Reflections on archaeology and the Nigerian public

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Introduction

Archaeology is still a highly misunderstood subject in Nigeria, just as in other parts of West Africa. To the general public, including educated lay persons, archaeology is a government-funded triviality without any relevance to today's challenges and expectations. Government agencies like museums and state cultural centres are mainly responsible for financing archaeological operations in Nigeria. Their target is to conserve and preserve for posterity archaeological sites and monuments that dot the geo-polity. They are also to promote tourism - an industry that is yet to blossom in the country due to poor management policies.

The poor image of archaeology in Nigeria is a reflection of a wide communication gap between the practitioners as well as governments and the general public. In this connection, radio and television programmes popularising archaeology are important so that more people can begin to appreciate its relevance to practical issues (Ogundele 2004; Fagan 2000). Archaeologists in Nigeria and West Africa as a whole need to tell the public about their work in order to remove its current esoteric character.

While a few West African archaeologists are becoming worried about this situation and are advocating for a paradigm shift, many colleagues still believe that popular education in archaeology is unnecessary. They are satisfied with their own personal agendas. But archaeology is a dynamic subject reflecting the ever-changing human challenges and expectations (Fagan *et al.* 1996; Fagan 2000) in time and space. Therefore it is better to conceptualise it in two ways as follows:

1. Professional training - involving surveys and excavations as well as writing specialist reports. This is largely for members of the archaeological fraternity.
2. Popular education - this entails writing jargon-free reports. This enables us to unlock the past so that it can serve as a source of fascination and education for a wider range of people.

The non-teaching of archaeology at the primary and secondary school levels also contributes to its unpopularity. Only three universities in Nigeria, located in Ibadan, Nsukka and Zaria, have archaeology programmes. However, these departments do not have enough modern facilities for both field and laboratory research. More international exchanges are desirable to expand the frontiers of knowledge of staff and students. Nigerian archaeologists should be participating in international archaeological campaigns in countries like Britain, America, Germany, Italy, France and South Africa. Similarly, scholars and students from these countries should be encouraged to visit Nigeria to do joint research.

In addition, the teaching and practice of archaeology must be more socially and globally engaging as opposed to the current rigid mindset with respect to pedagogy. Modern archaeology in West Africa should include on-site re-enactment operations, constructing replicas of archaeological finds on sites. This is one of the pillars of 'modern open museum' enterprise. This can enable a 'dead' archaeological site to come alive - sites like Old Oyo, Birni Garzargamo and Igbo-Ukwu could be transformed into such tourist attractions. But we need great commitment on the part of all the stakeholders. This includes partnerships with museologists, museum technicians and architects among others. This shows the multi-dimensional character of modern archaeology.

Employment opportunities (public)

Job opportunities can come in two forms after receiving the right kind of training and education. Archaeologists can work in museums where they should be carrying out excavations, analysing, interpreting the finds and publishing their results. They can also serve as ethnographers - collecting, preserving and managing aspects of the material culture of each of the ethnic groups in Nigeria.

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Archaeologists can be of great value to state cultural centres. Currently, hardly any of these centres have archaeologists working with them, which means that a lot of archaeological resources cannot be harnessed for tourism purposes, among other things. There are several national parks like Old Oyo and Yankari in Nigeria with a great deal of archaeological resources, but no archaeologists are attached to them.

Oil companies could also provide fruitful employment opportunities for archaeology graduates. Archaeologists have the skills needed for social engineering or environmental impact assessment (cultural) or sustainable development. They can help minimise the impacts of development actions on a given ecosystem and the local people. They also serve as a bridge between oil workers, aggrieved local communities and governments - state and federal. Archaeological E.I.A. surveys prior to and during construction or pipe laying activities is a legal and moral component of sustainable development which Nigeria cannot afford to wish away (Treurnicht 1997). Archaeologists are in the best position to offer technical and social engineering advice on how best to relocate settlement features such as shrines, groves and burials when oil prospecting is about to disturb the equilibrium.

Archaeologists and anthropologists in Nigeria could also work as immigration officers assisting in checking illegal trafficking in antiquities and other valuable cultural objects. Today, illegal trafficking in Nigerian antiquities is booming. Nigeria has lost numerous priceless works of ancient art to international antiquities markets scattered around the developed world (Darling 2000 pers. comm). This negative attitude of many Nigerians to their cultural heritage arises from material poverty - a product of bad or reckless leadership at all levels.

Television authorities need archaeologists and anthropologists as producers or editors to create culture-loaded programmes for the education and enjoyment of viewers. They can collect data on the indigenous knowledge systems e.g. blacksmithing; pottery technology; cloth weaving and dyeing; basketry and medicine. In addition, they could work with newspaper organisations among other print media, focussing on culture-based articles.

Archaeology and anthropology graduates may become secondary school teachers teaching subjects such as geography, history, English, mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics. However, they need to enrol later for a diploma programme in education. This would improve their skills in pedagogics and also turn them into trained teachers. Those with a master's degree can be employed as assistant lecturers in colleges of education, polytechnics or universities. They would then be in a better position to teach 'Foundations of African Civilisations' courses in general studies departments.

Employment opportunities (private)

Art galleries could be established by archaeology/anthropology graduates, including exhibits such as photographs and/or replicas of some spectacular archaeological artefacts, in addition to contemporary artworks. Decorative items such as clay vessels, carved wooden objects and bronzes could be produced in the centres for both local and international tourists. Alternatively, archaeologists/anthropologists could open restaurants serving local food and drinks such as *burukutu* (beer prepared from guinea-corn or millets) and palmwine (*emu* among the Yoruba of south-west Nigeria) at cheap prices. Apart from the above, organising tours for primary, secondary and tertiary students is a potentially vibrant job opportunity. This is a virgin area for archaeology/anthropology graduates in Nigeria to begin to explore.

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