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Community Archaeology: The Kitikmeot Heritage Society’s Iqaluktuq Project

Sean Stoughton

Recently, some archaeologists have made an effort to include the views and knowledge of the people who live in the areas they study. Archaeological projects that are conscious of the benefit of community involvement, and able to connect with local people, can draw from sources of traditional knowledge and first hand experience of people for whom the archaeological record is part of living memory. These projects are able to not only expand the information base available to the archaeologists working in them, but also to make their work inclusive and relevant to groups that are often overlooked in archaeology. This kind of cooperative approaches has been called ‘community archaeology’, and has been promoted both for the academic benefits, specifically the inclusion of oral histories and ethnographic analogies, and the ability to be inclusive to groups traditional excluded from archaeological research. One such combined effort is the Iqaluktuq Project, conducted by the Kitikmeot Heritage Society in association with the University of Toronto. This project is an ongoing series of excavations around the Cambridge Bay area of Victoria Island, Nunavut (Friesen 2002). The excavations conducted by this project are done in the presence of local Inuit elders, who are able to share their knowledge of the areas and many of the features and artifacts recovered. The cooperation between the local community and archaeologists has improved the quality and depth of the interpretations made, and made it possible for the people of the Kitikmeot area to participate in the study of their ancestral cultures. The Kitikmeot Heritage Society (KHS) and the Iqaluktuq Project are examples of a community based heritage project that has been able to contribute to the understanding of archaeological cultures in the Canadian Arctic, while making their research engaging and relevant to both the archaeological and indigenous communities. In this paper, I will explore the theoretical issues raised by community archaeology, the nature of the interactions between the various groups involved, the methodology and results of the Iqaluktuq Project, and evaluate what successes the project has had thus far.

Theoretical Issues

The American Anthropological Association’s El Dorado Taskforce, in considering the issue of community involvement in anthropological work, concluded that, “the anthropology of indigenous people and related communities must move towards ‘collaborative’ models, in which anthropological research is not merely combined with advocacy, but inherently advocative in that research is, from its outset, aimed at material, symbolic, and political benefits for the research population” (Lassiter 2005:84).

In terms of archaeological work, this means the development of community based archaeology. Broadly speaking, community archaeology is an attempt to involve local people in archaeological investigation and interpretation (Moser, Glazier, Phillips, el Nemr, Mousa, Aiesh, Richardson, Conner, Seymour 2002:220). There are many ways that this can be done, and implicit in this process is the inclusion of oral histories and ethnographic analogies as sources of interpretive information. However, community archaeology is closely connected with the populations related to the sites under investigation, which places the work being conducted in a broader social and political context. This involvement is inseparable from the academic aspects of archaeological research, as the nature of the relationship between archaeologists and local communities will in many ways determine the focus of the study. The connection between archaeologists and the involved communities is a matter of give and take, with both groups benefiting from the other.

Theoretical issues in community archaeology

There are several reasons for engaging with the local communities during the course of an archaeological investigation. As previously stated, collaboration with community members can give the archaeologist access to new sources of knowledge and experience regarding the materials and cultures they study. However, there are also several ethical issues involved. The first is the traditional exclusion of local and indigenous people from participating in the archaeology of the cultures and peoples they associate with. This has often been the result of
the self-absorption of academics, who occasionally desire to have control over the subjects they study (Marshall 2002). Often it is the case that archaeologists have benefited from researching the ancestors of a living group, while that group has received none of these benefits. The hesitancy to include other points of view in the interpretation of the archaeological record in favour of more ‘scientific’ or ‘scholarly’ approaches has had the effect of separating some groups from their own cultural history, as well as the social, political, and economic implications implicit therein (Marshall 2002). This raises the ethical issue of archaeological work being on some level oppressive to the very groups that it is most closely connected to (Moser et al. 2002). Such a situation is intolerable from both an ethical and social viewpoint. Community archaeology can help to alleviate and reduce the severity of these problems, and instead promote an active connection between a living group and those who they identify as their ancestors. The practical advantages in community archaeology are also an impetus for its utilization. When involvement with archaeological sites becomes personal for the people in the area, they are more likely to contribute to the preservation of these sites (Moser et al. 2002:224).

A fairly comprehensive, albeit general, guide to the important aspects of creating a successful community archaeology project was outlined in an article by Moser et al. (2002). The authors have outlined seven components of the involvement with the community that they feel are necessary for a successful community archaeology project. These seven components paraphrased are:

1. **Communication and collaboration:** In establishing a partnership and a dialogue between archaeologists and the communities being studied, both sides must keep the other informed of their work. Archaeological excavations and reports must be open and available to the public. A personal and professional relationship between archaeologists and members of the community must be maintained both during and following the dig season (Moser et al. 2002:229-232).

