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One Size Does Not Fit All: Theory and Practice of Decolonizing Archaeology in Africa

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Despite claims to data-driven, objective, scientific approaches, archaeology is unavoidably political and does not exist in a social vacuum. The focus on recent time periods and places that are relevant to local living communities, often with a colonial history of displacement, disenfranchisement, and power relations based on systems of oppression, has driven some archaeologists to grapple with the social, ethical, and political implications of their work. This has propelled calls for a critical and activist archaeology and efforts to decolonize the discipline. While critical archaeology reflects upon political and social impacts that research has on descendant populations, decolonizing archaeology intends to recover knowledges and materials made invisible by colonial relations of power, using heritage to promote self-awareness and empowerment through different ways of knowing and subaltern narratives. However, under the cloak of conspicuously political, radical, and critical archaeology, some authors resort to iconoclastic finger-pointing and simple accusatory language, with limited pragmatic results – that is, beyond publications and lectures for academic purposes and like-minded archaeologists – risking the perception that their arguments constitute just another hegemonic epistemology. My contribution to this issue offers a personal reflection on the role and practice of critical, decolonizing archaeology that steers clear of polemic, drawing upon my experience in African contexts, with special emphasis on research conducted in Mozambique and São Tomé e Príncipe. I consider how in post-colonial states, colonial legacies continue reproducing and undermining critical archaeological practices. I also examine how African archaeology's current paradigm shifts aim to decolonize traditional frameworks by bringing decision-making back into the community by highlighting local ontologies and concepts, rather than focusing purely on more conspicuous politicized and confrontational discussions anchored in yet other Western paradigms. A culturally informed, nuanced, and context-specific approach that draws upon good archaeological practice, explores complexities, and allows for multiple ways of knowing and versions of the past is certainly subtle and often slow to achieve, but demonstrates great potential for social intervention (as manifested in Zimbabwean and South African projects, for example; Chirikure et al. 2010; Chirikure et al. 2015; Pikirayi and Schmidt 2016; Manyanga and Chirikure 2017).

My observations from archaeological work in Africa reflect on the dilemma(s) faced by scholars working in foreign countries, especially in countries that were colonized spaces and which in addition to inequalities brought in from outside are also burdened by internal colonial structures and institutional dimensions of power. Such complex issues can be explored through engagement with a decolonized critical archaeology that transcends elementary dichotomies such as oppressors/oppressed or colonial agents/colonized victims but is aware of complex local power dynamics. In archaeological practice, we have to be mindful of the excesses of bombastic, but unproductive political discourse, the limitations and local conditions of knowledge production, and the proliferation of competing alternate pasts. A more inclusive and democratic African critical archaeology that aims to put decision-making back into the community needs to take into consideration the diversity of contexts (Pikirayi 2015: 532–533). It requires theoretical flexibility and openness to explanations that are germane to a unique cultural and historical moment, without neglecting the fact that new interpretations must be in dialogue with good archaeological practice, centered on collecting reliable information in places that have been at the periphery of research. The question, then, is how to conduct nuanced archaeology that is decolonized, action-based, and critical, but also faithful to the archaeological record, respectful and meaningful to diverse stakeholders, including erased populations of the past, local communities in the present, and archaeologists and heritage specialists.

