EAZ Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift

EAZ 58, 2024, X–XX. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/ERJB9626 • CC-BY 4.0
Submitted: 03.12.2024 | Accepted: 05.12.2024 | Published: 18.12.2024

Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood Practices: Report on the International Conference in Barcelona, 16–18 October 2024

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Abstract

The international conference *Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood Practices: Exploring the Nexus of Food Production, Resource Management and Sustainability* was hosted at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain, from October 16th to 18th, 2024. This event was co-organized by Spanish and Italian institutions and funded by the project *CAMP – (Re)Constructing the Archaeology of Mobile Pastoralism* and the Department of Humanities of Universitat Pompeu Fabra. The conference gathered a diverse group of participants, including esteemed experts in ethnoarchaeology and enthusiastic early-career researchers, who attended both in-person and online. The case studies and more general discussion papers covered four main topics: (1) reflections on the discipline, (2) Traditional Ecological Knowledge, (3) pastoralism and (4) social aspects of food and resources. A key point emphasized in several presentations was the importance of including and involving local communities, which was encouraged as a vital component for future collaborations.

Keywords:
ethnoarchaeology, livelihood practices, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Indigenous communities, conference report

Introduction

The conference *Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood Practices: Exploring the Nexus of Food Production, Resource Management and Sustainability* was held at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Ciutadella Campus in Barcelona, Spain, from October 16th to 18th, 2024 (Fig. 1). It was organized in a joint effort by Stefano Biagetti (UPF), Carla Lancelotti (UPF and Institución Catalana de Investigación y Estudios Avanzados (ICREA)), Debora Zurro (Institución Milà i Fontanals-CSIC) and Francesca Lugli (Società Italiana di Etnoarcheologia). The event was made possible thanks to financial support from the ERC-funded project *CAMP – (Re)Constructing the Archaeology of Mobile Pastoralism*[1] and the Department of Humanities of Universitat Pompeu Fabra. A total of twenty-eight researchers presented their studies and engaged in discussions on the *status quo* and future directions of the discipline. Due to the international composition of the participants, the presentations covered a wide range of topics, spanning research from five continents.[2]

1 PI Stefano Biagetti, GA 101088842.

2 Conference programme and abstracts are available at https://eventum.upf.edu/104526/programme/ethnoarchaeology-of-livelihood-practices-2024.html (accessed: 12/12/2024).

Figure 1: International conference *Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood Practices*, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 2024. Photo: S. Biagetti.

The themes of the conference encompassed four broad subjects:

1. Reflections on the discipline;
2. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK);
3. Pastoralism;
4. Social aspects of food and resources.

Overarching discussions addressed the lingering impact of colonialism, which currently renders the discipline less appealing within critical cultural studies. This highlighted the need for a reimagined perception and practice of ethnoarchaeology. To tackle this challenge, the further development of new materialism theory was identified as particularly promising. More broadly, this calls for adopting a new mindset to drive meaningful change.

Reflections on the discipline

Presenters at the conference concurred that ethnoarchaeological research explores the interplay of traditional practices, environmental management and socio-economic shifts (see also David/Kramer 2001). Following a critical analysis of the current state of the discipline, the role and responsibility of researchers – across generations, scientific fields and beyond academia – were emphasized (notably contributions by Cunningham 2024; Lugli 2024). It was argued that the validation of ethnoarchaeological concepts is essential within the broader field of archaeology. Moreover, archaeological methodologies and interpretative frameworks can and should be further developed through the integration of ethnoarchaeological approaches.

Rethinking the discipline of ethnoarchaeology and its approaches through deliberate transdisciplinary efforts is essential to breaking down entrenched 'theoretical silos' that limit interdisciplinary dialogue and innovation. This requires a critical reassessment of the discipline's fundamental elements, prompting questions not only about *what* archaeology studies but also *why* and *how* these studies matter in contemporary contexts. Such reflection must encourage openness to shifts in mindset. By embracing diverse perspectives – whether cultural, theoretical, methodological or ontological – these differences transform into strength rather than a challenge. Fostering flexibility, multivocality and inclusivity allows the discipline to evolve and become more relevant and impactful in an ever-changing world.

A present concern in ethnoarchaeology is the risk of disconnecting the 'ethno-' from the 'archaeology.' Therefore, one of the primary challenges for this multidisciplinary field is to cultivate a strong and integrated bond between these two components.

