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Past imperfect, present tense: the archaeology of Africa's past 200 years

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ABSTRACT

The archaeology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a rapidly growing sub-field of African historical archaeology in tandem with a trend seen elsewhere in the world. Currently research on this time period in Africa is dominated by studies of slavery and emancipation, colonialism and capitalism and industrialisation. This research is described and research trends such as archaeologies of conflict, missionisation, Islamic expansion, colonial urbanism, identity and the contemporary world are identified as directions for the future.

ABSTRAIT

L'archéologie des dix-neuvième et vingtième siècles est un domaine en plein essor en archéologie historique en Afrique, faisant parallèle à une tendance observée ailleurs dans le monde. Actuellement les recherches sur cette période en Afrique sont dominées par des études de l'esclavage et de l'émancipation, et celles du colonialisme, du capitalisme et de l'industrialisation. Ce sujet de recherche est décrit dans le présent article, et les tendances de recherche telles que l'archéologie de conflit, les activités missionnaires, l'expansion islamique, l'urbanisme colonial, l'identité, et le monde contemporain, sont identifiées comme étant des orientations pour l'avenir.

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Introduction

In view of the fact that the recent discovery of pre-Oldowan tools in Kenya dating to 3.3 mya pushes the start of Africa's archaeological record back some 500,000 years earlier than previously thought (Harmand *et al.* 2015), some Africanist archaeologists might be forgiven for wondering why any time and attention should be paid to the archaeology of the past 200 years, less than an eyeblink on Africa's chronological scale. Indeed, at conference dinners, when scholars of different chronological persuasions sometimes mix, the archaeologist of Africa's nineteenth and twentieth centuries gets exactly that impression. Yet, worldwide, this period is increasingly drawing scholarly attention from members of our discipline (Orser 2010), a particular growth area being the archaeology of the twentieth century and the contemporary world (Graves-Brown *et al.* 2013). A discussion of

recent trends and possible future directions of archaeological work on this more recent period in Africa is thus timely.

Studies that aim to excavate the global and other interactions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should not be viewed as attempting to define the more recent period as an abrupt break from the past that can be studied without reference to deeper time (Reid 2011). There was, however, a specific confluence of events, people and ideas that arose out of the circumstances specific to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the impact of which on the people of the African continent bears closer examination within a global framework.

Perhaps one of the most impactful processes was the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which contributed to the reorientation of many social, political and economic relationships within the continent, particularly in West Africa (Law 2002). This was not, however, the end of the trade as the domestic, trans-Saharan and illegal trans-Atlantic trades continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, new regimes of production emerged as 'legitimate commerce' came to dominate West African trade, resulting in plantation economies becoming even more prominent (Bredwa-Mensah 2008). This economic system was also utilised on the East African coast where the Omani colonial regime introduced plantation agriculture from its existing economic repertoire (Croucher 2015). Twinned with the abolition of the slave trade was the emancipation of enslaved individuals in places such as the British-governed Cape Colony (South Africa), with the knock-on effect of precipitating the expanding frontier of Boer migration into the interior of southern Africa (Lucas 2004).

The end of the Napoleonic wars in Europe in 1815, along with innovations in travel and communication technologies, accelerated the pace of European colonisation in the form not only of spheres of interest, but also of settlers (primarily in the southern part of the continent, followed by a later wave in eastern Africa). Others also came to settle in Africa, particularly Indians who were brought in as indentured labour into South Africa or the Indian Ocean islands or who came as traders to eastern Africa. In 1884 the continent as a whole was carved up between the major European powers of the time at the Berlin Conference (Pakenham 1992). This process also shifted the focus and nature of the colonial enterprise in Africa as swathes of territory and the people in them were brought under the direct or indirect control of colonial governments (Reid 2012). At the same time the discovery of gold and diamonds set off an industrial revolution in the southern end of the continent, attracting participants from all over the world, including other parts of Africa (Weiss 2011). But this is but one example of the many population movements within the continent over the past 200 years. Nineteenth-century *jihads* in the West African interior, for example, spurred the migration of groups to other regions (for example, the Zaberma in northern Ghana; Nkumbaan 2008) and there was — and is — ongoing in- and out-migration to and from Africa's cities.

The last two centuries have also been characterised by much conflict: the 'small' wars of the imperialist nations that sought to impose a *pax colonia* or expand their territories and the ensuing wars of resistance (see, for example, Rushohora 2015); the world wars, in which African troops participated (Saunders 2008) and that Africans at home used to try to undermine the stranglehold of colonialism (Şaul and Royer 2001); and civil wars — whether between Boer and Briton in South Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century or the more recent post-liberation conflicts in other parts of the continent; not

to mention the African hot spots in the global Cold War (Reid 2012). The independence of the mid-twentieth century era brought further dramatic changes to African identities and socio-political realities, while in South Africa the ideology of *apartheid* reshaped the landscape and lifeways of millions (Hall 2008).

