CAMEROON

The Mandara Archaeological Project 1994-98

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Introduction

The Mandara Archaeological Project (MAP) is now 14 years old. We must have one of the two largest ethnoarchaeological databases in the world — the other being that of William Longacre and his Kalinga (Philippines) team — and ours is complemented by our archaeological research and that of its daughter project, Scott MacEachern's Project Maya-Wandala (PMW) which has also produced a substantial ethnoarchaeological thesis by Claire Bourges (1996). We approach our ethnoarchaeological materials from a perspective of over 2000 years. The volume accumulated also means that new information is almost always found to resonate with and relate to bodies of data gathered in different years and countries. We draw on earlier research to illuminate later, and see more in the former than we did before. The results are cumulative, and a particular piece of research can rarely be regarded as the product of a single season's work.

The MAP began in 1984 with the dual aims of contributing to a predictive theory of style that would be generally applicable in archaeology, and of constructing culture history in the Mandara region of North Cameroon. High population densities have resulted in the obliteration of almost all sites in the northern Mandara mountains, and thus we have done little archaeology (though the PMW has carried out extensive work in and around inselbergs on the adjacent plains). We have devoted considerable time to ethnohistorical research (David and Sterner 1995, 1996), both for its own sake, and because it is immediately relevant to studies of style and ethnicity. Although we have learned a great deal about style, I no longer expect (if indeed I ever did) to be able to generate any generally applicable predictive theory. We have on the other hand achieved considerable success in understanding the work of style and its generation within specific historical contexts. In the process we have come to find the concept of ethnicity less and less useful, preferring to deal with communities and patterns of interaction between them. In the initial stages of research we may find ethnicity useful as a basket category, but as we come to know an area better we find it less and less capable of providing analytical leverage, unless in its recently constructed political form, and it fades into an as yet inexplicable residual.

Recent results[1]
The Mandara mountains of Cameroon and Nigeria

Four years ago at the SAfA meetings in Bloomington, Adam Smith and I gave a paper on "The production of space and the house of the chief of Sukur" that was published in *Current Anthropology* in 1995. I will here summarize some of the work carried out or published since that time. Participatory observation involves planning, patience, and opportunism, and it was partly through the latter that we became engaged in studies of metallurgy and materials science, in which Dave Killick, in collaboration with Michael Wayman, took on the scientific work on the metallurgy side (see David et al. 1988). The title of the 1995 film *Black Hephaistos: exploring culture and science in African iron working* (David 1995) quite precisely indicates its content, which includes scenes of analysis in Killick's University of Arizona lab. Much more has still to be published.

A paper on ceramics by Dale Walde, myself and MacEachern (Walde et al. in press) remains in press since 1994. In it we argue, following Whitney Davis, that understanding of artifact production systems, whether present or prehistoric, is a prerequisite for meaningful stylistic analysis. The present peoples of the Mandara region of northern Cameroon are ethnically diverse and, under differing production regimes, practice a variety of pottery manufacturing techniques. In our archaeological work we faced the problem of identifying these techniques as indices of prehistoric production modes and interaction. In addition to visual inspection of broken and sawn surfaces and X-ray radiography, petrographic and textural analysis of thin

sections were applied to three sets of ethnographic and archaeological samples. We had initially hoped that there would be sufficient overlap between different kinds of observations to render some redundant. A pilot study might then enable future field identification of construction techniques and wares to be achieved, possibly by simple visual examination of sherd surfaces and broken sections. Unfortunately this is not the case. There proved to be no reliable short cuts to identification. The results indicate that vessels were generally manufactured locally, using local clays. Vessel forming techniques vary on a larger, sub-regional, scale. While exchange of ceramics was infrequent until recent times, ideas moved easily through the area. This supports previous style-based interpretations of northern Cameroonian pottery as one manifestation of a "conceptual reservoir" that transcends so-called ethnic and linguistic boundaries. The techniques utilized in this paper can and should, we argue, be applied to the tasks of definition and interpretation of the styles of pre- and proto-historic terracottas such as those of Nok and Ife.

In 1996, during a second stay at Sukur lasting four months, during which Judy Sterner focused on the nature and formation of communities, I took an ethnoarchaeological and field archaeological approach to understanding the archaeology of grinding hollows and other equipment, with which Sukur is richly endowed. This study (David 1998) demonstrates the potential of artificial hollows as evidence for the study of prehistory, culture and demographic history, and the history of landscape in Africa and beyond.

