NEGOTIATING NORTHERN PASTS: ONE ARCHAEOLOGIST'S REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING TO TEACH HISTORY IN NUNAVUT

Over the last decade, **BRENDAN GRIEBEL** has lived, worked and traveled extensively throughout the circumpolar countries. His research is currently based in Nunavut, where he is the Senior Researcher for the Kitikmeot Heritage Society and runs a consultancy for heritage-related projects. In 2013, he received his doctorate degree in Anthropology from the University of Toronto.

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade in Nunavut, the discipline of archaeology has been strongly encouraged to reconsider its practices and narratives concerning the past so as to better align with contemporary Inuit politics, culture and society. While archaeologists are open to new approaches for engaging Nunavut populations, there exist few tools within the discipline's repertoire for understanding history beyond the excavation and interpretation of material remains. This has become particularly apparent in situations where archaeologists use their trade to educate Inuit about their own history. This paper is a personal reflection on the act of teaching Arctic history, and describes my own attempts to better understand the greater context of history in the community of Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. This is ultimately accomplished by de-emphasizing the pedagogic value of material artifacts, and developing more grounded research methodologies to incorporate local understandings of how and why historical learning takes place.

As an archaeologist, it has become tricky to teach about history in the North. The politics surrounding the creation of Nunavut as both an Inuit land claim settlement (1993) and Canadian territory (1999) has ushered a new era of self-consciousness into the discipline. The designation of Nunavut as an Inuit homeland—Nunavut literally translates as 'Our Land' in the Inuktitut language—has not only promoted indigenous title over the region's terrain, but over its history as well. Acknowledgement of Inuit ownership of the past has had direct implications for how archaeology is both perceived and practiced. Mandatory components of community engagement—including employment, education, and exhibition—are now requisite for incoming archaeology projects. The territory's archaeological materials have been redefined as "a record of Inuit use and occupancy of lands and resources through time" (NLCA 1993:33.2.1) and the involvement of Inuit in their identification, protection and conservation has been mandated as both "desirable and necessary" (ibid:33.2.2). With the past no longer the preserve of archaeologists, the discipline has been forced to rethink how they communicate their specialized brand of knowledge and engage local populations' own

understandings of what history is and how it is learned. Despite concerted attempts to teach the past through more culturally and socially sensitive frameworks (see for example Friesen 2002; Rowley 2002, Stenton and Rigby 1995), community interest in excavation-derived knowledge is rarely sustained, and archaeologists continue to struggle with the feeling that their fundamental messages regarding the nature and importance of the past are somehow being lost in translation. Put simply by northern archaeologist Sue Rowley (2002:270), a "dramatic change" is required in the way that archaeologists work with northern communities, "to formulate innovative research programs and gain a richer understanding of Inuit history." This ultimately requires that archaeologists consider their role not only as teachers of history, but also as students of the subtle social and cultural rules that guide processes of learning about history in the North.

In 2006, I began a doctoral research program looking into new methods for archaeological engagement with Inuit communities. One of the original objectives for this project was the production of an educational course focused on uncovering the history of the landscape immediately around the Nunavut hamlet of Cambridge Bay, a community of roughly 1600 individuals (85% of whom are Inuit) located on the southern shore of Victoria Island. The course, as it was designed, would allow high school students to learn and apply the professional methodologies of archaeology through excavation and material interpretation, while also drawing important conceptual links between their own contemporary world and that of the past. After successful feedback from Cambridge Bay's high-school and partnering heritage organizations, a preliminary course outline was completed, and negotiations were underway to pilot the curriculum within a year's time. From an academic perspective, there was little reason why the course would not be a success; it was modeled after one of archaeology's most successful studies in community engagement (Moser et al. 2002) and its content and delivery methods had been sanctioned by university committees, ethical boards and northern authorities alike.

It was not until I actually moved to the Arctic in 2008 that my confidence in the curriculum's success began to waiver, and it became painfully obvious that the entire course had been devised according to logic utterly foreign to local circumstance. Between the time that discussions about the course began and the time I had moved north to deliver its content—a space of approximately two years—the school had already seen the rotation of three principals and roughly half its staff of teachers, rendering carefully built alliances non-existent. Assurances of local enthusiasm for a new history course present in earlier email correspondence were less easily found on the ground. Obligations to family life, desire to be on the land, or simply the act of coping with day-to-day social challenges meant that few people had the time or passion to help push forward a program whose only contribution was academic knowledge about the past. For nearly a month in the summer of 2008 a team of University of Toronto archaeologists and I held a trial 'community excavation' while the stream of potential 'community participants' drove steadily past without stopping.

