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Aboriginal people struggling

WINNIPEG (CP) — Native police officers in Winnipeg win the right to wear braids on religious grounds and Indian prisoners take part in sweat lodge ceremonies.

A treatment centre in a remote area of northern Manitoba uses traditional native religion to treat alcoholics and drug addicts.

Not long ago, these things would have been considered unusual.

But today, native spirituality has become increasingly visible as Canada's aboriginal people struggle to reclaim their cultural heritage.

To the elders whose role it is to pass on the traditional teachings to the young, their beliefs form a vibrant world view that

gives meaning to life — and death.

They also guard some of their teachings from prying eyes.

"They're for the Indian and Metis people," Myrtle Thomas, an elder in Winnipeg, says of some of the stories she tells.

"I don't give it out to non-Indian people. It's too sacred for me."

The stories they are willing to share, however, offer a fascinating glimpse of a world rich in legend.

Many of the tales concern Nanabosho, the trickster and teacher — a superhuman being in Indian mythology compared by many natives to Jesus Christ.

Also known as Nanabush or Wesukechak, the shape-chang-

ing Nanabosho is renowned for his pranks in countless versions of his often humorous adventures. Like Jesus, he's also revered as a great teacher.

"He's almost what you would call a divine creature because of the power of the creator that's within," says Dan Thomas, an Ojibwa who follows traditional ways and is no relation to Myrtle Thomas.

"But he's looked upon differently than how Europeans look upon Jesus," added Thomas, whose waist-length braids and black and yellow clothing signify his membership in the wolf clan.

It's said that Indians were given teachings by God but didn't follow them, so they were sent Nanabosho as a teacher.

to regain cultural heritage

The versions of his birth vary. In one, a beautiful woman, Winona, was swept away and impregnated by the harsh west wind and died after giving birth to two sons. One of the boys changed himself into a rabbit because he was hungry.

Nanabosho emphasized standards for moral behavior, helped in understanding the environment and provided lessons for survival. And, like Jesus, he promised to return.

"He's sleeping now, but when the Indian people need him he will rise up," said Joseph McLellan, a Winnipeg teacher originally from the Nimipu tribe in Oregon.

McLellan has written a chil-

dren's book called *The Birth of Nanabosho*. He explains that Nanabosho's penchant for practical jokes is a teaching method.

"You can tell somebody something but they're not going to listen, so you might as well trick somebody to show them."

Legends tell how Nanabosho often lived and laughed by his cunning.

For example, he's said to have tricked 10 women whose husbands were out on a war party into being unfaithful — twice.

In anger, he confined the loon to water by breaking its back and he made the raven a scavenger.

Others tell of Nanabosho's

goodness — how he recreated the Earth after a great flood, put Indians on Earth and declared that the dog would be man's best friend.

There is also some sensitivity to the trickster label, which many ascribe to white anthropologists who point to the similarities with other mischievous figures in Japanese, Norse and Greek mythology.

"It belittles," said Dan Thomas, a native studies consultant with Manitoba's Department of Education. "All of the good things that are attributed to Nanabush are left out."

Both Myrtle and Dan Thomas say the stories don't have the same meanings if they're told in English or abbreviated.