

THEORY IN AFRICA, AFRICA IN THEORY

Locating meaning in archaeology

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AFRICAN MODELS IN GLOBAL HISTORIES

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Introduction

Over the course of 2009, I completed a series of lectures on the archaeology of state formation for a company that markets commercial versions of university courses on DVD to interested members of the public in the United States (MacEachern 2010). As might be expected, from the beginning this involved extensive conversations on the material that might or might not be included in this lecture series, as well as marketing surveys by the company in question about potential buyers' interests. For the most part, these discussions were straightforward: members of the public wanted to hear about the well-known civilizations of the Mediterranean Basin and the Near East, and were also open to lectures about regions that they were less familiar with but that they also associated with ancient civilizations – China, Mesoamerica and the Andes and so on. The topics that people wanted to hear about broadly paralleled the topics that I present in the college courses I teach, which was heartening.

The only two segments of the course that provoked any serious discussion were an introductory set of lectures on archaeological theorizing about state formation, and a set of lectures on sub-Saharan Africa. Both the marketing professionals involved in conducting these surveys and the members of the public that they surveyed were surprised and a bit sceptical to hear that archaeology had any theory associated with it, and also that sub-Saharan Africa was relevant to archaeological understandings of the origins of states. In the end, both segments were incorporated into the course (although online reviews indicate that many purchasers of the series still don't believe that theory has any place in archaeology). My experiences with this lecture series underlined for me the paradoxical role that Africa occupies in modern archaeology – a continent central to some areas of our discipline, but fairly inconsequential in others, including the study of state formation. Moreover, this seems to be the case not merely for the general public, but also for professionals,

given the ways in which Africa appears or is obscured in the academic literature. In this chapter, I will briefly consider where Africa can be located in global human histories and especially archaeologies, and will argue that this intellectual positioning of Africa may stem at least in part from continuing Western assumptions about the passage of time – or its lack – in African societies.

Africa in global archaeology

Today, work in sub-Saharan Africa, and the results and theories associated with that work, plays a significant role within certain areas of archaeology and related disciplines within the anglophone world,¹ but is far less important within others. Research on the continent is central to palaeoanthropological understanding of hominin origins and human evolution and related fields, and to ethnoarchaeology and material culture studies, and such research in both fields is recognized to be of significance to the discipline more generally. At the same time, studies of agricultural development, sociopolitical complexity and state formation in sub-Saharan Africa play a relatively marginal role in global debates on these latter topics.

To a great degree, the reasons for Africa's centrality to palaeoanthropology and archaeological studies of hominin evolution are obvious. Given the initial evolution and diversification of hominins on the continent and the subsequent evolution and proliferation of modern humans there, it is clear that studies of these processes in Africa will be important to palaeoanthropology; that is where the sites and many of the behavioural and ecological analogues are. Africa also remains central to theories concerning human behavioural and cultural evolution. Although the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA) beloved of evolutionary psychology is supposed to be 'not a place or time' (Cosmides and Tooby 1997), it is in fact in most cases held to be an amalgamation of human experiences and evolutionary responses in Pleistocene Africa (e.g. Cosmides and Tooby 1987; Barkow et al. 1992; Wilson 1992: 350; Charlton 1997; Mazur 2002; but see also Foley 1995). In part, this is because fieldwork to test models in evolutionary psychology so frequently takes place in Africa, especially with recent forager populations like the Hadza and various San-speaking and Pygmy groups. In both media representations and university textbooks, the initial movement of modern humans out of Africa marks the inflection point at which the continent vanishes from accounts of human cultural evolution (see below), although debates through the last decade about the contentious concept of behavioural modernity have to a significant degree involved African cases (Brooks and McBrearty 2000; d'Errico et al. 2005; Zilhão 2007; Nowell 2010).