2. **Employment and training:** By employing members of the local community, archaeological projects can get local people involved in the excavations, while providing training and experience in the heritage industry (2002:232-33).

3. **Public Presentation:** The presentation of materials recovered allows the community to see the work that has been done. This may come in the form of heritage centres or museum displays, which can engage the community in selecting which materials should be displayed (2002:234-236). This may also include the creation of interactive websites, such as that which was created by Carol McDavid in her work with the local African-American community in the excavations of the Levi Jordan plantation, which facilitated the inclusion of multiple viewpoints in the archaeological study (2002).

4. **Interviews and Oral history:** Consultation with members of the community, particularly local elders, can provide first hand knowledge of the areas under investigation. It can also give researchers insight into the very long traditional knowledge relating to their work. Oral histories and traditions can extend back long past the lives of the individual informant. While this information may not be guaranteed as completely accurate, it can provide information that is not obtainable in any other way. It is also in this component that the multiple viewpoints regarding the archaeological record can be seen, and used to broaden the view taken of the subject matter by archaeologists. It is also the case that such interviews can provide information that is outside of their direct content, such as patterns of thought and personal and social aspects of culture (Moser et al. 2002:236-238).

5. **Educational resources:** It is important in a project that bases itself in community involvement that archaeologists provide educational resources for local people, particularly youth and children. This can be done through workshops and presentations, as well as making books and artifact databases available (2002:238-239).

6. **Photo and Video archives:** In much the same way as presentations and educational resources are important, the creation and maintenance of a photo and video archive can be helpful in creating interest in archaeological
While issues of fairness and equality in the cooperation between archaeologists and local communities in archaeological projects are addressed, the crucial issue of power sharing and authority is ignored. If a project of this kind is to be successful, both groups must also share in the authority and decision making process. If one group has ultimate control over what the work being done, then the elements listed above would be trivialized, negating the possibility of real partnership with local communities.

Community archaeology also has an inherent political component. At a time when the reclamation of history and cultural identity have political value in debates over issues such as land claims and local economies, heritage projects can become political tools. For example, Andrew Crosby’s work in Fiji showed that archaeological projects could help give a political voice to communities that were traditionally silenced. When a peasant community became involved in the archaeological projects in the area, they were able to increase their economic standing, allowing them to lessen the gap between themselves and the landholding Chieftains (Crosby 2002). However, there are also instances in which the interaction between anthropologists and communities has been less successful. In many cases, anthropologists have been distrusted because of their perceived connection to a colonial power, or because of their work has been one-sided and excluded the views of local people (Clifford 2004:5). Despite this, anthropologists are needed in many cases to validate cultural claims in situations where identity is entangled in politics.

James Clifford’s work in Alaska with the Alaskan Native Heritage Center was a case in which a heritage organization desired to use archaeology to politically empower their community by establishing their identity as being separate from non-indigenous groups (2004:18). In these cases, archaeologists must remain conscious of their position in these political issues, and to keep their work from being co-opted. Some groups may wish to privilege the traditional view over the archaeological interpretation for political gain. Though this may be their own prerogative, the archaeologist must balance these viewpoints in their own work to avoid unjustified assertions. It is also important to remember in such situations that the community involved is itself not a homogenous entity that speaks with a single voice. There may be multiple interpretations made by different members, as well as a variety of intentions and interests, that could have different implications for archaeological interpretations (Marshall 2002:215).

Heritage and tradition cannot be assumed to be politically neutral. While cooperation between archaeologists and indigenous people can provide invaluable insights into the archaeological record, archaeologists must remain conscious of regional social issues to make sure that such collaborations are beneficial to both groups, and that one point of view does not become privileged over another. Though community archaeology may often lead to a multiplicity of incongruous points of view regarding the same subject matter, this multiplicity of view points in no way diminished the usefulness of association with a community, as it is the introduction of theses multiple viewpoints that is community archaeology’s greatest asset.

**Theoretical issues of oral history**

Oral histories and oral traditions can contain information that extends far back into the archaeological record. The personal accounts of living people who have lived in ways similar to the people represented in the archaeological record can provide specific information from their own experience that would not be available through any other method. While an artifact itself may give no evidence of its use or function, the personal account of someone who has used that tool can explain all of these things, in so far as they were true for that individual’s
experience. Though the explanation given may not have applied to all uses of that artifact throughout time, it does show one way that the tool was used for certain. The cultural patterns that have no functional purpose may also only be accessible through oral histories and traditions. These traditions may also extend far beyond living memory, through the transmission of stories from one generation to another.

