



# I Introduction: Changing Perspectives on Africa's Pasts

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When I teach the archaeology of sub-Saharan Africa at an American university, I begin by asking students to name African archaeological sites of which they know something. The resulting list is predictable in composition and length: Olduvai Gorge invariably tops the list, Great Zimbabwe is typically second, while students who enjoy archaeological documentaries may come up with Jenné-jeno or Gorée Island. Those who have taken an introductory course on human evolution may recall the classic quartet of Sterkfontein, Swartkrans, Makapansgat, and Kromdraai. At this point, the room grows quiet. “Any other sites? No?” As we move to talk about the images they hold of Africa, safaris and wildlife come easily to mind, as do images of exotic “otherness” invariably combined with those of violence and warfare (see Achebe 1978; also Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:3–48; Ebron 2002:163–216; Lane 2001). Two points emerge from these discussions: (1) students know little at the beginning of the course about African archaeology (which is neither a debility for them nor for the reader of this volume); and (2) their perceptions of Africa draw on imagery sustained by the media and a broader popular imagination. Some are motivated by this negative imagery to take courses on Africa. They seek knowledge that will enable them to counter ethnocentric presumptions and sustain more positive views of Africa. In this, the students are little different from a long tradition of scholars whose research has been motivated by a desire to create respect for the cultural achievements of African peoples past and present (e.g., Bates et al., eds., 1993; Ebron 2002:viii–xi).

As in the course I teach, the goal of this volume is twofold. First, and most conventionally, it is intended to familiarize readers with *some* of what we know of Africa's past through archaeological sources. In no sense is it an encyclopedic compendium. The volume samples the temporal, topical, and geographical spectrum encompassed by sub-Saharan African archaeology. Though an effort has been made to be temporally and spatially inclusive, major gaps remain. Temporally, the volume is ambitious, “covering” 2.6 million years from the earliest archaeological traces to

sites occupied in the last century; yet coverage is uneven, favoring some regions while slighting or omitting others. Notable geographic omissions south of the Sahara include the Horn of Africa (see Munro-Hay 1989; Phillipson 1995, 1997, 2001), Mediterranean Africa, and the Nile Valley. Regrettably, by focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, the volume reinforces an artificial division between North Africa and Africa south of the Sahara (see O'Connor and Reid, eds., 2003 for an effort to surmount this division); however, publisher's page restrictions force selectivity. Within those restrictions, however, the conventional goal of the volume is to impart knowledge of Africa's past.

The second, less conventional goal of the volume is to encourage critical evaluation of archaeological knowledge; what questions are posed by archaeologists working in Africa and why? What presumptions (implicit and explicit) have shaped knowledge of African pasts? For whom is knowledge of Africa's pasts relevant? And how might that knowledge affect the present and future of African peoples? These questions are intended to bring into view the contexts in which knowledge about African pasts is produced (see also Hall 1990a:2-4, 1990b). This goal is motivated by the view that knowledge is always "interested" and has effects in the world. The concept of "interested" knowledge stands in juxtaposition to the ideal of "disinterested" knowledge that is sustained by simplistic perspectives on objectivity. Recent, often rancorous, debates over the nature of scientific inquiry have hinged on the issue of objectivity. From the time of Descartes' effort to free "mind" from the constraints of "body" (Descartes 1979), science became linked with objectivity. Objectivity was equated with removing oneself from the fray and letting evidence or scientific facts "speak for themselves." Objectivity was viewed as a prerequisite of rigorous scientific knowledge and linked to Enlightenment goals of producing generalizable knowledge. However, the last two decades have seen vigorous critiques of objectivity which some dismiss as nihilistic perspectives rooted in post-structural/post-modern perspectives of the last two decades (Wilson 1998). Yet the sources of these critiques are diverse (e.g., Alcoff and Potter, eds., 1993; Foucault 1972; Nielson, ed., 1990; White 1973) and cannot be equated with a denial of a "real world" or, for the purposes of this volume, denial of a "lived past." From Kuhn (1962) on, scholars have discussed the effects of "paradigms" (accepted ideas about the way the world works) on scientific thought. As Kuhn argued, paradigms structure what is "knowable." Change in what is "known" often proceeds less from an accumulation of new facts than from paradigm shifts that cast existing facts in a new light. But this does not negate the importance of empirical evidence which can, when data are allowed to "just say no" (Gould 1981:68-69, 74), lead to the rejection of entrenched ways of thinking (see Chapters 10, 13).

Though schisms remain between those who embrace a model of science as objective knowledge and those who embrace radically relativist views of knowledge (questioning the notion of reliable knowledge grounded in a knowable reality), there is a broadening awareness that knowledge is shaped by the social, political, and economic contexts in which it is produced (e.g., Schmidt and Patterson, eds., 1995; Shepherd 2002). This is not so much a condemnation of scientific inquiry as a recognition that science is a human product. As such, the goal of a critically aware

science is *not* to strip away or disembed knowledge from its human context (arguably an impossible goal). Rather it acknowledges the contexts and concerns that shape scientific inquiry, and works to understand how that context affects the resulting knowledge (e.g., Wylie et al. 1989). In the case of archaeology, the questions that archaeologists ask of the past are shaped by the presumptions and concerns of the present (Trigger 1990:309). In this sense, new knowledge about the past often emerges as much from asking new questions as it does from newly discovered evidence.

Thus the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of critical perspectives that emphasize the “interested” character of knowledge. These perspectives are theoretically diverse. There is no single perspective within history or archaeology on what motivates change or how change occurs. Despite their diversity, however, they share a concern to explore the contexts that shape what we know of Africa’s pasts and how we know it.