On a more theoretical note, Judy Sterner and I have argued in a paper entitled "Wonderful society: the Burgess Shale creatures, Mandara polities and the nature of prehistory" to appear next year in a volume, provisionally titled *Pathways to complexity: African perspectives*, edited by Susan McIntosh, that the band > tribe > chiefdom > state trajectory beloved of the neoevolutionists is an oversimplification of human cultural development, and that, beginning in the early Holocene, human culture may have been characterized by a far greater variety of social formations than presently exist. The analogy here is with the extraordinarily disparate Burgess Shale fauna of the early Cambrian, much of it belonging to phyla and classes that are no longer extant. We develop this idea in the context of Mandara "chiefdoms" that neoevolutionists would variously classify as egalitarian, ranked and even stratified, even though they have far more in common with each other than such a categorization would imply, and they rise and fall on the scale of cultural complexity. This research relates to widening anthropological interest in the interrelationship of hierarchy and heterarchy in human society.

Diane Lyons (1996, 1998) continues to publish on the politics and ideology embedded in household architecture. Other recent developments include the near completion of Judy Sterner's thesis, a thematic regional study of the cultures of the northern Mandara that supplies essential background for ethnoarchaeological work, and which is also a critical commentary on the vexed topic of comparison in anthropology.

Ghana

The Ghanaian component of our project represents a broadening of our program to include societies with very different cultural heritages but somewhat comparable histories, in that the peoples of the Upper East Region of Ghana - speakers of languages of the Congo-Kordofanian rather than the Afroasiatic linguistic phylum - live in societies of comparable socio-economic complexity and have like the Mandara montagnards been under pressure from surrounding larger polities for several centuries. Thus we intend an exercise in as nearly controlled a comparison as is possible in anthropology, but recognize that this must necessarily be preceded by case studies within the region.

To date three such investigations have been carried out. For his 1995 MA thesis Nick Gabrilopoulos worked on the spatial organization of Tallensi compounds with a view to identifying the physical, social and ideological factors that combine to produce the built environment. He proposed a vigilance model, emphasizing the notion of defensible space, the compound as a reverse panopticon in which the would-be penetrator is subject to the gaze of the inhabitants, but in which the elders also exploit an inward gaze to their own ends. The organization of family courtyards within the compound reflects and reinforces lineage organization in that architectural space is topologically similar to kin-

ship space. Both themes relate to the political character of the house, helping to explain the fortress-like nature of the compound, internal courtyard arrangements, and the absence of auxiliary entrances. At the top of the hierarchy of watchers are the ancestral spirits.

Charles Mather's doctoral research focuses on spirits, shrines, and their projection of social personae through time and space, producing a landscape suffused with history and constitutive of Kusasi culture. His (1998) paper at the 14th Biennial SAfA meeting on change and continuity in Kusasi housing portrayed the house as an arena in which the language of shrines forms an important element in the discourse between a core of patrilineally linked males and a diverse group of incoming wives.

R. (Caesar) Apentiik is himself a Bulsa; his MA thesis (1997) entitled "Bulsa technologies and systems of thought" integrates the advantages of insider status and anthropological training. He achieves in depth documentation in a living culture of Dobres and Hoffman's (1994:212) dictum that "Technology acts ... as a fundamental medium through which social relations, power structures, world views, and social production and reproduction are expressed and defined". Bulsa ceramic and iron working technology are firmly situated in the matrix of Bulsa thought. Certain Bulsa axioms can be identified: that symbolic and magical actions directly affect on the material world; that things perceived as similar, for example fire and 'hot' words, are likely to have additive effects, and sometimes vice-versa; and that people, acts and things that are (actually or metaphorically) out of place, dirty, as for example adultery, are inherently dangerous. As the Bulsa say "The ground hornbill is not destructive to crops but its presence on a farm is ugly". When these axioms play out in the context of Bulsa beliefs about personhood, thermodynamics, and cosmology, we can appreciate and explain the conceptual interrelationships of smelting, warfare and birth - to cite just one example. Similarly the study of potting helps to explain attitudes to hygiene and reproduction and related practices including taboos in a more holistic manner than ever before.

He also shows how belief systems and technology mutually support each other. Changes may occur in technology so long as they do not actively challenge the belief system. Most commonly, new technology is initially defined as being outside the belief system - like strangers' pots - and is only incorporated after considerable delay. When new technology replaces old, the fibers of belief remain, somewhat weakened but still there. Thus, because they are constituents of larger webs of thought, beliefs and rituals that were once intimately connected with a technology survive, at least for a while, following its disappearance.

Plans

We have plans to publish aspects of these and other materials in a core volume of papers that will pull together much of the ethnoarchaeological work of the MAP and PMW, serving as a vantage point from which to view the rest, and which will include for the first time comparative treatments of Mandara and Ghanaian data in several material culture domains. As to future fieldwork work, we hope soon to return to Cameroon to carry out a combined ethnoarchaeological and archaeological program of research into traditional power heterarchies in the northern Mafa area, where local community chiefs coexist with others whose powers are recognized over a larger region, a rain chief and another able to control locusts, leopards and other plagues. We hope also to excavate the only well-preserved archaeological sites known in the mountains, a series of strongholds abandoned long ago and whose builders are unknown, but which may, in the context of other public works, be one day interpretable as archaeological signatures of a specific kind of socio-political structure.

Footnote

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