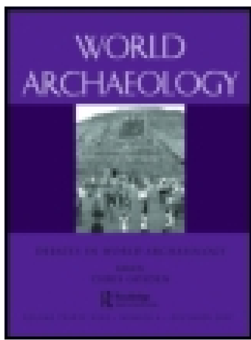

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The role and place of ethnoarchaeology in current archaeological debate

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One characteristic of ethnoarchaeology is that it is a field in a constant state of reflection, not only about its ontological and epistemological bases, but also about the usefulness of its results and the ethical dimension of its practice. The four papers which comprise this special section of *World Archaeology* are in consonance with this reflexive state. These papers approach different current issues in ethnoarchaeology from different perspectives and represent the vitality and worth of this (sub-)discipline.

Although I find the paper by Lyon and Casey extremely illuminating, and I agree with most of their ideas, I am not convinced that ethnoarchaeology is a methodology. More in agreement with the papers by Cunningham and MacEachern and that by Sillar and Ramón Joffré, I believe that it is either a discipline (or an 'ambiguous sub field', as the former authors call it) between archaeology and ethnography, or a research strategy framed within different theoretical structures (from behavioural ecology to the 'ontological turn'), displaying a variety of methods (from participant observation to the development of sophisticated software) and applying many recording techniques (from simple maps drawn with a pencil to highly sensitive Global Positioning System mapping).

Several archaeologists have taken a depressing and pessimistic perspective in relation to ethnoarchaeology. Criticisms revolve around the problems related to the transportation of information from a living society to a distant past society, which has always been difficult to deal with. As Diane Lyons and Joann Casey state, to be effective such transfers require analogical literacy since this process is not mechanical, as some behavioral archaeologists optimistically believed during ethnoarchaeology's formative decades. The argument that ethnoarchaeology has little impact on 'real archaeology' is a derivation of the former and has proved to be wrong: many studies are using ethnoarchaeological results to explain the archaeological record, whether they are aware of it or not (see discussion in Politis 2015). Cunningham and MacEachern also correctly argue that most archaeological interpretations can be traced back to knowledge derived from contemporary contexts, ranging from personal experience to explicit use of broad range models. Moreover, the application of such 'ethnographic' analogies is not always direct, *per se*, but rather indirect since the results of ethnoarchaeology are part of a constellation of interpretative models in one way or another. In some way, the suspicion about the use of contemporary societies as resources for analogical arguments is associated with the fallacy that present-day cultural groups are not suitable sources because in one way or another they have been impacted by globalization and are therefore not 'pristine'. This conception is outdated since we know that no such thing as

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zero time exists – that is, a point in time from which a cultural group is useful for analogical argumentation and another point from which it is not. All groups are in a dynamic process of change at different rates, and ethnoarchaeological research intersects them at some points of this on-going process. Despite this widespread view, few ethnoarchaeological studies have been conducted by explicitly addressing the post-colonial condition of the groups under study and their transformation, ethnogenesis or 'creolization' (a notable exception is González-Ruibal 2015, although he discusses his work as being archaeological ethnography rather than ethnoarchaeological in the traditional sense). As Sillar and Ramón Joffré exemplify in their paper, many studies of the Andes have concentrated on tradition and not on the process of change. Such studies operated and produced knowledge under the assumption that Andean cultures have a single but widespread set of characteristics which have been typified as '*Lo Andino*' and that can be applied as a unified model across the Andes without sufficient consideration of the evidence for multiple economic, socio-political and historical variations across time and space.

Furthermore, insufficient attention has been devoted to the interference in information gathering created by the asymmetries between the cultural 'other' studied and ethnoarchaeologists. Even in cases where ethnoarchaeologists have worked with emerging leaders who embrace the values of modern society at the expense of their own traditions, the result still creates an asymmetrical situation (Hernando et al. 2011), and more generally in many cases it is still unclear how information was gathered. I am sure that part of the observed actions and answers obtained during fieldwork are biased due to this kind of uneven situation, and this is probably a feature of all ethnoarchaeological projects regardless of where in the world they are undertaken. As a result, I am sceptical about the supposedly 'objective and rigorous' observations, whether expressed in words, numbers or formulas, of which some ethnoarchaeological projects are proud. Certainly, deeper inquiry about such matters is needed if we are to improve ethnoarchaeology as a methodological strategy.

As Cunnningham and MacEachern state, it is the narratives elites produce that write and re-write history and we, the ethnoarchaeologists, are a part of these elite, sharing, Eurocentric, neoliberal and often alienated systems of knowledge production. In this scheme, Anglo-Saxon and French scientists (or those working in these academic contexts) are the 'cream' of these elites. Therefore, writing the history of 'the others' by using ethnoarchaeology as a interpretative tool is a process framed within a neocolonial context and dominated by scientists from some of the most developed and powerful countries. With few exceptions, and the paper by Sillar and Ramón Joffré is one of them, the contributions of non-Anglo-American or non-Francophone researchers have been generally overlooked in the global debate about ethnoarchaeology. Most of the theoretical reflections written in languages other than English or French remain quite hidden outside their country or region of origin. Needless to say, ethnoarchaeology from eastern countries such as China (Kong 2013) or Russia (Kening, Tikhonov, and Korusenko 2013) or the Near East (Tekkok-Bicken 2000) remain imperceptible in the world debate about this sub-discipline. This statement is not intended to diminish the many and substantial contributions that ethnoarchaeologists from Anglo-Saxon or Francophone European countries have made over the history of the discipline, but to highlight the question that if we want, and need, to decolonize the practice of archaeology, as for example Brady and Kearney put forward, we should not only incorporate the voices and the emotions of the cultural 'others' but also balance the theoretical and conceptual discussion by integrating the intellectual production of scientists from non-central countries. Although the problems hampering access to information have been dramatically reduced in the last 20 years or so thanks to the World Wide Web, there are still strong linguistic barriers and cultural affinities