This second goal distinguishes this volume from the handful of published syntheses of African prehistory (although see Hall 1990a, 1996). Texts often present what is known within the context of a narrative, typically one of technological progress (below). This volume does not offer an overarching narrative of African prehistory because such narratives “paper over” significant interpretive debates and obscure how archaeologists generate and revise knowledge about the past. By introducing readers to the paradigms, points of debate, and implications of key case studies/topics, the volume is intended to provide a platform from which to enter the primary literature on African archaeology. Each chapter thus provides an extensive bibliography that allows readers to follow debates into the primary literature, and to expand geographical coverage of particular time periods and issues.

Given the second goal of the volume – to foster critical awareness of the contexts that have shaped archaeological knowledge of Africa’s pasts – remaining sections of this chapter and Chapter 2 explore underlying assumptions and preoccupations that have shaped the questions archaeologists ask about Africa’s pasts and the methods they have employed in answering those questions. Thus, these first two chapters explore the history and practice of African archaeology. This exploration is partial, and readers wanting to know more of the contextual history of African archaeology are referred to Robertshaw’s (Robertshaw, ed., 1990) edited volume, which remains a standard. Remaining chapters of this book are temporally and topically organized, beginning with the earliest archaeological traces (Chapter 3) and the archaeology of Pleistocene Africa (Chapters 4–6). Chapters 6 through 10 explore Holocene contexts and pay particular attention to various forms of “intensification” that characterized later Holocene lifestyles. Chapters 11–13 are topically focused contributions that explore debates surrounding metallurgy, urbanism, and historical linguistic modeling of Bantu languages. These chapters lay the groundwork for an exploration of the last several millennia in Chapters 14–18. Here authors explore the mosaic of technological, social, and political-economic strategies that characterized different geographical regions over the last 2,000–3,000 years. This temporal organization mirrors to some extent the standard organization of synthetic volumes on African archaeology (e.g., Phillipson 1985, 1993). Yet a key

difference is that this temporal organization is not overlaid with a narrative based on stages of technological progress. This will become most evident in final chapters devoted to the last several millennia, which explore complex interactions among groups that would previously have been considered as belonging to different “Ages” (i.e., stone tool-using hunter-gatherers interacting with metal-using agriculturalists).

### **Valuation, Significance, and Archaeological Knowledge**

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The sites listed by students in the opening sessions of my African archaeology class are strikingly similar to the roster of World Heritage sites approved by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO World Heritage sites are chosen on the basis of their “outstanding universal value” to a human heritage in which we all share (World Heritage 2003). National parks meant to conserve African wildlife top the list of World Heritage sites in sub-Saharan Africa with more than 30 sites, underscoring a view of Africa as a place of natural rather than cultural heritage (compare this with other world areas where cultural sites outnumber natural sites 4 to 1; World Heritage 2003). Ancient cities and towns are a distant second (ten sites), and sites that have yielded ancestral fossil hominids are third (five sites). Royal palaces, royal burial grounds, and European sites are tied with four sites each, while the remaining seven sub-Saharan African sites include rock art (two sites), stelae (two sites), unique cultures (two sites), and a church (one site). The parallels between these lists raise the issue of *valuation* or *significance*. How do archaeologists choose sites for investigation? Why are some sites known to the general public or nominated to heritage lists, while others remain obscure?

The question of valuation or significance raises the issue of audience – *by whom* is a site valued? For many archaeologists, the importance of a site is determined by its significance to “the human story” – a story of physical and cultural change spanning our transition from terrestrial primate scavengers to proficient stone tool-using hunter-gatherers, to metal-using food producers living in urban settlements with complex political organizations. Local inhabitants, however, value sites for different reasons (Thiaw 2004). Contemporary groups may be very concerned with the interpretation of sites linked to their own past, but uninterested in those deemed to represent the past of others. Colonial processes often contributed to a people’s sense of disconnection from, and therefore indifference toward, their cultural heritage (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999). Some archaeologists see this sort of disconnection as linked to the “plundering of the past” (Schmidt and McIntosh, eds., 1996), as for example in Islamic areas of West Africa where terracotta figurines valued by Western collectors may be seen as vestiges of a “pagan” past disconnected from the present. Archaeologists have struggled with how to foster a sense of local connection to cultural heritage as a means to combat illegal excavation and export of antiquities (Bedaux and Rowlands 2001; McIntosh 1996; Posnansky 1996; Sidibé 1995:32–33; and see Sowunmi 1998 on the need to foster more than simply pride in the past).

The question of valuation also helps us see how our knowledge of Africa's past is entangled with a broader political economy. Generating knowledge of the past through systematic survey and excavation requires access to financial and infrastructural resources (Abungu and Abungu 1998; Karenga-Munene 1996; Kibunjia 1997; Kusimba 1996; Lane 2001; Mabulla 2000; MacEachern 2001; Posnansky 1996; Pwiti 1997). Investment in relevant training, facilities and fieldwork is, understandably, a low priority for African nations facing pressing social and economic problems and straining under burdensome debt loads (Ellison et al. 1996; Posnansky 1996). Consequently, archaeological research in Africa has been funded primarily through external sources, which therefore have the power to shape research priorities – determining the kinds of sites that are excavated, and thus the archaeological knowledge that is generated (Andah et al. 1994; Shepherd 2002:192). So, for example, World Heritage designation, driven by the criterion of “outstanding universal value,” opens coffers for research and preservation of select ancient cities, colonial forts and castles, and royal palaces. Research on sites deemed important to the project of “World Prehistory” may be funded by international agencies and non-African governments. And sites likely to yield ancient objects that suit the tastes of Western collectors become the focus of illegal excavations fueled by the illicit art market (Brent 1994, 1996; Shaw 1997; Sidibé 1995, 1996). So the possibilities and partialities of our knowledge of Africa's past are shaped by a complex mix of what “we” wish to know or possess and why we wish know or possess it. Since the relevance of that knowledge is often framed in terms of our human heritage, I turn now to the “Project of World Prehistory.”

