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Communication and Consultation: Bridging Boundaries within the Discipline

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Everyone has an agenda. That is the only explanation for my impulse to volunteer to help organize and chair a workshop with the theme of communication between indigenous people and archaeologists. Part of the appeal was the challenge of convincing a group that seemed to be thinking primarily in terms of prehistoric Native American archaeology to broaden the field to include perspectives from other realms of archaeological practice, most particularly one of my fields of interest: the archaeology of African America. Related to that attraction was the desire to hear the discussion which would result from getting archaeologists who work in a variety of social contexts, with different interest groups, coming together.

Clearly, communicating and consulting with descendant communities has been a major concern for a number of archaeologists whose research focus is African-American archaeology. A complete list of works on this theme would be out of place here, but would include Brown 1997, Harrington 1993, Leone 1992, McDavid 1999, McKee 1994, Patten 1994, Potter 1991, Wilkie 1995, contributions to McDavid and Babson 1997, and contributions to Update (the newsletter of the African Burial Ground project), among others. Works such as these echo the concerns facing the archaeological community at large, as we grow increasingly self-reflexive and aware of the social contexts within which we work. The similarities I perceive between the social contexts of archaeological practice in African America and Native America inspired the attempt to bring practitioners in these fields together. I often wonder to what extent the popularity and prominence of African-American archaeology in historical archaeology is because it fulfills important social functions, not unlike Native American archaeology did in the early years of archaeology in the United States (see, for example, Trigger 1980). According to this vision, archaeology becomes, among other things, a means to alternately understand, idealize and objectify an intimate and problematic "other." African-American archaeology becomes a mode for coming to grips with African America (Agbe-Davies 1998:1-2).

The idea for the session was conceived at the meeting of the Student Affairs Committee at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in 1998. After brainstorming for a topic to develop into a workshop for the 1999 meeting, the group settled on the theme of communication between archaeologists and Native groups. Two of us volunteered to help organize the session. My co-chair, Melissa Baird, had a great interest in the ethical practice of archaeology, and during the course of our collaboration was working as the NAGPRA coordinator at Agate National Monument. Over the next few months we worked on developing a more specific direction for the workshop, rounding up participants, and putting together an abstract. Throughout this process I continued to push the idea that this workshop need not be (indeed, should not be) restricted to archaeologists at work on prehistoric Native North America. Our e-mails back and forth about the wording of the workshop's abstract reveal the process of negotiation. Although Melissa Baird was very open to the inclusion of archaeologists from other fields, the language of our abstract became very abstract. I was hard pressed to express my interest in a broad construction of "descendant communities" and the importance of working

with other interest groups (I've since picked up the handy word "stake-holders") without resorting to jargon or platitudes. The end result, described in the abstract, below, constituted our vision of a workshop we called "Communication and Consultation: Working toward an Informed Archaeology."

This three-hour workshop sponsored by the Student Affairs Committee critically examines relationships between Native groups and archaeologists in order to facilitate communication and cooperation. How can archaeologists, descendant groups, and host communities collaborate? How do we traverse the distance between science and tradition? Many archaeologists attempt to work with other constituencies, but lack the experience or networks necessary for effective consultation. Furthermore, successful interaction requires an investment in time and commitment from all sides. How can we achieve this ideal? This workshop is a forum for discussing how archaeologists, descendant groups, and local communities might reach a common ground. The emphasis is on communication that encourages the development of working relationships between groups and addresses issues that have previously prevented collaboration. The panel includes members of Native groups, professional archaeologists and graduate students at work in a variety of contexts, with experiences in communicating and collaborating across archaeology's constituencies.

The panel of ten archaeologists (Alison Bell, Shannon Dawdy, Garrett Fesler, Andrea Hunter, Kathy Kawelu, Carol McDavid, Robert Preucel, Nina Swidler, Joe Watkins and Michael Yeatts) represented many facets of the discipline. The group included graduate students and professors as well as archaeologists that work in cultural resource management, museum and government settings. Some of the panelists were employees of the groups whose past they studied. Several were members (at various levels of inclusion) of the groups whose past they studied. Some were in the field, some spent most of their time wearing a bureaucratic hat.

I was thrilled to be able to recruit a number of historical archaeologists, all of whom had an interest in African-American archaeology, who were committed to communication not only with "the public," but with colleagues in other subfields. Four of the members of the panel came specifically to discuss their experiences working with African-American constituencies and, equally interesting, communication with non-African Americans about the legacy of slavery in their communities.