Furthermore, the collection and storage of samples and ethnoarchaeological artefacts present ethical implications and practical challenges. These include respecting the interests of Indigenous communities, ensuring the restitution of material culture, navigating export restrictions on samples and material culture and dealing with limited physical storage capacity.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

Ethnoarchaeological fieldwork employs immersive approaches to learn from traditional practices, with interviews uncovering the ideological background behind material choices and ecological management. Some case studies involve first-hand learning of traditional processes – from sourcing to production (e.g., contributions by Houle 2024; Kerfant/Ibardo 2024; Nixon-Darcus 2024). This complex and multifaceted set of ideas and practices aligns with the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which shapes both traditional crafting and subsistence practices. Berkes et al. (2000, 1252) define TEK as:

> *'[...] a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.'*

A shift toward the commercialization of livelihood practices, driven by the effects of globalization, is contemporarily impacting TEK in various contexts. This makes the work of recording and preserving traditional techniques all the more urgent, as many are being rapidly replaced or forgotten.

Traditional land-use practices result from long-term, resilient human-environmental interaction and tend to actively shape landscapes (e.g., papers by Manzini 2024; Pescini/Cevasco 2024). Besides supporting biodiversity in general, TEK serves as a cultural expression of local socio-ecological systems, sustaining, for instance, food-related practices (e.g., Moreno/Pescini 2024; Pescini/Cevasco 2024). Modern environmental conservation policies, however, risk impacting species that depend on these traditional practices (Pescini/Cevasco 2024).

TEK can also be observed in ritualized cultivation and ideologically or symbolically validated environmental management practices (e.g., Cascon/Silva 2024; Falquina Aparicio 2024; Filatova et al. 2024; Manzini 2024; Sabnis 2024). Cases of cultivation under extreme conditions, such as rainfed agriculture in drylands (Lancelotti et al. 2024), demonstrate how risk management, flexibility and practices that do not aim at maximization are beneficial elements of TEK.

Environmental proxies, such as phytoliths, offer valuable insights into ecological management strategies, particularly those related to plants (e.g., Kerfant/Ibardo 2024; Ruiz-Giralt 2024). Understanding and preserving traditional practices, especially those identified as flexible and resilient, is crucial for future human societies, as global warming leads to rapidly changing and unstable environments.

Animal husbandry and pastoralism

Animal husbandry practices have not been immune to the influence of capitalism and Western economy, especially as these have encroached on more isolated regions. However, pastoral practices continue to persist as well-established methods to provide food security, thanks to their adaptability to environmental and socio-economic contexts (e.g., Balbo et al. 2016; Jenet et al. 2016).

Contemporary pastoralist communities show regionally diverse socio-economic systems, yet archaeological data often reveals strong spatial continuity in mobility patterns across a given landscape (e.g., contributions by Falay 2024; Houle 2024; Piezonka et al. 2024). Modern herds may be moved between high- and low-altitude seasonal settlements due to various factors, including weather conditions, availability of grazing material and even hazards like insects. These mobility patterns mirror those seen in the archaeological record. Ethnoarchaeological case studies presented at the conference employed a combination of observations and interviews with local pastoralists to help interpret spatial and functional analyses of archaeological features through knowledge exchange (e.g., Falay 2024; Houle 2024; Martín Rodríguez et al. 2024; Piezonka et al. 2024). Pastoral landscapes – comprising elements such as pastures, tracks, water points and settlement sites (Biagetti et al. 2024) – are studied by ethnoarchaeologists using markers, such as phytoliths, geochemical and organic residue analyses, often coupled with a spatial analysis approach (e.g., Biagetti et al. 2024; Égüez et al. 2024).

Mobility and seasonal migration serve as strategies to manage resources and spread risk over space and time (Balbo et al. 2016). However, these practices can be restricted by external factors such as environmental and political challenges. Cases of architectural and mobility adaptations (e.g., Piezonka et al. 2024) demonstrate flexibility while preserving cultural traditions, balancing innovation and adaptation with traditional nomadic livelihoods.

Social aspects of food and resources

The investigation of the intricate social, cultural and ecological dimensions of food production and consumption, as well as resource management, is a dynamic and multifaceted research venue within ethnoarchaeology, as demonstrated by diverse contributions at the conference. Adaptive strategies for managing scarcity reflect various responses, including mobility, resource acquisition and consumption adjustments, which are shaped by whether shortages are anticipated or unforeseen (Zurro/Garcia Granero 2024; see also Houle 2024; Maltseva 2024; Manzini 2024; Schulz/Adamou 2024).

Several studies highlight the importance of food and livelihood practices that strengthen social cohesion, rooted in social memory and ritualized and/or symbolic conceptions of the environment, tools and foodstuffs (e.g., Cascon/Silva 2024; Falquina Aparicio 2024; Filatova et al. 2024; Kuto 2024; Manzini 2024; Picornell-Gelabert et al. 2024; Sabnis 2024). This also encompasses cases of exclusion through liminal food or practices and in the system of specialization and gendered tasks (e.g., Cascon/Silva 2024; Kurcz 2024; Nixon-Darcus 2024).