Despite these benefits, several researchers have criticized the use of oral history in archaeology. Some, such as Ronald Mason, have criticized the use of oral history for its unempirical nature and unreliability (Mason 2000). Mason has contended that the use of oral history represents the end of academic archaeology, and that the inclusion of oral histories will mean that those interpretations will supersede the interpretations made by archaeologists (2000). He also criticizes oral histories for their perceived inaccuracy and potential inauthenticity, saying, “recording the past has necessarily always been incidental and subsidiary to the main functions of that genre… it is a difficult task to tease out what may qualify as bona fide historical data” (Mason 2002:263). However, there are also many people who have defended the use of oral history in archaeological interpretations. Roger Echo-hawk, Ian Hodder, Max Friesen, and many others, have shown that oral histories and multiple viewpoints can provide information that may be invaluable to archaeologists. Responding to criticism like those made by Mason, these authors point out that these viewpoints are not given precedence over archaeological interpretations, but instead add another element to a deeper pool of information (Echo-Hawk 2000; Friesen 2002; Hodder 2004). In addition to providing information directly relevant to the interpretations of the functional properties of artifacts and site features, these multiple viewpoints may raise questions and concerns that would otherwise not be considered. It is this additional depth to archaeological interpretation and research that the inclusion of oral histories and traditions can bring is the reason for its value to archaeology.

**Theoretical Issues of Ethnographic Analogy**

The interpretation of the archaeological record, particularly in the North American arctic, has often been facilitated by ethnographic analogy. The arctic areas of North America have a detailed and rich ethnographic record, compiled from over a century of research.

Community archaeology is often inherently tied to the use of ethnographic analogy. By using informants from a descendant culture, or one that was not descendant but indigenous to the region, archaeologists are making an analogical interpretation of the sites excavated. In much the same ways that oral histories have been useful, ethnographic analogies can give insights into cultural practices that would not be accessible in any other way.

In general, archaeologists attempt to make analogies between cultures that are closely related historically, follow similar cultural patterns, or produce a similar material culture. For example, the Northwest Alaskan Inupiat have been used to interpret the social and spiritual practices associated with whaling sites from the Classic Thule (Grier 1999:12). Similarly, the modern Inuit have been used to make analogical interpretations of more recent Thule sites, on the basis of a shared cultural history and similar material culture and subsistence patterns (Friesen 2002:332). These inferences have allowed archaeologists to theorize about cultural patterns, such as the hierarchical nature of Thule whaling practices, that they would otherwise have little or no relevant evidence for (Grier 1999:24).

While ethnographic analogy has often been a useful and productive interpretive tool, there have been several criticisms made regarding its applicability. Some archaeologists have argued that ethnographic analogy inherently limits the interpretations that an archaeologist can make. By filtering questions through an ethnographic analogy, it is possible to overlook the diversity and variety that exists across cultures (Wylie 1985:64). However, like oral history, these problems can be compensated for by not using these analogies as direct evidence, but instead use them while conscious of their inherent problems and limitations (Wylie 1985:106). Interpretations based on ethnographic analogy should be used as one possible interpretation out of many, without being considered directly factual. While these interpretations may not be complete or entirely accurate, and archaeologist using these analogies who also remains conscious of their inherent limitations and potential to confine their perspectives can still find useful information. By considering these inferences as a possibility instead of the single ‘true’ explanation, archaeologists can maintain a balanced perspective without privileging one line of evidence to the exclusion of others. Ethnographic
analogy does not give direct factual evidence, but instead a suggestion as to the ways in which archaeological cultures may have lived. By including these interpretations in the wide array of sources of information, greater depth is added to archaeological studies.

