

Indigenous Archaeologies (again)

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Introduction: Indigenous Archaeologies (again)

Numerous edited volumes centred around Indigenous archaeology and Indigenous archaeologists have been published in the past two decades (e.g. Gnecco and Ayala 2011; Nicholas 2010; Nicholas and Watkins 2024; Smith et al. 2024; Smith and Wobst 2005; Van Alst and Shield Chief Gover 2024), highlighting the depth and wealth of research in this growing field and its impact on local communities. Despite this, none of the volumes in the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* have yet explicitly discussed this constantly evolving and decolonising (Atalay 2006; Schneider and Hayes 2020) branch of archaeology. As the first of its kind in this journal series,¹ this issue brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous archaeologists, a bioarchaeologist, a museum curator and a community leader representing Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, South Africa and the USA² to discuss multiple forms of Indigenous Archaeology. This collection is then closed by Professor George Nicholas, who contemplates the Past, Present and Future of Indigenous Archaeology. From theory to traditional knowledge to anti-colonial practice, *Indigenous Archaeologies* illustrates the current efforts of early career and established researchers to reclaim the narratives of their ancestors and centre Indigenous communities within their work. Before

¹ I highlight here the establishment of the Indigenous Studies Discussion Group at the University of Cambridge (2019–present; CRAASH 2024), the return of the Gweagal spears from Trinity College, Cambridge to the Gweagal clan of the Dharawal Nation in April 2024 (Foster 2024), the return of a Benin Bronze to Nigeria in October 2021 (Jesus College Cambridge 2021) and the establishment of the ‘Bringing the Ancestors Home Project’ (Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge 2024). Whilst these efforts are respected, there is much more to do.

² I regret the absence of contributions from Europe and Asia, but examples can be found in Nicholas 2010; Nicholas and Watkins 2024; and Smith et al. forthcoming.

turning to the thought-provoking contributions of this volume, it is pertinent to explore the usage of the term ‘Indigenous’, the emergence of this field and its placement within the broader discipline of archaeology to highlight the context from which this research was formed.

What does it mean to be Indigenous?

In this volume, ‘Indigenous’ is capitalised to emphasise the respect for and nationhood of Indigenous peoples throughout the world (Smith and Wobst 2005:16). The term ‘Indigenous’ was originally used to distinguish between native populations and colonists, and as such it has been problematised as a colonial term (Haber 2007). It is certainly more appropriate to refer to individual nations, tribes or clans, but no other term is as all-encompassing as ‘Indigenous’ to describe multiple communities, hence its continued use in the literature (Nicholas and Watkins 2024: 8). The term ‘Indigenous’ is also used in global legislation (Sillar 2005: 80), but in the case of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) a definition of the term was not included, stating that Indigenous peoples have a “right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions” (United Nations 2024). As the use of the term ‘Indigenous’ differs, so does the constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples around the globe. Some examples are discussed below to illustrate the ongoing marginalisation Indigenous peoples have faced which in turn impacted how Western scholars narrated their ancestors’ histories. However, through the practice of Indigenous archaeology, the coloniality embedded in these narratives can be undone.

In North America and Oceania, Indigenous communities may be referred to as First Nations, Native American or Aboriginal more broadly, but more specific nations, tribes or clans exist within these terms and are identified according to their own languages. Although the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi recognised shared power between Māori chiefs and the British, it was not until the 1970s to 1990s that the treaty was reinterpreted to officially commit to this shared relationship (Palmer 2022). In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not officially recognised as part of the population until 1967 (AIATSIS 2024). First Nations peoples were not recognised in the Canadian constitution until 1982 (Hanson 2009). In the United States, the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act opened

the way for tribal sovereignty, resulting in 574 federally recognised tribes (Library of Congress 2024), though many continue to fight for recognition (Azocar 2022). Outside of English-speaking settler colonial countries, different terminology is used to identify Indigenous communities, who have similarly experienced issues surrounding constitutional recognition.

The Sámi of Sápmi inhabit the “Kola Peninsula in Russia, the northernmost part of Finland, parts of Sweden as far south as Idre, and the adjacent area of Norway along with northern Norway’s coast and inland” (Truth Commission for the Sami People 2024). Their rights as Indigenous peoples were recognised in 1751 (Heaps 2019). However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century debates ensued as to whether the Sámi’s Indigenous origin was legitimate (Mulk 2024: 307–308). Nonetheless, a non-governmental Sámi council was established in 1956 (SÁMIRÁÐDÁI 2024). It was not until 1973 in Finland, 1989 in Norway and 1993 in Sweden that Sámi parliaments were inaugurated; despite this, the Sámi were not recognised as people in the Swedish constitution until 2011 (Sametinget 2019).

