive. This one would usually become the next chief.

Village chiefs, called **yilmixwem** had the say about resources on the land in their village areas. For example, in the Ashnola area (near Keremeos B.C.) the village chiefs had the say in the hunting of the big horn sheep, the taking of eagle feathers and the gathering and trading of tulmin (Indian Paint) because these things were located in that village's area. It was a responsibility to care for and regulated the use of those things so they would not be over used.

After the death of a village chief, family head elders gathered to confirm the choice. The will of the people is the strength of the Chief. The survival of the people even into the future and the protection of all the life on the land is the only reason for a chief in the community. All other things are everyone's responsibility.

The **senq'a?itk<sup>w</sup>**, Southern Okanagan, practiced a good custom in which a village had two or three chiefs at one time, each with equal authority. They took turns in the duty of village chief.

There were women chieftainesses in some of the **senq'a?itk<sup>w</sup>** Southern Okanagan villages. They were called Skumalt, women of great authority. They were appointed formally at a village meeting just as a chief is. They were always related to the chief, and at death, the office passed another female relative. As an example in a village near Omak, the chief served as the group manager while the Skumalt was the adviser in cases of serious crimes or emergencies.

In the villages the heads of extended family clans were called xatus meaning "head of". They could be either male or female. Xatus took care of keeping good relations between their family members and other family clans. An example is if a family member did wrong to a person from another family and the household head could not straighten it out, then it went to all the family heads. In a dispute, the responsibility moved upward to the village chief until it was cleared up.

The eldest of each household, called "tlax tla kap" whether female or male, were responsible for the good conduct of individual family members in the day to day work of the households.

Serious older males or females became *suxencwiltm*, the ones who discipline. They were law keepers who took on a role to keep discipline and peace in the village. They were usually called on to give "reminder" talks at funerals and to talk to young married people who were having problems. Some of the males were later called watchmen and were given duties by the Catholic priests similar to policemen. Later they became advisors to the chief and were called "*sux kwina mam*" and were called councilors.

Individual members were responsible to the household heads. Each person was free to work at whatever they chose. The responsibility of the individual to the whole village is central to the rights of the individual. Individual rights were very carefully respected as long as they in turn respected the rights of others.

The **syilx** had a very organized life style. Each member had a responsibility and a part in the way the whole Nation lived in health. They had a good system of day-to-day care of people in the community. Such customs were the same throughout the **syilx** territory.

Babies up to age three always accompanied the mothers of one family. They worked together and helped each other to feed and care for them. There was never a need for babysitters and leaving the children with strangers.

Within the family unit, the grandparents watched over children between the ages four to eleven. Their role was to educate and discipline the little children in a patient loving way. The children grew up to be happy gentle people. It was good for the grandparents and the children and the parents.

Teens and young adults accompanied older uncles and aunts to be trained by them in special work.

Children were taught from the time they could learn. Skills such as fishing, hunting, tanning hides and making baskets were taught with great patience. By the time the child was grown, he or she already had what they needed to take full part in the community.

Harshness was not used in teaching children. Learning was always made very easy at first then it gradually became harder, but only as much the child could do well at. There was no such thing as failure. Teaching them through **success** opened up the child at a very young age to being good at things. They were then ready to do harder things later, without fear of failing.

Children found out what not to do through a sense of learning to be responsible to their family teachers. It is a **syilx** law to teach that each person is responsible to the rest of the people, to be a healthy part of the whole family and community. Adults are responsible to teach about this at an early age by showing very clearly how our actions are always tied to others, and how some actions disappoint and hurt their teachers and their family; the people they love most.

By the time the child became an adult, he knew how to respect others and how to live within the family unit, the extended family, the community and the whole nation and the land. This is good governance and the laws of the **syilx** as a people.

There was no such thing as an orphan, because the whole family, not only the direct parents was responsible to teach, love and provide for children. Each person then has a right, even when unborn, to family, to teachings and to security and love. No one can be left out. This is good governance because all **syilx** are important and must be cared for.

One of the most outstanding laws of the **syilx** is to learn to live and work in harmony with everyone and share with everyone in the community. We were taught in the **cepcaptik**<sup>w</sup> story of turtle that we must not think only of ourselves as individuals. We were taught that having more than others has to do with power and control of others. We were taught that it is wrong to have more things while others go without **in your community or family**. Wealth is to be enjoyed by all in times of plenty, and hardship is to be faced by all in bad times. The people stay strong together that way and it is good governance.

Another law was that every person shared equally in the work and its benefits. The highest form of good government is one in which all the members are healthy, housed and protected. In such a society, there is no need for **enforcement** laws because people don't steal from each other. Real self-government means all the people govern themselves without enforcement.

Good government, to the **syilx**, means that we carry the laws inside us. It means that we know how to act and live right without having someone force us. The **syilx** people were masters at civilization in that way. We know that those who do not know these simple laws are savage, barbaric and uncivilized. We call such people "wildmen" because they are lawless.

The **syilx** had no schools, jails, judges or police. No person ever went hungry while they were part of a village. Rape or child abuse was unknown. People were strong and lived to be old and were free all their lives. Gathering food and everyday work was shared and there was lots of time to spend on creative and interesting things. The **syilx** were great story tellers, artists, crafters, thinkers, singers, and musicians. They were the best of natural scientists and doctors. They excelled at sports and were extensive travelers. Our history shows all of this.

If the poor landless people from Europe had not been so busy fencing off properties for their governments, they might have learned a great deal from the **syilx**. We might not be living in the middle of the savageness we see every day in the news and on the streets everywhere. Perhaps if landless poor people in Canada would look at the unjustness which the legal system really protects, the way we see it, we would not be in the mess we are today. Perhaps they would know that they too have **human** rights, to live in health on the land in peace.