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Possibilities for a postcolonial archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa: indigenous and usable pasts

Paul Lane

Abstract

It has long been recognized that archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa, and its public manifestation through the medium of museums, emerged within the context of European colonial rule, and that legacies of colonialism continue to shape archaeological practice across the continent. Following independence there has been steady indigenization, initially in terms of personnel but subsequently also in terms of organizational structure and research agendas. Recent calls for a 'post-colonial archaeology' liberated from the constraints imposed by 'the colonial archive', have highlighted many of the challenges that remain. Nevertheless, indigenization has also resulted in the production of more nationalistic and/or Afrocentric perspectives. These echo some of the sentiments voiced by the first generation of African political leaders regarding the need to recover a truly 'African past', which have also been revived in more recent calls for an African Renaissance as articulated by NEPAD, among others. This paper explores these developments so as to highlight some of the inconsistencies and inherent contradictions of current conceptualizations of postcolonial archaeology in sub-Saharan African contexts.

Keywords

Sub-Saharan Africa; postcolonial archaeology; indigenous archaeology; usable pasts; material memory.

Where archaeology is employed in societies very different from those in which it originally developed, it may not be able to reproduce itself in its old image and expect all the familiar sets of relationships that define it to follow.

(Miller 1980: 709)

Introduction

It is well attested that the introduction of Archaeology (see below for an explanation of use of initial capital) in areas of Asia (Glover 2003), the Indian sub-continent (Cohn 1996;

Paddayya 1995), South America (Hegmon 2003; Politis 1995) and Africa (Andah 1995a; Kinahan 1995; Robertshaw 1990) was closely associated with the spread of European colonial rule. At a very basic level, as Díaz-Andreu reminds us: 'Colonial archaeologists were part of a diaspora formed by members of the army, administrators, explorers, fortune hunters, and settlers' (2007: 9). More fundamentally, as she and others have explored, the establishment of 'scientific' Archaeology in non-Western settings as a disciplinary practice also challenges and undermines pre-existing ontologies and epistemologies.

This 'colonization of consciousness' operates on a number of levels and across various domains, from that of everyday practice (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991) to scholarly discourse (Said 1978), and can reconfigure, potentially, both how the past should be understood and what can be considered as legitimate sources of information about the past. Thus, within the context of nineteenth-century colonial rule in India it 'was the British [colonial rulers] who ... defined ... how the value and meaning of ... objects produced or found in India were determined' and who also

created a [new] system of classification which determined what was valuable, that which would be preserved as monument[s] of the past, that which was collected and placed in museums, that which could be bought and sold, [and] that which would be taken from India as mementoes and souvenirs of their own relationship to India and Indians.

(Cohn 1996: 77)

Moreover, as Gosden (2001) notes, while the formal structures of European colonialism have been largely removed (albeit not entirely; see, e.g., Pagán-Jiménez 2004), many of the intellectual, political and economic consequences of Archaeology's colonial roots pervade the discipline even though these are now being actively challenged (e.g. Green et al. 2003; Leone 2009). When viewed in global perspective it is evident that this legacy has shaped, and continues to shape, virtually all aspects of modern archaeological practice – from the interpretation of archaeological evidence and the weight given to different events, processes and agents in the shaping of that evidence to structures of funding and the definition of research priorities. In all these domains, as with its sister discipline anthropology (L'Estoile 2008), Archaeology remains strongly Eurocentric and so, on a global scale, privileges Western perspectives.

That the historical legacies of European colonialism continue to influence research agendas and provide the definitional parameters of Archaeological research is widely held in the African context. Augustin Holl, for example, has described Archaeology as the 'child of the colonial enterprise' (1990, 2009), while for Alinah Segobye, the

colonial legacy of the discipline, like its sister discipline anthropology, still plagues attempts to foster archaeology as a truly African discipline. It remains perceived as an elitist subject, which is the preserve of tertiary education institutions, museums, and foreign research teams far removed from people's struggle for livelihood.¹

(Segobye 2005: 34)

Whereas Segobye sees the main fracture lines to be a perceived lack of relevance, other archaeologists working on the continent have gone further to suggest that Archaeology's 'governing paradigms and epistemologies often conflict with African historical needs, views of the past, and ways of structuring time and space' (Schmidt 1995: 119). In the same vein, while conducting archaeological research in Nkwere, central Igboland, Nigeria, Pamela Eze-Uzomaka became aware that many Nigerians 'have a concept of their past which is divergent from the past presented by archaeologists' (2000: 153). Consequently, so it is argued, if African Archaeology is to be truly effective at providing 'a firm basis for learning the social and environmental plans and designs of past populations and for formulating actions for social and environmental planning today', understanding indigenous knowledge systems is deemed essential (Andah 1995b: 173).