The Ainu of Japan were officially recognised by the Japanese Government as Indigenous in 2008 under the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP – Watkins 2017: 278). Despite this, the Ainu do not have any Indigenous rights beyond those given to all Japanese people (Maruyama 2013) and still face a “lack of nationwide representative organisation and [a] lack of public understanding” (Osakada 2020: 1053). In India, the term ‘Scheduled Tribes’ was used in the constitution of 1950 to refer to its Indigenous peoples, but the Hindu term *Adivasi* is more commonly used. Loosely translating to ‘earliest inhabitants’, *Adivasi* was employed in 1930 to “forge a sense of identity among...over 200 distinct peoples speaking more than 100 languages” (Minority Rights Group 2023).

However, in Africa and Central and South America, the use of the term Indigenous is more contentious. In Central and South America, the term is considered colonial, describing the ‘other’ as inferior (Haber, 2007: 225). Beginning with Honduras in 1982, other countries have followed suit recognising the “existence and aspirations of Indigenous peoples in the region” (Brinks, 2018: 349). Despite this, the fight for rights is ongoing throughout the continent (Postero and Zamosc

2012).

In the case of Central and West Africa, ‘indigène’ was used by French colonists as a term of abuse (Lane 2014: 436; Werner 2023: 403). Nonetheless, a distinction should be made “between those who are ‘indigenous’ (i.e. of African ancestry) and those who are ‘Indigenous’, (i.e. lay explicit claim to an indigenous identity)”. Those who are Indigenous may be defined as such by their practice of hunter-gathering, transhumant pastoralism, traditional drylands horticulture or the loss of cultural identity and land sovereignty (Lane 2014: 423 and 432–433). Whilst both indigenous and Indigenous Africans experienced a loss of sovereignty under colonial rule, in the post-colonial world those who are Indigenous are still subject to prejudice and threats from their African neighbours, government and conservation schemes (Corry 2011: 76, 212–213; Koot 2023; Mbaria and Ogada 2016).

Thus, whilst the term ‘Indigenous’ is useful for referring to multiple communities, it essentialises and simplifies the complexities of different identities, consequently amalgamating the challenges they face, which differ between contexts. These challenges are caused by current or former settlers who enforce(d) colonial systems of government to marginalise and forcibly assimilate Indigenous communities, leading to ongoing intergenerational trauma (McCallum 2022; Middleton-Moz et al. 2021). Despite this, numerous Indigenous communities around the globe persist in their fight for recognition, rights and their representation in settler colonial governments, all whilst maintaining, passing on and healing with their unique cultural identities, ceremonies and traditions. Indigenous archaeology offers another opportunity for reconnection, relearning and healing amongst many Indigenous communities, archaeologists, anthropologists and heritage practitioners who have been separated from their Indigenous identity by colonialism, genocide and assimilation policies.

Relearning, reconnecting and healing: what my Indigenous heritage means to me

I accept that many will wish to understand my positionality in the realm of Indigenous archaeology, as an archaeologist who studies ancient Egypt and Sudan —a British woman of colour with a Punjabi surname. My heritage is indeed more multicultural and complicated than most people can comprehend, especial-

ly in the United Kingdom. Encompassing South Asia, Northern and Southern Europe, Western and Central Africa and Central America, my ethnicity is often questioned, sometimes out of curiosity, but often after an assumption has already been made. I was born and grew up in an industrial city in the Midlands, England, situated in an economically deprived landscape that some of my ancestors have called home for centuries. I simply identify as British when asked, in retaliation to the boxes that others attempt to place me within. However, the way in which I perceive my identity is much more complex. I am not here to ‘prove’ my ‘Indigeneity’ by providing a breakdown of my blood quantum, but it is my recent and ongoing reconnection to my *Maaya Wiinik* (Yucatec Maya) heritage that opened up my academic interests to Indigenous archaeology, which in turn influenced me to compile this volume after recognising the absence of its discussion in this journal series. I share this journey with you; one that has had a profound effect on both my personal and academic lives.

When I was a teenager, my maternal grandmother began telling me stories of her childhood in Belize, the then colonised British Honduras. Many of these stories centred around her grandmother, Ester Cocom. Despite the obvious Mayan surname, our Spanish heritage was always stressed. Little had I known I had colonised my own mind like those before me, as a reaction to the racism we had experienced as children. We could not be the ‘other’ if we projected the aspects of our heritage that identified with the colonisers.

