

Rethinking African archaeology from inside-out

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Introduction

The rethinking of African archaeology is an ongoing process. Some thoughts about how the objectives, media, audience, and consequences of archaeological enquiry in Africa can be reshaped and improved upon have been expressed, for example, in *African Archaeological Review*, volume 13, and number 1, of 1996. My discussion complements ideas that have already been put across by many scholars. It is presented from the perspective of an archaeologist of African descent, who trained in Africa and in North America, in Calgary, to be precise, and who has been practicing in Africa over the past decade and a half. I shall draw on my personal observations and experiences in Ghana, and on information I have gathered from my colleagues in Ghana and from other African countries to discuss the state of archaeology in African countries south of the Sahara, and propose specific ways in which the discipline can be strengthened in those countries.

I contend that the results of archaeological enquiry in Africa have contributed to knowledge and deepened understanding about human evolution in general, and about the prehistory and culture history of Africans in different regions of the continent. Yet, the discipline remains enigmatic and is considered to be dysfunctional among a cross-section of Africans. It is thus incumbent upon archaeologists, who practice on the continent to become unorthodox and go beyond the pursuit of purely academic and scientific goals to address social and economic issues that may help to improve the conditions of life of peoples with whom and among whom they work. By so doing, archaeology would become responsive to the social and economic interests of African communities and nations. It will also be better understood and its value will be known and appreciated.

A Brief Background

Archaeology is among the several disciplines that were introduced to Africa by European scholars. Following the collecting and piecemeal reporting of prehistoric and ethnographic objects by geologists and miners, among others, who encountered these objects in the course of work across Africa between the 18th and 19th Centuries, formal archaeological research began in the first half of the 20th Century. Excavations of sites and studies of objects that were found during geological surveys and during mining, road, and railway constructions characterized this research. In addition, a number of archaeologists embarked upon the discovery and cataloging of sites (e.g. Davies 1970), and multi-disciplinary teams studied sites in various regions, including the Nile valley, the East African Rift Valley, the Niger Delta area and the Volta Basin. The results of these activities, as well as the creation of museums and academic departments in a number of African countries bolstered the discipline in Africa.

Archaeological enquiry in Africa has, since its inception, varied among practitioners. It has been characterized to a large extent by investigations of human evolution, and of prehistory and culture history of different regions (e.g. Phillipson, 1993; Connah, 1981). There have also been a number of ethno-archaeological studies (e.g. Hodder, 1982), which have enabled archaeologists to review and improve upon their research strategies and interpretations of archaeological records and objects, and to generate data that inform on the dynamics of the culture of various groups contemporary African peoples.

Although its initial focus was on research, teaching has become a major component of archaeology in Africa. It is the main activity of archaeologists of African descent, who work on the continent. Some of these archaeologists at the University of Ghana, for example, teach about 800 undergraduate students per semester. The training of graduate students is also done by most of the European and North America archaeologists, who research in Africa.

Nonetheless, archaeology is poorly understood and suffers negative public image in Africa. A cross-section of the public perceives it to be dysfunctional and irrelevant, and hence demeans it in various ways. As a result, career opportunities and sources of research funding in African countries for African archaeologists remain very limited. European and North American archaeologists, who have better access to research funding, thus undertake the major research expeditions. The situation is so bad in Ghana, for example, that local archaeologists are ridiculed publicly, and archaeology is among the least preferred courses of study among students at the University of Ghana. So far, less than five percent of all students, who are offered courses in archaeology in their first year at this university, major in archaeology.

The absence of efficient cultural heritage management policies and practices in many African countries, and poor research ethics among many archaeologists, museum curators, trustees, and conservators have also not helped the cause of archaeology on the continent. The plundering of archaeological sites and objects is thus common (Schmidt and McIntosh, 1996)

Among variables that influence the negative public perception of archaeology in Africa is a general overemphasis by archaeologists, who practise in Africa, on academic and scientific goals, as a means of career development and job security. The vast majority of archaeologists in African institutions are very poorly remunerated. They are thus forced to engage in other income generating activities in order to generate funds to meet their private domestic and professional responsibilities. In most cases, these archaeologists gloss over the social and economic impact that their research may have on the communities and nations in which they work. They also fail to collaborate meaningfully among themselves, and are generally indifferent to public education (McIntosh, 1996:174). In spite of their predicament, however, many of them are able to accomplish a lot that contributes to knowledge in their fields of research.

Responsive Archaeology in Africa

It is highly important for all archaeologists to pursue academic and scientific interests in order to advance their discipline and careers, but it must be remembered that any academic or scientific endeavor that fails in contributing to improvements in the conditions of life of people is meaningless. There is, therefore, the need for archaeologists to ensure that their activities impact positively not only on themselves but also on those, whose past and life-ways they study. This is particularly necessary in Africa as a means of reversing the negativity that clouds archaeology on the continent. In the midst of poverty, Africans, like other peoples of the world would place much value on only those academic and scientific endeavors that assist in alleviating their plight, and frown upon those, which do not.

I am aware that the majority of Africanist archaeologists in the industrialized nations cannot be expected to be interested in all issues that concern Africa – and reasonably so. Separated by thousands of miles and alienated by differences in race, culture, lifestyle and language, problems and events in African nations seem hardly relevant to their situations. However, Africa should not be considered a mere laboratory; the welfare of its people must be at the heart of any kind of research activity undertaken there, if such activity is to be meaningful to the people.