### **Images of Africa and the Project of World Prehistory**

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Standard narratives of world prehistory frame the “human story” as one of progressive development in which simple forms of technology and organization gave way to progressively more complex ones. These narratives have deep cultural roots in Western thought. Medieval notions of a “Great Chain of Being” (a single, hierarchical ordering of all creatures from creation; Lovejoy 1936) were incorporated first into Enlightenment conjectural histories that posited a universal sequence of development through stages of “savagery,” “barbarism,” and “civilization,” and later into 19th-century social evolutionary formulations (Stocking 1987; Trigger 1989). The technologies and organizational forms highlighted by this narrative were not confined to a single world area; however, their appearance in some world areas was accorded greater significance in “the human story” compared to others, a significance based largely on time. Time has been a crucial standard for significance or valuation because world prehistory was cast as a race in which it mattered who “got there first” (Neale 1985, 1986). By extension, a preoccupation with origins was shaped by the esteem in which invention/innovation are held; once a technology, or a social or political form, was invented, later manifestations of that technology or form were thought to be derivative unless a case for independent origins could be made (see Sinclair et al. 1993:9–13).

The project of “world prehistory” that emerged in the 19th century was shaped by the dual legacies of industrialization and colonization, and simultaneously grounded in the universalism of Enlightenment science. As the Crystal Palace exhibition (1851) made clear, England’s increased industrial capacity was seen as an outgrowth of progressive technological innovation (Stocking 1987:1–6). Industrial modification of European landscapes fostered the growth of paleolithic studies, which reinforced this view of progressive technological development. Mining and construction disturbed the earth’s surface at an unprecedented scale and led to the exposure of ancient remains that were only slowly accepted as proof of the deep antiquity of human occupation in Europe (Heizer, ed., 1962; Stocking 1987:69–74; Trigger 1989:87–94). Fossil remains of extinct animals in association with stone tools contributed to the rejection of Ussher’s short chronology (a mere 6,000 years based on the Bible) in favor of “deep time” that could be known through two sources: (1) the material evidence of archaeology (traces from the past); and (2) the customs of non-European people who were perceived as living in the manner of the past (traces of the past in the present). The methods of 19th-century prehistory were aptly captured in the titles of prominent works such as Sir John Lubbock’s (later Lord Avebury) *Prehistoric Times as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* (Lubbock 1865; see also Sollas 1915). The oxymoronic phrase “modern savages” betrayed the dual temporality embedded in the project of world prehistory. To be “modern” was to be living in the same time, coeval with, Europeans; but coevalness was simultaneously denied to “modern savages” who were perceived as remnant societies, survivals from earlier times and evolutionary phases (the past persisting into the present). This temporal “sleight of hand” framed European knowledge of colonized peoples well into the 20th century (Fabian 1983).

The knowledge of “modern savages” that flowed from colonization enabled fuller imaginings of pre-modern life in Europe (Orme 1973, 1974; examples in Heizer, ed., 1962), and laid the contours of a universal scheme of technological and social development in which savage societies stood in for early stages of development, while Europe manifested the pinnacle or end point of this trajectory. But as Laclau (1996) argued, the universal emerges *NOT* from widely documented shared features, as we might at first imagine, but rather from the elevation of a *specific instance* or example to *stand for* the universal. The particular instance (e.g., European society) thus became the exemplar of the universal. Other particularities (i.e., non-European societies) represented “stops along the way,” steps in the direction of the purported universal. Thus in 19th-century Europe, the *present* of so-called savage societies became a key source of insight into a *European past*, while Europe, in its present, stood for the future of all (see Chapter 2 for fuller consideration of analogy).

Implied in the structure of the preceding paragraph is a distinction between “us” (Europeans) and “them” (“Others”; the “savages” and “barbarians” of 19th-century thought), a distinction that betrays the universal pretense of Enlightenment-inspired world prehistory (e.g., the singular “human story”; also Mehta 1997). True to its Enlightenment legacy, world prehistory espoused a universalist program in which

all societies passed through the same (or a broadly similar) sequence of technological and social development. Simple technological and social forms were superseded by more complex ones. This trajectory was captured in the early terminology of the Three Age System – Stone, Bronze, Iron (Rodden 1981). This system was later elaborated into a ladder-like scheme of successive Paleolithic stages (Lower, Middle and Upper) characterized by various chipped stone technologies, followed by a Neolithic (or “new” stone age) marked by the advent of polished stone technologies, which gave way to successive ages of metal, first a Bronze and later an Iron Age (Trigger 1989:73–79, 94–102, 155–160; on Africa, see Sinclair et al. 1993:3–9). Initially defined on the basis of European archaeological materials, this age/stage terminology was thought to manifest a universal sequence of human technological or, in later formulations (Childe 1936), socio-economic development, and thus the structure of world prehistory. As archaeological research began in other world areas, this sequence acted as the universal standard against which the particularities of “regional prehistories” were compared and often found wanting (Trigger 1989: 110–147).

