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Commentary: debating ethics in African archaeology

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In a recent intervention, Alejandro Haber and I have questioned the extent to which discussions under the heading of ethics continue to provide a useful framework within which to conceptualise the complex and politically entangled contexts in which archaeologists work. Notwithstanding these concerns, the papers collected here show why discussions under the heading of ethics in archaeology *do* still matter. I briefly discuss the argument presented by each paper. In concluding, I ask: what would it mean for African archaeologists to articulate a theory of practice? And does the language of ethics best enable us to do this?

Keywords: Africa; archaeology; ethics; heritage; theory

Dans une communication récente, Alejandro Haber et moi nous sommes demandés dans quelle mesure les discussions dans le domaine de la déontologie fournissent encore un canevas utile pour conceptualiser les circonstances complexes et politiquement enchevêtrées dans lesquelles travaillent les archéologues. Ces préoccupations à part, l'excellente collection d'articles rassemblés ici démontrent pourquoi les discussions sur le thème de l'éthique restent encore vitales. Je présente brièvement l'argument qui est avancé dans chaque article. En conclusion, je mets sur la table ces questions: qu'est-ce qui cela impliquerait si les archéologues africanistes en venaient à articuler une théorie de la pratique? Par ailleurs, est-ce que le langage de l'éthique est-il le plus indiqué pour y parvenir?

In a recent intervention, Alejandro Haber and I have questioned the extent to which discussions under the heading of ethics continue to provide a useful framework within which to conceptualise the complex and politically entangled contexts in which archaeologists work. In contemporary worlds of practice, discussions of ethics have come to name the contested conjunction between disciplinary practices and a set of contemporary social, political and economic contexts and concerns. However, in naming this conjunction they also frame it, in ways that are both enabling and disabling of these concerns. Our interest has been in what is elided and neglected — or systematically disabled — once one enters upon the terrain of the language and protocols of ethics.

There is an established body of work in archaeology critiquing the limitations of a discourse on ethics. In a searching and far-reaching critique of codes of ethics in archaeology, Sarah Tarlow (2001: 245) writes: 'Codes of ethics promote conservatism and conformity, reinforce the power of hegemonic institutions and pre-empt ethical debate'. The effect of such codes is to foreclose on debate, smoothing over ethical dilemmas and disagreements. The Wenner-Gren sponsored symposium 'Beyond Ethics:

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archaeological moralities and the boundaries of the public and professional' in 2002, produced an important set of papers critiquing standard approaches to ethics in archaeology (Meskell and Pels 2005). In their introductory essay, Lynn Meskell and Peter Pels argue that discussions of ethics tend to disembod, exteriorise and alienate ethics from everyday practice. At their worst they become 'a form of public relations aimed at employees and gatekeepers' (Meskell and Pels 2005: 2). Their concern lies in relocating and embedding ethics, focusing on 'locations of ethical practice' rather than 'the constitutional realm of codes and committees'. Pels, in particular, argues that codes of ethics enshrine modernist values of individualism, legalism and nationalism, based on a concept of knowledge as a kind of 'expert' commodity. In the same volume, Alison Wylie (2005: 7) argues that ethical codification displays a kind of 'constitutional modernism' in which the 'fiction of universalism' makes ethics exterior to everyday scientific practice.

Developing some of these ideas, Yannis Hamilakis (2007: 20) writes: 'I want to suggest that what has happened in the last 15 years or so is nothing less than the bureaucratisation and instrumentalisation of ethics, and these transformations have resulted in the depoliticisation of ethical debate in archaeology'. In finding reasons for this, he points to 'the structural and disciplinary power of professionalisation, and its effect on... ethical debate in archaeology' (Hamilakis 2007: 20). Ethical matters have been 'removed from the arena of conflict in the world, and become a matter of regulation for the professional organisations' (Hamilakis 2007: 21). One expression of this shift is the establishment of codes of ethics, in which contentious issues of the day 'often become single-sentence principles after a series of internal debates and compromises' (Hamilakis 2007: 21). Hamilakis (2007: 21) argues that the codification of ethics in archaeology 'is inscribed within the broader managerial culture of auditing, dominant in western academia... in the last two decades'. The logic of the code of ethics 'relies on the notion of individual morality, taking as its basis the western notion of the autonomous individual person', even as it attempts to establish 'abstract principles of universal applicability' (Hamilakis 2007: 22).

In critiquing the objectivism and positivism of standard discussions of ethics, Hamilakis writes of the tendency of 'western official archaeology' to fetishise an abstract, metaphysical entity, the 'archaeological record', ignoring both the constructedness and contingency of the archaeological record and the human communities that live in association with archaeological sites and remains. Discussions of ethics 'become the decoy that can rescue us from politics, and, once we make sure we comply with the ethical guidelines of our professional organizations, once we have checked the boxes and filled in the forms (along with 'health and safety' forms), then we are okay' (Hamilakis 2007: 23-4).

