

Grounding the Past: the Praxis of Participatory Archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico

Alexander Geurds

Reviewed by LISA BREGLIA

At the heart of Alexander Geurds' newly released study of the central Mexican Mixteca Alta is the gritty reality that so-called 'community archaeology' may only be a utopian ideal. Surprising? Perhaps. Unfounded? Absolutely not. In this relatively short text focusing on the archaeological site of Monte Negro and its surrounding communities, *Grounding the past* is a timely study of the past and present lives of archaeological monuments. In the course of his own fieldwork, Geurds recognized that local communities have long been left out of not only the interpretive practice of regional archaeological and heritage management, but also out of interpretive practices of the past – a past that is not terribly distant and remote, but one that is everyday-lived and palpable within the landscape. Geurds thus produces (alongside a more conventional reporting of archaeological findings mostly based on several seasons of mapping and surface collections) a narrative reflection on community interaction in the surroundings of Monte Negro.

When it comes to the documentation of the complications of the micro-level interactions with local communities in the logistics of hiring workers, seeking permission to access land while mapping, establishing neighbourly relations among the many settlements a site may cross, disseminating information to counter the rumour mill, and so on, Geurds' account is certainly credible. Many a reader will find familiar terrain here. These issues chart Geurds' experience as part of workaday archaeology. So why, one might ask, (1) write about these experiences, and (2) have these logistical commonplaces form the grounds for a new model of archaeological praxis? Because he is attempting to move out of the realm of a logistical engagement with local communities into a participatory relationship that has an ethical dimension. In Oaxacan archaeology specifically and Mesoamerican research more generally, this element has been missing – a lapse that hurts not only human relations but, when remedied, might enhance research results and heritage management, too.

Within a rather loose framework informed by postprocessual concerns (notably reflexivity), Geurds uses the occasion of his interactions with the communities of Santiago Tilatongo and Santiago Apoala to build a provisional (rather than prescriptive) model of 'participatory archaeology', set in contradistinction to more problematic modes of 'community archaeology'. The model is designed to

encompass and encourage interpretations which highlight the multiplicity, diversity and partiality of opinion, values, knowledge both past and present. While his efforts are important here, there are a couple of ways in which his arsenal comes up a bit short. In the first instance, he seems less than prepared to take on the sticky complexities of theoretical issues, including those he seems to find central to his argument: power and identity. Geurds recognizes that relationships between archaeologists and local communities are power-laden, an insight shared in various forms to multiple ends by unnamed and unengaged colleagues from Annapolis to Great Zimbabwe. The chapter ‘Deconstructing community participation’ presents a newsy, anecdotal account of the different points of contact between archaeologists and local residents in the course of fieldwork that several times references the importance of constructed identities. Even as we are expecting Geurds to be assessing the terms upon which local communities negotiate the archaeological presence in their communities, his consideration of constructed identities only takes into account, rather strangely, the identities of archaeologists. Ignored, in effect, are how local residents are constructed as so-called descendants, stakeholders, heritage workers and managers, and interpreters of the everyday-lived past. This latter issue is the very heart of what I would have thought to have been a new, improved, revived, critical model of archaeological praxis.

The other area in which his discussion is less than satisfactory is in terms of the structural and aesthetic tension in the book between ‘straight’ archaeology (reported in the third person) and the discussion of community participation (told through the first person). In a sense, the book reads as an archaeology report with a supplementary discussion of community involvement. And remarkably enough, when we do learn a bit about Tilantongo and Apoala, the view is narrowly top-down, focusing almost exclusively on local political authorities rather than a broader spectrum of community residents. Geurds critiques the sort of community archaeology that ‘oversimplifies the lived realities . . . of descendants and stakeholders’ – an important and appropriate critique indeed (p. 179). Yet the lived realities of local residents are perhaps dimmer and sketchier than what book length study and a proper model of what Geurds’ new ‘participatory archaeology’ should have promised.

Geurds is strongest when he focuses on a specific manifestation of local participation in archaeological interpretation. As a case in point: things come together in the sixth chapter, a relatively short discussion of landscape. Specifically, Geurds draws on local Mixtec oral tradition and daily practice to examine the use of toponyms in the cultural geography of the Apoala valley. Yet for either archaeologists or ethnographers, it is difficult to see whether this method is at all novel. Perhaps it is for the archaeological record in Oaxacan/Mesoamerican archaeology per se because unlike in the work of Geurds’ predecessors he works extensively with the local residents and acknowledges their contributions. But is this simply an opening of the hermeneutic circle of archaeological interpretation a la ethnoarchaeology? Not really (because of the emphasis on modern contexts of meaning), but it would have been helpful to emphasize this distinction as part of the Geurds’ discussion on local oral tradition. It also would have very much been worth the effort to translate the oral history narratives tucked away (unfortunately untranslated) in

the book's bulky appendices. Moves like this would go a long way in 'showing' rather than 'saying', this chapter's main point about communal narratives of local history and landscape in the Mixteca Alta.

Grounding the past perhaps inadvertently calls to mind something that should always be remembered when any researcher sets off with the good intentions of involving local communities in their projects (the rosier version of community archaeology that Geurds is contending with throughout the book). The lesson here should be that researchers committed to a participatory praxis are obligated to see these sites and landscapes through a slightly altered lens. Rather than tacked on or sandwiched between archaeological data, studies of community involvement ought to work more seamlessly within a text as a single, however experimental, project.

Grounding the past: the praxis of participatory archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico. Alexander Geurds. CNWS Publications (vol. 150) (Leiden University, 2007). 367 pp., 80 illus. €59.00 978-90-5789-150-2.

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