Although some early colonial officers and amateur archaeologists in Anglophone Africa employed European terminology in pioneering archaeological investigations in Africa, a separate terminological framework was developed to emphasize the distinctive qualities of the African archaeological record (Bishop and Clark, eds., 1967; Deacon 1990; Gowlett 1990:18–19; Hall 1990a:8–12; Robertshaw 1990a; Sinclair et al. 1993:3–9). Goodwin, a student of European prehistorian Miles Burkitt, is credited with introducing the framework of an Early, Middle and Later Stone Age that has structured discussions of Africa’s past in ensuing decades (Goodwin and van Riet Lowe 1929). Though African researchers stressed the distinctive, local features of these “ages,” they obviously paralleled in a general sense the threefold Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic of Europe. Other European terms appeared even more problematic. The applicability of the Anglophone concept of “neolithic” to Africa was a source of considerable debate (Shaw 1967; Sinclair et al. 1993:4–8; Chapters 7–10), and it was recognized early on that, by contrast to Europe and the Middle East, no discernible Bronze Age preceded the Iron Age in Africa. In Africa there was apparently a “direct transition” from the Late Stone Age or “Neolithic” to the Iron Age (Chapter 11). Africa’s past (*their* past) was thus distinctive, a departure from the universal standard embodied by European prehistory (*our* past) glossed as the *human* past writ large.

Yet despite the early recognition of diversity in prehistoric sequences around the world, the terminological framing of world prehistory (Lower, Middle, and Upper Paleolithic, followed by a Neolithic, then Bronze and Iron Age) hangs on a European/Near Eastern scaffolding. The perception of this *particular* sequence as the embodiment of a universal one had implications for the narrative staging of world prehistory (also Connah 1998). Picture the world as a stage on which the “human story” is played out. As narration of the story proceeds, a spotlight trains our attention on different geographical areas. The area “illuminated” at any point in the story is determined by temporal priority; in other words, the geographical area with the “first instance” of a particular development occupies the spotlight as the “human

story” is told. In standard narratives, the spotlight is trained on Africa – home of our hominid ancestors – as the story begins. Thus the staging of world prehistory is, in theory, broadly encompassing in the earliest reaches of time (periods when “we” trace “our” common ancestry to Africa), but becomes less encompassing as the story of “our” ancestry shifts to the narrower geographic stage of the Near East, and narrower still as the “center” of civilization shifts to Europe. This entails an ever-narrowing “circle of we” that excludes major portions of the globe from a central role. Micaela di Leonardo (1998:123, 138, 140) explored the significance of a “circle of we” for patterns of inclusion and exclusion. “We,” she argued, is a dynamic category with shifting boundaries that strategically include and exclude in relation to particular goals and contexts. Building on di Leonardo, it becomes important to ask who is included and who is excluded from the “circle of we” in world prehistory.

In standard narratives of world prehistory, the “circle of we” is inclusive in early human history. The Plio-Pleistocene hominids (Chapter 3) who forged new adaptations in the open woodlands of East Africa are portrayed as common human ancestors (see Dennell 1990 on geographical centers of human origins). Thus, early hominids do not belong to the particularity of “African prehistory” but are broadly relevant to “our” universal prehistory. This is captured in comments by Gowlett, who suggests that

Archaeological studies of human origins differ from other areas of African archaeology, in that in principle, and perhaps for some researchers, the prime importance lies in the subject – human evolution – rather than the place . . . There is a theoretical contrast with any other field of African prehistory, since . . . those who choose to work in Africa have done so primarily because of their own interest in Africa. To many researchers in human evolution the continent has been important in its own right, but for others it has been merely the backdrop to a science which was the main interest. (Gowlett 1990:13)

Thirty years ago, when regional models of modern human origins prevailed (Chapter 4), the “circle of we” rapidly telescoped following the migration of Acheulean peoples out of Africa and into the Near East and Europe. The Middle Stone Age (MSA) of Africa (thought to be temporally and technologically comparable to the Middle Paleolithic of Europe and the Near East) was viewed as a parochial topic pursued by a few dogged individuals (part of Glynn Isaac’s [1975] “muddle in the middle”). As explored in detail in Chapters 4 and 5, the last 15 years witnessed important changes in the perceived significance of the African MSA. Based on fossil evidence as well as more controversial mitochondrial DNA evidence, many students of human evolution now favor a more recent African ancestry for modern humans (Chapters 4, 5). In this view, all contemporary humans share a common African ancestry as recently as ca. 100,000 to 200,000 years ago. In light of these claims, African MSA studies have achieved new prominence and focus of research that will, no doubt, be claimed as integral to “our” human story. But the geographical telescoping of the story remains intact for periods after this;

the Later Stone Age of Africa is framed as a distinctive/*particular* Late Pleistocene response, while the Upper Paleolithic of Europe, with its rock art and finely worked stone and bone tools, embodies the prehistory of “us” (see Connah 1998:1). In standard narratives, the Near East remains in the “circle of we” through the neolithic and urban “revolutions” because of the temporal priority of these developments in the Near East compared to Europe (Chapters 10, 13). However, the “story of human development” narrows in focus to Europe as historians and archaeologists track the growth of “civilization” in its linguistically unmarked form.