Two different models of a post-colonial archaeology suited to sub-Saharan Africa seemed to be being proposed by these different authors. For convenience, I term these here 'the usable past' model and the 'indigenous epistemologies model'. While potentially complementary, as both emphasize the importance of doing and producing archaeologies that are relevant to Africa's modern-day populations, their conceptual bases and implications for archaeological practice and interpretation are different. One goal of this paper is to review the key aspects of each model and to discuss how their adoption might change the discipline in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, however, I would argue that, while there are merits to adopting either strategy, both need to be complicated by paying greater heed to two well-established observations by postcolonial theorists. These are Bhabha's (1994) argument that colonial encounters did not produce impoverished versions of earlier, pre-colonial social formations, but instead generated new, hybrid or creolized forms of culture, and Spivak's (1988) recognition that the imbalances of power inherent in colonialism created marginalized groups and persons whose voices could not be heard within the hegemonic discourse of that setting, and in this sense they became (or remained) subaltern.

In what follows, I discuss the core elements of the 'usable pasts' model before going on to a consideration of the 'indigenous epistemologies model'. Before doing so, however, a brief review of recent arguments concerning the links between Archaeology and 'modernity' is called for, since, I suggest, defining archaeology as a modern, Western disciplinary practice limits its potential in non-Western contexts and, more seriously, reproduces (albeit in an unintentional manner) the kind of differential evaluation of Western and 'Other' understandings of space, time, being and materiality that have been the subject of sustained scholarly critique for several decades. Of course, defining Archaeology has always been problematic. My intention is not to be prescriptive, and I use the terms 'scientific' or 'modern' Archaeology here to refer, simply, to the general, taken-for-granted understanding among the majority of practitioners of what archaeology is concerned with, how evidence is interrogated so as to generate archaeological interpretations, and a general reliance on the authority of the historical method. Since I argue in this paper that there are other forms of archaeology, so as to distinguish these from 'scientific'/'modern' archaeology I refer to the latter simply as 'Archaeology'. The use of a capital 'A' is partly a heuristic device, but is also intended to signify the kind of cultural capital, hierarchical relationships and authoritative and allocative power that have become attached to the discipline of Archaeology.

Archaeology and modernity

Elements of what today would be described as archaeological practice are of considerable antiquity, traceable in Western culture to the rise of antiquarian interest in ruins and ancient objects during the Renaissance (Schnapp 1996), which in turn was a revival of earlier scholarly interests in these phenomena during the late Classical era (Clarke 1968: 2–10). The word ‘archaeology’, after all, ‘comes from the Greek *arkhaiologia*, the study of what is ancient’ (Díaz-Andreu 2007: 2). The birth of the discipline of Archaeology, however, is conventionally taken to fall around the mid-nineteenth century, due in no small part to crucial developments in Western thought concerning the chronological ordering of material remains, human evolution and understanding of geological time and the great antiquity of the earth (Daniel 1977; Trigger 1989: 73–109). The emergence of Archaeology as a Western disciplinary practice has also been associated with the rise of European nationalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kohl 1998), state-level systems of organization and governmentality (Gero 1985: 342) and notions of modernity.

Archaeology’s links with modernity have been most clearly articulated in recent years by Julian Thomas, who has argued that the desire to investigate past lives through the medium of material culture is a ‘distinctively modern pursuit’ and that ‘if we were not modern, it might not occur to us to do archaeology at all’ (Thomas 2004: xi). Thus, while there are well-known examples of individuals in antiquity and in the early medieval era taking an interest in ancient objects and in uncovering ancient ruins, in the absence of the particular understandings of time, materiality and humanity that emerged from the collective work of scholars such as Darwin, Lyell, Thomsen, de Perthes, Pengelly and others during the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, such activity, Thomas argues, does not qualify as ‘Archaeological’ practice (2004: 4). Lucas is equally adamant that ‘archaeology was born of modernity’ (2004: 109). He is also of the opinion that Archaeology was central to shaping the idea of the present as being *distinct* from the past, a notion which lies at the heart of all concepts of modernity. Before modernity, he argues, ‘understanding of the past had come through tradition, yet in breaking with tradition, with the past, modernity now had to find another way of understanding it’ through the use of reason and the senses (*ibid.*). It was during the process of rupture between the dominance of tradition and religion and the birth of scientific reasoning, Lucas argues, that *things* and the material world in general came to be regarded as alternative authoritative sources about the past, and so acquired value in their own right.

