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Archaeology is changing, slowly. But it's still too tied up in colonial practices

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6–8 minutes

For many people, the mention of archaeology makes them think of Indiana Jones. He's the hero of the 1980s movie franchise – but any archaeologist will tell you that Indiana isn't very good at his job.

For starters, he destroys so much of the contextual information that could tell people more about the site where an artefact was found, the climate at the time, what material was used to make something and whether that material was local or from another area. That's all just as important as the exciting artefact he's trying to find.

The films also glorify the long relationship between colonialism and archaeology. Indigenous communities are depicted stereotypically, and Indiana isn't above violent methods to collect the artefacts he wants. This isn't poetic licence: colonialism aided access to sites and the collection and distribution of artefacts. This gave colonial powers control of other cultures' heritage – especially on the African continent.

There are some moves towards recognising archaeology's colonial history. Some European nations have begun to return items taken from the African continent by archaeologists. Contemporary archaeologists also do a much better job than Indiana did, trying to understand a site and its social context.

The work we're doing alongside other scholars at the University of

Cape Town's Human Evolution Research Institute in South Africa is trying, among other things, to address the legacies of racism and colonialism in archaeology and related sciences.

A chequered history

Archaeology's history in South Africa ties it to race science, which tried to justify racism.

Some of South Africa's most prized archaeological finds were made by Western men who came to the country to study its people. Mapungubwe, an Iron Age archaeological site, was "discovered" by a student and his father who coerced a black local informant into showing them where the sacred hill was.

Archaeologists also perpetuated the idea that Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe, which had large stone wall structures, were constructed by outsiders such as Persians rather than by the African people who lived in these places.

A conical tower in the Great Enclosure of the Great Zimbabwe ruins.
DeAgostini/Getty Images

Archaeological practices in the 19th and 20th centuries not only sidelined African people's heritage and knowledge. They also resulted in many important fossils and artefacts being held in institutions outside Africa; many remain there today. African scholars and the indigenous people themselves often have difficulty accessing this material.

Some things have changed in the past few decades – but problems persist.

Paper versus practice

Many countries in Africa have formal procedures related to accessing archaeological sites. Legislation is also in place in many countries that outlines what's to be done with material once it's been discovered. And increasingly researchers are being encouraged or required to work with local researchers and communities.

But what's on paper doesn't always translate into practice. Some of the most recent significant advances in the field were made as a result of foreign researchers working in Africa.

While this is recognised, there are problems often with research ethics and processes. That's not to say foreign researchers shouldn't be working in African countries. The problem is that their work can still happen with little or no interaction with local people, including researchers as well as communities who live near or on sites. And when locals do share their knowledge, it isn't always acknowledged. Findings aren't always shared with them in accessible forms nor is there necessarily protection of indigenous knowledge shared.

For this reason the San Institute of South Africa, for example, has developed a Code of Research Ethics for researchers. Many of the continent's indigenous people are deeply familiar with regions and

landscapes on spiritual levels. Some have interacted closely with the types of objects that archaeologists are trying to find.

Often, archaeological sites have acquired new meaning for communities over time. Zimbabwe's Matobo Hills, for instance, have rock art sites originally produced thousands of years ago. They have subsequently become significant in different ways to local communities and are still of ritual significance. Archaeological research too often interferes with this without any real consultation.

There is also so much valuable local knowledge to tap into that can aid archaeological research. Recently a whole city was discovered in Ethiopia because of local communities' knowledge about the site.

It's crucial for archaeologists to listen deeply and respectfully to indigenous people locally based at sites. There has been some great progress in this direction. The scholar Nthabiseng Mokoena examined what the rock art in Matatiele in South Africa's Eastern Cape province meant to local communities and what this would mean for conservation and research at these sites. Working closely with the community produced recommendations that genuinely included them and protected their sacred sites.

But too often archaeology is still extractive and not aware of sociopolitical issues and research sensitivities.

Ethical approaches

A lot of work lies ahead to make sure that archaeology does not perpetuate colonial power dynamics in its practice. There are a few ways to do this.

One of these, which we are championing at the Human Evolution Research Institute, is to cultivate young African scholars. These scholars are taught to include communities and genuinely value the continent's heritage and local indigenous knowledge.

Collected material shouldn't only be available to scientists from the global North. African researchers, in African countries, need to be able to access the continent's heritage and history and share it with descendant communities.

Ethical practice requires awareness of colonial history and how that has benefited archaeology – and why it's not sustainable. Indiana Jones' days are numbered.