

World Archaeological Congress 4

University of Cape Town

10th - 14th January 1999



Symposium: Public Archaeology

Archaeology For Whose Interest – Archaeologists or The Locals?

Bertram Mapunda¹ and Paul Lane²

Abstract

Archaeological research in East Africa started over eight decades ago. Since then almost every district in the region has been visited by archaeological researchers at least once. In fact some districts have become virtual “homes from home” for particular field teams. Surprisingly, the majority of local people, including those from areas that have become “homes from home” for particular researchers, remain entirely unaware of the archaeological materials from their district, let alone the archaeology of the rest of the region. Using concrete indicators of public awareness to archaeology, this paper discusses some of the reasons for this lack of awareness and its effects on the management of the region’s archaeological resources. In the concluding section we offer some suggestions as to possible remedial measures - some of which have been used elsewhere in Africa to good effect.

Introduction

Archaeological research in East Africa started over eighty years ago with two major spatial foci, one centred on the interior along the Eastern Rift Valley, and the other along the coast from Somalia south as far as Mozambique. Initially, research in the interior was mostly concerned with hominid evolution and the Early Stone Age and Later Stone Age rock art, resulting in the discovery of numerous internationally famous archaeological localities and sites, that include Olduvai, Laetoli, Koobi Fora,

¹ Archaeology Unit, Department of History, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

² British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

and Lake Turkana and the rich collection of rock art sites in the Kondoia region of Tanzania. Pioneering researchers included Hans Reck, Ludwig Kohl-Larsen, Louis Leakey, Mary Leakey and E.J. Wayland (a geologist by profession). The work on the coast, on the other hand, focused on a much more recent period of the region's history – the architectural monuments of the Swahili towns such as those at Kilwa Kisiwani, Kaole, Manda, Gedi, Lamu, Pate and many others. Much of this early research was conducted by the likes of James Kirkman, Neville Chittick, and Peter Garlake.

Since these early efforts to develop the discipline, archaeological research in the region has continued to expand both spatially and thematically (for a more detailed overview, see Robertshaw 1990; also Posnansky 1982). Today almost every district in Eastern Africa has been visited by an archaeologist, and almost all classes of monument and all periods from the Early Stone Age through the Iron Age to the late 19th century have been the subject of investigation. The broad archaeological sequences for the different geographical and cultural zones are known, and widely exhibited in numerous National, Regional, and Site Museums. Parties of school children are frequently to be seen being led through these displays, and in some cases can attend 'Archaeology Days' organised by one of the museums. In the past two decades, the opportunities to take courses leading to B.A. and M.A. degrees in Archaeology have become increasingly available at the various Universities in the region, and as a consequence there is a growing number of qualified East African archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists. Despite quite severe budgetary constraints, the Antiquities services in most East African countries are still able to sustain a basic programme of archaeological resource management, and in some instances have a relatively high public profile. At least one National Museum service, the National Museums of Kenya, has even recently launched its own Web site (<http://www.museums.or.ke>).

Given the extent of this work, and the considerable sums of public, donor and research foundation money that have been invested in developing archaeological research in the region, it is legitimate to ask, 'How much of this reflects the needs of the general public, the *wananchi*, in East Africa?' Equally, one is entitled to ask 'In what ways have archaeological research projects benefited local populations in the region?' *The answer to both of these questions is "very little!"* Do members of the public, know that there has been so much archaeological work going on in, so to speak, their backyards, for almost a century? *Again, we are inclined to answer "very few do!"* If this is indeed the case, then why? Why, despite the efforts of Museums, Antiquities Departments, Universities and visiting researchers, do so few of East Africa's population have so little knowledge about archaeology – to such an extent that far from being 'public', archaeology in the region could be better described as a very private and intellectually elitist affair?³

In this paper we try to account for the low impact archaeological research has had for the majority of East Africans. We also suggest methods that may be more suitable for bringing archaeology closer to the rural and urban populace than those which archaeological bodies across the region currently rely on.

³ See Nzewunwa 1990, for a similar argument with regard to the situation in Nigeria.

