

## POTTERY

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Precontact pottery has long captured the interest of Manitoba archaeologists, and a number of very interesting hypotheses have been developed by them and their colleagues in adjacent provinces and states. More often than not, the pottery itself was not the focus of interpretive endeavour; rather, it was regarded as an indicator of other cultural phenomena and processes such as social organization, demography, and migration patterns. Perhaps one of the first questions raised about Manitoba pottery was, Who made it? Very early on, Chris Vickers (1949:14), following the lead of Lloyd Wilford, advanced the suggestion that the Blackduck Ware of the "Manitoba Focus" was the product of Assiniboins, partly in view of the correlation between the geographic distribution of Blackduck pottery and the known territory of the Assiniboin in early Postcontact time. Inevitably, such correlation led to discussion and debate, and more recent musings on the subject attribute Blackduck pottery to the Ojibwa (Dawson 1987:155). Scotty MacNeish (1958:82) credited "Selkirk" pottery to the Cree, an assignment that has thus far stood the test of time.

Suggestions as to the ethnic relationships of various ceramic wares gave rise to further hypothesizing on more detailed and complex social phenomena. The association of Selkirk and Blackduck pottery at certain sites was interpreted by J.V. Wright as evidence of inter-marriage between Cree and Ojibwa bands; "the necessity to obtain wives from distant regions appears to offer the best explanation for this mixture of completely different pottery traditions" (Wright 1972:102). Patrick Carmichael's (1981:40) study of Blackduck decorative motifs led him to suggest that the different observed elements reflected the Ojibwa clan structure, while the regional distribution of Late Woodland ceramic types in Manitoba and their patterned association at the Aschkibokahn Site on Lake Winnipegosis gave rise to the hypothesis that endogamy -- the restriction of marriage to members of the same local segment of the population -- was at play among the people of western Manitoba in Late Woodland times (Hanna 1992:24). Likewise, Leigh Syms (1980) took into account the regional distributions and site-level associations of distinguishable pottery types in southwestern Manitoba, and the appearance of 'domestic' and 'foreign' decorative attributes on individual potsherds from the Stott Site, in developing his "Co-influence Sphere Model". For Bev Nicholson (1994:103), "the diversity of [ceramic] wares, derived from identifiable antecedents elsewhere, indicates a complex mingling and syncretism of cultural elements drawn from widely separated sources in some form of hybrid ethnicity" in southern Manitoba between 1000 and 1600 AD. To trace the source of horticulture in the Red River valley during late Precontact times, Catherine Flynn looked to the distinctive ceramic types discovered at the Lockport Site north of Winnipeg and their distribution outside of the province (Flynn 2003:4; Historic Resources Branch 1994:9).

Attention to pottery has not only allowed us to hypothesize about other cultural and historical phenomena; it has also provided insights concerning the manufacture and use of the ceramics

themselves. The well-publicized efforts aimed at replicating Precontact-style pots (e.g., Syms, *et al.* 2004:10-12) have helped archaeologists to understand how pottery might have been made in ancient times. And Mary Malainey's (1997:3) analysis of carbon residues from the insides of potsherds has revealed details of Precontact diet.

The consequence of all this activity has been a wealth of stories about the Precontact peoples of the province. I call these outcomes "stories" because that's exactly what they are – accounts of suggested happenings or situations, based on interpretations of empirical evidence, that are intended to interest the reader or listener. They are "told" in conference presentations, in university lectures, in hard-copy publications and on the Internet. The "empirical evidence" upon which they're based comprises found objects and features that qualify as *bona fide* Aboriginal heritage.

But in addition, there is a body of information that also qualifies as genuine Aboriginal heritage -- the so-called "myths" (teachings, oral literature, oral tradition) that, like projectile points and clay pots, originated long ago within Aboriginal societies. Many of the traditional stories incorporate pottery as an important theme or sub-theme, and for this reason I'd like to introduce you to a few of them here. My purpose in so doing is to acquaint you with what has been said by Aboriginals themselves about a topic that receives so much attention from archaeologists, in the hope that you will find it of interest. To keep my presentation within manageable limits, I will confine my sources to peoples, members of whom lived, or still live, in the area now defined as Manitoba. *And it will be seen that pots had a significance in Aboriginal culture that went far beyond the basic function of a work-a-day ceramic container.*

