

Chapter 12

Commingle Bodies and Mixed and Communal Identities

Tiffany A. Tung

Introduction

Let us just say it: We would all rather have complete, intact skeletons to analyze, and the sample sizes would be so huge that no reviewer could ever criticize our proposal or article on that particular detail. We envision deep insights about human society and the human condition emanating from those incredibly complete skeletons, and we imagine those richly textured narratives that we could write about a person and their community from 5000 years ago, if only there were complete skeletons and lots of them. But this is rarely the case; instead archaeology sites often yield commingled and fragmentary human skeletons. There are what the mourners left behind, what nature did not dissolve, what developers did not destroy, what looters did not loot, what wars did not ravage, what archaeologists have uncovered, what descendants have requested or approved for study,¹ and what curators have opted to save. This often results in bony fragments of history and a tenacious group of bioarchaeologists examining them to tell the tale of lives once lived and societies once cultivated. The preceding chapters are a good example of that deep curiosity about ancient lives and the detailed, meticulous analyses that are necessary to understand the wide array of cultural norms, the arc of human health, nutrition, and disease, and the embodied ways that we perform our social longing and cultural belonging. At the heart of it, bioarchaeologists are anthropologists who want to learn about and explain the human condition, particularly in the context of those who lived decades, centuries, or millennia before us.

The themes of inquiry embraced by bioarchaeologists are wide and could include such things as food consumption patterns and what that reveals about how

¹ And in which important ethical guidelines have been followed to ensure that descendent communities have a full and authoritative voice in the process.

T. A. Tung (✉)
Department of Anthropology, Vanderbilt University, VU Station B #356050,
Nashville, TN 37235-7703, USA
e-mail: t.tung@vanderbilt.edu

resources were distributed and/or how that affected nutritional health; how people marked their bodies as a reflection and generator of social identity; the deadly consequences of political struggle and who was targeted in those conflicts; the criteria for being perceived as a person and a member of a community; cultural practices and how that might hinder or enhance the spread of disease, among many other aspects of what it means to be human and part of a community. Incredibly, bioarchaeology has the means to address those and other issues through the analysis of the human skeleton, insights that are enhanced even further with archaeological and environmental contexts and theoretical perspectives that provide expectations and a means for explaining particular human behaviors and health outcomes. As this volume shows, even in cases where only commingled and sometimes highly fragmented remains are available for study, these and other anthropological questions can be addressed with success.

The History and Future of Analyzing Commingled Skeletons

Before bioarchaeology was recognized as a subfield of anthropology, western researchers had published descriptions of mostly intact mummies and skeletons, focusing on the exotic or the diseased, while commingled human remains went largely unanalyzed unless it had a special pathology. Of particular interest to European scholars were the intact, wrapped mummies from Egypt (Blumenbach 1794; Granville 1825) or those from royal or elaborate tombs across the globe. In the rare cases in which mummy or skeletal fragments were analyzed, the work was done primarily to document particular diseases, such as schistosomiasis (Ruffer 1910) and tuberculosis (Cave 1939). Those studies laid the essential foundation for paleopathology and bioarchaeology, and as the field has developed our research programs have expanded to inquire about population health, requiring larger samples of skeletons—and not just those with obvious lesions. Nonetheless, researchers still tended to focus on the intact, complete skeletons. Commingled remains, particularly those that were fragmentary, were ignored and left sitting in storage boxes; other times they were simply thrown out. Exceptions to this practice could be seen at archaeology sites with massacre victims, as in the case of Crow Creek and the 486 individuals that were massacred and dismembered there, resulting in several large pits filled with commingled skeletal elements. Numerous studies were published on this skeletal population (Gregg et al. 1981; Zimmerman et al. 1981a, b; Willey and Emerson 1993; Zimmerman and Bradley 1993; Willey et al. 1997; Zimmerman 1997 and many others), but again, the focus was on the unusual or the sensational. Ordinarily, the “healthy” skeletons were overlooked in favor of those with unique pathologies, and commingled and fragmented remains were left in situ, or if removed they were mostly ignored. Fortunately, our discipline has been maturing, and researchers have recognized the importance of using insights from various theoretical perspectives to frame new research questions and to conduct analyses of commingled human

remains. This recognition of the immense knowledge to be gained by analyzing commingled and fragmentary skeletal elements is providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of ancient lifeways and morbidity profiles of all segments of societies. It also diminishes biased health profiles in which large segments of populations are excluded from analysis simply because they were interred in ossuaries or disturbed by looters or natural processes.

