Living and learning on Aboriginal lands: decolonizing archaeology in practice

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The 'doing' of archaeology at any place in the world is an inherently political act. This is recognized in the second statute of the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), which states that the Congress is based on the explicit recognition of the historical and social role, and the political context, of archaeological enquiry, of archaeological organisations, and of archaeological interpretation (WAC 1990). The sociopolitical dimensions of archaeological research perhaps are at their clearest when one is conducting archaeology with Indigenous peoples. In Indigenous archaeology, in particular, it is important to consider how the sociopolitical dimensions of archaeological research influence field procedures, methods of analysis and the selection and presentation of results. Grounded in the cultural constructs and values of Western societies, and with its very genesis in a Western obsession with material objects, the discipline of archaeology has been embedded in, and has perpetuated, the frameworks of colonialism (Kehoe 1998; McGuire 1997; L. Smith 1999; Watkins 2000; also see Wobst, Chapter 2 in this volume).

And yet the world is undergoing a process of decolonization. Throughout the world, poorer countries are seeking the return of archaeological material taken from them by wealthier colonizing countries as part of the ‘spoils’ of colonialism (Greenfield 1989) and Indigenous peoples are demanding greater control over their cultural heritage (Deloria 1995; Isaicon 2003; Richardson 1989; L. Smith 1999; also see Watkins, Chapter 10 in this volume). Throughout the world, the frameworks of colonialism are changing - emerging from, and producing, changes in power relations between colonizers and the colonized. Countries with Indigenous populations are at the forefront of particular types of transformation, at least partly because the impetus for change is coming from within these societies.

A first step in the process of decolonizing archaeology is to obtain some understanding of what colonialism has meant for Indigenous peoples. Colonialism has not been a positive experience for these peoples. In Australia, the colonial era (and this has not passed) has meant structural disempowerment and external control over Indigenous people's daily lives. It has meant having restrictions placed on where you can live, who you can marry, even such things as whether you can have a gun or how many dogs you can own (Smith 2004). It has meant living with the possibility that children of mixed heritage may be taken from you to be schooled in European ways and values, without your consent and without you being told where they have been placed or having a right to visit them (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997). More recently, Indigenous Australians have experienced structural empowerment through legislation which has returned to them control of their traditional lands or which has been aimed at maximizing their participation in the formulation and implementation of the government policies that affect them. As they have gained power, Indigenous Australians are seeking greater control over archaeological research, shared benefits from research and an ethical archaeology to consciously engage with issues of social justice (Isaicon 2003; Smith 1999; also see Isaicon and Ford, Chapter 19 in this volume; Rigney and Worby, Chapter 20 in this volume). As part of this process, archaeologists have been making serious attempts to grapple with these issues (e.g. Layton 1998a, 1989b; Lewis and Rose 1985; McIlvade 1985; Nichols and Andrews 1997; Thomas 2000; Zimmerman 1989).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Australia provides a pertinent example of the processes involved in colonization and decolonization. Developments in the colonial frameworks surrounding the lives of Indigenous Australians can be traced through changes in legislation, which record a movement from gross disempowerment to one of relative empowerment. The legislative frameworks shaping the lives of Indigenous Australians have resulted in - and, more recently, been directed by - their increasing empowerment. This paper explores some implications for archaeological research of the nexus between the frameworks of colonialist attitudes and the research process, linking the practice of archaeology to the social milieu within which research is conducted. The analysis of decolonizing archaeology in practice is based on a case study of research in the Barunga-Wugularr region of the Northern Territory, Australia (Figure 18.1), an area in which Aboriginal people have been subject to the extremes of disempowerment and, more recently, have benefited from the return of control over lands, and subsequent social, cultural and economic empowerment.

The contemporary social and political environment within which archaeological research is conducted in this region is grounded in notions of Indigenous self-determination and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Today, land in this region is part of an Aboriginal Lands Trust and legal access to the region is controlled by Aboriginal people. Archaeological research is conducted within a spirit of collaboration with the senior traditional owner and senior custodians and many aspects of this research are controlled by them. In this paper we argue that their control over research design, publication and the dissemination of results is an essential element in the decolonization of archaeology in practice.

THE CHANGING FRAMEWORKS OF COLONIALISM

The framework of colonialism in Australia can be monitored through an analysis of changes in legislation, much of it racially based, aimed specifically at ordering, or impacting on, the lives of Indigenous Australians. While the historical overview
outlined here is mainly framed by events in the Northern Territory, it is also applicable to developments occurring in Australia as a whole. The general historical movement is one from protection for a ‘dying’ race, through the notion of assimilation to the wider society, to the current movement towards self-determination and national reconciliation. Researchers working within these changing social milieus have worked on the basis of assumptions that were grounded in the values of their times and, as such, research practices have undergone significant changes through time.