As organizers, Melissa Baird and I were in contact with the panelists over the year leading up to the workshop. We hoped to stimulate discussion within the group prior to the SAA meeting, so we circulated informal position papers that we would use to kick off the session. Following that would be a combination round table discussion and questions from the audience. The informal position papers generally took the form of a narrative of the panelist's experiences either with a particular project or over the course of a career. Throughout these stories ran a number of common themes, many of which readers of this newsletter will undoubtedly recognize.

The underlying element in all of the following workshop themes is power, particularly as defined by Weber as the ability to act contrary to the will of others (Weber 1968:53). I believe that this is the root of many of the differences observed between the archaeologists of Native America and Hawaii, and those whose focus was on non-indigenous inhabitants of the modern U.S. One could

argue that the power relationships between Native America and the white majority was, and are, not unlike those of African America in many respects. This is in all likelihood the root of the shared themes discussed below.

Very prominent in the panelists' narratives was the need to overcome the negative legacy established by the practices of previous generations of archaeologists. The archaeologists who study the Native American past noted having to undo the damage of colleagues who treated the archaeological record as a "laboratory" and ignoring the human factor in the past, as well as in the present. Likewise, archaeologists of African America were challenged to dismantle, by word and deed, the belief that archaeology and its sister disciplines, such as historic preservation, are more than elite enterprises that serve only to venerate, and to perpetuate the hegemony of, the white majority. Time and again, panelists confirmed that the best way to do this was to do work that is of value to one's constituents. Carol McDavid described the goodwill she established--and the cooperative networks she built--by sharing the genealogical data with people who had a vested interest in the work at the Levi Jordan plantation. Other examples included monitoring and inventorying sites of cultural value, or addressing those questions of host communities that can be answered with archaeological data.

Of course, then the question becomes who comprises "the community?" Who are these "stakeholders" whose opinions should be taken into account? Garrett Fesler described his reluctance to approach black leaders in the town where his site lay, because he did not wish to assume (or appear to assume) that, 'naturally', this slave quarter site would necessarily be of interest to any and all black Americans today. As it was, he received a very enthusiastic response, both from those contacts (and from the citizenry at large) for his efforts. Yet even if it were a simple matter to identify a bounded entity with which to consult, groups contain factions. Even attempts to work with a group may find the archaeologist working against the interests of some element of that group. While one doesn't often hear such buzzwords as "information age" and "knowledge-worker" applied to the practice of archaeology, their currency points out the fact that our society in some senses resembles a bureaucracy, in which authority is grounded in knowledge (Weber 1968:225). The production and dissemination of archaeological knowledge clearly has consequences beyond the discipline. In a struggle for power, archaeological information can become a valuable resource.

One axis of power struggle in African-American archaeology is between "black America" seen as a collectivity, and those individuals or groups who see their interests in some way conflicting with those of that collectivity. This may be out of a racist ideological commitment, but is no less likely to be inspired by the perception of African-American archaeology as a competitor for attention or resources with more traditional (read: comfortable) historical themes, or in reaction to the revelations of archaeological research into specific African-American pasts. For example, Shannon Dawdy described the challenge of working at a site significant to the story of black Union soldiers with input from the Daughters of the Confederacy.

This question of interest surely has an impact on another issue that was raised repeatedly in the workshop: the small numbers of archaeologists from some of the groups whose pasts we study (see also Franklin 1997, Singleton and Bograd 1995:28, 30-31). While in the session we didn't spend much time discussing why that might be, a number of remedies did come to light.

Intensive archaeology workshops for at-risk youth (such as that developed by Shannon Dawdy in New Orleans), open houses and internships have all provided opportunities for enthusiastic black school-age children and college students to explore the inner workings of archaeology and get them excited about the potential for applying the discipline to issues that they find relevant. Of course, the problem of inclusion is also imbued with questions about power and authority. The impetus to create a more diverse archaeology is sometimes (mis)construed as an assault on a) the authority of current practitioners and/or b) the authority of an objective social science. Nevertheless,

The past can only be told as it truly is, not was. For recounting the past is a social act of the present done by [people] of the present and affecting the social system of the present... I mean that the whole archaeological enterprise from its inception--the social investment in this branch of scientific activity, the research orientation, the conceptual tools, the modes of resuming and communicating the results--are functions of the social present. To think otherwise is self-deceptive at best. Objectivity is honesty in this framework...Objectivity is a vector of a distribution of social investment in such activity such that it is performed by persons rooted in all the major groups of the world-system in a balanced fashion. Given this definition, we do not have an objective social science today. On the other hand, it is not an unfeasible objective within the foreseeable future. (Wallerstein 1974:9-10)

