

The Antiquity of the Ojibwa

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I recently read in a book by Dr E. Syms (2014) that the Ojibwa presence goes back thousands of years as revealed by archaeology. On the surface of it, that doesn't sound very controversial; ask any self-respecting Manitoba Ojibwa ("Outchipoué") Elder, and s/he will probably tell you that "we've always been here." However, there are other opinions on the books that don't quite jibe with that point of view, or with the notion that the history of Ojibwa ethnicity is multi-millennial. Does the Ojibwa presence in Manitoba indeed go back *thousands* of years?

To begin, let's try and make sure we're all on the same page regarding the basics. First, we are dealing here with the late Pre-Contact, Proto-Contact, and early Contact periods (*ca.* 1000 CE – 1800 CE). So what was an "Ojibwa" at those times in history? Leigh doesn't say what, culturally, an Ojibwa is or what, in so many words, was diagnostic of a true Ojibwa. Here's my own definition, from a centuries-ago historical perspective: **an Ojibwa was a person of Indigenous biological and cultural descent who self-identified, and was identified by outsiders, as an Ojibwa, who adhered to the local Ojibwa lifeway, and who routinely and habitually spoke a dialect of the Ojibwe language subfamily (Ojibwemowin).**

These criteria can be problematic for the archaeologist because, theoretically, non-Ojibwas can adopt selected cultural traits and, at the same time, retain other of their own existing home-grown customs and their traditional self-identity. Nor of course can we archaeologically excavate a language, or recognize an Ojibwa-made potsherd or projectile point just by looking at it. The only archaeological techniques that permit us to ethicize Pre-Contact cultural materials are the direct historical approach, the inferential historical approach, and the direct ethnological approach (Meyer 1987:188), but these methods require access to specific kinds of early Contact-period sites that are, alas, rare. And they can't take us very far back in time either.

As stated above, Leigh uses the term "thousands of years" (note the plural) to define the antiquity of Ojibwa culture in general and, presumably, language in particular. By this measure, Ojibwemowin would have to be at least 2,000 years old. In the current Manitoba cultural chronology, this puts the Ojibwa back into early Laurel times. What I would like to do now is see how this hypothesis stacks up to the thinking and findings

of scholars in the sister disciplines of historical linguistics and Indigenous historiography.

The Ojibwa language is one of a dozen that evolved at one time or other in the general Great Lakes region during the Woodland Period of ~200 BCE-1600 CE. They all ultimately originated from an ancient parent language called "Proto-Algonquian." One hypothesis holds that Proto-Algonquian itself developed somewhere in the eastern Great Lakes region around 1200 BCE (Siebert 1967:35); and since Proto-Algonquian is the predecessor of Ojibwemowin, then by this measure *the latter must post-date 1200 BCE*. Can we be any more specific than that?

The *modi operandi* of the historical linguist are glottochronology and lexicostatistics.¹ Without going into all the details about how language historians ply their trade, let me begin by pointing out that Dr Paul Proux (1982: Fig. 1) places the advent of Ojibwemowin at ~300 BCE – 100 CE. Thus, sometime between 300 BCE and 100 CE, a sub-population of long-ago Anishinaabe "became" Ojibwemowin-speakers. This translates into a maximum of 2,300 years ago, *and is therefore essentially compatible with Leigh's estimate of "thousands of years" (i.e., 2,000+ years) for the presence of the Ojibwa* as an identifiable entity to modern-day researchers.

Dr Paul Voorhis (1978:Fig. 2; Syms 1982:7, Fig. 5) is another historical linguist whose thinking is of interest to us here. He hypothesizes that Cree and Ojibwa modes of speech split from the parent Proto-Central Algonquian about 1,000 years ago. If this evolutionary divergence marks the advent of Ojibwemowin, and if language is a prime factor in defining the Ojibwa identity, then Ojibwa ethno-genesis goes back only a thousand, not "thousands of," years.

Another scholar who has ventured an estimate of Ojibwemowin antiquity is Dr J. Peter Denny. He places its origins at sometime around 1200 CE, when it broke off from its immediate predecessor "Ojibwa-Potawatomi" (P. Denny, personal communication, 1995) and became a language in its own right. This means that it's only 800 years old at most, and thus is, again, too young to qualify as something that has been in existence for thousands of years.

¹ "Glottochronology" is defined as "the use of statistical data to date the divergence of languages from their common sources"; "lexicostatistics is "the statistical study of the vocabulary of a language, with special attention to its historical links with other languages."

The Indigenous historian William Warren (1974:81) provides some very interesting information on Ojibwa self-identity. Writing in the early 1850s, he notes that

“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. It is only within this time bracket that they have been disconnected as a distinct or separate tribe from the Ottaways and Potta-wat-um-ies.”

It would have been at this point of disconnection that Ojibwemowin began to arise as a dialect and, in the fullness of time, have become a distinct language comprising several dialects of its own.

So the Voorhis, Denny, and Warren estimates don't support Leigh's calculation that the people who spoke Ojibwemowin -- i.e., the Pre-Contact Ojibwa -- were possessed of an Ojibwa (Outchipoué) identity so named that endured for literally thousands of years. Only the Proulx model does, so the “weight of opinion” would seem to favour an antiquity of only a few hundred years.

On the other hand, it would most assuredly be correct to say that the historic Ojibwa, as North American Indigenes, were and are direct descendants of people who arrived on the continent as far back as 14,000 years ago if not much earlier – in any event, long, long before Proto-Algonquian language and words like “Outchipoué/Ojibwa” and “Ojibwemowin” came into existence. Is it possible, then, that Leigh is actually (and intentionally) also referring to the Ojibwas' ancestors, and not only to people explicitly denominated as “Ojibwas” in historical records and in recent linguistic and historiographic research?

This last query calls to mind John A. Grim's (1983:57) nomenclature for the earliest forebears of the Ojibwa: *Paleo-Ojibway* – “the nomadic tribal ancestors who crossed the Bering Strait and eventually moved toward the Atlantic Ocean.” “Paleo-Ojibway” is appropriate only in the sense that the historic Ojibwa are indeed descendants of Ice-Age migrants to the Western Hemisphere and of the descendant peoples and cultures.

But it's inappropriate in that the Ancients' languages, whatever they were called 'way back then in the local vernacular, and the specifics of their lifeways, were not

comparable in detail to those of the Algonquians who became the first true Ojibwa many thousands of years later during the Common Era. People living 14,000 years ago surely didn't refer to themselves as "Ojibwa," nor were they likely to have been referred to as such by their neighbours. And I think we can comfortably assume that the particulars of their languages and overall lifeways were substantially different from those of the historic Ojibwas as well. In basic essence, "Paleo-Ojibwa," as used by Dr Grim, is a misnomer.

The Ojibwa presence anywhere on the continent for thousands of years is, to my mind, an abiding and worthwhile topic that will require a sustained, multi-disciplinary effort in the decades to come. In the meantime, a critical assessment of any of what I have written here would be most welcome for publication immediately below.

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