The British colonization of Australia was based on the notion of terra nullius which asserted that the land was effectively without owners. This view was adopted because the land was not under a system of ownership which was understandable to Europeans and because natural resources did not seem to be effectively exploited or managed by Aboriginal people, according to European practices. This doctrine was taken as extinguishing native title to land and was the legal basis for the British acquisition of Australian land (Reynolds 1989: 67–8). In effect, settlement became sovereignty (Coe 1992: 71).

The policies of early colonial administrations were explicitly interventionist, and wielded extensive control over the daily lives of Aboriginal people. In the Northern Territory, the main legislation framing the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people was the Aboriginals Ordinance 1918–1947 (NT) Act. This Act established a Chief Protector of Aboriginals, to be appointed by the Administrator, whose duty was to ‘exercise a general supervision and care over all matters affecting the welfare of Aboriginals and to protect them against immorality, injustice, impositions and fraud’. These policies were based on the assumption that traditional Aboriginal belief systems and social structures would die out and that younger generations would assimilate into European society. For much of the twentieth century such policies were implemented with the conscious intention of undermining traditional Aboriginal social structures, initially in order to achieve general community compliance and later in order to facilitate the assimilation of younger generations of Aborigines into mainstream European society. At this time, researchers felt a responsibility to ‘rescue’ information that would surely be lost forever if it wasn’t recorded in a Western system of knowledge. The primary imperative for scholars working with Indigenous people was to conduct a kind of ‘salvage’ anthropology or archaeology.

During the 1960s and 1970s the legislative setting that framed Aboriginal people’s lives in the Northern Territory underwent major changes. The main legislative restrictions discriminating against Aboriginal people on the basis of race were eased during 1964. The passage in the Northern Territory of the Social Welfare Ordinance 1964 coincided with the repealing of the Welfare Ordinance 1953 and around this time many other racially based ordinances were amended to omit specific reference to Aboriginals. These included the Firearms Ordinance, Licensing Ordinance, Poisons Ordinance, Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, Methylated Spirits Ordinance, intestate Wards Ordinance, Native Constabulary Ordinance and Registration of Dogs Ordinance. All of these Ordinances were racially based and aimed at controlling specific aspects of Aboriginal people’s behaviour.
In 1962 Aboriginal people were given the right to vote and in 1967 they were recognized as citizens and, for the first time, counted in the national census. An impetus for radical change came at the federal level with the election in 1972 of a left-wing Labor government. This government immediately created a Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and in 1974 the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Jim Cairns, summarized departmental policy as one which sought to "make equality a reality for Aboriginal Australians" through acting "in the closest consultation with Aboriginal communities and individuals" (Lovegrove c. 1978: 11–12). The focus changed from the care and protection of Aboriginal people to a recognition of their rights to manage their own affairs and determine their own futures. A fundamental difference between this and earlier periods is that the new policies were based on the premise that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people were equal, though different, and hence on recognition of the rights and abilities of Aboriginal people to determine their own futures, which could either converge or diverge with European trends. During this period, the focus of research in Indigenous studies was still on "salvage", but researchers had to interface with the growing political consciousness of Aboriginal peoples, and local groups began to identity with a national Aboriginal identity (Maddock 1971).

Despite these landmark reforms in legislation, assimilation policies in the Northern Territory remained essentially unchallenged until the 1970s. The desire to eradicate some of the inequities of previous eras and to help Aboriginal people achieve 'equality' were factors in the passage of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976, in which responsibility for the administration of Aboriginal reserves, some of them millions of acres, moved from the hands of government to that of Aboriginal groups. The enactment of this legislation resulted in Aboriginal reserves, such as those of Banyill (now Barunga) and Beswick Station (now Wugularr), reverting to Aboriginal ownership. The Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 remains the most significant such legislation in Australia, and returned about half of the Northern Territory to traditional ownership.

A major development in the structural empowerment, and consequent politicization, of Indigenous Australians occurred with the passage of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989 (Cwlth). This act explicitly recognized 'the past dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and was aimed at providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a greater degree of self-management and self-determination. Its specific aims were:

- to ensure maximum participation of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders in the formulation and implementation of government policies that affect them;
- to promote the development of self-managed and self-sufficient Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders;
- to further the economic, social and cultural development of Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders;
- to ensure coordination in the formulation and implementation of policy;
- to ensure Aboriginal persons and Torres Strait Islanders are necessarily amongst the beneficiaries of Commonwealth government policies and programs; and
- to assert Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and responsibilities over their own affairs and over matters of particular importance to them.