This newfound focus is a welcome one; it requires better analytical skills (and tenacity) to identify and examine small fragments of bone, and the commingled nature of a sample tends to promote better framing of research questions because mere descriptions of mixed, fragmented bones will not suffice, nor will they serve our attempts to better understand the health profiles and lifeways of ancient human societies. Thus, this volume that situates theoretical insights from anthropology and the social sciences at the forefront of analysis of commingled skeletons shows the potential of those forgotten, commingled bones and brings us closer to achieving a more richly contextualized bioarchaeology.

Many of the chapters in this volume articulated an anthropological question about the ancient community under study and presented specific data that aided in addressing the issue. For example, the chapters engaged such themes as how the construction of particular marriage practices in the Bronze Age Arabian Peninsula may have had negative effects on biological health status, an observation that the authors suggest is an example of structural violence in which a cultural institution (arranged marriages, particularly of young adolescent girls married off to consanguines) affects their health and that of their offspring (Baustian and Anderson, this volume). A couple of chapters examined mortuary treatment of infants and children to explore how childhood was constructed and perceived, concepts that authors traced to the construction of personhood (Marklein and Fox, this volume; Beck, this volume). Bodies and body parts were also examined as integral and tangible components for demonstrating control over enemies, as in the case of the Iroquoian war trophies fashioned out of body parts (Jenkins, this volume), a topic that has been extensively discussed by others as well (Trigger 1969; Trigger 1985; Robb 2008; Traphagan 2008). Osterholtz (Chap. 7, this volume) explicates the role of violence as a means for communication even further, discussing how at the site of Sacred Ridge in Colorado, the process of massacring and dismembering bodies was a form of social communication that aided in creating and reinforcing group identity. Community identity could be generated in other ways too, as Epstein and Toyne (this volume) demonstrate. They examined how the careful selection of burial place in precarious cliff faces and the treatment of the dead exemplify the practice theory perspective in which those ongoing actions (in this case, the mortuary activities) foster the construction of group identity in the Chachapoyas region of the Peruvian Andes. Somewhat relatedly, an analysis of how social ties were created and maintained within a community could be seen in the work at Çatalhöyük, in which the authors examined how bodies and domestic spaces were entangled in the ongoing production of domestic and ritual life (Haddow et al., this volume). One final study drew on insights from postcolonial theory and from studies of migration to clarify interactions between Cypriotes and others in Bronze Age Cyprus, conclud-

ing that the migrant communities were not colonizers, and that both the locals and the migrants experienced similar childhood health profiles, an observation that suggests that there was cultural integration between the various groups living on the island (Osterholtz, Chap. 3; this volume). In all, we see a plethora of examples that illustrate how the analysis of commingled and often fragmentary remains is a worthwhile pursuit, particularly when those detailed observations are enriched with theoretical insights from the social sciences more broadly.

Commingling the Community

Although the mixing of numerous human skeletons makes it impossible to accurately reconstruct individuals (unless they are of markedly different ages), there are many analytical techniques that still permit bioarchaeologists to conduct individual osteobiographies, while also exploring community health and how the individual compares to the larger social group. Many of the studies in this volume demonstrate this point, and looking forward, I can see many opportunities in which deep insights about past populations can be gained, even when skeletons are commingled and fragmented. For example, in cases where crania cannot be affiliated with postcrania, a study of cranial trauma, cranial modification, and/or cranial trepanation can provide opportunities to pose focused research questions that are informed by particular theoretical approaches.