When I started my first archaeology degree at the University of Cambridge, I had access to a wealth of knowledge about my ancestors that I had not experienced before. Through a process of unlearning and relearning, turning to the history books, archaeology and reconnecting with close relatives in the United States, I listened to these stories again.

Ester was renowned in the then small town of San Ignacio as a midwife and healer, using traditional herbal medicines to cure all manner of illnesses and ailments—even those that could not be cured by expensive and often inaccessible British doctors. She spent much of her time in the Maya mountains bordering Belize and Guatemala, serving as a healer to many Indigenous communities, given her knowledge of multiple Mayan languages and connection to this landscape. She often took her granddaughters with her, including my grandmother, who still

remembers some of this traditional knowledge.

After her death in 1968, she would appear to her granddaughters in times of crisis. She had provided the recipe for traditional medicine to cure illness when Western doctors could not, and she led the dying back to the land of the living. Then, when I began learning and reconnecting, she appeared to me.

Ester Cocom was Maaya Wiinik, a descendent of the Great Lords of the post-classic period, “at least that’s what I’ve read in archaeology and history books” (Castillo Cocom 2024: 95). The complex layers of invasion, colonialism, attempted genocide, enslavement and forced assimilation have disconnected us from our heritage. Archaeology can help fill in the gaps when we lack connection with our communities (in my case, the cause is geographical). However, some scholars cite the problematic colonial terminology of ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Maya’ in central American contexts. As noted above, Haber states that the term Indigenous is colonial, because it describes the ‘other’, consequently determining what the ‘other’ is (2007: 225). Castañeda states that ‘Maya’ is an “invented and politically constituted identity” (2008: 46), but if my ancestors and indeed living relatives are not Indigenous, and not Maya, then who are they? Whilst some may problematise this term, others such as Batún Alpuche (2024) speak of reclaiming Maya identity and heritage, and undoing erasure in the Mexican educational system. Indeed, when I ask my relatives about our ancestors they respond, “they were Maya”, so this is the term I choose to use.

“Listening in silence to the wisdom of ancestors is a very profound way to gain an understanding of what you seek to understand” (Steeves 2021: 16). This is what I have done for the past four years, and this is what has led me to the creation of this volume. Discovering the field of Indigenous archaeology has enabled me to further reconnect with my Maaya Wiinik heritage, but I have much to learn. Indeed, I have experienced much privilege and marginalisation in my life and each aspect of my heritage has impacted my identity and research in different ways, both of which are constantly reforming. Many Indigenous archaeologists experienced disconnection from their heritage and went through processes of reconnecting, relearning and reforming their identity (Alpuche 2024; Castillo Cocom 2024; Jofré 2024; Supernant 2024; Uyeoka 2024). This volume is one embodiment of these processes, whereby I use my privilege to provide a mean-

ingful contribution to the ever-growing field of Indigenous archaeology, in a prominent journal series that has not yet acknowledged its importance in today's world. This volume is led by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, from whom I have learnt so much. Indigenous archaeology is not just about *doing*, it is also about *listening* (see Schmidt and Kehoe 2019).

Early Indigenous archaeology

The earliest evidence for Indigenous involvement within archaeological practice can be traced (thus far) to the 1830s, where evidence from Australia shows that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders were actively providing archaeologists with their knowledge of the deep history of their lands (Spriggs and Russell 2023). In the 1950s, the Navajo Nation performed archaeological surveys to assert pre-1846 Navajo Land Claims, leading to the establishment of the Navajo Nation Cultural Resource Management Programme in 1978 (Navajo Nation Archaeology Department 2014: 5163; Nicholas 2024: 2). In the same year, the Zuni Archaeology Program was established by the Zuni Tribal Council. This mandate states,

The program is charged specifically with the preservation, protection, and scientific study of the cultural resources of the Zuni people... A plan-of-operation outlines five major program activities: planning and consultation; archaeological and scientific research; inventory and curation; public interpretation; and training and development of tribal members (Resolution No. M70-78-947 – Mills and Ferguson 1998: 31).

The evidence for Indigenous contributions to archaeology in the nineteenth century demonstrates the reliance of this Western discipline on Indigenous knowledge to form narratives of the deep past, though this knowledge went uncredited in academic papers on megafauna from the period (Spriggs and Russell 2023: 4). Here, the Indigenous peoples involved were simply used as informants and knowledge-givers, with little care for appropriate accreditation or further learning. However, in the United States, the early practice of Indigenous archae-

ology was centred around the research questions that these Indigenous communities sought to answer. It is this difference in how Indigenous peoples are centred in the archaeological approach that defines Indigenous archaeology.