Other archaeologists (e.g. Glørstad 2006; Witmore 2006; Knapp and van Dommelen 2008) have questioned straightforward identifications of Archaeology as a modern, Western disciplinary practice. Equally, as Patterson notes (1999: 158), even in its earlier guises, Archaeology was never a monolithic entity, not least because ‘different parts of the world [had] different meanings in the historical narratives crafted and reproduced by [the] ruling class and state intellectuals’ who were then at the centre of the production of archaeological knowledge. Nevertheless, there remains a general, implicit assumption among many archaeologists that the interrogation of material culture to reconstruct ‘the past’ is a Western, post-Enlightenment invention that stands in contrast to other ‘local’/‘folk’/‘traditional’/‘indigenous’/‘non-Western’ modes of historical practice.

The utility of such dichotomies is questionable, however, for at least three reasons. First, the manner in which the contrast is drawn between ‘scientific’ and ‘indigenous’ understandings of ‘the past’ tends to imply that both categories are closed and static systems rather than being open-ended and continually subject to change. A further problem associated with the scientific:indigenous contrast is that it can imply a ranking of knowledge which sees indigenous knowledge systems as being contextually specific and having only limited geographical applicability. It is in this sense that such knowledge systems are often categorized as ‘local’ and used to provide a contrast with the more comparative, generalizing and hence ‘global’ theories of Western natural and social science. As Moore (1996: 2) has argued, while the deconstructionist/postmodernist debate has highlighted the partial and contextually dependent nature of all theories, including those of ‘general scientific procedure’, rather paradoxically this debate has also served to reinforce the view that ‘local people produce local theories . . . [which] are, almost by definition, not comparative ones’. Finally, the continued use of this dichotomy introduces a particular tension for those who practise Archaeology in non-Western contexts. Specifically, despite its apparent Western and modernist origins, Archaeology remains one of the most effective means of researching the unwritten past, and so has the potential to challenge the very same colonial discourse of which it was a part. Overcoming these tensions, I suggest, must lie at the core of any attempt to develop African postcolonial archaeologies.

Archaeology as anti-colonial practice

Despite the colonial origins of Archaeology as a disciplinary practice in many parts of the non-Western world, the production of archaeological knowledge about these very same localities has frequently been hailed as: a way of challenging colonial denigration or dismissal of the history of colonial subjects (e.g. Robertshaw 1990: 92; Trigger 1990: 318); as a means of recovering information about the largely unwritten pasts of these areas of the world (e.g. McIntosh 2005: 57–8; Trigger 1983); a way of countering the alienating effects of a new education system (Miller 1980: 711); and having the potential to offer a different understanding of the past, independent from the written accounts produced by European observers (e.g. Rubertone 1989: 32). As such, Archaeology can be regarded as an anti-colonial practice. In the African context, the development of archaeology, along with investigation of the past through oral traditions and histories, has been widely seen as the way best to challenge older claims that the continent had no history prior to the arrival of Europeans (see Stahl 2005), as epitomized by the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper’s remark that there ‘is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not a subject of history’ (1963: 871).

The importance of the past as a source of identity and self-confidence was central to many of the writings of the earliest proponents of pan-Africanism, including Cheikh Anta Diop (MacDonald 2003; Posnansky 1982) and William Du Bois (Miller 1999), many of which incorporated a notion of *négritude* as developed by Léopold Senghor (Holl 1990: 301–4). In North Africa, historians such as Marcel Bénabou and Abdellah Laroui have stressed, similarly, the importance of writing ‘decolonized histories’ of the Maghreb and Roman North Africa from indigenous perspectives and sensibilities as a challenge to the hegemonic legacies of French colonialism (van Dommelen 2006: 105–6). Laying claim to and demonstrating that

African societies had histories that were as diverse and as rich as those of Europe and North America was also recognized as a central part of the process of decolonization by several of the first generation of leaders of independent African nations. The best known of these is the statement made by Sir Seretse Khama, Botswana's first president, at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland graduation ceremony in 1970:

We should write our own history books to prove that we did have a past, and that it was a past that was just as worth writing and learning about as any other. We must do this for the simple reason that a nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past are a people without a soul.

