

A First Nations Archaeologist: Struggling for Middle Ground

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between archaeologists and First Nations groups is of growing concern. At issue is whether this relationship can be called a "partnership." This is a topic that has been discussed in detail by both groups, but not from the perspective that I wish to address it. Being a Native North American archaeologist and First Nations Liaison gives me a unique perspective. In the past year I have worked with several First Nations groups in various archaeological contexts. Discussion will centre on a few of the projects I have been involved with, noting their positive and negative aspects, and what I learned from these experiences.

RÉSUMÉ

La relation entre les archéologues et les Premières Nations est une source de préoccupation croissante. Est-il vraiment possible de parler de « partenariat »? La question a été débattue en détail par les deux parties, mais jamais du point de vue que je propose. En tant qu'archéologue amérindien et agent de liaison pour les Premières Nations, j'ai une perspective unique. Au cours de la dernière année, j'ai travaillé avec plusieurs groupes autochtones dans divers contextes archéologiques. Ma conférence portera sur certains de ces projets, leurs points positifs et négatifs, et ce que j'ai pu tirer de ces expériences.

There is increasing First Nations' awareness towards archaeology and archaeological practices and what they can contribute to traditional beliefs and knowledge. The need for a clearer understanding of archaeology by First Nations is becoming more important, thereby making it necessary for archaeologists to recognize these concerns and how they may affect archaeological practices. Furthermore, the issue of whether the current situation between First Nations and archaeologists can be called a partnership needs to be addressed.

In the past year or so, I have learned that I have at least three obstacles that I look forward to facing and overcoming as my career evolves. Not only am I an archaeologist, but a member of a First Nation and a woman. Each of these factors on its own will present obstacles, but all three together can amount to an uphill struggle. Being a female Native archaeologist would give me enough material for an entire paper, but today I just want to look at a few things. I want to look at the connection between the "Native" and the "archaeologist" and see how much of a partnership is possible.

As I thought about the concepts of partnerships and relationships, I decided to look at some definitions. A relationship can be generally defined as some connection between parties who have dealings with each other, while a partnership can be defined as a connection between parties characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility for the achievement of a common goal (websters.com).

Keeping these definitions in mind, when I look at the state of the connections between archaeology and First Nations I find that what has occurred in the past fits under "relationship" because the two groups have only been connected when it was necessary

and most often their goals have been different. It is vital to move past the relationship stage into the partnership stage where both archaeologists and First Nations will have that mutual cooperation, responsibility and communication for the common goal of an archaeology that benefits all involved. How can this be done? By moving past the discussion stage and into the action stage.

This topic of First Nations and archaeological relationships has been discussed for years, but what I look forward to seeing are the actions necessary to put all the discussions into motion. Instead of talking about how First Nations should be involved in archaeology, archaeologists should do something about it, find out what the particular group would like to see come out of research and excavation. Instead of First Nations saying they have nothing to gain from archaeology or only being involved with burial issues, they should be involved in every aspect and ask questions. There is a definite need for more First Nations people to be archaeologically trained, and this is something that I have had experience with.

Upon finishing university, I began working at Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants in London, Ontario, on a variety of archaeological projects involving First Nations, a topic I will come back to later. What I have found interesting is the lack of role models I have to follow. I am an Ojibwa with a Master of Arts degree in archaeology and anthropology, but I have had difficulty relating my experiences to anyone before me. I have role models in archaeology and in the First Nations community, but virtually nobody that fits into both groups. Essentially what I am finding is that I am flying blind, learning as I go along. This is something that drives me to create something for others to follow. What needs to be kept in mind though is that my personal experience so far has been limited to Southwestern Ontario, and I therefore only speak for what I have experienced.

Moving on, both archaeologists and Aboriginal groups have presented thoughts and feelings on archaeological encounters, but it is a rare occurrence when they talk about something jointly. What I mean is that they are usually “[one-]sided”, the archaeologist more often being portrayed as the one who wants to study Native ancestors, and First Nations more often being portrayed as against anything scientific or archaeological occurring as it relates to their “people”. What a partnership would essentially do is to make these “sides” more transparent, so that it is more about a group of archaeologists and First Nations working together to achieve a common goal. Sounds easy, but we all know there is a lot of work to be done for this to happen. One of my long-term career goals is to become a bridge of sorts, so that both First Nations and archaeologists are represented on a more even playing field. I would now like to turn to sharing some of my own experiences as a First Nations archaeologist over the past year and a half.