Archaeology and the Public: the current situation

Engagement by archaeologists with members of the general public in both rural and urban areas in East Africa takes two broad forms. On the one hand, the various National Antiquities and National Museums services, as in other parts of the world, have either statutory or *de facto* powers and responsibilities to curate, manage and research the archaeological resources in their respective countries. The extent to which these different bodies actually fulfill their duties, however, is extremely variable. In some respects, this can be attributed to the different levels of economic prosperity and relative strengths of the national economies across the region. However, it is also the case that certain National Museums and/or Antiquities services have had a far more pro-active approach to promoting archaeological awareness among the general populace, than others. The Zambian Heritage Commission, for example, has a long record of establishing regional and site museums, and of producing information sheets and other low-cost publications aimed at sensitizing the public to the importance of archaeological remains and the need for their protection. In Kenya, where there is no formal Antiquities service, the National Museums of Kenya, partly because of greater and more sustained funding, have made even more strenuous efforts to communicate the importance of archaeology through a variety of media and events. Yet, despite such efforts, site destruction through ignorance, neglect, complete disregard and even malicious intent remains an ongoing and major problem across the region (for a discussion of recent examples from Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, see Brandt and Mohamed 1996; Karoma 1996; Kusimba 1996; Mturi 1996; Wilson and Omar 1996)⁴. A further common problem faced by those bodies with statutory responsibility for the archaeological heritage, is that they are often negatively perceived by the rural and urban populace as yet another arm of central government interference and state control. That is, of what Foucault has termed 'govern-mentality'.

Public awareness and support for archaeology in the region is also not greatly helped by the level and quality of site interpretation media. On-site interpretation panels, signing, visitor orientation centres, self-guided leaflets, knowledgeable guides and even site custodians are absent from all but a tiny handful of publicly accessible archaeological sites and monuments in the region. Even where some of these media are employed, the style of writing and presentation are geared more towards foreign visitors and the educated elite, than for a mass audience. Perhaps because of this, there is only a very rudimentary culture of visiting museums and archaeological sites among the East African public. Equally, although there has been some recent improvement across the region in formal education about archaeology, especially at University level but also in Secondary and Primary schools, many text-books are woefully out of date and Eurocentric in their interpretations (Wandibba 1990).⁵

The other broad category of opportunities for contact with members of the public is within the context of field research projects, by both local and visiting researchers.

⁴ A very similar range of concerns were expressed at two recent international gatherings held in Nairobi - *viz.* The Archaeological Heritage of Eastern Africa: Conservation, presentation and research priorities Workshop (February 1997) jointly organised by the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the National Museums of Kenya, (Sutton 1997); and, the International Workshop on Urban and Monuments Conservation (May 1997) organised by the National Museums of Kenya.

⁵ For a discussion of these problems as they affect the teaching of History in schools, see Zeleza 1990.

Typically, researchers involve local people only as generators of information or as labourers. Rarely do archaeologists deliberately inform villagers about the objectives and significance of their research before they start working or about the research results at the end of their projects. Consequently, any critical evaluation of archaeological awareness among rural communities would most likely show that very few people know what archaeology is about or what archaeologists do. This would seem to imply that not only have archaeologists failed to inform, train and/or educate local people but also have not even made themselves and their projects especially visible to those who live in their research areas. This is true even with regard to ethnoarchaeological field projects, where the interaction between a researcher and the local people is a methodological necessity.

In many cases, the failure to recognize the importance of engaging villagers in the research process has alienated the local people from their own cultural heritage instead of retrieving, studying and preserving it for them. To a large extent, archaeologists have only succeeded in talking about the academic significance of artifacts, architectural monuments and faunal remains amongst themselves, as opposed to showing the significance of these materials to local people. Yet, it is the latter who are the caretakers, and in many cases the direct heirs, of the cultural heritage the archaeologists seek to retrieve from other peoples' homes. The general failure of the archaeological profession to get members of the public to recognize the rationale of protecting heritage resources from destruction, looting and illicit trafficking is a direct consequence of this. Lack of communication may well explain, for example, why local people, the Maasai, were ready to vandalize the roofing materials covering the DK site at Olduvai Gorge; why residents at Kilwa Kisiwani continue to mine this World Heritage site for building materials; why villagers continue to use parts of the earthworks at Bigo and Ntusi for cultivating crops; and, why numerous similar cases can be drawn from many other sites in East Africa.