(cited in Phaladi 1998: 233)

Similar sentiments can be found in the speeches of other first-generation African leaders, notably President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (e.g. Nkrumah 1973: 206–17) and President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (e.g. Nyerere 1968: 80–5, 176–86). More recently, overt political promotion and preservation of Africa's diverse cultures and 'indigenous knowledge' systems has been restated as one of the goals of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).²

We should not find any of this at all surprising, given that the majority of former European colonial powers drew similarly on the past, and especially ruins and other physical reminders, in their own constructions of nationhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Graves-Brown et al. 1996; Kohl 1998). Nevertheless, despite such overt political statements, the teaching and practice of Archaeology have received only limited government support in most independent African nations, and the lack of resources and trained personnel (Plate 1) have been recurrent narrative tropes in most commentary on the state of the discipline, whether by Africans or outsiders (e.g. Aguigah 2009: 132–3; Karega-Münene 1996; Mabulla 2000: 212; Musonda 1990: 11–15; Posnansky 1982: 355; Sahnouni 1996; Shaw 1989: 15). As illustration of this devaluing of the importance of history (and in this context also Archaeology) by African governments, we may note that Seretse Khama's famous exhortation about the value of the past is now consistently misquoted in most official references in Botswana to the speech, and simply rendered *without any reference to history*, as 'a nation without a culture is a nation without a soul' (Parsons 2006: 668–9). This further underlines Segobye's observation quoted above that Archaeology is often perceived as having little to offer contemporary Africa. In short, as Schmidt has argued, archaeologists working on the continent are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they are masters of 'a repertoire of techniques and approaches that promise significant ways of recuperating African pasts heretofore obscured' but in the application of these may be applying 'theoretical assumptions that are often out of tune with African sensibilities, needs, and structures' (1995: 119).

Developing African postcolonial archaeologies

As debate over these issues has progressed, a common trend has been to challenge aspects of the narratives and interpretations produced during the colonial era and to offer



Plate 1 The limits of indigenous archaeology in Africa? University of Botswana archaeology field school, Ranaka 2009 (photo: Paul Lane).

alternatives that emphasize local processes and agents as the drivers of change and innovation rather than external factors, as tended to be the case in older so-called ‘colonialist’ interpretations. The changing emphases in archaeological interpretations of the origins of Swahili stone-built architecture and their trans-oceanic trading relationships provide an excellent example (Kusimba 1999: 43–66). Others include the changing interpretations of the origins, technological accomplishments and spread of African metallurgy (Schmidt 1996), and the history and significance of Great Zimbabwe (Pikirayi 2001: 1–36).

While initially controversial, as the weight of evidence has accumulated many of these revisionist interpretations have become accepted alongside continued recognition of the pivotal role of global connections in the continent’s diverse history (Mitchell 2005). Not all Africanist archaeologists would concur with this assessment, however. The Tanzanian archaeologist Felix Chami (2009), for instance, has recently responded robustly to criticisms of his interpretation of the evidence he argues indicates the active engagement of East African populations in trade with the Roman world and the very early presence of south-east Asian domesticates, such as chicken, on the East African littoral. This has further prompted him to ask ‘Why in ancient Africa must foreign contributions be balanced with those of local people while explaining the internal development of societies?’ (Chami 2009: 46). The Kenyan archaeologist Chapurukha Kusimba has also written about how the embedded nature of what he terms ‘sacred colonial paradigms’ can prevent African scholars from getting their interpretations (his own included) being published (2009: 65). Peter Schmidt has described such strategies as a ‘form of silencing those who

challenge colonial discourses', and sees the existing structures of academic power and privilege as a hierarchy of elders within which they continue to 'eat the young' (2009: 4–10; see also Holl 2009; McIntosh 2009).