These two centuries also resulted in a proliferation of source materials: the written accounts of African and European travellers, missionaries, traders and colonial officials; the development of new — and the refashioning of old — oral traditions and histories; rock art produced by those at the interstices of state societies; the bureaucratic records of empire and newly independent nations; media such as newspapers, photographs, radio and film, accompanied by the increasing importance of advertising. All of this was accompanied by a material record that mixed the old with the new, the traditional with the modern and the imported good with the local product. It is for this reason that archaeology has made, and will continue to make, a contribution to broader debates about the changes that the larger-scale, often global, events and trends described above wrought in the everyday lives of African peoples occupying extremely diverse geographical and socio-political contexts.

This diversity makes it impossible to discuss all the relevant examples here. Instead, I draw on a survey of research featured in the major African and global archaeology journals since 2000, highlighting work executed by archaeologists that focuses specifically on sites and material culture dating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have focused this discussion on research trends that have been most closely examined with the widest range of case studies, namely: slavery and emancipation; colonialism; and capitalism and industrialisation. As pointed out by one of the paper's reviewers, this tends to emphasise the 'colonial rupture' experienced by African peoples rather than 'contexts of continuity.' While I do not disagree with this diagnosis, several existing discussions already illuminate linkages between earlier periods and the more recent past (see chapters in Reid and Lane 2004; Ogundiran and Falola 2007, Swanepoel *et al.* 2008; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012; Mitchell and Lane 2013 (Part VII)).

In addition, and again for reasons of space, I do not discuss studies strictly related to heritage and memorialisation. While the remains of the more recent past may be mobilised in the interest of various groups of people and serve as a flashpoint for debate and/or more overt conflict (for example, Shepherd and Ernsten 2007; Kankpeyeng *et al.* 2009; Giblin 2014; Weiss 2014) and this process may benefit from an archaeological viewpoint (for example, Hall and Bombardella 2007), it is an extremely complex issue that deserves an article on its own (see chapters in Peterson *et al.* 2015).

Finally, I focus on studies that relate to similar processes occurring in different parts of Africa in order to highlight the value of comparative approaches. By necessity this discussion thus excludes a range of potential themes. Some scholars, such as González-Ruibal (2014a: 421), see a commonality between slavery, colonialism and capitalism as forms of a 'predatory political economy.' I acknowledge that these themes are in fact closely linked and many studies could easily fall under all three of them.

Slavery and emancipation

The institution of slavery remained an important component of Africa's economic and social life even after the legal abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (by Denmark in

1803, by Britain and the United States in 1807, and then by other European and American states, culminating with Brazil in 1821) and the emancipation of slaves in the Cape (in 1834), not least because a clandestine slave trade persisted for several decades. These broader scale changes nevertheless impacted on local practice and are thus visible in the material record. In West Africa, for example, the rise of a 'legitimate commerce' in commodities such as palm oil after the abolition of the slave trade across the Atlantic, led to an increase in the importance of continental plantation agriculture that drew on the domestic slave labour market. Bredwa-Mensah (2008), for example, has examined slave lifeways and evidence for resistance at Danish plantation sites in the Gold Coast (Ghana) with a focus on how power relations and the will to resist were manifested spatially.

Slaves were not only present in plantation settings, however, and many African states of the time, such as the Asante kingdom and Yoruba states, utilised slaves not only for labour but also as items of conspicuous consumption to underline the power of the political élite (Usman 2007; Prestholdt 2008; Stahl 2008). As a result, slave-raiding intensified and expanded into new areas as the slave-raiding frontier moved over time, impacting daily life and settlement patterns (Swanepoel 2005; Usman 2007; MacEachern 2011; DeCorse 2012; MacDonald 2012).

The focus on the impact of slavery and slave-raiding in West Africa as documented archaeologically is long-standing and has been the focus of several edited volumes (DeCorse 2001; Lane and MacDonald 2011). More recently, there has been a surge in the archaeology of slavery in eastern Africa and the African islands, including a focus on Islamic colonialism in the region, particularly the role of Oman in the nineteenth century. Here, too, a plantation model of production was introduced. Croucher (2011), for example, has investigated the archaeology of clove plantations on Zanzibar. During the nineteenth century the bulk of these plantations were owned by colonists of Arabian origin under the political auspices of the Omani Sultanate. Croucher (2011: 166) situates their study within a broader archaeology of capitalism in view of the 'intensive agricultural production' and the increasing penetration of the cash economy. However, while the Omani plantations share similarities with their North American counterparts, the spatial organisation of Zanzibar's clove plantation houses grew from pre-existing social and economic relations in the Swahili and Omani social worlds. The organisation of labour thus gave rise to new material forms seen in the positioning of clove drying floors alongside the reception area of many of the plantation owners' houses. Despite the colonisation of the area by the Omani, the people of Zanzibar were consuming the same kinds of manufactured products as found elsewhere at the time in the Indian Ocean world, including in the European settler colonies of the Cape and Antipodes (Klose and Malan 2000; Lawrence 2003). While the ceramic ware types were similar, the forms of ceramics being bought differ significantly from those seen at the Cape, with an emphasis on the use of bowls, indicating the persistence of local and Indian Ocean foodways that linked the eastern coast of Africa with parts of Asia (Croucher 2011).