The broad direction taken by the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was reinforced by the passage of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991 (Cwlth). This marked the formal beginning of the reconciliation process within Australia. Two of the Council's main tasks were to promote a deeper understanding by all Australians of the history, cultures, past dispossession and continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and the need to redress that disadvantage, and to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider Australian community with the view of ascertaining how reconciliation might best be obtained (Tickner 1992: 22).

This general approach was reinforced in 1992 when the 'Mabo' decision in the High Court of Australia rejected the doctrine of terra nullius, providing formal recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people held a form of native title over the lands of Australia at the time of contact with Europeans. The importance of native title to Indigenous empowerment, and the core place of Indigenous cultural heritage in this, is apparent in the following statement:

Native title is important for the access that it potentially provides to ancestral lands and territories. This access is fundamental for the practice of culture, and to ensure the transmission of culture to future generations. Matters of concern include caring for graves and burial sites, the ability to protect sacred sites, undertaking ceremonies, hunting, fishing and camping, and educating children about the land and its significance. As well, the ability to control and benefit from developments on native title land is crucial to cultural survival. It also impacts on the ability to maintain a satisfactory standard of living, including good nutrition standards by access to traditional foods.

The Mabo decision was important also because it recognized customary laws and traditions as a source of Australian law, thus providing a major contribution to the social, cultural and economic empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (see Commonwealth of Australia 1993: 9).

More recently, the movement has been towards self-determination and national reconciliation, an integral component of which has been the structural and legislative empowerment of Indigenous people. This has been supplemented by the 'outstation' or 'homelands' movement, in which people return to live on their clan lands, which arose during the 1980s and 1990s. This became a major way through which Aboriginal people were able to reclaim traditional lands. In 1992, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and Minister Assisting...
the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Robert Tickner (1992: 23), commented that 'the process of reconciliation aims to transform relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people'. Established within this era of reconciliation, relations between Aboriginal people and field researchers, including the way in which archaeology is practised in Australia, are also under transformation.

For researchers in Indigenous studies, the effects were reflected not only in how they envisaged their positions but also in the expectations that Indigenous peoples brought to the research endeavour. As they gained control over much of their traditional lands, Aboriginal people sought greater control in other areas of their lives. In terms of Indigenous studies, they began to seek new levels of control over research and to expect benefits for Indigenous people as well as researchers. Indigenous people began calling for a more ethical archaeology, one which recognizes the primacy of Indigenous interests in Indigenous cultural heritage (see for example Rigney 1997; also see Rigney and Worby, Chapter 20 in this volume). The political voice of Indigenous Australians is heard directly through web sites such as that of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), as in the following critique of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Bill 1998:

And there are the obvious cultural considerations. First is the fact that there may be customary law restrictions on information and that, despite the intentions of the Act to protect indigenous heritage, disclosure will often constitute a form of desecration. Second is the observation that indigenous people are the only people able to speak about their cultural heritage values and to determine issues of significance and threat. The views of anthropologists or archaeologists, let alone developers and other 'interested persons', will be largely irrelevant.

(ATSIC 2002b)

These are major changes in the social and political environments within which Indigenous studies are conducted. The moral basis for such changes in colonial relations is expressed by the National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody:

Non-Aboriginal people must face the fact that for a very long time we have proceeded on the basis that Aboriginal people were inferior, were unable to make decisions affecting themselves, that we knew what was best for them... This is true both for public officials and for private persons. It is an attitude which is very deeply rooted by Aboriginal people, as would indeed be by us if roles were reversed... it is important that non-Aboriginal people not try and impose on Aboriginal people their non-Aboriginal idea of what is good, wise or moral but to let Aboriginal people feel their own way... the whole thrust of this report is directed towards empowerment of Aboriginal society on the basis of

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their deeply held desire, their demonstrated capacity, their democratic right to exercise, according to circumstances, maximum control over their own lives and that of their communities.