Such continued neglect of East Africa's archaeological resources is perhaps understandable where sites are remote and poorly researched. Surely, though, at such well-known and intensively researched localities as Olduvai, Kilwa, and Bigo, which have all been visited periodically by teams of researchers for at least several decades, there can be no such excuses. And much of the blame for the continued lack of public regard for such sites must lie with the archaeological research community and our preferred *modus operandi*.

To try to change this sorry state of affairs, we argue here that researchers should be obliged to inform, train and seek to educate local people, so that they become aware of both the scientific significance of archaeological materials and the historical and cultural ties which link them to these remains. Drawing out the cultural and/or historical links, in turn, may well help to create a sense of ownership and hence an obligation among the local people to conserve and protect the archaeological materials. At the same time, there is a need to make archaeology a useful discipline for local people, just as it is for archaeologists themselves (Mapunda 1991; see also Lane 1990), and to fulfill our ethical obligations to return something to the communities that have hosted archaeological researchers for so long.

Suggested Methods

There are several ways that archaeologists can impart archaeological knowledge to local communities. The conventional methods have been those involving mass media such as television, radio and newspapers. These popular methods have been used with varying levels of success. On Pemba, for example, Adria LaViolette found that coverage of her excavations at Pujini by Zanzibar Television stimulated considerable interest amongst the inhabitants of both Pemba and Zanzibar and encouraged many local people to visit the site (LaViolette 1991). Equally, several researchers working in Uganda, including Andrew Reid, Rachel Maclean and Pete Robertshaw, have found coverage of their research projects in the national press encouraged widespread local interest in archaeology and cultural remains (pers. comm.). On the other hand, many journalists are almost as uninformed about the archaeology of the region as the readers archaeologists would wish them to target, and as a consequence reports carried by newspapers and other mass media often contain many inaccuracies. Also, with the exception of radio, the mass media may not be the most effective mechanism to use, especially when trying to target rural communities. Television, for example, which is possibly the best media for educational purposes, is poorly distributed in rural areas because the majority of the rural population cannot afford TV sets, and often have no access to electricity. Newspapers, in many cases, may not have reliable circulation in rural areas, and given the variable levels of literacy readership figures can be quite low in some areas, especially among rural communities. Moreover, some countries do not have a recognised lingua franca, thus, the languages used in such media are foreign to the common people.

Given these constraints, we suggest methods executable by researchers and ones that can be applied to all people, commoners and the affluent and educated elites. These include: 1) recruiting local people as field researchers; 2) conducting field site tours; 3) organising exhibitions of research results; 4) field public lectures; and 5) low-cost publications.

We know that some of these strategies are commonly used. For example, a good number of foreign researchers employ local people as interpreters in interviews or as labourers on site surveys and excavations. Typically, however, this type of local participation is not deliberately aimed at teaching local participants but rather exploiting their skills and labour. Similarly, with site visits and exhibitions, local visitors are usually treated as if they were tourists coming to admire excavation trenches and the “dirt” collected therein, instead of as students who come to learn from and exchange views with researchers. Villagers should be allowed and encouraged to observe what is going on, to see what kind of materials are recovered and most importantly, be told about the cultural and scientific significance of the materials recovered and asked to provide their own intellectual input.

To do this, a researcher should try to do the following:

1. **Research goals:** Prior to the commencement of survey or excavation, a researcher needs to visit the villages covered by the respective research universe, introduce him/herself to the village officials and traditional leaders so as to inform them about the research goals and what s/he perceives as being the significance of the research. During this time the researcher should welcome and encourage local

people to visit the research in progress, and also encourage members of the local population to contribute their own suggestions as to how the research may be of benefit to their communities. Efforts should also be made to ascertain how the local population perceive their past, and how archaeological research may contribute to global understanding of this.