Other recent projects that have focused on slavery in eastern Africa include those that have documented the landscape of refugia (Kusimba 2004), as well as the formation of community in fugitive slave settlements in Kenya (Marshall 2012), while work on the Indian Ocean islands includes that of Seetah (2015), who examines the archaeology of slavery and indenture in Mauritius (see also Pearson *et al.* 2011).

In South Africa the emancipation of slaves in Britain's Cape Colony in 1834 did not result in an immediate change in social, economic or political status for many emancipated individuals (Lucas 2004). For example, the free 'Malay' and 'Coloured' women of Cape Town continued to wash laundry in the rivers and streams, the same work that their enslaved ancestors had done (Jordan 2006: 136), but this time as members of a Cape underclass that was to suffer later forced removals under *apartheid* (Lucas 2004). In rural areas, however, many former slaves moved from living on their masters' properties to mission stations, partly because it was difficult for them to acquire land on their own behalf. Although they continued working on white-owned farms they now enjoyed the freedom of their own homes, something reflected in the architecture of mission station houses that show a deliberate shift away from the slave lodge-style buildings on some farms towards a style that signified the establishment of family homes (Lucas 2004).

Colonialism

The bulk of work on colonialism in Africa during the two centuries under review has focused on the relationship that various African societies had with European countries such as Britain, France, Germany and Portugal as the relationship between them shifted from one of economic trade and exploration to territorial acquisition by European agents, often working through African élites or by the direct application of superior military force. In that European colonial administrations required the control of goods, people, transportation and other resources, colonialism was often accompanied by a great deal of infrastructure that housed the people and offices responsible for such administration, while also acting as a visual cue to the people in the affected territory of the power of the colonial state. Of particular relevance here is the work by Rhodes (2011, 2014), who has demonstrated in both Tanzania and Sudan the tremendous investment in infrastructure by the British and German authorities in urban contexts at points of transition for people and goods (Rhodes 2011:167).

In West Africa, Apoh (2013) has examined a colonial station at Kpando-Todzi in eastern Ghana, established by the Germans in 1889 and taken over by the British in 1914. Significantly, this station was established on the site of a traditional shrine, a clear appropriation of power. Such stations were typical of the system of indirect rule whereby colonial officers worked through local chiefs and would make the rounds between communities from a central base. Despite the European appearance of the station, Apoh (2013: 371) argues that there was a 'blurring' of boundaries between the colonial and the indigenous as colonial officers employed local cooks and had to adapt to local foodways and other practices. Interestingly, the site was re-used not only by the British, but also by the post-independence administration of Ghana, revealing once more how landscapes are inscribed with new meanings.

Such stations formed important nodes in the network of colonial power. As Richard (2012) points out with reference to the Siin region in Senegal, however, colonial rule that extended over large territories could not always be sustained and often came into conflict with more localised regimes of power. Colonial infrastructure was not necessarily highly visible on rural landscapes and most likely had a greater impact in towns. The process of colonialism itself was often accompanied by high levels of violence, presented

as necessary action in the imposition of a 'colonial peace', thus forts and outposts were familiar features (Thiaw 2012).

The intent of colonial officers to reshape the lives of colonial subjects according to the dictates of colonial policies manifested in their attempts to alter how local people related to the material realm of things. Often commented on are programmes by officers to reorganise space by, for example, forcibly relocating villages and recreating them in a grid pattern as noted by Stahl (2001) in Ghana and King *et al.* (2014) in Lesotho. This came with a drive to increase the practice of cash cropping so that colonies would be able to pay for themselves through taxes and goods revenues. Colonies were also to be cultivated as marketplaces for the manufactured goods produced in the factories of Europe, primarily through the institution of a cash-based economy (Richard 2012), and the variable ways in which currencies were introduced, embedded, accepted or rejected into various African societies has the potential to offer us a great deal of insight into the 'regimes of value' operating in those societies, as well as into the role of the state (Swanepoel 2015). Richard (2012) has also suggested that a transition to cash-cropping fundamentally altered settlement patterns as the settlements dating to this period in the Siin region (Senegal) appear to be more transient in nature than those present before the nineteenth century.

Apart from the role of African societies as marketplaces, the continent served, and continues to serve, as an important source of raw materials for the rest of the world. A body of archaeological work in eastern Africa is now beginning to illuminate the African side of this trade in the form of studies of caravan trade halts and of goods such as ivory that were portered along these routes (Biginagwa 2009; Lane 2010; Coutu 2015).

