Understanding Ethnicity and Cultural Affiliation: Huron-Wendat and Anthropological Perspectives

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It is a well-known fact that archaeological cultures constructed by archaeologists do not always overlap with actual past ethnic groups. This is the case with the St. Lawrence Iroquoians of the Northeast. Up until recently, conventional narratives viewed this group as distinct from all other historic Iroquoian populations. However, the Huron-Wendat and the Mohawk consider themselves to be their direct descendants. Our paper is an attempt to reconcile oral history and archaeological interpretations by suggesting that part of the disparity between Huron-Wendat and archaeological conceptions of the group identity of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians lies in differential understandings of the very nature of ethnicity by each party.

Introduction

For more than a century now, archaeologists have sought to establish correlates between material culture and ethnic groups (see Trigger 2006). Unlike cultural anthropologists, who can access the emic perspectives on contemporary group identity, archaeologists are often limited to extrapolating ethnicity from the material culture of past human societies. Making this connection has been shown to be a difficult enterprise. In fact, archaeological concepts of cultures[1] and ethnic groups in the past do not always align with Indigenous peoples' own conceptions of themselves and of their ancestors—or even with ancient peoples' conceptions of group identity, which sometimes contribute to alienate communities from their past (e.g., Warburton and Begay 2005; see also Voss 2015:659, 665). These broader issues have engendered much discussion within anthropological and archaeological studies over the past 40 years (Barth 1969; Hodder 1982; Hu 2013; Insoll 2007; Jones 1997, 2008; MacSweeney 2011; Moore 1994; Shennan 1994;

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[1] An archaeological culture is a recurring (i.e., normative) pattern or set of geographically and temporally restricted shared cultural traits (material culture, subsistence remains, settlement patterns) observable in the archaeological record that have long been understood by culture historians as the remains of ethnic groups (Childe 1929:v-vi; Trigger 2006:232-233). Culture historians have used this as a proxy for ethnic groups, a position challenged since the mid-twentieth century and one that is still the subject of ongoing discussions.

[2] In this paper, the term *Huron-Wendat* is used as an encompassing term to refer to the Iroquoian population that lived in what is known today as southern Ontario in the early time of New France, spoke the same language, and identified as "Wendat" (i.e., the Huron and the Petun). The Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendate does not believe that the distinction made by Champlain and the Jesuits between the Huron and the Petun reflected actual ethnic differences and considers both groups and their descendants (i.e., the Huron-Wendat and Wyandot nations) as Huron-Wendat. When referring specifically to the contemporary community of Wendake, the term Nation huronne-wendat (Huron-Wendat Nation) is privileged.

Voss 2015; Weik 2014; Wiessner 1983; Wobst 1977).

The long-standing question of the ethnic identity of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians is a good example of this particular situation (Tremblay 1999b). The Huron-Wendat[2] have long argued that they have ancestral cultural roots in the St. Lawrence valley that predate the establishment of part of their population near Québec City in 1651, an argument also present in the Mohawk communities (Blanchard 1982). Even though most scholars recognize that the relationship between the Huron-Wendat and the St. Lawrence Iroquoians was one of close interactions and alliances, the general consensus in archaeology, as we will discuss further, is that the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence valley were distinct from all other Northern Iroquoian groups at the time of the voyages of Jacques Cartier in the mid-sixteenth century.

In this paper, we look to ethnicity theory for insights to better understand the diverging perspectives of the Huron-Wendat Nation[3] and Iroquoianist archaeologists. First, we present a short overview of each party's understanding of the identity of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians. We then briefly review how ethnicity is understood in the anthropological literature, by presenting some of its defining elements. Finally, we reflect on those elements in the hope that they may shed new light on current understandings of Huron-Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquoian relationships.

Who Were the "St. Lawrence Iroquoians"?

