Ian Lilley

2 STRANGERS AND BROTHERS?

Heritage, Human Rights, and Cosmopolitan Archaeology in Oceania

Archaeologists are archetypal strangers in most if not all of the localities in which they work. This is certainly the case in Australia and Melanesia, where this chapter is set. Can they truly hope also to be brothers, part of the family, in such places, to the point where the universalizing scientific tenets of archaeology and heritage management can be reconciled with local perspectives on the past and its material reflection? I see such reconciliation as a straightforward matter of human rights. It would be a major step forward if the profession were to treat all those among whom it works justly, as equals, and in a way that does not simply do them no harm, but also delivers them some good as they define it. I have no doubt that a cosmopolitan perspective is critical to any such endeavor. Yet as Kahn (2003: 404) reminds us, cosmopolitanism as generally conceived in Kantian terms has its problems, most resting on its embeddedness in the Western intellectual tradition. This position greatly diminishes the claims of universality to which such cosmopolitanism aspires, because “all forms of cosmopolitan thought—those that following Kant aspire to treat a diverse humanity for ‘what they have in common’—will inevitably begin with culturally-inflected presuppositions about what it is that constitutes that common humanity (a human essence, whether defined biologically or otherwise)” (Kahn 2003: 411).

Kahn recognizes that the solution is not just for archaeologists to listen more to “the Other,” or help make more “recognition space” for other voices to be heard alongside ours, vital though such actions might be. Rather, we should aim to produce truly cosmopolitan knowledge “out of the encounter between representatives of different cultures,” that is, new knowledge that could not “conceivably have pre-existed the . . . encounter” (Kahn 2003: 411). To do otherwise is to remain
stuck in the unproductive essentialist oppositions of “us and them,” “Self and Other.” The trick, of course, is to produce this new knowledge in a manner that reduces and, ideally, ultimately eliminates the enormous gulf between the power wielded by Western scholars and that of their interlocutors in local communities (Kahn 2003: 411). The only real means of doing this is to go beyond inviting local people or descendent communities to participate in work in the field and the laboratory, attend conferences, or perform ceremonies on site to ensure spiritual safety and the like. As the succinct overview by Conkey (2005, esp. 15–18) makes clear, it has long been understood that relinquishing power in a politically effective fashion means bringing local conceptualizations into archaeological practice in ways that guide interpretation at a theoretical level as well as field and laboratory studies at the level of technical execution.

The New Frontier

This is where things get disturbing and even intolerable for many in the profession. It is one thing to ask that colleagues consult local descendent communities, but are significant numbers of them really ready to make the conceptual and practical adjustments that are necessary to take the process of power sharing to its logical conclusion? As is appropriate in a discussion of cosmopolitanism, this question can be recast in Kantian terms to ask whether most archaeologists, as outsiders, can make the leap from being visiting strangers to being resident guests in accepting the hospitality of their hosts. As is clear from Scham’s contribution to the present volume, making such a move reconfigures the social distances among the parties and so changes how outsiders and hosts alike are recognized and expected to behave. When an archaeologist ceases to be a visiting stranger, the latitude usually allowed owing to the stranger’s naïveté is dramatically restricted if it does not evaporate altogether, and he or she is expected to conform much more closely with vernacular custom and practice. If a visitor takes up residence like a guest but refuses to conform in this manner, he or she will be received as neither stranger nor guest, but rather as a difficult and potentially dangerous interloper (Dikeç 2002; Rundell 2004).

Archaeology has long been in this latter position, but global currents of decolonization will inevitably force archaeologists to become guests
in the societies in which they work, despite the readily apparent difficulties that this entails. The alternative would see the profession denied access to archaeological resources to a far greater extent than happens now. This struggle for the hearts and minds of archaeologists as well as local communities is not fundamentally different from the upheavals being experienced in a great many other fields of scholarly enquiry, and indeed at the highest levels of international affairs, as the process of decolonization plays out (Lilley 2008). It is worth noting in this context (and in relation to the chapter by Scham, this volume) that Kant thought outsiders should not attempt to switch from being strangers to being guests because of the claims that this makes on both the host and the outsider. Moreover, he explicitly excluded nonstate societies from those among which his “universal” rules of hospitality should apply, because they were too different from states to be included (Dikeç 2002; Harvey 2000). Such questions of difference are still the crux of the matter, insofar as dealing with state-level actors generally entails dealing with institutions that despite inevitable cultural differences share basic characteristics that reduce the uncertainties of cross-cultural communication (as attendance at—indeed, the very possibility of—any successful international conference instantly makes clear). Dealing with nonstate or substate actors, though, and especially indigenous minorities, frequently entails encounters with profound difference for all parties, despite the long-term and ever more intense cross-cultural interaction of the post-Columbian period.

