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A Response to "Indigenous Archaeology: Historical Interpretation from an Emic Perspective" — from a Native American Archaeologist's Perspective

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Editor's Note: This response is written from the point of view of the senior author, the former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. It is not intended as a rebuttal, per se, but rather an expansion upon the topics addressed in Kennedy's "Indigenous Archaeology: Historical Interpretation from an Emic Perspective." This response is thus designed (and was sought by the Nebraska Anthropologist editorial staff) to broaden the reader's understanding of a complex topic within archaeology.

Writing a response to Kennedy's topic is challenging, given my equally emotional and professional ties to the subject. How does one take an objective look at a discipline (Indigenous archaeology, in this case) that has not been defined by those who comprise it? For the purposes of this response, however, I am aware that the original author is not a trained archaeologist, but has, in good faith, examined Native participation in archaeology as an important issue.

With that said, the author may not have accessed all the available information. Several contradictions within the article suggest a certain amount of ambivalence. For example, the author suggests that Indigenous populations should take control of their past, but then suggests that Indigenous people should embrace archaeological techniques. In practice, however, these two approaches are

fundamentally at odds, given archaeology's heritage as a colonialist pursuit (Trigger 1984, Wobst 2005, Zimmerman 2005). In other words, for many years, archaeology and Indigenous history have represented two opposed methods of understanding the past. To embrace one is often to disregard the other, privileging 'science' above 'heritage' or vice-versa. Fortunately, archeologists in recent years have been made aware of this issue, as evidenced by Kennedy's paper.

As a Native American archaeologist, I understand there is still a fundamental rift between archaeology and Native view points. This rift has originated simply because ideas (i.e. the way we investigate or perceive the past) are tacitly based on a cultural belief system. Defending ideas—in the scientific sense—is easy, but changing a person's beliefs about the past is beyond the purview of either archaeology or Native perspectives. My colleague has looked to the future of archaeology, and has proposed that partnerships should be formed between archeologists and Indigenous populations, necessitating ideological sacrifices by both parties. Again, if only 'scientific ideas' were at stake here, Kennedy's proposal would be welcomed. Many supporters of either side, however, would be hostile to even small concessions regarding their culturally defined beliefs. One of the most tenacious myths within archaeology is that our subjects are dead; on the contrary, Native populations maintain a deep connection with the past, and the callous investigations of archeology can be seriously offensive or damaging to extant cultures (Deloria 1973:33, Henry 1993:10, Meskell 2002). As a cultural anthropologist, Kennedy would likely agree that in view of this, archaeology may need to revise its methods to avoid harm to Indigenous people and culture (Wobst 2005). I would further suggest that a full partnership in the current climate is unlikely or impossible, but I do agree with Kennedy that some change has already begun.

One sign of archaeology's heritage is that such change has not come easily. This is due in part to the perception that archaeologists are the sole interpreters of the past, especially the pre-Columbian past in North America (McGuire 1997:64-65). Legislation in the United States has since necessitated a shift in archaeological methods by the passing of Federal laws. Laws such as the Archeological Resource Protection Act of 1979, the 1992 amendments to the National Historic Preservation Act (that established recognition of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers), the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and numerous Executive Orders and Federal mandates to consult with tribes on a government-to-government basis have improved Indigenous control over their own past. Socially, the American Indian Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s played a significant role in shaping how Native people are viewed today. If it was not for the activists of the time, the above legislation would not

have been passed. Thus, as an Indigenous archeologist, I suggest that if the author looked to sources outside of archaeology, she would have seen the discipline of archaeology historically as a way for the dominant society to control the history of the land. Such a discipline, necessitating the legal and social reforms listed above, has not yet fully rejected its colonialist roots. The Kennewick Man case is a prime example of non-native archaeologists trying to lay claim to a land and a history that is not their own (see Watkins 2004). In fact, I argue that Kennewick Man is of Native descent, and this has been increasingly supported even by 'white' archeological investigations.

In summary, "Indigenous Archaeology: Historical Interpretation from an Emic Perspective" looks at Indigenous archaeology through 'rose-colored glasses.' The fact is, most Native archaeologists do not understand what 'Indigenous archaeology' means—it is an oxymoron. Kennedy did not define the term, and neither do I, because I do not know what it is. Partnerships are a wonderful thing, but in this case, 'Indigenous archaeology' would be forcing a population to accept a belief, not merely an idea. To fully understand the issue, readers should pursue sources outside of archaeology, and delve into the reasons why the field has developed as it has; an understanding of the original intentions of archaeology suggests why Native peoples are wary of archaeologists dictating history. Perhaps someday, 'scientific' and 'Native' beliefs will come to an understanding, but asking Native Americans to sacrifice their views of the past to accommodate archeological investigation is a fundamentally inappropriate solution.

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