ARCHAEOLOGY AS INDIGENOUS ADVOCACY IN AMAZONIA

By Michael Heckenberger

Not so long ago, most anthropologists held a view of pre-Columbian Amazonian peoples as fairly uniform across the region and roughly identical to 20th century ethnographic groups—a view based on very scanty direct evidence. Attention was therefore directed at contemporary social forms and single-sited ethnography, which seemed well suited to studying the small, dispersed, and autonomous villages of the region. In recent decades, archaeology and ethnohistory document much greater variability through time and space, notably complex, regional social formations and broad regional social networks. At the same time, contemporary issues of cultural ‘property’ rights have drawn attention to the agency and dynamism of indigenous social formations. In light of new views on Amazonia, as dynamic, diverse, and unpredictable, the unique ability of archaeologists to consider long-term change provides a critical perspective in regional ethnology, although in-depth archaeological investigations are rare.

Archaeology itself has also changed, from description and classification, to the application of a positivist scientific model imported from the natural sciences, to the more theoretically and practically ambitious attempts of recent archaeology to address issues of human symbolic and social systems, human agency, and consideration of the hegemonic ideas of dominant political structures. Coinciding with this ‘loss of innocence’ is an increased awareness of cultural heritage (notably cultural resource management, CRM, mandated by Brazilian national laws) and the contested political space of archaeology. Today, this includes greater reflection on the question of who ‘owns’ the past, particularly repatriation and resource control (including lands, valuable objects, and intellectual property rights).

These changes are familiar and parallel those of scientific inquiry, in general, which has moved from tightly restricted areas of knowledge and practice—disciplinary—toward more interactive (‘interdisciplinary’) and socially accountable (‘engaged’) approaches. Socially engaged anthropology depends on context rather than scientific formula or philosophical dogma, and requires the articulation of diverse viewpoints. In anthropology this shift is most obvious in the applied and medical areas, but the question of relevance concerning the broader impacts of research for society at large resonates throughout the discipline and blurs the distinction between ‘applied’ and ‘academic’ anthropology. If this is the case, then what type of ‘engagement’ does archaeology entail?

‘Engaged’ Archaeology: The Agora

In “The New Knowledge Production” (Gibbons et al. 1994) and “Rethinking Science,” (Nowotny et al. 2001), a new framework for the dynamics of “science and research in contemporary societies is suggested: an approach or mood (‘mode 2’) that, unlike mono-disciplinary approaches (‘mode 1’), emphasize heterogeneity, contingency, and dialogue (see also Ashman and Baringer 2000; Latour 1998). Their vision of knowledge production centers on the metaphor of the agora, meaning “meeting place” in Greek. The idea of the agora, or “context of application,” as they also describe it, is particularly appropriate here since in Portuguese, the language of the Brazilian portions which make up about 70% of the Amazon, it means the “here and now.” Archaeology, although typically framed in broad human timescales, is also about the “here and now,” focusing on concrete material objects, spatial patterns, structural forms, settlement patterns, ‘eco-facts,’ etc. The materiality of subject matter, in fact,
provides a medium for dialogue between viewpoints in the context of recovery and exposition. The idea of the agora, the dynamic, multi-vocal research context, is also appropriate here for still another reason: the indigenous peoples in many parts of southern Amazonia debate public affairs in central plaza forums.

For local Amazonian peoples archaeology is a critical tool to defend their cultural resources and lands and, at the same time, explore and preserve their heritage. Too often it operates within a narrow disciplinary context, however, aimed at addressing questions of Western scholarly interest and government compliance (CRM), where debate is restricted to academic ‘experts.’ Indigenous voices have generally played little role, except as the objects of ethno-archaeological research. But, archaeology also offers unique opportunities for engagement between points of view and relevance to indigenous concerns. The relevance is eloquently described by Xinguano leaders (Xinguano refers to culturally related groups who reside in the headwater region of the Xingu river, Parque Indi
gena Xingu Indian Reserve, PIX, Mato Grosso, Brazil). As the Kuikuro (Carib speaking Xinguano) chief, Afiukaka, once said of archaeology: “this is the only research that has taught me something I do not already know. Others have asked about our rituals, how we cook our food and grow plants, how we speak, and these things I already know, but this [archaeology], this I did not know.” He refers to learning about the places of ancestors, niholo, and the ancient places where they dwelled, niholo intuye.