## **A Sampling of Stories**

A pot can be regarded as a vessel that contains good things – life-sustaining things like food, water and other vital resources. A truly remarkable instance of this is to be found in a Cree version of the re-creation of the world during the deluge that covered the land a long time ago. In this particular story, the hero Weesakayjac and the animals built a huge canoe in which they could take refuge before the land was entirely inundated. After the rains had abated, Weesakayjac undertook to renew the world by sending several types of animals down to the ocean floor to retrieve a bit of sediment from which he could grow the earth. The muskrat was successful in scooping up a piece of clay and presenting it to Weesakayjac. But how can the continents be reconstituted from a morsel of clay so small that it could fit in a muskrat's paw? Fortunately, Weesakayjac had a pot with special powers; he placed the clay into this pot and boiled it. "The clay expanded over the sides of the pot falling into the great sea until land was reformed" (Stevens and Ray 1971:24). Several times, Weesakayjac dispatched the wolverine to determine the size of the earth, and each time upon receipt of wolverine's report he repeated the boiling process until he was satisfied that the world was big enough.

This story is significant in that it bears witness to the pot's vital role in renewing the earth, an undertaking of the utmost necessity if human beings were to find a home following the deluge. And from whence did these human beings spring? Weesakayjac drew clay from his fabulous pot and moulded the races of humanity therefrom. So the miraculous vessel was not only instrumental in the creation of the post-diluvian earth; it was also the wellspring of humankind.

The theme of the overflowing pot is found in other stories, and here they call to mind the "horn of plenty", or cornucopia, familiar in Western culture. The image of the horn overflowing with fruit, grains and vegetables is a symbol of well-being and prosperity. Its counterpart in Native tradition is exemplified by a story of the Cree hero Iyas who, when a young boy, was one day walking along a beach, weak from hunger after having recently endured a distressing ordeal. He espied smoke rising in the forest, and upon inspection determined that it was coming from a lodge inhabited by a mother fox. The fox invited him inside to take his rest, and after awakening from a deep sleep, he saw she had a miniature clay cooking pot positioned over the hearth. She welcomed him to eat all that the pot contained, with the assurance that if he did so he would gain spiritual powers.

Now the fox's pot, like that of Weesakayjac discussed above, was no ordinary pot; "he ate and ate the delicious stew but only a little of the food was gone from the tiny vessel. Iyas had now been eating for about a day and he just could not eat anymore" (Stevens and Ray 1971:115). But his stomach progressively expanded until, after several days of eating, he at last finished all the food in the pot. Renewed and encouraged, he no longer felt like a small boy but a self-assured adult emboldened to fulfill his heroic destiny.

An Ojibwa rendition of this story is interesting because of the ethnographic detail it provides. In this account, four men set out in search of Nanabozho, the hero figure and emissary of the Creator who provided the people with the many things that constituted the Anishinaabe way of life. The men sought to renew their strength and prowess, and a visit with Nanabozho at his place of residence far to the northwest would accomplish that end. Their long journey at last brought them to Nanabozho's lodge where he lived with one of his granddaughters. The part of the story of interest to us here reads as follows: "They went inside and the young woman picked up a very small clay pot. In it, she placed a few small pieces of bear meat, and covered these with a few berries. She put the pot over the fire to cook. One of the hunters looked at the little pot. It was all he could do not to let his feelings show on his face. 'Surely', he thought to himself, 'that is not all we are going to get to eat? Why, I could eat everything in that pot in one little mouthful.' By and by, the dinner was cooked, and the food served out on birch bark plates. To the utter amazement of the hunters, the plates were heaped high with meat and berries – and the little pot was still full to the brim. The hungry men ate and ate. When they had cleaned their plates, they helped themselves to more, but still the pot stayed full" (Snake, *et al.*1979:79-80).

The motif of the self-replenishing clay pot isn't unique to Algonquian peoples. In a Mandan version, two brothers, Black Medicine and Sweet Medicine, were on a buffalo hunt. They came upon a footpath that led to a large earth lodge wherein dwelled an old woman. Inside, the elder "showed them a small earthen jar of cornmeal mush and told them to eat what was there and then stir with [a] spoon and it would be full again. They tried to eat it empty, then stirred it with the spoon and it was full to the brim" (Beckwith 1938:55).

Food and earth-renewing soil were not the only things to be found issuing from clay pots. Archaeologists are now fairly confident that the Precontact Blackfoot possessed ceramics (Walde, Meyer and Unfreed 1995:53), and this trait no doubt provided the substance for the story of the Blackfoot culture hero Kutoyis (Blood Clot) who was miraculously conceived in one. The story is rather complex, but part of it basically involved an old man on a hunting trip for buffalo. He mortally wounded one and, following it, he came upon a spot where the animal had lost a large clot of blood. The hunter placed the clot in his quiver and, upon his return to his lodge, instructed his wife to heat some water in a kettle. "When the water began to boil, the old man tipped his quiver up over the kettle, and immediately there came from the pot a noise as of a child crying, as if it were being hurt, burnt or scalded. They looked in the kettle, and saw there a little boy, and they quickly took it out of the water" (Grinnell 1962:31). Thus was Kutoyis conceived and born.

