

CHRONOLOGIES: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ABORIGINAL

Leo Pettipas

Introduction

Years ago, archaeologist Lewis R. Binford more or less summarized the three major objectives of archaeology thusly: (1) delineating/naming cultural history; (2) reconstructing the lifeways of the peoples responsible for the constituent archaeological remains implicit in (1); and (3) reconstructing culture process, which is, identifying change in the archaeological record and, most importantly, explaining it. In this paper, I'm going to focus on the first of these – reconstructing cultural history. More specifically, I want to discuss the standard device archaeologists use to graphically display and summarize cultural history, that being the “cultural chronology.”

A cultural chronology is typically expressed as a diagram or chart comprising a timeline subdivided into intervals measured in years BCE/CE (Before the Common Era/Common Era, and/or BP (Before Present)). In the appropriate places adjacent to this time scale are placed the names of the various archaeological stages of culture and the individual cultures that comprise the local or regional culture history. Figure 1 is a good example of a cultural chronology. Note that a conspicuous attribute of it is its straight-line configuration, or linearity. Oldest at the bottom, youngest at the top. And in fact, this linear model is fully in keeping with the Western perception of history, which is an onward-and-upward progression; you can't turn back the clock, nor can the past be revived or modified – what's done is done. Within Western society, history is studied in fulfillment of intellectual curiosity and personal interest within a professional or avocational academic setting.

In contradistinction to the Western model, the Aboriginal concept of history, we're told, is circular rather than linear. By means of ritual, songs and story-telling, the ancient past is revived annually, and it is anything but academic. The *circle*, a prominent motif in the natural world, has played a major role in inspiring and shaping the Aboriginal worldview, including the understanding and portrayal of time. Through yearly world-renewal ceremonies, ancient events of creation and origination are recalled and re-enacted, and the cycle of existence begins anew.

However, the Indigenous model of time in the past tense is not solely cyclical; the old stories typically begin with the qualifier “a long time ago,” or words to that effect. There's no doubt that Native traditionalists have a clear sense of remote antiquity (“deep time”), when the world was often in tumult and giants and monsters threatening humankind were dealt with by culture heroes of extraordinary powers.

So the Aboriginal concept of history is a combination of the linear and the circular. It can be compared to a coil-spring that is made up of a continuous, connected sequence of spiral rings (circles) that together have obvious linearity and length by virtue of that connectedness. Native writer Ward Churchill's term “circulinear” perhaps best conveys, in a single word, the composite nature of the Indigenous perception of past time. It's the linear aspect of this dual model that's of particular interest here, because it has some interesting parallels with the archaeological expression of the historical continuum.

Archaeological Chronologies

Archaeological chronologies are frequently subdivided into three or four major periods or stages. Thus we have the European Stone Age divided into the "Palaeolithic", "Mesolithic" and Neolithic." The cultural sequence of the northern plains of North America has been expressed in a number of schemes,

