

Claroscuro 16 (2017)

Revista del Centro de Estudios sobre Diversidad Cultural

Facultad de Humanidades y Artes

Universidad Nacional de Rosario

Rosario – Argentina

E-mail: claroscuro.cedcu@gmail.com

Título: What's wrong with cultural diversity in world archaeology?

Autor(es): Cornelius Holtorf

Fuente: *Claroscuro*, Año 16, Vol. 16 (Diciembre 2017), pp. 1-14.

Publicado por: [Portal de publicaciones científicas y técnicas \(PPCT\)](#) - Centro Argentino de Información Científica y Tecnológica (CAYCIT) - Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET)

URL: <http://ppct.caicyt.gov.ar/index.php/claroscuro/>



Claroscuro cuenta con una licencia

Creative Commons de Atribución

No Comercial Compartir igual

ISSN 2314-0542 (en línea)

Más info:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.es>

Los autores retienen sus derechos de usar su trabajo para propósitos educacionales, públicos o privados.

What's wrong with cultural diversity in world archaeology?

¿Qué hay de malo con la diversidad cultural en la arqueología mundial?

*Cornelius Holtorf**

Resumen

La noción de diversidad cultural en arqueología ha llevado a una diversidad de arqueologías exclusivas y a veces inconmensurables vinculadas al patrimonio cultural asociado con culturas específicas. Este tipo de diversidad cultural se basa en un "culturalismo" problemático que asume que los individuos están determinados por su cultura y que solo pueden realizarse dentro de sus respectivas culturas (Eriksen y Stjernfelt 2009). Para evitar tal culturalismo que restringe la libertad de los individuos de pensar y vivir como lo deseen (y no de forma predeterminada por lo que algunos podrían sostener es su cultura), argumento que lo que necesitamos en arqueología no es más el reconocimiento e la "diversidad cultural" sino más bien una celebración más inclusiva de una diversidad de ideas y enfoques que pueden influir en el patrimonio y beneficiar a diversos tipos de comunidades de forma conjunta, trascendiendo asociaciones de culturas humanas supuestamente distintas y, por lo tanto, no determinando la relación de un individuo con el patrimonio cultural.

Palabras Clave

Culturalismo – Globalización – Patrimonio comunitario – Derechos humanos – Identidad

Abstract

The notion of cultural diversity in archaeology has led to a diversity of exclusive and sometimes incommensurate archaeologies linked to the cultural heritage associated with specific cultures. This kind of cultural diversity is based on a problematic 'culturalism' which assumes that individuals are determined by their culture and that they can only realise themselves within their respective cultures (Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2009). To

* Linnaeus University, UNESCO Chair in Heritage Futures, Department of Cultural Sciences, 391 82 Kalmar, Sweden. Email: cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se

HOLTORF, Cornelius (2017) "What's wrong with cultural diversity in world archaeology?", *Clarusculo. Revista del Centro de Estudios sobre Diversidad Cultural* 16: 1-14.

Recibido: 11 de Junio de 2017

Aceptado: 03 de Noviembre de 2017

avoid such a culturalism that curtails the freedom of individuals to think and live as they wish (rather than in ways predetermined by what some might contend is their culture), I argue that what we need in archaeology is not more recognition of “cultural diversity” but rather a more inclusive celebration of a diversity of ideas and approaches that can be brought to bear on heritage and benefit various kinds of communities joint by choice while transcending associations with supposedly distinct human cultures and thus not predetermining an individual's relation to cultural heritage.

Keywords Culturalism – Globalisation – Heritage communities – Human rights – Identity

Introduction: Cultural Diversity in Archaeology

Archaeology emerged as its own cultural realm and academic discipline during the course of the nineteenth century, i.e. the time of Romantic Nationalism and the developing nation-states in the aftermath of the French Revolution. By projecting backward contemporary collective identities and establishing, or even inventing, the origins of their respective national people in the distant past, many young nations reassured their citizens of a shared origin and history. The cultural heritage of one people was not that of another. In this way, from its beginnings, archaeology has been contributing to forming common identities and thus legitimizing the existence of the modern nations. By the early 20th century archaeology had become institutionalized and more and more nations had founded national museums displaying collections associated with various archaeological cultures on their territory, passed legislation protecting the archaeological heritage and appointed professorships in archaeology at the universities. World archaeology, therefore, relied to a large extent on a diversity of national archaeologies, each one investigating first and foremost the national past in its various dimensions and all together presenting a picture of cultural diversity in which each present-day people had their own past and their own archaeology. International trends and affinities were not ignored but often perceived precisely as inter-national, linking various national pasts and national archaeologies with each other rather than transcending them.

