INTRODUCTION

While conducting fieldwork among the northern Ojibwa, A. Irving Hallowell once asked an Elder, “Are all the stones we see about us here alive?” After some reflection, the Elder replied, “No! But some are” (Hallowell 1975: 147). This paper explores the cultural and political significance of a group of similarly alive rocks known as the “sinmedwe’ek” that are found among the Ojibwa/Nishnaabeg people of Wiigwaasgingaa, also known as the Whitefish River First Nation in north-central Ontario. Sinmedwe’ek translates as “bell rocks” or “sounding stones” (McGregor 1999: 80) since they produce a ‘bell-like’ sound when struck with a hard object. Oral history states the rocks were used as a communication device marking celebrations, events, and ceremonies.

In 1999, the Whitefish River Elder Arthur McGregor published a series of oral histories, including one of the sinmedwe’ek. Interwoven in McGregor’s account are important historical events that have affected the Nishnaabeg, including wars with the Iroquois, the fur trade, alcohol and the arrival of Europeans and Christianity. Using a textual analysis of McGregor’s published oral history and my own lived experience, I

explore the meaning of the sinmedwe’ek in the past and present. Drawing on the work of A. Irving Hallowell, I argue that the rocks are “other-than-human” grandfathers that evoke the culture, history and identity of the Wiigwaaskingaa Nishnaabeg. Specifically, the rocks symbolically “speak” of the historical experience of the Nishnaabeg such as warfare, the fur trade, alcohol and colonialism. I further draw on Tim Ingold’s critique of the Indigeneity discourse and my own critique of Canada’s Indian Act to suggest that the sinmedwe’ek reflect a counter-hegemonic expression of Indigeneity in the present.

BACKGROUND

While en route to Mackinac in northern Michigan, Alexander Henry stopped at the Great La Cloche Island, north of Manitoulin Island in northern Lake Huron, on September 1, 1761. Upon arrival he was informed that the area had received its name from French fur traders who named the area “La Cloche,” meaning “bell,” because of the bell-like sound given off by some of the rocks. Despite referring to the rocks, Henry does not document seeing them, but elements of Henry’s visit are part of the oral history of the sinmedwe’ek. The following describes his documented visit:

I found the island inhabited by a large village of Indians, whose behaviour was at first full of civility and kindness. I bartered away some small articles among them, in exchange for fish and dried meat; and we remained upon friendly terms till, discovering that I was an Englishman, they told my men, that the Indians, at Michilimackanic, would not fail to kill me, and that, therefore, they had a right to a share of the pillage. Upon this principle, as they said, they demanded a keg of rum, adding that if not given them, they would proceed to take it. I judged it prudent to comply; on condition, however, that I should experience at this place, no further molestation. (Henry 1809: 33-34)
Henry’s historical account reveals the antiquity of the French term ‘la cloche’ at Wiigwaaskingaa. This term persists in the present as the whole region of the sinmedwe’ek bears this name. A glance at a map reveals the La Cloche Mountains, Great and Little Cloche islands, Cloche Peninsula and Cloche Channel (cf. Greenman 1951: 9).

In 1938, Emerson Greenman of the University of Michigan conducted an archaeological excavation on the Great La Cloche Island and adjacent Old Birch Island of the region of Wiigwaaskingaa. Greenman was interested in the Manitoulin region since it was part of the historic fur trade route and archaeology of the region at the time was scant. His report alludes to a Nishnaabe informant, John Walker, who identified the rocks as “sin’dewe.” Walker also relayed an oral history of the significance of the region for the fur trade and an alcohol incident involving traders. Citing Alexander Henry, Greenman postulates a correlation of Walker’s oral history and the meeting between Henry and the ancestors of Wiigwaaskingaa (1951: 57).

In his observations, Greenman provided the approximate location and dimensions of the rocks. He described them as quartzite boulders that had been struck with axes or smaller rocks, claiming that the rocks were struck so often that some were in pieces (1951: 13). Greenman concluded that the area had a prehistoric and historic occupancy by the ancestors of the Nishnaabeg. After he left, Greenman sparked anger in the community when it was revealed that he had transported excavated Nishnaabeg ancestral human remains and artifacts to the University of Michigan (Gutsche, Chisholm and Floren 1997: 25-27). However, following a campaign that began in the 1960s, the remains were finally returned to the community in 2005 for reburial (Landry 2005: A2).

