

THE NATIVE AMERICAN AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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During the past two decades, social and cultural anthropologists and their work have become the center of an ever increasing moral controversy. Anthropologists have, during this period, found their profession challenged throughout the world on political, ethical and moral grounds, and have often found themselves to be the focus of concerted and bitter resentment in many non-Western countries. Today, all of us are familiar with the problems facing the social scientist attempting to obtain a visa which would allow him to work in many African, Asian and Latin American countries.

Throughout much of this period, archaeologists have largely been able to feel detached from this controversy. Many archaeologists have assumed that prehistory is a politically neutral discipline which harms nobody and can only lead to the increase of any people's knowledge of themselves, and must therefore be considered by everyone as a positive asset. Unfortunately, during the past several years, events, especially *in North America, have made it clear that this assumption has not been borne out, and that archaeology has been subject to much the same criticism as social and cultural anthropology.*

Native Americans have become increasingly antagonistic towards archaeology and within recent years prehistory has

become one of the central themes of Native American protests and demonstrations. The level of conflict has now escalated far beyond the plane of verbal debate. Museum exhibits have been disturbed. Such a situation developed at a demonstration conducted by a Native American group at the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles on January 12, 1971 (Akwesasne Notes Oct./Nov. 1971). Archaeological excavations have been disrupted and, on occasion, notes and equipment have been destroyed and individuals threatened with force (Akwesasne Notes Oct./Nov. 1971). It is clear that Native Americans feel genuine indignation toward archaeological fieldwork, and it also seems that many prehistorians underestimate the degree or misunderstand the source of this resentment. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to exploring the sources of conflict between archaeologists and Native Americans and to proposing a number of ideas that might basically improve relations between the two groups in the future.

The one central focus of resentment by Native Americans toward archaeology and the major source of conflict between the two groups is the excavation of burials. This resentment, although of topical interest today is by no means new. As early as 1665, Indians and settlers in New England were at odds due to the violation of Indian graves by Europeans. In Rhode Island, "when a Dutch trader robbed the grave of a Narragansett Indian, the brother of the deceased presented

himself to Roger Williams with fourscore armed men to demand compensation and to threaten open war" (Simmons 1970). In short, in many **aboriginal** Native American cultures "graves were inviolate and anyone found meddling with a burial could expect retribution from the kinsmen of the deceased" (Simmons 1970).

Aside from the many other problems with the white man during the nineteenth century, Native Americans living on the Great Plains were incensed by the fact that settlers and soldiers defiled burial scaffolds wherever and whenever they encountered them (Linderman 1962). A number of well known and articulate native spokesmen of the nineteenth century (among them Black Hawk and Chief Joseph) expressed their dislike of their white neighbors because of the violation of the graves of their ancestors by the settlers (Akwesasne Notes June 1971).

With this background, it is easy to understand the resentment felt by contemporary Native Americans toward the excavation of burials. The modern wave of demonstrations and protests can be seen as an old and ongoing cultural attitude toward the dead, if viewed in the context of the preceding examples. However, with the recent upsurge of Pan Indian consciousness, many Indians feel a sense of affinity with all other Native Americans, not merely those with whom a tribal connection can be demonstrated. The feelings of outrage by a twentieth century Navajo over the looting of the grave of a thirteenth century Costanoan is legitimate and understandable.

At this point, one might ask himself what any of the previous examples have to do with archaeology. Archaeologists do not loot graves, or rob sites, or defile any people's culture. We do work in the name of science for the benefit of all. Unfortunately, as true as we believe all of these precepts to be, many Native Americans do not make the same distinctions we do. There is often no clear cut line between our work and the digging of what we call pot hunters. To many Native Americans who do not view prehistory through the eye of an extensive university experience, grave digging is grave digging and semantic differences and involuted explanations are meaningless. And if, indeed, Indians do not make the categorical distinctions that archaeologists would like them to, we must shoulder much of the responsibility for this misunderstanding.

Technical archaeological publications mean little to most non-professionals, red or white, and we cannot expect non-archaeologists to be able or willing to digest our detailed and often confusing nomenclature and sequences and find them relevant. It seems that we have avoided publishing material that can be readily understood by the layman, and, at least in part, this avoidance has helped create the quandry of misunderstanding and confusion that now plagues us. It is not enough to state that Native Americans do not understand what we do or why we do it. If we, in the future, want any

assistance from Native Americans, we must present ourselves in a way that makes them feel that prehistory is of benefit to their cultural interests as well as to our own scientific aims.

At this juncture, a few concrete examples might well illustrate Native American complaints. Recently in western Iowa a highway construction crew unearthed an unmarked cemetery containing twenty five graves. Upon discovery, an archaeological team was called in before construction resumed. Shortly thereafter, all but one of the twenty five dead were reburied in a cemetery in the town of Glenwood, Iowa. In the one grave, that of a young girl, a few artifacts and trinkets were found and it was concluded that her remains were those of an Indian. Her bones were scheduled to go on "display" in a local museum. As one Indian woman commented about the above incident, "If I did that to a white man's grave, I'd be arrested" (Warpath June 1971).

