Forum: Enclosing the Archaeological Commons?

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> *History will judge harshly the saint who does not get her hands dirty.*
> Overheard at 70th Society for American Archaeology conference,
> Salt Lake City, 2005.

I think I understand Kenneth Aitcheson's thoughtful article. And I disagree fundamentally with most of it. I take this position as an Africanist worried about the enclosure of our archaeological commons by well-intentioned but excessive and extractive ethical 'codes'. I express my unease via the multiple roles of the post-colonial archaeologist, the notion of 'common' standards, and conclude by offering a reformulation of the archaeologist–client relationship.

   In post-colonial contexts, the practice of archaeology is not restricted to select 'professionals' – it is a social, political and economic set of activities undertaken by different people, only some of whom are 'professional' archaeologists. Thus, the classist distinction Aitcheson makes between 'professionals' and 'technicians' such that the latter are reduced to ever-compliant ghosts in a machine, constructs a false dichotomy between skill and ethical practice. Many formally 'unskilled' and organizationally unaffiliated African labourers will routinely refuse to disturb burial or ancestral sites, manifesting skilled and professional behaviour. More complexly, archaeologists do non-archaeological work that requires skills not easy to codify. The scarcity of archaeological posts – South Africa has one of the continent's largest archaeological corps at perhaps 250 persons – means archaeologists must have multiple personalities – researcher, fund-raiser, CRM specialist, exhibition designer, interlocutor, counsellor and so forth. A proscriptive list of skills and conditions that defines a 'professional' persona also threatens our capacity to do the non-archaeological 'extras' that justify our employ to the publics we serve. More conceptually, a socially responsible archaeology must also be socially responsive. Input from civil society helps reconfigure how we deploy our skill and judgement. For example, rock art was, until the late 1970s, the preserve of the 'amateur' until David Lewis-Williams (then an English master) and Patricia Vinnicombe (then an archaeologist's wife) demonstrated rock art an artefact worthy of professional scrutiny. Rock art research has since produced data, created additional posts and even contributed imagery to a symbol of state (Smith et al., 2000). In post-colonial contexts, Aitcheson's 'professional' unravels. Each of the parameters he lists also exclude and widen the gap between predominantly non-indigenous archaeologists and the people whose history we study and represent. Underwriting his imagining

of a professional is an agentive, capitalist individual rather than a corporation of persons.

This contradiction is not resolved by Durkheimean 'common morality and shared responsibility', which forces a conformity that the complexity of the world simply does not allow. For example, in Botswana citizens are destroying archaeological sites associated with powerful ancestors who, it is believed, imbue the soil and artefacts with curative powers that counter the HIV AIDS pandemic (Segobye 2005). Do we here insist on protecting these sites at the cost of AIDS sufferers' psychological well-being? Or do we abrogate our professional ethics but support personal and situational ethics by allowing the death of a site to counter the death of a nation? Do we then also allow developers building a hospital or school off the hook because their work aids a common morality? The polarity between 'development' and the finite archaeological record is only tenable if we believe the 'record' to be finite. The notion of finity is a double-edged sword. On one edge we are damned because we abet developers on their (capitalist) terms. On the other edge, we resist the selfsame extractive capital by making 'heritage' a scarce commodity. Yet archaeological sites and artefacts have, thanks to CRM work, never been less finite (cf. Holtorf 2005). Indeed, Ireland has run out of storage space for artefacts. Artefacts and sites are property – they may be stewarded, held in trust, even considered inalienable. But in practice it is a minority of museum curators, CRM practitioners, field archaeologists and the like who make the decisions on what to do – or not to do – with fragments of the past. Aitcheson is partially correct – we are managers of change – but his preferred option of self-regulation compounds rather than ameliorates conflicts of interest. While certain 'First World' governments are unable or unwilling to regulate archaeological work, many 'Third World' nations are so capable, concerned with managing heritage as a national estate. Wanting a majority of practitioners to join a centralized body for the discipline to be considered 'professional' sounds like co-option as these ethics, skills and conditions have already been set by a minority of practitioners. Organizations like the World Archaeological Congress accept that common ground will seldom be found – especially in a 'global context' – and instead manage difference rather than coerce conformity. A combination of self-regulation, legislation and business practice mutually constrains and enables the limits and possibilities of what we do more adequately than insisting we alone best regulate our internal and external relationships.

Rather than a client–archaeologist binary, adding a third entity to make of the relationship a triangle allows both greater regulation and greater possibility. It also radically redefines the client–archaeologist relationship. I mean 'radical' as a perspective from 'below' (*radix* – 'root') that allows us to contemplate who, in fact, we work for. Rather than see ourselves as working for an external 'client', our client should be the archaeological 'record'. This approach is allowed for in Western law as an *in rem* ('against the thing') motion, where artefacts and sites become juridical persons and stand as defendants (common in shipwreck salvage cases; Cunningham 1999). This approach also connects with certain indigenous sensibilities that hold that artefacts and sites are not objects external to humans, but have a sentience and

even life (and sometimes death). Acknowledging artefacts and sites as clients whose life and death we manage does not privilege heritage as a 'resource' where artefacts have cash or management values. Aitcheson is spot-on in saying we are not archaeology's guardians – implying a patronizing parent–child relationship – though he does suggest ethics will keep us out of 'business trouble'. This meek acquiescence to an economic system that promotes vast socio-economic injustice is not the same as managing change, whatever ethical gloss we put on it. More than managers of change, we are agents of change who have multiple and ever-evolving responsibilities that are unlikely ever to be domesticated by reactive ethics.

References

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