

Who lived at The Forks 6,000 Years Ago?

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Introduction

In an article published in the 8 March 2019 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press*, it was stated that 6,000 years ago, members of the Dakota, Nakoda, Cree, and Anishinaabe nations would make their way to The Forks and engage in the trade of furs (Syvixay and Melfi 2019). This is basically a rendition of the oft-repeated and now-familiar theme of the locality's multi-millennial and multi-cultural Indigenous history.

We can be quite sure that Indigenous people frequented The Forks 6,000 years ago and probably even some 1,500 years before that. But this hypothesis begs the question: did these long-ago inhabitants identify themselves as Dakota, Nakoda, Cree, and Anishinaabe, as stated in the Syvixay-Melfi article? All these nations exist today, of course, but did those familiar, modern tribal names also exist 6,000 years ago, and did the people self-identify through the use of them? From the historical linguist's point of view and -- by extension, that of the archaeologist -- the answer would probably be "not necessarily," or perhaps even "probably not."

From the historical linguist's standpoint, people identified today as Dakota, Nakoda (aka Assiniboin), Cree and Ojibwa are unlikely to have been known as such 6,000 years ago. To put it another way, 6,000 years ago there were unlikely to have been any populations bearing these particular names, due to the effects of long-term linguistic change. And linguistic change is the focal theme of this paper.

The Algonquians

I will concentrate here on the Anishinaabe¹, specifically, the Ojibwa, and the Crees because I am most familiar with their histories; and before addressing the questions raised above, I must say a few preliminary words about the meaning and significance of the words "Anishinaabe(g)" and "Cree."

"Anishinaabe" is an umbrella term that today is used by a number of Algonquian-speaking peoples², namely, the Ojibwa, Odawa, Nipissing, Mississauga (Michi Saagig Nishinaabeg), Algonkin (Omamiwininiwak), and Potawatomie (Bodewadmi). Native historians also use "Anishinaabe" to refer to the primeval ancestors -- the Ancients or original people -- of these nations at the time of their Creation by the Great Mystery. The Algonquian-speaking Indigenous who nowadays live in southern Manitoba are mostly Ojibwas, and it is this specific term (Ojibwa) that I will use, within limitations, with reference to them in the balance of this essay in place of the more inclusive "Anishinaabe" with its multi-nation implications and hence its inspecificity. The word for "Ojibwa language" is "Ojibwemowin."

¹ The plural of "Anishinaabe" is "Anishinaabeg."

² The term "Algonquian" is said to be derived from the Maliseet word "elakomkwik," which means, "they are our relatives/allies."

Likewise, the term "Nehiyawak" will occasionally, and where appropriate, be used in place of "Cree" because the former is the people's own name for themselves that would have been in use during the Late Precontact era. "Cree," on the other hand, came into existence with the arrival of Europeans and is therefore, strictly speaking, only applicable to Postcontact time. The Indigenous word for "Cree language" is "Nehiyawewin."

Over many generations after their first appearance, the long-ago Anishinaabeg differentiated into the Ojibwa, Ottawa, Nipissing, Mississauga, Algonkin, and Potawatomie nations, and in time each of them developed its own variation of Algonquian speech. Obviously, linguistic change had to have taken place in order to give rise to the various modern dialects and corresponding tribal names listed above.

Traditionally, a very widespread criterion for group self-identification among Native people was the language they spoke. "Our language is our identity" and "We *are* what we *speak*" are long-entrenched concepts, and even today this all-important relationship between identity and language holds true. This has been well expressed by Ojibwa educator Edward Benton-Banai (1979:4): "The Ojibway are a tribe *because of* the way they speak" [*italics mine*]), and Red Cliff Ojibwa Elder Walter Bressette cautions that "if we lose the language, we are no more. We may become something else, but we will not be Anishinaabe" (Anonymous nd). This is why language courses are so vitally important to Indigenous educators today.