The fine set of papers collected together here shows why discussions under the heading of ethics in archaeology *do* still matter. In their introduction Giblin *et al.* (2014: 132) write of their intention to '[de-centre] ethical assumptions by re-centring ethical debate in African archaeology'. This conception of ethics as a field of contestation and debate becomes a powerful means of addressing a range of concerns that, they hope, will 'restart a conversation in African Archaeology by re-centring ethics as a continual concern to be debated and acted upon' (Giblin *et al.* 2014: 132). The background to this concern is the relative lack of discussion in African archaeology under the heading of ethics.

In a closely argued paper John Giblin then shows how despite the entanglement of the discipline in histories of colonialism and apartheid, 'depoliticised interpretation remains

pronounced in African archaeology' (Giblin 2014: 152). Surveying three major journals, the *Journal of African Archaeology*, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* and the *African Archaeological Review*, he demonstrates that fewer than ten percent of published papers deal in any way with questions of ethics or the political contexts of practice. Using two case studies — the historical debate around the origins of Great Zimbabwe, and the history of archaeological practice under apartheid — he argues that African archaeology is inevitably political in its implications. In a forthright intervention he argues for a 'politicised interpretation ethic', demonstrating through his own work how this might be applied in practice.

Rachel King and Charles Arthur discuss some of the practical and conceptual challenges associated with the Metolong Cultural Resource Management Project in Lesotho. This project included the training of a corps of Basotho in archaeological field research skills. However, in a context in which heritage management remains under resourced, few employment opportunities emerged in the project's wake, leaving them stuck at an ethical crossroads. In my experience, it is comparatively rare to find papers addressing ethical concerns written from within the cultural resource management sector, rarer still to find papers that argue for a strong sense of accountability or urge heritage managers to begin conceiving of capacity building and the rights of stakeholder communities as central to their practice or advocate that they take a stand on these issues with developers.

In an engaging and wonderfully written paper, Benjamin Smith, currently the President of the Pan-African Archaeological Association, uses his involvement with this organisation, and others in various parts of the African continent, to consider the set of ethical values that should underpin good practice in African archaeology and the actions that need to be taken to enact these values more widely. Using the *Nyau* masked dance of the Chewa as a framing metaphor, he explores some of the masks behind which African archaeologists operate (the lecher, the tribalist, the power monger and so on). He should be congratulated for saying in a forthright and open manner what many of us know, but few have the courage to articulate.

Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu gives a closely argued account of the transformation of South African archaeology through the post-1990 proliferation of contract archaeology. He discusses some of the practical and ethical issues associated with this new dispensation. These include lack of accountability, the inability to enforce a professional code of conduct and the problem of poor reporting. Of particular concern is the lacuna in existing heritage legislation around the need to consult descendant and affected communities. In contrast, Shadreck Chirikure makes a case for the co-existence of heritage assets and extractive industries such as mining and the role of commercial archaeology in facilitating this co-existence. He discusses two case studies, using the first, the controversy around mining in proximity to the Mapungubwe World Heritage Site, to demonstrate the possibility of a negotiated settlement between social movements organising to protect a heritage landscape and mining interests. In the second, the discovery of a 500-year-old Portuguese shipwreck on the Atlantic coast near the southern Namibian town of Oranjemund, he describes the proactive response on the part of a mining company.

Asmeret Mehari, Peter Schmidt and Bertram Mapunda discuss the history and state of contemporary archaeological field schools in Tanzania. They argue that 'close examination and open discussion of past and current archaeological field schools are a must if transformations of archaeological practices in Africa are expected to take place' (Mehari *et al.* 2014: 184) give a striking account of changes in field school methodologies and practical arrangements, away from Western expeditionary models of four-wheel drive

vehicles and tented camps, to using local bus transportation, walking to field sites and staying in shared rooms in local communities. Such experiences can, they argue, both illustrate a culture of sharing and the contribution that this can make to the success and endurance of field schools, while also moving toward a more sustainable approach, more in keeping with 'African settings where research and training in archaeology are less urgent, for example, than public health and general education' (Mehari *et al.* 2014: 194).

In their general introduction to this set of papers, John Giblin, Rachel King and Benjamin Smith (2014: 134) write: 'we would ambitiously, but not unrealistically or unreasonably, like to promote an African Archaeology that does not see ethics as a cumulative list of rules, of dos and don'ts, but as a critical and creative debate that may lead to a more lively and relevant discipline, one in which any archaeologist that suggests their work does not engage with issues of ethics would be precariously exposed'. They have admirably succeeded in this intention. So where to from here? What are the next steps in this discussion? Referencing some of the ideas with which I began, how might we best articulate some of the political and contextual challenges associated with the contemporary practice of African archaeology? What would it mean for African archaeologists to articulate a theory of practice? And does the language of ethics best enable us to do this?

Notes on contributor

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