Keynote Address 1

Imagining an African Archaeology Without Frontiers

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It is with humility that I address the 14th Congress of the PanAfrican Archaeological Association for Prehistory and Related Studies and the 22nd biennial meeting of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists. I am honoured to be the first Kenyan to address this congress 63 years after the scheduled congress was withdrawn. I wish to thank Professor Karim Sadr for inviting me to address this august group. I doubt that I can pretend to walk in the footsteps of the fathers who founded the congress 66 years ago. What I can proudly assert is that the purpose of that congress was to create an African archaeology without frontiers. Indeed, throughout much of its history, the African continent was a frontier-less entity. People as well as its bounty of life forms moved freely across this beautiful, diverse landscape. They still do today except under quite different conditions and circumstances. Professor Sadr asked me to speak to the theme of an African past and future that is not bound by frontiers, real or imagined, that divide archaeologists and diminish the impact of the continent’s contributions to global history.

The theme of the 2014 joint meeting, African Archaeology Without Frontiers, challenges us to transcend national, linguistic, disciplinary and epochal boundaries that separate archaeology’s practitioners in Africa. Often, archaeologists work on what are essentially similar research questions, be they focused on technological, ecological, economic or even political themes. Often, these themes mirror the universal questions that are aimed at identifying global patterns. African archaeology has moved forward from its early days as a peripheral sub-discipline of European prehistory to being a diverse field at the centre of global archaeology. Today, practitioners of African archaeology are drawn from all corners of the world. There are research and teaching programmes involving Africa in archaeology departments all over the world. The diversity of practitioners cuts across gender, class, ethnic and national identities.

This is an exciting time to be an archaeologist working in Africa precisely because this may well be the only continent where archaeology in all its dimensions – from
hominid evolution to protohistory – can be studied. Furthermore, there are few restrictions on who can conduct research in Africa and on what topic. In a world where everything was equal, Africa would be the best place in which to study the fullest the human career in all its diversity.

As Africanists, we are among the most fortunate in that this may be the only place left where the practice of archaeology can still be carried out as it was intended. That window and opportunity might be closing quickly, but we have an opportunity to dictate the manner in which we can keep it open longer.

Scholars of globalisation today describe the paradox of our contemporary world. On the one hand, our contemporary reality is seeing the breaking down of boundaries of time, space, culture and difference at a pace that is quite dizzying. As mobile networks stretch and bend communication, contact becomes possible at nearly every point in time and space, enabling global economic integration and unprecedented levels of migration and trade.

Discourses and social movements debate human rights and the social contract at a global level. On the other hand, these centripetal effects are opposed to the countervailing process – that of the new and existing boundaries that are being built up and that seem stronger than ever. The centrifugal effects include the creation of greater inequalities of wealth and access; the demand by many ethnic communities for autonomy or national identity; the resistance to global integration or to ideologies thought to be or associated with the west that sometimes lead to violence or terrorism; the weakening of the power of states and fissioning of communities and the resistance or subversion of national boundaries. In my keynote lecture today I want to speak to the influence of these countervailing trends of the coming together and the coming apart – these contradictory effects of globalisation – and how they affect African archaeology as we practise it today.

I want to focus on three topics. First is the boundaries that have been broken down for archaeology in Africa. Second, I want to remind us of the boundaries that still remain, and that in some cases have become even firmer than ever before. Finally, I want to propose some ways in which our practice of archaeology can work towards a discipline that is truly without boundaries.

**On breaking down boundaries**
The past 30 years have been a period of tremendous growth for African archaeology. The number of grants, research funds and media available for publishing research and results has burgeoned.

African archaeology has much to contribute to global research questions such as climate change, technological innovation, migration, domestication, trade, conflict and warfare and ethnic identity formation. Rich ethnographic examples and oral
traditions can be directly connected to the persistence of cultural practices. These practices provide archaeologists with numerous opportunities to study the past as part of the lived present. Furthermore, national boundaries have been a recent invention in Africa and have never been particularly firm. Therefore, collaborations among scholars from different countries on research areas that cross political barriers have been easy in Africa and have greatly improved the resource base and opportunities for data sharing and training of future generations of scholars. Collaborations among scholars based in Africa have increased and now it is not unusual for African-born archaeologists to conduct research outside their own nations. African universities are increasingly training advanced students in archaeology through the PhD level. Specialised laboratories for conducting collections-based research are now common from Cairo to Cape Town. Even more promising for the future, large archaeological sites and unexplored regions still have great potential. The story is still largely unwritten in central Africa, the Sahara and many other regions.

