

Ancestors and Archaeologists

Leo Pettipas, Manitoba Archaeological Society

Introduction

The 2018 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Archaeological Association featured a session titled “Learning from the Ancestors II: Collaboration and Community Engagement.” The session abstract contained the following points: in recent decades, repatriation debates have caused heritage practitioners to confront the problematic pasts of their disciplines. In particular, discussions and dialogue between Natives, governments, and archaeologists demonstrated the need for agreed-upon protocols for dealing with found human remains.

I believe it’s correct to say that the archaeological excavation of Aboriginal¹ burials expressly in the interests of Western science² is no longer practiced in the Prairie Provinces. In Manitoba, provisions for repatriation and reburial have been initiated and activated as matters of government policy under the terms of the provincial heritage legislation (e.g., Province of Manitoba nd, 1987).

Admittedly, the writing of the present paper is a rather belated and perhaps futile exercise; it’s something that would probably have been more at home at the beginning of the dialogue than toward the end of it. Nonetheless, a review of the current situation and its evolution regarding the excavation and disposition of found human remains can be worthwhile, and so just such an undertaking is offered here.

At the risk of stating the obvious, when people laid their dead to rest many generations ago, they were not doing so on the understanding that centuries or millennia later the remains would be disinterred, photographed, analysed and documented in a laboratory, placed in storage or on public display, or published in scientific journals. It comes as no surprise, then, that Indigenous people have long objected, often strenuously, to the archaeological excavation and processing of ancestral Precontact burials. For them, the issue extends far beyond a matter of exceedingly bad taste.

Decades ago, archaeologists took the view that Indigenous people are not justified in their objections because, for example, “prehistoric” human remains could not be conclusively shown to be culturally or genetically related to a specific ethnic/tribal group currently living in a given area.

The famous, or infamous, instance of the 9,200-year-old “Kennewick Man” discovery in Washington State is a case in point: local Indigenous groups argued that since the bones were from their present and ancestral home territory, they (the bones) were those of an ancestor of theirs, and laboratory analysis would be a desecration of the remains and an affront to traditional beliefs. They demanded immediate reburial.

The archaeologists took the position that the remains of Kennewick Man could not be convincingly aligned with any living tribe, in part because of the bones’ remote antiquity. The archaeologists, as reported by David Hurst Thomas (2000: xx-xxi), argued that the bones and the scientific information contained within them “rightfully belong to the American public rather than any special-interest group.”

A key objective of this paper is to examine the rationale behind the above opposing points of view.

To begin, let us specify the nature of “ancestral Precontact burials.” To do that, I will draw upon and paraphrase the legal definition of “human remains” as contained in The Heritage Resources Act of Manitoba, to wit, remains of human bodies

¹ In this essay, “Aboriginal,” “Indigenous,” “Native” and “First Nation,” hitherto commonly referred to as “Indian,” are considered to be, and are used here as, synonyms.

² Unavoidable archaeological rescue excavations, necessitated by impending land development projects and subject to government policy on the disposition of found human remains, are not at issue in this paper.

of heritage significance, that are situated or discovered *outside of* a recognised cemetery or burial ground, such that there are no means of identifying the persons in question.

Next, I will pursue the above-stated focal objective of the present paper by reviewing

(1) the application of “biomolecular archaeology,” and

(2) the role of ancestral spirit beings in the modern-day culture of traditionally-oriented Indigenous people, notably the Saulteaux,

in an effort to determine the relatedness (or otherwise) of temporally-distant Precontact and extant local communities.

Biomolecular Archaeology

It was the impression among archaeologists several decades ago that the *antiquity* of found human remains had a bearing on whether or not they could be shown to be biologically ancestral to living populations (Thomas 2000:xx-xxi). In other words, if osseous material was “too old,” it was not possible to determine if it was ancestral to a particular living population. But answering this question is critical to us here, and fortunately we are nowadays able to pursue an answer to it through the application of “biomolecular archaeology.”

Biomolecular archaeology is defined as “the study of ancient molecules – especially nucleic acids, proteins, lipids, and carbohydrates – that were produced by past living organisms and is most often applied now toward identifying organic residues from archaeological sites, objects, and human remains” (Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology, 2014 Edition). It can be used, for example, to ascertain such things as the population to which a given bone sample specimen belonged, and long-ago migration patterns.

Now then, let’s imagine that a burial of the so-called Middle Precontact “McKean Complex” (ca. 4,000-3,000 BP) came to light due to riverine erosion on the reserve of a local Manitoba Saulteaux nation. Would the present-day members of that community be justified in claiming that the long-deceased individual was their ancestor? The well-informed archaeologist would answer, “It depends” ... it depends on the scope of the discussion: i.e., are we only concerned specifically with Saulteaux forebears, or is our dialogue about Indigenous ancestors and their descendants in general?

The present-day Manitoba Saulteaux are the most recent successors of people who first came west from the Great Lakes during the 18th Century CE fur trade. Before that, there were no Saulteaux *sensu stricto* living on the Canadian prairies. Obviously, then, a locally-found 3,500-year-old burial could not possibly be the remains of a person whose Saulteaux ancestors only began to arrive hereabouts some 250 years ago.

