

Historical archaeology in Africa: an appropriate concept?

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Recently Peter Robertshaw published a book review of Peter Mitchell's *African connections*. In it he remarked that the author had succeeded 'in destroying entirely the useless boundary between prehistoric and historic archaeology' (Robertshaw 2005: 303). There will be those who will regard his remark as a timely challenge to the increasing tendency in recent years to apply the concept of historical archaeology to African contexts.

Historical archaeology was the creation of American archaeologists, first appearing in the 1920s and involving the study of colonial European material culture as distinct from the study of Native American material culture. However, even amongst American archaeologists there seems to be a growing disquiet about dividing prehistoric and historical archaeology into distinct subfields. In 1995 Kent Lightfoot voiced his concerns 'that the current separation of prehistoric and historical archaeology detracts greatly from the study of long-term culture change, especially in multi-ethnic contexts' (Lightfoot 1995: 200).

European archaeologists, who had invented the concept of prehistory back in the nineteenth century, seem to have remained oblivious to the concept of historical archaeology but things were different in those parts of the world into which English-speakers had expanded over the last few centuries. The idea of historical archaeology was quickly adopted in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Historical archaeology in these various countries fitted quite well into the 1970 definition by Schuyler, who described what he called 'Historic Sites Archaeology' as: 'The study of the material manifestation of the expansion of European culture into the non-European world starting in the 15th century' (Schuyler 1978: 28). However, such a definition meant that in Africa the concept fitted only parts of the evidence.

In such circumstances, definitions of historical archaeology have inevitably proliferated. As Martin Hall and Stephen Silliman have stated in the opening sentence of their recent edited book *Historical archaeology*, "'Historical Archaeology" means different things to different people'. They point out that for some 'the field is the archaeology of European colonial expansion', for others 'it is the archaeology of capitalism', for yet others it is 'the outcome of the rich play between word and object, text and artefact'. Thus, as they say, many people believe that 'this latter aspect defines historical archaeology by its method rather than its content'. In other words, historical archaeology is the archaeology of literate peoples. Given such ambiguities, it is hardly surprising that Andrew Reid and Paul Lane entitled their edited book of 2004, *African historical archaeologies*, note the plural. It is hardly surprising but it is not really a solution for an already confused situation.

For confusion undoubtedly exists. Whether we like it or not there is a general notion that historical archaeology concerns a time period for which written sources are available and which is therefore distinct from prehistoric archaeology. Yet there is no chronological fault line in the African past that can neatly separate the two. Not only do written sources appear in some parts of the continent several thousand years before other parts but in some areas there are instances of regression, when periods with written records are followed by periods without. To add further to the confusion there are those who, understandably in the African situation, think that oral tradition as well as written documents can define historical archaeology.

Back in 1986 Merrick Posnansky and Christopher DeCorse published a paper about historical archaeology in Africa in which they expressed the hope that 'an integrated study of Africa's recent past will emerge without a separation between research on the European and African components' (Posnansky and DeCorse 1986: 12). To an extent their hope has been realized so that, for instance, in a book of 1998 edited by Kit Wesler, entitled *Historical archaeology in Nigeria*, we find British

archaeologist Patrick Darling writing about the earthworks of Benin in Nigeria and Nigerian archaeologist Yinka Ogedengbe writing about the British colonial settlement of Zungeru. Elsewhere in Africa, as for example the Reid and Lane book shows, an increasing interest in historical archaeology has been demonstrated by work on topics as different as the Middle Nile two thousand years ago and the site of a late-nineteenth-century explosives factory in South Africa.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that historical archaeology is a somewhat amorphous concept borrowed from the United States that we are trying to apply in African contexts. It is also apparent that to most people the existence of a separate sub-discipline of historical archaeology pre-supposes the existence of a separate sub-discipline of prehistoric archaeology. We should perhaps remember that the very idea of prehistory was a European invention that resulted from ignorance of the pre-literate European past amongst nineteenth-century scholars. We might even find some sympathy with *Annales* historian Lucien Febvre's remark in 1949 that 'the concept of pre-history is one of the most ridiculous that can be imagined' (Bintliff 1991: 19). At least one might view it as a Eurocentric notion that has outlived its usefulness.

Thus to some extent the application of the concept of historical archaeology in African contexts might constitute yet another compartmentalization of the study of Africa's past according to criteria originating elsewhere. In this respect its use could be regarded as similar to the retention in some quarters of epochalistic concepts like Late Stone Age and Early Iron Age, also of European origin and increasingly meaningless to many of us.

So, in conclusion, I return to Peter Robertshaw's remark about 'the useless boundary between prehistoric and historic archaeology'. As archaeologists investigating the African past we should surely seek to create a seamless account of human endeavour, in which a variety of culture contact and interaction, both external and internal, has played a part. To be able to do that we might need to free ourselves from the chains of previous thinking and see the past in a new way.

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