In her guide to Manitoulin Island, Shelley Pearen (1996: 20-21) briefly mentions the sinmedwe’ek and claims that the rocks were rung by a chief or messenger to announce a meeting or
ceremony. Without citing her source(s), Pearen says that the rocks were once part of one “single glacial granite boulder” that was broken by “frost or erosion” and no longer rings. Pearen claims that local residents indicated the rocks were last used in the 1890s; the rocks were also publicized in postcards in the 1920s.

In their guide to the history of the North Channel, Gutsche, Chisholm and Floren (1997: 27-29) also note that the sinmedwe’ek were once one large boulder (the authors refer to the rocks as ‘Assin-mad-wej-wig’). Tobacco was offered to the rocks before they were rung and, upon tapping the rocks, an ear placed to them connected one to voices of the spirit world. The rocks were “among the oldest and wisest of teachers...placed there to guide and protect them” (1997: 28). The authors also mention that the rocks were used to forewarn of approaching enemy Iroquois; in one instance, the Iroquois successfully attacked and dispersed the Ojibwa. The Iroquois then settled around the rocks though they would not sound for them. A skin disease struck the Iroquois causing all to die. The Ojibwa returned and buried their enemies in a common grave. As years passed, Christianity was accepted by the community, forcing stories of the rocks underground since the priests called this “idol worship.” The passing of time led to a gravel company’s established control over the land and rocks; in one instance, the company cracked one rock for conversion into gravel. In the process it was discovered that the rock was important to the nearby Nishnaabeg and a community member (Dan McGregor) was summoned to move the fragments for safe keeping (1997: 27-29). Though the authors do not cite their source(s), they conclude that “The rock has been silenced, but the Old Ones say that for those who have ears to hear, Assin-mad-wej-wig still holds its promises and echoes messages from the dwelling place of their ancestors” (1997: 29).
In 1999 a Whitefish River Elder, Arthur McGregor, published a community-based book titled *Wiigwaaskingaa (Land of Birch Trees)*. Though McGregor is credited as the author, numerous community members participated in its publication with his daughter Julie Wilder serving as editor, Mary Wemigwans as Ojibwe editor and Finian Paibomesai as illustrator. Other community members and Elders are cited as assisting with the publication as well. The book is bi-lingual (English and Nishnaabemowin [Ojibwa]), and contains a general history of Wiigwaaskingaa, ten oral histories of important places and spiritual beings of the region, and a glossary of Nishnaabe terms. A summary of the published sinmedwe’ek oral history follows (McGregor 1999: 30-34). As will be noted, this oral history contains elements of previous accounts.

According to McGregor, the rocks are a gift to the Nishnaabeg from the Creator and Mother Earth representing respect and reverence. Originally there were eight rocks set in a circle with the largest in the middle. Prior to the arrival of the ‘whiteman’ (McGregor’s term) the rocks were used as a communication device for various purposes, such as warning of an approaching enemy from the south, the passing of a chief, the announcing of ceremonies and other special occasions. Sounding like a drum, the rocks could be heard as far as the north shore of Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron, east as far as Lake Nipissing and south as far as Parry Sound. In one instance, an enemy scouting party from the south destined for Sault Ste. Marie was successfully intercepted by a sounding of the rocks. One member of the scouting party was allowed to return and warn the enemy not to war with the Nishnaabeg (1999: 30).

The rocks were home to a large village of Nishnaabeg and one day traders arrived who exchanged liquor and goods for fur. Only the males drank, but tragically, since the liquor kegs were poisoned, this killed them. After burying the deceased near the rocks, the Nishnaabeg vacated the village and went on to form the
regional First Nations of the area: these included Whitefish River, Wikwemikong, Sagamok, Sheguiandah and West Bay (ibid.: 32).

When priests arrived at Wiigwaaskingaa they learned of the sinmedwe’ek and believed the rocks to be evil; the priests’ blessing of the rocks thus caused the sound to fade away. McGregor last heard the rocks used when he was 4 or 5: a Nishnaabe from Sheguiandah sounded them to mark the death of a lifelong chief (1999: 34).

In the early part of 1999, I had the opportunity to hear this story spoken by Elder McGregor. His text and oral version are identical, with the exception that in his oral account he mentioned that the rocks were used for thousands of years, the southern enemies were the Iroquois, the land of the sinmedwe’ek is now in the possession of a quarrying company, and that this company had moved some of the rocks in the past.

