

Hunter-Gatherer

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Question: From an Indigenous standpoint, is Archaeology part of The Solution, or part of The Problem?

In all honesty I have to admit that, for Native people, our discipline is rather more problematic than it is beneficial. And one of the irritants that we have bestowed on the populace – more the Native than the non-Native – is the terminology we use to disseminate, in our publications, our hypotheses regarding ancestral Indigenous lifeways and histories.

In the interests and spirit of reconciliation, it could be argued that we should look into the prospects of further cleaning up our act in this regard. And in fact, Manitoba archaeologists have been doing just that on and off for more than three decades now: all but gone from our lexicon are such terms as "prehistory," "New World," "central-based wandering," "BC-AD," "Indian," and "primitive." Some of us also eschew "Archaic" and "nomad."

What I want to focus on here, however, is the anthropological expression "hunter-gatherer," a name-tag that is – but need not and should not be – a somewhat obscure bone of contention between Indigenous thinkers and a small cadre of Euro-Canadians, namely, academics and their students. Most specialists probably would not consider "hunter-gatherer" to be a piece of objectional jargon, but the widespread misunderstanding of it shows that in fact it is just that among folks in the Native community.

To set the stage for the discussion that follows, I must first of all present a minimal, economy-focused anthropological understanding of "hunter-gatherer." The following summary is drawn from several sources in the literature:

Hunter-Gatherers: a community whose economy is variously based on hunting, fishing, trapping, snaring, and the collecting of wild -- i.e., non-domesticated -- faunal and floral resources.

Note that this definition excludes farming, that is, the husbanding of domesticated animals and the harvesting of domesticated, cultivated plants. Note also that this definition makes no mention of savages, primitives, or cave men.

Secondly, we must be aware of two genres of wording and their associated meanings that exist within the English language -- the "vernacular," and the "disciplinary." The former is the down-to-earth, popular lingo of the non-specialist -- the common folk. Within the disciplinary category we can include otherwise familiar terms that are assigned esoteric meanings that are technical and unfamiliar to the general public.

"Disciplinary" speech is the jargonistic vocabulary of practitioners of a scientific discipline which incorporates terms and their associated meanings that are technical and unfamiliar to most people. These also can be denominated "specialist" terms.

Thirdly, I would like to say a few words about the term "misinformation." This refers to an erroneous or distorted conception of something. I suggest, for example, that the numerically dominant mainstream (non-Aboriginal) population is abysmally misinformed about Indigenous history, culture, and heritage. Misconceptions about these subjects abound amongst the hoi polloi, and much of the toxic racism and ill will directed toward Indigenous people are rooted not only in misinformation but also in outright ignorance, that is, a lack of awareness of something – in the present case, most if not all things inherently Aboriginal.

Regarding the last statement, I must also point out that the door swings both ways, although not to the same degree of importance or seriousness. I contend that most persons within the Native community, with their non-academic, vernacular standard of perception and information-gathering on the subject, are also misinformed about, and have false impressions of, what Manitoba archaeologists are all about in the here-and-now professional environment of 2019 CE. I do not hesitate to suggest that the few Indigenous critics that I have encountered possess an overly simplistic and generally erroneous impression of the true nature of archaeology and the scope of what it is we do.

So, back to the nomen "hunter-gatherer." I recently approached a highly respected U of M Native Studies scholar with the following: *"I have long been under the impression that Indigenous people hereabouts generally don't like the term "hunter-gatherers" being used in reference to their ancestors. If this impression is correct, can you tell me why they feel this way? Why do they regard this terminology as objectionable?"*

My correspondent hazarded the guess that, in the minds of many, "hunter-gatherer" infers some form of "savagery" which, when used in reference to their ancestors, is understandably anathema among Indigenous people. He also opined that the discipline of Anthropology hasn't done a very good job of disabusing the general public of the notion that "hunter-gatherer" equates with the savage "cave-man" image and all that it implies.