When we focus on indigenous societies as an exemplar of such difference, we see that the difficulty for archaeologists who try to “go native” (or the reverse for Native scholars) is that there is a strong chance they will fall between the two stools they aim to straddle—the indigenous one and the Western scientific one. This is because they could give up the intellectual and technical positives of science to attain a goal they might be unable ever to reach owing to the “blood and soil” factor well known to scholars of identity: their lives lack some experiential dimension or, in even more essentialist terms, the “single drop of blood” that is critical to an authentic indigenous perspective (Conkey 2005: 26–29). For Native scholars the matter would be to achieve a truly Western standpoint (e.g., Atalay 2006; Cachois 2006; Dugay-Grist 2006). Archaeologists making the attempt thus risk becoming marginalized as neither fish nor fowl, like Naipaul’s (1964) unfortunate Mr. Biswas. If they pull it off, though, they should gain the sort
of mongrel cosmopolitanism paraded so provocatively in exactly such terms by the likes of Salman Rushdie (e.g., 1989). This hybridity is both founded upon and most effectively able to produce truly cosmopolitan new knowledge of the sort envisaged by Kahn (2003). It should also provide an appropriate vantage point from which to deploy such knowledge ethically to the benefit of all parties involved (Lilley and Williams 2005).

Looking Up from Down Under

The latter prospect has led *inter alia* to the idea that archaeologists should become “discrepant” (Clifford 1992), “rooted” (Appiah 2006a), or “vernacular” (Bhabha 1996) cosmopolitans. As the other contributions to this volume all discuss, this means archaeologists should acknowledge their inevitably Western roots and decolonize their practice to make it meaningful in the varied local settings into which they insert themselves (see also L. T. Smith 1999). This process has gained a lot of momentum over the last decade and now reaches well beyond the settler societies in North America and Oceania where most headway has been made (e.g., Atalay 2006; Bedford 1996; Bernardini 2005a; Byrne 2003, 2004; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006; Conkey 2005; David and McNiven 2004; Lilley 2000a; Lilley and Williams 2005; McGuire 2004; Nicholas and Andrews 1997; Sand 2000a; Sand et al. 2006; Watkins 2000). It now encompasses places as diverse as the more isolated parts of Great Britain (e.g., S. Jones 2003) and at least some Asian countries, such as Japan (Mizoguchi 2004) and Taiwan (e.g., D. Blundell 2000). Australia, though, seems to be at the cutting edge. This is not simply self-serving chauvinism on my part, as the words of my North American colleagues such as Atalay (2006) and Silliman (2005) make clear. As I have described elsewhere (Lilley 2006a), pictures like those painted by Atalay and Silliman are reinforced by concrete evidence from the world of international cultural heritage management. The World Bank leans heavily on the Burra Charter of Australia *ICOMOS* (http://www.icomos.org) for guidance on the “world’s best practice” in its management of “physical cultural resources” (http://www.lema.ulg.ac.be), as did the Chinese government in its recently promulgated “China Principles” (http://www.icomos.org/australia). Much the same is happening in Iraq, where “world-class site management plans based on the Burra Charter” are being developed (http://hnn.us).
The Burra Charter was originally designed to deal with historical non-indigenous built heritage, but it has evolved along a trajectory that has seen its wording and applications expand to accommodate pre-European indigenous heritage as well as shared colonial heritage. The transformation of other aspects of the country’s archaeological practice has advanced at the same time. This is most emphatically not to say that Australian archaeology and cultural heritage management are flawless paragons of cross-cultural virtue, a question to which I presently return. Nor is it the case that individual colleagues elsewhere in the region, such as New Zealand or New Caledonia, or for that matter elsewhere in the world, such as Canada or the United States, lag appreciably behind Australia in any critical respect. For the moment, though, it seems that as an institution Australian archaeology is enjoying unparalleled success in bringing archaeological and indigenous interests together as a matter of conventional professional practice at a national scale (Lilley 2000b).