Scientific methods and approaches have developed phenomenally over the past century and academic archaeology today is global in many ways. But in contemporary societies, to some extent, the national archaeologies still function according to the old template: as a historical canvas onto which paintings of present-day cultural diversity are attached. National legislation, national museums, policies of national research councils and national systems of higher education, including national curricula in archaeology, although gradually changing, are still shaping contemporary archaeology around the world representing both past and present in terms of cultural diversity (see Brück and Nilsson Stutz 2016).

The widespread recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity was instrumental in modern anti-imperialist and anti-totalitarian struggles that led to increased independence of many peoples around the world. Archaeology has played its part in empowering colonized populations, ethnic minorities and indigenous communities. For example, the World Archaeological Congress has been campaigning for three decades to enforce and protect the rights of indigenous peoples and in particular to safeguard their archaeological heritage. In the context of heritage management, the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), called for more respect for cultural diversity and stated that “the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong”. At this point, the recognition of cultural diversity turns into cultural relativism and culturalism: ‘cultural context’ contextualizes not only the way we should manage each people’s past but it also comes to determine each individual’s criteria for making judgments about what reminds us of the past of that individual’s people. It is here that the problems begin.

Cultural Diversity and The Dangers of Culturalism

Culturalism assumes that individuals are determined by their unambiguously distinct cultures and that they can only realize themselves within their respective cultures. According to Eriksen and Stjernfelt (2009),

“Culturalism is the idea that individuals are determined by their culture, that these cultures form closed, organic wholes, and that the individual is unable to leave his or her own culture but rather can only realize him or herself within it. Culturalism also maintains that cultures have a claim to special rights and protections - even if at the same time they violate individual rights.” Intriguingly, culturalism transcends established political divisions. It occurs on the political Right in the form of ethnopluralism promoting the co-existence of different cultures in different territories. But culturalism is equally found on the political Left in the ambition to practice peaceful multiculturalism and protect the rights of cultural minorities within each society.



Fig.1: Cultural diversity emphasizes collective differences deriving from the past while hiding individual choices and commonalities in the present. As in this caricature, it is as if the collective identity of human beings inhabiting each major global region is defined exclusively by a particular representation of past traditions. Source: <http://clipart-library.com/clipart/2040503.htm> . Free Stock Image.

Culturalism is dangerous because it challenges civil liberties and human rights in the name of a profoundly essentializing notion of cultural diversity which does not recognize the diversity, in various respects, of individuals within each society but instead imprisons them in narrow cultural cages and confines them to their culture's protected boundaries (Figure 1). In his study of *Violence and the Need to Belong*, Amin Maalouf (2012: 31) called this the "tribal concept of identity" which is prevalent around the world and has been known to coerce people to becoming violent defenders of their race, religion or ethnicity. When societies break apart into divisions of "my" culture and cultural heritage and "your" culture and cultural heritage, culturalism exacerbates the dissolution of social cohesion and the decline of civil society that we witness today in various parts of the world. In the name of anti-imperialism, culturalism can even become a hindrance in the struggle against totalitarianism because it emphasizes overarching cultural allegiances and downplays individual diversity and freedom within each culture (Eriksen and Stjernfelt 2009).