Soon after my visit with McGregor, I had an opportunity to visit the rocks. Though McGregor claims eight rocks once encircled a large centre rock, only three remain. The three range in height from 4-5 feet (1.22-1.31 metres) and vary in width. They have depressions on them resembling “cuplike holders” and some of the holders have stones in them. Upon striking all three rocks with one of the stones in the holders, only one produced a low ringing sound. Based on sources cited, it is possible that only three remain because the quarry company moved them; or based on Greenman’s account, overuse may have led to a disintegration of the rocks. Furthermore, McGregor mentioned that Jesuit priests blessed the rocks, this may account for the lack of sound produced by two of the three rocks and the decreased sound of the single rock. Lastly, McGregor’s published account gives evidence of a community memory of the meeting with Alexander Henry in 1761.

Since 2004 my spouse (a member of Whitefish River) and I have maintained a summer home in Whitefish River. Through participation in the community, I can attest that the sinmedwe’ek discourse is active, and that others aside from Elder McGregor
relay this oral tradition. It is common to periodically hear reference being made to the rocks by other Elders and community members. The community website mentions the rocks (www.whitefishriver.ca/history.htm) and as part of the annual powwow in 2005, members of the community sponsored a tour of the sinmedwe’ek.

**Sinmedwe’ek as Other-Than-Human Grandfathers**

From an academic perspective, the sinmedwe’ek are symbolic of Nishinaabeg culture, history and identity. For instance, in the glossary of McGregor’s book, Mary Wemigwans classifies the rocks as animate (McGregor 1999: 80). Thus, it is possible to interpret the symbolism of the sinmedwe’ek by comparing these insights with the existing literature on the Nishnaabeg regarding animate rocks and/or stones.

A. Irving Hallowell explored the animate grammatical category of stones among the northwestern Ojibwa of Manitoba. As noted at the beginning of this paper, Hallowell learned that not all stones are animate; it is only through cultural experience that one learns of such a classification. One example he lists is flint, which is classified as a mythological person; other examples include the stones associated with Midewiwin practitioners (Hallowell 1975: 148-149). Hallowell concluded, “Simply as a matter of observation we can say that the stone was treated as if it were a ‘person,’ not a ‘thing,’ without inferring that objects of this class are, for the Ojibwa, necessarily conceptualized as persons” (1975: 149).

On the concept of persons, Hallowell expands on various classifications such as those found in dreams, metamorphosis, and stories. Two types of stories exist: one is “news or tidings” or “tabatcamowin” which refer to the events of human beings ranging from legendary to mundane; the second are myths or sacred stories known as “atisokanak.” Characters in atisokanak have existed
since time immemorial and the process of relaying stories takes place as a "social interaction" between the spiritual beings of the story and the Ojibwa (1975: 150). Hallowell contends that the characters of these stories are synonymous with the classification of "our grandfathers." Grandfathers refer not only to the kinship classification of human persons and elderly men, but also to spiritual beings. As Hallowell points out, "the relation between a human child and a human grandfather is functionally patterned in the same way as the relation between human beings and grandfathers of an other-than-human class" (1975: 145).

In comparing Hallowell's insights with the oral history of the sindmedwe’ek, it is possible to envisage the rocks as other-than-human persons, or grandfathers existing since time immemorial. McGregor claims that the sindmedwe’ek have existed for thousands of years, and that the rocks were "a gift to the Nishnaabeg from the Creator and Mother Earth" (1999: 30). This reverence suggests that the rocks are not ordinary, but of special significance that qualifies them as other-than-human.

The relationship of other-than-human grandfathers and human grandfathers applies to the sindmedwe’ek as well. Grandfathers are Elders in Ojibwa society and are symbolic of knowledge, wisdom and respect. Julie Wilder states, "Our Elders, the most valuable resource persons a Community can have, to be respected, these keepers of knowledge and wisdom...are also, the strength of a community" (in McGregor 1999: 4). Thus, both McGregor and the sindmedwe’ek seem to fill the category of grandfather that Hallowell proposes.

The sindmedwe’ek symbolically speak of the history and culture of the Nishnaabeg. In pure historical terms, the listener is informed of the events of importance to the Nishnaabeg from an Indigenous perspective. The sindmedwe’ek history starts prior to the arrival of Europeans, and following a linear history, turns to warfare with the Iroquois. Next the fur trade is mentioned with the concurrent arrival of alcohol. The deaths of the Nishnaabeg males
are suggestive of the problems alcohol presented in the past. While a literal translation is that alcohol caused deaths in the community, I suggest that an alternative symbolic interpretation is possible in that alcohol altered communities negatively, thus creating symbolic deaths. This interpretation is shared by Esther Jacko, a member of Whitefish River: “As alcohol and greed were incorporated into our people through trade, brother turned against brother, tribe against tribe. Combined with this, sickness, disease and poverty created the final divisions which lay [sic] the groundwork for the taking of our lands” (cited in Gutsche, Chisholm and Floren 1997: 26). Jacko’s perspective suggests that an extension of the alcohol event in the sinmedwe’ek oral history is the dispersal of the Nishnaabeg. The meaning of this event was evidently an extraordinary one since it caused the Nishnaabeg to vacate the region of the sinmedwe’ek. It is implied that some formed the Whitefish River community while others formed the communities of Wikwemikong, Sagamok, Sheguiandah and West Bay. All of these represent contemporary First Nations that exist as colonial creations resulting from land cessions and Indigenous-State relations.

