

Cree Ancestry

Leo Pettipas

Manitoba Archaeological Society

Theoretically, at least some modern-day Western Woods Crees residing in Manitoba should be able to trace their ancestry to the earliest postglacial inhabitants of the North, namely the Northern Plano peoples of ca. 8,000 radiocarbon years ago. This hypothesis would appear to be contradicted by Julien Bighetty, former band chief at Pukatawagan, who told ethnologist Robert Brightman that the Crees were not the earliest inhabitants of the Churchill River drainage, but that they had displaced an earlier and autochthonous race, the *Kayasiđiniwak* ('Ancient People').

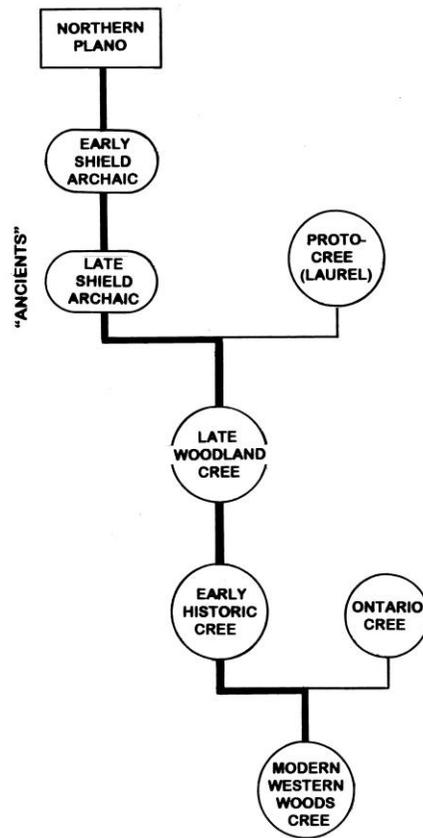
When, in time out of mind, the Crees entered the Churchill River country, they found the Ancients in possession of it. Mr. Bighetty's testimony implies that the Crees were comparatively recent immigrants to the North; according to this scenario, the initial immigration of Crees would have taken place -- in archaeological terms -- in Woodland, but certainly not Palaeo-Indian, times.

These seemingly-contradictory points of view are not necessarily incompatible, and in this paper I will attempt to show how 21st Century Crees of Manitoba's boreal forest may be justified in claiming descent from the early postglacial Plano colonizers of the North. The operative terms here are immigration and intermarriage.

Following Mr. Bighetty's account, the original postglacial colonizers of the North were not Crees. Furthermore, we aren't in a position to suggest what language these earliest arrivals spoke and therefore can't hazard a guess as to their ethnicity. We can reasonably propose that their immediate successors were bearers of the home-grown Shield Archaic cultural tradition, but again, "who" these people were linguistically can't be stated with any degree of confidence either.

The Shield Archaic people of northern Manitoba didn't live in splendid isolation. Archaeological returns point to cultural and probably demographic input from the grasslands to the south and some degree of multi-ethnicity as a result. However, we are also hard put to surmise "who" the transplanted plains people themselves were, so that doesn't afford any hint as to the linguistic/ethnic affiliations of the Shield-dwellers either. For most of us, the first real opportunity we have to assign ethnicity to Indigenous boreal populations comes with the Selkirk composite. Personally, I am inclined to accept that Laurel pottery is a Proto-Cree cultural indicator, but I doubt that there are many others who share that inclination.

All that notwithstanding, I still think that we can argue effectively that modern-day northern Crees can trace their cultural and genetic heritage back to earliest postglacial times in the region. To that end, I refer to the diagram that follows, beginning at the bottom. Following the heavy dark line, we see that the immediate ancestors of the contemporary Western Woods Cree were a mixture of indigenous Cree of the Recent era¹ and Cree immigrants from Ontario who were expanding westward with the fur trade. The “Early Historic Cree” of Manitoba in particular were descendants of Late



Woodland (i.e., Selkirk composite) people, who were also Cree according to conventional archaeological wisdom.

The Late Woodland/Selkirk composite population was the result of miscegenation of (a) incoming groups speaking an early Cree dialect and possessing a Laurel-type culture, and (b) regional indigenous people nowadays referred to by Woods Cree as the Ancients and by archaeologists as late Shield Archaic. The latter were direct descendants of an early

¹ In this paper, the word “Recent” refers to the time since the first arrival of Europeans in Manitoba, that is, since the appearance of Thomas Button on the shore of Hudson Bay in the very early 17th Century.

Shield Archaic demographic, whose cultural and biological roots in turn were firmly planted in the pioneering Northern Plano tradition of 8,000 years ago.

The thing to note is the uninterrupted, multi-millennial, multi-generational connectedness between the modern western Woods Cree and Northern Plano, traceable by way of the heavy dark line.