**The Kitikmeot Heritage Society and the Iqaluktuuq Project**

The KHS is a non-profit volunteer based organization whose goal is to “promote and celebrate the history, culture, language and diversity of the people of the Kitikmeot region” (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005a). The KHS, like other community based heritage projects, concerns itself with involving the larger community with their work. The KHS has established a community library and culture centre that have displays concerning traditional and modern life ways. The focus of these displays is not the objects presented, but the knowledge regarding the people of the past that they provide (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005b). Other ongoing projects at the centre include the Kitikmeot Atlas Project, which collects and preserves the names given to local areas by indigenous people, and a traditional skin-sewing project, which seeks to pass on traditional skills (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005c). The goal of these programs is to involve members of the community, particularly youth, in their culture (2005c). As stated by McDavid, the Internet can be a useful tool in programs designed to make research available to the public (2002). The KHS has created an extensive website to make their projects easily accessible to a broader audience. The website has information regarding the finds and site histories of the areas being excavated in the Iqaluktuuq Project. This information is presented in non-technical language with a particular focus on ways of life, and with photographs to illustrate the objects and sites discussed (Freisen 2005b). Another section based on oral history is the life story of Stephen Angualalik, a fur trader and local leader who was well known throughout the Kitikmeot region (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005d). This section describes his life, and the interactions between indigenous and immigrant populations both socially and in trade (2005d). The website also provides information about their other cultural programs in a similarly interactive format. For example, there is a section that contains recordings of conversations with local Inuit elders discussing a variety of topics. These recordings are available in both the original Inuinnaqtun and as English translations (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005e). It also has its own web store, which sells a variety of merchandise relating to the cultural history of the Inuit. As stated by Moser et al, this kind of community control of merchandising can provide economic benefits to community based projects (2002). On the whole, this website seems to fulfill many of the goals outlined by McDavid, and is of value to academics and non-academics alike (2002).

**The Iqaluktuuq Project**

The major archaeological project currently being undertaken by the KHS is the Iqaluktuuq Project. This project was started in July 2000 as a collaborative effort between the KHS and the University of Toronto. The Iqaluktuuq area contains a variety of sites that span the entire history of human occupation in the Iqaluktuuq area (Friesen 2002:330). The primary archaeologist involved in this project is Max Friesen, Associate Professor at the university of Toronto. Friesen, a specialist in hunter-gatherer socio-economic organization and the Dorset/Thule culture contact debate, was specifically chosen by the KHS because of his interest in working in collaboration with local Inuit populations, and in incorporating oral histories in his analysis (Friesen 2005a, Rusk 2005). Friesen describes the goals and intentions of the Iqaluktuuq Project by saying, “The goal of the archaeology at Iqaluktuuq is to reconstruct, and compare, the life ways of the several very different peoples who have lived there over the past four millennia” (Friesen 2005a). Though this project is still in progress, it has so far led to the publication of two articles, as well as the development of a website detailing the history of the area and the nature of the fieldwork being conducted.

One of the major issues that this project has been able to shed light on is the Dorset/Thule culture contact debate. Some researchers, such as Robert Park, contend that the contact between these cultures came only in the form of scavenging, and that no significant contact between the two groups occurred (Park 1993). However, others, such as Robert McGhee, have suggested that it is possible that there was direct contact between the two groups, albeit minimal (McGhee 1997). The Iqaluktuuq Project has been able to provide some evidence in regards to this debate, which are discussed below.

The area of the Ekalluk River referred to as ‘Iqaluktuuq’ is so named for the abundance
of arctic char, an important food source for many of the people who have inhabited the area over the last two millennium (Friesen 2002:343, 331). The numerous sites in the area have yielded dates between 3700 BP to the present day, spanning the entire length of human activity in the arctic (Friesen 2004:686). The sites in the Iqaluktuuq area are important not only because of their long timeline, but also because of the state of preservation. Organic materials have been well preserved, with large amounts of bone, wood, and antler being found on all sites in this area (Friesen 2002:335). It is also an area that is important to the local community because of its abundance of arctic char, and the historical connections they have to the region (Friesen 2002:335).

While many archaeologists have chosen not to use the Inuit in analogies regarding the Dorset because of the distinction between the Paleo-Eskimo and Neo-Eskimo cultures, Friesen has included this analogy in his interpretations. Even though the local community may not be connected to the Dorset in the same way they are to the Thule, the analogy can still provide some useful information when used in combination with other sources (Friesen 2002:333).

The most interesting feature of the Iqaluktuuq Project is the direct involvement of local Inuit elders. During the first week of the dig season, elders are brought out to the excavation sites to observe the work being done, and give their interpretations of both the artifacts recovered and the area in which the sites are situated (2002:333). The KHS has found that conducting these interviews while present in the areas under discussion have been more productive than interviews conducted in other contexts (2002:333). These elders have been able to share their recollections of their youth in groups that had a similar material culture to that which was being excavated, which has allowed them to explain the function and purpose of many features and tools that have been found (2002:336). For example, the accounts given by one elder were able to suggest possible hunting patterns of the Dorset. Because the Dorset lived in the same environment under the same conditions and with the same resources, it is not impossible that similar hunting patterns occurred in the different cultures occupying the area (2002:340). Whether or not this is the case is indeterminable, as the results of such activity would not be recognizable in the archaeological record, but in this case the use of oral history has provided a hypothesis in a situation where no other source could provide one (2002:341). In cases when the elders have had no experience with the artifacts and features being recovered, they can provide informed speculation based on their own experiences (2002:341). These speculations may not be 'right', but they do serve the purpose of providing another point of view in the interpretations (Rusk 2005).