Just why this is so remains a matter of conjecture (Lilley 2006a; Smith and Jackson 2006). It seems plain, though, that it hinges in significant part on two factors. The first is the profession’s recognition beginning in the early 1980s that decolonization raises profoundly important questions about archaeology’s relations with descendent communities. The second has been the pragmatism of the discipline’s response (i.e., calling a spade a spade and doing what was needed to make things work). This pragmatism is typically quite creative and at times even radical by global standards, as Smith and Jackson’s (2006) recent contribution leaves in no doubt. Yet all is not as rosy it might seem, if Thorley’s (1996, 2002) periodic interventions are anything to go by. On the basis of his extended experience with remote desert people, Thorley (1996: 10) points out that even in situations where archaeologists (as well as ethnographers, linguists, and the like) have endeavored to practice reflectively in a manner that is sensitive to issues of authority and representation, indigenous people usually have other priorities. If they value research at all it is because of the social and economic opportunities it offers and in fact the value to them of such opportunities can make it hard for them to challenge researchers or their findings. Thorley (1996: 10) observes that “interest in the relationship could be misinterpreted as approval of the researcher’s findings while from an Aboriginal point of view the content of the research may be seen as unimportant. Different
values are assigned by each side. As a society without a Western tradition of impersonal academic debate there is little incentive to argue with the researcher and risk the relationship; in fact there may be a tendency to defend the researcher in order to preserve the relationship, no matter how misguided the representation.”

Elsewhere Thorley (2002: 110) draws attention to a similar question of values in connection with notions of cultural heritage management in remote settlements. He is specifically concerned with the idea that the value of material items often lies in their intangible qualities, which might require them to decay physically to be preserved, what Colwell-Chanthaphonh calls the “preservation paradox” in his contribution to this volume. Thorley (2002: 110) notes that while indigenous Australians use archaeology and heritage management for their own purposes, this does not mean that they invest in Western archaeological or heritage management values. For Thorley (2002: 110), “This raises the question of whether the transmission of new cultural forms and practices must include a corresponding transfer of meaning. It could be argued that rather than the internalisation of Western values, adoption of contemporary heritage practices by Indigenous groups reflects a conscious manipulation of terms of their own priorities and interests.”

There is significant variation in the wider indigenous Australian community, which means that issues like those Thorley raises apply to greater or lesser degrees in different places. Nonetheless there is a very high level of physical (and virtual) mobility within that wider community, and so a great deal of communication about values and the like, both from the remote areas to more settled regions and vice versa (e.g., Lilley and Williams 2005: 237–38). This means that attitudes such as those Thorley describes exhibit a strong underlying continuity across the continent despite the above-mentioned variation. Thorley does not think the gap between indigenous and Western approaches can be bridged. “While there has been growing support for Indigenous perspectives,” he writes (2002: 123), “it is doubtful whether wider recognition will be sufficient to resolve underlying conflicts of value.” In his earlier article (Thorley 1996: 11) he pointed out that “both Byrne . . . and Hodder . . . have put forward arguments for ‘indigenous archaeologies’ in Australia, but neither have described how these might translate into practice. Despite the best of intentions, the notion of indigenous archaeology is itself the product of an external and more
powerful society. This is particularly ironic, since it would seem that the basis of such approaches would draw from Aboriginal forms of identification, rather than a framework not of their making.”

Talking the Talk

Thorley (1996: 11) believes the way forward is to accept that the foregoing intellectual differences are too great to span and to get on with things using approaches that respect the reasons for the differences. I understand perfectly well what he means, having worked in remote parts of Australia and the Pacific for many years. I am not yet convinced, however, that all is lost. Language is a large part of the issue for Thorley. He (1996: 9) points out that English is not the first or even second language of choice in much of remote indigenous Australia. I would add that Standard English is not even the language of choice among indigenous Australians in most rural and many urban areas, where either some local form of “Aboriginal English” or the Kriol of northern Australian and the Torres Strait is commonly used in everyday contexts. The barriers to effective communication created by such linguistic variation should be apparent, especially as they reflect often profound differences in worldview.

One obvious way such barriers might be breached, though, is for more archaeologists not only to take care with the academic language that they use so that they can avoid neocolonial overtones (e.g., Smith and Jackson 2006; Watkins 2006), but also to learn to speak local languages or lingua francas, and indeed to produce appropriate written material in local languages, too. This idea goes a long way beyond simply being able to translate for basic comprehension: in my experience it can have crucial social and political implications in cross-cultural encounters. Clendon (2006: 50) underscores how important the matter is in much of northern Australia, for instance, where a “religious mandate linking land and language” underpins “a positive social expectation that visitors . . . should speak the language of their hosts if they can.”

Numbers of archaeologists around the world do this now, of course. I do not speak any of the myriad local indigenous languages of Oceania, but I do speak Papua New Guinea’s lingua franca, *tok pisin*. So do most of my colleagues who work in the region. This gives us reasonable
linguistic access in other parts of Melanesia, where related but slightly different creoles and pidgins are spoken. It helps in Torres Strait and Aboriginal northern Australia, as well, where the related Kriol is used. The same obviously applies in reverse for colleagues working in these varied areas. I have not yet produced an academic or even a popular publication in any of these languages, though I have presented informal written reports to community authorities in tok pisin. Others are in the process of producing school texts, primers for heritage rangers, and the like (e.g., Kaltal et al. 2004). Just as Anglophone colleagues working in Latin America or Francophone Africa frequently learn Spanish, Portuguese, or French, I have also learned (still rudimentary) French to help with research I am developing with local and expatriate colleagues in the Francophone Pacific. I will endeavor to learn at least enough of the language of the island on which we work to allow me to follow conversations among community members and my multilingual local colleagues as the project advances. The issue of language is crucial to this particular study, a matter to which I will return.

