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Ethnoarchaeology as a State of Mind

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Abstract

This paper reflects on ethnoarchaeology as a 'state of mind' rather than a discrete methodological approach. Drawing on discussions from the *Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood* conference held in Barcelona in 2024, we situate ethnoarchaeology within broader disciplinary debates on epistemology, social relevance and the role of archaeology in a rapidly changing world. We engage with the historical development of ethnoarchaeology, highlighting its dual trajectory between particularistic, context-specific studies and cross-cultural, model-building approaches as well as longstanding critiques concerning analogy, epistemological bias and limited engagement with diverse knowledge systems. Building on these discussions, we develop a perspective in which ethnoarchaeology is understood as a reflexive and relational practice grounded in epistemological and ontological plurality. This perspective emphasizes dialogue among different forms of expertise, including Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and challenges extractive or asymmetrical research models. We argue that ethnoarchaeology can contribute to more inclusive and critically informed archaeological interpretations by foregrounding variation in the present, clarifying the limits of inference and expanding interpretive possibilities. Ultimately, ethnoarchaeology, understood as a state of mind, offers a framework for engaging with difference, fostering collaborative knowledge production and rethinking how archaeology relates to contemporary social and environmental challenges.

Keywords:
ethnoarchaeology, epistemological plurality, Indigenous knowledge, knowledge production, archaeological theory

Introduction

In October 2024, participants of the *Ethnoarchaeology of Livelihood: Exploring the Nexus of Food Production, Resource Management, and Sustainability* conference gathered at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) in Barcelona, Spain, to present and discuss their research. Although the workshop was not specifically focused on theoretical or methodological questions, a shared concern emerged across presentations and discussions: the growing need to critically assess the role of ethnoarchaeology in contemporary research. This paper builds on the main arguments discussed at the conference and represents a collective effort by the authors to reflect on the present state and future directions of ethnoarchaeology.

Why ethnoarchaeology, why now?

Over the past decade, archaeology has entered a phase of intense self-reflection regarding its social role, epistemological foundations and future trajectories. Across the discipline, scholars have increasingly questioned not only *how* we study the past, but also *why* archaeology matters in a rapidly transforming and deeply unequal world. These debates have unfolded both at a general level (e.g., Kintigh 2014; Cipolla et al. 2024) and within specific subfields, including the archaeology and ethnoarchaeology of pastoralism (Rouse 2024; Biagetti 2025), hunter-gatherer archaeology (Elliott et al. 2022) and archaeology and ethnoarchaeology of rainfed agriculture (Ruiz-Giralt et al. 2023). Collectively, this body of work signals a growing concern with archaeology's capacity to contribute meaningfully to contemporary societal challenges and to the imagining of fairer and more sustainable futures.

One prominent axis of debate has crystallized around the tension between increasingly positivistic, data-intensive approaches – often framed in terms of 'big data,' modelling and computational scalability – and perspectives that emphasize relationality, historicity and ontological plurality, frequently associated with posthumanist, Indigenous or decolonial frameworks (e.g., Kristiansen 2009; Cunningham/MacEachern 2016). Although these positions are sometimes presented as antithetical, their coexistence reflects a deeper disciplinary struggle: how to balance explanatory power, ethical responsibility and social relevance in a world characterized by profound cultural, ecological, social and political diversity (Schreiber 2022).

At the same time, non-Western and non-industrial perspectives and knowledge systems have gained increasing visibility and legitimacy within the mainstream social disciplines and archaeological discourse. Influential works such as *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) have challenged long-standing evolutionary narratives through a rethinking of social complexity, while broader societal developments – such as the United Nations' declaration of 2023 as the International Year of Millets or the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists in 2026 – underscore a growing recognition of Indigenous and traditional livelihoods beyond academia. Importantly, archaeology itself is no longer practiced exclusively *about* such communities: an increasing number of scholars from non-Western backgrounds, including representatives of minority and Indigenous communities, are now actively shaping archaeological and ethnoarchaeological research agendas (e.g., Lyons/David 2019; Jamir 2024).