Alongside the production of revisionist histories, there have been calls to produce 'usable pasts', echoing similar concerns expressed by historians (Jewsiewicki 1989; Lonsdale 1989; Ranger 1976). By this is meant producing archaeological knowledge that is not merely about what happened in the past and why, but which can also address some of the problems and challenges that face African communities and governments in the present day. Many of the African scholars who have extolled the virtue of this approach emphasize that as individual citizens they feel that they have a responsibility to produce practical knowledge for the benefit of other members of their society, while also emphasizing that there is an expectation on the part of their governments that their research activity and its results have practical utility in the contemporary world (e.g. Andah 1995b: 151; Mapunda 1990; Musonda 1990: 18; Sowunmi 1998).³ An example of this might be using archaeological and palaeoenvironmental data to assess the longevity and ecological consequences of particular industries, such as iron production (de Barros 1988; Schmidt 1994), or to review the environmental narratives that inform current policy interventions (Lane 2009). The concept of usable archaeological pasts has also been raised with reference to debates about the potential value of 'indigenous knowledge' in rural development (Horsthemke 2008; Stump 2010). Again, such concerns are not unique to Africa (e.g. Honeychurch 2010; Selvakumar 2010), and elsewhere this approach has been termed 'applied archaeology' (e.g. Erickson 1998 [1992]; Kendall 2005).

In both the 'revisionist' and 'usable pasts' approaches the disciplinary practices and philosophy of Western Archaeology are considered legitimate, and in this sense they do not offer, epistemologically, an 'alternative' archaeology. What distinguishes them from earlier approaches, nevertheless, is that they place at least as much emphasis on establishing the relevance for contemporary society of the information archaeologists produce, as they do on the value of archaeological materials in their own right.

African indigenous archaeologies

In many parts of the world the development of postcolonial archaeology has been linked to the emergence of 'indigenous archaeology'. This has perhaps been most clearly articulated by Atalay who has called for the development of a 'collaborative approach that blends the strengths of Western archaeological science with the knowledge and epistemologies of indigenous peoples' (2006: 301). In a similar vein, Smith and Wobst have argued for 'an archaeology *shaped by indigenous knowledges* ... [capable of] decolonizing archaeological theory and practice' (2005: 394, emphasis added). Most recently, Nicholas has argued that failure to incorporate indigenous approaches within the discipline 'will limit significantly or marginalise the potential contributions of archaeology as a more representative and responsible discipline, and constrain its continued intellectual growth' (2010: 233).

Statements such as these echo some of the views cited above by Schmidt, Andah and Eze-Uzomaka, and draw attention to the need to address the differences between

Archaeological approaches to understanding and writing about the past and indigenous knowledge systems and constructs of history. In the cited examples, and in the broader trend within the discipline (e.g. McNiven and Russell 2005; Phillips 2010; Watkins 2000), the goals of promoting indigenous archaeology/archaeologies are: to celebrate these alternative strategies; challenge long held assumptions about who has the right, authority and power to interpret the past; and wrest exclusive control over the production and use of archaeological knowledge from the discipline of Archaeology and its self-identifying practitioners. Beyond this, however, there is considerable difference between various calls for the development of 'indigenous archaeologies'. As Stump (2006: 50–75), points out, current usage typically covers three quite different (albeit overlapping) issues. These are: 1) potential conflicts and confluences between Archaeological and other interpretations of the past; 2) debates regarding the rights and responsibilities of archaeologists in the light of local claims to land, materials or technologies (especially relating to the issues of repatriation of objects and human remains); and 3) examinations of the ways in which archaeological data or methods could be employed to benefit local communities through the extension or reapplication of indigenous resource exploitation strategies. There are also multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions used by archaeologists when discussing 'indigenous people'. The degree to which these overlap with formal definitions (such as favoured by the UN or the International Labour Organization) and taken-for-granted concepts circulating in the public sphere is variable (Watkins 2005). For Conkey, this lack of homogeneity in approaches is to be welcomed, not least because 'there are many different indigenous groups and settings in which an indigenous archaeology comes into play, and each has its own history and emergent needs and goals, many of which are themselves shifting and evolving' (2005: 15).

In sub-Saharan Africa contexts, there have been relatively few explicit calls for the development of 'indigenous archaeologies' despite recognition of the need to give greater prominence to 'local' oral histories and understandings of the past, and the recognition (at least by some) that in their construction and use of evidence these narratives may differ both ontologically and epistemologically from Archaeological interpretations (e.g. Schmidt 2006). This contrasts with the situation in Australia (McNiven and Russell 2005), Canada (Nicholas and Andrews 1997), the United States (Watkins 2000) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Rike-Heke 2010), all former settler societies where people of European descent comprise the dominant social, economic and political group. It also contrasts with the situation in Scandinavia, notably Norway, where recognition of Saami identity, culture and self-determination has become more entrenched politically (Thuen 1995), if not entirely in mainstream archaeological practice (Ojala 2009).