Approaches to Research

I wish to recommend the adoption by Africanist archaeologists of development education (Foubert 1986), as a means of advancing the cause of their work in Africa. In this regard, research, new discoveries, and publication should not be considered the pinnacle of achievement, as observed by Brian Fagan (1996:239). The goals of research should be revised in relation to the interests of the people, whose culture or ancestry are studied. Archaeological enquiry, its related activities and results should be used to empower Africans to develop their communities, and should foster understanding and peaceful coexistence among peoples of different cultural and historical backgrounds. Cross-cultural connections between different groups of Africans may, for example, be investigated and commonalities that are found highlighted and promoted over differences.

I also propose the enhancement of meaningful partnerships and collaboration among Africanist archaeologists, and between them and the members of communities in which they work. The archaeologists should strive to not distant themselves from people, whose ancestors' life-ways they study. They must communicate effectively, recognize diverse decision-making structures, place collective interests and goals of projects ahead of personal and private goals, and be aware of gender and social issues (Watkins, 2000: 172). Eric Huyssecom's Ounjougou work among the Dogon (see http://www.dimmbal.ch/060_projects.htm), Nicholas David and Judy Sterner's advocacy for an International Peace Park in the Mandara Mountains (see <http://www.sukur.info/PeacePark/files/frame.htm>), Ann Stahl's community development project at Banda Ahenkro in Ghana, and Roderick McIntosh's collaboration with local groups against the plundering of heritage sites in Mali (McIntosh, 1996) are few examples of how archaeologists can meet their social responsibilities in Africa in addition to the pursuit of their scientific and academic goals.

The African public has to be engaged and educated by archaeologists through various outreach programs. On a project specific basis, education is necessary, and the archaeologist must educate affected cultural groups so that they can have an informed understanding of the reasons for the project, the types of information being sought, and the implications and utility of the study to the groups and to archaeology. Engagement between the Archaeology Department at the University of Ghana and the Traditional Councils of Techiman, Katamansu, Yilo-Krobo and Assin Manso have so far resulted in a better understanding among the respective local communities of the need for them to protect archaeological and other heritage sites in their territories.

While they are educated, the members of communities in which research projects are undertaken should also be provided with opportunities to educate the researcher about their wishes concerning information that may be present, the way they may want to involve themselves in the project, the types of information they desire obtaining, and any restrictions they feel might be necessary for the protection of information they would not want the general public to have. Such mutual education, on a project-by-project or one-to-one basis, provides both parties with an understanding of what would be expected of both groups should such programs be undertaken (Watkins, 2000).

Interpretations of Finds

Interpretations of archaeological objects and observations by archaeologists in Africa must serve scholarship and, at the same time, enhance cultural dialogue. They must not be restrictive and, hence, go beyond anthropological and ethnocentric perspectives in order to generate more informed discourse. Thus, researchers need to engage a wider audience and work more closely with skilled interpreters, including oral historians, craftsmen and women, who have interest and knowledge in their subjects of study.

Information dissemination

Knowledge obtained from interpretations made by Africanist archaeologists should be packaged in simpler and less technical language, and made available to a wider audience in Africa not only for academic referencing but also for public education, recreation and possibly for the training of contemporary craftsmen. The conventional practice of disseminating research results and related information through conferences and publications are restrictive, and are usually beneficial to mainly archaeologists with interest in the related subject matter. The majority of the African public is thus excluded from the benefits of such conferences and publications, and cannot therefore apply aspects of information that are disseminated, which may be relevant, to their collective development efforts. Beyond conference reports and other conventional publications therefore, more efforts should be made by Africanist archaeologists to document information they derive from research in video and in picture books.

Teaching and Capacity Building

More archaeologists of African descent than the number that is found today need to be produced to support their European and North American counterparts in advancing archaeology in Africa. Academic departments of archaeology in African nations thus have to attract and train more students at the graduate levels than they presently do in order to attain this. In view of the social and economic contexts in which archaeology operates, and which influence students' career interests and choice of subjects, the departments need to regularly revise their academic syllabi in relation to changing development interests and efforts of their nations. Presently, courses that bear on museum studies, tourism, poverty alleviation, and on cultural resource management and administration are, for example, very attractive to students.

The departments also need to develop and undertake course-credit summer field school programs that would include "exposure trips" to various communities and sites. This may be done in collaboration with partner institutions across the world. Apart from experiences in field archaeology and ethnography that they may gain, participants in the programs may forge lasting bonds of friendship and links of solidarity, which may transform their world outlook.

Conclusion

I may have made several generalizations and glossed over important issues that pertain to archaeology in Africa today, and discussed issues that may have already been addressed elsewhere. My discussion, however, highlights fact and perceptions that may not be known to many that, the numerous achievements and value of archaeology in Africa are not appreciated by most Africans because the discipline has not been very responsive to their social and economic interests. Archaeologists, who practice on the continent, are partly responsible for this situation by shirking much of their social responsibilities in favor of purely selfish academic and scientific goals.

In spite of the situation, however, archaeology has a great potential to become a major actor in social and economic development and poverty reduction among African peoples. Practitioners thus need to be upright in revising their goals and strategies to work. Without compromising their academic and scientific goals and career objectives, Africanist archaeologists must ensure that their activities are people-centered, and the results of their work must be packaged in ways that would impact positively on the conditions of life of Africans. Through this, archaeology in Africa can be advanced and its future secured.

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