In addition to evolutionary psychology, those domains of archaeological and related research that focus on present-day populations are similarly preoccupied with sub-Saharan Africa. The disproportionate amount of ethnoarchaeological research taking place there was roughly quantified in David and Kramer's (2001: 14–31) *Ethnoarchaeology in Action*, and is still evident in the Anthropology Plus database more than a decade later. This dominance of the continent in ethnoarchaeology seems rather harder to account for than Africa's central place in palaeoanthropology,

especially given that it is not accompanied by a similar intensity of archaeological research on prehistoric African communities, where historical connections between present and past might be of particular interest. There need be no necessary historical or cultural relationship between archaeological cases and sources of ethnoarchaeological analogies, but it is difficult to avoid the impression that Africa's importance in ethnoarchaeological research persists because 'that continent continues to be perceived [by archaeologists] as having the most peoples practicing "traditional" lifestyles, i.e. lives less obviously affected by industrialization and globalization' (David and Kramer 2001: 24). This assumption that Africa is the home of 'traditional' lifeways confuses material impoverishment, brought on in part by profound but asymmetrical participation in the structures of a capitalist and globalizing world-system, for isolation from that world-system, and ignores the complex histories of engagement between African communities and the West over many centuries (e.g. Stahl 1993).

In other areas of archaeology, Africa plays a substantially less important role. African cases play no significant role in synthetic treatments of the origins of agriculture (see, for example, Bellwood 2005, where the importance of African agriculture is generally minimized). It is notable that, in a recent issue of *Current Anthropology* largely devoted to 'Rethinking the origins of agriculture' (Cohen 2009), the only significant references to Africa were, first, a paper that treated modern African farmers as analogues for early farmers in evaluations of fitness (Lambert 2009) and, second, a comment on ethnobiology among modern southwest Ethiopian populations (Hildebrand 2009). This seems curious; one would expect that phenomena like the long-standing and quite distinctive association of animal domestication and harvesting of wild cereals during the early-/mid-Holocene (Neumann 2003; Marshall and Hildebrand 2002), the question of domestication in agricultural 'non-centres' (Harlan 1971; cf. Fuller et al. 2011) or the processes through which plant and animal domesticates were moved between continents in prehistoric times (see for example Kimber 2000; Perrier et al. 2011) would be of some wider interest, even if the tremendous diversity of indigenous African agricultural systems was not. That does not appear to be the case, and Africa remains entirely marginal to global treatments of the issue of agricultural origins and development.

More strikingly, sub-Saharan African cases are also more or less marginalized in archaeological theorizing about sociopolitical evolution on a global scale (see, for example, Renfrew and Cherry 1986; Earle 1987; Johnson and Earle 2000; Chapman 2003; Haas 2006; Smith 2012; but see Trigger 1998). When African cases are mentioned in such texts, they typically provide examples of comparatively small-scale societies, organized as 'tribes', 'chiefdoms' or 'intermediate societies' (depending upon the terminology in use), and providing models for the early stages of the long rise toward the state in other areas of the world. In large part, this is due to an assumption held until quite recently, that states in Africa beyond the Nile Valley were late and derivative, with antecedents that were also comparatively uninteresting to archaeologists interested in state formation processes. In addition, there has been a tendency to straitjacket African cases into evolutionary typologies developed

in other areas of the world but frequently assumed to be universal (Kopytoff 1987; David 1996; S. K. McIntosh 1999a; Stahl 2004; MacEachern 2005a). Even quite recent research on urbanism, political complexity and state formation in Africa (Kusimba 1999; R. J. McIntosh 1999; S. K. McIntosh 1999b; Pikirayi 2000; Edwards 2004; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2004; Bedaux et al. 2005), undertaken well after the identification of the indigenous roots of sociopolitical complexity in West, East and southern Africa, has not been much reflected in writings about such complexity on a global scale. Further attention to these questions would presumably involve not only the search for indigenous examples of state-level societies on the African continent, but also investigation of the processes through which such states developed: we can no longer assume that Hawaiian or Mesoamerican models can be applied wholesale to Africa.