A number of Native American cemeteries have been excavated and turned into profitable tourist attractions. One such in St. Ignace, Michigan (Akwasasne Notes 1971) has a billboard which advertises "Exposed to View - 52 skeletons in a single grave - Ceremonial Fire site - many interesting artifacts. Modern camp grounds - showers - electricity available - clean rest rooms - dumping station." The blatant lack of respect in such an advertisement requires no comment.

Many Native Americans feel that displays in anthropological museums are put together tastelessly and often offensively. Many artifacts which are displayed as art or ethnographic material are of religious significance to various Native American groups, who feel that such objects should not be placed on public exhibition and of course, the hundreds, and often thousands of Indian skeletons which fill the basements and store rooms of many anthropological museums are an affront to nearly all Native Americans.

In short, much of archaeological work, and of course, pot hunting (which, as mentioned before, is considered by some Native Americans to be part and parcel of archaeology) is considered to be a form of ethnocide by a great many American Indians. Indians feel that their past cultures are treated with a distinct lack of respect by archaeologists, just as many feel that their present culture is treated with disrespect by social anthropologists. The following, therefore, is a list of proposals to be considered by American archaeologists in their future work.

1. Archaeologists should ask the permission of Native Americans to dig whenever this is possible. Obviously this is a necessary first step if the site an archaeologist wishes to excavate is on reservation land. However, even if the site is on non-reservation property, prehistorians should consult with local Native American groups before excavation begins,

explaining their aims and expectations and in turn asking what knowledge or other benefits Native Americans can hope to gain from such a venture. If, in any given area, there is a Native American community that feels an affinity with either a particular site or a general region, such a group should certainly be consulted. Such a procedure would allow Native Americans to participate in the process of prehistory, as well as open a channel of communication which would hopefully serve to mediate conflicts and difficulties at an early stage.

2. The recruitment of qualified Native American archaeologists should be given a high priority by the profession. As with the recruitment of other third world people within the discipline, training of Native American archaeologists would introduce a degree of relevance about archaeology among Indians and provide a connecting link between the scholar and the object of study. I realize that at the present time such recruitment is perhaps easier said than done, but efforts in this direction should be made whenever an opportunity presents itself.

3. American archaeologists might adapt a policy of refraining from the excavation of recent or historic sites except when such sites are in imminent danger of destruction. In such a case, archaeologists could confer with Native Americans, explaining the danger to the site, and attempt to acquire their aid and cooperation. In this regard, the

term 'recent' must be defined slightly other than strictly chronologically. There are sites of several hundred years antiquity which may have great significance to certain Native American groups. In cases such as these, archaeologists should consider the site a recent one, and attempt to refrain from excavating it.

4. Archaeologists and museum curators should establish a procedure whereby Native Americans are directly consulted about museum exhibits that pertain to Native American culture. Such a procedure would greatly reduce the possibility of a display which is found to be objectionable by Native Americans. Many well meaning curators have exhibited material inadvertently which is judged improper by Indians. The above procedure cannot help but increase communication and understanding between the two groups.

5. Archaeologists should explore the idea of returning ethnographic or archaeological specimens of particular religious or cultural value to various Native American groups. With today's techniques of artifact reproduction, there is often no need to keep every piece of cultural material provided that it has been properly recorded and the relevant scientific data noted.

6. In this regard, it might be proper to mention the possibility of archaeological and Native American cooperation in the areas of the reburial of skeletal material excavated,

after a reasonable period of scholarly study. There is nothing more offensive to Native Americans than the vast numbers of skulls and bones on shelves in museum basements. The re-interment of skeletal material excavated by archaeologists might go a long way toward the improvement of Native American attitudes toward prehistory.

7. As alluded to above, archaeologists should take it upon themselves to publish a certain amount of popular literature pertaining to their work, written in non-technical English, which pertains specifically to the cultural traditions of ancient Native Americans rather than to any particular theory of current interest to the prehistorian. How else can we expect to encourage the interest and cooperation of the general public, particularly Native Americans, if our publications are unreadable, totally irrelevant and alienated from the mainstream of most peoples' lives?

8. Finally, a group of prehistorians might find it useful to band together and compile a questionnaire to be sent to Native American organizations throughout the country, seeking the views and opinions held by Indians about archaeology, and inquiring how archaeology might be employed to serve their interests. Such a procedure would open the channels for the inclusion of the Native American into archaeology as a participant rather than a specimen.

The preceding has been a brief attempt to articulate some of the difficulties currently existing between archaeologists and Native Americans, and to propose a number of ideas which might improve the situation. It is clear that any number of practical difficulties and obstacles can be found with all of the preceding proposals, and it should be made clear that none have been offered as end products or final solutions, but as preliminary ideas for thought and consideration.

In closing, let me state that Native Americans feel that they are totally disenfranchised from the process of the discovery of their own past, a past, which as we all well know, has been made distinctly unpleasant by the ancestors of those who now excavate their bones. Archaeologists must now take stock, and then deal with Native Americans, both past and present, and take steps to make our science more relevant to those whose past we seek to reconstruct.

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