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Debate Article

Making archaeology relevant to global challenges: a Global South perspective

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Introduction

Why is it that archaeology—a discipline that deals with human experience over the long term—is failing to achieve its potential in tackling global challenges? As Smith (2021) rightly argues, this issue raises legitimate questions about the relevance of archaeology. I am unconvinced, however, that a retreat to scientific rigour is the only answer; neither is gaining the attention of specialists in other disciplines through transdisciplinary research. If archaeology manages to demonstrate its relevance to society, collaboration, methodological rigour and acceptance by other disciplines will be natural consequences. Other specialists represent a tiny sector of society and are not always the decision-makers at governmental and inter-governmental levels. In making this assertion, I am alert to differences in the history, geography and genealogies of archaeological practice across the globe.

In parts of Africa colonialism ended Indigenous ways of farming, introducing new crops that are drought intolerant and farming practices that are unsustainable. Archaeology provides records of past successes with food security and crops fit for purpose (Logan *et al.* 2019). Therefore, to tackle the global challenge that is hunger, archaeology must produce solutions. This might not be a challenge in the USA, but in Africa it is a question of life and death. The relevance of archaeology is, to some extent, determined by whom, for whom and how archaeological work is undertaken. In Africa archaeology emerged as a tool of empire, concerned with extracting resources and rendering locals dependent on the colonising powers. This situation has not fundamentally changed, as some archaeology currently practised in former colonies, such as South Africa, is still under the tight grip of colonial influences and a few hegemony-seekers (Hall 2005; Meskell 2011). Rigour or no rigour, some current African archaeology is out of touch with the everyday needs of the continent's populations. Statements about relevance made by African archaeologists are therefore aimed at precipitating a change of course and to secure support from stakeholders. It is an acknowledgement that archaeology cannot reform itself. Meanwhile, the public image of archaeology in some African countries is that of a discipline that is colonial, a preoccupation of foreigners with resources to burn on unproductive pursuits (Pwiti & Ndoro 1999). Archaeology tied to colonial privilege and its neo-colonial extension cannot help address either local or global needs (Shepherd 2002; Chirikure 2020).

What are global challenges and how might archaeology help?

Local challenges morph into the global when they appear in every local context on a planetary scale. Inequality, access to health care and wellbeing, poverty eradication, safe settlements and climate change are some of the local issues with a global resonance. Climate change, for example, is forcing some West African communities to fight for pastures, resulting in endless conflict and insecurity. These challenges are so vital that the UN has developed mechanisms to translate them into an international agenda—initially through Millennium Development Goals and subsequently through Sustainable Development Goals. As Smith (2021) rightly points out, archaeology deals with ancient cities, farming systems and infrastructures, some of which experienced the same challenges—inequality, conflict and climate change—that we are experiencing today. The question then becomes what are archaeologists doing with this embarrassment of riches?

In southern Africa there existed cities with large populations, such as Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe, Mapela and Khami. Much traditional research on these sites has concentrated on defining ethnicities based on ceramic designs, mirroring colonial stereotypes of unchanging tribal identities (for a critique, see Lane 2005). Even with the methodological and transdisciplinary rigour suggested by Smith (2021), this research does not intersect with the needs of the majority of society today, including policy-makers (Murimbika & Moyo 2008). Ironically, in the 1960s and 1970s, some Africanist archaeologists held the attention of policy-makers and politicians, applying what, at the time, were robust and interdisciplinary methods. It appears, however, that this goodwill was squandered, because few African countries now have archaeologists as advisors, and still fewer fund archaeology to any meaningful extent. Of course, the sacrosanct nature of academic freedom means that researchers must work on what interests them. Unfortunately, some of these interests are far removed from the everyday needs of populations languishing in hunger, poverty, inequality and suffering the effects of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic (Chirikure *et al.* 2010; Logan *et al.* 2019; Dandara *et al.* 2021). And yet renowned economists such as Thomas Piketty and Branko Milanović draw on the long-term perspective of the past to highlight the global challenges of inequality (Milanović 2016; Piketty 2018). Perhaps there is need for more archaeological work in this area, such as that being undertaken by Kohler and colleagues (2017). The point is that methodological rigour, transdisciplinary cooperation and innovation are luxuries that will not make archaeology relevant and help the world reduce the gap between the rich and poor. Neither will studies of culture-histories, ceramic designs and stone-tool typologies earn archaeologists invitations to the Global Challenges agenda-setting table at the UN or other fora. Propaganda or spinning the communication of our findings to other disciplines might not yield the required returns in the absence of tangible problem solving.

