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## Indigenous Concerns, Archaeology, and Activism

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### **Introduction**

Archaeologists have been in contact with Indigenous communities since the origins of the discipline during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the beginning, this relationship was fundamentally structured by the fact that academic archaeology reflects the development of European/Western modernity, nationalism, and imperialism. As a consequence, during archaeology's long and complex history, the relationship with Indigenous communities has often been characterised by confrontations, disputes, and misunderstandings. The dominant worldview upon which archaeology stands, rooted in Enlightenment philosophies and materialism, is often in contradiction to Indigenous perspectives. This applies, for example, to notions of time and history, the position and roles of humans within the natural world, ancestry and personhood, distinctions between life and death, and the animated and unanimated. These fundamental differences, and the associated unequal power relations between researchers on the one hand and Indigenous communities on the other, have caused innumerable instances of the appropriation and/or destruction of heritage sites and built structures and the removal and theft of artefacts and human remains. Accordingly, archaeological practices have been causing pain and suffering for Indigenous communities. However, these aspects are not restricted to archaeology but are more broadly related to the idea and reality of modern science and research practice itself. The perspective of Indigenous communities is encapsulated in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's statement that "scientific research remains inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism [...] The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 232). This understanding reflects the extensive and continuing experiences of objectification by Indigenous people in their engagements with researchers. It unmaskes the position of Western (and other imperially rooted) science as yet another facet of extractive and exploitative practices of European domination. Indigenous communities have criticised that scientific practices can extract and claim ownership of Indigenous ways of knowing and heritage while excluding the people themselves from these processes and the subsequent results (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 240).

It is now generally recognized that the development of archaeology as a discipline has been closely related to the expansion and establishment of the global European colonial system and the subsequent denigration of colonised peoples (Liebmann and Rizvi 2008; Gosden 2012; Lydon and Rizvi 2012). This recognition has facilitated a range of important developments towards critical academic (self-) reflection, and essential work has been undertaken over the last years to uncover the intellectual and institutional legacies of these problematic foundations (Bruchac et al. 2010; Porr and Matthews 2020). Growing research in this direction emphasises the importance of reflexivity towards archaeological methods and theories, towards the socio-economic circumstances and consequences of archaeological research, and, hence, its ethical, moral, and political position (Cunningham and MacEachern 2016). While these aspects apply to archaeological research in general, they take on a special role in countries with Indigenous populations, who are often under severe political, economic, legislative, and social pressures to maintain their physical and cultural survival. Here, an activist archaeology can help to re-centre Indigenous concerns in the interpretation of the world and support the endeavour to re-gain control of histories, cultural continuation, and survival.

## **Boundaries between “Traditional” and “Activist” Archaeology with Respect to Indigenous Concerns**

Within so-called settler-colonial contexts, archaeological research is always deeply entangled with questions of cultural heritage documentation, management, and preservation. However, following the problematic association of archaeology with the project of European colonialism, the discipline continues to be connected to practices of the destruction and removal of heritage sites and artefacts while at the same time appropriating the past and claiming hegemony over the histories produced. One reason is that most archaeological work is conducted as part of legislative requirements and within professional consultancy contexts. As legislation often prioritises development demands in many countries, archaeologists continue to support dominant discourses and capitalist values. Accordingly, in the perception and experience of many Indigenous people, archaeology and archaeologists continue to perpetuate existing asymmetrical power relationships between government and research institutions and their own communities. These attitudes can also extend towards other research activities and scientific interpretations, especially if they are conducted without appropriate consultations of Indigenous Traditional Owners and knowledge holders.

However, archaeology also has the inherent possibility to position itself in these circumstances very differently and instead become an ally of Indigenous concerns (Smith and Wobst 2005). Archaeology has the potential to uncover and make visible aspects of societies that otherwise might remain hidden and peripheral. To a certain extent, archaeology can adopt a position that is comparable to the location of subaltern studies within the postcolonial tradition (Nicholas and Hollowell 2007). In this way, archaeology has the capacity to adopt an activist stance and align itself with the demands and concerns of Indigenous communities. Archaeology can become a supporter of the fundamental interests of Indigenous stakeholders. Hence, the archaeological documentation and preservation of cultural heritage can line up with the aims of the Indigenous struggles for survival. As these processes are often entangled in complex political and economic conflicts, an activist agenda becomes part of archaeological work on the ground. The preservation of cultural heritage is, thus, not just an aim in itself or a consequence of legislative requirements but becomes a matter of social justice (Smith et al. 2019, 2022b).

However, tensions between the mechanisms and processes of mainstream scientific knowledge production and Indigenous knowledge systems remain (McNiven 2016). This necessitates constant reflection and collaborative efforts. It also requires an assessment of the entanglements between archaeological practices and power imbalances and the asymmetries that continue to govern the relations between researchers and Indigenous communities. For example, aspects of data access and sovereignty are of central importance. If these aspects are not addressed in a transparent and inclusive way, research will continue to follow an extractive logic and will cause further harm to Indigenous communities. Therefore, breaking with these established mechanisms of the conduct and communication of research and its protagonists can itself constitute an activist agenda for archaeology.

### **Can Activism for Indigenous Concerns Be Reconciled with the Scientific Claims of Archaeology?**

Archaeological research must not be conducted against the wishes, interests and concerns of Indigenous communities. In virtually all countries, legislative frameworks are in place today to protect Indigenous heritage. Possibly the most prominent example is the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the United States that was legislated in 1990. This step was an important beacon for the installation and development of collaborative engagements between Native American groups and Cultural Resource Management companies. It also facilitated crucial debates around repatriation issues and the Indigenous participation in archaeological and heritage management projects in the United States, and it poses an opportunity to legitimize the Indigenous past and histories against the dominant settler-colonial society. While these developments have not been without frictions, partnership projects are now the norm in research and cultural management projects in the U.S. Similar legislation to protect Indigenous heritage now exists in many other countries together with complex engagements about the access to archaeological sites and evidence and the treatment of artefacts and human remains (Colwell 2016). These are the contexts in which archaeology needs to operate today together with Indigenous communities in settler-colonial countries. Activist elements, e.g., in knowledge dissemination, participation, legal issues, land rights, etc., come into the equation whenever issues of power are to be navigated and the aims of archaeology guided by Indigenous concerns are not aligned with the aims of the dominant discourses.