Despite having made a conscious effort to correspond with various Inuit individuals who would have a stake in the delivery of the course, the fundaments of my course had ultimately been adopted from official narratives regarding both Inuit culture and the appropriate archaeological methods for interacting with it. Among these assumptions were that Inuit communities valued material artifacts for the information they shed on the past; that they saw the methodologies of archaeology as an authoritative means through which to interpret the past; and that they considered knowledge about the past as something that can exist independently of contemporary people and experience. It was with a fair amount of trepidation that I realized the project would have to be re-designed through recourse to local perspectives, beginning with the most basic question of how and why the learning of history takes place.

"You can come into a community knowing a lot or you can come into a community learning a lot. There is a big difference." This was a valuable piece of advice given to me by Ermie Leblanc, a long time student councillor and wellness program instructor in Cambridge Bay. Upon the failure of my original curriculum program, I struggled to untangle the preconceptions of my research from the realities that guided life in the Arctic. Such was the extent of this unravelling that I was ultimately left with only a series of loose threads. Over the course of the next three years, I began to slowly weave these back together in a fashion that made more sense at a local level. The first step in rebuilding my archaeological program was to better understand the social nature of learning in Inuit society. Both learning and teaching in traditional Inuit

cultures are based around a concept of 'ihuma,' a mental faculty roughly translatable to western understandings of 'reason,' which allows for individuals to interact with their surrounding environment and community in a way that conforms to social expectations. Individuals are not born with this capacity; until the age of 3 or 4, a child is usually not considered responsible for their actions because they lack ihuma, which can only be gained through watching and learning from positive examples being conducted in their environment. The teaching of ihuma is subtle, with every lesson showing deference to personal agency by embedding knowledge in a practical context so as to allow the individual to find their own path towards the wisdoms being conveyed. To maintain a rigid academic agenda is to flounder under such a system. A western approach to teaching favouring directed questions and narrowly-focused investigation is perceived by many Inuit as inhibiting an individual's ability to develop 'reasonable' answers based on a combination of firsthand observation, practical engagement and existing societal values. To pursue a subject to the exclusion of personal experience and surrounding social and environmental context characterizes one as fixated, or 'ihumaquqtuuq' (one possessing too much reason), a state often considered to be both socially oppressive and undesirable. The contrast between this approach to learning and that typically employed in the discipline of archaeology—which prioritizes concentrated studies of material culture to build images of a socially and personally disconnected past—is easily apparent.

The inability (and unwillingness) of many Inuit to adapt to non-Inuit styles of education is evidenced in part by the bleak statistics that continue to plague high-school attendance and graduation rates in Nunavut. While speaking to teachers in Cambridge Bay about this trend, another query previously ignored by my curriculum began to emerge: What physical and social environments are amenable to historical learning in the Arctic? Many Inuit are sceptical regarding the potential for students to learn traditional knowledge and skills within the confines of Nunavut classrooms. As Cambridge Bay elder, Tommy Kilaodluk, pointed out to me (pers. comm. 2008):

> *Having children out on the land without pen and paper, they learn more about Inuit culture…From the time you are young, starting from babies growing up, you cannot learn to be on the land on a schedule, in a week or in a month. It is not a 9 to 5 thing. It would be a good thing to learn out on the land without a clock or watch. It is not how you learn the Inuit way…We must be on the land year round to feel what it is like. If you are in class all day, your vision is vague.*

I began to wonder whether learning about the past through on-site archaeological excavations did not present a similar challenge. Despite removing individuals from the classroom, excavation promotes an equally structured and scheduled experience of learning. Field seasons limit historical investigation to one month periods in the summer. The methods and logic of excavation are pre-determined according to standards and priorities that few local people understand. The balance of narrative authority is also fundamentally slanted, allowing newcomers to the Arctic to lecture lifelong residents about the history of their people. While archaeological excavation is often enjoyed by Inuit communities and considered useful as a source for producing artifacts, it does not by default mean that it can be considered an integral source for understanding history in the Arctic. I began to look at more emic situations in which concepts of history were being engaged. These ranged along a wide spectrum of activities, from hunting trips on the land to more urban practices of cribbage games and skidoo repair. Inuit can sew a pair of mitts or even make tea in a way that invokes tradition and history. Rather than emerging from the study of the unknown (whether buried artifacts or temporally distant populations), many Inuit revive the past through the familiar: daily contexts of practical experience, environmental exposure, the transferring of information between socially known and trusted sources. The theme of sensual connection to history repeatedly emerged from these situations in a way that was absent from the practice of excavation. While the physical act of rebuilding a traditional kayak or tool could be conceptually linked to ancestors doing the same tasks in the past, meticulous trowel work and measuring to uncover the same buried objects found no resonance with ideas of ancestry. As Arctic archaeologist Daniel Gendron once told me (pers. comm. 2011), for many Inuit "the past is something very alive, or something they want to keep

alive, so the best way to keep something alive is to do it. Digging holes is not part of the tradition."