The remains that archaeologists study are things they know well, such as, exceptionally fertile soils (dark earths) found in archaeological sites (egepe), pot sherds (egeho), and other things that litter ancient village sites (etepa), but never as instruments of knowing the past. Today, the Kuikuro have a word for an archaeologist, egeho uhinhi (“person who looks for potsherds”), and they see the relevance of archaeology clearly as a means to link oral histories with an even deeper past and as a means to better understand special places and personages with important cultural and economic properties. Importantly, the Kuikuro see it as an important tool to preserve and defend their culture. After a two-hour Power Point show-and-tell, another Xinguano chief, the renowned Yawala-
piti (Arawak-speaking) chief Aritana, commented that “this is one of our most powerful weapons to defend ourselves.”

**Authenticity**

The idea of the agora does not negate the traditional interests of archaeology or anthropology, but it does call for a transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, reflexive, and socially accountable research agenda. The challenge is not merely to document human cultural and biological diversity, but to construct knowledge in a way that is socially accessible, or open, and engaged. This approach is also important since it counters the dubious tendency in regional anthropology to turn individual cases into general characterizations, creating even more dubious conditions of ‘authenticity’ that ignore variability and historical change and rob indigenous peoples of agency. In virtually all cases, individual indigenous histories are complex hybrids and ‘tradition’ is a question of not only heritage but diversity and resistance.

What constitutes ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous,’ in a worldwide sense, is obviously a highly contentious issue, particularly insofar as rights to lands and resources are concerned. Archaeology documents long-term cultural continuity in the Upper Xingu, which paradoxically is one of the most obvious cultural ‘hybrids’ in the broad region, produced through the intersection of diverse indigenous histories, the ethno genesis, of the Xinguano nation over the past 500 or more years. In this case, at least, ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ is dynamic and problematic. Many indigenous peoples are displaced from their original homelands, but their very displacement insured their physical precedence in most areas: the surviving indigenous groups in Amazonia were first occupants, almost regardless of where ‘there’ is. ‘Authenticity’ is re-constructed in terms of the critical places, memories, and identities, including dwelling places, sacred ancestral sites (including cemeteries), and other special locations, but alsoincluding ‘places’ that lie well beyond the limits of demarcated indigenous lands. These issues require special provisions, but regulations, while fundamental, must remain flexible and keyed to local issues and forums of discussion.

**Indigenous People, Parks, and Cultural Heritage**

One area where tensions have emerged is that between indigenous peoples and environmentalists. In a lively interchange initiated by Schwartzman, Moreira, and Nepstad (2000), several specialists in tropical forest conservation and development weigh in on the issue of “parks versus people” in the tropics. Schartzman et al. ask: How do anthropologists, ecologists, and policy-makers create a dialogue that incorporates diverse viewpoints and, particularly, native voices, into discussions of policy-making, development, and conservation? Recognizing that most tropical forests are occupied by indigenous peoples (Colchester 2000:1365), the position espoused by Redford and Sanderson (2000:1362) is highly significant: “Traditional and indigenous people can claim incontrovertible rights to their land...As independent peoples with rights to self-determination, their future should be in their own hands - whether that future meets our expectations or not.” In other words, means must be developed to insert indigenous voices in dialogues and promote local pride of place. The question, once again, is not only who can speak but, who will listen, and, who will be heard? In this respect, the job of anthropology is not to speak for but to speak with ‘others,’ to create an agora where alternative voices are present, including to the degree possible those of the past (indigenous ancestors).

There is no doubt that there were many more Amerindian people in AD 1492 than at any time afterwards, as a result of epidemics, cultural loss, and political and ecological marginalization. This challenges many traditional views, notably those presented by Meggers in
her classic work *Amazonia: Man and Culture in a Counterfeit Paradise* (1996 [1971]), suggesting that the Amazon’s tropical forest, if not tropical forests in general, cannot sustain intensive agriculture and, by extension, large, settled population aggregates (i.e., complex societies). Most regional anthropologists today reject this view, but, as Coburn (Chicago Magazine 2003:105) notes, ecology activists seized upon Amazonia, as “one of the fundamental texts of the save the Earth/Save the Rainforest Movement.” Thus, many pleas for the development of nature parks or conservation areas rest on the assumption of “technological limitations and low population densities” (Terbough 2000:1358), but, one might ask, what are the historical justifications of such an argument?