To some extent, therefore, culturalism lets cultural belonging stand against human rights. This dilemma goes back to the Enlightenment (Finkelkraut 1987) but it is still with us today. For example, UNESCO policies champion human rights but at the same time the organization's reasoning considers each one of the many different cultures in the world as a bounded entity to which individuals belong and which are identified by a shared cultural heritage and a shared set of values, customs and historic roots that these individuals can expect to have protected. In the UNESCO report on *Our Creative Diversity* (World Commission on Culture and Development 1995: 25-6), cultural freedom is proposed as an additional pillar for the modern state, supplementing equality and civil rights. But that freedom is defined as "a collective freedom" and any resulting curtailments of individual freedom in the name of culture are brushed aside by dismissing them as mere "corruptions of collective rights", yet without establishing where the freedom ends and corruption starts. Likewise, the report (1995: 54) proclaims that some cultures are intolerant and "may not

be worthy of respect” owing to “repulsive practices”, while a few lines later it reaffirms the need to “rejoice at cultural differences”, celebrating “the diversity and plurality of cultures”. These contradictions culminate in a paradoxical invitation (1995: 55): “Let us rejoice in diversity, while maintaining absolute standards of judging what is right, good and true.”

In his critique of *Our Creative Diversity*, the Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001: 133) took UNESCO to task for naively fueling contemporary identity politics, in an age when many armed conflicts occur within rather than between states and have a strong ethnic/cultural dimension. Today, we see some extreme consequences of cultural freedom in (rightly or wrongly) religiously-motivated terrorism associated with the emergence of an Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and in growing anti-immigrant sentiments throughout Europe. Notions of cultural diversity evidently cement seemingly irreconcilable differences between people; they favour campaigns to “take back control” of Britain and therefore vote for Brexit and to set “America first” and thus support Donald Trump as US President. Such notions also do not help in stopping brutal terror attacks or xenophobic discrimination against refugees.

Populist national movements are gaining ground around the world by capitalizing on fears that the national culture and heritage in ‘our’ country is threatened and that immigration therefore needs to be stopped, restricted or even reversed to combat that threat. David Goodhart’s (2017) distinction between Anywheres and Somewheres is highly relevant here. Whereas the former are autonomous individuals living fulfilling lives irrespective of cultural roots and territorial belongings, the latter value to be anchored in time and space and have a strong sense that change means loss. Heritage and history are very much implicated in this debate because they make differences between people a seemingly natural outcome of the past which ultimately governs who belongs where.

Modern nations once stood for liberty and human rights but in more and more contemporary nations ethnos dominates over demos, cultural privilege over equal rights (Högberg 2016). Eriksen (2001: 135) pointedly

resents the observable fact that “the right to an identity does not seem to entail the right *not* to have a specific (usually ethnic) identity.” I would add that the requirement for all individuals to belong to their own culture does not seem to entail a requirement to be aware of all the many needs, aspirations and hopes so many living individuals of any background share with each other, either.

These are rather important issues and they have been debated in the anthropological literature (besides Eriksen 2001 see also Kuper 2003, Robbins and Stamatopoulou 2004, McGhee 2008). Perplexingly, many archaeologists do not seem to be aware of these problems and happily embrace culturalist notions of cultural diversity in their work, e.g. by insisting that historical and ethnic identities are deep and profound whereas contemporary creole, hybrid or globalist identities are shallow and superficial, or by perpetuating seemingly self-evident distinctions of *our* past and heritage as opposed to *their* past and heritage (cf. Holtorf 2009, Högberg 2016). In fact, though, as Amin Maalouf (2012: 101-2) pointed out, “we are all infinitely closer to our contemporaries than to our ancestors”, as ‘horizontal’ heritage and identity, transmitted to us by our contemporaries is more significant to us than ‘vertical’ heritage and identity transmitted from the past.

Alternatives to Cultural Diversity in Archaeology

Most if not all contemporary societies are increasingly subject to processes of globalization related to the economy, the environment, communication, popular culture, etc., and, in addition, many are increasingly characterized by very diverse populations comprising individuals of very different backgrounds and affiliations. As Nikos Papastergiadis (2000: 3) assessed, “[t]he twin processes of globalization and migration have produced changes in the geopolitical landscape that have compelled social scientists to rethink their conceptual frameworks.” The concept of cultural heritage is a case in point. The relations between cultural heritage, collective identity and spatial belonging in contemporary

societies are much more complex than at the time of Romantic Nationalism, and different societies have been negotiating these changes very differently (Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge 2007). It can no longer be taken for granted that the vast majority of people living in any one area share the same cultural identity, a common history, and a joint sense of belonging to their place of residency. What does that imply for the social significance and indeed the meaning of the concept of cultural heritage? Given a “deterritorialization of culture” (Papastergiadis 2000), how will cultural heritage and cultural diversity have to be rethought?

