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Zitiervorschlag
Félix A. Acuto. 2023. Making Archaeology Available to the Subaltern: Towards an Engaged, Militant Archaeology. Forum Kritische Archäologie 12, Theme Issue: Archaeology as Empowerment: For Whom and How? Comments on Scholarly Activism: 2–5.

URL https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de

DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-40255

ISSN 2194-346X

Making Archaeology Available to the Subaltern: Towards an Engaged, Militant Archaeology

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It is not a secret that archaeology is not a politically innocuous enterprise. Throughout its history, and in the name of science, modernity, and the state, the discipline has appropriated minorities' heritage, generating representations that have contributed with their subordination and denial. For some decades now, scholars have critically reflected about archaeology's social role, its contribution to sustain Western, capitalist hegemony, and the negative impact that archaeological narratives have had on different collectives. In this light, the decolonisation of the discipline and the construction of a more reflexive, open, tolerant, and democratic archaeology have become valuable goals. Although some believe that archaeology is no longer what it used to be, in actuality only a small group of scholars have developed an engaged, activist archaeology. Just by attending any archaeology congress in the First World or in Latin America, we can easily realize that the great majority of our colleagues still maintain a bourgeois fascination about the exotic, conducting an uncommitted, apolitical, and increasingly hyper specialized archaeology. Archaeologists keep discussing topics that, in the great majority of the cases, only interest other archaeologists.

The "reflexive turn" has improved archaeology, no doubt about it. Nonetheless I believe that archaeology has become stranded in this process of self-evaluation and internal transformation, leaving aside or minimizing praxis. Praxis is not plain critique (or the critique of the critique of the critique – a game some scholars seem to be playing in their quest to become the coolest guys in the 'postcolonial block'). Praxis is a theoretically informed action(s), but also a politically oriented one(s). It departs from knowing and critiquing the world, but it also entails actions oriented to change it and to fight against inequality, oppression, discrimination, and domination. These actions do not bloom from personal goodwill or political correctness. They are based on knowledge, reflection, and political commitment.

Activist archaeology is certainly a small field in our discipline, and it will probably always be like this, but this does not mean that we should discard our beliefs and obligations toward the subordinate. We should keep fighting to make archaeology a more democratic, participative, plural, and engaged discipline. In my case, my praxis and archaeological militancy have been highly influenced by my relationship with Indigenous Peoples, communities, and territorial organizations in Argentina. They have taken the time to guide me and to explain their perspective about Original Peoples' historical claims and current struggles in general and their demands on science in particular. Being in indigenous territories and learning from native wisdoms have deeply impacted my understanding of archaeological practice, interculturality, and political commitment.

For several decades, Indigenous Peoples in Argentina, and everywhere in Latin America, suffered from discrimination, repression, invisibility, and political and juridical disenfranchisement. Their identities were denied, their cultural practices and spiritualities rejected, and attempts made to eliminate and replace them with modern, Western ways. This situation would begin to change, at least partially, in the 1980s with the regaining of democracy in many Latin American countries after years of military dictatorships and with a new international context that, through what has been defined as the constitutional, neoliberal agenda, has promoted the respect of diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism, and rights for minorities. Original Peoples have found in this context new legal tools to reposition and defend themselves, which has favoured the re-emergence of indigenous identities, organizations, and movements, and the reconstruction of native institutions, cultural practices, and spiritualities. Even though Indigenous Peoples and their communities have gained new rights, these are not always fulfilled and hence

their struggles for recognition, inclusion, consultation, participation, autonomy, self-determination, and territory continue. What should the role of an activist archaeology be, considering this context?

We must begin by accepting that archaeological sites and objects are not national, state/provincial/departmental, or municipal patrimony, but they are the ancestral heritage of Original Peoples and, therefore, they belong to them and not to science, museums, or tourism. Although heritage laws in most Latin American countries establish that archaeological things belong to the state, key contemporary international agreements (for example, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Organisation of American States, and, indirectly, article 5 of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization) recognize that Indigenous Peoples have rights over archaeological sites and objects because they are closely linked with their values and cultural and spiritual practices. That which we call "archaeological" are elements of indigenous territories, important for the territorial balance and for the well-being of people. This is the case for indigenous mortal remains. They are not just inert bones, source of bio-anthropological information, but ancestors who participate in the dynamics of the territory and influence the lives of the living.

When archaeologists visit indigenous territories to register, map, and excavate archaeological sites, they do not find unspecified "local communities or local inhabitants," but they encounter subjects of rights and, as subjects of rights, they have the right to be consulted. In other words, we must receive their free, prior, and informed consent before proceeding with the study of their heritage.

