

## **POINTS OF YOU**

### **Tribal versus Academic Archaeology: Power Dynamics and Cultural Sensitivity**

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#### **Introduction**

Over recent years archaeology has developed into an increasingly scientific and specialised/professionalised method of collecting the material evidence of the past. Therefore personal memories, local myths and community traditions often go unresearched and unrecorded by archaeologists. However with the recent economic downturn affecting developer-financed, commercial archaeological projects, and the growth in funded heritage themed investigations there is now greater room than ever for oral history to be included as part of the archaeological process. This has resulted in an increased community involvement in archaeology in the form of oral history, and particularly memories related to place (Moshenska 2007). The memories of oral history participants provide a more personal and private interpretation of the archaeology uncovered during excavation. This has been particularly relevant to the exploration, remembrance and memorialisation of traumatic events in individuals' lives (Andrews *et al.* 2006).

This paper is a discussion of tribal perspectives in US archaeology. Sadly, tribal authority is often obscured and overlooked. Little has changed since archaeologists Robert Kelly (1998), Randy McGuire (1992) and Larry Zimmerman (1989) wrote about this issue. In this paper, Drs. Rhianna C. Rogers and Menoukha Case personally reflect on the continuing struggle that tribes face in this field. Their hope is to contribute to the conversation and provide new insights for successful archaeological collaborations with Native peoples.

In 2012, Rogers, a former Tribal Archaeologist for the Seminole Tribe of Florida-Tribal Historic Preservation Office (STOF-THPO) and current associate professor at SUNY Empire State College (SUNY ESC), was invited to join a prestigious panel about native-focused archaeology. Initially, Rogers was excited; however, she quickly realized many of the speakers were non-Native “experts” offering archaeological “truths” for native artifacts devoid of tribal consultation, context, and/or meaning. She wondered how many Native peoples were invited to this panel, if these experts consulted Native elders to establish meaning for each site, and whether the average academic archaeologist considered Native peoples to be “experts” of their own cultures. This begged the question: who has the authority and power to speak for native objects and determine their meanings?

In 2016, a similar experience occurred during the SUNY ESC course “Living History: The Battle of Little Bighorn.” Mr. Clifford Eaglefeathers, a historian/linguist of the Northern Cheyenne tribe and adjunct ESC professor, asked Case and videographer John Hughes to develop a course to commemorate the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn; Case invited Rogers to author the archeological module and co-teach the course. Eaglefeathers emphasized a historical thread of racism, and the instructors saw this reflected as the course unfolded. Video oral histories made during the course revealed the issues faced by the Cheyenne as they attempted to assert their own cultural interpretation of events surrounding the battle.

Through these examples, they will scrutinize colonial assumptions still dominating perceptions of native US history. With the post-modernist acceptance of historical relativism and the need for more diverse, post-colonial histories for Native peoples, scholars and non-scholars alike must begin to address power dynamics and proactively foster respect between tribal and academic experts. Doing so will allow us, Native and non-Native alike, to address the cultural discord and contention in tribal and academic archaeology, and suggest possible bridges towards more inclusive practices.

## **Rogers Reflects: Tribal versus Academic Archaeology**

Modern US archaeology has a history of distancing itself from the people who create the objects it studies. There are many reasons for this, including an international push towards scientific analysis of remains/artifacts rather than ethno-archaeological techniques; a resistance to post-modern/post-processual ideals of relative dating; and conflicts between oral native, and written non-native histories. As Kelly described, "I suspect that the first generation of academic archaeologists—Nels Nelson, Alfred Kidder, and their contemporaries—knew Native Americans as people, not just as objects of study." <sup>1</sup> In contrast, many archaeologists today receive very little training in cultural and linguistic anthropology. Furthermore, some archaeologists actively distance themselves from these subfields, often because of a distrust of post-processualism/historical relativism; in so doing, they devalue, and many times exclude, the importance of native cultural interpretations.