There are several reasons why the concept has not been widely adopted in Africa, many of which probably derive from contrasting understandings and definitions of 'indigenous people' (Sillar 2005). As Yeh notes, this 'transnational' concept is both a legal term and claimed by people with very diverse historical trajectories 'to imply, among other things, firstness, nativeness or original or prior occupancy of a place; attachment to a particular territory or homeland; marginalization within a culturally or ethnically different wider society; and often, a history of colonization' (2007: 69). However, in a context, such as found across sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of the population would probably describe themselves if asked as 'indigenous', there may be little call or cause for self-definition as

such. Instead, in a manner similar to the lack of uptake of the concept (and in some cases even hostility toward it) among Tibetans as described by Yeh, for the majority of sub-Saharan societies the notion of 'indigeneity' lacks the kind of relational significance that it has acquired in former settler societies such as Australia (Merlan 2007) and North America (Cruikshank 2007), even though there remain lasting legacies of European colonial appropriations of land, disenfranchisement and dispossession. There are important exceptions to this, especially in southern Africa where Khoisan populations have become increasingly conscious of their 'indigenous' status from the perspective of international bodies such as the UN and ILO and relative to 'non-Khoisan' peoples, although their claims to this identity have also been contested by members of the political elite, particularly in Botswana (Lane 1998; Segobye 2009).

Also, there have been remarkably few attempts in sub-Saharan Africa to employ archaeology to explore indigenous claims to land, materials or technologies. Nevertheless, there is clearly scope for archaeological involvement in disputes over 'intellectual property' and trade marks (e.g. Chennells 2009),⁴ and in debates over the displacement of peoples from protected areas so as to conserve wildlife and biodiversity. In recent years this has been given considerable prominence as a human rights issue, pitting the global benefits of conservation against local community rights of access and resource use. Archaeology may well be able to play key roles in these debates in two ways. First, by providing tangible evidence for a long-term human presence in landscapes now marketed as 'pristine wilderness' (Meskell 2007), and, second, by offering a means to assess competing claims that the presence of humans acts to either enhance or reduce overall biodiversity. Such studies could also feed into broader theoretical debates about the relative 'resilience' of different ecosystems (Redman 2005), the 'sustainability' of different land management and natural resources extraction systems and ideas concerning the processes of landscape 'domestication' (McNiven 2008; Terrell and Hart 2006).

Regarding the third category of approaches to indigenous archaeology identified by Stump, there have been some recent attempts to identify 'globally-important indigenous agricultural heritage systems' or GIAHS,⁵ in some cases involving, among other research strategies, archaeological methods. Such studies clearly place considerable emphasis and value on 'indigenous knowledge systems' but these are valued more for their practical outcomes, for 'knowing how' rather than for any inherent epistemological or ontological strength of these knowledge systems relative to those of Western science (Stump 2010).

Nevertheless, some genuine collaboration between archaeologists and local communities has emerged (e.g. Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; Denbow et al. 2009). Many more practising archaeologists working on the African continent are also ready to question the role of research in the community where they undertake their work (e.g. Bolaane et al. 1998; Damm 2005). Another 'postcolonial' development that resonates with the goals of 'indigenous archaeology' is the space being given to incorporating 'alternative' histories (for which read non-archaeological and typically oral accounts). For Flordeliz Bugarin, 'postcolonial archaeology embraces multiple voices' (2009: 193) and for Segobye their inclusion has provided 'an entry point to archaeological dialogues with people who had been subjects of research through several decades of knowledge production' (2009: 171). However, there is far less evidence to suggest that indigenous 'conceptions of the past, history, and time' (Conkey 2005: 16) have been incorporated into archaeological

interpretations of the material record or that archaeological reasoning has been shaped at all by the inclusion of 'indigenous epistemologies' (ibid.) – both aspects that Conkey lists as being core features of a truly indigenous archaeology.