I assume that by "cave man" is meant the Palaeolithic Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon populations of alpine Europe. There's not much doubt that those long-ago Ice Age/Stone Age people were hunter-gatherers as defined above; the question arises, were they the *only* humans, in the multi-millennial history of humanity, who can be classified by students of long-term history (archaeologists) as "hunter-gatherers"? Is the European Pleistocene cave-dweller the only referent with which we can equate Precontact Manitoba populations?

The answer to that question is a resounding “no”; not all hunter-gatherers who inhabited the planet down through the millennia were comparable only to and synonymous with Ice-Age European cave-dwellers. For example, the traditional Caribou Inuit of Nunavut, the Sahtu Dené of the Great Bear Lake area, the Australian Arunta, and the !Kung Bushmen of Africa’s Kalahari Desert, to name just a few, did not live in mountainous caves because such natural features did not exist in their traditional territories. And yet these peoples were all hunter-gatherers, a fact well known and readily accepted by anthropologists.

In short, all western European Palaeolithic cave-dwellers were hunter-gatherers, but the reverse isn’t true: not all of the world’s hunter-gatherers were European-Palaeolithic-type cave-dwellers. By the same token, today’s archaeologists take the view that the pre-agriculturalists of Manitoba’s Red River valley were hunter-gatherers. Contrary to the fallacious popular lens through which archaeologists are widely perceived, university-educated specialists are not in the habit of referring to these Precontact peoples as savages, nor do they mean to imply that the Indigenous inhabitants of what came to be Treaty 1 Territory were ever comparable in any meaningful way to the stereotypical Ice-Age “cave man” image.

It may be said that we have been given an important heads-up thanks to the widespread but ill-informed objection toward the “hunter-gatherer” categorization of Precontact inhabitants of the Manitoba region. I am in full agreement with my scholarly colleague ... we archaeologists can do a better job of clarifying our specialized disciplinary terms and their attendant concepts, and what we do -- and do not -- mean by them. “Hunter-gatherer” is a perfectly valid expression whose use is justifiable as long as we are all “reading from the same (authoritative) hymn book.”

Bottom line: at the very least we must clearly define what we mean by disciplinary terms like “hunter-gatherer” in our publications, especially in those intended for non-specialist audiences, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We should also somehow address the misinformed “folk” perception of archaeologists, and what it is that we actually do and produce.

Post-script

Interestingly, some Native people themselves have, in a way, contributed to the North American Indigenous cave-man stereotype. Cree tradition speaks of the “Hairy Heart” people, or “Ancients,” who preceded, and then were contemporaries with, the Crees in the North. The Hairy Hearts were nasty, brutish, primitive, and cannibalistically inclined. If cannibalism can be included within the subsistence pattern of hunter-gatherers, then the Hairy Hearts were hunter-gatherers. They certainly weren’t agriculturalists.

And what did the Hairy Hearts look like? When ethnographer Robert Brightman was collecting Cree oral literature in northern Manitoba in the 1970s, one informant demonstrated for him what the Ancients looked like by showing him a picture in his grandson’s schoolbook. The image

comprised “a conventional illustration of Neanderthal man, standing at the mouth of a cave, garbed in animal hide, gripping a club, and gazing out on a herd of mastodons” (Brightman 1992:175).

Thus, if some people nowadays object to the anthropological designator “hunter-gatherer” because it invokes the primitive cave-man image, they should be reminded that traditional northern Crees have long had their own home-grown ideas of what their ancient predecessors looked like ... and the latter seem to fit the cave-man stereotype to a “T”!

Reference

Brightman, R., 1992, “Primitivism in Missinippi Cree Historical Consciousness.” In *The First Ones: Readings in Indian/Native Studies*, edited by D. Miller, C. Beal, J. Dempsey and R. Wesley Heber, pp. 173-184. Saskatchewan Indian Federated College Press. Piapot Reserve #75.