

# Sacred Geography: On Rocks



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# Overview

- Ojibwa Ontology and Worldview
- Chief Berens and the Stones
- Shi Tou Gong
- Chinese Rock Gardens
- The agency of rocks
- Children and animate rocks.

# Ojibwa Ontology

- Influential work of the American ethnographer Alfred Irving Hallowell (1892-1974).
- “...I have assembled evidence...from my own field work on a branch of the Northern Ojibwa, which supports the inference that in the metaphysics of being found among these Indians, the action of persons provides the major key to their world view” (Hallowell, 1960, in Harvey, 2002, p. 20).
- Work on Ojibwa ontology paved the way for later work in anthropology’s ontological turn (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017).
- Also influential in the emergence of the New Animism, e.g. Bird-David (1999), Harvey (2005), and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998 in Lambek, 2002).



# Ojibwa Ontology

- Hallowell points out that the category of 'person' is an important one in all languages.
- In Ojibwa language the category of person includes much more than just human beings.
- “The more deeply we penetrate the world view of the Ojibwa the more apparent it is that ‘social relations’ between human beings...and other-than-human ‘persons’ are of cardinal significance...” (p. 21).



# Are all stones alive?

- “Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected for a long while and then replied, ‘No! But *some* are.’...”
- “The Ojibwa do not perceive stones in general as animate any more than we do. The crucial test is experience...”
- The Ojibwa language holds open the door for the possibility of interaction with animate rocks.



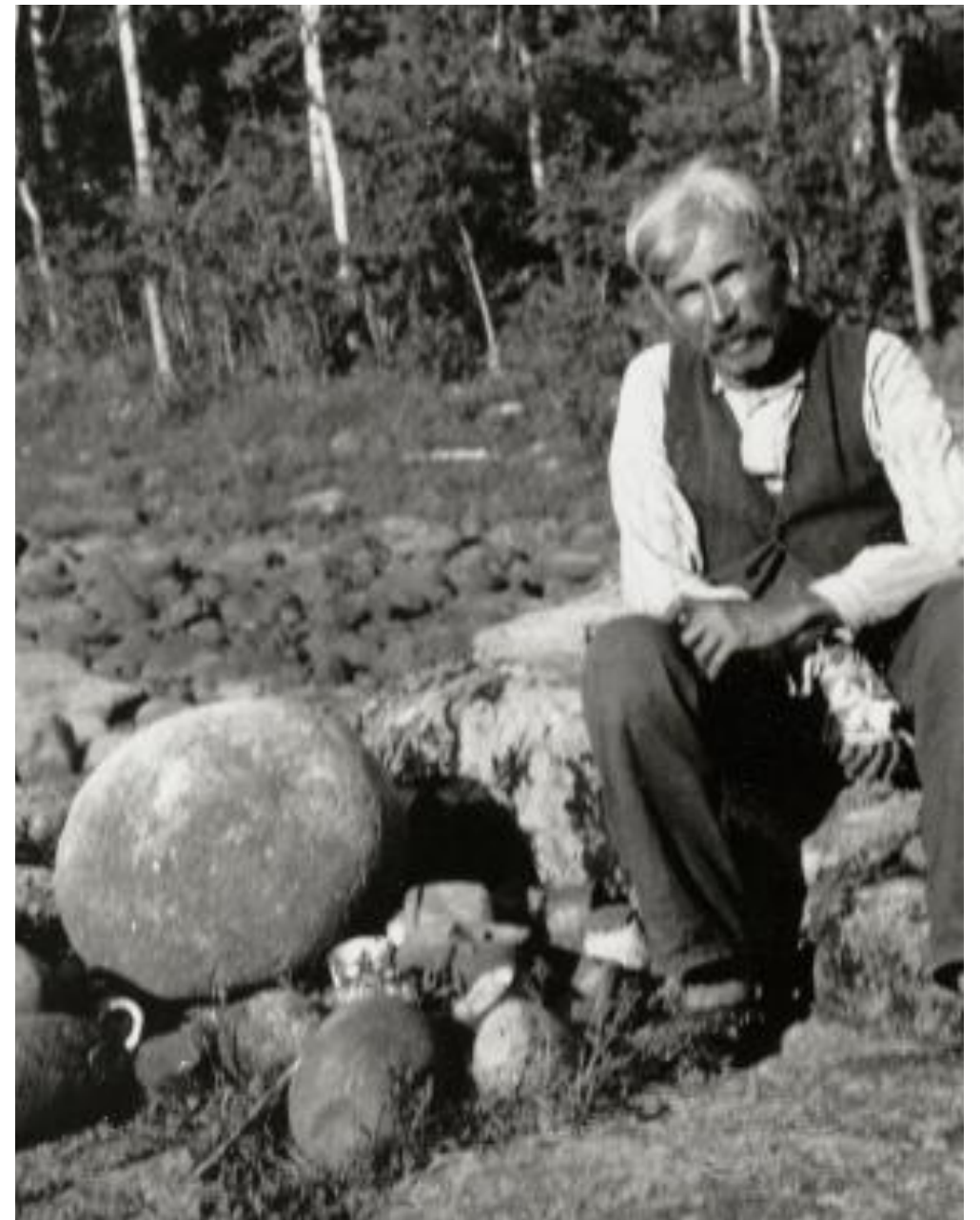
# Chief Berens

- Hallowell worked with Chief William () Berens for 10 years between 1930-1940.
- They established a strong rapport, and Berens became a key informant for Hallowell.
- Chief Berens was custodian of a place on the Berens River that was sacred because of the distinctive round stones that are found there.