(Johnson 1991: 20-3)

ABORIGINAL CONTROL OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE

If colonialism has meant living within a framework in which Europeans assume control, what kind of shape might a decolonized archaeology take? Basic to this is working within a framework in which Indigenous people exercise substantial power; a framework in which the research process and the outcomes of archaeological enquiry are genuinely negotiated between researcher and community. Fundamentally, the decolonization of archaeology in practice involves a reassessment of power relations between archaeologists and Indigenous peoples. The WAC has had a major role in this process. The fifth principle of the Code of Ethics of the World Archaeological Congress states that 'Indigenous [sic] cultural heritage rightfully belongs to the descendants of that heritage'. Acceptance of this view leads to two important conclusions. The first of these is that Indigenous people's interests, experiences and knowledge must be at the center of archaeological research methods and the construction of their identity by others. The second is that the results of research cannot be owned by the archaeologist alone but are the negotiated and shared intellectual property of Indigenous peoples and archaeologists. This change in theoretical positioning leads to a different kind of archaeological practice, one in which Indigenous peoples have significant input and control.

The methods used in our research in the Barunga-Wagurarr region of the Northern Territory are outlined here as an example of the practices that are emerging as part of the decolonization of archaeology. The methods outlined here were developed when Claire Smith was conducting her doctoral research (Smith 1994) under the scrutiny and guidance of Aboriginal elders. While there is considerable variation in the procedures followed by individual researchers, to a certain extent the procedures outlined here reflect how archaeology is practised in areas of Australia which are controlled by Aboriginal people and, less formally, in other areas of the country as well. The major issues that need to be addressed are:

- obtaining permission to conduct research;
- the 'selection' of Aboriginal colleagues;
- access to information and sites;
- Aboriginal censorship of published material;
- the dissemination of results.
Obtaining permission

One of the biggest changes that has occurred within the colonial framework has been the process involved in obtaining permission to work with Aboriginal communities. In the past, researchers obtained permission to work with remote Aboriginal communities through application to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. This application was assessed by the predominately, or solely, non-Aboriginal members of the department. In effect, permission was negotiated between non-Aboriginal people, without provision or a perceived need for direct consultation with the Aboriginal community involved. Of course, once the researcher arrived at the community he or she had to negotiate their personal relationships with the Aboriginal community as a whole, especially with the people with whom they wished to work.

Today, permission for extended fieldwork in remote Aboriginal communities must be obtained directly from Aboriginal groups or organizations. This is not an easy task. Our own experience involved, first, a preliminary visit of ten days to the community in the company of our son in 1990, the year before we wished to conduct research. This visit gave people a chance to meet us and decide if they wanted to have us living in their community for a full year. During this period, Phyllis Winyjorrorc, the senior traditional owner, gave us permission to return to conduct fieldwork the following year. We had navigated the first, and fundamental, rung of authority.

After we returned to our usual home, we submitted a formal application to Barunga Council, requesting permission for extended fieldwork. After about six months of trepidation and no written response to my application, Claire Smith phoned Cyril McCartney, the Council President, and he gave us verbal approval to conduct the research. Good, we had permission from the Council.

However, there were more levels of scrutiny to pass. Some months after our arrival at Barunga, we were surprised to learn that our presence was raised at a community meeting. This meeting provided an opportunity for any member of the community to have a public voice and thus influence over our presence there. While our presence had been approved unanimously, we were shocked to realize that in Aboriginal people’s eyes, the original permission to conduct the research had only been permission in principle, subject to our acceptance by the community. This incident shows that the system is structured in such a way that people who are not in formal positions of power can have a public voice and thus influence over such issues. Good, we had permission from the senior traditional owner, the Council, and the people.

But there was more. While in the field we travelled often to central Arnhem Land. Before we made our first trip we were assured by several Barunga people that our permission to stay at Barunga also covered visits to central Arnhem Land in the company of traditional owners. In April 1992 I discovered (from a non-Aboriginal person) that, in addition, we should have obtained a permit from the Northern Lands Council (NLC). We approached Cyril McCartney, who said that such a permit was unnecessary. However, we pursued the matter and the Town Clerk, Robert Lee, arranged for an NLC permit to be issued and backdated to the time of our arrival. Subsequently, we found out that the initial advice given to us was correct and that verbal permission can be given by traditional owners, though people are encouraged to go through the formal application process. The important point is that the NLC was another level of authority with which we had to negotiate and that for a long time we were not directed towards this. People at one level of authority will not necessarily direct the researcher to people at another level.

The main point here is that there are four levels of authority with which a researcher in the Barunga-Wugularr region has to negotiate entry – traditional owner and senior custodians, the general population, the Community Government Council and the Northern Lands Council. For the committed researcher, the Jawoyn Association is a fifth point of contact, though it does not have the power to formally ratify research in this region. The contemporary process of obtaining permission to work on Aboriginal land is one in which the researcher has to negotiate with many levels of authority, all of which are composed of Aboriginal people. The length of time involved and the intricacies of the process of negotiating access to Aboriginal lands empower Aboriginal people since they demonstrate to the researcher the fact that he or she does not have an intrinsic or irrevocable right of residence. Permits are issued by, and can be revoked by, Aboriginal people.

