

## Documentary Lens Lesson Plan for *Mother of Many Children*

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### Curriculum Connections

#### Lesson Objectives

*Mother of Many Children* is a one-hour documentary by Canadian director Alanis Obomsawin. The film portrays Aboriginal women and their struggles to retain their culture and traditions. This 1977 documentary is a testimony to the resilience of Aboriginal women as they face prejudice and discrimination and to their strength and determination to come together in addressing the issues that they face as keepers of their culture.

The lesson is appropriate for middle school to explore themes in current Canadian Native Studies, Social Studies and History courses. Before viewing, students discuss the meaning of family. They then compare the traditions in the different Aboriginal communities shown in *Mother of Many Children* with traditions in their own communities. They close the lesson by using the messages in the film to discuss discrimination and prejudice in Canadian society.

#### Canadian Social Studies, Native Studies, and History Themes in *Mother of Many Children*

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connection to <i>Mother of Many Children</i> – Application and Discussion Points
Culture and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the role of elders in Aboriginal communities?</li> <li>• Why are grandparents so important in the education of children?</li> <li>• How did residential schools affect the transmission of culture from one generation to the next?</li> <li>• Why is Aboriginal education important for all Canadians?</li> </ul>
Beliefs and Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the significance of the birthing scene in the film?</li> <li>• How does this birthing scene compare to birthing in the past?</li> <li>• What are two traditions connected to the birth of children in this example of Aboriginal culture?</li> <li>• Describe the Walking-Out Ceremony in Cree culture.</li> <li>• Describe the customs surrounding menstruation.</li> <li>• Describe the Ojibway wild rice harvesting traditions.</li> <li>• What are the values and beliefs reflected in the above cultural practices?</li> </ul>
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do Aboriginal people interact with the animals and plants in their environment?</li> <li>• How did the interaction of cultures in residential schooling affect Aboriginal people?</li> <li>• The abuse of alcohol in Aboriginal communities is highlighted in the film. What is the impact on individuals and communities?</li> </ul>

<b>Theme/Strand/ Key Concept</b>	<b>Connection to <i>Mother of Many Children</i> – Application and Discussion Points</b>
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does “losing status” mean?</li> <li>• What were some ways Aboriginal people lost status?</li> <li>• Describe the events surrounding the Laval court case.</li> <li>• What is the significance of the Laval case in furthering the rights of Aboriginal women in Canada?</li> <li>• Do you think the final decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in the Laval case was fair?</li> </ul>
Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is an egalitarian society?</li> <li>• How are the roles of men and women complementary in an egalitarian society?</li> <li>• Describe the roles of women in Aboriginal societies.</li> <li>• How has the participation of Aboriginal people in the dominant society affected the role of Aboriginal women?</li> <li>• What influence has the action of Aboriginal women had on policy-making decisions ?</li> </ul>
Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is culture affected by environment?</li> <li>• In the film, what common cultural values are present in all Aboriginal groups in Canada?</li> <li>• How does the rich diversity of Aboriginal cultures in Canada enrich our country?</li> </ul>
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When cultures meet there is always cross-cultural exchange. What does Wilma Simon, a Chippewa women educated at Harvard University, fear she has lost during her time away from her community?</li> <li>• How do oppression and discrimination affect identity?</li> <li>• How do our traditions help us to face struggles in life?</li> </ul>
Power and Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was power structured in egalitarian Aboriginal cultures?</li> <li>• What do the terms “matriarchal” and “matrilineal society” mean?</li> <li>• How are power and decision making exercised in a matriarchal society?</li> <li>• What examples in the film illustrate the powerful role of women in traditional Aboriginal societies?</li> <li>• How has government policy and action affected the traditional role of Aboriginal women?</li> </ul>
Time, Continuity and Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How has the role of Aboriginal women changed over time in their communities?</li> <li>• How has the role of Aboriginal women remained the same?</li> <li>• How have Aboriginal women’s voices been silenced in Canada?</li> <li>• What will ensure that Aboriginal women’s voices are heard on issues that relate to Aboriginal people in Canada?</li> <li>• How is the experience of Aboriginal women in Canada important for all Canadians?</li> </ul>

## Background

The 1970s were particularly interesting years for Aboriginal women because of the government's policy of assimilation during this period of history. Aboriginal people resisted the government's attempt to destroy their cultures through the reserve and residential schools policies which tried to achieve assimilation through isolation.

In the 1960s, the government had taken a different approach: assimilation through integration. Families were encouraged to move from the reserve into the cities. It was hoped that integration would encourage Aboriginal people to leave behind their traditions and beliefs and to adopt the culture of the dominant society. Instead, Aboriginal people resisted. Aboriginal women, especially, sought to revitalize their communities through protecting their traditions and beliefs and by making a concerted effort to pass skills on to younger generations.

## Materials and Resources

- Background on Alanis Obomsawin and links to other sites about the filmmaker (from Senses of Cinema) <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/obomsawin.html>
- Biography of Alanis Obomsawin from "Celebrating Women's Achievements. . . Canadian Women in Film" from Library and Archives Canada <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/women/002026-709-e.html>

## Activities for *Mother of Many Children*

### Introduction

#### ACTIVITY 1: We Are All Related

Before showing the film in class, read or tell your students several Aboriginal stories about the origin of humans. Discuss any similarities and differences among the stories. Compare these with the Book of Genesis.

Discuss the concept of family, using examples from the students' lives to illustrate that families come in different shapes and sizes. What are the rights and responsibilities of each member of their family? Using a prepared family tree, illustrate how families are more than just the people in a house.

Write the title of the film on the board and ask the students what they think it will be about. Write the ideas on chart paper so that students can refer to them later.

### Developing Concepts

#### ACTIVITY 2: Who Am I Anyway?

After viewing the film, have students list different traditions practised among the various families.

What were some of the traditional practices they learned about in *Mother of Many Children*?

Focus in on the Walking-Out Ceremony and the first menstruation ritual. Establish that these are ceremonies of initiation. Use these questions to guide your discussion:

- What is the importance of the Walking-Out Ceremony?
- What items do the girls carry? The boys?
- Why do both girls and boys carry tobacco?
- Why is this an initiation ceremony?
- Why does a feast follow this ceremony?

- Why is first menstruation important in the life of Aboriginal girls?
- Describe the traditions/beliefs of Aboriginal people about menstruation.
- What do these traditions signify in the life of an Aboriginal girl?

### **Applying Knowledge**

#### **ACTIVITY 3: Walk a Mile in My Moccasins**

In the film the Harvard professor says:

Most minorities not only have to suffer the oppression but they also have to suffer the experience of ending the oppression by saying, You can't do it any more. The majority keeps on oppressing until the minority says no.

Discuss the statement with examples from Canadian history. Use a concept attainment method to come up with a definitions of discrimination and prejudice.

- What examples of discrimination are highlighted in the film?
- What is systemic discrimination?
- What examples of systemic discrimination are discussed in the film?
- How were residential schools examples of systemic discrimination?
- How is the loss of status experienced by Jeanette Laval systemic discrimination?
- Why was the Laval case considered a victory for Aboriginal people even though the case was lost in the Supreme Court of Canada?