These impediments are likely to remain, I suggest, until such time as three issues are addressed: first, that archaeologists wishing to engage with 'indigenous' communities need to develop modes of community-based research that are genuinely participatory and in which these communities have as much scope for proposing and developing research questions and agendas as their archaeological counterparts (see Heron and Reason 2001); second, that the implicit distinction between 'archaeological' and 'local'/'indigenous' knowledge systems is abandoned, since this serves only to reinforce a false distinction between their respective strengths at global and local scales of application (see also Horsthemke 2008), while also encouraging the search for, and recovery of, 'pristine' or 'original' elements of the indigenous system and thus implicitly defining indigenous knowledge as ahistorical (Stump 2010). Instead, these categorical distinctions need to be replaced by recognition that knowledge systems are inherently 'hybrid' and that this is as true of Archaeological research in 'the West' as it is of other modes of historical understanding. Third, there is now ample ethnographic evidence that people throughout the world frequently draw on the material traces of previous inhabitants in their construction of historical narratives about their own past (Plate 2), and make assessments regarding the historical significance of such materials to their sense of place and identity (Lane 2005). Archaeologists have also begun to recognize that similar practices operated



Plate 2 Indigenous African archaeology? Selective conservation of buildings associated with the founders of a Dogon village (Banani Na), Bandiagara escarpment, Mali, 1982 (Photo: Paul Lane).

in the past (e.g. Bradley 2002), and some even acknowledge that ‘indigenous archaeologies’ were practised in European contexts before the emergence of a formalized discipline termed ‘Archaeology’ (e.g. Hamilakis 2008). In the light of this, perhaps it is time for Archaeologists to abandon the conceit that the ‘pre-modern’ and/or ‘non-Western’ Other they aspire to understand, whether from an archaeological or anthropological perspective, did not practise their own ‘archaeology’.

Summary and conclusion

In summary, the use of the term ‘postcolonial archaeology’ with reference to African contexts has come to mean much more than simply the training and capacity building of non-Western archaeologists of African ancestry (cf. Plate 1). It is certainly the case that archaeologists working on the African continent have developed a more critical gaze and have created the intellectual space for different voices to be heard, making different identities visible and facilitating different modes of discourse or ‘ways of telling’ in much the same way as has also been accomplished by those who have sought to develop a feminist archaeology (see Conkey 2005). This greater emphasis on engagement by archaeologists with the inhabitants of their study areas, and accommodating their perspectives on the histories of these locales and on the work of the archaeologists, is to be welcomed. As is the increased emphasis on the importance of oral testimony and the multi-vocal dimensions of interpretations of the past in present-day contexts, although, as Schmidt (2009: 14–17) cautions, we need to be wary of the potential abuse of these concepts and principles.

However, there remains considerable diversity in what is meant or implied by the use of this term by different archaeologists and uncertainty as to the broader philosophical issues its use raises. To address this, there is a need to move beyond the recognition that ‘the historical consciousness of indigenous people does not manifest itself in the same way as western history does’ (Eze-Uzomaka 2000: 152), to an understanding of how African communities, both past and present, have used material evidence – the tangible, physical traces of past lives, activities and events – in constructions of their history (Fontein 2006). It would be naïve to suggest that such a strategy alone will resolve all the documented tensions associated with the contrasting demands of relativist versus universalist approaches to ‘the past’ and ‘history’ and we should perhaps resign ourselves to ‘the discomfort of moving in-between’ (Dembour 2001: 72). Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why adopting such an approach might be beneficial. First, in much the same way that modern Archaeological practice results in the selective preservation of buildings and artefacts and so shapes the archaeological record of contemporary society for the future, so too was this the case among societies in the past (Plate 2). Hence, as ably illustrated by Bradley (2002), in order to understand the archaeology of these past societies we need to comprehend *their* archaeological practice. Second, if we aspire to impart greater understanding of the goals and conceptual frameworks of the discipline of Archaeology to those who are not versed in our methods and theories, we need to reciprocate by trying to understand how they ‘do’ archaeology. Currently, very little is known about what commonalities these archaeological practices share with Archaeology, where they differ or how these archaeologies vary across time and space. It is surely time to change this.

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Notes

- 1 See also: http://www.asapa.org.za/index.php/archaeology/importance_of_archaeology_in_the_southern_african_region/, consulted 22/11/2009.
- 2 Available at: <http://www.nepad.org/home/lang/en>
- 3 This seems akin to what British research councils now refer to as 'impact'.
- 4 See also: <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=13380&tid=20715> (accessed 21 October 2010).
- 5 See <http://www.fao.org/nr/giahs/en/>

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