The ‘selection’ of Aboriginal colleagues

A substantial literature exists concerning the ‘selection’ and reliability of ‘informants’ in field-based research (e.g. Becker and Geer 1986: 241–2; Bernard 1988: 179; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 116–17). Generally, this relates to the ideal qualities of such people – reflective, articulate and possessing formal or informal power – especially in terms of ‘key informants’ (e.g. Burgess 1984: 73–5; 1986: 114). However, much of this literature does not appear to recognize the intrinsic power that individuals and social structures within the research community may have over the choice of colleagues. Our own experience, for example, involved the people with whom we might work being selected by the senior traditional owner, Phyllis Winyjorrorc. Our first day of fieldwork was spent with Phyllis, visiting each of the outlying population centres, Beswick (now known as Wugularr) and Eva Valley (now known as Manyallaluk), and being introduced to the appropriate people with whom we might/should work (e.g. Figure 18.2).

Apart from this, the areas of interest of individual researchers and their specific position in society (in terms of age, gender, marital status) predetermine them to work with individuals of comparable interests and status. These relationships have been true, though it may not have been recognized. For instance, the early researchers in this region – A.P. Elkin, N.W.G. Macintosh and Ken Maddock – were all men, generally interested in male ceremonial activity, and they all worked
in the camp with mothers and children (Hamilton 1981: 1–12). Luke Taylor and Paul Tacon, both single men interested in bark painting and rock art, worked primarily with senior Aboriginal male artists in the western Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory (see Taylor 1987: v; Tacon 1988: xiii). The general point here is that, even though it may not be recognized by researchers themselves, there exists a process whereby Aboriginal people allocate researchers to the social group which is most appropriate to their own social position, particularly in terms of age and gender, as well as their research interests. It follows that the types of information to which a researcher will have access will vary according to these factors and therefore each researcher will have understandings of the society which are peculiar to herself/himself. This acts not just at the fairly coarse-grained level of gender but also at the fine-grained level of the individual. A woman and a man working separately within the same community will have different access to information and because of this they will develop different understandings of that community, and so will two women or two men of different ages, social positions or primary research interests. Research methods and results are necessarily situated in the unique position of the individual researcher. The implications for archaeological and anthropological meta-narratives are obvious. Each researcher will collect data specific to their social relationships – and the stories that researchers create will differ according to the data they have collected, based on these relationships. This means that different data sets and different archaeological stories can be produced from the same community at the same time, according to the specific social relationships of individual researchers.

Access to sites and knowledge

Indigenous people have always had a level of control over archaeological and anthropological research. In the past this control has been exerted primarily through restricting access to Aboriginal sites and knowledge. For example, all researchers in the Barunga region have recorded that they visited sites in the company of local Aboriginal people. This meant that while Barunga people were assisting researchers in locating particular sites they also had the power to direct them away from other sites. There are many secret/sacred sites in the region to which access is restricted or denied. It is difficult to determine precisely the degree to which this power was implemented in the past but it is certainly well used in the present. Today, researchers in this region are only allowed access to public sites.

There is a remarkable continuity in the Aboriginal people involved. A.P. Elkin (1952, 1972) and N.W.G. Macintosh (1951, 1952, 1977) were accompanied by Charlie Lamjerooj, Charlie Mangga and Joli Laiwongu. Ken Maddock (1969, 1971) and Graeme Davidson (1981), in their respective research, were accompanied by Lamjerooj's son, Gordon Bolumbaru, and Joli Laiwongu's soas, including Jack Chadum. Maddock was also accompanied by Peter Manabarri. More recently,
Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey worked with Phyllis Wijnjoroc, the daughter of Lamjaroc and sister of Bulumbur, Peter Manaburu, Joli Laiwongu and Jack Chadum, among others (Merlan and Rumsey 1982). We also visited sites with this latter group of people as well as with Lily Willika, the widow of Charlie Mangga and the deceased wife of Peter Manaburu, and with Jimmy Wesan, younger brother to Joli Laiwongu, and Jimmy’s wife, Glen Wesan. This continuity shows that the major responsibility for country, and the associated level of power and knowledge, have remained in the hands of relatively few families. It is clear that for as long as there have been researchers in the region Aboriginal people have had a level of control over those researchers’ access to information. For example, Macintosh (1977: 191) records that when he and Elkin visited the Barunga region together in the late 1940s they were given different information on the paintings at the Beavers Creek cave rock art site by the senior traditional owner, Charlie Lamjaroc. Macintosh concludes: 

Retrospectively I came to think of these two sets of explanations as being in the first instance a lay interpretation sufficiently satisfactory in his opinion for me. In the second instance an erudite interpretation for Professor Elkin, going much beyond the first, and appropriate to the depth of knowledge and length of association and understanding between Landered [sic] and Elkin, on matters of Aboriginal inner lore.