Diversity of archaeological practice is clear even from outside the discipline. The diversity of the discipline is just one facet of the need that all of our panelists saw for an expanded educational agenda. Many commented on the lack of attention to ethical issues and the question of working with descendant communities in their own graduate training, and their high hopes for the new educational agenda expressed by the SAA in their document "Teaching Archaeology in the twenty-first century: Promoting a National Dialogue" (SAA 1998). Six of the seven principles--Stewardship, Diverse Interests, Social Relevance, Ethics and Values, Written and Oral Communication, and Real World Problem Solving--include topics that we addressed with this workshop.

Of course one of the reasons that it is so important to encourage the development of "insider" professionals, and as professionals to consult with interested parties in our research, is that the archaeological value of a site or its contents is not always congruent with other values such as religious or spiritual, political, local or familial ones (see, for example Watkins 1998, contributions to Layton 1989). Understanding the nexus of these sometimes-competing agendas for, and interests in, the archaeological record was expressed time and again in our workshop. Alison Bell found that the local value of the Piedmont Virginia house sites she analyzed was to a certain extent wrapped up in beliefs about their age, beliefs which did not conform to her archaeological and architectural analysis. This, she felt, undermined the value of these sites, in local eyes (though certainly not in hers), which led her to pose the question how and to what end do archaeologists confront stakeholders with information which contradicts deeply cherished beliefs? Should beliefs about a structure's age be more or less subject to confrontation than beliefs about the role of African-American slaves in the region's history? As many on the panel pointed out, archaeologists need to develop the conceptual tools to analyze and reconcile multiple assessments of archaeological resources.

While power relationships between archaeologists and other stakeholders can account for the

similarities in the presentations by archaeologists of African America and Native America, it is also the root of their notable differences. Federal legislation such as NAGPRA has created a system within which Native American groups have power vis-à-vis the archaeological establishment. Whereas previously, the primary power was to conduct research or salvage without regard for the will of Native American constituencies, now there is a reciprocal power to demand the return of archaeological and other materials and to monitor ongoing archaeological work regardless of the will of the archaeological community. A legal source of authority (that is to say, of legitimate domination (Weber 1968:212-216) does not exist in the practice of African-American archaeology. Archaeologists communicate and consult with African-American constituencies out of self-interest or out of altruism, but not due to any legal compulsion, a difference that affects the character and content of the discourse. The existence of legal mandates for archaeologists to "consult" with Native American groups means not only that there are guidelines for engagement, but that there has grown up in the past few years an infrastructure for coping with the power struggles which emerge: precedents to appeal to; boards and committees to settle disputes; guidelines for establishing the limits of accountability.

One notable product of this difference was the vocabulary of the archaeologists immersed in federal compliance procedures. In crafting the abstract for this session, I had been using the word "consultation" in its most basic, English language sense, as "to ask the advice or opinion of...to have regard to." But I found that the term carried more specific meanings for several of our panelists. "Consultation" was a federally-mandated process that was simultaneously a crucial right and a financial burden for some tribes. It was difficult to unpack the nuances of this term when our experiences of "consultation" were so different.

In certain ways, archaeologists of African America are formalizing the communication and consultation process in a way which echoes the experiences of the archaeologists on our panel who are in the employ of Native American tribes. Both Garrett Fesler and Carol McDavid described working with structured steering committees, groups that had real power to develop research programs, devise publicity strategies, identify additional resources, and generally ensure that the progress of archaeological research does no harm to those people whose lives are impacted by the execution of archaeological agendas.

In many ways, the workshop fulfilled my every expectation. It was an important opportunity for a group of archaeologists with similar concerns but different arenas of expertise to come together and discuss their viewpoints on and strategies for negotiating the sociopolitical contexts of archaeological research. I think that beneficial ideas were exchanged and that all concerned had a new appreciation for the efforts of their colleagues in other subfields to conduct archaeological research that was responsive to the needs and interests of descendant and local communities. Of course, there were a number of areas where there was some disconnect between those working in African-American contexts, or other historical archaeological arenas, and those whose primary work was with Native American or Native Hawaiian archaeology. This fact convinced me more than ever of the need to keep the lines of communication open, to continue educate ourselves, as historical archaeologists, about the strides made by those working in fields where "communication and consultation" are not only desirable, but mandated by law. Likewise, I hope that archaeologists of all specialties will continue to realize that positive working relationships with stakeholders are an important part of any archaeology.

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