Within this evolving landscape, European research and innovation policy has articulated new operational frameworks aimed at aligning scientific knowledge production with societal engagement and real-world experimentation. Concepts such as Living Labs and Lighthouses, promoted by the European Commission and supported across Horizon Europe (2021–2027) by the European Research Council, reflect a broader shift toward place-based, participatory and demonstrative modes of knowledge production. Formulated from the mid-2000s onward and consolidated in the early 2020s, these frameworks resonate with – and partially institutionalize – calls within archaeology to move beyond extractive research practices toward more collaborative, situated and reflexive forms of inquiry.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. One of the most persistent lies not simply in the limited degree of transdisciplinary collaboration between archaeology and social or cultural anthropology, but in the deeper epistemological question of who is acknowledged as a legitimate producer of knowledge. Although ethnoarchaeology has historically been positioned at this interface, in practice the exchange has often been partial, asymmetrical, conceptually biased and methodologically constrained. As a result, archaeology continues to struggle with integrating contemporary social theory, ethnographic insight and Indigenous epistemologies and agendas in ways that move beyond analogy or data extraction. This limitation has been increasingly challenged, but not yet overcome, by Indigenous and collaborative approaches, particularly in contexts where Indigenous communities maintain political visibility and authority over land and heritage (e.g., Watkins 2000; Atalay 2012; see also Smith/Wobst 2005).

These disciplinary challenges unfold against a broader global backdrop marked by escalating polycrises. Over the last decade, the world has witnessed a sharp rise in authoritarian politics and undermining of international law, widening wealth inequality, increasing racism and group-targeted violence and the normalization of war and terror as structuring conditions of everyday life. In such a context, archaeology cannot retreat into methodological self-referentiality. The question is no longer *whether* archaeology should engage with contemporary concerns, but *how* it can do so responsibly, reflexively and without reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to critique.

It is within this conjuncture that ethnoarchaeology gains renewed urgency. By engaging with living communi-

ties, ethnoarchaeology has the potential to open gateways toward understanding the diversity and plurality of ways in which humans organize social life, engage with more-than-human worlds, build and negotiate relationships with environments and sustain collective action. This includes not only models of resilience, cooperation, solidarity and care but also a deeper comprehension of conflict, exclusion and social fragility. Ethnoarchaeology, understood not merely as a method but as a state of mind, can thus contribute to envisioning alternative forms of being together – past, present and future – that foreground relationality, responsibility and shared well-being.

In this context, a critical awareness of the historical settings in which disciplines have developed – archaeology in this case – becomes essential, functioning as a kind of 'epistemological social standpoint.' This perspective recognizes the centres where knowledge is produced, the benefits associated with certain research programmes, the reproduction of various frameworks and entrenched patterns and also identifies areas of marginality within that knowledge production (Longino 1990). The convergence of perspectives that value Indigenous traditional knowledge as well as contemporary social and political agendas within the framework of social epistemology has been developing since the 2000s (Lawal 2019; Hukmi/Khasri 2023) and is further enhanced through current discussions such as ours.

Where do we stand? Ethnoarchaeology at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century

After its first heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s as a new epistemological approach within New Archaeology, ethnoarchaeology has become a minor but persistently important pillar in the construction of archaeological methodologies for the interpretation of the past (David/Kramer 2001). At its core, ethnoarchaeology can be understood as the systematic engagement with ethnographic information and/or contemporary communities and practices in order to address questions about material culture, behaviour and processes that are relevant to archaeological problems. From its inception, the field sought to bridge present and past by examining how social practices become materially expressed and transformed over time.

Throughout the last decades, ethnoarchaeological research has largely developed along two interrelated but distinct trajectories. On the one hand, many studies have focused on highly specific, well-defined research questions framed within particularism and the direct historical approach as well as on recording practices in living societies and their material footprint from an archaeological perspective (e.g., Binford 1978; Gould 1980; Kramer 1985; Gallay 1992). On the other hand, ethnoarchaeologists have also engaged in cross-cultural studies, often based on big data (and strongly anglophone-biased) collections such as the Human Relation Area Files (HRAF), in order to develop broader and more general models in the present to guide archaeological interpretations of the past and to reach a general understanding of human behaviour and society (e.g., Ascher 1961; White/Peterson 1969; Gould 1971; Schiffer 1976; Yellen 1977; Ruiz-Giralt et al. 2023). These approaches aimed to provide archaeologists with heuristic tools that enhance interpretive capacities, particularly in cases where continuity – broadly defined – between the present and the past has been established.

However, the discipline has faced harsh criticism. Not only has the fundamental concept of analogy been questioned (e.g., Gould/Watson 1982; Wylie 1985), but concerns have also been raised about the backgrounds of most practitioners – often white and Western – whose work has been shaped by colonial legacies as well as power imbalances that have not always been acknowledged, let alone explicitly rejected. Connected to this, the research questions posed have been criticized for being biased, reflecting and perpetuating industrial, Western-centred and capitalist preconceptions and assumptions (Gosselain 2016).

