



**SCIENCE VS. TRADITION:
UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURAL PATRIMONY**

by

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In the world today there is a longstanding debate between science and tradition. From stem cell research to prayer in school, issues cover a broad scope in a society that is ultimately being forced to decide between belief systems or scientific research. One would have to be completely detached from the rest of the world to not be impacted by such debates. As with many other disciplines, archaeology has found itself in the spotlight. When 10,000 year old bones are excavated, we are able to interpret the past and also make sense of the living world today. Then again, perhaps thousands of years ago, those bones belonged to a prominent tribal chief who, at death, was laid to rest in a particular way such that he could travel to a better place. Herein lies the crux of the problem. All over the world, indigenous groups are claiming cultural patrimony to bones and artifacts while archaeologists struggle to hold on to cultural material for research purposes. Should indigenous groups be able to acquire and rebury excavated cultural material that could possibly hold answers to the history of humanity? Should archaeologist be able to disregard ancient belief systems in the quest for greater understanding of past life ways? The ethical concerns of each group over who owns the past are valid and demand closer evaluation. It is hoped that by examining both sides of the issue, compromise can be reached, but one will find that the subject is far more complex than meets the eye.

A primary goal of archaeology is to preserve and conserve the material remains of the past for future generations. “Archaeological sites and their contents are a unique record of our forebears in every part of the world. Conserving this priceless asset is our greatest responsibility to the past whether professional archaeologists or laypeople” (Fagan 2004: 31). The motivation for archaeologists to have access to excavated cultural

material is based on the importance of the information such bones and artifacts might contain. The study of cultural remains is cumulative, meaning that each new artifact added to the archaeological record can either validate or negate prior interpretation of past life ways. Thus it is important for archaeologists to have the long-term retention of bones in the event that new technology is developed or other cultural materials of similar association are discovered. It is important to understand that archaeologists do not necessarily disregard indigenous peoples relationships to cultural remains. In fact, many archaeologists are very understanding of their demands because they have devoted many years researching such groups and their extinct predecessors. The American Anthropological Association states in its code of ethics that

“Anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work. These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities” (American Anthropological Association 1998).

Thus, archaeologists must have a cooperative relationship with indigenous people and the remains of the cultural past. In the event of a conflict they are obligated to seek solutions to ethical issues even if it means stopping all research and handing over the cultural material. One can imagine the heartache of an archaeologist on the brink of opening a door to humanity’s past and having to close the door before he has a chance to peer through, because a group is upset with the excavation.

Some groups feel that it is never acceptable to excavate, particularly burial sites because it goes against their religious beliefs and cultural values. For example, the rules for attending Hopi Tribe areas and celebrations are quite strict, even when it comes to

living people and their artifacts. On the official Hopi Tribe website, one such rule for outsiders to adhere to is as follows:

“Don’t touch, especially if you aren’t sure. Some shrines are more easily recognized than others. Hopi spirituality is very intertwined with daily life, and objects that seem ordinary to you might have deeper significance to the person who placed them. Shrines are placed by sincere individuals and are not to be disturbed. If you come upon a collection of objects at Hopi, respect the wishes of the person who left the offerings and do not disturb them” (Hopi Tribe 2006).

It can be inferred then, that contact with buried materials would be frowned upon. Such groups are often at odds with archaeologists and are gaining respect for their ideals and winning in the judicial system in ethical cases. The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) that was passed in 1990, is an example of legislation that seeks to protect the values and beliefs of Native Americans and their cultural property. The legislation states that “NAGPRA provides a process for museums and Federal agencies to return certain Native American cultural items -- human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony - to lineal descendants, culturally affiliated Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations” (National NAGPRA 2006). It seems as though, at least for now, that tradition is beating out science in this aspect of archaeology. In some ways, it is a loss to the rest of the world because we no longer have access to the remains of humanity’s past.

Returning cultural material can get very messy internationally as well. Some might conclude that countries seek the return of items that might bring in high revenue, not necessarily for religious beliefs. “Some governments want to redress colonial-era wrongs or highlight their country’s glorious past. Like the museums themselves, they undoubtedly have their eye on the bottom line as well: Marquee artifacts can help draw

millions of visitors a year” (Carpenter and Sandford 2003: 1). Others fear that the return of cultural artifacts to politically unstable countries is an invitation for looting in times of war; an example of which recently occurred in Iraq at the Baghdad Museum. Carpenter and Sandford suggest that keeping artifacts away from their native lands also serves as a precautionary measure stating that “the Iraq war has underscored the dangers of keeping all of one’s cultural eggs in one basket” (2003: 2).

Finding a compromise between science and tradition is a very complex matter. It seems a bit ironic that the groups demanding cultural remains would not know that the artifacts and bones belonged to their ancestors if not for the research conducted by archaeologists. Sebastian Payne (2004) discusses the issue of compromise in his article. Early in the text he suggests that most people feel that if individuals or groups are able to show a direct line to remains, that their beliefs about research on their bones should hold more weight in court cases than the interests of archaeologists. Later however, he explains that “those interests have to be balanced against the interests of others---as they are for reasons of public health and justice---and against the widespread belief that increased knowledge and understanding is a good thing” (Payne: 419-420). Payne infers that each case should then be considered independently based on the arguments of each side.

In justification for the value of world knowledge, Dan Brothwell (2004) makes an interesting argument about the definition of “indigenous people.” He states, “strictly speaking, the only indigenous people are those still living in the area in which our species evolved, whether that was Africa, Asia or wherever. But of course we are all indigenous somewhere in our own way” (Brothwell: 414). Brothwell brings about an often

overlooked idea that we are all truly related. This gives further merit to the archaeological perspective in the controversy that the knowledge of one echoes through us all; that perhaps, cultural remains truly belong to everyone.

Overall, each side of the controversy has valid motivations for possessing cultural remains. In the interests of spiritual beliefs or indigenous people's and the general knowledge of the world, the situation demands some form of give and take from both sides of the table. It is hard to imagine how groups with such differing world views could come to a compromise however, because what is expected from each group as the end result is completely different. Essentially we are all related, and shared knowledge is powerful. The science versus tradition debate is huge and it encompasses many aspects of life. Only time will tell how the debate will play out in archaeology. Perhaps future generations might have a change in ideology and consensus can be reached, but the process of such change is slow. For now, archaeologists should continue to dig where appropriate and follow as closely as possible to ethic guidelines. Their work is valuable not just to the groups they are studying, but to our understanding of the world.

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