One might argue that research in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali, especially in and around Jenné-jeno (S. K. McIntosh 1995; R. J. McIntosh 2005), disproves this assertion, as it has been noted in a variety of comparative studies of sociopolitical evolution and state formation (e.g. Chapman 2003; Smith 2012). This attention to the Inland Niger Delta exists to a great degree because of claims that heterarchical sociopolitical structures played a dominant role in the developmental trajectory at Jenné-jeno and indeed throughout the Inland Niger Delta (S. K. McIntosh 1999c, 1999d; R. J. McIntosh 2008: 37). Given the recent popularity of heterarchy as an alternative to hierarchical models of social organization in complex political systems, such attention is perhaps warranted. At the same time, some caveats should be noted: (1) the evidence for heterarchical social structures, organized to a significant degree via caste specializations, at Jenné-jeno is perhaps more equivocal than sometimes assumed (MacEachern 2005b); (2) there also seems to be a good deal of evidence for more 'traditional' sociopolitical hierarchy in and around the Inland Niger Delta during the late first millennium AD, particularly in funeral monuments (Desplagnes 1951; McIntosh and McIntosh 1986); and (3) there is a good deal to African prehistory and precolonial African states apart from the Jenné-jeno example, and these might also be of some interest to archaeologists beyond the continent.

In at least one case, the putative existence of heterarchy at Jenné-jeno is generalized to an 'absence of centralized organization and vertical control hierarchies in sub-Saharan Africa' (Chapman 2003: 161, see also p. 95), which makes assumptions about places like Great Zimbabwe, Bornu and Kongo that are hardly supported by the data. It is notable that this emphasis on heterarchy as a sociopolitical form associated with sub-Saharan Africa (and not just with Jenné-jeno) accords fairly closely with earlier assumptions about the continent which, as noted above, held that centralized states there were late and derivative. It will be extremely ironic if an entirely justified emphasis on alternative paths toward sociopolitical complexity in particular parts of Africa (R. J. McIntosh 1999) serves to marginalize the continent in broader archaeological theorizing on that topic.

We might try to explain this absence of African cases in global reconstructions of farming or political evolution by the challenges of working with relatively sparse data, and with varied and multilingual literatures – although that does not seem to

deter theorists from using data derived from other parts of the world. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some larger issues are influencing the informal intellectual divisions of labour that professional archaeologists use to partition their expectations of the ancient world. I argue that this curious intellectual position of Africa in global human histories stems from continuing Western assumptions about the passage of time – and its negation, timelessness – in African societies. It is a commonplace in Africanist research that such assumptions about Africa existed in the past, and so from that point of view this is hardly an innovative statement. However, it appears that in the early twenty-first century those assumptions are being given new life, in part because of the emergence of particular kinds of scientific research on the continent – some with distinct ideological agendas, others without – and in part because of the continuing weakness of institutions in many sub-Saharan states.

Time and timelessness in Western views of Africa

For Westerners, sub-Saharan Africa has long been seen as a continent marooned outside the flow of time and history. The intellectual and popular history of ideas about 'timeless Africa' is fairly well known (Hegel 1956: 93–9; see also Fabian 1983; Mudimbe 1988; Keim 1999; Heggund 2005), but Africa is unfortunately unique among continents in that such assumptions of timelessness and lack of cultural development continue to be widely associated with the continent today. Perhaps even more importantly, these ideas of 'timeless Africa', the 'Dark Continent', continue to be found not only in popular culture and the media, where they are routine and reflexive and appear to have changed very little from a century or more ago (Hagos 2000; cf. Fair 1993; for archaeology, see MacEachern 1996; Hall 2002); they also continue to play an important role in intellectual and political assumptions about the continent as well. Trevor-Roper's (1965) statement that '[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa' could perhaps be ascribed to the attitudes of a conservative academic almost fifty years ago. However, the persistence of these attitudes is reflected in that fact that, in 2007, the President of the French Republic could, in an address in Dakar, express the same sentiments in even more detail, apparently channelling Hegel directly (Sarkozy 2007):²

The tragedy of Africa is that the African has never really entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time marked by the unending repetition of the same epics and the same conversations. In this imaginary world, where everything starts over and over again, there is room neither for human endeavour, nor for the idea of progress. In this universe where nature directs everything, humans escape the historical anguish that torments modern man, but are rendered immobile in an immutable order where everything seems to be written in advance. . . . The challenge of Africa is to enter to a greater degree into history.

