

ARCHAEOLOGY AND CONFLICT: QUESTIONS FOR SCIENTIFIC ORGANIZATIONS

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has placed increasing emphasis on engaging with and protecting of the interests of subjects. The Archaeology Division (AD) is one of main sections of the association; recently AD members have been active in two internationally significant instances of conflict, referred to here as the Yaqui repatriation and the Honduran coup. In each, archaeologists took public steps that may set directions for future action, and which permit reflection on how scientific organizations may best extend the principle of engagement to include heritage protection.

During his 1902 field work in northern Mexico, Aleš Hrdlicka conducted excavations in Totoate, Jalisco, and collected human skulls from two sites of political killings in the Yaqui territory of Sonora. The archaeological excavations are incidental here, except as they reinforce Hrdlicka's connection with archaeology. In search of skeletal material for craniometric comparisons, Hrdlicka came upon a Yaqui individual in Torim, Sonora, whom Mexican forces had hanged without trial in retribution for a murder. Seeing that the body was not removed after several days, he collected "the first skull of a full-blooded Yaqui" [\[1\]](#) for his project. Hrdlicka made collections at a second site in the Sierra Mazatan, where soldiers had killed 78 unarmed men, 26 women and 20 children in a political reprisal. He exported the skulls to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH).

A century later, archaeologists J. Andrew Darling, Randall McGuire, and Ventura Perez, working with Yaqui leaders in Mexico and the U.S., the Gila River Indian Community, and Mexican historian Raquel Padilla and linguist José Luis Moctezuma, initiated a complex international repatriation. In 2009, the AMNH, in collaboration with the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), returned Hrdlicka's collections to the Yaqui community. The process was fraught with legal issues, as

explained by the collaborators in forthcoming publications. These issues resolved, the Yaqui community welcomed the remains back as long-lost community members. With the assistance of Darling, Perez, and Robert Valencia, Vice-Chairman for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, the Yaqui leadership allowed young students from the school to visit with the remains and to learn of their demise. Ultimately, the Tribe gave them an emotional reburial. The story made front-page news in *Indian Country Today* [2]. As stated by Darling, the original field work was in effect "undone".

The second case is equally complicated, and some do not consider it yet resolved. On June 28, 2009, Honduran president Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed from office during a widely contested regime change. Zelaya had proposed a referendum on support for a new constitutional assembly. Although the Honduran Supreme Court questioned its legality, Zelaya proceeded and military officers arrested Zelaya and flew him to Costa Rica against his will. Congress voted to remove Zelaya and replace him with its leader, Roberto Micheletti, who promptly instituted curfews and other measures to discourage resistance. Opponents of the regime change emphasized the illegality of Congress's actions while supporters emphasized the illegality of the president's approach to reform. Although essentially all nations denounced the coup, the replacement regime held new elections with "broad participation" (also questioned by opponents), installing yet another president.

The new regime replaced the Minister of Culture, who eventually replaced the Director of the National Institute of History. It defined new priorities emphasizing the Maya site of Copan. Archaeologists became divided along lines similar to those of Honduran politics itself, while the cancellation of projects left some without access to crucial collections and records. Opponents of the new regime argued that the director was removed without cause and that his replacement lacked adequate qualifications. Within the AD, scholar-opponents of the coup appealed to the AD to denounce the actions; a letter was drafted but did not receive the approval of the AAA Executive Board, which found that it had insufficient knowledge of foreign politics to render judgment. This view was colored by protests from other interested archaeologists who argued that the new appointee was in fact qualified and that intervention was unwelcome. The scholar-opponents then successfully proposed a resolution from the

membership of the AAA (made up predominantly of sociocultural anthropologists) denouncing the coup.

Can such cases guide scientific organizations in discerning principles for constructive future action when caring for heritage in cases of conflict? They have in common the extreme delicacy of protecting the heritage of distant others. Clearly extensive consultation with the affected populations as well as amongst archaeologists is one key to finding a right course of action. Such consultation in the Yaqui repatriation resulted in peace-building action that brings past practices into line with today's valuation of descendant communities. Scholars in that case were unified and developed a pathbreaking model. In the Honduran coup on the other hand, archaeologists diverged in parallel with different affected populations. In retrospect archaeologists in leadership positions in the AAA should have consulted more widely. Gaining consensus is difficult, and perhaps impossible if guiding principles are not identified in advance.

[1] A. Hrdlicka, *American Anthropologist* 6, 51 (1904).

[2] G. C. Toensing, "107 years later: Yaqui warriors' remains returned," *Indian Country Today*, December 9, 2009.

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