

Archaeological Perception, Reconciliation, and Occam's Razor

Leo Pettipas
Manitoba Archaeological Society

In their poster announcing the March 2018 Archaeology and Reconciliation Panel Discussion, the Manitoba Anthropology Students Association (MASA) referred to the often-rocky relationship between professional archaeologists and Indigenous people. This disconnect is a classic example of culture clash and addressing it effectively and productively is part of some archaeologists' objective within the country-wide initiative to de-colonize mainstream Canadian society and culture as a whole.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) defines "reconciliation" as "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships." This is a sociological definition, concerned with the here-and-now. A more relevant descriptor to the archaeologist would go something like this: "a resolution of differences between two markedly discrepant perceptions of past reality." This can be very difficult for archaeologists to accomplish, since the Indigenous and archaeological versions of the past are very discrepant indeed.

Nonetheless, some archaeologists seek to answer the call for reconciliation with the Indigenous community by acknowledging and incorporating facets of Aboriginal world view in the conduct of their (the archaeologists') work. This cross-over, according to its proponents, can take place in the field, in the lab, and in the interpretation and publication of the field and laboratory results.

The purview of archaeology is human history; and "history," by my definition, is anything and everything that actually happened in the past. For their purposes, it's useful for all reconciliation-oriented archaeologists to know the particulars of two divergent perceptions of the distant past — the traditional "spiritualist¹-mythic," and the archaeological "scientific-secular."

Indigenous spiritualist-mythic teachings tell the history of a people or explain some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involve spirit beings and supernatural events (modified from a definition provided in the Oxford Dictionary). Acquired through dream experiences and vision quests, the revelations contained in traditional stories were delivered or divinely inspired by the Creator Being and his non-corporeal (spirit) emissaries. Hence, they are sacred and faith-based. Scientific-secular hypotheses and theories, on the other hand, are definitely not sacred in any sense of that word.

It can be said that there are two approaches to discovering and defining the nature of things: the **holistic** (aka "wholistic"), and the **reductive**. Elders and conservative Indigenous scholars who abide by their ancestral traditions regard their own approach to the past as holistic, which means that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole (On-line Dictionary). The *Worldwide Indigenous Science Network* notes that the holistic approach to acquiring knowledge or explaining phenomena draws upon all of the senses, including – *nota bene* -- the spiritual and psychic (i.e., the "sixth sense," of which more below). Above all, a holistic paradigm is typically multi-faceted and comparatively complex; it is a perception that rejects what its adherents would regard as over-simplification.

¹ As used here, a "spiritualist" is someone who believes in the existence of anthropomorphic and zoologic spirit beings.

The reductivist mind-set differs significantly from the holistic because it favours a basic, minimal explanation of a phenomenon or event. Conservative Indigenous scholars and Elders can be expected to regard the conventional archaeological approach as reductive and inherently deficient, because it does not invoke the spiritual or the psychic dimensions, as does the holistic. "Knowledge earned at a 'human level' is considered as inferior. If a person does not have dreams, visions, and connections to spirit power, he or she is viewed as somehow deficient" (Stonechild 2016:4). Traditionalists would envisage the Precontact Indigenous world (for example) as rather more complex than the limited, empirically-based interpretations that scientific archaeology can be realistically expected to provide.

A further distinction can be drawn between Indigenous-traditional and scientific modes of explaining the meaning of, say, found heritage objects. The former is **emic**, while the latter is **etic**. The holistic model, as discussed here, is "emic" because it conveys an internally-conceived Native perspective. An "etic" concept, on the other hand, is one that is generated via the outsider's standard scientific procedures that render hypothetical reconstructions of history.

A good example of this arises in the question of who made Precontact stone arrow points in southern Manitoba. To the reductivist archaeologists this question is a non-issue – such things were made and used by *bona fide* human beings. Period, full stop; simple as that. But for the traditional Ojibwa of the northeastern plains this is not the case; rather, the stone artifacts were made by the "little people," or maymaygwayshiwuk.

So, from the emic standpoint there were *both* human beings ("Keté Anishinaabeg, or ancient people) *and* "other-than-human," albeit anthropomorphic, beings; the maymaygwayshiwuk. Conventional archaeologists, on the other hand, need have nothing more in mind than *Homo sapiens sapiens* when interpreting the contents of a habitation site or a bison kill. For them, only one class of anthropomorphic being is needed to account for the arrow points; for the Native traditionalist, two entities were involved – the Little People who made the artifacts and traded them to the Keté Anishinaabeg who used them to kill the bison.

