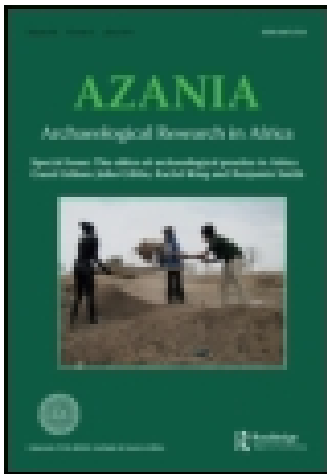


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## Commentary: on the debate on ethics in African archaeology

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While commenting on the debate on ethics in African archaeology, this paper asks for a contextualisation of archaeological practice in territorial entanglements where capital, state and science — including archaeology — meet with local territorial agencies in encounters that work as battlegrounds where globalised discourses and practices (corporations, states, science) intervene in local territories, communities and knowledge. By codifying epistemic violence within its built-in assumptions, the archaeological discipline, has already taken fundamental ethical decisions regarding the Other. In order to decolonise archaeology an un-disciplining from those epistemic assumptions is needed. Such tasks may be aided by informing epistemic interests with local knowledge.

**Keywords:** ethics in archaeology; un-disciplining archaeology; post-discipline; territorial entanglements; politics of knowledge; epistemic violence

Cet article offre un commentaire sur les débats entourant la déontologie en archéologie africaine, et préconise une contextualisation de la pratique archéologique dans le cadre des enchevêtrements territoriaux. Capital, état et science (y compris l'archéologie) y confrontent les agences territoriales locales dans des rencontres qui deviennent des champs de bataille, où les pratiques et discours globalisants (corporations, états, science) interviennent dans les territoires, communautés, et savoirs locaux. En codifiant la violence épistémique dans ses préconceptions, l'archéologie a d'ores et déjà pris des décisions éthiques fondamentales en ce qui concerne l'Autre. Afin de décoloniser l'archéologie, il nous faut nous 'dé-discipliner' de ces préconceptions épistémiques. Une telle tâche peut être facilitée si l'on combine le savoir local avec les intérêts épistémiques.

I should start this comment by confessing that, although the editors of this issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* present me as an outsider to these papers on African archaeology, while reading them I experienced an unexpected familiarity with my own South American context. Both continents are similarly undergoing a strong reactivation of the neo-colonial order led by developments based on extractive economies (mainly mining and agro-business), together with a tendency towards the democratisation of national states and the implementation of multicultural policies. Moreover, in both settings archaeology is changing from disciplinary to post-disciplinary environments. Consequently, as the papers brought together here show, ethics is becoming a focal point of archaeological debate, in some ways replacing the former interest in epistemology (Haber 2012). These similarities are not due to a fluidity of relations between South

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America and Africa or between their respective academic and archaeological communities. On the contrary, African and South American archaeologies rarely communicate with each other, although both are closely knitted to European and North American metropolitan theories, methodologies, trends, funds, universities and so on. Such a distribution of academic relations maps late capitalist global political, economic and cultural structures and also mirrors the structuring of what counts as knowledge (or true, perfect, better, expected or, in other words, hegemonic knowledge), including what counts as knowledge of the pasts of South American and African peoples. This globally structured post-colonial cartography of the politics of knowledge remains under-theorised in most academic settings. Even academic practitioners from the global South tend to consider their disciplines as universal, global or general, thus failing to localise their discourses and practices as having historically set and politically informed genealogies of violence. Ethics is called upon to deal with the perceived effects of violence but, as some have already noted (Hamilakis 2007; Giblin 2014), ethical debate on its own can do very little to understand — not to say to disarticulate — the roots of violence. Both Hamilakis (2007) and Giblin (2014) (together with many others) consider that the ethical debate should be expanded to a political debate. While I may agree with this, I also think that a political debate on its own is as insufficient as the ethical one and that it may even provide the appearance of overcoming colonial violence while at the same time facilitating its reproduction. Global and/or national state political discourses on liberation and their corresponding practices have often helped the renewal of violence against local populations and the dismissal of local knowledges in favour of the ‘global’ ideas that inspired those same liberal worldviews. The history of modern colonialism is full of ideals of goodness and aid for others — the poor, indigenous, barbarians, dark-skinned, handicapped or whatever — and every colonial intervention, whether military, political, commercial, cultural or scientific, is guided by non-selfish ideals. ‘Evangelisation’, ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, ‘development’ and ‘social justice’ are all good ideas that include the donation of something valuable to others that they inherently lack, donations with a long record of justifying colonial interventions (Dussel 1992).