Such descriptions of sub-Saharan Africans as inhabitants of a region cut off from processes of human progress that take place in other parts of the world appear in other contexts as well. In some cases, this is the result of interactions between unexceptionable science and popular assumptions. Scientists are not entirely to blame for the frequently expressed media assumption that African history south of the Sahara must only involve early periods of human evolution, that our most ancient ancestors may have come from that continent but that nothing ever really happened there afterwards. However, interpretations of research results, especially in genetics, sometimes seem to reinforce such assumptions.

Recent African foraging groups, in particular, continue to be seen as people that time forgot, and since they are some of the widely known African societies in the West, such stereotypes are important. Thus, for example, the claim that genetics proves that Biaka Pygmy and San populations are 'the most ancient human populations' (Chen et al. 2000; Wade 2002; see also Wells and Read 2002: 56–59) marries difficulties of interpretation of genetic data with ignorance of the grotesque circumstances in which especially the particular San genetic samples in question were taken. Those circumstances involved both voluntary and involuntary displacement between countries, forced involvement in counterinsurgency operations, war crimes and at least one significant misidentification of ethnicity by genetics researchers³ – a community history of exemplary modernity and tragedy, and certainly not cut off from the flow of time in any way. The controversy over the functioning of the microcephalin and ASPM genes for brain development – where low levels of particular genetic variants in Africa were assumed to be related to a supposed lack of cultural advance on the continent – provides another example of this process at work (Evans et al. 2005; Mekel-Bobrov et al. 2005; see also Balter 2006). Such confluences of Africa's past and present are then refracted into media statements like '[g]enetic analysis finds that modern humans evolved from southern Africa's Bushmen' (Krieger 2011) or 'all modern humans stem from a single group of *Homo sapiens* who emigrated from Africa' (Anonymous 2007; cf. Cochran and Harpending 2009: 243) – statements which are both not only nonsensical in evolutionary terms, but that also have the effect of decisively divorcing Africa and modern Africans from any association with human cultural development.

Beyond such cases of collision between science and the media, however, there remains a significant body of modern scientific literature that continues explicitly to place Africans in a timeless past. Much of this literature is situated in the disciplines of psychology and psychometrics, and in related fields like criminology and economics. Some of this seems to be based in simple ignorance, as, for example, when a prominent psychometric researcher ascribes poor test performance in countries across Africa in part to a persistent (and in his view apparently uniquely African) belief in supernatural forces like witchcraft (Rindermann 2007: 770). However, beliefs about the cognitive inferiority of Africans are more widespread in comparative and evolutionary psychology, to a significant degree because of a set of studies of 'national intelligence' (consolidated IQ test score results from different countries), undertaken over the last decade by Richard Lynn and collaborators

(Lynn and Vanhanen 2002; Lynn 2007, 2008) and which are directly derived from Lynn's earlier writings on racial science and the racial inferiority of Africans (see for example Lynn 1991, 1996). These studies claim that sub-Saharan African populations have, on average, very low intelligence, such that the average intellectual level on the continent would be one of severe cognitive challenge (MacEachern 2006).

The trajectory of research initiatives using these studies on 'national intelligence' has been interesting. Some of this work has involved straightforward applications of medical science and evolutionary psychology that somehow manage to evade or ignore without questioning the issue of whether the continent of Africa is really inhabited by people so much less intelligent than those living in other parts of the world (cf. Eppig et al. 2010; Daniele and Ostuni 2013). Other research works toward more deliberately ideological ends, seeking to prove that Africans are less culturally advanced, more violent and indeed less evolved (in both the evolutionary and the intellectual sense) than are any other human continental populations (Itzkoff 1991; Rushton 2000, 2004a; Kanazawa 2006; Lynn 2007; Templer 2008; Wright 2009; Lynn and Vanhanen 2002). Such work often makes vulgarized appeals to the concept of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, claiming that the evolution of humans in Africa renders modern Africans less fit for life in the modern world – an ironic reversal of early twentieth-century disbelief that our species, *Homo sapiens*, could have originated on a continent as benighted as Africa.