This incident shows that information was given out differentially according to the specific relationship between the researcher and the individuals with whom he or she worked. Even though they were working with the same person in the same place at the same time Elkin and Macintosh were given substantially different stories. It is likely that a third researcher would have been given a different explanation again. This does not mean that one story is necessarily correct and another incorrect. They may all be true, each one accessing or emphasizing different aspects of a multi-faceted central story, which itself is not a single overarching truth. The point here is that Barunga people clearly had the ability to control Elkin and Macintosh’s research through restricting their access to information.

However, both Elkin and Macintosh were given secret information, some of which they subsequently published (discussed below), while Maddocks’s (1969) doctoral research focused on a restricted male ceremony, the Jeanba. Aboriginal people have ‘closed up’ on this information and they explicitly inform new researchers that they will not be given any secret knowledge. There would also be the problem for a new researcher of recognizing the information as being secret, by the context of its telling, or its full importance in the wider cultural context. This needs to be acknowledged as a limitation of any study undertaken in this region.

In many ways it is unwise to seek secret information. First, secret information is virtually useless from a research point of view as it can not be referred to in published works (see below). Second, there is a distinct burden involved in keeping other people’s secrets. Third, it is important to establish comfortable relationships with the people and there will be a constant potential for conflict if the researcher particularly enlightening comment was made to us by Peter Manaburu when he did those old men give him that story? Maybe they thought he was like a policeman. This response illustrates that Peter understands the white-fellow law knows the difference when speaking with researchers.

One problem faced either consciously or unconsciously by researchers in Aboriginal communities is that some fundamental field procedures are antithetical to the values and mores of Indigenous Australians. Ah Kit (in Burke et al. 1994:17) states that:

In fact, research – ‘the diligent and systematic inquiry’ of the dictionary definition – runs against the way our society has worked in the past. It is considered rude to pry into other people’s secrets, or demand direct answers, or draw your own conclusions despite the evidence of what people say to you.

A particularly illuminating aspect of this statement is that Ah Kit considers what people say to be evidence, rather than mere statement. He implies, this is in and draw one’s own conclusions. There are many such differences in the behaviour of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It should be clear, therefore, that to learn what constitutes appropriate behaviour for somebody in their position, to some extent, this will be determined by the researcher’s age, gender, personal qualities and so forth.

One effective way in which Barunga people protect secret information from people who have no right to that information is to simply censure that it exists. Barunga, the right to knowledge has to be earned, primarily through demonstrating responsibility. This is in contrast to the Western scientific tradition of knowledge people have an inalienable right to learn all that they are capable of learning.

The main point here is that Aboriginal people always had a capacity to control anthropological and archaeological research through restricting researchers’ access to information. The major change is in the way they have chosen to use this power. Today, they are more cautious about the information that they give to the researcher and they are particularly careful of secret knowledge. In part, this is because they are more informed about how this knowledge may be disseminated. A related development concerns the control they now seek over the
Aboriginal control over published material

In the past, Aboriginal people had virtually no control over the material that was published on their society. This is because both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people had difficulty truly understanding each other’s methods of disseminating and curating information. Many Aboriginal people, especially those from remote areas, could not read and did not have physical access to published material. They did not know what happened to the information once the researcher took it out of the community and, in any case, they trusted the researcher to curate the knowledge appropriately by their own standards. One problem here is that the researcher was educated in an entirely different tradition of knowledge and may not have been fully aware of Aboriginal people’s expectations, or to have picked up on subtle cues that indicated information should be treated in a confidential manner. For example, the context of two men alone talking together about cultural matters could have been considered by Aboriginal people to be sufficient to indicate that information was secret, but this message may not be understood by researchers with a European background, unless it was actually articulated (i.e. they were told ‘This is secret!’).

In addition, the early research was conducted during a time in which Aboriginal people were expected to either die out or be integrated in Euro-Australian society. Some people during that period felt that by publishing important (i.e. secret) information they were curtailing it properly for future generations of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This was based on the assumption that the information would be lost within the Aboriginal system of knowledge, which was thought to be undergoing irretrievable breakdown. The implication here is that as Aboriginal people become more literate in English, the repercussions for researchers become more relevant as non-approved publication of research results can bring restrictions, or embargoes, on research in the future. This could result in the abrupt interruption of some career paths.