As a case in point, analysis of cranial trauma among commingled skeletons from the sites of Conchopata (Tung 2012) and Huari (Tung 2014b) in the Peruvian Central Highlands employed a practice theory perspective (Bourdieu 1977), evaluating how the actions of warriors (and the creation of a warrior class), as well as the celebration of their violent activities contributed to the likelihood that a community might engage in war. Further drawing from structuration theory (Giddens 1984), the process was seen as recursive, and warfare thus simultaneously created the need for a warrior class, while the presence of a warrior class made the option of engaging in war more tenable (Tung 2014b). The interpretation of the data generated from those commingled bones was deeply informed by those theoretical perspectives and by the larger cultural context that was made available by the excellent analyses of iconography, architecture, site layout, chronology, diet and foodways, and production activities at those Wari sites (Bencic 2000; Finucane et al. 2006; Isbell 2004, 2007; Isbell and Cook 2002; Ketteman 2002; Ochatoma and Cabrera; 2002; Ochatoma 2007; Wolff 2012). Other studies in the Andes have similarly analyzed commingled remains, evaluating how the corporal performance of identity (cranial modification) might be affected by intense interaction with a powerful neighboring state (i.e., Tiwanaku) (Torres-Rouff 2002), while other studies have probed how the practice of warfare may have generated new medical procedures, or at least the vast improvement of them, as in Kurin's (2012, 2013) study of trepanation among Chanka crania from central Peru. I cite these studies as examples because bioarchaeological research in the Andes is notorious for having to deal with commingled

or incomplete remains—much of it resulting from prehistoric, early colonial, and modern disturbances or looting. However, through collaborations with archaeologists and a willingness to plumb ethnographies and texts on social theory, focused research questions can take shape when only mixed and incomplete skeletons exist. Subsequently, the rich data sets, when screened through particular theoretical perspectives and comparative studies, provide expectations that can lead to rich, meaningful interpretations by the bioarchaeologists, rather than appendices of data (Buikstra 1991) that are often synthesized and interpreted by the site archaeologist (Sofaer 2006).

Having an archaeologist offer up a grand synthesis is obviously not necessarily a bad thing (Sofaer 2006), and there have been superb synthetic works by archaeologists who have deftly integrated osteological data, among many other categories of data, in order to create richly textured narratives about ancient populations. Nonetheless, I think much is to be gained from bioarchaeological investigations aimed at articulating deep and detailed narratives, and those will require analyses of both the complete skeletons and commingled, fragmentary skeletons. Further, if bioarchaeologists are to consider the larger social forces shaping the health and lifeways of the people we study, bioarchaeologists must be deeply engaged with the research produced by our archaeology colleagues and keenly aware of the theoretical insights that allow us to articulate how (pre)historic societies shaped the individual and how the individual shaped society. It is the bioarchaeologist's profound understanding of the local culture history and social context from whence the skeletons came, combined with an arsenal of theoretical perspectives (sometimes contradictory ones), which allows hypotheses to be constructed and tested, expectations to be articulated, data to be collected, and interpretations to be posited.

Not Commingling Sex and Gender

Working with commingled remains, however, is not always easy. The commingling certainly limits our ability to address particular questions and frame them theoretically. For example, postcrania can be quite difficult to assess for sex identification, and without the associated pelvis, as is often the case with commingled samples, questions about differences in health among those estimated to be skeletally male and female go unanswered. This can lead to challenges in articulating how a past society constructed, cultivated, and performed gender. Because bioarchaeologists agree that we should make an analytical distinction between sex and gender (Walker and Cook 1998), we often use skeletal sex as the starting point for discussions about the construction of gender norms and gender identity. Thus, the inability to categorize a skeleton as male or female can be frustrating. And this is still the case even with bioarchaeologists who are attuned to theoretical insights from scholars like Butler (2006) and Fausto-Sterling (2005) and their argument that biological sex is a social construct, similar to how gender is a social construct.

Many of us recognize our role in (sometimes unintentionally) reifying the seeming stability of the binary sex categories with each os coxae that we observe for a subpubic concavity and ventral arc. But because we recognize that "sex has a material reality" (Sofaer 2006, p. 96) and because we tend to use skeletal sex designations as a starting point for documenting and understanding how this aspect of one's identity might structure health status and many other life qualities, this does not suggest that bioarchaeologists are biological determinists who assume that biological sex is purely prediscursive. Indeed, Sofaer (2006) and Geller (2008) have tackled this issue head on, building on previous scholarship about the semantics and analytical categories of sex and gender (Armélagos 1998; Walker and Cook 1998) and reminding us to be wary of assumptions that identifying skeletal sex means we have documented and explained the process of learning and performing gender (also see Joyce 2000). It is a long, analytical, and theoretically challenging process to go from estimating skeletal sex to understanding past constructions and performances of gender, but bioarchaeologists are trying. This is in large part because gender and other aspects of identity are performed through the body, and this is the primary locus of analysis for all bioarchaeologists.

