

FORUM

The Africanisation of African Archaeology: What are the Implications for a "World Archaeology" Department?

Oliver Boles*

I would like to respond to Sue Hamilton's comments on under-representation in archaeology, and draw on some of her points regarding obstacles to career progression in light of my own experiences as an "Africanist". I believe there are a number of issues beginning to arise not just in African archaeology but in "World Archaeology" more generally that the academic community will sooner or later need to address.

African archaeology has a strong history within the Institute; many of the new generation of British Africanists – and a good number of the old – have been affiliated with the department at some stage, whether through undertaking study, research or teaching here, or through collaboration. Until a few years ago an MA course in African Archaeology was available, though this was cancelled due to lack of interest. I would argue that this may be symptomatic of wider issues.

For the first time in as long as I have been affiliated with the Institute (since 2007), there are no sub-Saharan African research students here and, to my knowledge, only a single student at Masters-level. The post-colonial era has taken time to impact on the representation of Africans working in archaeology; it is only relatively recently, perhaps as

late as the 1980s, that Africans have regularly begun to set research agendas and taken up key positions within the heritage sector (Reid, 2014). Today, however, African archaeology is being reclaimed. A number of universities in sub-Saharan Africa now offer quality undergraduate and graduate courses in archaeology, and these courses are generally taught by Africans. Further, the ethical obligations of foreign researchers towards the countries they work in have become a vital topic and one that today is omnipresent at Africanist meetings (Giblin, King & Smith, 2014). It is – rightly, of course – no longer possible in most African countries to conduct research without the consent of and engagement with, local communities and national heritage institutions.

Though it could never be reasonably suggested that these developments are anything but a force for good, I would like to raise the question of where this leaves African archaeology as a subject taught at and practiced by Western universities. Though at present it appears that there are generally enough project-based research positions to accommodate the majority of recent PhDs, there are worryingly few permanent jobs available at the few UK institutions that maintain a focus on Africa.

I do not believe that this situation is unique to African archaeology. Indeed, from my own experience working in Mexico prior to

* UCL Institute of Archaeology, United Kingdom
o.boles@ucl.ac.uk

shifting my focus as an undergraduate, non-Mexican students and even those further into their careers are being marginalised by legislation that requires all archaeological projects to be directed by Mexican nationals, and as a result employ predominantly Mexican or Mexico-based teams; it is increasingly difficult for Western students to envisage career paths for themselves that are focussed on the so-called “developing world”. Indeed, part of my rationale for switching focus was the recognition that Mesoamerica – and outside Mexico, archaeology is dominated by North American universities – would be a very difficult region in which to establish myself as a scholar. Out of the *comal* and into the *sufuria*, one might say¹.

In a department that prides itself on having – as proclaimed on the front-page of its website – a “truly global” focus (IoA, 2014), the trend towards the nationalisation of archaeology in the developing world is something that needs to be considered in the structuring of courses, particularly at undergraduate level. In a situation comparable to Sue Hamilton’s comments on the current state of archaeological specialism – though her comments refer to technical rather than regional specialism – to be an Africanist, with expertise relating solely to a single geographical area, may become untenable for those of us at the early stages of our careers. In terms of my own prospects, I have made a conscious decision to develop research and analytical skills – i.e. technical skills – with a wider applicability than a deep but restrictive knowledge of a particular regional or cultural history. Perhaps it is in this aspect of archaeology that foreign institutions still have a role to play in African archaeology; access to technical equipment and knowledge here far outweighs all but a few African institutions. It may be a reflection of this that recent students from sub-Saharan Africa at the IoA have been largely concerned with technical

training in areas like archaeometallurgy and GIS. It seems to me that departments offering the opportunity to study world archaeology have an obligation to ensure that students are aware of the potential limitations of regional specialism; courses and degree programmes should be structured to integrate the development of versatile technical knowledge with the global perspectives that spark so much initial interest.

While I would like once more to assert that this piece is in no way a criticism of the appropriation of research agendas by African institutions nor of the ethical debate that has surrounded these developments, I do believe this raises genuine concerns for “world archaeologists”, particularly those of us whose fledgling careers will have to navigate a changing academic landscape. I would be very interested to know whether these concerns are, as I suspect, of relevance to those working in other parts of the world.

Notes

- ¹ A *comal* is a traditional Central American frying pan, used for making tortillas. A *sufuria* is a cooking pot ubiquitous in Eastern Africa.


References

- Giblin, J, King, R, and Smith, B** (eds.) 2014 Introduction: de-centring ethical assumptions by re-centring ethical debate in African archaeology, *The Ethics of Archaeological Practice in Africa* (Special issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*), Vol. 49(2): 131–135
- Institute of Archaeology webpage** 2014 retrieved from www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology on 30th July 2014
- Reid, D A M** 2014 Some reflections on ethical developments in African archaeology, *The Ethics of Archaeological Practice in Africa* (Special issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*), Vol. 49(2): 255–260

How to cite this article: Boles, O 2014 The Africanisation of African Archaeology: What are the Implications for a "World Archaeology" Department? *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 24(1): 23, pp. 1-3, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.471>

Published: 20 October 2014

Copyright: © 2014 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

 *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press

OPEN ACCESS 