More reflexive, ontologically informed and multi-vocal approaches have emerged in response to these critiques, yet they remain comparatively rare and unevenly integrated into the field (e.g., Porr/Bell 2012; Cunningham/MacEachern 2016; González-Ruibal 2017). Moreover, ethnoarchaeological scholarship continues to be shaped by a pronounced dominance of anglophone academic traditions. While rich and long-standing (ethno)archaeological research traditions exist in other scholarly contexts, these have often developed in parallel rather than in sustained dialogue with anglophone debates, limiting their broader theoretical integration, as also reflected in recent compendia of non-anglophone ethnoarchaeology (e.g., Gallay 2011; Marciniak/Yalman 2013).

Where will we go? Towards a future ethnoarchaeology

Theoretical and conceptual engagement: Epistemological and ontological pluralism

Building on the call for openness and plurality, ethnoarchaeological practice needs to more systematically integrate epistemological and ontological diversity. Specifically, it seems crucial to recognize traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems as co-constitutive epistemic frameworks that enrich the discipline's interpretive and ethical capacities, rather than merely as complementary.

Getting back to the terminological roots: *Ethnos* as plurality

Ethnoarchaeological research should transcend Western-centric and colonialist knowledge systems, adopting a more pluralistic and inclusive perspective. In this context, it is important to reexamine the origin and meaning of the prefix 'ethno-.' In Homer's *Iliad*, the ancient Greek word *ἔθνος* [*tr*. ethnos] referred broadly to a collective or group, primarily human but not exclusively so (Autenrieth/Keep 2002, 95; Grimm 2010, 168). Thus, the original semantic diversity of the term "ethnos" points to a concept of community that, while most often applied to human groups, can also extend to other living beings. Although not determinative, this broader semantic field opens space for reconsidering how communities are conceptualized within ethnoarchaeology.

Considering different knowledge systems – especially Indigenous forms of knowledge – as valid and equal ways of understanding in scientific research can be seen as consistent with the term's etymological depth. The term itself can thus facilitate the development of pluralistic and inclusive research approaches.

Therefore, ethnoarchaeology should not be seen as a means of accessing the past through living societies, nor as a repository of analogues grounded in assumptions of non-modernity. Rather, its value lies in engaging contemporary communities as coeval actors whose ways of being in the world and material practices offer standpoint diversity and expose the multiple ways in which social life becomes materialized. By foregrounding variation in the present rather than survivals of the past, ethnoarchaeology sharpens archaeological inference, clarifies its limits and enables a more reflexive engagement with ancient societies as genuinely historical others.

Understanding material patterns and cultural processes

Past attempts at identifying general rules have often resulted in what might be described as overly general or weakly informative patterns – broadly applicable observations that ultimately proved analytically limited and of little interpretive value. Archaeologists generally aim to interpret the uniqueness of historical settings, and ethnoarchaeology should play a role in this. Strong interpretations often draw on both broadly applicable trends and the study of unique phenomena and their material consequences. These may not take the form of a 'behavioural-material correlate' – i.e., a constant conjunction between behaviours and a diagnostic material culture pattern. This suggests that ethnoarchaeology can operate at both levels: to understand diverse causes behind specific material patterns (including one-off causal influences and unique cultural elements) and to trace the influence of broad processual trends on assemblages (e.g., how patrilineal family structures may impact the use of domestic space in different cultural settings).

Building bridges between knowledge systems

Indigenous knowledge systems are not merely alternative sources of data. Rather, they represent plural and epistemologically diverse ways of knowing that are dynamic and evolving in the production, application and transmission of knowledge (Radcliffe 2017). Therefore, they should be approached as forms of knowledge with their internal consistency and validity, often based on relations between different parts and beings of the world rather than dualisms such as nature and culture (Viveiros de Castro 2004), not merely as observation-based applications. Fikret Berkes's (2008) 'ethnoscience' approach provides a strong framework that supports this pluralistic understanding. Berkes (*idem*) argues that traditional knowledge should be accepted as 'Indigenous science' and emphasizes that this knowledge comprehends nature through systematic, culturally structured classifications (*idem*, 70). Although these classifications may differ from Western science, they are equally valid and functional and can be combined with Western scientific approaches and understandings in a meaningful and fruitful way (Kimmerer 2013). In this context, the ethnoscience approach offers a potent conceptual framework for integrating diverse knowledge systems into a pluralistic ethnoarchaeological practice that can enable

research to reach more robust understandings of human possibilities in the past.