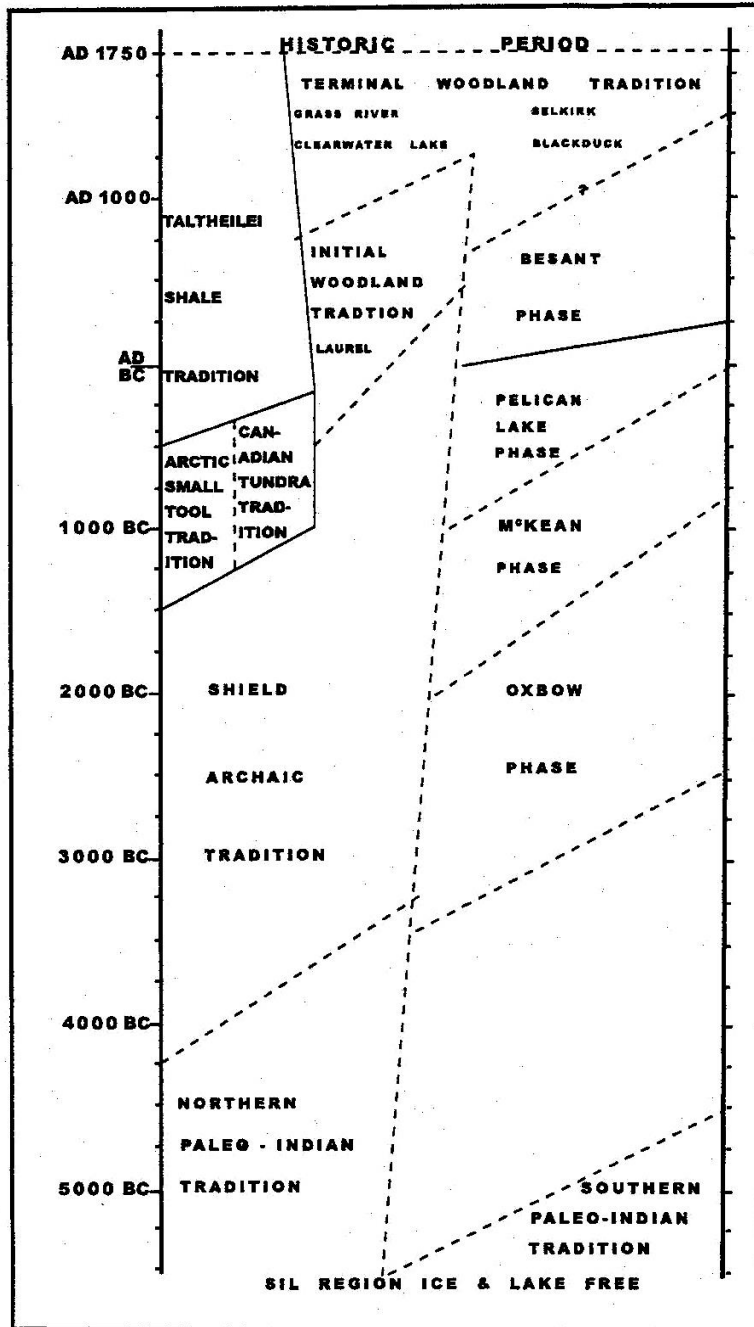


Fig. 1. Cultural chronology prepared by the Archaeological Research Centre, Winnipeg, in the early 1970s.

one of which is “Paleo-Indian”, “Meso-Indian” and “Neo-Indian.” With particular regard to Manitoba, five cultural “stages” -- “Paleo-Indian”, “Archaic”, “Woodland,” “Protohistoric,” and “Historic” – have been used by archaeologists in recent decades to summarize most of the province’s cultural history.

Aboriginal Chronologies

Interestingly, Aboriginal people have also expressed their understandings of past time in terms of sequential periods or ages. Russell Wright, an Alberta Blackfoot, speaks of four “legendary periods,” the earliest of which witnessed the origination of the natural environment – the prairies, rivers, lakes, foothills, forests and mountains – through the intervention of Napi, the creator-being. Next came the period of the great menaces when monsters, fierce animals, and cannibals held sway. A new and hopeful era was ushered in with the arrival of culture hero Bloodclot, who taught the Blackfoot to fend for themselves and to survive. Finally, there came the time when the people received their sacred ceremonies, bundles, and the great tribal societies.

Dr Henrietta Whiteman made her mark as a leading advocate of university-based Native studies programming. She pointed out that her people the Cheyenne likewise recognize a four-phase history comprising a sequence of “times.” The first is the “Ancient Time,” when the people lived in the boreal forest somewhere between Lake Superior and Hudson Bay. Their sojourn in that region was long-lived and is remembered for a great epidemic that orphaned many. The survivors migrated southward, and in so doing initiated the second historical period, the “Time of the Dogs.” It was then that the people tamed the large part-wolf dogs that thereafter accompanied them on the road of life. The “Time of the Buffalo” was one of comparative abundance as the people followed the bison far out onto the plains and made it the mainstay of their economy. And eventually, as foretold by the prophet Sweet Medicine, a truly remarkable animal made its appearance among the people that would carry them to far-off places. So began the “Time of the Horse,” the final historical period of the Cheyenne.

Likewise, Peter Nabokov, Professor of American Indian Studies and World Arts and Cultures, feels that we can look to “genres of tribal narrative” for the insider’s perspective on their multiple historical periods. He points to the Tillamooks of Oregon as an example. These people divide the past into three broad spans of time: the “Myth Age,” the “Era of Transformations,” and the “Period of True Happenings.” These headings are obviously English translations and no doubt approximations of Tillamook wording, but Nabokov seems to be telling us that the basic concept of three distinguishable broad spans of time are in some cases at least inherently Indigenous. He cites the “tripartite division” of the Nunamiut Inuit as a further case in point, this time using their own words: “*Ithaq amma*, the ancient, almost timeless days before any known ancestors; *Ipani*, recent times, within the memory of individuals living today; and *Ingalagaan*, the indistinct period in between.

From Cree archaeologist and ethnohistorian Eva Linklater of Nelson House in northern Manitoba comes yet another cultural-historical sequence. This one comprises a four-phase version that reads, from earliest to latest, the Beginning of Time (*Mimoci Kiyahs*), Ancient Time (*Mawac Kiyahs*), Long Ago (*Kiyahs*) and finally Recent Past (*Anohciki*), each marked by several key events or manifestations (Fig. 2, this paper).