Problematizing a Decolonized Activist Archaeology

In his advocacy of archaeology as social activism, Christopher Barton rightly acknowledges that archaeology does not need to take the form of overtly radical social activism to function as political action (Barton 2021: 4). That is, an action-oriented archaeology can be low-key and still promote change that matters. Each case is unique, and we need to be aware that sweeping, overtly uncompromising rhetoric that is intrinsically political may not necessarily overcome the long-lasting inequalities that it seeks to address. Instead, it may create other disparities and even put those it intends to defend in harm's way. Peter Schmidt (2009, 2010) and Karega-Munene (Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010), among others, report on how being associated with practices and discourses that challenge or oppose state-sanctioned narratives can be dangerous for archaeologists (both African and foreign) and for their local collaborators. Many of us have experienced or know someone who has experienced encounters with authoritarian state representatives and institutional gatekeepers because they/we challenged established paradigms, supported alternative narratives and subaltern communities, or were at odds with systems of patronage and corruption. One possible result is silencing, which can take the form of explicit harassment, denial of research permits and access to funding, and blocked professional advancement (Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010). The case of Eritrea detailed by Schmidt (2009, 2010) is only one among many examples that expose power relations in the postcolony that directly affect researchers, preventing ethical, socially responsible archaeology as well as putting at risk work, publication, and livelihoods (Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010). It is also possible that an archaeologist's notion of empowerment through archaeological narrative is not shared by local stakeholders. A rift between (critical) theory and accepted practices can emerge when archaeology projects with a social and political dimension take place among communities that may not acknowledge the importance of a site, may not have a direct connection with it, and may have other, more immediate concerns that supersede preserving heritage monuments. Furthermore, archaeologists supporting a critical, activist, inclusive, and decolonizing approach often must confront local conservative academic and institutional elites trained in traditional Western systems of value and approaches to archaeology, history, and heritage and who dismiss the perspectives of local communities (Pwiti and Ndoro 1999; Ndlovu-Gatscheni 2013; King 2019). In reality, these elites reproduce colonial practices in the post-independence era that privilege object-centered archaeology, scholarly scientific discourse, and employ outdated legislation upholding ostensible international standards of preservation that exclude insights from descendant populations, particularly those that counter official narratives (Rowlands 2009; Cruz 2022a).

But recently, despite limitations, risks, and opposition, archaeology in Africa has seen a proliferation of works that aim to decolonize the practice, actively promoting paradigm shifts and changes to institutions that preserve, archive, and present cultural heritage (e.g., Chirikure et al. 2010; Chirikure 2021; Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010; Pikirayi 2015; Manyanga and Chirikure 2017). This decolonized and informed critical archaeology has prompted key transformations that go beyond academic and institutional marginalization to scrutinize mainstream methodologies, theories, and entrenched practices. Such efforts call for an ethically committed archaeology that positively affects communities and engages them in telling the story of their past in a way that is creative and culturally appropriate. While overturning hegemonic paradigms, the result is a more democratic archaeology that puts people (both past and present) at the center, recapturing excluded and ignored histories. The centrality of community participation brings to the fore local ontologies and diverse engagements with material culture, privileging the local rather than the national or global. However, this is not without problems, clashes, and contradictions.

A Personal Perspective

My thinking on an action-based archaeology is informed by my experience conducting research in various African countries. I discuss two cases that are particularly noteworthy in terms of their relevance to this issue of *Forum Kritische Archäologie*. In Southern Mozambique, a project that I carried out drew into sharp relief the conflict between local, non-official narratives and state-dominated authorized metanarratives, grounded in long-held, Western-dominated views of what constitutes heritage and who has precedence in its preservation (Cruz 2014, 2022a; and Smith 2006 for a discussion of authorized heritage discourse). This case highlights how local concepts and ontologies are marginalized by institutional knowledge production that centers in intellectual elites' hierarchical structure and their understanding of the past. The second example centers on my current project in São Tomé e Príncipe, one of the few countries in the world that has not yet been the subject of archaeological research.

This case study emphasizes the need to negotiate different views pertaining to community participation and the possibilities offered by critical archaeology. However, the São Tomé project also highlights the laborious process of making local partners aware of the fundamental role of non-Western ontologies and inclusion of communities, their values, and goals without reenacting previous colonialisms. In reflecting on these two different cases, I defend a situated and context-specific practice that eschews rhetorical considerations divorced from the concrete reality of the regions and communities among whom the projects take place. This is not to say that we should dismiss theoretical discussions and practices anchored in political, critical debates (and, just as important, we should not reject robust, empirical data that contribute new evidence to the knowledge of subaltern populations). Instead, I argue that we should resist (generic) categorical radicalisms that may be appropriate in contexts where strong political and cultural engagement exists and where indigenous archaeologies are well established, but which may sound hollow and inappropriate in other settings. As Claire Smith (2012) notes, what seems easy in one part of the world can be difficult in another, and we have to be aware of such differences.

