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Archaeologies of Listening

Beginning Thoughts

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Listening is a skill, an art, a means by which knowledge is gained. In anthropology, it is fundamental to evidence-based practice. From the beginning of anthropological practice, we have drawn on millions of years of selection for listening capacity. Our ability to listen effectively derives from our aural mechanism and our human orientation to face-to-face interaction. It is through our human communications that we go beyond our physical bodies into universes of discourse rich with compounded experiences, memories, and thinking. Listening to our fellow humans living at or near our sites, or to those descended from ancestors who once frequented what we call sites, provides a wealth of knowledge about pasts that we could not otherwise understand or even be aware of. We, as anthropologists who practice an archaeology that is both scientific and humanistic, are committed to examining as wide a spectrum of information as we can access. That is why we listen. Yet, as most of us are keenly aware, we archaeologists are so deeply involved in digging “telephone booth” stratigraphic columns, describing data, and comparing artifacts that we often forget the human side of our mission—listening and learning from others who may hold distinctive and important knowledge about the places and objects that we so highly value in the abstract world we inhabit. Indeed, one thing that Thor Heyerdahl got right was his observation that we cannot hear within university walls.

In this introduction, we explain how “archaeologies of listening” bring to the fore a postcolonial standpoint (see Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010; Schmidt 2009). Its opposite, the imperialist colonial standpoint (not just Western), elevates the paradigm of knowledgeable imperial persons above allegedly igno-

rant barbarians living in the colonies. Hierarchies of power are simultaneously hierarchies of knowledge. Our familiar Western worldview developed along with Europe's early modern nation-states and the colonizing outreach that was central to our own history. Conventional history lauds Enlightenment principles, notwithstanding the poignant summation of philosopher Joseph Agassi (1981:386): "positivism, inductivism, pure rationality, scientific proof, and all that, are parts of a myth." The social charter myth for "modern society," allegedly superior because it is built on the practices specified by Agassi, denies these practices in subordinated societies.

As Fabian (1983) has argued, the processes of othering that prevail in anthropology carry ancillary baggage that makes the Other irrational, fails to appreciate scientific proof in all its ontological guises, and fails to admit inductive thinking. If that were not the case, those Others might have a claim to participate democratically in the dominant nations' governance. Postwar economics spurred the breakup of administered colonies, without breaking up racist opinions on their peoples' intelligence. Colonialist archaeological projects also continued. White men, funded by imperial nations, directed crews of manual laborers whose counsel, if listened to at all, was seldom acknowledged. Herzfeld (2010:302) addresses this colonial isolation: "these earlier scholars were perhaps blissfully unaware of taking directions from anyone. Anthropologists' failure to treat their informants as intellectual equals, however, makes little sense today." An archaeology of listening addresses what Herzfeld (2010:302) sees as a need to address "a lingering intellectual colonialism [as well as] demand respect for social actors as theorists of, at the very least, their own conditions of life." Accepting local actors as thinkers has yet to gain traction in archaeological practice.

Our position here is that archaeologists, and archaeology as a discipline, benefit from interchange with local and descendant communities through which their deep experience and historical knowledge broaden our base for inference to the best explanations. We address how calling for listening brings up issues of science versus history, focus versus breadth, and neutrality versus advocacy. Listening is much more than speech entering one's ears. Listening, for an anthropological archaeologist, is also perceiving the landscape, close and beyond, feeling the weather, hearing and seeing ambient sounds and activities, tastes of food and smells, tactile sensations of structures, bedding, tools, containers, clothing. Some of these sense receptions are conscious, while some may be stored subliminally, to rise into consciousness when triggered by more

listening or later reflection. In these essays, we hope to illustrate that archaeologists who listen evoke the diverse capacities that make us and the people whose residue we investigate fully human.

History and Science

Ethnographers of science recognize “epistemic cultures . . . the different practices of creating and warranting knowledge in different domains” (Knorr-Cetina 1999:246). This is more than differences between scientific disciplines; within a discipline, one sees national differences and “schools” following leaders’ paradigms. We see the Western intellectual tradition as a broad, persistent epistemic culture valuing formal logic and classifications, authority in written documents, ostensible observation, and rejection of immaterial sources of knowledge. Within this Western tradition, battles raged between the ancients and the moderns, statisticians and empiricists, functionalists and symbolists, with the common limits less noticed. Listening to people living in communities maintaining non-Western epistemic cultures illuminates those seldom-remarked conventional limits. That other societies have their own limits is not the point: listening to these others adds to our knowledge. Our project is to crumble arbitrary limits to archaeologists’ epistemic culture.

Among the fallacies about science that bedevil archaeology are notions that measurement is essential, that statistics reveal relationships, and that replication is the test of validity—all of which militate against recognizing singular occurrences. Regularities are sought, cross-cutting through sites and times, reducing complexity and eliminating particularities. A moment’s reflection leads us to realize that cross-cultural regularities cut out huge amounts of information that potentially has significance, leaving us wondering what of importance was lost. Such elisions may hold great significance for recognizing communities that lived in our sites or for understanding ecological histories that may illuminate climate change and sustainable resource production; differences may be more crucial than regularities. Moreover, hypothesized or discovered regularities often arise, tautologically, from within the Western academic tradition, reinforcing its particular worldview.

Again, one way to crumble such reification is to listen, opening out knowledge to alternative epistemic cultures and their capacity to explain. It is informative that few archaeologists have analyzed their field from an STS (Science, Technology, Society) perspective (exceptions are Kehoe 1998; Patterson 1994).

In *Cultures without Culturalism: The Making of Scientific Knowledge*, Chempla and Keller (2017) describe how researchers usually form communities of practice that share a worldview and premises from which research problems are stated and methods made consonant. In archaeology, such analyses reveal a tight, cordoned-off worldview where the representations and conceptualizations of the Other remain deeply entrenched as a form of distancing, preserving the tenets of the discipline. This epistemic culture of distancing provokes much of what follows in this volume, as we seek ways to open attitudes, nurture a capacity to listen, and work toward a transformed practice.

However, we have some key hurdles to acknowledge on our way to implementing this program. First comes recognition that it is the culture of Cold War America and Britain that projects a conflict between history and science that rejects “culture histories” as worthwhile archaeological goals. Anyone who has been following archaeological history understands that change toward nomological science has come with myriad sacrifices imposed on historical sciences. One of our anthropological ancestors, E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1963:26), captured this conflict when he scathingly remarked:

The concepts of natural system and natural law, modeled on the constructs of the natural sciences, . . . have been responsible for a false scholasticism which has led to one rigid and ambitious formulation after another. . . . Released from these essentially philosophical dogmas [anthropology] can be really empirical and, in the true sense of the word, scientific.

He further noted that some academics have “the feeling that any discipline that does not aim at formulating laws and hence predicting and planning is not worth the labour of a lifetime” (Evans-Pritchard 1963:27). Such hubris was enhanced during the Cold War by the National Science Foundation (NSF) when it became a principal source of funds for archaeology couched in natural science terms, only occasionally deigning to fund proposals intending to examine history and archaeology of local and descendant peoples.

Shifting government funding from NSF dominance toward more support for the National Endowment for the Humanities made history more feasible for archaeologists and conveyed a message that the reductionist approach mimicking the physical sciences is no longer uncritically accepted. Our insistence that we engage with culture histories, particularly as expressed by local interlocutors, uses the methodology of the historical sciences, an approach now widely accepted.