One of the major developments that has occurred over the last decade or so is that of Aboriginal people demanding control over the publication of material concerning their culture. This has generally focused on the publication of secret information (e.g. ATSIC 2002b). Thus one of the main issues facing contemporary archaeologies working in Aboriginal Australia is that of Aboriginal control over research. This has both simple and complex dimensions, depending on the degree to which the particular form of control is determined by Indigenous people or the researcher. While it is a relatively simple matter for researchers to accept that Indigenous people control their research through withholding certain types of information, the issue becomes more complicated when it enters the realm of intellectual property rights, especially those relating to dissemination of the results of research. Kelley (1981: 436, quoted in Ferguson 1984: 232) discusses this in his assessment of the Zuni Archaeology Program in the American southwest:

Are we as professionals to accept without question that there are archaeological problems that must remain mysteries because the [Indigenous]
used should be discussed within this partnership. The analogy that fits here is that of making a pie, with different people supplying their own special ingredients (skills and knowledge). Since the outcome is something that neither group could have produced by themselves, it seems obvious that it must be owned jointly by both.

If material is jointly owned, then it follows that it is also subject to joint control – and this is the point where many archaeologists, particularly in the USA, become wary. The issue of Indigenous control over research is a ‘hot’ topic in archaeological circles, bringing up the spectre that aspects of the research results may be suppressed, and that the results that are published may not fully reflect what was discovered. There are three points we’d like to make here: first, all research is subject to certain limitations and, from this perspective, Indigenous control is simply another limitation that needs to be acknowledged; second, the fact that research results are skewed needs to be acknowledged, and this does not go hand-in-hand with presenting false results; third, in our opinion the process of decolonization is more important than any specific research result.

Apart from access to sites and restrictions on the information that is given to us, our research in the Barunga region is controlled by people discouraging us from reading early publications that contained secret information about their culture. However, self-censorship in response to cultural awareness of Indigenous values is rarely a simple issue for researchers. In our own case, we were naturally concerned that these early articles could shed light on questions that we examined. Apart from this, conducting a thorough literature review of previous research in the study region is seen as fundamental to the academic process. The real problem as we see it is that behaviour which is ethical by Aboriginal standards can sometimes be considered unethical by the standards of the research community.

Aboriginal people also have direct control over the content of the publications arising from our research. This control is part of a process whereby it is necessary to obtain formal permission for the analysis and presentation of results. Senior people are much more concerned about the use of information through photographs or other visual media such as videos, than they are about the dissemination of written material. This concern is due at least partly to the fact that photographs and other visual material can be recognized immediately by other senior Aboriginal people. Written material is less worrying since few senior Aboriginal people in this region can read. This is not to say that senior people are not concerned about the use of sensitive information in books or other publications. Clearly they are, as discussed earlier. The point is simply that visual material is more broadly accessible to the broader Aboriginal community than written material.

The dissemination of results

A recurring criticism voiced by Indigenous people is that researchers do not involve them in the distribution of research results (e.g. Everett 1990; Richardson 1989a; Willmott 1986). A problem for Indigenous people, as Price (1983: 21) remarks, is that the researcher’s necessarily selective written account of a system of knowledge, especially if it is supported by archival evidence to which people living ‘canonically’ or “authorized” version, even by individuals from within that society, should have control over, or, at the very least, involvement in the formulation and dissemination of results: ‘Aboriginal people control, as people, surely have the right to be involved in what is said about them, how it is said and what research is carried out.’

Over the last decade or so, we have attended conferences with Barunga people in Armidale and Cairns in Australia, as well as in Cape Town, Washington, DC, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Sometimes the presentations have been joint, sometimes they have been given by one of us, sometimes solely by Aboriginal people. However, the successful undertaking of such collaborations is never simple. If researchers are working with people from a remote area, it can involve helping them get birth certificates and passports, as well as making certain that there are sufficient funds to cover their travel costs and daily expenses. When archaeologists are at a conference, it means looking after people, as they are operating in an involve sacrifices such as going to the beach or a market, rather than a conference session or meeting – and sometimes this does feel like a sacrifice. But the most difficult part is that of helping people to succeed in a presentation environment that is shaped by the rules and cultural assumptions of the academy. Giving for people who are operating outside their normal cultural environment. For Aboriginal people, especially people from isolated communities, there can be considerable stress involved in leaving their lands, in being judged by others in a formal situation and in wanting to succeed within the structures of another culture. For the researcher, there is a responsibility to make certain that presentations are structured in such a way that Aboriginal people are able to present their ideas successfully. In our experience the environments that work best for people from remote communities are those that are closest to Aboriginal forms – small rooms and small groups in which it is possible to make contact with individuals. For us, the presentation works best where speakers and audience sit on the floor. This is a convention for Aboriginal people who are talking about important ‘business’, especially if rules or laws are being articulated.