To begin, I have noticed that I am treated differently in varying contexts. This is something that is difficult to understand unless you have gone through it in some form. What I am referring to here is how I am treated differently in relation to First Nations and non-Native people. It is generally thought that I have knowledge of and that I follow a traditional lifestyle, when this is something that should be asked before it is assumed. I spent the first part of my life learning things in a decidedly non-Native environment and

plan to spend the next part of my life learning and incorporating more traditional viewpoints. What I am saying is that just because I am a First Nations person, you shouldn't assume that I automatically know all things traditional for all First Nations in Canada. I would like my knowledge to expand in that direction, but as with anything else, it takes time.

Another thing that has been said subtly when I am with non-Aboriginal groups is that I am just a "token Native" hired because of my heritage. I would like my advanced level of university education to be recognized instead of having people look at me assuming I have no credentials or that I am a Native representative with no archaeological training. These are unfortunate stereotypes. However, instead of allowing them to hinder me, I intend to work to erase these preconceived notions through hard work and the raising of awareness.

In addition, while working with Aboriginal groups, I have noticed that I am treated differently from my non-Native counterparts. An example to illustrate this occurred only recently. I was invited to a traditional longhouse together with two non-Native archaeologists to inform the elders of what we were doing and finding in our work relating to their territory. I was introduced last and what is interesting is how I was introduced. The other two archaeologists were introduced by name, occupation and then by their company. I was introduced by name, then as a member of my First Nation and then by occupation. After introduction, I noticed that people moved forward in their seats for a better look at me, certainly for me a new but also comfortable experience. After the meeting, the elders were invited to come to a display table set up with some of the artifacts recovered from their territory. Once again I was third in line, so the elders had to pass by the other two archaeologists before meeting me. It was fascinating that the other two archaeologists were often passed by with a nod and polite smile, while almost every elder stopped at me, exchanged jokes, asked questions and said, "Keep up the good work." I remembered this incident because for once, I was put into the forefront and not pushed to the back because of my ancestry. For me this was a good experience that I hope was positive for the First Nations group as well.

Another occurrence I would like to share involves cultural differences and viewpoints. One of the projects I am currently working on has a First Nations monitor working with the crew during archaeological surveying. The monitor was always very nice to me, clearing the way through raspberry bushes, stepping on tall grasses to make passage easier, and helping to carry my equipment, among other things. The crew misinterpreted these gestures as his showing a more than professional interest in me. The way I interpreted the situation, knowing he was of a traditional Iroquoian upbringing with several sisters, was that he was treating me as he had learned to treat Native women. I knew that he would have been brought up to see a Native woman as important to the community with certain kinds of power, and therefore to be respected and highly regarded in every aspect. I feel that my basic understanding of different native groups allowed me to handle a situation that was not as others had viewed it. Today I have a good working relationship with this First Nations monitor and have attempted to explain to the crew the differences in culture.

One of my most significant encounters to date is with an ongoing project that involves the combination of archaeology and the cultural and traditional beliefs of a particular First Nation. We have been working on a cultural program that involved interviewing elders within the community and then producing materials for teaching non-Native contractors about that particular group's way of life. We have been able to make traditional usage area maps, and a document illustrating the group's history and present status. This is an intriguing project in that it seems to be fairly uncommon in Ontario for archaeologists and First Nations groups to work so closely that each of their viewpoints are incorporated into one program.

One of the best and ongoing experiences for me though, is that through archaeological research I have been able to learn about my cultural background. Throughout my formal education I have always had to look at First Nations through a European-based mindset. This was certainly difficult because textbooks and teachers always talked about First Nations as "they" when all along I was thinking, "Wait a minute, that's me!" This was difficult, but it was also the starting point that helped push me to look at things from a multitude of perspectives. I learned things through non-Native teachings, and am now making the effort to expand my knowledge through Native teachings. This is something that I expect will be part of my lifelong learning, and is something I am determined to do. Essentially what I am saying is that I am aware that as a Native archaeologist I will need to recognize that there are different ways of looking at the same thing, and I need to be able to relate to these different viewpoints. As you can imagine, this is a complex situation to work through, but one that I am prepared for.