Being conversant with the vernacular of their research areas would help archaeologists get their message across, but there is much more to it than using a bit of “restaurant French” to get by. The latter is necessary but obviously far from sufficient. Whatever language they use (though the more locally specific the better), the heart of the problem is that archaeologists need to frame their research in terms that makes sense to the communities with which they pursue their research. In Thorley’s terms, they must appeal to the sorts of values and perspectives local people are likely to bring to the matter. As described elsewhere (Lilley 2006b; Sheehan and Lilley 2008), my current approach to this question takes off from Merry’s (2006) discussion of the vernacularization of transnational ideas concerning human rights and violence against women. Like these ideas, archaeology has been resisted to varying degrees by indigenous people around the world as “an alien, Western import not suited to local normative systems” (Merry 2006: 38). If archaeologists are to engage local people with the discipline in their local context, the discipline’s universalizing scientific conceptual apparatus needs to be “framed and presented in terms of existing cultural norms, values and practices” (Merry 2006: 39). Merry (2006: 39) calls this process “indigenization,” which she defines as the “symbolic dimension of vernacularization.” The term applies regardless of whether the recipient
population is indigenous in the sense commonly used to refer to colonized native minorities.

One problem with orthodox approaches to vernacularization and indigenization can be that they seek “resonance” on the seemingly sensible grounds that a “frame needs to be resonant with cultural traditions and narratives to be appealing” (Merry 2006: 39). Research summarized by Merry (2006: 41) shows, though, that “resonant discourses are less radical than nonresonant ones . . . [so] resonance is a costly choice because it may limit the possibility for long-term change.” This is because “frames” can restrict who may and may not speak and what can and cannot be said, and thus they can flatten variability and downplay dynamism and contestation (Merry 2006: 41). On these grounds, Merry (2006: 41–42) advocates “a more dialogic analysis” that recognizes variation and competition between views. This fits closely with my experience of the interactions between archaeology and local and especially indigenous communities over the last few decades. If we recognize rather than avoid this reality we will be better equipped to benefit from the conceptual and technical opportunities a dialogic—or, in Appiah’s (2006a) terms, conversational—process has to offer.

To gain maximum leverage from these insights, vernacularization and indigenization must proceed from one specific end of a range of variation in the degree to which “local cultural forms and practices are incorporated into imported institutions” (Merry 2006: 44). This end is that of hybridization, an interactive form of cross-fertilization “that merges imported institutions and symbols with local ones, sometimes uneasily” (44). Merry (2006: 48) describes the novel phenomena that result as being “thickly shaped by local institutions and structures.” At the other end of the range, where many past and some contemporary attempts at collaboration by archaeologists are still lodged, there is “replication,” which is only “thinly adapted to local circumstances” (Merry 2006: 48). Although she makes no mention of vernacular (or any other form of) cosmopolitanism, the link between Merry’s line of thought and Bhabha’s is obvious and compelling.

Creating functional and mutually rewarding hybrids will not be easy. To paraphrase Merry’s comments about international funding for human rights NGOs, the funding and permitting agencies that facilitate archaeology are still strongly oriented toward hard science and are thus likely to react skeptically to thickly indigenized research proposals. By the same token, the local (and especially the indigenous) communities
with which archaeologists work are likely to remain skeptical about the discipline owing to continuing historical grievances or the imperatives of contemporary identity politics. We must try, though, if we believe that vital matters of mutual interest are in the balance (Lilley and Williams 2005). Though this issue cuts in both directions, archaeologists should make the greatest effort at this stage, given that they still have by far the most institutional power (despite the passage of NAGPRA and so on). The first steps are to show our colleagues that there are other ways of seeing the world and on that basis train them to think outside the square.