2. **Labour recruitment:** Employment of local people as field assistants should go beyond simply meeting the labour needs of the project, so as to include members of the local populace as ambassadors to their respective communities. In case the research universe covers more than one village, the researcher should make sure that at least one person is employed from each village. In situations where employing a representative from each village would cost more than can be covered by the available budget, employment should be on a turn by turn basis as opposed to permanent persons for the entire research duration. As a matter of principle, the best “ambassador” is one who is picked by the people represented. So the researcher should let the local people pick their own candidate provided he/she meets the basic qualifications needed for such a role. These may include physical fitness, hard work, acquaintance with the people and the research area and trustworthiness. If recruitment is on a turn by turn basis, the “village ambassador” should join the research team when the work is conducted in his or her village or area. Apart from the usual research activities, the village ambassador could assist the principal researcher by satisfying the curiosity of local residents, and allaying the suspicions that the public usually have about archaeologists and archaeological fieldwork. In our experience, it is almost impossible to eradicate such suspicions through a non-local crew member.

An exercise of this kind, which eventually involved over 450 local people, was mounted by a team of archaeologists from Eduardo Mondlane University in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during the excavation of the site of Manyikeni in Mozambique. The strategy appears to have been greeted with considerable enthusiasm by the local populace, and even the government, and led, among other things to the construction of on-site displays (Sinclair 1990)⁶. An even more radical approach, which would certainly have long-term benefits, would be to provide more intensive on-site training for a few selected members of the local community in archaeological field techniques. This approach has been used to good effect by Andy Smith and Richard Lee among Ju/'hoansi in northern Bushmanland, Namibia, as part of a strategy aimed at empowering the communities in their research area so that they can engage in the production and representation of their past (Smith and Lee 1997).

3. **Exhibition:** Towards the end of the research period, the principal researcher needs to organize exhibitions of selected finds and preliminary results for public viewing (as happened at Manyikeni). The number of exhibitions would depend on the size of the research area. In extensive areas, where more than one exhibit may be necessary, concurrent exhibits could be conducted provided that there are a

⁶ Note, however, that these displays have not been maintained and both access to the site and the condition of the site have now deteriorated (Macamo 1996). Although this may be attributable to the difficulties Mozambique has faced given the recent civil war, it makes the point that there is a need to ensure the long-term sustainability of interpretation facilities at any site, and thought must be given to this when planning such ventures.

sufficient number of competent assistants to draw on. Where the researcher lacks able assistants, one way of mounting the exhibitions could be on a rotational basis. Alternatively, it may be worthwhile getting competent members of the Adult Education Departments at local universities to assist.

The exhibition need not last more than a day, or at most two. Also, so as to achieve maximum public exposure, it ought to be arranged to coincide with a day of rest, such as Sunday or a public holiday. The event needs to be advertised well in advance to encourage participation. Public viewing should be preceded by a lecture. This should touch on the following: the research objectives, the reasons for picking the respective research area, the methods employed, the materials retrieved and their relevance to local culture, knowledge and beliefs (emphasizing the connection with the local people), and the contribution of the results to world culture and science.

4. **Project-assessment:** Researchers should cultivate a habit of conducting project assessments in the field so that the input of the local people is honoured and incorporated. The evaluation should be done at the end of fieldwork. Participants should include a cadre of local intellectuals such as village elders, officials and spokespersons, government workers (teachers, agricultural officers, medical officers etc.) religious leaders, and those villagers who have contributed in any important way to the project e.g. as key informants or guides. From the local people the researcher should tease out views on the educational impact the project has had for their communities. At the same time, the researcher should seek their opinions and suggestions as to how the project could have been improved. The incorporation of local people in this exercise does not only enrich the researcher with suggestions for planning similar projects in the future, but also cultivates a sense of pride and confidence among the local people. In the longer term, this should enable them to carry out their own decisions in the future regarding the protection and preservation of heritage resources. Our experiences have shown that local people are highly motivated once they have been involved in this type of intellectual discourse.

5. **Popular publication of results:** There is a great dearth of popular, low-cost literature on archaeology and the results of archaeological research in the region. With the greater availability of desk-top publishing systems, and the concomitant fall in publication costs, such a situation is no longer acceptable. Although we recognise the value of using the World Wide Web as a means of disseminating research results and project information, access to such technology is limited to a few, comparatively wealthy members of the middle classes, most of whom are likely to be well educated professionals. This pattern of access is likely to continue for some years to come.