The multicultural discourse on ethics, and much of what has been included under the heading of archaeological ethics, implies that good consequences for ‘the Other’ are the result of individuals (for instance, archaeologists) having good intentions and good practices towards them. However, what the history of colonialism shows is quite the opposite landscape, where the best of intentions towards ‘the Other’ lead to the reproduction of violence. Even present-day archaeologists overtly inspired towards improving the well-being of the people among whom they conduct research (even those developing research schemes with those particular aims) very often see themselves unexpectedly enmeshed within political or cultural antagonisms with those who were formerly thought of as the beneficiaries of their work. Histories of archaeological involvement in education in non-archaeologically-developed countries (discussed here by both Mehari *et al.* and King and Arthur), rural and archaeological tourism in marginal areas (Mortensen and Hollowell 2009) and archaeological research on indigenous histories/cultures/territories (Gnecco and Ayala 2011) that become either capitalised by state power policies and corporative extractive interventions or contested by the intended local beneficiaries’ political actions can be counted in the thousands in South American archaeology and, as I can see by reading the papers collected here, in African archaeology as well (Shepherd 2007). Here, Ndlovu (2014: 209) says clearly and directly that ‘contract archaeologists have not done enough to challenge legal frameworks that still fail to provide an effective consideration of the cultural interests of Indigenous African

communities, nor to decolonise the discipline of archaeology as a whole', a sentence that I would seek to generalise to every kind of archaeology, not just the field of commercial contract archaeology. Ndlovu goes on to declare, 'It is clear, therefore, that the interests of the paying client are given greater weight over those of Indigenous African communities *even when the discipline of archaeology is attempting to transform itself from the colonial attachments*' (Ndlovu 2014: 209, emphasis added). I have stressed the last phrase of this comment because it agrees with my own argument: attempts to transform the archaeological discipline from its colonial attachments are not having the intended consequences and instead it is corporate interests that are informing archaeology. Ndlovu goes right to the point here, describing the political landscape of archaeological practice as an antagonism between the cultural interests of Indigenous African communities and the interests of the paying client, in other words, corporate interests, as archaeology finds itself on the latter side of the antagonism even if it would have wanted to be on the former. The political alignment of archaeology with colonialism happens notwithstanding the efforts to decolonise contracted and public and community versions of archaeology.

My position (see also Haber 2012, 2014, *in press*) is as follows:

- (1) the archaeological discipline is informed by, and serves, a particular — local or provincial but presented as global — episteme, Western if written in shorthand;
- (2) global or late or post-capitalism is grounded in the same Western ontology and is guided by the same theory of history (where development works as the orientation of vector time);
- (3) epistemic violence is already built into a Western theory of history that informs both Western knowledge and its colonial expansion;
- (4) archaeology has undergone a technological reconversion in order to include other aims (development, market, social justice, multicultural democratisation) together with the search of true knowledge, what can be called post-disciplinary archaeology (which includes contract, tourism, public, multicultural, indigenous and several other brands of present day archaeology as heritage education) and recapitulates the former disciplinary assumptions that codify the modern Western colonial episteme;
- (5) the post-disciplinary archaeological landscape can be described as consisting of territorial entanglements where capital, state and science — including archaeology — meet with local territorial agencies in encounters that work as battlegrounds where globalised discourses and practices (corporations, states, science) intervene in local territories, communities and knowledges (which may react to the intervention through resistance, incorporation or by ignoring them).

The papers here by Chirikure, Giblin and King and Arthur present several descriptions of such territorial entanglements. Normally, the ethical debate seems to be aimed towards the disentanglement of archaeology from such contested scenarios. However, as I have already mentioned, the archaeological discipline already has a built-in complicity with certain epistemic and ontological taken-for-granted (such as the essential separation of past and present, matter and spirit and rationality and affection, a vector-like — i.e. a line with an origin point and an orientation — shape of time, a topological distribution of subjectivity and objectivity of knowledge and the sacred character of alphabetic writing that shapes the politics of knowledge linking the relation to truth with the relation to otherness; Haber *in press*). Under such premises, archaeologists are more in need of help themselves than in a position to help others. It is archaeology that should be decolonised

from its inner epistemic violence and such endeavours must encompass a much deeper transformation than that included in an ethical or political debate of good ideas and practices towards others. To transform the racial, sexual and class integration of the disciplinary collective can be important (as the South African papers in this issue seem to discuss), but is definitively not enough to decolonise the discipline as a whole. Following Ndlovu's contention, to decolonise archaeology implies the need to inform archaeology with the cultural interests of African indigenous communities. This would imply whole transformations, in the sense of un-disciplining archaeology to include acknowledgement of African communities' knowledge and epistemic frameworks (i.e. an acknowledgement as knowledge in their own right, not merely as ethnographic data), political and epistemic solidarity towards local communities (i.e. the willingness to accommodate epistemic solidarity with political solidarity to local communities within territorial entanglements) and the willingness to learn (i.e. learning to learn from local knowledge, instead of teaching to teach, as is the normal trend within hegemonic knowledge) (Haber 2013).

Archaeology has a lot to gain if it accepts the opportunity to learn from local people, but it also has a lot to contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge. Its local commitment, its bodily (and not merely intellectual) intervention, its easiness for crossing over different languages/writings/textures/texts and its usual bridging of realms severed by modern colonial knowledge (such as past and present, alive and dead, and so on), makes archaeology a potential art of decolonially relinking the world formerly severed by coloniality.

Ethical decisions have already been taken by the discipline of archaeology, the epistemic assumptions of which codify colonial violence (Haber in press). However, if un-disciplined from those assumptions, archaeology has an important contribution to make to the decolonisation of Africa just as in South America.

### Notes on contributor

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