# Chief Berens

- Photograph by Hallowell of Berens at Grandfather's Rock - "beside a shrine, with offerings, between Grand Rapids and Pikangikum, Ontario, Canada."
- "Grandfathers" (*mishoomis*) refers to both genealogical ancestors (e.g. Chief Berens' great-grandfather placed this particular rock here), but also to the rocks themselves who may be animate grandfathers.
- "My friend Chief Berens had one of these, but it no longer possessed these attributes. It had contours that suggested eyes and mouth. When Yellow Legs, Chief Berens' great-grandfather, was a leader of the Midewiwin he used to tap the stone with a new knife. It would then open its mouth, Yellow Legs would insert his fingers and take out a small leather sack with medicine in it..." (Hallowell, 1960, in Harvey, 2002, p. 25).
- Certain rocks present themselves in such a way as to invite our participation.



# Shi Tou Gong

- “Zi Nan Gong also has an animistic deity called Shi Tou Gong - literally 'Respected Rock'. It was discovered 250 years ago after a devastating flood when they dug up a stone shaped like a human. It was assumed to possess a spirit, was robed and has been worshipped as a Money God ever since” (Graham, 2012, p. 10).





<https://www.zmescience.com/science/rock-face-museum-japan/>

# Rock Worship

- Rocks are a central feature of classical Chinese garden design.
- “As an ancient mentality, rock worship remains in Chinese legends, myths and is practiced in folk culture such as feng-shui, a traditional Chinese practice used to harmonize people with their environment...”
- “In Chinese gardens rock worship mainly appears in two aspects: the adoration of rocks and use of rocks as the tool to drive evil factors away...” (Xu, 2014)



# Agency of Rocks

- Hagstones - rocks with apotropaic functions.
- Aguaruna Jivaro - women make use of magical gardening stones (*nantag*) for protection against evil spirits. Gardens are dangerous liminal places (Brown & Van Bolt, 1980, p. 173).
- Estonian sacred sites - wounded or injured limbs are placed onto rocks for the purpose of healing (Kõivupuu, 2020).
- But rocks are not always beneficent.



# Careg y Big

- According to a local legend there was once a tall, pointed, stone pillar in the village of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant known as Careg-y-Big (The Bickering Stone).
- Every Sunday the people of the village would challenge each other to climb to the top of the stone and shout out 'Captain Careg-y-Big,' if they reached the top.
- Unfortunately these competitions frequently turned violent, with skirmishes breaking out around the base of the pillar.
- It was not uncommon on a Monday morning for people to ask how many had been killed in Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant on Sunday, trying to reach the coveted pinnacle of Careg-y-Big.



# Careg y Big

- Noticing that there was something unusual about the stone's unpleasant influence on the villagers, the Parish Priest employed the services of a farmer from the nearby village of Penybont Llanerchemrys to get rid of the stone and its malevolent influence.
- The farmer used a team of large Oxen to remove the stone from the village, while the villagers were asleep.
- When the farmer brought the stone to his farm, the animals began attacking one another.
- Realising the malevolent influence of the stone, the farmer hauled it to a deep pool in the river Tanat and threw it in (Hancock, 1873).



# Animism in Childhood

- “The paper draws on a project with young children which invited them to share what they thought was ‘good’ in the outdoor spaces at their early learning centre...”
- “These encounters revealed children’s relationship with nonhuman elements which seemed to be calling in and enchanting children...”
- “In particular, children’s playful animation of so-called inanimate things – trees, rocks, clouds – allowed an egalitarian view of the world in which both humans and nonhumans were seen to be engaged in intentional projects” (Merewether, 2018).



# “Let me introduce you to my rock friends...”

- “He is good.”





- “This one is 10,000 years old.”

- “This one has been here for twenty years.”





- “This one is a bit shy.”

- “This one is a big brother.”



# Remnants of Animism?

- Working with Welsh labourers (mid-late 70s) in Mid-Wales.
- Building stone walls - stones are referred to as 'him' - 'pass him over here.'
- Cutting trees for fence posts - 'Oh, he's a good one.'
- Sitting having a cup of tea and the wind blows - 'Oh, Morus y Gwynt!'



# Summary

- Ojibwa worldview holds open the possibility that rocks and stones might be animate through structures of language.
- It is our interaction and participation with rocks and stones that enables their animate qualities to be revealed.
- This kind of interaction with the world is actually foundational in childhood development.
- ‘...enchanted animism kindles children’s sensitivity to Earthly processes, enabling them to listen to the Earth more attentively, with the awareness and responsiveness that a planetary crisis demands...” (Merewether, 2018).



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