The Nation huronne-wendat (Huron-Wendat Nation) perceives itself as the direct descendants of the Iroquoian people who occupied the St. Lawrence valley until the late 1580s, whom

archaeologists refer to as the St. Lawrence Iroquoians. Their position on the ethnic identity of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians is primarily rooted in their own oral tradition fixed in the historical record between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries (see Richard, this volume). For example, in Barbeau's (1915) *Huron and Wyandot Mythology*, there are at least seven mentions, mainly recorded in the nineteenth century, that allude to a Laurentian origin for the Huron-Wendat (Barbeau 1915:299-300, 310, 312, 324, 360-361, 375, 383). An example from the Huron-Wendat Nation's oral tradition comes from the words of Grand Chief Nicolas Tsawenhohi Vincent, recorded at the Legislative Assembly of Lower Canada in 1824, where he stated that the ancestors of the Huron-Wendat Nation, at the time of early contact with Europeans were "masters of the land" along the St. Lawrence valley all the way to the Great Lakes (Vincent 1824). According to Sioui (1994:25), the fact that oral histories about the eastern origin of part of the Huron-Wendat population were still being told more than 300 years after the St. Lawrence valley had been depleted of its original population says much about the importance of this information for those communities. While the Huron-Wendat Nation agrees that it shares ancestry with the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence valley, subtleties exist concerning at least two aspects of this interpretation, particularly regarding the exact traditional land of their Laurentian ancestors and how and when the common belief in their shared ancestry emerged.

First, tribal historian George Sioui (1991:78) describes the present-day Huron-Wendat as "an amalgam of peoples of Wendat-Iroquoian linguistic background, originating partly from Ontario and from the *northern* shore of the St. Lawrence River, from Lake Ontario to Île-aux-Coudres" (emphasis added). By insisting on this geographical detail, Sioui seems to imply that the present-day island of Montreal and the south shore of the St. Lawrence valley (i.e. the Saint-Anicet region) may have been more Mohawk than Huron-Wendat, a position that is not shared by all. In fact, the Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendat does not make the same distinction as

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[3] We suspect that the contemporary Wyandot Nations also share the Huron-Wendat Nation's position on their relatedness to the St. Lawrence Iroquoians. However, since we do not have official statements from the former communities and we do not want to make assumptions or speak in their name, we will only speak for the Huron-Wendat Nation in this paper. However, this admission does not mean that the Wyandot do not also share the ideas expressed here.

Sioui and views the St. Lawrence valley in its entirety as ancestral Huron-Wendat territory based on several of their oral traditions recorded in different historical sources between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries (see Richard, this volume). Second, Sioui does not deny that the Huron-Wendat and the St. Lawrence Iroquoians may have been different ethnic groups at the time of Cartier's travels (Sioui 1989:56-62), but he explains their shared ancestry by the fact that during the sixteenth century, important segments of the Laurentian population sought refuge with their Huron-Wendat allies. Hence, when part of the Huron-Wendat population established itself near Québec City in 1650 after the defeat of their confederacy, they perceived this move as returning to the land where part of their people and ancestors originated (Labelle 2013:100; Sioui 1989:118). This idea is also not entirely shared by the Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendat. Following from their above-mentioned position on the ancestral

Huron-Wendat territory, they see no ethnic distinction between themselves and the St. Lawrence Iroquoians at any point in time. They consider themselves as belonging to one large Huron-Wendat family regardless of the geographical, linguistic, and material differences between them. In other words, they see no discontinuity in their past and present occupation of the St. Lawrence valley.

On the other hand, the common archaeological perspective views the St. Lawrence Iroquoians as distinct from the Huron-Wendat based on two main sets of data: material culture (principally but not exclusively ceramic style) and ethnolinguistics. In fact, decades of research have brought archaeologists to see important differences in the ceramic material production of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians, the Huron-Wendat, and the Mohawk (of the Haudenosaunee), and have suggested that each group developed and lived in their respective historical territory at least a thousand years prior to the arrival of the first

Figure 1. *Ancestral ethnic territories of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and St. Lawrence Iroquoians as suggested by archaeologists.*

Europeans (e.g., Chapdelaine 1989; Gates St-Pierre 2004; Tuck 1971; Wright 1984; see Figure 1). Ethnolinguistic studies seem to corroborate these distinctions by suggesting that each group spoke a different Iroquoian language or dialect (Steckley 2009, 2012).