Operationally, the reductivist approach is guided in part by the principle of "Occam's Razor," which maintains that the simplest explanation for something, and the fewer assumptions you must make in developing it, is the best one. To put it another way, given two explanations, the simpler one is most likely to be correct. The "razor" part of the expression refers to the "cutting away" or exclusion of perceived non-essential variables or phenomena (such as spirit beings) in the formulation of the hypothesis.

This is not to say that secular archaeologists deny that Precontact Native culture included spiritualist concepts -- we can take it for granted that it most certainly did. It's just that conventional archaeologists regard those concepts as "super-natural," that is, they are beyond the scope of archaeological research (no one excavates a spirit being) and are incompatible with the materialist laws of nature. As such, they are not, in my opinion at least, amenable to testable hypothesizing; and the archaeologists must focus their attention on more tangible objectives, the achievement of which is within their grasp.

Let's take another example: attention has been drawn in recent decades to an Indigenous emic belief that spirit beings potentially have a role to play in the recovery and study of endangered Precontact burials. This position is very well summarized by Kevin Brownlee and E. Leigh Syms (1999:1): "The Elders believe that the appearance of burials of their ancestors that have been found eroding out of banks of the Churchill, Nelson, Rat and Burntwood rivers are [sic] happening for a reason. 'These are gifts from

the ancestors to today's generation. They are to be used by Indigenous youth to learn about the old ways and gain respect for the past.' The ancestral spirits "may have made this possible by allowing themselves to be found" (Syms 2014:6).

The traditionalists do not deny that riverbank erosion plays a role in the overall process in bringing these remains to light; obviously it does. It's just that, consistent with their holistic paradigm, they feel that there's more to it than that.

Essential to the holistic scenario is a conscious decision by spirit beings (Old Ones, Ancestors) to allow their physical remains to be found and recovered archaeologically. This holistic-type perception rests on two critical assumptions: (a) that ancestral spirit beings well and truly exist, and (b) that these spirits can and do make actionable decisions that can contribute to living human experience – e.g., young people's learning about their ancestral past.

The alternative (etic) explanation for the riverside exposure of the burials and its beneficial consequences are less complex (i.e., reductive) in that it does not require the aforesaid assumptions about spirit beings; it is non-spiritual. The river banks referred to in the above Brownlee/Syms quote are being affected by erosive forces from industrial manipulation of the natural water levels, and this, to the reductive-secular mind, is all that is needed to account for the exposure of the burials -- a simple cause-and-effect relationship between physical riverine erosion and the exposure of the human remains. From this standpoint, assumptions about the existence and intervention of spirit beings as noted above are not required, so they are "razed away" from consideration.

It is indeed true that everything happens for a reason; but for the non-spiritualist the only reason for the appearance and conventional archaeological interpretation of the burials is nothing more than the accelerated destruction of the river banks by artificial elevation of the water levels and the availability of attending archaeologists to recover and process the findings.

Given this point of view, the scientist's reaction to the more complex, spiritualistic, emic explanation for the exposure of water-edge burials can well be anticipated and need not be pursued here. As for young peoples' learning about the past, this can be achieved -- say the secularists -- through the routine archaeological interpretation and dissemination of the findings through a variety of readily-available, conventional media wherein no spiritual initiative or involvement is necessary.

The traditional Indigenous iteration, then, clearly holds that there is more to the river banks than what meets the reductivist's eye. The invocation of the spiritual dimension is, to that extent, more holistic than the simpler, non-spiritual, physical one. In sum, the Western scientific principle of Occam's Razor is neither applicable nor appropriate within the holistic scenarios embraced by traditional Native thinkers in modern-day Manitoba.

One of the main challenges for the reconciliation-conscious archaeologist is to somehow resolve the conspicuous differences between the two genres -- the spiritualist-mythic and the scientific-secular -- of the region's multi-millennial Indigenous history. Note: A major initiative in this direction is Kevin Brownlee's book *Dibaajimindwaa Geteyaag: Ogiyose, Noojigiioo'iwe gaye Dibinawaaag Nibiing Orji Stories of the Old Ones: Hunter and Fisher from Sheltered Water*. The Manitoba Museum, 2018.

References

Brownlee, K. and E. Leigh Syms, 1999, *Kayasochi Kikawenow: Our Mother from Long Ago*. The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. Winnipeg.

Stonechild, B., 2016, *The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality*. University of Regina Press.

Syms, E.L., 2014, *Stories of the Old Ones from the Lee River, Southeastern Manitoba: The Owl Inini, Carver Inini and Dancer Ikwe*. The Manitoba Museum. Winnipeg.