According to Indigenous historian William Warren (1974:81), the name "Ojibwa," and hence his people's identity as such, did not exist until the 16th Century CE at the earliest: "It is comparatively but a few generations back, that this tribe have been known by their present distinctive name of Ojibway. It is certainly not more than three centuries, and in all probability much less."

From the standpoint of the historical linguist, then, the notion that Algonquian-speaking people living at The Forks 6,000 years ago were speakers of the Ojibwa language as it is spoken today, is questionable because it does not take into account 6,000 years of change over time in the variables that make up a language such as vocabulary, grammar, semantics, and pronunciation. In addition, the borrowing of external linguistic traits down through the centuries can also contribute to the differentiation of a language away from its ancestral mode of expression.

It is estimated that all the present-day Algonquian languages, including Ojibwemowin and Nehiyawewin, variously developed from ancestral "Proto-Algonquian" at some time or other during the Common Era, that is, within the last 2,000 years. Historical linguist Johanna Nichols (2015:117) reminds us that only rarely can linguistic descent be traced back more than about 6,000 years; beyond that, an ancestral language would be unfamiliar to those who nowadays speak a descendant tongue. Stuart Fiedel (1987:3) notes that "if glottochronological assumptions are valid, originally related languages should each lose about 14% of their cognate [*shared*] words every 1000 years." This would mean that after the passage of 6,000 years, two languages of common ancestry/origin would have lost upwards of 84% of their cognates, with the result that the speech of the two languages would be substantially unintelligible.

So then, using Ojibwemowin as an example, the line of reasoning would go something like this:

- (1) If The Forks people were Ojibwas, their mother tongue had to have been Ojibwemowin
- (2) But they could not have been speaking 21st Century CE Ojibwemowin *per se* 6,000 years ago
- (3) Therefore, they could not have self-identified as Ojibwa, and hence were not Ojibwa.
- (4) However, they were surely biological forebears of modern-day Ojibwa people.

There is another reason why it is highly unlikely that Algonquians living at The Forks 6,000 years ago spoke either Ojibwemowin or Nehiyawewin if you accept that the Indigenous history of Manitoba goes back some 11,000 years: the predecessors of the above-named peoples were comparatively recent arrivals from somewhere outside of Manitoba. The Ojibwas began to migrate into the region for the first time with the establishment of the Montreal-based fur trade during the latter half of the 18th Century CE.

It's surmised by historical linguists that the modern Nehiyawewin evolved from an ancestral language that historical linguists call "Proto-Cree"³ spoken in the Upper Great Lakes region shortly before the beginning of the first millennium CE, but no earlier. Archaeologically recognizable in the form of the southernmost "Laurel" material culture, the early Nehiyawak soon made their inaugural appearance in southern Manitoba.

Plains Cree testimony affirms that before the year 1700 CE "they inhabited a district much farther north than at present" (Denig 1961:100). Archaeologists hypothesize that Nehiyawak were still living along the lower Red River as early as 1300 CE ... but not 6,000 years before present as stated in the Syvixay-Melfi article.

There are other factors that enter into this discussion. Historical linguists suggest that Cree and Ojibwa split from a common ancestral language that they call "Proto-Central Algonquian" around 800 to 1,000 years ago (P. Voorhis, cited in Syms 1982:7) when the two began to become differentiated from one another. Eight centuries later "a rather sharp distinction [existed] between the Cree and Ojibwa languages" (Bishop 1974:324) and this is repeatedly borne out in the fur trade journals.

For example, trader George Sutherland observed that "there is not a man on the Albany Establishment that is capable of trading with these [Ojibwa] Indians, as they differ far in their language from our [Cree] Indians at hudson's bay" [sic], cited in Bishop 1974:324). And George Barnston of the Long Lake post noted that Cree and Ojibwa speech "in many instances varies much, for a pure Soulteaux [Ojibwa] speaker requires to be for some time with the [Cree] Indians of this post before he can understand them perfectly" (cited in Bishop 1974:325). And finally, "their [Ojibwa] speech differs greatly from the Keskatchewan [Cree] Indians; they have so many words to represent one thing [that] it [is] difficult for us to converse with them" (Andrew Graham, quoted in Bishop (2002:83).