This emphasis on the extraction of raw materials by colonial powers represents a fundamental shift from the situation that prevailed in the period prior to the nineteenth century where, as uneven as such relationships were, local élites still had some degree of agency in shaping the overall encounters they had with their European counterparts. González-Ruibal (2014a) for example, examines the archaeological record at the Muni Estuary in the former Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea and argues that, as communities there became increasingly reliant on imported goods, they also became increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economy in ways that would ultimately impact on the ability of the élite or others in them to afford the goods that they wished to obtain, resulting in an impoverishment that is clearly reflected in the archaeological record (luxuries visible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cheap imports in the twentieth).

Although colonialism in Africa is largely associated with the expansion of Europe, increasingly archaeologists are beginning to look at other kinds of colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These include work by Croucher (2015) and Rhodes *et al.* (2015) on the Omani sultanate's presence in Zanzibar, while González-Ruibal (2011) draws attention to the nineteenth-century infrastructure instituted by the Turco-Egyptian state in the borderland area between Sudan and Ethiopia. Not merely external colonial forces were present, however. Africa represented, and, to some extent still represents, a mosaic of societies that are shaped by different forms of socio-political organisation. These societies were also liable to be subjected to colonisation or to colonise others. As Lane (2014) points out, stories of migration and colonisation feature prominently in the oral traditions of many African societies. In southern Africa, for example,

the role of nineteenth-century Nguni-speakers who migrated from coastal South Africa and established expansionist states in what are now areas of Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique is coming under increased scrutiny (Pikirayi and Pwiti 1999: 81; Cruz 2014).

Although there have not been any explicitly archaeological studies of neo-colonialism and what has been termed the ‘New Scramble for Africa’ (Arnold 2009), it is worth pointing too to the work by socio-cultural anthropologists Ferme and Schmitz (2014) that uses a material culture approach to trace the presence of the Chinese in Africa over the last half century. While there is a tendency to think of the presence of Chinese companies in Africa as a relatively new, twenty-first century phenomenon, their study shows that the Chinese have been present through material flows and farming practices in countries such as Sierra Leone since independence, even if they did not maintain a human presence as they do now. This suggests that studies focusing on the flow of goods, services and political interests during the Cold War era, and how this was operationalised differently in different African states, may bear interesting fruit.

Perhaps not as widely explored a topic as it might be, quotidian resistance to the impositions of the colonial order is often implied, if not always overtly explored and theorised. Examples include the rejection of coinage by people in northern Ghana during the first half of the twentieth century (Swanepoel 2015), or the tactic employed by groundnut farmers to only grow as much of the cash crop as needed to acquire the money needed to pay their taxes (Richard 2011). This is an area that requires deeper thought and investigation as it may offer explanations for otherwise puzzling aspects of the archaeological record. This is evidenced, for instance, by Smith (2001), who presents a convincing case that a set of secluded rock art images in Malawi and Zambia that depict various mask form characters from the *Nyau* secret society most likely date to a period when the activities of the society, and by extension the mask forms themselves, were forbidden by the colonial regime (first the South African-derived Ngoni and later the British colonial government). The rock art depictions, the production of which would ordinarily have been regarded as breaking a taboo, thus provided a means by which the form of the masks and the secret knowledge associated with them could be transmitted to young people during a period when to perform the masked dances and other rituals in public was to risk incarceration or worse (Figure 1).

More overt forms of resistance to the process of colonisation and expanding state frontiers are also receiving archaeological attention. This kind of work is important as it highlights the degree to which the colonial encounter was often violent and punitive in nature. González-Ruibal *et al.* (2011) and Esterhuysen (2015) have studied cave refugia in Ethiopia and South Africa respectively, illustrating the way in which colonialist regimes shattered the everyday, domestic lives of those targeted (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2011: 60). Other studies that have highlighted such encounters include that by van Schalkwyk and Smith (2005), who capitalised on the subversive nature not only of rock art, but also a satirical troop newspaper to shed new light on the war fought between the South African Republic and the Hananwa of what is now South Africa’s Limpopo province in 1894. Rushohora (2015), on the other hand, uses a landscape approach to address historical gaps and biases in our understanding of the *Majimaji* uprising against German rule in mainland Tanzania in 1905–1907.