So what are the benefits of having Aboriginal people involved in the dissemination of research results? For the discipline, the obvious benefit is that of the audience having direct access to Aboriginal views. Instead of asking the researcher ‘What does Dolly think about . . . ?’, as we heard on one conference presentation, an interpretive lens of the researcher. In 1992 we helped organize the attendance of Barunga people at two conferences (e.g. Figure 18.3). At one of these, John Ah Kit, Robert Lee and Cyril McCartney presented a paper that called for researchers to be more aware of Aboriginal people’s desire to have control over the dissemination of research results (Ah Kit et al. 1992). This paper provoked much
discussion. Moreover, conference involvement gave people greater knowledge of the research process. For instance, Peter Manabaru’s experience of the Second Congress of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA), held in Cairns, Australia in September 1992, gave him an understanding of the eclectic nature of conference audiences. This change in his understanding was highlighted by an incident in which he revoked permission for Claire Smith to show a particular image as part of her presentation. Certainly, one value of the Cairns conference to Barunga people was that it illustrated to them what researchers actually do when they leave communities: they ‘go away and talk about them’.

DISCUSSION

The decolonization of Indigenous archaeology in practice involves a fundamental reassessment of the roles, rights and responsibilities of both archaeologists and Indigenous peoples. Given that differential access to power is at the core of colonial relations, and the research practices that emerge from these relations, it follows that the decolonization of Indigenous archaeology has to involve a change in power relations. In the field, it is producing a change in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and archaeologists from that of informants and researchers to that of colleagues, who share responsibility for the results of research and the shaping of the discipline. A fair result of this realignment of power can only be achieved if it is based on respect by both groups for the achievements and abilities of each — and on the solid appreciation of each group for its own skills and endeavours. The outcome will be an archaeology that is shaped by the goals, rights and timetables of both Indigenous peoples and archaeologists.

The developments in colonial frameworks outlined in this paper can be linked to changes in the methods adopted by researchers working in Aboriginal communities. We have tried to give the reader some feeling for the experience of living and learning in the Barunga-Wugularr region of Australia in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and some insight into the practices that we developed as ethical archaeology under the guidance of Aboriginal elders. We have shown how the involvement of these elders in our research has informed aspects of our data collection, analysis and presentation. In archaeology generally, and in ethnoarchaeology particularly, an understanding of the dynamics of the contemporary sociopolitical context is fundamental to an understanding of why data are collected in particular ways, how the data are constituted and the perspective from which they are analysed. This grounds methods and the results of research in their broader sociopolitical and interpretative context. We all work within the social milieu of our time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Peter Manabaru, Paddy Babu, Lilly Willika, Daisy Boudik, Phyllis Wynjorroc, Jimmy Wesan and Glen Wesan for teaching us about the right way to conduct research on their lands. Phyllis Wynjorroc, in particular, gave us the task of teaching these principles to non-Aboriginal people. Conversations with Daryle Rigney, Lester Rigney, Martin Wobst and Larry Zimmerman helped us develop our ideas in a wider context. Heather Burke, Tracey Treloar and Martin Wobst kindly commented on a draft of this paper.

NOTES

1 In this paper we use the term ‘Indigenous’ when referring to Indigenous peoples generally, and ‘Aboriginal’ when referring to Australian Aboriginal people within a historic context or to people from the Barunga-Wugularr region. ‘Indigenous’ is more of a global or national political construct, while ‘Aboriginal’ is the way in which people describe themselves in terms of language group - Jawoyn, Ngalikan, Mirdi and so forth.
2 These are highly mobile communities in which people travel extensively throughout the region to see family, and for meetings and ceremonies. When referring to people who encompass people from the communities of Barunga, Wugularr, Manyallaluk, Westmak and Galin Golin, as well as the outstations that have been established in the last 15 years so that people could return to live on their traditional lands.
3 Obviously, this is not true for all of Australia. Literacy levels in this region are particularly low, partly because teaching is undertaken primarily in English, which is not the first language of Aboriginal children in the region.
REFERENCES


Davidson, I. (1991) 'Notes for a code of ethics for Australian archaeologists working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage', Australian Archaeology 32: 61-64.