The expertise of long-term ecological adaptation and sustainability embedded in Indigenous knowledge systems enhances the epistemological depth of ethnoarchaeology. However, advancing this process requires acknowledging the differences in understanding and the tensions between scientific and Indigenous knowledge systems (e.g., Porr/Bell 2012; Taçon 2019). According to Julie Cruikshank (2001), the 'scientific' perspective may interpret local knowledge as 'myth,' while local communities may view science as abstract and disconnected from context. Thus, local knowledge should be regarded as meaningful information produced within specific historical and political contexts rather than as time-independent data (*idem*). Rather than positioning these systems in opposition, ethnoarchaeological research should develop models that facilitate dialogue between them.

Sheila Jasanoff's (1998) concept of 'reasoning together' forms the basis of this holistic approach, emphasizing dialogical engagement across knowledge systems rather than their assimilation. Indigenous knowledge should not be treated by academia as mere data to be extracted but as an epistemological partner to be engaged within its cultural context and as a way of expanding researchers' understanding beyond their own experiential worlds and lifeways. This approach offers more inclusive and sustainable solutions to contemporary environmental and social challenges, extending beyond understanding of past societies alone. As Cruikshank (2001) emphasizes, local people are not merely observers but active participants in the construction of knowledge systems. Oral traditions – such as narratives about glacier movements, vegetation or animal behaviour – constitute forms of knowledge with historical continuity, not merely stories (*idem*).

Ultimately, ethnoarchaeological studies enrich knowledge production by developing models based on collaborative reasoning and by accommodating multiple knowledge regimes within scientific discourse. Rather than rejecting expertise, this approach recognizes the coexistence of different forms of expertise. In research, this entails moving beyond the assumption that expertise resides solely within academic knowledge systems and instead fostering dialogue between archaeological expertise in material culture and long-term socio-environmental processes, and Indigenous and local expertise in domains such as landscape use, resource management, human–non-human relations, craft practices and environmental knowledge (Berkes 2008, 162; Thornton/Bhagwat 2021).

There is growing recognition across the sciences that Western research paradigms are frequently data-rich yet history-poor – offering high-resolution but incomprehensible accounts. In contrast, Indigenous knowledge systems situate environmental change within holistic relational frameworks: rather than isolating discrete variables, such as temperature or precipitation, they emphasize interconnected dynamics linking climate, soils, animals, plants and human practices.

Ontological pluralism and ethics

Indigenous knowledge systems generally reject the ontological dichotomy between nature and culture that is inherent in Western thought, emphasizing instead the constitution of the world through co-inhabitation with other humans and other animate and inanimate entities connected through diverse relations (Ingold 2000; Descola [2005] 2013). Such plural lifeways are shaped by a diversity of human and nonhuman actors through notions of kinship and shared life (Bird-David 2017). Traditional knowledge thus goes beyond 'local knowledge'; it is both an expression of, and a function of, the multifaceted relationships within a shared world (Berkes 2008, 253). While Western science often treats nature as an object to be managed, Indigenous ontologies tend to understand the environment as a living, conscious entity in which humans are embedded in relationships of mutual responsibility (*idem*).

For ethnoarchaeology, engaging seriously with diverse ontologies and forms of knowledge is not merely supplementary, but a pathway to rethinking how evidence, temporality and causality are understood in the study of human–environment relations. Comparable approaches are evident in broader scientific contexts. The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), led by the Arctic Council, combined scientific research with local knowledge to produce a multi-voiced assessment of environmental change (International Arctic Science Committee 2000). Similarly, the Science Panel for the Amazon (SPA) demonstrates that forest health cannot be fully understood without locally grounded and relational knowledge, showing that deforestation rates are significantly lower in Indigenous-managed territories. At a global scale, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has institutionalized

the integration of Indigenous and local knowledge, with its Global Assessment highlights that a large proportion of the world's biodiversity is located in Indigenous-managed lands. Together, these examples show that integrating different knowledge systems can generate more comprehensive and effective understandings of complex socio-environmental processes.

