

Umbilical Cord Bags (Birth Amulets)



Umbilical cord bag made by Métis artist Louise Vien, Rockland, Ontario.
(Lawrence J. Barkwell Collection)

We are connected to our mothers and to mother earth throughout our lives—the umbilical cord is our first attachment. The umbilical cord bag was traditionally used to store the small stump of the umbilical or navel cord of a newborn child. These bags were attached to the cradle board or may also be attached to a cradle or crib, to bring the baby good luck and protect him/her as they grew. Alternately, the amulet is worn by the mother/grandmother of the child. The turtle is used for girls and the lizard for boys.

Among the Crow, when a girl was old enough to wear an elk tooth dress the bag with the cord inside was tied to the back of the dress.

Gary Johnson (1943-2008), a Métis artist who lived on the Crow Reservation at Lodge Grass, Montana made the bags featured in the accompanying pictures. These photos taken in 2001 are part of the Louis Riel Institute collection.



Gary contributed photographic images of his beadwork and quillwork to the book. *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography* by L. J. Barkwell, L. Dorion and D. R. Préfontaine (Eds.) Winnipeg and Saskatoon: Pemmican Publications, Gabriel Dumont Institute and Louis Riel Institute, 2001. He then contributed further images and a chapter “The Art of Porcupine Quillwork and the Métis,” to *Métis Legacy, Volume Two: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways*, by L. J. Barkwell, L.M. Dorion and A. Hourie (Eds.) Saskatoon, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 2007.



By Métis artist Gary Johnson



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Lakota Oyate Umbilical Cord Bag

Animal Symbolism in the Sioux Culture¹ The Turtle (*ke-ya*)²

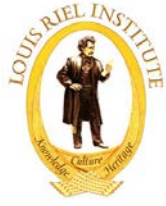
You will often see the turtle symbol in Sioux Art. The Lakota Oyate observed the changes occurring with each new moon. Each moon was identified in descriptive terms by the occurrences of that month. The Lakota also observed the changes in the stars in the night sky.

Certain star constellations appeared during each season. From these observations, they determined the equinox and the changes in the seasons. The Lakota identified 13 months in a year because of the 13 new moons; each moon has 28 days from one new moon to the next.

The Lakota Oyate also observed some creatures that reflected natural phenomena. For instance, the *keya* (turtle) has 13 large scales on its back, and 28 small scales around the shell. Because of these and other natural occurrences the *keya* became an important symbol in Lakota society. The turtle is also involved in a custom for many families. When a newborn child's umbilical cord drops off, the Mother often crafts a pouch, in the shape of, or with the symbol of a turtle on it. This "amulet" is tied to the child's crib. It is meant to ward off illness and also used as the child's first toy. The Amulet is then put up until the child is old enough to respect the meaning of it, it is then usually worn around the neck.

¹ From: <http://www.squidoo.com/nativeamericanartandculturesn>

² For the Lakota, the Métis, and other Plains Indians the symbolic turtle is the Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*). It is the most common turtle native to North America.



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