What happens if the presumed conservation of indigenous peoples or their low densities and impacts are placed in doubt by historical and archaeological evidence, which mounting evidence increasingly seems to support? In a recent essay aimed at “mapping an engaged anthropology” Beth Conklin (2003) argues that anthropology should “speak truth to power.” She notes that anthropologists cannot “tailor our research agendas and writings to produce the images that certain activists or advocacy groups want,” since “distorted claims inevitably backfire when the gap between rhetoric and reality is revealed.” In the 1980s and 1990s, Western environmentalism was challenged, revised, and expanded to shift from ‘conservation’ focused on preserving flora and fauna to ‘sustainable development’ recognizing local people’s rights to use environmental resources. That the Amazon forest is in significant part a human artifact, the product of a very long culture history in the region, does not make ‘nature’ any less ‘natural,’ any more than elsewhere in our highly anthropogenic world. It does cast doubt on models that promote stable systems operating in delicate equilibrium that humans uniformly disrupt.

Speaking truth to power thus involves scientific research methods, which are about pattern recognition in a fixed amount of time and space, as well as historical procedures, which are necessarily bridging, since they seek to compare things across different spatio-temporal scales and involve translation and interpretation. Alongside knowledge production, however, the scope of research should be expanded to include alternative viewpoints and external critique. There is no singular solution, no right answer about the real past (or present), but there are resonances and correspondences between different perspectives.

Regardless of what Western scientists or policy-makers might feel is the appropriate use of the land or not, the simple fact is this: where indigenous Amazonians remain is precisely where the most intact forests also remain, as borne out by even a cursory study of satellite imagery, now widely available. Indigenous development, although not without problems, e.g., mining, logging, etc., (Fischer 2000), is typically based on detailed ethno-scientific knowledge and is uniquely suited to local conditions. This ecological consciousness of indigenous peoples is also reflected in the alliance movements between indigenous and small rural landholders over, for instance, the construction of the Kararao and Babaquara dams, at Altamira (Pará, Brazil) in 1989; a similar initiative is underway (Forline & Assis, this volume).

**Intellectual and Cultural Rights**

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The question of who ‘owns’ the past creates a variety of philosophical and ethical questions, but also raises important practical and legal issues, including the ownership, curation, and conservation of cultural remains (ethnographic and archaeological) and of place. Intellectual and cultural property rights are often difficult to define in terms of indigenous peoples (Posey 1983, 2002) and must be considered on a case-by-case basis, as well as by definition of general categories. One area that needs immediate attention relates to the conduct of research and other engagements, which must increasingly develop means to incorporate indigenous peoples into research as active participants and decision-makers. One highly productive avenue has been to incorporate indigenous groups in filming and self-documentation projects, moving us away from the tendency of exotizing and denying agency through uncritical Western representation. Issues of co-authorship of imagery and research databases must be addressed, and appropriate remuneration for indigenous knowledge and resources must also be embraced, preferably through contractual agreement (the direction taken by the leadership of the Associação Indígena Kuikuro do Alto Xingu).

These concerns resonate strongly with issues that emerged in the U.S.
the 1980s, culminating in NAGPRA (The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act). Places are made by dwelling in an area, and making physical as well as symbolic or social ‘improvements’ of it. These ‘improvements’ can be documented through archaeological fieldwork, including the residues left by living populations, as well as ethnographic and linguistic collaboration with indigenous participants. Mapping out local histories and memories, critical to preservation of cultural traditions, and the places where they occurred should be a research priority, and archaeological perspectives are uniquely suited to situating these into a geographical, dwelling, perspective. While, as noted above, not all histories or archaeologies can be linked to place as easily, where cultural continuity can be demonstrated in space and landscape, such studies are critically important to indigenous concerns of land-rights, cultural survival and pride-of-place. In this regard, the necessary generation of spatial information should be embedded within larger participatory mapping strategies whenever possible.