I know some archaeologists will react badly to this suggestion, but there is nothing “fringe” or “New Age” about such thinking. It is just good anthropology. As Geertz (1983: 70) taught us a generation ago, “Accounts of other people’s subjectivities can be built up without recourse to pretensions to more-than-normal capacities for ego effacement and fellow feeling.” As he went on to say, though, “Normal capacities in these respects are, of course, essential, as is their cultivation, if we expect people to tolerate our intrusions into their lives at all and accept us as persons worth talking to.” Applied anthropologists have been putting precisely these sorts of ideas into practice in this fashion for at least a decade (e.g., Sillitoe 1998a, b). Furthermore, as Strathern (2006) recently pointed out, approaches like the one I am advocating are ontologically not appreciably different from the “ideas trade” entailed in the interdisciplinary approaches to research that everyone is being encouraged to pursue these days and, we might add, with which archaeologists have long been acquainted (cf. Warren 1998). To quote Strathern (2006: 192) quoting Galison (1996: 14), the idea in all of these varied areas of endeavor is to “work out an intermediate language, a pidgin, that serves a local, mediating capacity” (also see Osborne 2004).

The following examples from Australia and New Caledonia discuss how my colleagues and I are trying to develop such mediating intermediate languages of this sort. Both projects are in their infancy and so may appear somewhat underdeveloped here. My descriptions should be read as “dispatches from the front” rather than reports on mature case studies. Moreover, the two projects involve very different researchers and descendent communities in very different historical, linguistic, and current sociopolitical contexts. This means that what we are trying to achieve, the way we are going about it, and the language and tone
I use here to describe the projects all differ markedly between the two cases. In particular, the Australian example can be described in Merry’s language as seeking to frame archaeological approaches in terms that are resonant with Aboriginal perspectives, whereas the New Caledonian project takes a more radical, nonresonant tack to bring archaeological and local views together.

Aboriginal Ways of Seeing

I have previously described some of the efforts in which I have been involved to take such matters forward in Australia (Lilley and Williams 2005). These projects place indigenous concerns uppermost, but otherwise they entail relatively straightforward collaboration between Aboriginal and archaeological interests. More recently I have tentatively headed off at more of a tangent with an indigenous nonarchaeological colleague to explore the deployment in archaeology of contemporary indigenous visualization of landscape (Sheehan and Lilley 2008). I stress that it is still very much work in progress that remains largely at the experimental conceptual level. We hope it will ultimately build on the advances of landscape archaeologists such as Bender (1993), Bradley (2000), Thomas (2001), and Tilley (1994). Their approaches incorporate ethnographic information about hunter-gatherer perspectives on landscape, but they do not, themselves, apply it to the landscape archaeology of hunter-gatherers rather than of agriculturalists. Our focus on landscape is intended to complement the attention to matters of history that has characterized much of the effort to indigenize the discipline so far (e.g., Bernardini 2005a).

We advance the general proposition that the way that the physical landscape appears to Aboriginal people—its visual organization or structure—contains spiritual information concerning the organization or structure of the landscape that constrains people’s behavior. This means, to give a simplified example, that if the landscape in a particular place looks like a snake, it actually is, in its spiritual guise, that snake and must be approached as such. Different sorts of sites will occur in particular places along the snake’s body in accordance with the spiritual information inhering in this or that locality. Moreover, the investigation of those sites requires them to be treated as part of that specific sort of living organism (in this case a snake), which will be related as
kin to at least some of the local indigenous community. Digging, in particular, but also other forms of study such as mapping and photography need to be undertaken with this fact in mind.

In some parts of Aboriginal country, whole landscapes form images representing the meaning embedded in those localities. Faces might be discernable in vegetation patterns or rock exposures, for instance, because that country contains stories concerning the people whose faces can be seen. This sort of imagery is usually considered of profound significance to Aboriginal people because ontologically it is a manifestation of the ancestral knowledge of all the relationships between people and their environment that is held within the land (see also Godwin and Weiner 2006: 128–32). The nature and distribution of sites in such locations, and the archaeological work that can be done there, will depend on what the stories are about and whom they concern. The challenge for archaeologists is to learn to see what is there, just as they all once had to learn to see with “an archaeological eye” when they were students, so they could distinguish stone artifacts from natural rocks, or agricultural terraces from natural rotational slumping. Bender (2006: 313, original emphasis) describes learning to see in the Aboriginal way as coming “to recognise the animate nature of the . . . world” (cf. Bradley 2003).

Intellectual property negotiations prevent us from discussing specific landscape images at this stage, but opportunities are arising to develop a visual archaeology that can reveal what my co-researcher calls “these edifices of Aboriginal culture” to a wider audience. Furthermore, we have not yet developed our position to the point where we can carry out field trials. We have, however, described initial visualization experiments undertaken as classroom exercises in undergraduate courses for mainly non-indigenous university students in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies. Though lack of space prevents detailed discussion here, the results are very encouraging (see Sheehan and Lilley 2008, for initial findings). Other Australian archaeologists are doing broadly similar sorts of research. Some of the most innovative work is that led by David and McNiven in the western islands of Torres Strait, between mainland Australia and New Guinea. These researchers and their indigenous and non-indigenous collaborators have sought to “historicize the spiritual” by archaeologically examining various sorts of sacred sites, including ritual mollusk-shell arrangements (David et al.
dugong ("sea cow") bone mounds (McNiven and Feldman 2003), intertidal stone alignments (McNiven 2003), and caches of turtle-shell masks (David et al. 2004). Building upon contemporary Torres Strait Islander knowledge and belief, they are beginning to show how “chronological changes in the use of these sites inform us about historical developments in Islander ontology and their ritual orchestration of seascapes and spiritual connections to the sea” (McNiven and Feldman 2003: 169). David (e.g., 2006) has done similar work elsewhere in Australia.