The investigation of change and continuity in materials and practices related to food production offers insights into social aspects and identity. As global markets penetrate small-scale communities, patterns of resource use and labour are changing across various socio-ecological contexts (e.g., Arioua et al. 2024; Houle 2024; Sabnis 2024), often accompanied by a loss of TEK and connected practices, as mentioned above. However, despite changes in materials, functionality is not necessarily compromised, reflecting continuity in some cases (e.g., Mayor et al. 2024).

Discussion

The final discussion was a pivotal moment to assess the current state of ethnoarchaeology. The aim was to identify key points that underpinned the varied studies presented over the three days of the conference, which will be summarized in this section. Problematic aspects of ethnoarchaeology were critically analyzed, and potential solutions were suggested.

Ethnoarchaeology faces challenges in perception, largely due to the enduring legacy of colonialism, which has diminished its appeal. This underscores the pressing need for a reimagined and revitalized understanding of the discipline. To overcome this obstacle, the further development of new materialism theory has been proposed. Ethnoarchaeology has traditionally been a slow discipline, requiring in-depth theoretical thinking. In recent years, it has gradually detached itself from material culture, focusing more on present practices with less direct connection to archaeological evidence. This gap should be addressed by reintegrating material analyses into the study of practices. Such a shift would also allow for shorter studies and faster publication, complementing long-term research projects, thus enhancing interconnectivity and promoting greater recognition of ethnoarchaeological concepts within academia.

Additionally, during the discussion, the necessity of establishing a comprehensive statement — some suggested referring to it as a 'manifesto' — on ethnoarchaeology emerged. This statement would guide future practices and ethical commitments within the field. It should include defining fundamental terms and aims of ethnoarchaeology and specifying the best practices for the collection, storage and accessibility of data and materials, based on the interests of the origin communities. Research results should be published open access, and there should be a concerted effort to improve the organization and oversight of archival records.

Furthermore, alongside guided observations, it is advisable to engage in active collaboration and co-create research with local communities based on their interests and needs (Piezonka et al. 2024). Ethically, the discipline must uphold principles of social justice, ensuring the inclusion of diverse worldviews and perspectives. Hence, addressing inequalities in research resources and practices is essential to create a more equitable and inclusive approach to ethnoarchaeology, fostering collaboration, transparency and the respectful exchange of knowledge.

Finally, ethnoarchaeologists bear responsibility across generations of researchers, other scientific disciplines and beyond academia. Engaging local communities in all research steps, from research design to the communication of results, should be standard practice to maintain a symbiotic relationship between external researchers and the community members, who are vital to the research process. Ethnoarchaeologists also have the responsibility to raise awareness of the socio-political, economic and environmental challenges faced by many of these communities. Two key topics related to ethnoarchaeology are conflict and responsibilities. The current global geopolitical situation has tangible effects on academia, such as fieldwork obstructions in certain regions (e.g., Schulz/Adamou 2024)

and the limited virtual presence of some participants due to restrictive visa requirements. Similarly, Indigenous communities are vulnerable towards external aggressive factors that rapidly affect their way of life, challenging their resilience. This harm includes the loss of history, culture and TEK. Ethnoarchaeological conferences and similar events serve as an ideal platform to highlight these urgent issues.

Conclusions

The conference provided a rich and nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between traditional knowledge systems, resource management and socio-cultural adaptations across diverse global contexts. It highlighted the dualities inherent in contemporary ethnoarchaeological research, particularly the tension between preserving traditional practices and adapting to modern influences within Indigenous communities. The discussions emphasized the resilience and adaptability of these communities as they navigate environmental and socio-political changes.

By addressing a broad range of topics, the conference demonstrated how studying contemporary practices can prompt a reassessment of archaeological methodologies and their relevance in understanding the past. Furthermore, it showcased how insights gained from ethnoarchaeology can contribute to addressing modern challenges, such as cultural heritage preservation, environmental sustainability and equitable development. This approach underscores the critical importance of Indigenous resilience and adaptability as foundational to cultural and environmental sustainability.

Ethnoarchaeological conferences, such as this recent gathering in Barcelona, are indispensable for advancing our understanding of these complex dynamics. They serve as platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue, bridging fields such as archaeology, anthropology and environmental studies to explore themes of resource management and socio-cultural resilience. By bringing together diverse global perspectives, these events enrich our understanding of both historical and contemporary human adaptations. Moreover, they reveal the potential of ethnoarchaeology not only to enhance our comprehension of the past but also to inform strategies for fostering sustainable and inclusive futures in a rapidly changing world.

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