Beyond history, the sinmedwe’ek “speak” of the arrival of Christianity and the resulting conflict that emerged with Indigenous spiritualities. McGregor claims that the sinmedwe’ek were blessed by priests, decreasing the sound, which is symbolic of the Christian incomprehension of the meaning of the rocks to the Nishnaabeg and the resulting symbolic destruction of Indigenous spiritualities. Finally, the history of the sinmedwe’ek ends with the quarrying company’s control of the land. Symbolically, the company is the proverbial capitalistic enterprise that has displaced Indigenous peoples such as the Nishnaabeg.

Beyond a linear history, the sinmedwe’ek also evoke insights into the culture of the Nishnaabeg. The sinmedwe’ek are sacred, as is the place, since they are a gift from the Creator and Mother Earth, implying a close relation to nature and spirituality.
The original formation of the sinmedwe’ek was a circle, important in Indigenous worldview as it represents the interrelatedness of the world (cf. Bopp et al. 1989). The rocks were sounded to mark the passing of lifelong chiefs, evoking a pre-Indian Act and pre-colonial conception of political leadership. It was a period when the Nishnaabeg practiced self-determination. Further, the Nishnaabeg are referred to as a group prior to the alcohol event in the story, suggesting that Nishnaabe group identity was once collective, rather than reserve-based as it is in the present (e.g., “Whitefish River First Nation” or “Sheguiandah First Nation”).

**Sinmedwe’ek as Expressions of Indigeneity**

Aside from a sense of culture and history, the sinmedwe’ek represent a contemporary counter-hegemonic Indigenous identity discourse. Ronald Niezen (2003) has suggested that notions of Indigeneity can be complex and problematic, especially the political dimension of identity. To situate the sinmedwe’ek in the context of a contemporary Indigenous discourse, I draw on the insights of Tim Ingold (2000) for two reasons. First, he re-investigates the work of Hallowell and other researchers on hunter/gatherers and reframes that relevance. For Ingold, the importance of these studies is challenged in the present because of the hegemony of science and modernity. He proposes a science that is inclusive of hunter/gatherer studies, which I suggest entails new directions for Algonquian scholars. Second, by examining Ojibwa ontology and worldview, he suggests that the Indigenous discourse is an extension of colonial hegemony, since it frames Indigeneity in terms of descent that is devoid of worldview and being.

To address the first point, in his book *Perception of the Environment* Ingold (2000) draws on Hallowell’s fieldwork on the Ojibwa and reviews the literature on other global hunter-gatherers to challenge the hegemony of science. His critique is that science is
problematic because as assumed objectivity is arbitrary. In science, to be human is to be objective or a knowing subject, while at the same time a biological organism. The subjectivity of this worldview is illustrated by two questions he proposes: "So is the scientist a person rather than an organism?" (and if so) "How can we exist both inside the world of nature and outside of it, as organisms and persons, at one and the same time?" (2000: 90).

By primarily focusing on Hallowell's "Ojibwa, Ontology, Behaviour and Worldview" (1975), Ingold argues that notions of person are ultimately extensions of a "poetics of dwelling" for both the scientist and the Ojibwa. Citing Nurit Bird-David's (1999) examination of the concept of the "relational" among hunter/gatherers, Ingold writes,

the Ojibwa self is relational. If we were to ask where it is, the answer would not be 'inside the head rather than out there in the world.' For the self exists, or rather becomes, in the unfolding of those very relations that are set up by virtue of a being's positioning in the world, reaching out into the environment – and connecting with other selves – along these relational pathways." (2000: 103)

Ingold's model of the Ojibwa experience of the environment takes place outside of the mind and body, since the environment stimulates feeling, remembering, intending and speaking. For the Western scientist, the mind/body acts as a perceptual input that processes feelings, memories, plans and ideas, leading to a behavioural output (2000: 103-104).