Thus, queries into the historicity, cultural contingency, and fluidity of gender must also include attempts to analyze both intact and commingled remains in their archaeological contexts because how males, females, the a-sexed, the non-sexed, children, and others were treated in death can reveal deep insights into how mourners and others perceived them in life; each death provides an opportunity to instruct others on appropriate ways of being. Furthermore, the skeletal markers of life (e.g., body modifications, lesions, isotopes that reveal diet and origin, etc.) can sometimes be interpreted as cultural instructions regarding how gender was constructed. For example, in cases where skeletal sex can be estimated,² we can delve into questions about gender performance (Butler 2006) and explore how repetitive actions (e.g., processing reeds with teeth for producing basketry or grinding plants on a quern) might have marked the body physically, creating a gendered (and classed) body within the larger community. This marking and making of the gendered body enables researchers to identify and understand how mundane acts can create and enforce social norms about particular ways of being. With every basket produced, for example, a woman might further normalize notions about what it means for women to be productive members of society; this gender performance is for themselves, for others, and for the next generation in that it tends to reify the individual's and society's idea about what is appropriate behavior or suitable tasks for a particular segment of the community. Those cultivated ways of being, however, are obviously not always related to gender, and it is the challenging task of the bioarchaeologist to untangle and offer interpretations about those distinctions and the intersectionality of gender with the many other attributes that constitute an individual in society.

² Yes, I am still a practitioner of using skeletal sex as a fulcrum for discussions of gender, but I can envision other scenarios in which patterns of behavior are documented without any initial reference to skeletal sex. Depending on the richness of the archaeological and ethnographic contexts, an analysis of gender norms and gendered identity and how they may have been cultivated and performed could be posited.

The Body As Extended Artifact

Commingled human remains also offer an opportunity to rethink how people and dead bodies can extend or break down social relations. In the same way that objects, or more specifically the agency of objects (Latour 2005), can be seen as a way to make social ties more durable, the corpse and isolated body parts can also serve in this capacity (Tung 2014a). Haddow et al. (this volume) reflect this sentiment in their study of burials in platforms in houses at Çatalhöyük, showing how the house, the corpse, and the living were all tied together in the ongoing reproduction of community life. The analysis of commingled remains often reveals those kinds of entanglements between people, objects, and the living and the dead. Those theoretical and practical insights could not be achieved if we simply ignored the commingled and broken bones and focused solely on the intact, complete skeletons. This is especially the case when bodies are intentionally fragmented as part of the process of making cultural objects that reinforce preexisting notions about what should be done to particular kinds of bodies and who in society has the authority to transform them. Jenkins' chapter (this volume) presents an example of this kind of intentional transformation in which she describes the various cases in which prisoners were transformed into war trophies by Iroquoian warriors. I see this act, in which a new kind of object is created from a once sentient being, as a means for extending particular social identities and social relations. As Latour (2005) reminds us, social interactions can be fleeting, so we need objects to carry them forth and make those social ties more durable. Body parts from the dead in particular may be one of the most powerful objects for establishing and enhancing those social and political connections (Tung 2014a). Those corpses and corporal objects do the important work of forming and performing identities and of reinforcing social ties (antagonistic, agreeable, or other) between individuals and various groups of people.

Conclusion

As the chapters in this volume show, the study of commingled and fragmented human remains has much to contribute to our understanding of (pre)historic societies and of ancient health and lifeways. But those insights are really only amplified when incomplete bodies and bone fragments are also examined, and when they are analyzed through theoretical lenses that attempt to explain, clarify, and explicate the human condition, both biologically and socially. The contributions in this volume demonstrate this point, though it is clear that no single theoretical framework could possibly address and explain the various research questions posed by the authors. The palette of social theories (and critiques of them), ranging from postcolonial theory to feminist theories, to gender theories, to practice theory, to entanglement and object agency theories, and theories about personhood, are all discussed in this volume with varying degrees of accuracy, intensity, and complexity, but they all

reveal an important turn in our field in which bioarchaeologists are embracing social theoretical perspectives that should elevate the discipline and facilitate more articulate and nuanced explanations about ancient human populations.

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