Godwin and Weiner (2006) also provide some excellent case studies of how such opportunities are changing the way archaeology is being done in Australia, in this instance in cultural heritage management. They remind us how Aboriginal people read their country and the distribution of sites upon it in terms of past and present actions of ancestors and Dreamtime entities. This contrasts with the attention archaeologists would normally pay instead to the distribution of resources, though the latter is directly linked to Dreamtime activity and so is encompassed by Aboriginal perspectives in any event. Understanding this as a general principle means that archaeologists can develop appropriate analogical models that can guide research even if the specifics of the Dreamtime stories relayed by contemporary Aboriginal people differ from those in the past. The idea is not simply to replace conventional models based on past environmental patterns and the like, but rather to add a dimension to such models so they can better account for more of the complexities of past human behavior in modes that make sense to local indigenous people.

Godwin and Weiner also underline techniques by which meaning is negotiated through dialogue and conversation rather than imposed in such readings, highlighting the difference between Aboriginal and Western approaches to the creation and management of knowledge. If Aboriginal people working on a project were uncertain about the meaning of a particular site, landscape feature, or occurrence during fieldwork (such as the unusual activity of a swarm of native bees, in one instance), they took their questions to more knowledgeable people (Godwin and Weiner 2006: 132–35). The sites in question were usually unexceptional archaeologically, but their indigenous meanings had to be fathomed if their occurrence was previously unknown to the Aboriginal field crew or if they exhibited some noteworthy feature, such as a particular richness of worked stone.
As mentioned earlier, I am also involved in indigenizing research in the French Pacific, specifically the Loyalty Islands in New Caledonia some 1,200 kilometers off the northeast coast of Australia. The project includes local archaeologists of Kanak and European descent as well as colleagues from metropolitan France. It focuses on Tiga, the smallest of the inhabited islands in the Loyalties. Pilot studies concluded in 2006, laying the foundation for more intensive studies in years to come. To avoid continual highly repetitious citation, I note that the following is abstracted from our recent successful proposal for further work, which drew heavily on the extended treatment of the issues in question by Sand et al. (2006).

The project is motivated primarily by the fact that New Caledonia is unique in Pacific prehistory. The founding Lapita occupation some three thousand years ago differed in several critical respects from that elsewhere in the distribution of the Lapita cultural complex, while the ensuing trajectories of change produced levels of cultural diversification unparalleled anywhere in Remote Oceania, the region beyond the main Solomon Islands chain, uninhabited prior to the Lapita dispersal (Kirch 2000: 148; see Lilley 2004 for general discussion of Lapita; and Sand 1998, 2000b for overviews of New Caledonian prehistory). The problem for archaeologists is that their interpretations of New Caledonia’s dynamic human history conflict with local Kanak views. The latter are largely either based on or a reaction to Eurocentric historical and ethnographic pictures developed before modern archaeology began in the region. These scenarios portray “traditional” Kanak society as small-scale and semi-nomadic, and governed as petty chiefdoms. Such descriptions have been completely undermined by the archaeological demonstration that the last millennium before European contact was actually characterized by a densely inhabited landscape based on labor-intensive horticulture organized by strong chiefdoms that collapsed as a result of massive demographic and cultural disruption between initial European contact in 1770 and the French takeover in the 1850s.

This dramatically nonresonant archaeological reappraisal of “traditional Kanak culture” as it has been understood for generations does not sit well with politicized indigenous New Caledonians, the bulk of whom receive their higher education in metropolitan France, or
indeed with the expatriate scholars who have promoted it. Nor do scientific archaeological explanations of the often dramatic cultural changes that occurred over the preceding three millennia of human settlement in the archipelago. As much of the work of the New Caledonian Department of Archaeology makes clear (e.g., Sand 2000a; Sand et al. 2006), just what archaeology is “for” in New Caledonia remains as unclear to most Kanaks as it does to many indigenous people in other settler societies. The nub of the matter is that like those in other colonial societies, pre-archaeological settler interpretations in New Caledonia ascribed all evidence for pre-European change to successive waves of invasion much like the one represented by European colonization. The political effect of this approach is to diminish indigenous people by characterizing them as just another group of migrants who have no more claim to special land and cultural rights than any other group in the modern population. In reaction, Kanak activists and their European sympathizers have attacked the entire concept of history and long-term cultural change as an oppressive neocolonial device. As in other settler societies, the offending pre-archaeological interpretations have been replaced with a simplistic two-step model in which a static indigenous past where everything was peaceful and well organized was suddenly destroyed by Western colonization. In this scenario, the population of New Caledonia is polarized as “indigenous” or “invaders.” This division emerged in the late 1970s. It led to a major political emergency, including periods of undeclared civil war in the 1980s, the aftereffects of which have not entirely dissipated.