Linguists distinguish marked and unmarked forms of words. The effect of marking is to modify – often to specify – the meaning of a word. Unmarked forms are taken to be general, while marked forms are specific. Yet Laclau’s observations about the relationship between the particular and the universal are relevant here (i.e., that the universal is simply a particular form elevated to *stand for* the universal). Consider the broadly encompassing term “American.” As Williams (1989) argued, the supposedly inclusive term carries with it exclusions based on race and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> In practice the taken-for-granted referent of “American” is “white American,” which accounts for the proliferation of linguistically marked forms of Americans (African American, Asian American and so on). So too with history. Unmarked “history” is taken as broadly encompassing (Schlesinger 1991); yet it simultaneously obscures exclusions embedded in the practice of history (e.g., Bernal 1987 on the exclusion of Africa from the history of Western civilization). From the 1950s to the 1970s, calls to make history more inclusive resulted in specialities like “women’s history,” “black history,” and “African history.” These linguistically marked forms of history were intended to broaden the scope of history, to reveal and correct exclusions in unmarked “history,” yet their persistence as marked forms attests the persistence of exclusions they were intended to correct.

These issues of inclusion and exclusion through linguistic marking have implications for the narrative of world prehistory. The geographical telescoping of the narrative is obscured by representing world prehistory as “our story,” begging the question of who was included in and excluded from the “circle of we.” Yet exclusions from the main narrative are evident in the ancillary stories of “alternative developments” in “other world areas” to which final chapters of world prehistory texts are often devoted. Here is where we learn of the development of New World and African civilizations. New World prehistory is often considered distinct because of its geographical isolation. Yet African prehistory from the Middle, or more recently Later, Stone Age has long been treated as “ancillary” for at least two reasons: (1) Africa was explicitly perceived as a “late-comer” to technological and social developments highlighted by the narrative of world prehistory (e.g., agriculture, metallurgy, urban settlement, political complexity, and so on); and (2) there was an implicit perception that African prehistory was relevant to “them,” not “us,” underscoring the exclusion of Africa from the “circle of we.”

The first perception, that Africa was at best a “runner up” in the race of progressive development, drew on deeply rooted Western imagery of Africa as a barbarous continent that stood outside the progressive human impulse. From Hegel to Trevor-Roper, Africa was portrayed as the most unprogressive of continents, an

inversion of the civilized qualities of Europe (see Ebron 2002; Hammond and Jablow 1970; Holl 1995; Mudimbe 1994). This deeply rooted view, shaped and refined through the long history of the slave trade, was further reinforced by an early 20th-century pessimism about the ubiquity of innovation. Whereas 19th-century social evolutionists allowed that technological, social, and political innovations could develop independently, albeit at different rates, early 20th-century scholars were more pessimistic about the innovative qualities of humans. They believed that innovation was rare, that most inventions were singular, and that these subsequently spread through processes of diffusion and migration (see Trigger 1989:150–155, 161–167). The long-term exclusion of Africans from the “circle of we” (intimately linked to the dehumanization of the slave trade) was thus combined with a general pessimism about the innovative nature of humans, with important consequences for the development of African archaeology.

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### **Thematics in African Archaeology**

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Though there was isolated attention to a handful of prominent sites in the late 19th century (e.g., Great Zimbabwe; Hall 1995; Kuklick 1991), systematic archaeological investigations in sub-Saharan Africa developed in the context of 20th-century colonial occupation and were further stimulated by nationalism and the end of colonial occupation (Robertshaw 1990b:4–5; Trigger 1990; see contributions in Robertshaw [ed., 1990] for the development of archaeological investigations in different parts of the continent). Early attention focused on Africa’s Stone Age past (e.g., Chapter 17) which was seen as dynamic in relation to the perceived stagnation of Africa in more recent periods (Robertshaw 1990b:4). The so-called Iron Age was viewed as recent and inherently uninteresting, for it graded into the “ethnographic present” (see Clark 1990:189). Innovation was assumed to be a product of outside influence, and therefore diffusion or migration was invoked to account for apparent changes. Because archaeological investigations were in their infancy, there was often little direct evidence to sustain views of late, derivative development. This is clearly seen in the ambitious synthesis of African culture history offered by George Peter Murdock in 1959. His *Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History* (Murdock 1959) is exemplary of the received view of African history on the eve of independence. First and foremost, the history was organized by tribal/linguistic units. The tribal mapping of African societies had profound effects on the structure of archaeological knowledge as archaeologists sought to trace the ancestors of contemporary “tribal” entities (Hall 1984, 1990a:13–16; Chapters 16, 17). This project came to be questioned from the 1970s as anthropologists and historians began to explore the extent to which so-called “tribal entities” emerged through colonial interventions and were therefore problematic units of historical analysis (e.g., Cohen and Odhiambo 1989; Goody 1990, 1998; Lentz 1994, 1995; Ranger 1993). Second, Murdock’s history assumed the priority of diffusion over independent invention; much of the volume was devoted to tracking the spread of diverse traits and practices across the continent (e.g., Chapter 12). Unlike some of his contem-

poraries, Murdock did not assume that all cultural innovation was introduced to Africa. Based on the insights of botanists, Murdock postulated an independent development of agriculture in Africa (Chapter 10); however, “handicrafts,” trade towns, complex political organizations, and other potent signs of progress were, in Murdock’s (1959:72) view, introduced to the continent from the north.

