

Cross-cultural values and ethical practice: reflections on ClfA's Code of conduct in the context of international work

Leonora O'Brien MClfA (2487), Technical Director – Archaeology & Cultural Heritage, AECOM

Archaeologists work all over the world in countries and cultures with diverse social, cultural and legal systems. In places with no specific laws or regulations on professional conduct in archaeology, ClfA's Code of Conduct may be relevant.

Numerous existing codes of conduct and ethical guidelines touch on international heritage practice, with many examples on ClfA's own Archaeological Ethics Database. These include the codes of the US Register of Professional Archaeologists, the European Association of Archaeologists, the Society for Africanist Archaeologists, the International Association for Impact Assessment, the Association for Social Anthropologists of the UK, the International Council on Monuments and Sites and the International Council of Museums.

These address topics including professional conduct, ethical scholarly and business practice, socially and environmentally responsible work and decolonising heritage practice. Some consider research protocols for projects involving local, indigenous and descendant communities. These codes emphasise consent, credit, dignity, respect and justice. Heritage protection, looting and burials are often already covered by civil, criminal, customary and religious law.

Working in low- or middle-income countries, places with weak heritage governance and areas experiencing conflict can raise practical and ethical challenges. Getting equipment past customs and out again can be exasperating. There may be a bewildering gap between official policy, administrative systems and stark reality. Professional behaviour and values cause recurrent quandaries, often variations on those faced at 'home'.

Professional competence and training – It is important to seek to build lasting partnerships with local archaeologists where possible and distribute responsibilities, work, funding, training opportunities and credit fairly among participants. Working outside the geographies in which you first trained can involve a lot of reading, museum/site visits and learning from locals – a lot of CPD! Exchanging knowledge and practical experience are key to collaborative professional practice, everywhere.

Responsibilities to colleagues, clients and the public – Scholarly and scientific responsibilities are central, but commercial projects may impose limitations. Clients may fear that publications will reveal the location of early exploratory works to rival companies. Funding



Investigating a Middle Palaeolithic tool-making site with a local academic adviser, Riyadh Province, Saudi Arabia. Credit: Leonora O'Brien



Visiting a historic Sufi tomb with the local imam, Khazar Raion, Azerbaijan. Credit: Leonora O'Brien



Public consultation meeting including archaeology display, Tiris Zemmour Wilaya, Mauritania. Credit: Leonora O'Brien



Local residents talking to an environmental and social survey team during walkover survey, Estuaire Province, Gabon. There were a number of sacred trees and graves in this area. Credit: Leonora O'Brien

constraints and political events may curtail fieldwork; exporting artefacts or samples for analysis can be challenging.

The fallacy of impartiality – Truthfulness is paramount, but it is also important to be sensitive to the local context and avoid problematic outcomes. This is difficult when engaging with ethnonationalist and tribal narratives, post-colonial revisionism, theocratic regimes and dominant, state-authorised discourse. Discoveries and interpretations may be misused by those in power. This can fuel territorial claims, and cultural and political repression. The relationship between human and cultural rights is recognised in international law, but local implementation may be ineffective.

Environmental, social and governance impacts – Working in a socially responsible and sustainable manner involves ensuring an ethical supply chain, appropriate remuneration, training and career

Links

Archaeological ethics database: <https://archaeologicaethics.org/>

Register of Professional Archaeologists: <https://rpanet.org/code-and-standards>

European Association of Archaeologists: https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/About/EAA_Codes/

Society for Africanist Archaeologists: https://safarchaeology.org/resources/Documents/safa_pdfs/SaFAEthicscode%20amended%202016.pdf

International Association for Impact Assessment: <https://www.iaia.org/pdf/Code-of-Ethics.pdf>

Association for Social Anthropologists of the UK: <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/>

International Council on Monuments and Sites: <https://icomos-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICOMOS-Ethical-Statement-for-ICOMOS-members.pdf>

International Council of Museums: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics/>

Leonora O'Brien

Leo is a Technical Director at AECOM and leads the heritage team's international workstream. She has over 20 years' experience, ranging from field excavation and landscape survey to post-excavation research, publications management and consultancy. Leo has directed extensive archaeological surveys in remote and challenging environments in Africa, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia, working in partnership with local archaeologists, ethnographers and interdisciplinary environmental and social teams on Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, due diligence and monitoring. Leo co-founded ClfA's International Cultural Heritage Practice Group in 2013 and is serving as chair, 2021–2024.



progression wherever we work, and looking at the bigger picture to harness wider socio-economic and environmental benefits. There is a real risk of becoming embroiled in bribery, gifts and favours. Myriad potential conflicts of interest can arise. Between ClfA's Code of conduct, local business norms and law, the highest standard prevails.

Working together with local communities and experts

– Considering both lay and expert views informs good decision-making, respecting local and foreign knowledge alike. It is prudent to work closely with local archaeologists, ethnographers, earth scientists, ecologists, tourism and socio-economic advisers. Listening carefully may involve hiring professional linguists. Land workers, elders and stewards of sacred places provide crucial insights into oral history, living cultural practices and contemporary concerns. It takes time to establish good working relationships, but this dialogue is at the heart of responsible practice.

Colleagues around the world already work ethically without ClfA's Code of conduct. ClfA has no exclusive claim on professional ethics, but it is devoting substantial technical expertise and becoming a 'standards maker'. Global convergence and consensus are not necessarily feasible or desirable. Archaeologists can be 'standards takers' and adopt existing codes, develop their own national or regional ones, or adapt emerging codes to reflect local concerns. The norms developed by communities of experts can be a helpful guide to structuring reflection on ethical issues. It is in everyone's interest to seek to embed good professional practice and influence the expectations of the public, regulators, clients and each other.