The finality with which this stark and highly politicized model was asserted almost completely stifled Kanak interest in history, as witnessed by the almost complete absence of historically oriented research conducted by Kanaks, except the handful working in the New Caledonian Department of Archaeology. This reveals how difficult the indigenous community still finds it to replace the recent ideologically motivated two-part account with a more complex archaeologically informed conception. The principal criticism of archaeologists in this context is that they place too much emphasis on historicizing the past and not enough on validating models of stasis that in the view of indigenous activists provide the basis for historical rights. Although rooted in profoundly different approaches to history, this divergence in perspectives has been
exaggerated by synchronic ethnographic models that left Kanaks and other native peoples “outside the realm of world historical experience” (Peterson 2000: 27).

Ironically, because archaeology underwrites a diachronic view of indigenous societies, some indigenous people are adamant that their past—as described ethnographically—and the authenticity of identities built upon such pre-archaeological descriptions will be completely undermined by the historicization that archaeology entails. Contemporary political considerations are thus pivotal to the debate, because all nonliterate societies have oral traditions that clearly illustrate the dynamism of their pasts. A significant part of the problem is that the materiality of archaeological evidence is much harder to dismiss on political grounds than oral-historical testimony, which is often disputed within and among local communities, not to mention by settlers. Archaeology’s “solid” data thus fuel the fires of contemporary competition over land and other resources and archaeologists are inevitably drawn into current political maneuverings.

These internecine struggles belie the claims of those Kanak activists who contend that there is a unified “Kanak people.” Contestation of this sort also generates practical and intellectual difficulties for archaeologists and friction between them and sections of the Kanak community. Coping with such complications will be a small price for archaeologists to pay if the melding of a vibrant, archaeologically informed history with contemporary perspectives can produce cosmopolitan new knowledge that helps modern indigenous communities show that they have never been “people without history” at the same time that it renders archaeological interpretation more nuanced at the human level. In addition to any direct positive impact it may have on local conceptions of history and long-term change or on archaeological approaches to analysis and explanation, new knowledge that situates indigenous people well and truly within “world historical experience” should also improve the light in which they are perceived by non-indigenous people in multicultural settler societies such as New Caledonia. Western and other cultures that place a high value on “progress” and material acquisition still generally portray the alterity of indigenous peoples as a marker of moral and intellectual deficiency. By demonstrating that archaeologists have as much to learn from indigenous people as the reverse, the successful production of hybrid new knowledge should
provide local people with additional ammunition in their fight for social and political justice.

To the foregoing ends, our project on Tiga aims to produce cosmopolitan new knowledge by integrating archaeological field and laboratory research with an understanding of how local people conceptualize and mark culturally important sites and landscapes today, including the sites under archaeological investigation. A still embryonic methodology is being developed in collaboration with the Tiga community to integrate the results of the two parts of the study in this manner. At its most basic level, archaeological results and contemporary Kanak histories and conceptualizations of cultural landscapes will be brought together as the project proceeds, through constant dialogue between the local community and the professional archaeologists and oral historians (who include Kanaks from the Loyalties and elsewhere in New Caledonia). The extent to which a single, new, hybridized cultural history is feasible can only be determined through continual conversation as the results from the two different facets of the project become known and can be compared, contrasted, and where possible reconciled.

An exploratory project of this sort would be unnecessary if it were already known just how this process would advance. As is the case in the Australian work discussed earlier, though, we aim eventually to go well beyond the use of oral history or tradition to augment archaeological interpretation along the lines advocated by Whiteley (2002). There is certainly no cookbook to follow, but we envisage a procedure similar to the constant negotiation described earlier among the Aboriginal people working with Godwin and Weiner (2006). In accordance with the principles outlined by Merry (2006), the idea is to foster conceptual hybridization that is “thickly shaped by local institutions and structures,” rather than replication that is only “thinly adapted to local circumstances.” Language will be a critical factor in this process. We work not only in French, New Caledonia’s lingua franca in the absence of pidgins like those used elsewhere in Melanesia, but also in the local Kanak language(s), as made possible by working with local Kanak archaeologists and oral historians. This last should allow us to get much closer than we otherwise would to native conceptualizations of the past and the role(s) played in the present by archaeological materials as well as other tangible and intangible facets of local cultural landscapes.
A Concluding Note of Cautious Optimism