Consultation goes hand-in-hand with participation. Indigenous Peoples have the right to participate in every stage of our projects. In particular, they have the right to talk about their past/present and to narrate their own history and the history of their territories. I am not pleading here for multivocality. Multivocality has failed. It has been frequently applied in paternalist ways, more oriented to put at ease scholars' colonialist anguish than used as a political tool to open spaces to the subaltern to present their perspectives and knowledges with their own voices. Under the premise that they were unqualified and needed guardianship, many have talked for Original Peoples, from the state to churches, and from science to NGOs. Indigenous Peoples today reject those who try to arrogate their voices and claim instead that, as political subjects, they can represent themselves and speak for themselves. We must embrace this political stance and create academic spaces and products where they participate using their voices and express their knowledges in the first person. It is not about creating multivocal products where voices are blended as if they were all the same, or where indigenous voices are presented and mediated by scholars. It is about privileging the always held back voice of the subaltern.

But most importantly, an activist archaeology should transform the discipline into a tool available for the subaltern and their struggles for justice and equity. The great majority of Latin American archaeologists work in indigenous territories and with indigenous patrimony. These territories are crisscrossed by conflicts with the states, landowners, and national and transnational enterprises who seek to appropriate these lands since they are interested in the natural and cultural resources found in these places. These conflicts have involved evictions, repression, and even murders. These powerful actors, with the support of politicians, members of the juridical power, media corporations, and sometimes even science, usually argue that Original Peoples are extinct and that those who claim to be indigenous and who assert their rights over these territories are not actually indigenous, but mestizos or creoles. When they find it difficult to deny the indigenous roots of local residents, these actors contend that they are foreigners from neighbouring countries or newcomers and, therefore, these are not their traditional lands and they do not have rights over them.

Making archaeology available in these cases means developing an archaeology by demand, designing and carrying out investigations useful for Indigenous Peoples and oriented to support their projects and struggles, simultaneously refuting the arguments of those who deny their identity and their pre-existence in the territories. It entails spending time in indigenous territories to establish intercultural dialogues and to learn about their positions, needs, aspirations, and the conflicts they face. These are projects that should come out from the territories and serve the territories.

We must produce solid scientifically generated evidence to connect past and present, to demonstrate the pre-existence and continuity of Indigenous Peoples in their territories, to reject narratives of extinction, creolisation,

or making foreign. We must show that indigenous claims over lands and heritage are in compliance with the law and that Indigenous Peoples are not squatters, agitators, or even terrorists, as right-wing politicians from Argentina have recently accused the Mapuche People. This evidence will underpin Indigenous Peoples' status as subjects of collective rights confronting those who, in their own interest, accuse them of being "fake Indians" or illegitimate usurpers of private property. An example will serve to illustrate these points.

On October 12, 2009, a truck with Darío Amín, who claimed to be the legal owner of the territory of the Chuschagasta People (Diaguita Nation), and the ex-cops Luis Gómez and José Valdivieso arrived in the El Chorro place, Choromoro Valley (Tucumán province, Argentina), where several members of Los Chuschagasta Community, including children, were gathered in a communal assembly. Amín had already threatened the community many times and in different ways. Under the orders of Amín, Gómez approached the group of indigenous people establishing a brief conversation with them, especially with Javier Chocobar, who had identified himself as one of the principal authorities of the community (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZq_mzJSO5M, footage filmed by the perpetrators). Using as an excuse what he believed was some sort of provocation from Chocobar, Gómez took a gun he was hiding in his back under his shirt, fired a shot on the ground and then used the pistol to hit on the head another member of the community who was taking photos. People tried to stop Gómez and take his gun, when Amín and Valdivieso began shooting at the crowd, without any concern about the children present at the scene. As a result, Andrés Mamani, another communal authority, was shot in the stomach and was hospitalized for six months, for two of which he was unconscious. Emilio Mamani received a bullet in his knee, which affected the way he walks. Javier Chocobar was shot in his leg, a direct impact in the femoral artery that led to his demise. As is common in some of Argentina's provinces, landlord families have strong connections with the political and juridical realms, and this was the case of the Amín family. Dario Amín and his accomplices avoided jail and were able to delay the trail for the murder of Javier Chocobar and the injuries produced to the other two members of Los Chuschagasta community for nine years. During this time, Amín and other members of his family often visited the territory of Los Chuschagasta, making threats to different members of the indigenous community and to Javier's family. In a brutal display of power and impunity, Amín organized a barbecue gathering in the exact place where he shot and killed Javier. The trial against Amín, Gómez, and Valdivieso took place in 2018. They were found guilty and sentenced to 22, 18, and 10 years in jail respectively. However, because the provincial Supreme Court did not confirm the sentence, they were released after spending less than two years in prison.