On the contrary, US tribal archaeology follows the tenets and wishes of a tribe or nation. This approach was validated with the implementation of federal historic preservation legislation in the 1900-1960s. <sup>2</sup> A clear example of this occurred when I worked for

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kelly, *Native Americans and Archaeology: A Vital Partnership*. SAA Bulletin 16(4), Sept. 1998. <<http://www.saa.org/portals/0/saa/publications/saabulletin/16-4/SAA18.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, the most important federal legislation to support tribal interests came with the implementation of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA). This legislation required that federal agencies, prior to the development of federal lands, consult interested parties (including tribal peoples) in order to determine if the location contained items of cultural or historical significance. With its implementation, the NHPA formalized a process of consultation between the U.S. government and tribes which eventually evolved into two major agencies, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO). Both of these offices were directly linked to the National Park Service (NPS), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP). Within each federally recognized tribe, the responsibilities of the THPO stipulate that, through consultation with federal agencies, tribes would have direct supervision over cultural resources on Tribal lands held in federal trust. Ultimately, this legislation gave tribes the authority to regulate archaeological and cultural activities on their own lands, which, in essence, supported their status as sovereign nations. The emergence of cultural resource legislation and the funding of archaeological research has been an integral part of U.S. culture since the late nineteenth century. Both legislators and citizens alike have viewed cultural remains as a form of national identity and historic preservation; however, for a long period of time, tribal peoples were excluded from this process (1890s-1960s).

the Seminole Tribe in 2008. Unlike academic archaeology, where my own theoretical and academic interests were the main focus, research and fieldwork with the Seminoles was contingent on the ideas and beliefs of the Tribal Council, elders, political officials, religious leaders, tribal members, and the spiritual elements of the objects themselves. The academic notion of remnants of a distant past was displaced by an archaeology of a living present. The Seminoles viewed archaeology as reflecting culture, spirituality, and religion. Each day, I was reminded that projects on the reservation were a part of tribal culture rather than an examination of it; that objects embody the people and culture that created them.

### **Case Reflects: Little Bighorn from a Cheyenne Perspective**

Eaglefeathers had located and, over several decades, studied a long-lost dress made by Cheyenne women from the uniforms of Custer's soldiers who died at the Battle of Little Bighorn on June 25-26, 1876. Eaglefeathers worked closely with Lynn Pakonin, curator at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane,

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Although the United States government recognized tribes as sovereign nations, tribal peoples were not considered integral players in the U.S. preservation plan. Beginning in the late 1800s, tribes began to challenge this idea, arguing that it gave the federal government authority to determine the importance of sites without tribal religious and cultural considerations in mind. The U.S. Supreme court agreed with the tribes and in 1913, after the case *United States v. Felipe Sandoval*, the court modified the law to incorporate Indian cultural interests. As a result of this determination, the Supreme Court mandated the creation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a federal agency who represented Indian interests in the federal system and regulate properties held in federal trust by the U.S. government for tribal peoples. Coinciding with this determination, in 1916, the National Park Service (NPS) was created in order to "assume the responsibilities for the many historical and cultural units" in and outside the federal national park system lands. Since native lands were considered federal property, the BIA and NPS became two of the most important agencies for tribal-federal consultations in regards to native cultural properties. See Thomas W. Neumann and Robert M. Sanford, *Cultural Resource Archaeology* (Walnut Creek, California: Alta Mira Press, 2001), 4; Loring Benson Priest, *Uncle Sam's Stepchildren: The Reformation of United States Indian Policy, 1865-1887* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969); Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); U.S. Supreme Court, *United States v. Felipe Sandoval* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1913); U.S. Department of the Interior, *Federal Historic Preservation Laws* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Cultural Resources, 2002), 1.

Washington, to contextualize the dress for the 140th anniversary events at the Little Bighorn Museum in Montana. The provenience for the dress included a tentative analysis of the object, the collection of primary documents (e.g., museum records, journal and newspaper articles, photographs), as well as tribal oral histories.

Based on this research, Eaglefeathers, Rogers, Hughes, and I developed a course for students at SUNY ESC. In three modules, this interdisciplinary course addressed Cheyenne culture and religion, historiography and oral histories, and academic and tribal archaeological approaches to artifacts. Together these framed the fourth module, which integrated disciplines to consider the meaning of the dress through the lens of historical trauma.

Unlike traditional academic courses, we chose to raise intensive questions about whose voices are heard when contextualizing native artifacts. Following the protocols of tribal archaeology, the course included Eaglefeathers' spiritual journey with the dress, 3 the work he did with the Spokane museum, and other tribal representatives who offered interpretations of the dress. These were treated as expert accounts along with typical academic books and articles. Students were challenged to reflect on their biases and construct a holistic context. They were able to theorize the meaning of the dress to contemporary Cheyenne people and, through video oral histories, witnessed the way racism continues to impact their connection to their own sacred artifacts.