that make this integration difficult (and this is a two-way difficulty). However, the effort ought to be made by those who are 'setting the agenda', if they want to (and should) promote a more global and democratic science.

The paper by Sillar and Ramón Joffré is a very good example of such integration since in their discussion of '*Lo Andino*', the authors bring together a variety of contributions from diverse origins (including a good representation of authors from Andean countries) and from different disciplines. They also remind us that some current, phenomenological approaches have been criticized since the inception of ethnoarchaeology: Watson (1979) was worried that the temptation of 'going native' would produce the loss of analytical perspective. There are several lessons we can learn from this paper. One is that the study of present-day 'traditional' communities cannot overlook the influence of *Sendero Luminoso* and other political factors, in their current situation. Again, the value of a traditional group for analogical purposes cannot lie in their degree of 'traditionality' but must lie in the logical structure of the argument, and in every case, ethnoarchaeologists should be aware of, and inform about, the processes of change and their derivations in material culture and in other cultural dimensions. It is unfair to dissect the 'traditional' patterns from the other 'western' components embedded in contemporary Andean societies in order to make them more suitable as analogical sources.

Among other issues, Cunnningham and MacEachern raise the political and ethical side of ethnoarchaeological research and propose a re-focusing of the discipline as a form of 'slow science' or 'désexcellence' (Gosselain 2011; Stengers 2012). As they say, in many ways, ethnoarchaeology would perfectly fit within the parameters of 'slow science'. These parameters imply an explicit concern with the ethical and moral dimension of the research as well as with the communal aspects of such research. For this re-orientation they propose removing the 'positivist legacy that plagued the subfield'. Although it is true that not all the ethnoarchaeologists will agree with this proposal, there is a rapidly increasing number doing the kind of archaeology proposed by Cunnningham and MacEachern. In South America, the kind of research approach they propose has long been embraced by many ethnoarchaeologists, both in the Andes (e.g. Haber 2009) and in the Lowlands (Silva et al. 2008; Silva 2009a). In Brazil, there is a growing tendency to do ethnoarchaeological and archaeological research with the communities, but to call it 'collaborative archaeology' (Ferreira 2008; Lino and Da Silva 2013; Silva 2009b).

Following this trend, the paper by Brady and Kearney puts forward some issues usually overlooked in ethnoarchaeological research, based on their own fieldwork among the Yanyuwa people of northern Australia's Gulf and Zuni religious leaders in the North American South West. Their approach promotes not only a dialogue with the communities but also more openness and sensitivity to be led by them as they provide opportunities to explore different meanings and significances of the archaeological record. However, this attractive research strategy could be applied only in a few settings. In many cases, indigenous people do not feel any relationship with the archaeological record of their territory; therefore, the narratives and interpretations about it are very simple or non-existent, or in the great majority of the cases, archaeologists are working in areas where no indigenous people remain (although this rather begs the question, 'Just who is indigenous?'). However, Brady and Kearney's reflexive exercise poses a challenge: for a great many indigenous people, what we (the archaeologists) call the archaeological record does not exist, or at least does not exist in the same way as for us. And this is in part the result of the sentiency and agency given to the archaeological record (the rock art in Brady and Kearney's study), and due to the completely different meaning and notion of time between us ('westerners') and non-western, indigenous people. The examples provided by Brady and Kearny confront our notion of 'past' and

provide some insight into how to approach this issue. Several studies among South American aboriginal groups provide further insights into these points (e.g. Hernando 2002; Iparraguirre 2011) and reveal the ontological differences in the conception of time and temporality and how this, in turn, would affect our anthropological and archaeological interpretations. Here we reach a catch-22: How can we understand the past of 'the other' if we are unable to understand their concepts of 'time' and 'past'?

In summary, despite the epistemological criticisms and some persistent methodological problems, ethnoarchaeology is one of the main, if not always the best, sources of analogy produced in an operational way in order to be used for archaeological explanations. And this is ethnoarchaeology's strength. Although experimental archaeology can generate strong analogies, and probably with a better control of the variables (Outram 2008), it is narrower in scope, it addresses only low inferential levels, and it lacks the cultural context needed to give meaning to the obtained results. In addition, as Lyons and Casey clearly highlight, ethnoarchaeology has actively participated in the main archaeological theoretical swings, pushing new ideas and evaluating theoretical statements in living contexts. Ethnoarchaeolgy is also the main tool available to widen our interpretative horizons, and a powerful analytical strategy for approaching 'cultural others', both in the past and in the present. Finally, as the papers in this section stress, ethnoarchaeology mitigates our western ethnocentrism and expands the analogical consciousness of archaeologists.

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