While the scientific claims and methods of archaeology in general can support or undermine Indigenous concerns, it should be noted that there are many different ways in which archaeological research can be conducted and in which archaeological research and its findings can be communicated. It is the responsibility of researchers to design and conduct projects in ethical ways that do not cause harm to communities, that allow the latter a voice in the project itself and the ways in which its results are communicated, or that are altogether Indigenous-led. In the end, so-called scientific aims and claims of archaeology today cannot anymore take priority over the concerns of communities, and they need to become informed and shaped by the interests, world concepts and histories of the Indigenous communities in question. As outlined above, these processes in themselves can constitute a form of activism as they often are not aligned with dominant discourses and political and economic interests.

Beyond these considerations, which are often guided by existing professional Codes of Ethics and Codes of Practice, it must also be recognised that research itself as knowledge production can be defined in different ways, and prevailing understandings of science and academic practice may be questioned. In fact, archaeologists in many settler-colonial countries have already integrated elements of Indigenous thinking into their work and their interpretations, either implicitly or as conscious efforts to actively promote more symmetrical approaches to the pasts and its material reflections. For example, engagements with Indigenous communities as well as Indigenous-led discourses have generated new discussions about the meaning and significance of oral traditions and histories (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al. 2020). Oral evidence gains weight as a source of alternative hypotheses and propositions that contribute to a new understanding of archaeological evidence (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2012). In different parts of the world, Indigenous narratives are increasingly recognised to accurately reflect and record deep time historical events or environmental changes (Echo-Hawk 2000; Nunn 2018). Likewise, Traditional Ecological Knowledge is gaining weight in shaping research agendas and scientific interpretations (Wall-Kimmerer 2013; Berkes 2018), while at the same time becoming increasingly important as a source of information for activist de-growth and anti-extractionist endeavours. In summary, while the integration of scientific and Indigenous knowledge is not always unproblematic, it is essential to enable reflections on the strengths of different understandings of the world, if it is done in a reflective and symmetrical fashion.

These developments within archaeology have an activist aim in disrupting established ways of scientific practice and in questioning the foundations of scientific reasoning itself. The concern with Indigenous forms of knowledge creation and preservation draws attention to the fundamental processes of archaeological academic practices themselves, as these are largely products of the view that knowledge can be compartmentalized and separated from its generation and application. As academic knowledge is generated and mediated through writing and printed text, most researchers find it difficult to move away from essentialist understandings of the world. In contrast, in traditional Indigenous contexts, learning and knowledge acquisition are often understood as embodied, skill-focused, and without mechanisms of context-independent transmission of information (e.g., through schools, classrooms, textbooks). The so-called ontological turn in archaeology and anthropology has attempted to reflect these differences to a greater extent in the recent past (Alberti 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Moro Abadía and Porr 2021). However, some Indigenous scholars have since critiqued these developments because they nonetheless largely continue to benefit from and perpetuate established power relations within academia. In addition, Zoe Todd (2016) has drawn attention to the fact that many recent academic debates and contributions rarely engage with the work of Indigenous philosophers and thinkers.

This key challenge relates to the above-mentioned difficulties to truly transform and decolonise the often still exclusionary processes of academia and its mechanisms of communication. To reach a greater degree of inclusivity and diversity, the political economy and the power structures that enable, create, and reproduce the practices and forms of academic discourses need to be subjected to much more fundamental ontological critiques and revisions. Otherwise, the activist aim of a truly relational, holistic, and equitable archaeology will remain unrealised.

### **What Might Concrete Scholarly Projects with an Activist Claim Look Like?**

If activism is broadly understood as actions to question and disrupt established power structures, activist projects in archaeology would be those that either question the power structures within archaeological knowledge production or that question the power structures within which archaeology operates. Above it was already noted

that archaeological practitioners in countries with Indigenous populations often operate in complex political and institutional environments in which their work can either align with or challenge existing power relationships. These challenges can be directed at internal and external forces that either enable or prevent certain projects from going ahead. One of us has attempted a project in this spirit and has drawn attention to the possibility that rock art research can be understood as cultural critique if it questions established research and interpretative practices. The respective publication consequently was aimed at breaking with established conventions of academic publishing by using a multi-vocal structure and integrating direct Indigenous voices (Porr and Bell 2012).

In recent years, archaeological research in settler-colonial contexts has been increasingly influenced by the demands of Indigenous communities that question the mechanisms and the justifications of scientific practices. For example, it has been put forward that the basis of research should not be the quest for universal knowledge, which will often remain inaccessible and irrelevant to Indigenous communities. Rather, the key aim of research should be the specific and tangible benefit for the Indigenous partners. This is, for example, the proposition of the *Archaeologies of the Heart* (Supernant et al. 2020) or the basis of an understanding of archaeology as therapy (Schaepe et al. 2017). The healing potentials of collaborative and two-way archaeological and heritage projects have been documented and assessed in many different circumstances around the world. The fundamental aim of archaeological research consequently becomes not the pursuit of knowledge but of social justice (Smith et al. 2022a, 2022b). Within the existing conflicts about the interpretation and the survival of the world between powerful destructive forces, fulfilling such an objective can only be pursued through activist projects.

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