Defining Indigenous archaeology

Indigenous archaeology³ was first defined by Nicholas and Andrews as “archaeology with, for, and by Indigenous peoples” (1997: 5), and first formally defined in the *Encyclopaedia of Archaeology* (Nicholas 2008). Wilson echoes this, stating, “Indigenous research projects developed within archaeology should always be focused towards working in, with and for Indigenous communities” (2007: 322). The breadth of Indigenous archaeology and its global scale has expanded its practice from incorporating Indigenous worldviews, to acting as a decolonising practice and addressing political issues surrounding Indigenous sovereignty, all within the bounds of full collaboration with Indigenous communities (Nicholas and Watkins 2024: 9). This archaeology is largely practical and forefronts Indigenous agency, which means listening to Indigenous communities and placing their needs and requirements above planned research.

Indigenous-centred approaches to research can enable us to reinterpret historical narratives and better understand complex colonial contexts (e.g. Beaudoin 2019). However, the variety of Indigenous contexts that exist means that one must think beyond the concept of Indigenous archaeology as a single, clear-cut framework that can be applied universally. One must first understand the worldviews of the community they are working with, in order to respect and comprehend their research requirements.

There is more than one way of being

Indigenous archaeology encompasses many different communities, meaning that it in turn encompasses many different ‘ways of being’. The development of

3 It is important not to essentialise the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Indigenous archaeology’: regrettably such generalisation is unavoidable in a broader introductory literature such as this, but both terms encompass innumerable diversity. The following sections provide a general overview of Indigenous archaeological outputs, but the reader is encouraged to address context-specific literature.

archaeology as a discipline in the West means that in its most traditional form, the secular, objective and tangible approach of archaeology conflicts with the spiritual, subjective and intangible approaches of Indigenous realities (McNiven 2016: 29). Whilst many post-processual approaches to archaeology such as phenomenology consider intangibility and subjectivism in their interpretations, these approaches are wholly theoretical. The application of Indigenous ontologies to archaeological evidence centres active (not theoretical) Indigenous worldviews to retell their own historical narratives and present interpretations outside of the Western sphere of academia (see Blake and Jones; Van Alst this volume), which contributes significantly to our understanding of the diverse human past. Indigenous archaeology rejects the perceived hierarchy of Western archaeology and seeks to restore a balance whereby Indigenous ways of being are centred to create new methodologies that can Indigenise archaeology (Van Alst and Shield Chief Gover 2024) in Indigenous contexts.

In this volume, archaeology is pluralised to indicate that there is not one way of doing Indigenous archaeology. The papers in this volume are also arranged in alphabetical order to avoid grouping these contributions according to Western standards of archaeological themes or to enforce a narrative upon the reader. The authors incorporate both Indigenous realities and Western archaeological theory and practice, thus the dichotomies outlined by McNiven (2016) are blended to create the Indigenous archaeological approach.

Indigenous archaeology and ancestors

Connection to the ancestors is integral for many Indigenous communities, but the ways in which they manifest, can be contacted or are revered differs between contexts. Aboriginal Dreamtime describes the creation of the world, within which the ancestors made living things in the natural world, but also *are* these living things (Aboriginal Contemporary 2024). Thus, the ancestors may be physically and spiritually present at archaeological and natural sites (McNiven 2016: 30), which means that the ongoing threat towards heritage is harmful to the wellbeing of Aboriginal communities (Roberts and Woolford 2024). In addition to this is the connection to the bodies of ancestors, known as Old People in the Australian context (Wilson 2007: 323).

Repatriation of the ancestors is a difficult process that affects communities

throughout the world (see Kotze this volume). In some countries there is no legislation surrounding repatriation (Meloche et al. 2020: 1). In Latin American contexts, the bodies of the ancestors are considered property of the nation state (Jofré 2024: 209; Londoño Díaz 2021: 388), impeding claims from Indigenous communities and perpetuating harm to their identities and connection to their ancestors.

However, in museum contexts, ancestors can be both cared for and learnt from (Meloche et al. 2020) through Indigenous archaeological approaches. This is best illustrated by Brownlee (2018) who learns from the ancestors by forming ancestor biographies, whereby he alters archaeological terminology to create a more respectful environment of learning. Thus, *ancestor* replaces human remains and *belongings* replaces objects. Brownlee states that ancestors have “knowledge to share, if we only learn how to listen” (2018: 22–24; also see Nhatarâmiak this volume). This approach recognises the identity of the ancestors and facilitates a more respectful dialogue between museum caretakers and the communities whose ancestors rest there.

