

PREHISTORIC ETHICS

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I would like to thank the editors of *Current Swedish Archaeology* for inviting me to comment upon and discuss Liv Nilsson Stutz's keynote paper, which in a thought-provoking way addresses key questions everyone working with death, burials and archaeology should be concerned with. I will primarily discuss the last but also the least elaborated point Nilsson Stutz tackles, namely the ethical challenges, and how it relates to the archaeology of death and trans-disciplinarity, but also how a different focus on ethics may contribute new insights into the past itself.

Anyone who has work ethnographically with death immediately faces ethical challenges. As Nigel Barley remarked in *Dancing on the Grave*: “in Africa, my constant presence at funerals was rapidly noted. ‘You are like a vulture’, one man remarked coolly. ‘I see you climbing the hills and I know someone else must have gone’” (Barley 1995:13). This short quotation points to a central aspect with regard to death, and studying death. Death is social and primarily the realm of the descendants, and research is an intrusion in one way or another. Although archaeologists study dead material from the past, similar processes are involved when contemporary groups (indigenous, marginalized, religious etc.) claim a privileged access and rights to the archaeological remains, and as Nils-

son Stutz points out, this is also often seen as a matter of social justice and human rights and hence a serious concern.

Inevitably ethics is rightly and always in plural; there can never be one singular ethical approach and one can hardly expect consensus agreements in all matters at all times. Importantly, an ethical approach (if used in the singular) is a continuing and ongoing discourse where different perspectives are discussed on an equal basis, but also important, disagreements are not necessarily unethical. Moreover, plurality in interpretations and engagements has to be expected, since, as *Oxford Dictionaries* (2016) define ethics, it is the “Moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity.” Not only will people’s perceptions and even jobs differ (figure 1), but there are different cultural and religious traditions in the past and the present, and on whose standards should one judge ethical practices? I will try to exemplify what I mean by this and how an archaeology of death as a scientific discipline may create a partly independent space for interpretations.

At the outset, there are at least two challenges. On the one hand, archaeologists’ approaches to death and the dead body are often strongly



Figure 1. Going home after a day’s work. The catacombs in Paris, 2009. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

flavoured, although in most cases implicitly, by a Christian cultural ethics; the integrity of the dead, the dead body as a unity or entity, and death as an end. On the other hand, given the social role of death, burial remains are perhaps the strongest links from the past to the present legitimizing social rights and territorial claims for nation states or minority groups alike.

Starting with the latter aspect first, today's and the future's social, political and territorial boundaries hardly and rarely fit with the past. Ernest Gellner once pointed out that "Primitive man has lived twice: once in and for himself, and the second time for us, in our reconstructions" (Gellner 1988:23). While this is obvious, the primary role of archaeology with regard to nationalism has been to "anchor" the nation by making it simultaneously timeless and very old, and therefore nationalism itself has its reasons and its roots in the past (Sørensen 1996:28). In a similar vein minority groups often use archaeology in the same way, and in particular death and funeral remains have created stronger and more unquestionable links from the past to the present precisely because death matters. However, as shown among American Indians, this is also a difficult approach, which may undermine current rights and future territorial claims. In the US, analyses of old Indian remains revealed that the more than 9000-year-old remains had no links to current Native American groups, and after court cases the reality was turned upside down: the indigenous people were challenged with regard to when their culture "became native", since there were other people before them (Watkins 2013); and all this reasoning is based on the nationalist ideas of first and second comers and rights legitimized by anchors in the past. Hence, DNA and indigenous rights may pose new ethical challenges, and one may argue that it is the frame of reasoning and what constitutes reasons for legitimacy that need to be readdressed, not the past itself.

This relates to the other point; the often implicit Christian cultural ethics. The terms "emic" and "etic" were introduced by Marvin Harris (1964, 1979) to designate the difference between the native's and the anthropologist's point of view. I will use two personal experiences to illustrate the dilemma. First, in Varanasi in India I was staying at a guesthouse next to the cremation ghat in 2003. One day after a breakfast I was looking down from the balcony. Children are not supposed to be cremated in Hinduism and some youngsters suddenly came with a bamboo stretcher with what seemed like one of their dead friends, wrapped in golden clothes. They put the stretcher down just below the balcony, and very much like Nigel Barley, I felt like a vulture when I ordered a new pot of coffee, curious to see how poor children who could not afford a funeral solved death. Next to the wrapped body they placed a bam-

boo basket and Hindus as well as Western tourists passing by donated money. After an hour nothing had happened, and the children started behaving weirdly; they were laughing and yelling while throwing the bamboo stretcher around. I went down and the children asked me too for money, but I went to a boatman next to the children and asked what they were doing. “Just a joke, not real,” he replied. The children had collected remains from other cremations and wrapped some hay in them to use for begging, knowing that Westerners cannot bypass grieving children mourning their friend! (Oestigaard 2005:311–313). If any children had done this in Sweden, they would have been in serious trouble.