An important new development in this context is the emergence of the notion of heritage communities. First suggested in the so-called Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005), heritage communities jointly value an item of heritage but may be dispersed and unrelated in terms of culture or place. For example, heritage communities may be distributed in virtual spaces such as special interest groups on the internet. Or heritage communities may consist of individuals that grew up as global nomads and Third Culture Kids, sharing a sense of cultural liminality but also a joint affection for objects and places of mobility including airports, international schools, passports and personal ‘sacred objects’ that would always follow along with them (Colomer 2017).

In order to avoid a culturalism that curtails the freedom of individuals to think and live as they wish rather than in ways predetermined by what might be asserted to be their culture, I argue that what we need in archaeology is not more recognition of “cultural diversity” but rather a more inclusive celebration of a diversity of ideas and approaches that can be brought to bear on heritage and benefit various kinds of communities while transcending purportedly distinct human cultures (Holtorf 2006). The notion of communities should not be idealized, as it carries with it its own set of problems (Joseph 2002). In the present context, I use the term community mainly in opposition to the term culture, thus denoting groups of people that are linked with each other in other ways than through the combination of ethnic, territorial and historic

identities that was prevalent in the past and that joined up with each other because they chose to do so rather than as a result of cultural traditions, geographic belonging and an ancestral past attributed to them. Communities provide attachments that are multiple and partial; they overlap and adjoin to each other; they have porous boundaries and allow hybrid exchanges (Papastergiadis 2000: 196-7, 200).

Some people may be described as suffering from a condition of being “cultural homeless,” but psychological research suggests that “not everyone who lacks an ethnic cultural home feels a need for one” (Navarette & Jenkins 2011: 802). Eriksen (2001: 142) already recommended we discard the notion of culture altogether and talk of individual rather than cultural rights, including the right to attach oneself to a tradition and the freedom to choose not to. He reminds us that what is increasingly at stake in contemporary societies “is not cultural authenticity or purity, but people’s ability to gain control over their own lives”. This kind of liberation requires us to do away with the tribal concept of identity:

“[W]hen one sees one's own identity as made up of a number of allegiances, some linked to an ethnic past and others not, some linked to a religious tradition and others not; when one observes in oneself, in one's origins and in the course one's life has taken, a number of different confluences and contributions, of different mixtures and influences; some of them quite subtle or even incompatible with one another; then one enters into a different relationship both with other people and with one's own ‘tribe.’” (Maalouf 2012: 31)

This thinking has reached heritage management too. When the Nara+20 Document on Heritage Practices, Cultural Values, and the Concept of Authenticity (2014) was finalized, a major emphasis was put on managing the increasing diversity and variability of values and practices relating to cultural heritage, both within and among different communities of people – without drawing on notions of ethnic and cultural diversity and distinct cultural contexts and thus avoiding any problematic culturalism.

World archaeology can and should contribute to the further demise of

the problematic notion of cultural diversity and to the strengthening of individual human rights by supporting accounts of the past and structures of working in the present that promote inclusive rather than exclusive societies, where the lives of individuals are not determined by a distinct culture to which they are said to belong but by their own preferences (Holtorf 2006, 2009, 2010). Various kinds of communities of people may instead be defined right across conventional cultural boundaries. Archaeology and cultural heritage may promote groups and communities in which its members share and celebrate...

- the commonalities in *individuals' lives*, past and present, regarding challenges and achievements in making a living, bringing up a family, and conducting fulfilled lives (rather than their belonging to particular almost timeless cultures),
- their joint participation in *heritage activities and practices* fostering team building and group cohesion (rather than the accomplishment of certain outcomes for the collective heritage, directed by external experts),
- their devotion to joint *laughter, irony and humour* about the past (Figure 2) (rather than a commitment to serious study and solemn contemplation of heritage as tokens of people's deep-seated collective identity), or
- particular manifestations of cultural *hybridity and creolization* (rather than of cultural purity),
- a particular set of values to be applied, ambitions to be realized and interests to be pursued *in the future* (rather than documented in the archaeological and historical record of the past).