I began this series of traditional accounts with one relating to the *beginning* of the world. I'll close it out with a prophetic story about the *end* of the world, and it comes from the Dakota repertoire of oral literature. We're told that there's a hidden cave in the Badlands wherein dwells an ancient, wizened old woman dressed in clothing made of animal hides like that worn by the people before the coming of the Europeans. It's said she's been there for a thousand years if not more, making a blanket strip of dyed porcupine quills for her buffalo robe. To one side of her lies a large black dog, and a few steps from the woman's workplace is a big fire that she lit a thousand years ago and which she has kept going ever since. Suspended over this fire is a huge earthen pot containing a soup that has been boiling ever since the fire was started those many centuries ago. Every so often, the old woman goes over to stir the soup. This effort is slow and laborious, given her great age. While her back is turned, the dog proceeds to pull the quills out of the blanket strip, and so the project never gets finished. It's said that "if the old woman ever finishes her blanket strip, then at the very moment that she threads the last porcupine quill to complete the design, the world will come to an end" (Leeming and Page 1998:141). Once again, we see the central role played by a clay pot in a scenario of great importance to the well-being of the world as we know it.

## **Commentary**

Archaeologists generally don't use the old stories because, among other things, they aren't regarded by members of the discipline as viable sources of factual evidence. "Archaeologists, trained in the European scientific tradition and concerned with collecting empirical data, tend to

discount native traditions about their past as unscientific folklore” (McMillan 1988:18). Furthermore, the traditional narratives can’t be fitted into standard classificatory systems or linear chronologies that are so fundamental to the development of archaeologically-derived storylines. True, the above teachings, as indicated by their references to clay pots, are of Precontact antiquity. And they, like potsherds excavated from the ground, are true aspects of Aboriginal heritage. But unlike potsherds, they don’t fit the archaeological paradigm. For example, how would one classify Weesakayjac’s world-renewal pot – Laurel? Blackduck? Selkirk? Of course, the application of such terms to Aboriginal heritage objects is an invention of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Euro-American scientists; the labels are not in and of themselves items of Indigenous heritage as are the potsherds to which the scientists apply them. Since Weesakayjac’s pot can’t be classified according to the archaeologist’s taxonomic system, one would be hard put to incorporate it into a new hypothesis or model, or to use the story to test an existing one. Nor are archaeologists generally inclined to accept that clay pots can possess miraculous powers at the hands of spiritual creator beings. Some aspects of Native heritage, by their very nature, fall outside the scope of archaeological research and theorizing.

However, archaeologists who communicate only with their academic peers, students and avocationalists are not the only people who have an interest in Precontact Aboriginal culture. Non-academic story-tellers whose audience is the general public are stakeholders as well. As such, one can present archaeologically-generated stories (“interpretations of the data”) *and* items from the Indigenous oral literature in tandem to show, as an exercise in the comparative approach, how basically common themes are dealt with by two very different traditions – the Western scholastic and the Indigenous. The objective would not be to use one body of information to test or verify the other according to the scientific method, but rather to show that there’s more than one way to talk about Indigenous pottery, and to demonstrate the various roles pottery played in Precontact Aboriginal culture. A number of publications are available (Bjorklund 1969; Putt 1991; Pettipas 1994:34-67) that exemplify how the two genres can be merged to produce a coherent and integrated narration about the past.

## Conclusions

Why do we do archaeology? I’d like to think that we do archaeology in order to, ultimately, help create awareness, understanding and appreciation of the experiences and accomplishments of Manitoba’s Indigenous peoples. To grasp certain themes about the remote past, archaeology is the only means available to us, and in that sense it’s essential – there’s no substitute. But archaeology has its limitations, and for those seeking traditional knowledge of such abstract subjects as cosmology, cognition and worldview, alternative sources of information must be sought. Such a resource lies in the traditional teachings – the Native Voice. For a number of reasons, I haven’t attempted to analyse the stories here for the deeper meanings and symbolism they inevitably contain (e.g., what is the significance of the ever-replenishing pots all being *miniscule* in size?). Suffice it to say that a well-rounded, holistic perception of what pottery meant to Indigenous peoples is within reach via a combination of

archaeological research and readings of the oral literature, and to this end a familiarity with all manner of stories about the distant past, both archaeologically-generated and traditional, is highly recommended.

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