Colonial insistence on the unprogressive quality of African societies and the external origins of all/most innovations led to a backlash in the period leading up to and in the wake of African independence. The growth of nationalism and the promise of independence coincided with growing interest in Iron Age archaeology. Newly forged nations required independent histories that overcame the biases inherent in the limited documentary sources relied upon by traditional historians (Temu and Swai 1981:18–22). The late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed the emergence of a vital tradition of African historical studies that emphasized the importance of “non-traditional” sources, including oral history and archaeology (Vansina 1961; Vansina et al., eds., 1964; on the limits of early interdisciplinary cooperation, see Stahl 2001:15). “Iron Age” archaeological studies (see Hall 1990a:8–10, 1990b:64 on the introduction of this term) were viewed as providing important evidence regarding the precolonial history of African societies. The precolonial past took on new significance as archaeologists embraced two new projects: (1) helping to forge national histories, which meant a greater focus on Iron Age sites; and (2) countering images of Africa as an unprogressive backwater (Andah 1995; Sinclair et al. 1993:16–31; Stahl 2001:13). These negative images had gained new force through the broadcasts and writings of Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who excluded Africa from his program on world history on the grounds that “there is only the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe” (Trevor-Roper 1965:9). Trevor-Roper’s words, uttered in the context of African independence, became a rallying cry for historians and archaeologists determined to prove that Africa had a progressive history much like Europe’s (see Fuglestad [1992] and Neale [1985, 1986] for an extended discussion).

These new goals affected the kinds of sites that archaeologists targeted for investigation. New emphasis was placed on sites that promised to afford insight into the antiquity of agriculture, metallurgy, cities, and social complexity, all taken as hallmarks of cultural progress (Stahl 1999). The goal was to demonstrate that Africa too had a proud history of innovation and social complexity, one that rivaled other world areas in age and could therefore provide a platform for generating respect for African cultural history – in other words, that Africa was active in the story of human development (Rowlands 1989a, 1989b; Shepherd 2002:196–197). But in common with African history, these efforts to counter negative images of Africa through the production of new histories questioned the *details* of the narrative but *not its underlying presumptions* (Neale 1985, 1986; also Mudimbe 1994:xv). A focus on origins, kingdoms, and states was intended to stake a claim to the “right to universality, and thus the acknowledgment of African contributions to the make-up of humanity” (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993:1), in other words, to demonstrate that Africa’s past was continuous with the standard of world prehistory. But by

failing to question the presumptions of this narrative (i.e., the teleology of progressive developmentalist models, the valuation of “complexity,” and that the European/Middle Eastern sequence stood for the “universal”), archaeologists, like historians, fell into what Fuglestad (1992) termed the “Trevor-Roper trap.” The epistemological framework and narrative conventions of earlier approaches remained intact (Jewsiewicki 1989:36), and in the case of archaeology, were reinvigorated in the 1960s through American New Archeology, which reinfused evolutionary ideas into archaeology and reinforced the study of origins as a key issue (Trigger 1989:289–328; also Robertshaw 1990b:5). Nor did archaeologists question the standard of world prehistory which, as we have seen, was created through the elevation of a particularity to the status of the universal.

A renewed interest in origins flowed from the efforts to demonstrate Africa’s place in the story of human progress, and led to archaeological investigations into the origins of agriculture (e.g., Harlan et al., eds., 1976; Stahl 1984; Chapter 10); metallurgy (Schmidt and Avery 1978; Tylecote 1975; van der Merwe 1980; van der Merwe and Avery 1982; see Killick 1996; Chapter 11); and urbanism (McIntosh and McIntosh 1984; see McIntosh 1999; Sinclair et al. 1993; Chapter 13). Radio-carbon dating promised new insight into the antiquity of these “key” developments, but proved disappointing after results suggested that some of these developments occurred later in Africa than in adjacent regions of the Old World. Arguments intended to generate respect for Africa now hinged on issues of *plentitude* or *diversity*. Sutton (1974), for example, argued that food production occurred late in Africa because of the natural endowment of Africa in the early to middle Holocene (Chapter 7). His proposal for an encompassing “aqualithic culture” stressed a *distinctive* African pathway shaped by natural endowment; only later, under pressure from environmental deterioration, were African peoples forced to make the transition to food production (see Chapters 9 and 10 for assessments of these arguments). In the case of metallurgy, a consensus emerged through the 1980s that, although smelting techniques may have been introduced to Africa, there was considerable innovation in the techniques of smelting within Africa, with others postulating a *distinctive* “African pathway” to the production of steel (Schmidt and Avery 1978; van der Merwe and Avery 1982; Chapter 11). Difference, diversity, and distinctiveness have thus been lauded as reasons to respect Africa’s cultural history (e.g., McIntosh 1998). Yet we need to heed Ebron’s (2002:30) observation that “even well-intended efforts to turn around the valences of ‘Africa’ and ‘the West’ . . . still tend to repeat the framework.” Difference and distinctness are assessed in relation to a “standard,” and the unquestioned standard that continues to lurk behind the *distinctive* qualities of Africa’s past are the supposedly *universal* qualities of Europe’s past. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose!*

To this point I have argued that the thematics or “big questions” that drove early archaeological investigations into Africa’s pasts were framed by the project of world prehistory – first in negative fashion (denying Africa a place), and then in “positive” fashion (insisting on Africa’s place) – but without questioning the broader framing of world prehistory. This is, however, a generalization that does not account for the questions that occupied archaeologists working in specific areas. When we

examine regional trends, a second characteristic feature of African archaeological research becomes apparent, a feature shaped by the relationship between African archaeology and other disciplines. For a variety of reasons, which I develop below, the archaeology of Africa, particularly the archaeology of the last few millennia, was shaped by insights from linguistics, ethnography, and oral history. Historical reconstructions based on these sources were often in place before archaeologists put “spade to ground,” and these reconstructions, often speculative, provided a ready-made scheme into which archaeological data were slotted as they became available (Chapter 12).