Accordingly, researchers should endeavour to produce, at relatively low-cost, some tangible reminder of their research and the main results for public distribution, especially in their research area but also beyond. The types of publication can be quite modest – such as a double-sided sheet of A3 paper, folded for ease of

handling, and should be easy and inexpensive to reproduce⁷. In the longer term, small booklets, written in the local language, with line illustrations and, if funds permit, photographs should be produced and made available locally and nationally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we appeal to field researchers in East Africa and Africa in general to share the archaeological knowledge from their research with the people who live in their research areas. This is because the local people need and have the right to know about their cultural heritage. Also, this knowledge may provide some incentive to local people to conserve the archaeological materials that they may encounter in their neighbourhood. The use of researchers as educators requires neither additional labour nor money, only decision-making and planning, and adopting the type of strategies we have outlined may well go a long way to strengthening the effectiveness of the other 'public archaeology' measures currently used by museums and other bodies in the region.

References

- Brandt, S.A. and Mohamed, O.Y. 1996. Starting from Scratch: The past, present and future management of Somalia's cultural heritage. In P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh (eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, pp. 250-259.. London: James Currey.
- Karoma, N.J. 1996. The deterioration and destruction of archaeological and historical sites in Tanzania. In P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh (eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, pp. 191-200. London: James Currey.
- Kusimba, C.M. 1996. Kenya's destruction of the Swahili cultural heritage. In P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh (eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, pp. 201-224. London: James Currey.
- Lane, P.J. 1990. Archaeology and development in Africa: present dilemmas and future prospects. Unpublished paper presented at the 2nd Pan-African Association of Anthropologists Conference, University of Nairobi, Kenya, September 1990.
- LaViolette, A. 1991. Alternative approaches to East African archaeology and historiography: The archaeology of a Swahili fortification. Unpublished paper presented at the 34th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, St. Louis, USA, November 1991.

⁷ See, for example the leaflet produced in 1995 by Ras Kono, as part of his Certificate in Museums Studies course at the University of Botswana, on the recent excavations by Nick Pearson at Modipe Hill, Kgatleng District, to accompany an exhibition about the site at Phuthadikobo Museum, Mochudi.

- Macamo, S.L. 1996. The problems of conservation of archaeological sites in Mozambique. In G. Pwiti and R. Soper (eds), *Aspects of African Archaeology*, pp. 813-816. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Mapunda, B.B.B. 1991. The role of archaeology in development: The case of Tanzania. *Transafrican Journal of History* 20: 19-34.
- Mturi, A.A. 1996. Whose cultural heritage? Conflicts and contradictions in the conservation of historic structures, towns and rock art in Tanzania. In P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh (eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, pp. 170-190. London: James Currey.
- Nzewunwa, N. 1990. Archaeology in Nigerian Education. In P. Stone and R. MacKenzie (eds), *The Excluded Past: archaeology in education*, pp. 33-42. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Posnansky, M. 1982. African Archaeology comes of age. *World Archaeology* 13: 345-358.
- Robertshaw, P. 1990. The development of archaeology in East Africa. In P. Robertshaw (ed.), *A History of African Archaeology*, pp. 78-94. London: James Currey.
- Sinclair, P.J.J. 1990. The earth is our history book: archaeology in Mozambique. In P. Stone and R. MacKenzie (eds), *The Excluded Past: archaeology in education*, pp. 152-159. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Smith, A.B. and Lee, R.B. 1997. Cho/ana: Archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for recent hunter-gatherer/agropastoralist contact in Northern Bushmanland, Namibia. *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 52: 52-58.
- Sutton, J.E.G. 1997. The Archaeological heritage of Eastern Africa: Conservation, presentation and research priorities. Unpublished report submitted to sponsors and participants, on file at BIEA, Nairobi.
- Wandibba, S. 1990. Archaeology and education in Kenya. In P. Stone and R. MacKenzie (eds), *The Excluded Past: archaeology in education*, pp. 43-49. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Wilson, T.H. and Omar, A.L. 1996. Preservation of cultural heritage on the East African coast. In P.R. Schmidt and R.J. McIntosh (eds), *Plundering Africa's Past*, pp. 225-249. London: James Currey.
- Zeleza, T. 1990. The production of historical knowledge for schools. *Transafrican Journal of History* 19: 1-23.