The third, and perhaps most important, question I began asking of my work was why history is considered important in the Arctic. For most archaeologists, knowledge production is a goal in and of itself during investigations of the past. For many Inuit, however, history is a source of potential identity. If engaged through specific socially and culturally sanctioned ways, history functions as an important conceptual bond that positions individuals within a temporal continuum central to understandings and definitions of Inuit identity. As Jessica Kotierk, a young Inuk woman visiting Cambridge Bay, informed me (pers. comm. 2012), understandings of being Inuit are not built from abstract understandings of the past, but through actively recognizing yourself in both old and new traditions:

> *I think you kind of figure out what Inuit means by looking at Inuit history, by saying "that is me, that is me" even though they [the traditions] are from different communities, you can be like, "this is what we have in common and it is what binds us all together, not just me individually." I want to know what defines all of us, what is that common thing…I want to know what my father grew up with that I am not growing up with, that will help me understand what these people around me are going through that I wasn't there for.*

The history course that resulted from four years of working with the community of Cambridge Bay was a far cry from the neatly scripted pages of the original curriculum (Griebel 2013). While largely incomparable to my earlier approach of excavation, the final program's differences can be broadly summed up through four categories of change. Firstly, the course downplayed the act of excavation as a means to understand the past. Its emphasis shifted from determining what tools people used in the past to understanding the experience of revitalizing, using, and documenting those same technologies in the present. Replicas were created from antiquated tools, and shaped into new displays and museum exhibits based on students' own experiences and insights gained through interaction. An extinct style of regional kayak was revived and rebuilt from materials and animals harvested from the land. The stone outline of an 800 year old community dance hall was re-imagined and re-constructed as a performance centre and theatre based on discussions of how Inuit communities once worked and continue to work today. While excavation-derived materials and knowledge continued to be incorporated, the voice of archaeology became one of many used to interpret the past and its importance to contemporary society.

The second way that the course changed is that its schedule became more applicable to the Northern environment. Learning took place through a series of workshops spread throughout the year rather than a curriculum built to accommodate summer excavation. Workshops arose in response to seasonal timing: an igloo building camp was arranged for March, when proper snow conditions were present; a coastal kayak building camp was arranged for the month when seal were available for harvest and the Arctic char gathered to spawn. Workshops similarly responded to the social environment, fluctuating in response to the community: a collective desire to revitalize specific traditional technologies gave birth to new directions of workshop; the death of a community member resulted in certain projects being cancelled or postponed out of respect.

The third way in which the education program became altered was in relation to the topics it explored. Workshops were shaped by local desires to engage history outside of temporal boundaries through more enduring themes of identity, heritage, ancestry, and culture. Rather than investigating material remains as something in and of the past, the work saw them as tools in and for the present. The project to reconstruct an ancient community dance hall, for example, became a group meditation on community as a desired state, and the contemporary challenges that prevented this. Projects focused on traditional tool use became a venue for people to heal from the destructive legacy of residential schooling.

The final change to the history course was in terms of its membership. While formerly restricted to a dynamic of high school students learning from an archaeological 'authority,' the workshops came to include participants from the entire spectrum of the community—elders, youth, Inuit, non-Inuit, hunters, and those with little to no experience on the land. By engaging learning as a process of practical engagement informed by many perspectives and many different people, participants were allowed to navigate their own understandings of history, as well as its communicated values and place within the framework of modern Inuit life.

The underlying reality of archaeological education in the Arctic is that it continues to be conceived according to academic interests and methodologies. Put bluntly by Peter Nabokov (2002:239), "we feel freer to question whether we should even be speaking of indigenous senses of the past as alternative histories or alternatives to history. Instead of cramming them into familiar paradigms, might we not temper the hegemony of Western historiography by interpreting it into them every now and then?" While excavation continues to have a place in Arctic education, it needs to be situated within a greater cultural framework that encourages young people to see the past as a source of identity, community and values, all of which dramatically impact their contemporary lives.

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