The other example is from Pashupatinath in Nepal. 2001 was a tragic year for Nepal and the royal family. Ten royal family members died at the Narayanhity Palace massacre on 1 June. King Birendra died that evening and Crown Prince Dipendra was declared the new monarch on 2 June, but he died the next day. King Birendra and the other members of the royal family were given a state funeral on 2 June and King Dipendra on 4 June. At that time, there were six cremation platforms at Pashupatinath, and the one most upstream was exclusively for the royals and where the kings were cremated. Whereas thousands are cremated every year and the ashes immersed into the river further downstream, below this specific cremation platform there could only be the remains from the two kings.

In February 2002 Anders Kaliff joined me for fieldwork and there was very little water in the river, and one question came to our mind: should we go out into the river and see if we can find the kings’ bones? After discussing for some days, we decided that it was a good(?) idea, and while cremations took place only a few metres away, very soon we found some of the kings’ cremated bones. We took some photos and left the bones in the river without taking anything with us. Afterwards we asked one of the priests who cremated the king if it would be wrong if anybody collected some of the kings’ cremated remains from the river. The priest did not understand the question, or more precisely, the question did not make sense. There would be no point in doing so, not that we had violated any taboos, but the bones had no value anymore. The kings were in heaven as Vishnu, and the bones were like sand or stone, and all the elements of the bodies had been transformed back to their original elements (Kaliff & Oestigaard 2008).

Anders Kaliff and I presented this ethical experiment as a paper at EAA in Krakow in 2006, and the reactions from some, but not many, fellow archaeologists were as expected; this was highly unethical. But we knew before we went into the river, and as the cremation priest confirmed afterwards, it was unproblematic. In a similar vein, street children using a fake corpse for begging money would transgress Western social norms

and values, but not in Varanasi. The point is that if we had acted unethically in any way, it was not by transgressing any “emic” norms, but by confronting Christian cultural concepts regarding how to deal with the integrity of death and corpses. At the same time, if there is one thing burial archaeologists do, it is to (scientifically) disturb graves and collect bones.

The Gordian knot is then how to see other things than merely shadows of oneself in the mirror, whether it is implicit Christian cultural norms or past continuities allegedly giving legitimacy to current and future social, political and territorial boundaries. There are, I think, two aspects to this that are important in ethical discussions and also, in line with Nilsson Stutz’s prospects for an archaeology of death, ways forward.

First and foremost, research ethics is not necessarily identical with ethics in other domains or social realms. Hammersley and Atkinson write “that the most effective strategies for pursuing research should be adopted unless there is clear evidence that these are ethically unacceptable. In other words, indeterminacy and uncertainty should for the most part be resolved by ethnographers in favour of the interest of research, since that is their primary task” (Hammersley & Atkinson 1996:285). While there are some practices that are obviously unethical, such as playing with the bones or not documenting the excavation and so on, if for instance a road will be built and graves destroyed, archaeologists’ job is to conduct a rescue excavation in the best possible way.

This relates to the second aspect, namely, that in many cases the archaeological remains show traces of funeral practices with no contemporary parallels. Returning to the “emic” and “etic” distinction, *they* (whoever they were) often did things quite differently than we do and they had unique and varied world-views, cosmologies and conceptions of human life and values and so on. If a Christian cultural ethics includes the integrity of the dead, the dead body as a unity or entity, and death as an end, in the past one may find the opposite. With cremation as an example, the dead was a means to something else; corpses were chopped up and de-fleshed, body remains were integrated into other spheres transcending the grave (which may not have been the most important), and some people may have been burnt alive and sacrificed, and so on.

By aiming to analyse and identify the past as the past, in other words, *their* ethics, one may create a partly independent field in current discourses, since archaeological results often are publicly contested and used in contexts and for purposes beyond what archaeologists think is reasonable. As Marshall Sahlins once said, “Something like cannibalism or the eucharist can thus become anthropologically intelligible even if it is not to everyone’s taste” (Sahlins 1997:274). By asking questions such as why human sacrifice was necessary or why this femur was split

and for what purpose the bone marrow was used, archaeology may not only approach the past and the structuring principle of prehistoric people and their ethics, but also possibly reduce the potential for political misuse of the past in the present since it will reveal other narratives. The past will not be less interesting and important, but it may mirror the present less and therein broaden the field and importance of archaeology.

From this perspective, I can only concur with Liv Nilsson Stutz that the three proposed avenues will shape future archaeologies of death, and of necessity it has to be multi-disciplinary in order to understand the rich variation in the past. Precisely because death matters to everyone at all times, death and human remains will continue to fascinate professionals and the public alike, and understanding why other people had different beliefs about themselves and why they valued human life in other ways, is in itself a valuable source in understanding today's world.

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