

SECOND OPINION

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If someone asked me the question: "What is the most basic, fundamental assumption archaeologists make in going about their business?" my answer would have to be: "That the artifacts they study are indeed just that -- products of human workmanship, with the emphasis on "human." I'm sure no one in the archaeology community questions this; who would ever suggest that the stone projectile points found throughout Manitoba were made by anything other than bona fide *Homo sapiens sapiens*?

You may be surprised to learn, then, that not everyone has assumed that such objects were human-made. Rather, they have been attributed to spiritual and other-than-human beings, and the archaeological hypothesis that lithic artefacts are human-made is but a second, alternative opinion. Clearly, the worldview lying behind this Indigenous interpretation differs radically from that held by Western archaeologists. The purpose of this brief paper is to provide some examples of the non-archaeological alternatives that would be grouped under the heading "Indigenous ways of knowing."

Algonquian nations have traditionally assigned ancient found artifacts to the maymaygwayshiwuk -- the rough equivalents of the leprechauns and trolls of European folklore. At maturity the maymaygwayshiwuk were of a size and stature of a five-year-old child. They lacked noses and were covered with hair, or possessed long flowing head hair that hung down over their bodies. They inhabited underground dwellings in cliffs and bluffs along lakeshores and in riverbanks, and in sandhills. They were of both male and female gender, produced young and lived in colonies or extended family households. They were capable of speaking human languages, although they possessed a language of their own that was unintelligible to most humans.

The maymaygwayshiwuk ventured abroad in small stone canoes. They had the ability to suddenly disappear, and to paddle their canoes through the faces of cliffs and through openings that appeared magically in them. They wore animal-skin clothing, but otherwise acquired certain hand-made goods in the form of offerings left for them by human beings (Brightman 1992:181).

According to ethnologist James Howard (1977:109), the Plains Ojibwa considered the stone arrow points found on the prairie as the handiwork of the maymaygwashiwuk. The Plains Cree also regarded the little people as the stone-workers, who made the arrow points, flint knives and stone hammerheads. It was possible to hear the sounds they made while fashioning these things in their underground abodes (Ahenakew 1973:97). They traded them to the Crees for buffalo meat, hides, porcupine quills and other items that they needed but could not obtain for themselves (Brass 1978). Both the Plains Ojibwa and the Plains Cree moved into their current territories from

elsewhere. Since they didn't manufacture the found artifacts themselves, they attributed them to other-than-human beings already resident in the district. This was also true of the Dakotas in their westward movements beyond the Missouri River, by which time they had not been making flint points for several generations. "On reaching their present habitat they found many stone points scattered about the land; and not knowing who made them they attributed their origin to the supernatural, calling them now 'Iktomi arrow-heads,' because Iktomi, a legendary hero, is described as having used points of that kind" (Curtis 1976:26).

"Iktomi" is the Dakota word for "spider," and one old story invokes the spider as the primal source of arrowhead use by the ancestral Lakota. A hunter very long ago took shelter in a cave, and noticed a beautiful spider web. In appreciation of the respect the man showed the web, the spider told him of a special hill made of arrowheads created by her people. She told him that these points were useful in the hunt, and demonstrated how to make them. The man gathered some of them and showed them to his people. "These arrowheads changed their lives", said full-blood Dakota Oscar Howe. "The spiders are clever. They are the inventors of technology" (quoted in St. Pierre and Long Soldier 1995:50).

A rather similar belief is held by the Dené-speaking Navajos whose ancestors, according to one hypothesis, migrated from the Canadian Northwest during the Common Era. For them, the Clovis and Folsom points commonly found in the American Southwest were fashioned by horny toads (actually a type of lizard) (Nebokov 2002:30).

It is not uncommon to hear a local collector or landowner interpret certain sites as "battlegrounds" because of the abundance of arrow points discovered thereon. Professional archaeologists generally dismiss this explanation (Riddle 1983:34), but in fact it coincides to a degree with some traditional Native interpretations of the widespread occurrence of arrow points. They too invoke a battle scenario, only the combatants are spiritual beings, not humans.

A case in point is the Delaware story in which the hero Nanabush seeks to punish his father Wunchène'kis for killing his mother. Before the encounter, a voice directed Nanabush to go to Mahalèsànk, the Flint Place, gather up some flint pieces and sharpen them. In the heat of the ensuing confrontation, Nanabush hurled his flints at Wunchène'kis, who in turn fired arrows at his challenger. "To this day there are arrowheads and flint pieces found on the ground all over this Turtle Island as a result of that conflict long ago" (Hitakonanu'laxk 1994:55). An almost identical account appears in Ojibwa tradition (Johnston 1976:18-19).

The Dakota also have a story of an ancient battle, this one involving two culture heroes -- Ishnáechagé, the First Born, and his younger sibling Little Boy Man -- and the animals. Unktomé (Iktomi), the original trouble-maker, roused the animals against Little Boy Man who was destined to be their master. Before the impending conflict, Ishnáechagé gave his little brother a bow with flint-tipped arrows, a stone war club, and a spear. He cast a pebble four times into the air, and

each time it became a rock wall.

In due course, animals of all kinds -- bison, elk, bears, wolves, badgers to name but a few -- launched their massed assault in vast numbers upon the stone fortress. For the first time in history the bow was strung, and hundreds of flint-headed arrows found their marks in the bodies of the surging animals. Each time Little Boy Man swung his stone war-club, his enemies fell in countless numbers.

The Dakota scholar Charles Eastman (1980:128-129) notes that his people "have always claimed that the stone arrows which are found so generally throughout the country are the ones that the first man used in his battle with the animals." He further notes that neither tradition nor the memories of the elders bear witness to their forebears ever having made or used such arrow points.

Portable objects are not the only things attributed by traditional Natives to supernatural or other-than-human beings. Features nowadays classified by archaeologists as "rock art" have also been explained this way. According to the Mandan/Gros Ventre elder Crow's Heart in his place-names account of North Dakota, "Westward you come to a flat country with a knoll on top of which is picture writing made by the spirits. That country is known as the Stone-with-picture-writing. Nobody knows who makes the pictures, so they think it is the gods. Westward still ... is the Place-where-the-turtle-lies. It is a high hill, rising on a high bluff, on which they made out of stones an outline of a turtle about fifteen feet long, facing west" (Beckwith 1937:307).

I believe it is fair to say that contemporary Indigenous people in southern Manitoba are generally indifferent toward the findings of archaeologists concerning precontact history. There are surely numerous reasons for this, one of which may lie with the fact that their immediate forebears were relative newcomers to the region. If the ancestors of the present-day Manitoba Ojibwa and Dakotas can only be traced back, say, five centuries or less, then it is understandable that archaeological pronouncements about the times before that are of little interest to them.

But even if that were the case, among the Berens River Ojibwa "one hundred and fifty years is the outside limit of any genuine historic fact." Beyond that lies "a bottomless mythological epoch that lacks temporal guide posts of any conventional sort" (Hallowell 1937:667). This statement was published in the 1930s in reference to a local Indigenous people, but it can be used as a general rule of thumb; in his studies of the faraway Navajo, for example religious historian Karl Luckert (1979:129) learned that three generations "exhausted his [informant's] memory," and "the first people who taught the Deer Huntingway were the gods."

These circumstances help us to understand the traditional stories that I have recounted above.

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