However, it is important to note that while this scenario is still the most widely accepted, in recent years, there has been a growing interest by archaeologists to acknowledge diverging Indigenous perspectives and to engage in a dialogue with the Huron-Wendat and Mohawk nations.

Regardless of how Iroquoian people identified themselves in the sixteenth century or how they came to identify themselves later on, archaeological and ethnolinguistic evidence increasingly support a close relationship between the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence valley and the Lower Great Lakes, as evident in the papers in this volume. For example, the archaeological presence of segments of the Laurentian populations on the northern shore of Lake Ontario as early as the mid-fifteenth century (e.g., the Parsons site [see Williamson, this volume]) and in the upper Trent valley in the sixteenth century (e.g., the Benson and Coulter sites [see Ramsden 1988, 1990, this volume]), as well as the physical presence of individuals speaking the St. Lawrence Iroquoian dialect in the Huron-Wendat Confederacy in 1623 (see Steckley 2012, this volume) all point to the fact that for centuries Huron-Wendat and St. Lawrence Iroquoian populations shared the same territory and, at times, the same villages.

What Is Ethnicity?

Identifying ethnic groups in the past through the study of material culture has long been a central focus of archaeological research (see Trigger 2006, in particular Chapter 6). While the "archaeological cultures" developed at best approximate actual past ethnic groups, they still have value in cultural historical schemes and other applications, especially if used cautiously with respect to the nature of "ethnicity." In fact, this endeavour is not only of interest to archaeologists; it is of increasing importance to Indigenous communities, especially

for those engaged in repatriation, land claims, and historical rewritings.

While ethnicity is a difficult concept to grasp, scholars have nonetheless been able to reach a general consensus as to what it is and how it is manifested and used by communities. In this section, we discuss what we judge are the most important defining characteristics of ethnicity that differentiate it from other forms of social identity. We believe that a better understanding of ethnicity is a key element that may help resolve the diverging perspectives on St. Lawrence Iroquoian identity.

According to contemporary Western anthropology, the concept of ethnic identity or ethnicity refers to peoples' ancestral heritage (Baumann 2004:12; Voss 2015:658). It is understood as a large-scale social group identity founded on a real or assumed shared belief in a common ancestry, involving a process of self-identification (Emberling 1997:302-303; Hall 1997:19-33; Jones 1997:84; MacSweeney 2014:2514; Normark 2004:132). In other words, ethnic identity is subjective and cannot be determined solely on the basis of similarities and differences in cultural, linguistic, and biological traits, let alone material culture (Jones 2008:321; see Kroeber 1939). On the contrary, ethnicity is a conscious and fluid social construct based on socially meaningful distinctions determined by members of an ethnic group itself (Voss 2015:657). There is no doubt that cultural, linguistic, and biological traits do play an important role in the negotiation of ethnic identity, but they do not define it (MacSweeney 2014:2515).

Ethnic identity is thus very different from cultural identity, which refers to the objective cultural traditions and traits (e.g., language, religion, customs, material culture) developed and shared by groups (Barth 1969). However, even though cultural identity often overlaps with ethnic identity, both ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological research have demonstrated that exceptions are common enough that a predictable one-to-one overlap between the two can never be assumed in the absence of ancient peoples' perception of themselves (e.g., Hodder 1982; Jones 1997).

Recent social network analysis of northern Iroquoian pottery (Hart and Engelbrecht 2012:345; Hart et al. 2006; Dermarkar et al., this volume) has also demonstrated that, regardless of the period, potters from different historical ethnic territory shared many pottery decorative motifs—which impedes our ability to read historic ethnic labels far back into time. Their conclusion aligns with ethnogenesis theories that suggests that all modern ethnic groups and nations emerged from multiple predecessors as a result of ongoing patterns of cultural interactions, migrations, and political alignments leading to group fusions and fissions over time (Moore 1994, 2004:3046). Hence, it is very difficult for archaeologists to identify the boundaries of ethnic groups at any given point in time without a high degree of speculation (Voss 2015:665). Archaeology may provide us with the tools to define "archaeological cultures," but not ethnic groups.