The unusual relationship between archaeology and other disciplines that characterized African studies relates to the fact that, unlike other world areas subject to European colonization (the western hemisphere, Australia, etc.), African cultures remained vital through the rather brief formal colonial period (in many areas, the period from ca. 1890 to the 1960s). Formal colonization of most of the continent followed the 1884 Berlin conference, at which European powers divided the continent among themselves based on existing coastal interests. The ensuing “scramble for Africa” forcibly imposed colonial rule and shaped the later configuration of African nation-states. Make no mistake. These 20th-century developments led to considerable change; however, “African Africa remained a going concern” (Moore 1994:12). Change was perceived as a thin, recent veneer over long-standing traditional practices. Because these practices were thought to be enduring, knowledge of present practices, forms of organization, and so on was thought to inform directly and unambiguously on the past (Stahl 2004; Chapter 2). At the same time, a growing interest in the “culture history” of larger cultural units led to ambitious reconstructions of regional and interregional history based on contemporary sources (e.g., Murdock 1959). In order to evaluate these reconstructions and their effects on archaeology, we need to consider the sources we use to gain insight into the past.

### **Learning about the Past: The Value of Archaeological Sources**

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Knowledge of the past can be derived from a variety of sources, including written documents, the material traces of archaeological sites, and oral histories. These sources stand in different temporal relationships to the past, relationships that we might conceive of as “direct” and “indirect.” Documents and material residues are what we might consider “direct” sources, in that they were produced in the past. Though we might distinguish residues created by “actors” from those of “witnesses” (a distinction drawn by Hall [2000:9] in exploring differences between the archaeological and documentary records), both relate to events or circumstances of the time. We can consider other sources as “indirect” in the sense that they come from a time *after* the contexts about which we wish to know. Oral histories are an example. Oral histories are contemporary sources based on remembrances of a past from which they are temporally removed. This contemporary quality of oral histories sparked a controversy over their veracity as historical sources; because they can be

edited, amplified, and so on, some argued that oral histories were inadequate as historical sources (e.g., Henige 1982; see Ebron [2002:81–113] on oral sources and state archives). Others developed techniques of source evaluation that would allow their use as credible historical sources (Vansina 1961, 1985). This was a particularly important development in African historical studies given the paucity of “standard” historical sources (i.e., written documents), and a florescence of oral historical research in the early independence period (after 1957) generated a wealth of new insights into African societies of the last millennium.

Linguistics is another indirect source of evidence that has significantly influenced historical reconstruction in Africa. Spoken languages are contemporary, but carry “traces of the past” in their vocabulary and structure that historical linguists study in order to discern historical relationships among languages. In the case of written languages, documents can yield important insights into the changing character of language over time. Historical linguists who study non-written languages must, however, glean historical insights solely from contemporary language. By comparatively analyzing the vocabulary and structure of related languages, historical linguists reconstruct the relationships among contemporary languages based on patterns of similarity and difference. Languages that differ to a greater degree than others are assumed to have diverged or split off from one another earlier in time than those that are more similar. Though geographical “homelands” of languages have been traced by a variety of methods, all draw on the contemporary distribution of languages to posit places of origin and paths of dispersal (see Chapter 12). The key point for our purposes is that historical linguists derive historical insights from sources *in the present*. An analogous use of indirect evidence in the study of domestic crops is described by Neumann in Chapter 10. Based on the *current* distribution of the wild plants thought to be progenitors or precursors of their domesticated relatives, botanists have tried to pinpoint the general location where domestication occurred in the past. The logic is that plants must have been domesticated in an area where wild progenitors occurred (and see Chapter 2 on ethnographic sources).

What is the significance of the distinction between “direct” and “indirect” sources for the relationship between archaeology and other disciplines interested in the history of African peoples? First, there are few *direct* sources of insight into Africa’s past; the material evidence of archaeology is often the primary direct source given the paucity of documentary sources prior to the last century. Yet historical reconstruction has often, as readers will discover in later chapters, been driven by or based upon *indirect* sources (e.g., linguistics, contemporary distribution of ethnographic traits). The course of African archaeology has been plagued by a wealth of speculative reconstructions typically, though not exclusively, based on indirect sources and a dearth of empirical archaeological work. Murdock’s *Africa* (1959) is a primary example. Based on comparative analysis of ethnographic traits and historical linguistic analysis, Murdock offered wide-ranging historical reconstructions of agriculture and crafts, population movement, and more. As Eggert (Chapter 12) explores in detail, the widespread distribution of Bantu languages became a source of historical controversy which shaped the agenda of Iron Age archaeology in the

central, eastern, and southern subcontinent for decades. In another example, Neumann details (Chapter 10) how the study of plant domestication and agricultural origins has been shaped by early speculative scenarios based on the distribution of contemporary plant species and the ethnocentric assumptions of Western scholars.

Archaeological sources, as contributors to this volume demonstrate, provide valuable independent evidence against which to assess models of the past. A recurrent theme in the chapters that follow is how expanded, empirically based archaeological research has, on reflection, led us to revise earlier understandings of the past based on comparative ethnographic, linguistic, and other sources. Where earlier researchers tended to “fit” archaeological evidence to reconstructions drawn from ethnographic, linguistic, or oral historical sources, research over the last several decades has more often treated archaeological evidence as an independent source of insight that often modifies or extends our understanding of the past derived from other sources (e.g., Schmidt 1990; Stahl 2001).