³ In light of what I have written above regarding historical priority of terms, it would be more appropriate to denominate that early language as "Proto-Nehiyawewin."

The point being made here is this: if, after a mere seven centuries, so much change had taken place in two languages that shared a common ancestry that they were all but mutually unintelligible, how much change can be expected to have transpired over *six millennia*?! So if all of these facts and hypotheses are correct, and if Native peoples did indeed traditionally base their identity on their respective languages, *there is not much chance that peoples who explicitly call themselves Ojibwa, or Nehiyawak, or Dakota, or Nakoda -- in their familiar, modern iterations -- were frequenting The Forks as early 6,000 years BP.*

If I had to suggest a language that might have been spoken at The Forks 6,000 years ago, I would guardedly propose that all of the long-ago Algonquian people living there were speaking dialects of Proto-Algonquian, the parent language of all of the modern-day languages of the widespread Algonquian sub-family.⁴ Following the example of Walter Bressette, I suggest that the people living in The Forks area six millennia ago, culturally and linguistically, were “something” to be sure -- but that they neither self-identified with, nor were identified by others by, the same tribal names by which they are known today.

The Siouans

As for the Dakota and Nakoda, their ancestral Proto-Siouan language originated far to the southeast in the central Mississippi River drainage sometime before 500 BCE (Springer and Witkowski 1982:70, 72). After that, it split up and diversified, with the descendant dialects subsequently spreading to the north and northwestward. By 1,000 CE, the Dakota language had evolved in the Mississippi headwaters region of Minnesota as part of the “Psinomani” culture (Schlesier 1994:346). The latter is characterised archaeologically by its distinctive “Sandy Lake” pottery. From its Minnesota homeland, the culture became widespread across southern Manitoba, but again, it all happened during the Common Era and not before.

The immediate forebears of the Nakoda, who came to live in the country about The Forks, were members of a population that broke away from the Minnesota Dakota sometime during the early 17th Century CE (Hodge 1912:45). And here we have an example of how language can allow us to gauge how long, at least in general terms, populations have been separated from each other: the “separation of the Assiniboins from the parent stem, to judge by the slight dialectical difference in the language, could not have greatly preceded the appearance of the whites, but it must have taken place before 1640, as the Jesuit Relation for that year mentions the Assiniboin as distinct” (*Ibid*).

A Proviso and the Bottom Line

Before closing, there is one major caveat to the above argument, and that has to do with the historical linguists’ *modus operandi*. As was pointed out by Dr Scott DeLancey back in 1993, the linguists’ means of dating the events of language development are notoriously impressionistic

⁴ This affords us a further demonstration of how languages can change over time: the Proto-Algonquian word for “people,” for example, is “*eleniywaki.” The same word in modern-day Ojibwemowin, a daughter language of Proto-Algonquian, is “ininiwak” (Dr David Pentland, personal communication, 2019). The “family resemblance” is there, all right -- but so is the difference.

and imprecise. That is why we often see them expressed with huge plus-or-minus factors, e.g., 5,000 ± 1,000 BCE! (Denny 1989: 90).

Furthermore, “we don’t know enough about the sociolinguistics of dispersed hunter-gatherer communities [of the sort that inhabited The Forks 6,000 years ago] to know for certain that the expected rates of linguistic divergence should always be comparable to those that we see in larger-scale sedentary populations” (DeLancey 1993) upon which historical linguists tend to base their hypotheses of language history and rates of change at large.

Nonetheless, my own bias inclines me toward the prospect that Nehiyawewin- and Ojibwemowin-speakers living in Winnipeg today would have a hard time understanding their Proto-Algonquian forebears who may have lived here all those centuries ago. Arguably, people inhabiting the Red River valley six millennia before present may well have included Proto-Algonquian ancestors of Algonquian-speakers living here today, but they would not have been speaking modern-day Ojibwemowin or Nehiyawewin nor, therefore, would they have identified themselves as Ojibwa or as Nehiyawak.

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