My research in southern Mozambique was limited because the archaeological sites identified during survey revealed themselves to be sacred for local communities, and access to them was restricted. Elders entrusted with the sites' protection, rituals, and ancestral memories controlled visits and objected to the use of prescribed archaeological methods, namely artifact collection, because that would disturb the ancestors. These limitations prompted a more imaginative project emphasizing oral traditions, local narratives of resistance, and elements of nature in an interplay of archaeology, landscape studies, and related disciplines (Cruz 2014, 2022a), which foregrounded the conflict between hegemonic, state-dominated, heroic narratives and a local understanding of the past. Practitioners at Mozambican heritage and academic institutions declared that despite the wishes of local elders that the sites not be disturbed, I could do the work that I had originally envisioned because the research permit granted by a national institution validated archaeological survey and excavation. While the authorized heritage discourse for the region focused on sites related to the liberation struggle and classified as of national interest (Jopela 2017; Cruz 2022a), the way in which heritage conservation was actualized via the actions of official institutions was premised on Western concepts, with little local engagement. It thus precluded alternative constructions of the past that were not aligned with national narratives. In such a context, multifaceted questions surround the responsibilities borne by a western archaeologist whose research in an African nation-state can alternatively be viewed as promoting empowerment by raising up local perspectives or subverting established postcolonial narratives of legitimacy based on symbols of the nation as well as political and elite social hierarchies. The challenge, in such instances, is to decolonize archaeology without replicating colonial practices. An abstract intellectual critique provides little guidance when navigating the power structure and web of social groups with interests in the results of archaeological research. There are implications of aligning with different groups for the production of knowledge and possible negative consequences for the self and collaborators that can result from challenging the official establishment. I chose to respect the local wishes and not trespass on ancestral sites, and instead I collected local counter-narratives focused on an archaeology of the recent past and local ontologies of space and time. However, my choice had repercussions for my access to the official establishment.

The second example and associated reflection pertains to an emerging project on the island of São Tomé, designed in collaboration with colleagues from the University of São Tomé and the Ministry of Culture's Heritage Office. The project was born from an old interest in the origins of the plantation system and the Atlantic world, in which São Tomé played a fundamental role (Cruz 2022b). It centers on Praia Melão, a sixteenth-century sugar mill and estate house site located on privately owned land in a small village outside the capital. The absence of archaeology and heritage specialists in São Tomé prompted extensive discussions aimed to set up the project as a means for capacity building. My colleagues – full partners since the project's inception – have a background in contemporary history and a deep interest in the preservation of the country's heritage that is greatly hindered by the lack of funding and specialized, technical expertise. Nonetheless, our opinions diverge not only regarding concepts of preservation, but particularly on the rightful role and scale of community involvement. For me, community engagement focused on the neighborhood encompassing the site of Praia Melão is fundamental. In contrast, my colleagues defend a heritage-centered approach in which the building takes center stage and needs to be preserved according to international guidelines. The community is not viewed as an equal partner, but a receiver of benefits from forthcoming use of the site for sustainable tourism, deemed a cornerstone of economic development. I am an outsider, while my colleagues are prominent members of the country's establishment, and whereas, from a technical, archaeological perspective, I am the project's lead, in official aspects I must yield to their position. I hope, in time, to be able to persuade my colleagues that different perspectives be included and the community consulted. The