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### **A Final Word on the Goals of the Volume**

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As readers will discover, this volume is unified neither by a particular theoretical stance nor a limited sense of shared goals for African archaeology. What the contributions share instead is a commitment to *assessment* of or critical engagement with the state of archaeological knowledge (hence the subtitle of the volume, “A Critical Introduction”). Contributors go beyond a simple review of knowledge to critically assess the direction and substance of research in their areas. “Critique” is not, however, synonymous with “criticism.” The goal is not simply to criticize past research upon which all present knowledge builds; rather, it is to explore the pre-occupations and assumptions that framed that research; to assess the quality and veracity of evidence used to sustain understandings of Africa’s past; and to chart emerging research directions and questions that can help us surmount limitations and build on strengths of earlier work. As readers will discover, knowledge of Africa’s pasts has changed over the last several decades, but only partly as a result of new evidence. As important as new evidence are new questions and perspectives that reframe our understanding of old evidence (Ellison et al. 1996). More sophisticated understanding of site formation and taphonomic processes has led to reinterpretations of the material signatures of Plio-Pleistocene sites (Chapters 3–5). Simplistic views of hunting and gathering peoples as survivals of ancient lifestyles have given way to a recognition to the diversity of hunting-gathering lifestyles and the dynamic relationships among peoples pursuing diverse economic strategies (Chapters 6–10, 14). Similarly, the assumption that “farmers” and “herders” rely primarily on domesticated resources led us to ignore the archaeological evidence of mosaic subsistence strategies that rely on a complex mix of wild, cultivated, and domesticated resources (Chapters 8–10, 16). We are increasingly aware of the complex history of technologies (Chapter 11), language groups (Chapter 12, 16), and of how entanglements in global networks over long time periods have shaped

and reshaped the contours of daily life (Chapters 13–18). And we are coming to recognize that historically and ethnographically documented social and political formations only go so far in helping us to imagine the variability of arrangements in the past (David and Sterner 1999; Guyer and Belinga 1995; Chapters 13, 16, 17, 18).

There is then much that is new in African archaeology (Lane 2001), but that which is new builds on previous work. The foundations of earlier work may be disassembled and reassembled, but it remains an important component of contemporary knowledge. What is new today will no doubt be subject to revision and reinterpretation in future as research continues. As readers will discover, there is often a lack of consensus on our understanding of Africa's pasts, and a central theme of this volume is that knowledge of the past is dynamic and open-ended rather than fixed and finished, forged as it is through differences of opinion, revision based on new evidence, and the posing of new questions and new interpretations. Our knowledge of Africa's pasts is thus a series of successive approximations, shaped by contemporary concerns and issues, but nonetheless anchored in the study of material residues that attest the dynamic and varied lifestyles of African peoples. It is an archaeology shaped by categories inherited from the past, but categories that we need to "write into as well against" in an effort to understand how "facts" about the past come to be (Ebron 2002:51; see e.g., Pikirayi 1999 on ceramic typologies).

This is an exciting time to be involved African archaeology. We hope the volume will motivate archaeologists-in-training to learn more about Africa's pasts, and practicing archaeologists to use emerging knowledge of Africa's pasts in reformulating the project of world prehistory. Conventional narratives of world prehistory continually reinscribe a temporalizing view of Africa as a place apart (Stahl 2004). And whether we care to acknowledge it or not, archaeological knowledge extends "beyond academics" (Sowunmi 1998), simultaneously informing and replicating media images and popular imaginings of Africa. We need, therefore, to concern ourselves with the kinds of questions we ask, the answers we seek, and the effects of our successive approximations of Africa's pasts on her present and future. Africa's pasts speak to *us* – conceived as an encompassing "circle of we" – not for what they tell us about teleologically conceived universal progress, or quintessential difference and diversity conceived as a departure from an ever-present phantom standard of "us-ness." Rather they offer insight into our humanness; to the struggles of humans as social actors to feed and care for family, to express commonalities and differences, to impose or resist power and hegemony, in short, to make our way in a world of entangled and changing natural and cultural circumstances.

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#### **NOTE ON THE EXPRESSION OF DATES IN THIS VOLUME**

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Dates derived from radiocarbon age estimations are expressed in this volume in several ways. "Raw" dates are expressed as "b.p." (before present) with "present" taken to be A.D. 1950, the date after which atomic testing led to elevated levels of

radioactive carbon isotopes in the earth's atmosphere. Dates expressed as b.c./a.d. are uncalibrated dates that have been derived by subtracting the raw date from A.D. 1950. These dates do not take into account variations in radioactive carbon isotope concentrations in the earth's atmosphere. Dendrochronological evidence shows that radiocarbon levels have been relatively enriched or depleted during some periods in the past, and these variations must be taken into account in order to translate radiocarbon dates into calendric equivalents. Dates expressed as b.c./a.d. should not, therefore, be taken as equivalents of calendric dates. Dates expressed as B.C./A.D. have been calibrated (or adjusted) to account for these variations and may be understood as equivalent to calendric dates. On calibration see Bronk Ramsey (1995), Stuiver et al. (1998) and Taylor et al. (1996).

## NOTES

- 1 “Consider, for example, the following two sentences: 1. Americans are still prejudiced against blacks. 2. Americans still earn less money than do whites. There is absolutely no difficulty understanding the first sentence; the second sentence is confusing. This is because in the first sentence ‘American’ is used as a metonym for ‘whites’; in the second sentence ‘American’ was used as a metonym again, but this time for ‘blacks’ . . . most readers will understand the use of ‘American’ as a metonym for whites” (Stanley Lieberman, 1985, quoted in Williams 1989:430).

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