COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY & HERITAGE WORK IN AFRICA: ISSUES, LESSONS, & THE FUTURE

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In March 2014, CAS joined the Wenner-Gren Foundation in sponsoring a workshop at UF that addressed community archaeology and heritage work in Africa. Professional archaeologists and heritage experts from Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Eritrea, the USA, Canada, and Switzerland discussed pre-circulated papers with the assistance of three outside discussants from the USA and Australia. The goals were to explore ways in which community engagement in Africa by archaeologists and heritage experts can contribute to good practices outside of Africa as well as incorporate good practices from other world regions appropriate to African settings. The workshop also explored questions of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, examining both to see what positive lessons could be drawn from both genres. Much of community engagement heretofore in Africa has been mandated by funding agencies and development enterprises, top-down efforts have been colored by centralized control over policy and implementation, often leaving communities distanced from participatory activities. Centralized control over community work has meant the alienation of communities from critical heritage sites, with policy directives aimed at protection overwhelming community needs for access to sacred places. These legacies have dominated African efforts to integrate community needs in planning of research, implementation of preservation plans, and development of heritage sites.

The workshop discussions isolated a number of key issues: 1) many archaeologists engaged in long-term research over the last several decades do not view their research as community-based, 2) some notable top-down approaches (e.g., culture banks in Dagon, Mali) have incorporated innovative ideas with the potential to be grown elsewhere in Africa and around the world; 3) displacement of contemporary people by development activities requires that heritage experts be prepared to find innovative ways to care for sacred sites that are threatened by development; 4) the colonial legacy of central control over excavation planning and implementation is deeply engrained in university pedagogy and will take serious and determined efforts to change; 5) the glorification of heroes of colonial archaeology, such as Louis Leakey, masks serious degradation of community sensibilities and participation in archaeological inquiry and heritage protection; 6) community archaeology remains a remote ideal in some parts of the continent, particularly where land alienation has occurred under settler displacement and apartheid; 7) culture change, especially the coming of Christianity, has devalued traditional heritage values--thrusting experts into tenuous ethical postures when they advocate against the destruction of heritage places no longer highly valued.

Other common themes emerging in the papers and discussions, to be the focus of a forthcoming volume, were: a) Decentralization of some State institutions, such as the National Museums of Kenya, has led to community governance of heritage sites alongside professional heritage managers, a significant change from top-down approaches. b) Community archaeology and heritage takes many guises: local initiatives and professional participation; outside initiation with local buy-ins, etc. The many different permutations require nuanced case studies to bring out what practice best fits local needs and larger management strategies. c) Long term community engagement for research purposes inevitably means community buy-ins and participations at various points and levels of research, varying as research goals and community needs change. d) Response to community invitations to engage in heritage projects are fraught with hidden agendas and mixed motivations that may pose a threat to professionals or members of the community. e) Ethical responsibilities to individuals in attribution of testimony varies according to the subject matter and setting and must result in "no harm done." f) Public and community archaeology are different species that may be interbred. To avoid confusion in our use of these concepts we should distinguish between a public archaeology that incorporates outreach and dissemination of results and community archaeology that incorporates community engagement with research, crafting of interpretation, and sharing of indigenous knowledge. g) Multivocality in community heritage cannot be heard if archaeologists or heritage workers speak on behalf of community members. The clearest way to ensure that the voices of participating members of communities are heard is to stand aside and let them speak or to write them, letting them carry the narrative. h) A discourse-based approach to defining "What is heritage" requires listening to people as they engage in daily discourse about what they consider to be their heritage. i) Human rights claims are often unveiled in community heritage and archaeology investigations in disguised form, e.g., when people complain about the lack of food, the absence of employment opportunity, and the deprivation of religious beliefs. j) There is a professional and ethical responsibility to constantly assess the change that archaeologists and heritage workers are inducing in a community.

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