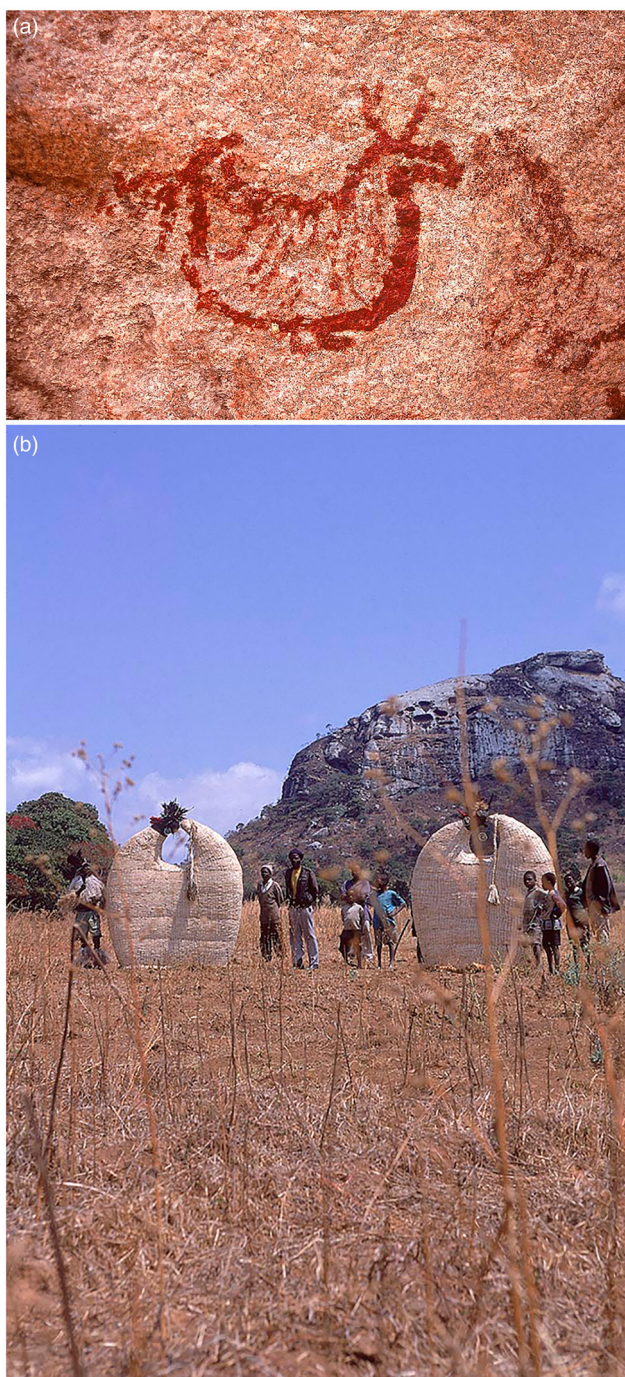


Figure 1. A Nyau 'mobile structure' and its representation in rock art, Malawi (images courtesy of B.W. Smith).

Capitalism and industrialisation

For some, a focus on capitalism as a defining feature of a broader historical archaeology is problematic in the African context as it is seen to materialise a Eurocentric bias (Schmidt and Walz 2007). In view of the fact that capitalism was imposed on many African societies, however, it surely behoves us to examine the ways in which it intersected contextually with people's lives in various areas of the continent, not least because it has so dramatically shaped Africa's economic, social and political present.

Hand in hand with modern capitalism goes the process of industrialisation. Much of the industrialisation associated with capitalist production within Africa, however, occurred at a distance. Thus, the groundnut oil produced from the crops of nineteenth-century Sereer farmers in Senegal 'literally "greased the wheels of industrialization"' in Europe, where they churned out the goods to be exported to and consumed by the colonies (Richard 2012: 61). This gives credence to Stahl's (2014: 486) argument that we should not be overly particularistic in our studies, but should rather follow the flow of ideas and commodities back and forth between the metropolises and the colonies (see also Stahl 2015), not least because it was not only the colonised who were transformed by these encounters, but also the colonisers (Gosden 2014: 477).

Several recent studies in West and eastern Africa highlighting the study of capitalism as a central theme are subsumed within the broader frame of colonialism. In southern Africa, however, there is a body of archaeological work and, arguably, a historical situation that allows for the study of the creation of a system of capitalist extraction and the emergence of a racialised system of class. While this was also rooted in a colonial milieu the birth of South Africa's mining industry permits an exploration of a number of facets of the capitalist system.

Here archaeology has given insights into the daily working of capital and the emergence of racial and spatial patterns that persist to the present day. One of the foci for such work is the Kimberly diamond diggings, which grew rapidly after the discovery of diamonds in 1867 resulted in a 'diamond rush' comparable to other 'rush' sites worldwide. Here, Weiss (2011: 220–221, 2015) argues that the early phase of such sites is characterised by what she terms a 'virulent, even "mutant" form of capitalism' characterised by a poorly regulated administrative regime, that imbued its participants with the lust for quickly obtainable wealth. This lust was accompanied by increasing paranoia about the possibilities of theft, which led to the eventual introduction of the segregation of black and white mine workers and the sequestration of black workers — the majority of them male migrant labourers — in workers' compounds from 1886 onward.

While black workers' compounds have not yet been the object of an excavation-based archaeological study, a number of studies have been carried out on the skeletal remains of the workers themselves. These remains were often interred in unmarked extensions of existing cemeteries and are encountered during the course of development projects. Fifteen graves in the Gladstone Cemetery in Kimberly, for example, yielded the remains of at least 86 males and 15 females with 12 of the burials containing the remains of between five and 14 individuals. Given the preponderance of men in the sample and the nature of their burial, these burials most likely represent the remains of some of Kimberly's black migrant worker population in the last decade of the nineteenth century who were given paupers' burials after dying in hospital (van der Merwe *et al.* 2010a).