Academic engagement

Ethnoarchaeology seeks to foster a more inclusive and enriched scientific discipline by integrating diverse, including non-academic, perspectives into archaeological practice. By promoting the inclusion of non-Western ethnoarchaeologists and archaeologists as well as greater diversity within Western societies (Gopaldas/DeRoy 2015; Caywood/Darmstadt 2024), ethnoarchaeology has been a pioneer in decolonizing archaeological research (Schmidt/Pikirayi 2016) and in advancing transdisciplinarity, bridging disciplines, time periods and cultural contexts. This, in turn, encourages the recognition of other sciences – understood here as non-Western approaches to understanding the structure and behaviour of the world and its inhabitants – that contribute to building and applying diverse bodies of knowledge.

Ethnoarchaeology today lends its strength to the broader movement of recognizing of Traditional, Indigenous and Local Knowledge in challenging the dominance of (Western) science, advocating instead for radical openness to diverse bodies of knowledge and fostering mutual dialogue and understanding. It seeks to overcome the historical and contingent nature of archaeology as a Western tool, while encouraging archaeologists to recognize the intrinsic limitations of their discipline and the challenges of engaging with societies distant in time and space. This reflects the unusual openness of ethnoarchaeologists who – although not universally – have acknowledged the need to engage with different worldviews in order to expand the spectrum of interpretive possibilities. It also highlights the maturation of the discipline, whereby, moving beyond its origins in Western academia, ethnoarchaeology increasingly embraces diversity and actively reworks its foundational principles.

Contemporary ethnoarchaeology thus involves critically questioning the broader cultural, social and economic systems to which many archaeologists belong. To produce more inclusive and meaningful narratives, archaeologists must deliberately look beyond their own worlds.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that ethnoarchaeology is neither a residual methodological niche nor a technical device for generating analogies between present and past. Rather, it emerges as a sustained commitment to reflexive, relational and ethically grounded archaeological practice. In a world marked by deep social inequalities, epistemological fragmentation and accelerating environmental and political crises, ethnoarchaeology's relevance lies in its capacity to engage with difference without collapsing it into sameness, and with the past without instrumentalizing the present.

Ethnoarchaeology contributes to a more pluralistic science by addressing archaeology's long-standing difficulties in engaging with diverse worldviews, ontologies and historical experiences. Acknowledging the colonial, Western and capitalist roots of archaeology is not an endpoint but a necessary condition for rethinking how archaeological knowledge is produced and validated. From this perspective, ethnoarchaeology foregrounds engagement with contemporaries who live different modern lives, offering the discipline standpoint diversity while simultaneously sharpening our ability to approach ancient societies whose social worlds and material logics may have been very different from our own.

Crucially, ethnoarchaeology does not seek to access the past through living societies, nor does it position contemporary communities as survivals of a non-modern world. Its contribution lies in engaging living communities as coeval actors whose material practices, knowledge systems and relationships with environments expose the multiple ways in which social life becomes materialized. By foregrounding variation in the present, ethnoarchaeology clarifies both the possibilities and the limits of archaeological inference, enabling a more reflexive engagement with ancient societies as genuinely historical others.

Understood as a state of mind rather than a fixed methodology, ethnoarchaeology retains the capacity to move across theoretical traditions without being confined by them. It can productively integrate qualitative, particularistic research and quantitative, pattern-oriented approaches – not in pursuit of universal laws but to expand archaeological interpretive repertoires through comparative insight, context-sensitive generalizations and cautionary examples. In this sense, ethnoarchaeology does not resolve differences but works with them. At the same time, a commitment to plurality does not entail epistemic

relativism or the suspension of critique. Ethnoarchaeology does not ask archaeology to treat all claims about the world as equally valid, nor to substitute empirical reasoning with belief. Rather, its value lies in improving archaeological explanation by exposing the cultural, historical and ideological assumptions embedded in interpretive models, thereby reducing error rather than multiplying truths. In this sense, ethnoarchaeology is best understood as a space of dialogue between different forms of expertise, rather than a rejection of expertise itself.

Finally, embracing ethnoarchaeology as a state of mind entails an ongoing ethical and political commitment. Ethnoarchaeological research is unavoidably embedded in asymmetrical worlds shaped by colonial histories, contested land rights and increasingly unequal access to resources and visibility. Responding to these conditions requires sustained reflexivity, accountability and a willingness to engage in dialogue across epistemological boundaries without subsuming one knowledge system within another. Ethnoarchaeology, as a state of mind, is ultimately not only about understanding how people have lived, but about expanding how we engage with different ways of knowing and living in the present.

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