Archaeological and Social Results of the Iqaluktuuq Project

The Iqaluktuuq Project has already had several benefits to both the archaeological understanding of the area, and to the community involved in the project. So far, there have been two published articles based on the work with the Iqaluktuuq Project by Friesen. The first article, "Analogues at Iqaluktuuq: the social context of archaeological inference in Nunavut, Arctic Canada" (2002), provided an explanation of the nature of the project, and the interaction between archaeologists and the local community, as described above. Friesen’s attitude towards the project and his theoretical approach is also included in this paper. He states his initial reluctance to using an ethnographic analogy between the Inuit and Dorset, and his reasons for doing so (Friesen 2002:338). Friesen wanted to use these analogies not only because of their possible relevance to the archaeological interpretations being made, but also to acknowledge and support the efforts made by the local community, and include their views on the subject matter (2002:338).

The second article is specifically focused on the information that some of these sites have yielded regarding the ongoing Late Dorset/Thule contact debate. While the bulk of this article is devoted to the specific details of the excavation in terms of the collection of artifacts, the layout of the site, and the radiocarbon dates taken from the site, the evidence so far supports the theory that these cultures existed contemporaneously, but in general avoided contact with each other (Friesen 2004:690). This information seems to be consistent with the oral traditions of the Inuit. Stories of the Tuniit being driven away by the Inuit suggest that, if the Tuniit are in some way representative of the Late Dorset, the interaction between these groups was minimal and uncooperative (Friesen 2004:690). Friesen uses this information to postulate the nature of migrations and adaptability of these populations, what the history of the Iqaluktuuq is, and speculates as to the extent that these
cultures influenced each other (Friesen 2004:690).

There have been several benefits to the local communities involved in this project. The projects that the KHS has created have all succeeded in recording and passing on traditional accounts. The creation of a cultural centre has established connections with other museums and heritage groups, which has facilitated the borrowing of artifacts for displays (Kitikmeot Heritage Society 2005b). More importantly, the KHS has directly engaged their local community, particularly youth, in their heritage.

In addition to the successes of the KHS itself, the collaboration with the University of Toronto has been beneficial to the community. Because of the small number of archaeologist living within the territory, the involvement of archaeologists from other provinces has meant that the excavations can actually take place (Rusk 2005). Many of the students hired to work on the sites are from the local community (Rusk 2005). Their participation in the project gives them training and experience in archaeological fieldwork, gainful employment, and a direct involvement with their own cultural history (Rusk 2005). Friesen has maintained the relationships with the community through presentations and slideshows of his excavations, further engaging the community in the project (Rusk 2005). This collaboration has also included archaeological decisions made not purely for the benefit of academia, but also for the benefit the kinds of displays most relevant for the KHS to display (Friesen 2002:336). There has also been a specific incident in which a local elder was able to provide information that corrected one of the displays in the KHS cultural centre. An object on display had been incorrectly labelled regarding its use and function, which was corrected by a local elder who had used similar tools in their youth (Rusk 2005). In a broader sense, the Iqaluktuq Project and the KHS have provided an example of successful community archaeology project, which may serve to promote this kind of fieldwork and involvement with local cultures in other archaeological projects.

Conclusions

Overall, it seems as though the Iqaluktuq Project and the Kitikmeot Heritage Society have been greatly successful. The information gained from the involvement of local elders during the excavations in the Iqaluktuq area has given archaeologists new ways of understanding both the Thule and Dorset cultures. Though there may be criticism of the use of oral history and ethnographic analogy, their judicious use in Friesen’s articles shows that these sources can be used without detracting from the validity of the interpretations presented. In fact, this project has shown specific examples where the information given by local people can benefit the interpretation of the archaeological record. Participants both from within and outside the community believe that the project has been a success so far, and feel that the relationship between the KHS and the University of Toronto has been mutually beneficial. Though the Iqaluktuq Project is not yet completed, it has thus far been successful both in terms of the archaeological work conducted, and in the relationships that it has fostered. Community archaeology is not only important as a way to gain new insights into the archaeological record, but also as a way to engage communities in the archaeological process. It is imperative for archaeologists to realise that their work exists within a broader social context, and is fundamentally connected to the associated communities, for both academic and ethnical reasons.

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