Studies of the remains have confirmed indications in the documentary records that the bulk of the migrant labourers drawn to the site were not local but came from all over southern Africa (van der Merwe *et al.* 2010a). Other skeletal evidence also brings home the harsh nature of life on the mines and the kinds of medical interventions made, including amputations. There were high levels of disease, including syphilis, as well as indications of a great deal of interpersonal violence (van der Merwe *et al.* 2010b). Epidemics on mines were also not unknown, as evidenced by the remains of 36 victims of a typhoid outbreak at the Koffiefontein mine (L'Abbe 2003).

Similar concerns with the control of space by industrial managers occurred in other contexts as well. The compound system, for example, was also implemented on gold mines in Johannesburg and at sites such as the Modderfontein dynamite factory (dynamite being needed to facilitate the gold mining industry), while imported European workers were segregated on the basis of their nationality, thus precluding the formation of class solidarity (Behrens 2005; Figure 2). Despite the growing interest in the landscapes of capitalism and industrialisation in South Africa, however, the physical infrastructure of industry is still understudied, industrial archaeology being woefully under-represented in the region's research (exceptions include Saitowitz and Lastovica 1998; Worth 2005). Having an ever-growing body of work that is examining these contexts within this phase of South African history nevertheless demonstrates the value of having a number of scholars working from different angles, with different primary research interests. Due to the small numbers of archaeologists working in this period on the continent as a whole, arguably one of the greatest problems that researchers face is the lack of comparative data able to stimulate new conversations, theoretical perspectives and conclusions.

Future trends

Much of the work reviewed in this paper has built on existing genealogies of research that have become fairly well established over the last forty to fifty years since 'historical archaeology', however defined, became a recognised sub-discipline in Africa. This is likely to continue as the body of work from comparative contexts increases. One topic not discussed thus far that is beginning to attract a significant level of interest is the archaeology of missions and missionisation. Until recently there was a smattering of isolated projects (Reid *et al.* 1997; Clift 2001; Boshoff 2004, Lucas 2004) but there are now active or ongoing projects on mission station sites in South Africa, Botswana (Ashley 2011), Zimbabwe and Ghana, with Crossland's (2006, 2014, 2015) work in Madagascar the most well-published thus far. Considering the importance of Africa as a mission field within the broader frame of colonialism, the significant interventions into African material life that missionisation entailed (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997) and the diverse paths that Christianity has followed in the societies within which it was introduced, including its integration, in many cases, with indigenous practices and beliefs, this is a topic crying out for more sustained and in-depth comparative archaeological investigation in multiple areas of the continent.

Equally impactful has been the Islamic expansion that has occurred in many parts of Africa during the last two centuries through processes of both diffusion and migration. In some instances this resulted in either campaigns of resistance from local people (often within the context of slave-raiding, see Swanepoel 2005) or in the adoption of