There are obvious connections between Ingold and the sinmedwe'ek. For instance, it is possible to see, feel and hear the sinmedwe'ek. In the process of seeing, feeling and hearing the literal "bell-like" sound of the sinmedwe'ek, a sense of Nishnaabe self is experienced as an extension of the environment. From the scientific perspective, there is an assumed primitiveness associated with this perception and it is thus excluded from scientific analysis. For Ingold, the situation should be the contrary, since both equally
represent a "poetics of dwelling"; science can therefore benefit by understanding alternative worldviews such as those of the Ojibwa since ultimately it leads to a greater understanding of human environmental perception (2000: 110).

Ingold’s second insight I draw upon has relevance to the political meaning of the sinmedwe’ek which is essentially a critique of unproblematized Indigenous identity discourses. The United Nations definition of Indigenous peoples refers to original inhabitants at the time of colonization. This is problematic for Ingold since it limits Indigeneity to biological descent, ultimately situated in a linear concept of time and history. Similarly in Canada, State definitions of Indigeneity follow the same logic, since the Indian Act defines Indian peoples and until 1985 followed male genealogies by excluding Indigenous females married to non-Indigenous males (e.g., Frideres 2001: 22-46). Ultimately, the Indian Act is an extension of Canada’s colonial history that has resulted in Indigenous land displacement, outlawed spiritualities (up to the 1950s), enforced State education, racism, Reserve control by Indian Agents (up to the 1960s) and overall control by the Indian Act and Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development up to the present (cf. Steckley and Cummins 2001). This colonial model of Indigeneity is problematic since it is devoid of a sense of being. A simple analysis of Ojibwa ontology and worldview illustrates this point.

Ingold labels this problematic approach “the genealogical model” since it limits being to biology and omits culture. For him, culture is a shared memory that is acted upon in the present. Labeling this as “generation,” Ingold notes “the past may be absent from the present but it is not extinguished by it” (2000: 143). Beyond generation, an important element of being is “substance.” Humans undergo histories of continuous change and development or “grow” (2000: 144). Key to this is memory since humans practice remembering which is “embedded in the perception of the environment” (2000: 148). As a component of the environment,
histories are evoked in the land and become a texture of the land (2000: 150). Ingold concludes that

the genealogical model is fundamentally a colonial model, with its notion of the land as a surface to be occupied, of the lifeworld as a country to which people can move in order to take up residence, bringing their endowments of heritable substance and knowledge with them, and of generation as serial replacement, such that the present takes over from, and extinguishes, the past. (2000: 150)

Situating Ingold’s arguments in the present context of the sinmedwe’ek, it is apparent that the oral history reveals “generation” and “substance” as evidenced by the persisting memory of culturally symbolic events such as warfare with the Iroquois, the fur trade and displacement resulting from colonialism. Within the broader political Indigenous framework, the stories of the sinmedwe’ek are counter-hegemonic expressions of what it means to be Indigenous. This is contrary to Indigenous definitions entrenched in the Indian Act of Canada that are limited to a genealogical logic devoid of an Indigenous sense of being.

CONCLUSION

For thousands of years the Nishinaabeg of north-central Ontario have shared an oral history of the sinmedwe’ek; since 1761, a growing written history of the rocks has emerged. The sinmedwe’ek were used to mark important social events and as a vital communication device. Historical events of importance to the Nishinaabeg such as wars with the Iroquois, the fur trade, alcohol, missionaries, land cessions and capitalism are preserved.

Beyond history, the stories of the sinmedwe’ek reflect worldview and Indigenous notions of identity such as land-based social collectivities as components of Indigeneity. This is in opposition to the colonial model of Indigeneity preserved in the Indian Act of Canada that follows a genealogical logic,
determining identity by biological descent. Despite the persisting hegemony of the *Indian Act*, Indigenous stories of the sinmedwe’ek exist as a parallel discourse that challenges the State’s “official” model of Indigenous peoples. The stories of the sinmedwe’ek are evidence of Indigenous expressions of Indigeneity that have persisted and continue to persist in the present despite colonial displacement, lost self-determination and political and economic encapsulation. I end by quoting a recent publication by the Elder Herb Nabigon (2007: 89) who writes on the continued importance of Grandfathers to the Nishnaabeg and the meaning of the past, present and future: “The Grandfathers can be understood in terms of spirit guides who possess all the knowledge of the universe. They are available to everyone. Sometimes they may plant thoughts in our minds to give us direction and guidance.”

REFERENCES