Indigenous archaeology, decolonisation and theory

The variety of (post-)colonial contexts within which Indigenous archaeology is practiced also means that the way in which it is understood and practiced may differ from the North American and Oceanic contexts that it developed within. This is particularly true of the African context, whereby an Indigenous archaeology is understood as one that trains African archaeologists and overcomes colonial structures. Again, the indigenous and Indigenous debate creates complexity (see above – Lane 2014: 425–426) and requires a sensitive approach according to each context. Here, the way in which the research will be approached should be considered (i.e. which communities are consulted and fully collaborated with, and whether they are Indigenous) before labelling all archaeology on the continent ‘Indigenous’. Nonetheless, the decolonising approach of both types of archaeology creates further confusion. Indigenous archaeology is clearly multi-faceted and in this context what we mean by ‘Indigenous’ (a term which is contentious anyway in Africa – Koot 2023; Nicholas and Waktins 2024: 8) and the ways in which this archaeology is different to other decolonising archaeology on the continent requires rethinking.

Indigenous archaeology is widely regarded as a decolonising practice, which aims to dismantle Western archaeological practice and forefront Indigenous concepts (Atalay 2006; Smith 2008). However, Schneider and Hayes argue that the decolonising output of Indigenous archaeology is still in its early stages, stating that there is a need for undisciplining and viewing archaeology through the lens of critical Indigenous studies (2020: 141–142). For others, decolonising or decolonial archaeology is not enough, and they instead favour anti-colonial practice (Thomas and Connaughton, this volume). Evidently there is a need for redefining what is theoretical, what is practical and what truly makes a difference, and how this is situated within the broader discipline of archaeology: a discipline that still struggles to address its coloniality and accept the inherently political nature of working in Indigenous contexts.

Moreover, the South American context favours a more theoretical approach to Indigenous archaeology through a multicultural and relatedness archaeology (see Lepori et al. this volume), to counter the politically biased historical narratives imposed by heritage education in contract archaeology (Londoño Díaz, 2021: 388). Haber notes that relatedness theory “can develop insights that are both more accurate and locally relevant” by working within Indigenous ontological frameworks rather than simply stating them (2009: 428–429). Relational archaeologies that centre Indigenous theory are also emerging in the North American context (see Bridges this volume). Nonetheless, Jofré’s creation of an embodied and situated methodology as a Warpe researcher (2024: 211–212) creates an active Indigenous framework that recognises the political applications of Indigenous archaeology *beyond* the theory.

Indigenous archaeology as healing

Perhaps most importantly of all, Indigenous archaeology can be used as a form of healing. It is widely recognised that reconnection to one’s ancestors, community and traditions actively heals (Gibson et al. 2021; Sjoblom et al. 2022) and therefore the interaction between those practicing Indigenous archaeology, and the communities centred within this archaeology is especially important. This is best expressed by *Archaeologies of the Heart*, a collection that advocates for a heart-centred approach to Indigenous archaeology throughout the entire process from excavation to research, teaching, collaboration and publishing (Su-

pernant et al. 2020). Schaepe et al. (2017) also demonstrate how archaeology can be used as a form of therapy that enables Indigenous communities to connect with their territories and intangible and tangible heritage. Indigenous archaeology as a healing practice is most emphatically stressed by Steeves, who coined the term “Pyroepistemology” which she describes as a ceremony that cleanses academia of “racist and misinformed discussions” to instead promote “healthier academic growth” (2021: 20). Thus, Indigenous archaeology can heal not only by physically reconnecting communities to their heritage and ancestors through excavation, but also by rewriting colonial narratives through heart-centred approaches to both the past and the present.

Conclusions

Evidently Indigenous archaeology is still evolving and finding its place in the broader discipline. Whilst acknowledging its overlaps with community archaeology, decolonial archaeology and aspects of post-processual archaeology, it is important to remember that Indigenous archaeology emerged as its own field with no imposed theoretical framework (Nicholas 2024: 3; Nicholas and Andrews 1997: 5). Centring Indigenous peoples in the entire process of archaeological research is an active process with real-time consequences and is therefore as much modern and political as it is historic and academic. Understanding and acknowledging how these dichotomies interact in this field is crucial to demonstrating the core aspects of Indigenous archaeology and their exploration by the authors of this volume.

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