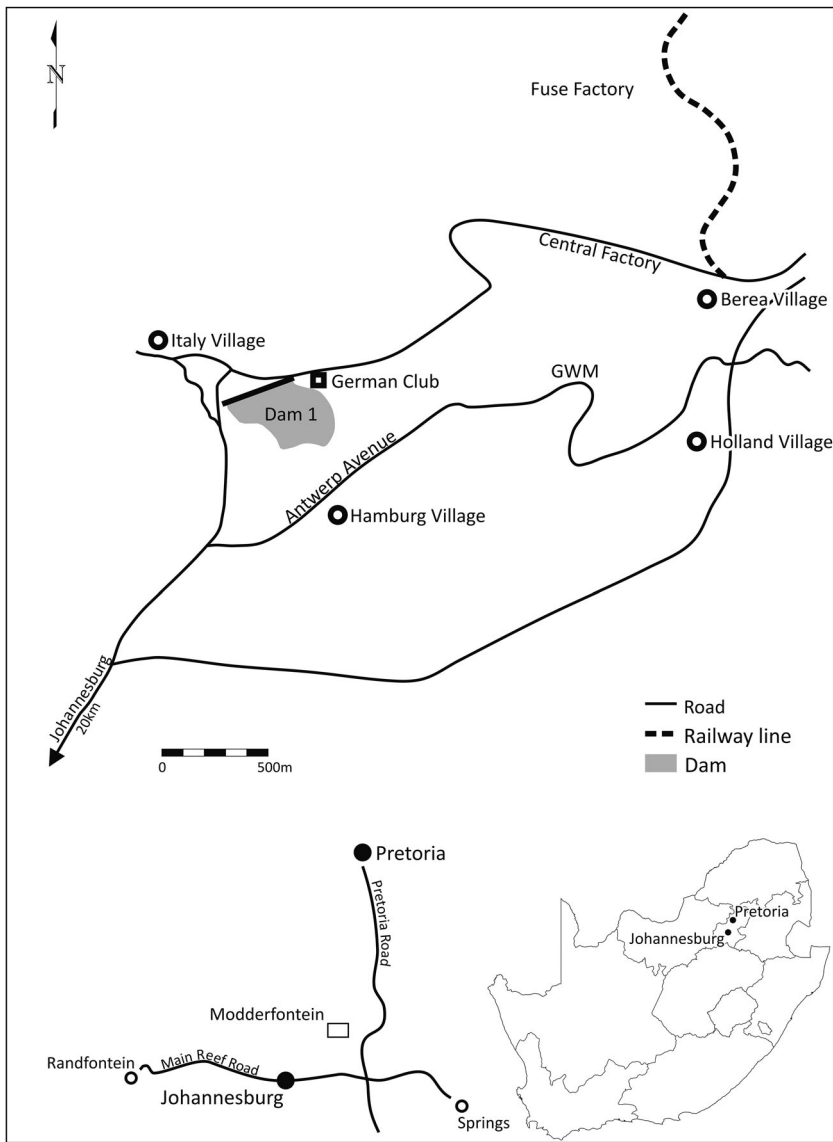


Figure 2 The European workers at company towns such as the Modderfontein dynamite factory in the late nineteenth century outside Johannesburg, South Africa, were segregated along ethnic lines (image courtesy of J. Behrens; map re-drawn by C. Bruwer).

new forms of religious practice, often accompanied by new architectural forms such as mosques (Figure 3).

A further topic that should perhaps draw more attention from archaeologists than it has is the African urban landscape, particularly that of the colonial and post-colonial era since studies of African urban centres prior to this time are fairly well established (see, for example, Hall *et al.* 2008; Anderson 2009; Sinclair 2010; Monroe 2014). A former special issue of this journal (Burton 2001/2002) would make a useful starting point for any archaeologist wanting to engage with the issue of eastern African and colonial era



Figure 3 Mosque at Wurinyanga, Upper East Region, Ghana. The (Muslim) founders of this community settled here in the early twentieth century after a number of migrations through other parts of West Africa (photograph: N. Swanepoel 2015).

urbanism. In particular, the relationship between space and racial or class identities may serve as a fertile research topic. In South Africa, this has been explored by some archaeologists who have documented the reordering of spatial and social life occasioned by the *apartheid* era legislation that led to the forced removals of residents from places like District Six in Cape Town (Hall 2008: 265).

South African archaeologists have, however, only just begun to really grapple with what an archaeology of *apartheid* would look like (see, for example, Hall 2000), whether it be in urban or rural areas (Figure 4). A point raised by Weiss (2014) is, however, of significance to all African cities in that many urban areas that have been labelled as ‘informal’ or ‘slum’ areas are by now quite old and thus may have heritage significance not only in terms of their intangible attributes such as centres for political organising or as gateways to urbanisation for many people from the countryside, but also for their material components, such as architecture and spatial organisation. Weiss (2014: 8) argues for example that the oldest section of Galeshewe township outside the diamond-mining town of Kimberly, which was created as part of South Africa’s policy of racial segregation, has examples of a unique vernacular architecture that can be contrasted with that found in ‘formerly colonial neighbourhoods’ of the town. This tangible heritage is now threatened from development programmes that seek to formalise the township landscape, but in many areas such structures may not be old enough to be formally protected by existing heritage legislation and may thus fall victim to development without being properly recorded.

As the archaeology of the ‘contemporary past’ gains ground theoretically and methodologically elsewhere in the world it is likely that this too will become more of a topic



Figure 4 A landscape of removal. Black residents from the Botshabelo Mission Station, Mpumalanga, South Africa, were forcibly removed from the site in 1972. Many of the stone houses were bulldozed (photograph: N. Swanepoel).

of interest to African(ist) archaeologists. Much of the existing work revolves around identity, (see, for example, Lyons 2007; González-Ruibal 2014b; chapters in Richard and MacDonald 2015; Wynne-Jones 2015). Giblin (2015) has analysed recent post-conflict material culture in the western Great Lakes region of East Africa and the potential role that archaeology can play there in memorialisation projects. Elsewhere, Gavua (2015), Pikirayi (2006) and Swanepoel (2009) have examined contemporary, symbolic landscapes, while Shepherd (2015) has delved into the material remains of archaeology itself with his study of the archive of John Goodwin, an early twentieth-century pioneer of Stone Age archaeology in South Africa.

The most appropriate focus of archaeological research into this very recent period is somewhat debated. González-Ruibal's (2008) archaeology of 'super-modernity' starts with the First World War and is described as an archaeology that is largely concerned with the destruction associated with this period, including the study of concentration camps, battlefields and the ruins of industry. Importantly, he argues that archaeologists should not aim simply to produce more data or to describe a happening and its material results in minute detail, but should rather seek to situate it within its broader social, political and economic context.

At the very least, the practice of archaeology can function as a method of manifesting the uncomfortable past, bringing it to light in a material way that otherwise could not be attested to (González-Ruibal 2008). While there is much discussion in South Africa of the

land restitution process, for example, there is relatively little awareness on the part of white and some young black South Africans of the actual mechanics and trauma inherent in a process that forcibly altered the disposition of land and settlement on the South African landscape. The process of alienation from land has been shown to have had detrimental effects on people's sense of cultural continuity (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999). The archaeology of such sites, including recording the remains of bulldozed buildings and abandoned household goods, allows for the witnessing of such events by those who were not there to see them occur (cf. Giblin 2015).