In relation to the time I was at the longhouse with the elders, I was confronted by one man who started to ask me questions in relation to his people. At first I said that I was unsure of how to answer, and his reply was, "Well, you are an archaeologist and a native, aren't you?" I thought for a few seconds and replied that I certainly wasn't an expert on either subject, that I was there to learn from them and asked if he would be willing to teach me what he could. I am sure my honesty caused him to think because he suddenly started smiling, and said that he had been waiting to hear that, that for too long archaeologists and other "specialists" had been telling him about his own people, but nobody had yet to ask him to share his knowledge. It was that day that I learned that there are tons of Native people out there who would be willing to share their knowledge if we only asked them. I have several more experiences that I would have liked to share, but since my time is limited here, I'll save them for another day!

To summarize, I will start with saying that overall I have been well received, although among Native people I catch notes of apprehension that often clear once I explain what I am doing. As well, of the First Nations people that I have met, most have expressed an awareness of the need for a Native archaeologist, which to me says that interest in archaeology among First Nations is increasing.

As for negative aspects, the most common one that comes to mind is one that all of you would have heard and experienced in some form or another. The misconceptions about archaeologists being "bone diggers", "pot hunters", or "just like Indiana Jones" come up

a great deal. I have had to work hard to help people realize that I am not like that, and that idea occurred more in the past than it does today.

Along with the good and the bad, I would also like to quickly share what I have learned from my experiences so far. I understand that the development of a good partnership between First Nations and archaeologists will not be easy, but it is attainable. I understand that there is a need for regulations or changes to existing guidelines that will make it a requirement that local Native groups be contacted when there is archaeological work in any given area. This contact should be made not just when a burial is at issue. Ask the First Nations if they would prefer the option of participating or contributing at the beginning of work, instead of at the end. Native groups are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of other kinds of sites and their relationships to their ancestors, and with this comes urgency for work on a more even level.

I have also learned that there is a desire by Natives to add to traditional beliefs. Some groups have realized that archaeological information can be used and may be seen as important to the history of their particular group.

There is a need for Natives to have established committees or departments to keep track of archaeological projects within their areas of concern, so that archaeologists know whom to contact when situations arise. As well there seems to be a need for a regulatory committee that will encourage partnerships between archaeologists and First Nations. Of course, these suggestions require time and money, and this is where all of us, Native and archaeologist alike, need to push.

Furthermore, archaeologists and First Nations should be able to agree upon a few simple points: archaeologists need to ensure that First Nations cultural concerns are addressed; First Nations need to continue voicing concerns to work towards an improved archaeology; archaeologists can help to establish an appreciation of First Nations cultural values among non-Native communities; and, whether you are First Nations or archaeologist (or in my case, both), there is an obligation to respect those among us helping to protect and preserve cultural resources.

Throughout my time here today I know that I could have talked about things like ownership, who has the right or responsibility for certain things in archaeology, or even how to encourage more First Nations people to learn about archaeology, but as you know, I didn't. I wanted to focus on what I have personally experienced as a Native archaeologist and I hope this is enough to get even one of you to think of how you will relate to each other in the future. I know my path is a clouded one where I can only see a step or two in front of me at a time. This is a path that not many have traveled before me, but I hope I will be able to help make it clearer for those who come after. All I need is to be accepted in both First Nations and archaeological communities, to persevere when things become difficult, and to push towards what I know is inevitable and necessary. We as archaeologists need to be able to learn not only about the First Nations, but also from them, and First Nations need to learn about the archaeologists with whom they increasingly come into contact everyday.

As I work to deepen my knowledge of archaeology and First Nations cultures, I may ask for help along the way, to know as much as I can and to represent each as fairly as possible.

This is how I hope to be able to serve both archaeology and First Nations.