Agenda setting at intergovernmental levels: where are the archaeologists?

In 2013, the African Union—an intergovernmental body made up of all the African states—decided to establish a road map for Africa's development in the twenty-first century. This is

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encapsulated in a vision and action plan known as Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want. Since the launch of this agenda, academics, businesspeople, policy leaders and community leaders, among others, have engaged to translate this vision into reality (DeGhetto *et al.* 2016). One of the aspirations of Agenda 2063 acknowledges the role of culture and heritage in stimulating a cultural and developmental renaissance for the continent. The big question is what is the role of archaeologists in all this? Do they sit on the agenda-setting table? Answers to these questions are vital, because the African Union has dedicated the year 2021 to arts, culture and heritage, declaring them to be 'levers for cultural development' and for peace to promote development. In line with this vision, the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (2021) is hosting events that include high-level panel discussions involving African ministers of culture and a diverse range of experts.

As an archaeologist on the panel, one of the issues that became clear to me is the lack of basic skills on the continent to ensure that the huge potential of archaeology, culture and heritage is made relevant and translated into solutions. Few archaeologists have skills in new-venture creation or finance, nor can they engineer green-energy solutions informed by the past. The curriculum taught in most African universities requires reform for it to be able to produce human capital capable of tackling such global challenges. A shift in mindset is required to ensure that the rich human experience preserved in the sediments of the past is complemented by the appropriate skills in the appropriate areas. To date, much archaeology teaching and, to a certain extent, research is too culture-historical in orientation, while insufficient attention is given to the problem-solving capability of Indigenous knowledge. Culture and heritage are being taught on the continent, but graduates lack the skills required to convert the knowledge, for example, into tech start-ups. A well-thought out, transdisciplinary curriculum will also feed into transdisciplinary research and draw the attention of those making policy and decisions.

The discipline must go beyond the self-interested concerns of individual researchers to align with societal needs and expectations in both research and teaching. Archaeology can link closely to global challenges, but archaeologists lack the skills necessary to translate potential into reality. While science provides one way of knowing, other cultures have their own epistemologies that must not be dismissed as unscientific. To do so would perpetuate the colonial matrix of power and privilege those who can afford science at the expense of those who cannot. Indeed, many archaeological associations were formed by those interested in reconstructing the past and not to innovate and create solutions and opportunities based on that past—hence my emphasis on disciplinary reform. The successful promotion by Hollywood of archaeology as a subject of broad interest, through series such as Indiana Jones and Tomb Raider, illustrates what can happen when people with relevant skills (and resources) convert archaeological narratives into tangible outcomes. The digital revolution witnessed an upsurge of computer games inspired by archaeological sites and discoveries. How many archaeologists write storylines for Hollywood, direct films there or develop games such as Minecraft? What if archaeologists were to learn, teach and apply such transdisciplinary skills in gaming, film and media, and among other areas such as food security? The ability to solve problems through such hard and soft skills provides the middle range that is required to ensure that archaeology achieves relevance. Inevitably, the knock-on effects will seep into rigorous transdisciplinary research.

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Society—not other disciplines—needs to see the benefits

Since its professionalisation, the main goal of archaeology has not been to address global challenges. In Africa and other previously colonised regions, the initial goal was to understand the colonised and, later, to satisfy intellectually those involved. The needs and concerns of archaeologists are far removed from matters such as the reduction of inequality, the creation of jobs, improving food security and mitigating climate change—some of the main challenges facing the African continent and the world. In addition to methodological rigour, a multipronged strategy pivoted on a shift in mindset, along with a reform of the academic curriculum, and inter- and transdisciplinary research is required to produce tangible benefits and for archaeology to claim a place at the agenda-setting table. Disciplines achieve influence on policy based on their contributions; climate scientists have done just that, as have economists. Archaeologists have the potential to do so, provided they implement the required disciplinary overhaul. As such, the combination of a more quantitative orientation, stronger collaboration and greater clarity about target audiences comes nowhere near what is required for archaeology to address global challenges in Africa or elsewhere.

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