Archaeology as a discipline that has long focused on the flows of commodities and their consumption is well-placed to engage with a globalised world and the place of Africa within that world, for example in studying the movement of people and resources around the colonial empires during the world wars (Saunders 2008: 269), or its significant role in the Cold War era. On the contemporary landscape, any study of e-waste, for example, would need to include the presumably unknowing and unaware consumer who drops off a computer at a recycling point in the United States or Europe with the assumption that it will be recycled, not exported as a second-hand good to Africa or elsewhere, where it will end in a landfill being stripped by workers without adequate protection from the dangerous chemicals and metals it contains (Taffel 2015: 80–81).

Karege-Munene and Schmidt (2010) have pointed to the problematic nature of doing archaeology in social contexts where local people face real fundamental societal challenges such as AIDS, electoral violence or other constraints and while, on the one hand, archaeologists need to build closer engagement with communities, it is also not beyond the realm of possibility that they should also turn their archaeological gaze on such issues in order to bring them to the surface in a process of manifestation.

Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction to this review, the African continent has a very long and rich archaeological record, combined — it should be noted — with limited archaeological capacity, both in terms of personnel and funding, when compared with some other world areas. It is therefore not unreasonable to ask what the archaeology of the past two centuries, an era rich in other sources, can bring to the table in terms of contributing to our knowledge of the world (Holl 2009: 140; Boeyens 2012). Responding to this point, González-Ruibal (2014a: 20) has stated that:

'We need prehistoric archaeology to show what was happening before the colonality of power entered the scene ... But we also need archaeology of the contemporary past to complete the story; a historical archaeology that stops short in the nineteenth century is insufficient. The archaeology of the present allows us to check whether the promise of the past, as creative and empowering was fulfilled. Or if it was actually a promise in the first place or a warning.'

Considering the rather dark vision of his archaeology of supermodernity, he would seem to regard the past as a warning. What this quote perhaps points to, however, is the duality not only of material culture, but also of the African experience across multiple contexts. While for González-Ruibal (2014a: 422) 'dress, bedrooms, forks, and dishes ... act as material agents of coercion' in the 'process of civilization', Prestholdt (2008: 24) has

argued that it was these very things that the inhabitants of the Comoro Islands used to demonstrate their *similitude* with their British trading partners, thus strategically manipulating global relationships in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

We should thus be wary of only seeing African contexts through the lens of exploitation and dispossession. Taffel (2015: 80–81) rightly argues that a study of e-waste that centres on ‘microelectronic devices as toxic trash with a pathologically short use-time’ would problematise their representation as the desirable objects that we see in advertising campaigns. In her scenario, however, it is intimated that the only interaction that the ‘subaltern’ has with ‘our digital detritus’ is through the processing of e-waste, or perhaps the production of the raw material needed to make such devices. Indeed, any study of a technology such as mobile phones in Africa should consider the tremendous human cost of mining minerals such as coltan in Congo-Kinshasa (Nest 2011) or the costs of their disposal. This is not, however, the only story that can be told of mobile telephones in Africa as they have also been responsible for transforming the lives of people across the continent, differently so in different places (see chapters in de Bruijn *et al.* 2009).

It must be remembered that archaeological intervention into the space of the last 200 years is inherently political, more so the closer to the present that we come thus opening up the opportunity for archaeologists to offer a critical perspective on the processes playing out in the ‘super-modern’ era, most notably by making that which is hidden visible (González-Ruibal 2008). In a world dominated by a global news cycle that consistently portrays Africa as a continent rife with problems, however, one could argue that the resilience and inventiveness of Africans are as hidden from view as the global relations of power.

Currently, within African archaeology the study of the material remains of the mid-twentieth century and more recent times is largely concerned with studies emanating from a heritage perspective. There is thus very little published work on sites from the more recent past, although there may be traces of it in much grey literature, particularly in the form of Archaeological Impact Assessment reports. Work by archaeologists elsewhere in the world has, however, offered valuable insights into modern-day problems such as homelessness (Zimmerman and Welch 2011), waste (Reno 2013) and undocumented migration (De León 2012). All of these will no doubt prove fruitful areas of enquiry for African(ist) archaeologists in the future.

In addition, archaeology, with its focus on space and materiality over the long term, is uniquely suited to understanding and highlighting the endless ability of Africans, in all their diverse contexts, to reinvent, reimagine and remake their present reflected through their relationship with tangible and intangible worlds at both the local and global scales. This suggests that archaeologists who are interested in the material remains of the more recent past should not only be concerned with what archaeology is good *for* (Segobye 2005; Pikirayi 2009) but also what it is good *at* (see, for example, Davies *et al.* 2014).

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