Discussion

The above Aboriginal chronologies were all provided by Native individuals. Furthermore, they were all published since 1985, in other words, fairly recently. I'm confident that their substantive contents (teachings) are fundamentally Indigenous in the sense that they originated within Aboriginal culture. But the chronological/episodic layout of the subject matter into segmented linear sequences is another issue altogether. If I were alive a hundred years ago, and asked a Native elder to tell me the history of the world and his people, would he have "packaged" the material in that fashion? Or is this format a comparatively recent adaptation among certain Aboriginal historians and story-tellers?

My reason for raising this question springs from my reading of a paper written by anthropologist and psychologist Irving Hallowell, who did fieldwork among the Berens River Ojibwa in the early half of the 20th Century. Hallowell delved into Ojibwa concepts of the past and came to the conclusion that, on the whole, events that are believed to have taken place 'long ago' are not systematically correlated with each other in any chronological framework. This observation took me by surprise, since I had expected that the Ojibwas would have formatted their own rendition of the past in a manner similar to that of other nations. Since they didn't, it occurred to me that the Ojibwa model was perhaps truly Indigenous and that the episodic variants propounded by Wright, Whiteman and Linklater as summarized above may be of more recent origin.

Cree Oral History		
Cree Oral Traditions Náhithowá Acimówina Mina Acahokiwina		
Recent Past Anohciki	Reserves Trapping Fishing Gathering Treaties	Iskonkana Owunihikawin Pakitawawin Mawacicikewin Okimawewin Usutumakiwin
Long Ago Kiyahs	Wasahkacahk Puts World Into Order For The Time When There Will Be People Wasahkacahk Ki-o-thastow Askiy Ispiyaawi Ithiniskathik Wasahkacahk Tests The Earth's Size Wasahkacahk Ka-ki-nanatawitisahahk Ka-ispicathik Askithiw Wasahkacahk Recreates the Earth Wasahkacahk Kitwam Ka-ki-osihtat Askithiw Wasahkacahk And The Flood Wasahkacahk Akwa Ka-ki-thiskipik Askithiw	
Ancient Time Mawac Kiyahs	Misipisiw Misipisiw Wasahkacahk's Contest With Wimithothaw Wasahkacahk Ka-ki-mahwinihat Wimithothwa Rolling Head Cicipistikwan Chakapis Shares the Sun Chakapis Ka-ki-nakwatat Pismwa	
The Beginning of Time Mimoci Kiyahs	Kici Manito Creates Four Major Orders of Being: Physical World, Plant World, Animal Beings and Human Beings. Kici Manito Kakiositat Nao Kikwana: Ithinito Askiy, Kanitowikiki [Tapiskoc Mistihwak], Pisiskiwak, Mina Athisithiniwak.	
		Supernatural Beings Interact With Ancient and Contemporary Worlds Acahwak Kiwaciwikonawak Anoch Akwa Mina Mimoci Kiyahs

Fig. 2. Oral history of the Nelson House Cree expressed in the form of a cultural chronology prepared by Eva Linklater in the 1990s.

Of course, the Berens River Ojibwa don't necessarily speak for other peoples, some of whom may have indeed "chronologized" their histories traditionally, that is, in precontact and early postcontact times. In 2005 I was able to speak to Eva Linklater who prepared the Cree chart shown in Figure 2, and she confirmed that it's a combination of the traditional and the Western/contemporary. She based it in part on enquiries with a knowledgeable local informant, but her approach and her product were influenced by her archaeological training, and as a result it cannot be said that the presentation of the diagram's contents is entirely Indigenous.

Nonetheless, it's important to note that the Rock Cree of northern Manitoba *do* implicitly distinguish between the recent and ancient past by the way in which they categorize their teachings, which are either

acađohkiwin or *acimowina*. According to ethnologist Robert Brightman, stories grouped under the former are understood to have preceded those in the *acimowina* class and comprise most of what is conventionally labelled “myth.” Stories in the *acimowin* class, on the other hand, are situated in a kind of ‘historical’ time and are continuous with the situation of narration. Examples are stories about exploits of celebrated ancestors. This dichotomy corresponds with Åke Hultkrantz’s more generic myth/legend distinction, where *myth* plays out at the beginning of time whereas *legend* takes place in historical and recent times. Even Hallowell, his above-noted observation notwithstanding, acknowledges a roughly similar temporal division of teachings among the Ojibwa.

Conclusions

My main purpose in this brief newsletter article is not to conclusively determine which Aboriginal chronologies are truly and entirely indigenous and which are not, but rather to simply note that the circular model is only part of the overall Native conceptualization of the past, and also that at least superficial parallels do seem to exist between the cultural chronological model of the archaeologist and those of both early and recent Aboriginal historians, as put forth in the modern literature.