The inherent racialization of the battlefield can be seen through the lack of Native presence. The name of the site was not changed to Bighorn until 1991, 4 and its monument only named US

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3 Following a dream about Sarah Yellow-Fox, Eaglefeathers spoke with her granddaughter Beatrice Yellow-Fox-Other Bull and many others. As Eaglefeathers stated, "Sarah Yellow-Fox's maiden name was Sarah Weasel-Bear; her mother was Mary Weasel-Bear, and her father was Frank Weasel-Bear. Frank and Mary were about 15 or 16 at the Battle of Little Bighorn." Knowing the genealogy, Indian names, and history of everyone who had something to do with the dress was crucial to recovering oral histories. Yellow-Fox-Other-Bull told Eaglefeathers that Mary had given the dress to Sarah; that the dress was supposed to be handed down woman to woman. Eaglefeathers was able to find intergenerational images of family members and the dress. It was Margaret Horn-Nason who asked the museum to keep it safe, and that's where the native and non-native versions of the story part ways.

4 The so-called Custer Battlefield National Monument was the only such US site

cavalry casualties until an Indian Monument was built in 2003 to commemorate the previously unmarked graves of Native people. Eaglefeathers' personal experiences as a museum board member suggested that the majority consider Custer a hero and the Indians to be savages. It was no surprise, therefore, when the Little Bighorn museum curator debunked provenience for the dress at the 2016 event. Based solely on photos, he believed that stitching in the dress did not align with contemporaneously manufactured uniforms; therefore, he asserted, Eaglefeathers' historical context and Pakonin's archaeological research were inaccurate. Note that the oral histories collected by Eaglefeathers were not analyzed in context with the object before this assertion was made. Nor did the Bighorn "expert" collect typical analytical attributes before making his assertions about authenticity. 5 Pakonin, a non-Native herself, supported Eaglefeathers, explaining that historical records indicate officers often wore tailor-made, uniquely stitched rather than manufactured uniforms. Adding insult to injury, the Bighorn "expert" persisted in invalidating their interpretation of the artifact and presented the dress in the museum with skeptical and contentious signage. Eaglefeathers and others considered this offensive; it was disrespectful of living relatives of the women who had made and passed along the dress who were in attendance at the event. By intentionally ignoring typical methodologies in history and archaeology in order to validate his own perspective, the Bighorn "expert" also violated tribal archaeological tenets, breaching rather than supporting cultural concerns. This example illustrates the power dynamics by which those who are accredited (the Bighorn expert) marginalize the knowledge of those outside traditional academia (tribal peoples).

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named for a person rather than a place. It was only changed after AIM protested and Senator Ben Nighthorse Cambell took their concerns to the Senate that a bill was passed changing it to the Little Bighorn National Monument. News articles at the time referred to it as 'Custer falling again'. <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/27/us/custer-falls-again-as-site-is-renamed.html>

5 Typical analytical elements taken during archaeological/museum artifact analysis of perishable materials consists of collecting artifact measurements, fabric types, stitch types, evidence for production and processing, decorative elements, sewing, and/or repairs (Sutton & Arkush 2002, 156-157) as well as chemical analysis and radiocarbon dating. In this case, Pakonin, an insect damage expert, believes that slits and the hole that had been framed with thread on the back of the dress preserve bullet and knife cuts to the fabric, a supposition that could easily be tested. Moreover, the fabric and decorative elements on the dress could be dated.

## **Moving Forward**

Our experiences illustrate that divergent theoretical and ideological stakes in archaeology can lead to contention that impedes inclusive and accurate knowledge of Native peoples and distorts representations of cultural patrimony. How can we address this problem? We propose the following guidelines for working with and alongside Native peoples:

1. Always be open to cultural perspectives particular to region when conducting field research.
2. Understand the limitations and effectiveness of theories and their application in the field, and incorporate the views of living people.
3. Consider the cultural, social, political, and religious implications of your project for tribal peoples in your research design to avoid inadvertently harming individuals you intend to work with and study.
4. Consider how power dynamics affect the interpretation of archaeological findings in public/scholarly venues and strive for inclusive representation.

Some archaeologists are already incorporating culturally sensitive methods; however, more projects with a tribal focus are needed. Collaborative work provides meaningful dialogue and opportunities for Natives and non-Natives to learn from each other. Our hope is that acknowledging the issues and offering strategies for cross-cultural understanding is one step in the right direction.