Fig.2: An example of the emerging post-culturalist heritage of dispersed communities joint together by global trends in popular culture manifesting hybridity and causing shared laughter. (c) interDuck / DUCKOMENTA (reproduced with permission)

In all these ways diverse people may be brought together rather than held apart by cultural heritage, minimizing any confining tribal affiliations along racial, religious, ethnic or other strong lines of division established in the past.

Conclusion

World archaeology does not have to trace the history of distinct cultures or contribute in other ways to celebrating cultural diversity around the world. World archaeology does not have to be practiced and taught in narrow cultural and national frameworks either. World archaeology may be about individuals' lives, joint activities, hybridity, shared futures, and indeed – quite seriously – about us all having a good laugh together.

Acknowledgments

For comments and suggestions about previous versions of this text I am grateful to one anonymous referee, Anders Högberg, and Ian Lilley. Needless to say, they all now bear their share of responsibility for the arguments presented here!

Bibliography

- ASHWORTH, G., GRAHAM, B., and TUNBRIDGE, J. (2007) *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*. London: Pluto Press.
- BRÜCK, Joanna and LIV NILSSON STUTZ (eds.) (2016) "Archaeological Dialogue on Archaeology and the Nation State", *Archaeological Dialogues* 23 (1): 1-70.
- COLOMER, Laia (2017) "Heritage on the move. Cross-cultural heritage as a response to globalisation, mobilities and multiple migrations", *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23 (10): 913-927
Available at:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347890>
(Consulted: 26/9/2017)
- COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2005) "Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society", "The Faro Convention", European Treaty Series 199, Available at:
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/199> (Consulted: 26/9/2017)

- ERIKSEN, Jens-Martin and STJERNFELT, Fredrik (2009) "Culturalism: Culture as political ideology", *Eurozine* 9 Jan 2009, Available at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-01-09-eriksenstjernfelt-en.html> (Consulted: 26/9/2017)
- ERIKSEN, Thomas Hylland (2001) "Between Universalism and Relativism: A Critique of the UNESCO Concept of Culture" in: J. Cowan (ed.) *Culture and Rights. Anthropological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 127-148.
- FINKIELKRAUT, Alain (1987) *La Défaite de la pensée*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- GOODHART, David (2017) *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. London: Hurst.
- HÖGBERG, Anders (2016) "To renegotiate heritage and citizenship beyond essentialism", *Archaeological Dialogues* 23 (1): 39-48.
- HOLTORF, Cornelius (2006) "One World Archaeology Today", *Archaeologies. Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 2 (2): 87-93.
- HOLTORF, Cornelius (2009) "A European perspective on indigenous and immigrant archaeologies", *World Archaeology* 41 (4): 672-681.
- HOLTORF, Cornelius (2010) "Ironic heritage: overcoming divisions between communities through shared laughter about the past", *MUSEUM International* 62 (1-2): 91-95.
- ICOMOS (1994) "Nara Document on Authenticity", Available at: <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf> (Consulted: 26/9/2017)
- JOSEPH, Miranda (2002) *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press.
- KUPER, Adam (2003) "The Return of the Native", *Current Anthropology* 44 (3): 389-402.
- MAALOUF, Amin (2012[1996]) *In the Name of Identity. Violence and the Need to Belong*. New York: Arcade.
- MCGHEE, Robert (2008) "Aboriginalism and the problems of indigenous archaeology", *American Antiquity* 73 (4): 579-597.
- NARA+20 DOCUMENT ON HERITAGE PRACTICES, CULTURAL VALUES, AND THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY (2015) *Heritage & Society* 8 (2): 144-147. Available at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2159032X.2015.1126115> (Consulted: 26/9/2017)

- NAVARETTE, Veronica and JENKINS, Sharon Rae (2011) "Cultural homelessness, multiminority status, ethnic identity development, and self-esteem", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35 (6): 791-804.
- PAPASTERGIADIS, Nikos (2000) *The Turbulence of Migration. Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- ROBBINS, Bruce and STAMATOPOULOU, Elsa (2004) "Reflections on Culture and Cultural Rights", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2/3): 419-434.
- WORLD COMMISSION ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT (1995) *Our Creative Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO.