

Unlike some truth and reconciliation commissions that have focused on individual victims of human rights violations committed over a short period of time, this Commission has examined both the individual and collective harms perpetrated against Aboriginal families, communities, and nations for well over a century, as well as the preconditions that enabled such violence and oppression to occur. Of course, previously inaccessible archival documents are critically important to correcting the historical record, but we have given equal weight and greater voice to Indigenous oral-based history, legal traditions, and memory practices in our work and in this final report, since these represent the previously unheard and unrecorded versions of history, knowledge, and wisdom.¹⁸⁴ This has significantly informed our thinking about why repairing and revitalizing individual, family, and community memory are so crucial to the truth and reconciliation process.

Dialogue: Ceremony, testimony, and witnessing

Just as Survivors were involved in the long struggle to achieve a legally binding Settlement Agreement for the harms they have experienced, and an official apology, they have also continued to advise the Commission as it has implemented its mandate. Guided by Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and the members of the TRC Survivor Committee, the Commission has made Aboriginal oral history, legal traditions, and memory practices—ceremony, protocols, and the rituals of storytelling and testimonial witnessing—central to the TRC’s National Events, Community Hearings, forums, and dialogues. The Commission’s proceedings themselves constitute an oral history record, duly witnessed by all those in attendance. Working with local communities in each region, sacred ceremonies and protocols were performed and followed at all TRC events. Elders and traditional healers ensured that a safe environment was created for truth sharing, apology, healing, and acts of reconciliation.

The power of ceremony

Sacred ceremony has always been at the heart of Indigenous cultures, law, and political life. When ceremonies were outlawed by the federal government, they were hidden away until the law was repealed. Historically and, to a certain degree, even at present, Indigenous ceremonies that create community bonds, sanctify laws, and ratify Treaty making have been misunderstood, disrespected, and disregarded by Canada. These ceremonies must now be recognized and honoured as an integral, vital, ongoing dimension of the truth and reconciliation process.

Ceremonies also reach across cultures to bridge the divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. They are vital to reconciliation because of their sacred nature