Another important area of discussion involves the disposition of collections. The question of appropriate repositories for archaeological remains and their storage is not fully resolved in terms of hierarchical local, state, and federal regulations. At the local level, communities often feel strong claims to these materials and, although federal law in most cases requires their curation in state facilities, local claims should also be recognized. Likewise, indigenous claims to ancestral materials, whether within their demarcated lands or not, must also be acknowledged. Minimally, indigenous groups should be incorporated into debates and participate in archaeological fieldwork, particularly as it applies to scared sites and remains, including human remains. In Amazonia, precisely due to the lack of archaeological history, indigenous peoples and archaeologists can forge lasting collaborations and avoid the pitfalls of cultural ‘partisanism’ that have sometimes occurred elsewhere.

The Upper Xingu Indigenous History Project

The Upper Xingu Indigenous History Project, co-directed by Bruna Franchetto and Carlos Fausto (Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro) and the author, is an attempt to create such a research context, a meeting place, that includes diverse specialties and points of view (Heckenberger 2004; Heckenberger et al. 2003). The project is a loosely affiliated group of researchers engaged in cooperative fieldwork with indigenous leadership and local research participants to promote local self-determination, as well as increase anthropological knowledge. It integrates archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, indigenous knowledge and history, and digital film/audio documentation. Indigenous community members participate in all aspects of the field research and open seminars are given regarding research results. With respect to local community participation, indigenous assistants are trained at the initiation of each field season in archaeological and mapping techniques, including ‘high-tech’ transit and GPS mapping and excavation. Importantly, a broad understanding of basic methodologies provides a way for project participants to communicate and design mutual research strategies. Archaeological mapping provides precisely such common language. The Xinguano case, although not unique, is one of the only examples of large-scale archaeological research conducted in an indigenous area.

Participatory projects of all kinds, including archaeological mapping, surveying and excavation, integrate Kuikuro people. At the beginning of each field season, Kuikuro assistants are trained, young to middle-aged adult men and women, providing a fertile ground for dialogue, since local individuals understand the research through hands-on experience. The Kuikuro leadership takes an active role in all decision-making, as well as data collection and interpretation. Project results and basic expertise of research partners are also incorporated into community education projects. Participants in the day-to-day research create enthusiasm, act as cultural interpreters, and help stimulate local community members to remember and recount events, which are then recorded in the documentary sub-project.

Importantly, while there is significant variation of opinion about details and relevance from one perspective to another, there is widespread agreement between project participants, native and outsider, with respect to many interpretations. Of particular note, all viewpoints involved in on-site research (indigenous, archaeological, ethnographic, linguistic, and others) is that: 1) the Xinguano peoples have lived in the area for a millennia or more, although they have an extremely complex history of change and ethnogenesis; 2) they had an economy, political system, and ideology that supported large, permanent, and densely distributed settlements; 3) all of these features were based on a highly sophisticated system of ‘ethnoscience’ largely intact (although not unchanged) today. In the Upper Xingu, history is inscribed on the body and on the land, in a highly indelible and clear ‘historical’ form.

These observations are critical for more than academic issues. Archaeology documents changes in settlement patterns from pre-Columbian times, including the complicated regional settlement patterns documented for the period c. AD 1250-1650, included complexly organized sub-regional clusters of some 6-12 villages, comprised of large, medium, and small-sized plaza villages interconnected by wide, straight roads and other intricately constructed features (Heckenberger 2004, et al. 2003). This evidence and demographic patterns over the past 120 years provide some of the clearest evidence for catastrophic population decline in Amazonia. After the introduction of regular medical assistance, the region shows remarkable rebound: population in the Kuikuro village went from about 100 in the 1960s to 150 in mid-1970s, 180 in the early 1980s, 220 in the late 1980s, and 330 in 1993. Today there are about 500 divided in three villages. Thus, in the Upper Xingu, at least, archaeology
provides a ready response to the common refrain of indigenous antagonists: “why so much land for so few people, people who do not know how to develop the land?” The answer is simple: before colonialism decimated regional populations, there were many more, they used their lands well, and—with basic medical assistance—they will be plentiful again.

The Upper Xingu case was the first federally protected indigenous area in Brazil. It is considered by many as the ‘crown-jewel’ of Brazilian indigenism. But, struggles over land rights are far from over. In fact, just as the federal government moved to establish the PXX in the late 1950s, the state government sub-divided and sold or distributed individual lots. Several juridical cases have already successfully incorporated archaeological data. Archaeology is thus a critical element in defining and demarcating indigenous lands. Through collaborative and engaged archaeological approaches, diverse viewpoints can be joined to help preserve and protect cultural heritage and indigenous property rights.

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