On challenges to be overcome

In spite of these improvements, most of us who have been practising archaeologists in Africa over the same period would probably agree that we never fail to encounter the same challenges and frustrations that our predecessors experienced. Boundaries persist and in some cases are more intractable than ever. The public has typically envisioned archaeology as a discipline primarily engaged in the recovery of the earliest examples of long-gone manifestations of primitive humankind’s lifeways. Many see archaeologists as largely concerned with the question of origins, for example of domestication, writing, urbanism and so on (Smith et al. 2012). This misrepresentation of archaeology and its practitioners as adventurers only concerned with personal glory minimises archaeology’s scientific credentials and reduces its impact and relevance to daily concerns of making a living. The persistent image of Africa as an exotic ‘dark continent’ underscores this distortion of African archaeology.

Funding difficulties and disparities have been with us since the days of A.J.H. Goodwin and Clarence van Riet Lowe. Economic disparities between the west and the rest have been tempered in recent decades, but African economies remain among the world’s most struggling. The impoverishment of many African countries continues to disadvantage archaeology. Economic growth, while beneficial, has introduced differences and disparities within African societies. These class differences are compounded by or sometimes clouded by the rhetoric of ethnic and regional interests. Politics has become more divisive than ever in Africa, its governments often more hapless than ever. The final challenge is the political challenge in Africa.

Unfortunately, the loser in this new globalised world of ours is governance. At independence, African governments set ambitious goals for unity, development,
health and education. In the face of neo-liberal reforms, we have rethought the role of the state in Africa and we must admit that in many cases we have reaped a success story widely touted in the media. There has been economic growth and there has been a growing middle class in some of Africa’s most successful countries. In the face of neo-liberal reforms, increased trade and entrepreneurialism has by and large improved the fortunes of millions of Africans. The inventiveness and resourcefulness of Africans has been widely celebrated and with good reason. But especially in Africa and in spite of economic growth, governments remain the thorn in our sides. Millions of Africans cannot get simple state services without paying bribes. Governments are underfunded, incompetent or absent. Ethnic and regional tensions beset politics, divide nations and communities, and make the discussion of real political ideologies or practices impossible in many countries. Failed states abound in the Horn and the Sahel, bringing the evil of terrorism into the daily lives of Africans. This raises an obvious point about the state of archaeology today in its African context. Archaeology is overwhelmingly practised by civil servants as a part of the mission of government. Governments oversee research at universities and museums and protect cultural patrimony through the gazetting of monuments and the prevention of illicit excavation and export of protected cultural materials.

Today, most African governments have resources to pay the salaries of archaeology and heritage managers but do not have budgets devoted to research or the cost of the heritage management of sites. Furthermore, the divisions both ethnic and class-based of the new globalised Africa are greater than ever before in countries like my native Kenya. The national patrimony is increasingly seen as the heritage of particular ethnic groups or communities and can be used as a political wedge. For example, when the fabled monuments of Kilwa and Gede are increasingly interpreted as contributions of the Swahili, whose identity as authentic Africans remains in dispute, it is hard to imagine the governments of Kenya and Tanzania generating political will at the national level to preserve these sites. In cases where political ethnicity and religious differences devolve into open warfare, the destruction of heritage sites such as the library at Timbuktu is the next step. The continued sorry state of government in Africa puts archaeology at tremendous peril.

I want to give three examples to make my point. First, this spring I agreed to provide written testimony in court in Kenya on behalf of the National Museums of Kenya, which had lost in a dispute between a landowner and the government of Kenya over ownership of the site of Mtwapa, a coastal town with 800-year-old standing architecture where I have been working since 1986. Our studies showed that the site was first inhabited in 1732 BC, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements on the East African coast. Because of the site’s importance, the National Museums had recommended that the site be gazetted as a national monument (Kusimba et al. 2013).
The current owners, who are foreign nationals, filed a suit in court as they wanted to build a hotel on the site. I learned about the outcome of the case when the National Museums had lost the case and appealed. I was invited to provide expert evidence, but it was too little too late and the owners prevailed. Because of poverty and weak governance, developers can often make compelling cases about their ability to bring jobs to areas, to improve livelihoods and to protect archaeological sites better than the beleaguered national institutions charged with protecting the national patrimony.

The second example involves my work at Chicago’s Field Museum of Natural History, where I was a curator for 20 years. On four occasions, I was able to identify illicitly exported African antiquities. We contacted national officials at African embassies and received no response regarding the materials being held by US customs. The trove included Nok pieces among others. Only the government of Mali responded and materials were returned. For Nigeria and the Ivory Coast, no response was forthcoming. After six months, the US government was forced to return these items of questionable provenance to the importers.