The idea that past peoples' group affiliation, including ethnicity, can be read from their stylistic expressions (e.g., ceramic decoration, clothing, hair styles) is well established in archaeology (see discussion in Burke 2014:6743; Tremblay

1999a:4). However, it is argued that not all stylistic productions automatically bear the marks of a group's ethnic identity, but that ethnicity is expressed and negotiated through only a small selection of traits. Polly Wiessner (1983) suggested in her stylistic analysis of Kalahari San projectile points that there exist two different types of stylistic expressions: emblemic and assertive styles. "Emblemic styles" are used consciously to express group affiliation. They have a more discrete distribution in the archaeological record, since they are usually reserved for specific social and ceremonial events (Curta 2014:2509; Wiessner 1983:259; Wobst 1977). "Assertive styles," on the other hand, are conscious or unconscious expressions of someone's personal identity. They are more likely to be copied and spread into trends because, unlike the emblemic style, they do not have a distinct referent.

Following this logic, since ethnicity is fluid, limiting emblemic symbols to a small number of markers rather than affixing them on widespread domestic pottery makes sense, because the latter are not easily adaptable (Burke 2014:6745). As Emberling (1997:311) suggests, "The distribution

Figure 2. *Huron-Wendat Band Council in ceremonial regalia, Wendake, 1895: Élie Sioui, Gaspard Picard, Adolphe Picard, Philippe Vincent, Maurice Sébastien, Francis Gros-Louis, Pierre Gros-Louis, Antoine Bastien, and Antoine Picard (Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendat Archives).*

of a pottery style […] may not indicate the existence of an ethnic group, but may instead mark political boundaries or simply the spatial limits of a particular system of distribution." For example, the growing presence of pottery with "huronizing" characteristics found in different St. Lawrence Iroquoian regions, such as Prescott, Summerstown, Saint-Anicet and even the Dawson site in Montreal towards the end of the sixteenth century, supports this interpretation (Chapdelaine and Woods 2015; Woods 2012; Woods et al. 2015). Alternatively, besides potters' personal and ethnic identity, it is very possible that a variety of less fluid and subjective group identities, such as matrifamily, clan, moiety, and phratry affiliations, may have been expressed on pottery through the use of certain motifs. In other words, without knowing the symbols and objects past people used to express their personal identity, group affiliations, and ethnic difference, it will always be difficult to extrapolate their ethnic identity from their material culture (see Figure 2).

Another important characteristic of ethnicity is that it is dynamic. Similarly to culture, it is never fixed or consistent through time but, rather, constantly adapts to different socioeconomic and political circumstances (Jones 1997:13-14; Voss 2015:657; see Figure 3). For example, groups splitting or merging into new entities as a result of political alliances or warfare are not uncommon in the historical record, as is the case with the Wyandot who originated from the alliance of the Petun (Tionontaté) and part of the Huron-Wendat Confederacy. Unfortunately, not all renegotiations and shifts in identities, especially those occurring during times of migration and warfare, have left traces to attest for them. As Curta (2014:2508) puts it, ethnicity is an idea more than a thing.

Finally, many scholars have argued that not all autonomous pre-state societies in the past defined themselves through the use of rigid ethnic boundaries. In fact, it is argued that ethnic identity is strongly associated with the rise of the state, and that it would have developed as a mode of resistance in the face of expanding political entities

Figure 3. Huron-Wendat community members in ceremonial regalia in front of the Wendake church, Wendake, ca. 1910: unknown, unknown, Francis Gros-Louis, Nicholas Gros-Louis, Gaspard Picard, unknown (Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendat Archives, François Vincent collection, Ph-15-4.)

(Bentley 1987; Emberling 1997:308; Fried 1967, 1968; Shennan 1994:15; Smith 1986:45). According to Emberling (1997:297-298), the widespread use of group names meaning "people" or "human beings" (e.g., Inuit) supports this idea. Boundaries between groups or tribes most likely represented temporary and fluctuating patterns of grouping and alliances based on social networks. Therefore, ethnicity should not always be assumed to be the primary criterion linking people together in the past; at particular points in time, as suggested earlier, clanic and regional identities may have been more important group identities.

Discussion

How can these characteristics of ethnic identity help us rethink our understanding of the inhabitants of the St. Lawrence valley? In our opinion, two issues need further consideration.

The first is that even after the creation of the Huron-Wendat and Haudenosaunee confederacies, Iroquoian groups within the region may not have defined themselves along strict ethnic terms. In fact, part of the Huron-Wendat population made the strategic decision to join the Haudenosaunee, with whom they had had conflicts for decades, rather than to establish themselves near Québec City in 1650 (Labelle 2013:120-140; Steckley 1997:33; Trigger 1987:782-788).

The second is that we cannot deny that the influx of Laurentian people into the Huron-Wendat and Mohawk communities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contributed to the construction of their later ethnic identity. It is important to keep in mind that the Huron-Wendat and Wyandot nations of today are not their fifteenth-century ancestors but, rather, the product of group fusions and fissions over several centuries (see Figure 4). Despite the fact that the St. Lawrence Iroquoians may have joined multiple Indigenous populations during their exodus, what really counts in the end is what each group chooses to retain as defining elements of their separate identity, since ethnic identity is subjective and self-constructed.

Figure 4. *The current and five past grand chiefs of the Huron-Wendat Nation: Michel Laveau, Wellie Picard, Max Gros-Louis, Konrad Sioui (current Grand Chief), Jocelyne Gros-Louis, and Jean Picard (Conseil de la Nation huronne-wendat Archives).*

In our opinion, denying that the Huron-Wendat Nation and the Mohawk have any right to consider themselves descendants of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians rests on a very rigid definition of ethnicity that reflects neither ethnicity theory nor contemporary communities' understandings of themselves. It also minimizes the importance of the deeply complex social processes that the Northern Iroquoian world was going through at the time of the arrival of the Europeans.

Conclusion

Excluding important Indigenous narratives from the reconstruction of history when they do not corroborate archaeological interpretations can sometimes translate into real social, economic, and political consequences for Indigenous peoples, especially when mainstream research challenges their authority to control what they consider to be their own cultural heritage (Voss 2015:657). Our attempt to bridge the Indigenous and archaeological perspectives on the identity of the St. Lawrence Iroquoians is necessary not only to ensure future collaborative relationships, but also to integrate Huron-Wendat perspectives (historic and contemporary) into mainstream research and enrich our understanding of the history of the Northeast. However, the growing openness and appreciation of the Huron-Wendat and Mohawk nations' perspectives by archaeologists in the past few years, as demonstrated in this volume, hint at a bright and rich collaborative future. For we believe that Indigenous and archaeological interpretations can offer a more accurate and representative understanding of the past when they are combined than when they are considered in isolation.

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C'est bien connu que les cultures archéologiques construites par les archéologues ne coïncident pas toujours avec les groupes ethniques réels du passé. Ceci est le cas des Iroquoiens du nord-est du Saint-Laurent. Jusqu'à récemment, les récits populaires considéraient ce groupe comme étant distinct de toutes les autres populations iroquoiennes historiques. Par contre, les Hurons-Wendats et les Mohawks se considèrent comme étant leurs descendants directs. Notre article tente de faire concorder les récits oraux et les interprétations archéologiques en suggérant qu'une partie des contradictions entre les Hurons-Wendats et les conceptions archéologiques sur l'identité du groupe d'Iroquoiens du Saint-Laurent réside dans les écarts de compréhension par chaque partie de la nature même de l'ethnicité.

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