The fact is, we cannot at this time credibly surmise “who” the “McKean people” were in terms of a modern, named cultural group. So no, it would not be logical to insist that a 3,500-year-old interment has to be that of a Saulteaux person simply because it came to light on what is now a Saulteaux reserve.

It would, however, be justifiable to identify a McKean burial as “Aboriginal,” or “Indigenous” or “Native” in the broadest sense. The people who possessed the McKean culture were all Indigenous and, of course, so also were the fur trade-era Aboriginals as well. The same applies to all Saulteaux people living today.

Molecular geneticists have hypothesized that “a single gene pool is ancestral to *all* Native American populations” past and present (Goebel *et al* 2008:1498 [emphasis added]; see also Curry 2012:30; Kitchen *et al* 2008:1). This would mean that all modern First Nation people are descended from a single source (“founding”) population variously estimated to comprise as many as ~1,000-5,400 (Kitchen *et al* 2008:1) to less than 80 (Hey 2005) individuals, who departed Siberia and migrated east to the Americas some 15,000 calendar years ago (Kitchen *et al* 2008:1).

Furthermore, if the single-founding-population hypothesis is correct, then it can be concluded that **all First Nations people, living and dead, were and are biological relatives**, since they all descended from the same discrete parent

population of origin. They have been members of a long-standing, time-transgressive, “extended” mega-family from the time of Creation. In light of these findings, it should not be too difficult to appreciate why the intentional disturbance – controlled excavation, laboratory analysis, and off-site storage -- of relatives’ mortal remains is seriously frowned upon by modern-day Indigenous, regardless of their cultural identity or “tribe.”

This reaction can be further understood in light of what the term “ancestors” means to First Nation people living today. Euro-Canadians generally do not relate to their distant ancestors to the same degree and in the same way that Natives do. Many white Canadians take a casual interest, or none at all, in their European roots. Among those that do, it is not uncommon for them to research their family trees out of curiosity, or simply because they find such pursuits and their results “interesting.” But they nonetheless regard their ancient forebears as temporally distant and personally remote from their own lives; they’re out of reach. I do not beseech my long-gone Irish ancestors to assist me in overcoming disease and troublesome challenges of everyday life. On the other hand, communication and interaction with ancestral spirits *is* important to Aboriginal traditionalists, who regard spirit beings as “natural members” of the community (DMcD Productions nd) – entities whom people can summon, through ceremony and ritual, to aid in the pursuit of good health and overall well-being (bimaadiziwin [“the good life”]).

For Example ...

To elaborate upon the contents of the immediately preceding paragraph, let’s take the example of the Cass Lake Hospital on the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota. The offerings of this modern facility comprise a wide range of health amenities, including medical, dental, pharmaceutical, laboratory, radiological, physiotherapeutic, audiological, podiatric, and optometrical services. But in addition to all that, spiritual benefactors and engagement protocols can also be involved; ancestral spirit beings are called upon by an Ojibwa osteopathic doctor trained in both Western and traditional medicine to participate in the healing process (DMcD Productions nd). The ancestors’ spirits are supplicated to assist in re-establishing the balance and bimaadiziwin that have existed and been accessible, via appropriate ritualistic protocols, since as far back as the time of Creation. There is thus an ongoing and pragmatic connection between existing ancestral spirit beings and ancestral osteological remains.

A healthy mind, body, and soul are conditions that people everywhere must surely have sought since earliest times, and healers’ engagement with spirit beings toward these ends is anything but academic to the traditional world view. *Ancestral spirits have a direct and vital role to play in the here and now*, and so it should be easy to understand why intentional disturbance of ancestral burials -- entirely out of scientific curiosity -- is anathema to traditional people. If non-essential conduct by members of the mainstream majority, i.e., archaeologists, culminates in distress, anger, and dismay among the Indigenous population, it occurs to me that we are then broaching questions of morality and ethics.

Summary and Conclusions

Spiritualism, the system of beliefs and attendant protocols, in conjunction with communication and interaction with transcendent beings through a ritualistic intercessor (medicine person), is a key component in the pursuit of bimaadiziwin. Spiritualism affirms the relevance and role of ephemeral entities in individual and group behaviour, notably in healing practices, and hence there exists a very long-standing functional relationship between the supernatural and the corporeal. Ancestral spirits are central figures within the scope of Indigenous reality, and they – unlike my Irish ancestors – are not “long gone.” Intentional, curiosity-driven disturbance of ancestral remains is therefore incompatible with the search for bimaadiziwin and peace of mind among Indigenous people, and can be expected to arouse profound disapproval and condemnation.

Genetic research has brought forward the hypothesis that *all First Nation* peoples in North America are and always have been biological relatives. Accordingly, perceived mistreatment of the mortal remains of spiritual relatives is a matter of concern to the affected community, and if true reconciliation and respect for Indigenous people are to be genuine objectives in mainstream Canada, and if social justice is to be well and truly served in our country, then deliberate disturbance (arguably, desecration) of sacred ancestral remains solely in pursuit of the colonialist goal of satisfying scholarly inquisitiveness, is difficult to justify.