The projects I have outlined above all pivot on the proposition that archaeologists cannot remain as visiting strangers rather than resident guests if they want to reduce the distance between their interpretations and those of the local and especially indigenous communities in which they work. In this the projects I have sketched here share a great deal with the post-processual approaches of Bender, Thomas, Tilley, and others. Recent appraisals of their work, such as Brück’s (2005) assessment of the rise of phenomenology in British archaeology and Fleming’s (2006) critique of post-processual landscape archaeology, therefore raise issues that are also of relevance to the sorts of research with which I am involved. The issue of most concern in both cases is “whether contemporary encounters with landscape . . . can ever approximate the actual experience of people in the past” (Brück 2005: 54). To my mind, this question subsumes or is at least closely related to many of those Whiteley (2002) raises regarding the evidential reliability of oral tradition. As archaeologists should know better than anyone else, people and their values change, as do physical landscapes. It should therefore be clear to us that “describing our own [or contemporary indigenous people’s own] embodied encounters with landscapes tells us more about contemporary perceptions and preoccupations [and the modern environment] than it does about the past” (Brück 2005: 57).

Despite this reservation, Brück (2005: 65) applauds the fact that the approaches of Tilley, Thomas, Bender, and others have forced archaeologists to “reconsider the social significance of landscape and to explore concepts of the person that are very different to modern Western models of the individual.” The studies I have described are intended to take this process further by according non-Western models a centrality that is absent from the sorts of post-processual approaches that Brück canvases. Intriguingly, Fleming’s (2006) altogether more pointed review takes an unexpected turn to argue much the same thing as Brück in this regard. After lambasting Tilley and others for visiting a postmodernist methodological nightmare upon the discipline, Fleming concedes that “it is good that landscape historians who work in prehistoric periods are exploring the potential of cognitive approaches, experimenting with new ways of writing, and have been reminded of the ever-present issues of ‘the dearth of people.’” Even more fascinatingly, though, he argues that conventional landscape archaeology has done this sort
of thing all along. In his estimation (Fleming 2006: 271–72, original emphasis), this is because it is about doing “work in the field . . . in the open air. An outsider at first, the landscape archaeologist has no choice but to become engaged in the landscape, to become an insider as a consequence of acquired knowledge. . . . Landscape archaeologists are not obsessed with the attainment of hard-edged objectivity always and everywhere, and our field discourse always and necessarily involves thinking about the intentionality and mindsets of people in the past.” As Fleming (2006: 272) himself recognizes, this contention is a far cry indeed from “Binfordian scientism,” despite what would seem to be their shared intention to debunk post-processualism and, by extension, the sort of approaches with which my colleagues and I are experimenting. In this connection, it is salutary to return to Wylie’s (1992: 16–17) discussion of the manner in which the “conceptual and methodological commitments of scientific archaeology . . . have tended to direct attention away from what Binford . . . has vilified, in his most uncompromising defenses of processual approaches, as ‘ethnographic,’ internal variables . . . he considers explanatorily irrelevant and scientifically inaccessible, such as gender . . . [and] other symbolic, ideational, social, and broadly ‘ethnographic’ dimensions of the cultural past.”

Conkey’s (2005) recent consideration of the “intersections” of feminist and indigenous archaeologies updates us on many of the questions Wylie took up in that landmark essay. I would expect scholars of Wylie’s and Conkey’s reputations as theoretical innovators and activists to have left processualism far behind in recognizing that greater attention to “relational dialogues” and other issues of language should make it “an easier step to engage with oral traditions and oral accounts as a viable line of evidence in the interpretation of archaeological materials and the cultural past” (Conkey 2005: 29–30). I am still somewhat disbelieving of the possibility that we have come so far that an “anti-post-processualist” as red in tooth and claw as Fleming not only explicitly distances his position from Binford’s but also asserts that the orthodox approaches he esteems have “always and necessarily” involved ostensibly post-processual perspectives. It gives me great hope, though, that far more of my colleagues than I imagined might be prepared to take the leap from outsider to insider, or, to return to Kant, from visiting stranger to resident guest in their relations with local communities. They might say they are comfortable with the sorts of approaches I
have sketched out here because they have always done such things, if under other names. I am certainly not going to split terminological hairs if it helps archaeology take local conceptualizations of history seriously. Ultimately this is the only way the discipline can live up to its obligations to advance the human rights of the people among whom it seeks to work.

Note

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