values and understanding that my colleagues have of the construction of knowledge is framed by a purely international heritage agenda as well as by relations of power based on social hierarchy. The fact that the community living near the site is not directly related to it and has very limited knowledge of its history exacerbates the problem. The site itself embodies São Tomé's early colonial history, which is entangled with the formation of the Atlantic world, slavery, and the plantation system. The current community is comprised mostly of more recent arrivals, part of the 19th–20th century forced migration of indentured labor from other Portuguese colonies to São Tomé's cacao plantations and "Angolares" fishermen who migrated from the south of the island and who distinguish themselves by an identity that differs from both older populations and recent arrivals. Interestingly, today's *Angolares* possibly descend from maroon communities who maintained independence from the plantation system by living in less-accessible mountainous areas from where they challenged the colonial authority, launched slave rebellions, and engaged in other forms of resistance. Community participation in the project is, thus, essential to bring yet a different narrative and the perspective of a community that has been marginalized by colonial and post-colonial powers. Questions pertaining to the everyday lives of enslaved people and other poorly documented groups, which have been erased from more traditional history, are at the core of the project, and as such, the present community can contribute with historical memory of inequality and oppression in a more recent plantation context and with their own narratives of resistance. My colleagues wholly embrace a perspective that recaptures past, excluded populations and ignored histories, but at the same time defend national values and goals that are more exclusionary and ignore a more democratic interpretation of the past, centered in the interests of the local community.

Reconciling various demands and promoting productive interaction with multiple stakeholders is a challenging task that is made only more difficult by incendiary, uncompromising, righteous theoretical discourse that takes place at the expense of conciliatory, nuanced, and informed inquiries. Commitment to meaningful research cannot preclude the use of robust data and methodologies to concentrate entirely on radical, iconoclastic, dissent-based archaeology or give uncritical precedence to local narratives. Rather, it requires broader, multidisciplinary approaches, of which a critical decolonized archaeology and community engagement are two facets. Only a nuanced, but sound archaeological practice can shed light on aspects of the past and subaltern populations that have been omitted and marginalized by authorized narratives – whether colonial or postcolonial – and offer the potential to truly transform the discipline. This is the case for the enslaved populations that toiled in the sugar mill of Praia Melão, for whom there is no historical record and our knowledge is limited to anecdotal information and snippets in documents. For example, we know that at times the estate had 200 slaves and that in the 19th century the rent paid for the property was significantly reduced because 13 slaves had run away. Little else can be gleaned from the historical record about enslaved persons. Where did they live, how did they resist the structures of power, how was their everyday life? Only archaeology can produce this knowledge, which can help decolonize historic narratives and link past and present populations.

Reflections on Theoretical Discourse from an Africanist Viewpoint

Archaeology in Africa is currently experiencing a profound paradigm shift, and decolonizing theory and practice is pivotal for its future. Such efforts arise mainly from within Africa itself (see Pikirayi 2015; Manyanga and Chirikure 2017; Chirikure 2020; Machiridza and Musindo 2023). This new Africanist archaeology contrasts considerably with Western research that privileges data-driven and scientific methodologies, often alienating local contemporary populations. African-centered paradigms are a call for direct action, stress the centrality of community participation, emphasize the diversity of engagements with material culture and the multiplicity of narratives, local ontologies, and pasts that are locally relevant (e.g., Fontein 2006; Pikirayi and Schmidt 2016; Chirikure 2021). A shift towards communities' needs and parameters is not without problems, and it is a long-term project, frequently contingent upon slow changes. Post-independence national heritage institutions and practitioners consistently reproduce colonial structures and power imbalances (Rowlands 2009; Karega-Munene and Schmidt 2010), at the expense of local communities' interests and values. The question thus becomes how to subvert these relations of power without engaging in new intellectual colonialism, especially when researchers advocating for critical decolonizing practices come from the outside and are associated with well-funded institutions located in the global north. The paradox of African archaeology is that colonial power dynamics are often reproduced by national, post-independence elites, as illustrated by the examples above. Class, social standing, and academic

affiliation can easily overpower the best-laid plans of decolonizing archaeology, but to not take into account local realities and simply attempt to transpose Euro-American epistemologies onto African contexts would be inappropriate and nothing more than a new hegemonic project. The answer may be that an action-driven, critical, and decolonizing archaeology does not need to be explicitly confrontational and iconoclastic. It can be engaged at once with archaeological evidence and local interpretations to create different types of knowledge about erased peoples from the past and promote counter-narratives upheld by present marginalized communities. I propose pursuing an archaeology that is at once grounded in rigorous methods but understands contemporary concerns and promotes change – one that modestly seeks to recapture excluded pasts through collaboration with those connected to it rather than merely heralding a radical rhetoric for ivory tower audiences.

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