Despair and Amín's constant intimidations produced a paralysing fear in Los Chuschagastas. It took the community years to overcome these feelings, but finally they began a healing process that revitalised them. This process involved the development of different projects oriented to reconnect with their identity, culture, and territory, and to celebrate Javier's life while they waited for the trial. Los Chuschagastas summoned me to participate in two of these projects: the creation of a ceramic workshop oriented to reactivating traditional pottery making, and the production of material markers to place in different locations of the territory, including the place where Javier was murdered. The purpose of these markers was twofold: to reconnect with their ancestral past and worldview, and to create landmarks of memory about Javier's life, Diaguita culture, and indigenous rights and contemporary struggles. The idea was to re-signify the territory and to overcome negative feelings. They requested me to help them explore their ancestral iconography and to produce intercultural knowledge about its meanings. Although this was not the region where I used to conduct my investigations, I invested a considerable amount of time learning about local archaeology, visiting the region, and talking with different members of the Los Chuschagasta community. Presentations before the community and other participants of the projects and a detailed report were the main products of this study.

Amín family attacks against Los Chuschagasta did not cease with the trial and sentence. They sued Javier's nephew, Ismael Chocobar, and his family as usurpers, taking them to justice in 2019. The Chocobar family asked me to prepare a technical/scientific report to support their claims of pre-existence in the territory and to demonstrate that the Chuschagastas were not extinct, a report that was presented as evidence in the trial. Moreover, they asked me to include my name in the list of witnesses of the defence. Once again, I invested time to study the archaeology and colonial documents of the region in order to avoid the eviction of Ismael and his family, which, if it had happened, would have triggered more trials and processes of eviction against other members of Los Chuschagastas. One of the challenges I had was to dismiss the arguments of an anthropologist, witness of the plaintiff, who presented a colonial document that stated that by 1808 the Chuschagasta people were extinct and this land was deserted. On September 13, 2019, I testified in court for around two hours, refuting on methodological

grounds the arguments of this anthropologist and presenting scientifically generated archaeological and historical evidence, both by other colleagues and by myself, that demonstrated that Diaguita People inhabited this region since pre-Hispanic times and that, at least by colonial times, and probably before that, the Chuschagasta community was settled in the region. In the face of this evidence, Amín's family lawyers intended to argue that although this could have been the case, the Chocobar family was not indigenous but were newcomers to the Choromoro Valley. To refute this, I presented and discussed the thorough study of the historical anthropologist Estela Noli, who found colonial documents that showed that the local parish, in charge of registering births, marriages, and deaths during those times, had registered that the Chocobars were an indigenous family who lived in the area back in the seventeenth century, before the constitution of the national and the provincial states. The Amín family lost the trial, Ismael was declared not guilty, and he still lives in the Choromoro Valley with his family.

Three central aspects of a good, engaged, militant archaeology serve as a conclusion. First, it always departs from critical thinking and politically positioned theoretical perspectives. How are we to become truly involved with the subaltern's struggles and emancipation when we spend our efforts in defending things, developing an ethic toward things, and analysing the interactions among them beyond their articulations with people's actions? Many Latin America scholars consider that social sciences will be controversial/anti-establishment or nothing. In this part of the world, social sciences have always been close to emancipatory movements, something very different from contemporary archaeological theory in Europe and the so-called symmetrical archaeology and those perspectives that downplay reflexivity and critical thinking. To me, they are disgraceful bourgeois ways of doing archaeology. Second, archaeology must become a tool for social justice. We need to re-orient our projects and research interests to produce investigations and knowledge that serve the subaltern. This does not imply manipulating or forcing evidence to fit our collective purposes, quite the opposite. Science is still respected and considered a source of reliable discourses in Latin America. A good science, one which produces strong theoretically and methodologically informed arguments and solid evidence, serves to categorically rebut the discourses of the powerful, driven by their political and economic interests. We need to be systematic, rigorous, reflexive, and creative to build these kinds of arguments. Third, a committed, activist archaeology should not be a selfish enterprise. This is not about trying to shine in academic circles by presenting ourselves as anti-establishment or some kind of liberators: that is pure academic snobbism. We are just small contributors to larger fights.