The third example recollects a surreal experience I had in 2013 at the Field Museum. I received an alarmed email from a colleague who had recently visited our gift shop. This scholar had been deeply involved in the effort to recover trafficked ancestral shrines from the Mijikenda of Kenya, known as vigango, that had made their way to North American museums. To her horror, she had discovered one such statue for sale in our gift shop! I immediately ran downstairs and confirmed that the vigango was indeed authentic and on sale in my own museum at US$1 000. Flustered and embarrassed, I immediately had the piece removed. But this lesson taught me how difficult the effort to safeguard patrimony can be in a world without boundaries, and with error-prone and imperfect human institutions both inside Africa and out. We must be vigilant and we must strive for more effective communication that begins at home.

**On solutions**

What solutions can we as practitioners work towards in our daily efforts and practice? To start with, we must become activists in the preservation of the sites we work with. How can we forge an Africa that protects the cultural patrimony of its diverse and pluralistic public? First we must train local scientists, share data and examine topics that unite the public and bring diverse communities together. Avoid the trap of primordial ethnicity and avoid the simplistic connections between archaeological sites and present-day communities. We should speak out on issues that weaken the state and divide our audience: political ethnicity, class-consciousness and class snobbery, ethnic stereotyping, nepotism and corruption. African archaeologists must support each other in the quest for funding, encourage collaboration and share data. They should build bridges among themselves and support each other by contributing to laboratories and
organisations that collaborate and share data. The poorly developed institutions in many African settings are an opportunity to create new partnerships across national boundaries – which are of course of dubious colonial origins in the first place.

Many lions of our field remain as examples to us, such as J. Desmond Clark, Thurston Shaw, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Richard Leakey, Bassey Andah, Peter Schmidt, Pierre de Maret, Fekri Hassan, Susan McIntosh and Nikolaas van der Merwe. The pioneering efforts of the late J. Desmond Clark, who conducted multi-country African research and shared his research results without boundaries in the training of Africanists many of whom are present here today, need to be emulated as widely as possible. Indeed, many of Clark’s own students have continued this effort. Paul Sinclair in a little over two decades has achieved what was once thought of as unachievable. Today, as we congregate here, we can’t help noticing that the attention being paid to vitally important topics such as the evolution of social complexity, the origins of urbanism and the interregional networks that made possible the founding and flourishing of states is traceable to our collective commitment to African archaeology’s contributions to global history. Sinclair marshalled funding from the Swedish Agency for Research and Economic Cooperation and was able to train scholars all over eastern and southern Africa, with the conviction that it is possible for Africans to lead. The late Professor Bassey Andah, the first African-born PhD in archaeology, embarked on a programme of training African scholars and thanks to his efforts West Africa boasts a large number of home-grown scholars.

I want to mention why I think it is so critical to share information today. Creating databases is the new frontier and many other fields are way ahead on this front. We still see the ability to gain access to a site as a means of career building or as a research achievement in and of itself.

Today’s data analysis tools are extremely powerful. Through social network analysis and other tools, we now have the capacity to find patterning in large data sets. We must publish and share our data as routine practice in archaeology. Here, I would like to commend Jeff Fleisher and Stephanie Wynne-Jones, whose efforts at creating and sharing large databases of ceramics from the eastern coast of Africa are worth emulating for the whole continent. Shadreck Chirikure’s efforts to develop an analytical lab for studying the history of technology in Africa, centred at the University of Cape Town, will ensure that Nikolaas van der Merwe’s pioneering efforts in archaeometry will go forward into the future.

Finally, I want to leave you with some thoughts to consider as we imagine an African archaeology without frontiers. What persistent boundaries do you encounter? What boundaries do you inadvertently build or maintain? How can we pull down boundaries that marginalise our discipline and alienate us from each other? Today, only a handful of African-born scholars work outside Africa. In North America, for
example, only one is employed in an Anthropology department, the traditional home of archaeology; the rest are employed in African and African Studies programmes. Several African scholars have complained of being discouraged by their advisors from considering employment in the west as an option. Within the continent, we are witnessing the creation of independently funded research institutions that have increasingly taken on the responsibilities of national research and heritage institutions. Some of these institutes claim corruption, poor leadership and funding problems as a motive for breaking ranks with state-sponsored institutions. Although these new research organisations offer the promise of new funding, collaborations and connections, they also run the risk of further marginalising state institutions and local scholars and students. A risk in the future is essentially separate and unequal streams of scholarship: one globalised, and one for the civil servants of local and national museums. At the same time, the risks for diminishing accountability and increasing marginalisation of local scholarship increase. African archaeologists must learn to speak with one voice and to support each other, as is done in other regions, for example, among Mayan students. As Africanists, these challenges are curable, but seeking long-term solutions must ultimately rest with everyone being committed to a level playing field.

**References**