The evidentiary basis of these research programmes is extremely poor (Lieberman 2001; Graves 2002; Peregrine et al. 2003; MacEachern 2006; Dickens et al. 2007; Wicherts et al. 2009), and indeed open to parody (Westling 2011), but a number of these studies have been widely quoted and have proven to be extremely popular in public discourse. The all-purpose accusation of 'political correctness' as a means of deflecting criticism of the research has proven to be very useful in this regard. Closer to archaeology, mass-market books like *The 10,000 Year Explosion* (Cochran and Harpending 2009) assume throughout that Africans (as well as a number of other aboriginal populations) have been left behind culturally and evolutionarily in the course of recent human evolutionary adaptation. Unsurprisingly, both authors are sympathetic to Philippe Rushton and other believers in the evolutionary and cultural inferiority of Africans. It is thus by no means outside the mainstream in some fields of scientific research to claim that Africans are cognitively and/or culturally inferior specimens of humanity not fully evolved from earlier forms or left behind in the course of recent and rapid biological and cultural evolution. Fiscal and political recommendations derived from such conclusions are now being disseminated (Vanhanen 2009) and such solutions may well be congenial to a Western world that finds engagement in Africa beyond the demands of resource extraction both frustrating and unrewarding.

Assumptions about a lack of cultural progress in Africa are not limited to racialized contexts in comparative psychology, however. They are often also evident among scholars writing in non-racializing contexts, but who simply assume that African cultural development in the past lagged behind those in other parts of the

world. Perhaps the best-known case is Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1998), where presumed differences in agricultural development are associated with the geographical orientation of the different continents, with the long east–west reach of Eurasia providing it with an advantage over Africa and the Americas. This is, first, a solution in search of a problem, since Diamond underestimates the diversity and sophistication of indigenous African agricultural systems, and, second, a solution significantly dependent upon the distortions associated with Mercator projections. East–west scales on a Mercator projection increase with increasing latitude, so that the east–west extent of mid-latitude Eurasia is visually exaggerated in comparison with equatorial Africa. In fact, the distance between Dakar and Djibouti is about three-quarters that between Brussels and Shanghai, and it seems unlikely that a 2000 km difference in distance would be enough on its own to change the destiny of continents. Ian Morris (2010: 118–20), an experienced and thoughtful classical archaeologist, takes more or less the same approach in his recent and very popular book *Why the West Rules – For Now*: he assumes that indigenous agriculture was impossible in mid-Holocene Africa and largely ignores the continent in his Old World history thereafter, as if not even its contributions of gold, slaves and other resources were important in the rise of the West.

In a co-authored economics paper entitled 'Was the wealth of nations determined in 1000 BC?', Diego Conin and co-authors (2010) conclude that in the African case neither modern governments, the slave trade nor colonialism are primarily to blame for Africa's modern poverty. Rather, they shift the explanation for that poverty onto a lack of African technology adoption in the distant past, thus providing a broader context for the conclusions of one of the co-authors' (William Easterly 2006) earlier book on the uselessness of aid to Africa. Their conclusions for early time periods (1000 BC and '0 AD') are supported by only very sparse and decontextualized archaeological data, which are themselves extremely sensitive to different research intensities in different areas of the world – thus placing Africa at a distinct disadvantage, given how comparatively little archaeology has taken place there.

Today, Africa and Africans are to a significant degree unique, in that influential understandings of the continent specifically and explicitly collapse the distinction between past and present, not merely in public discourse but in the academy as well. Such models of timelessness, wherever they are found, enforce particular kinds of understandings of human history in Africa. They are, first, evolutionary understandings: in these accounts, African societies continue in 2015 to provide the exemplar for the lower rungs on an evolutionary ladder, as populations that either evolve more slowly than peoples in other parts of the world or that have reached a particular evolutionary stage and failed to progress further. Such understandings also dismiss the possibility of historical genealogies of human action – indeed, of any historical agency at all for Africans in Africa – since the human actions that occur in African societies are either child-like (Rushton 2004b), variably archaic (Cochran and Harpending 2009) or meaninglessly random and repetitive (Sarkozy's 'répétition sans fin des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles'). Such imaginings, both historical

and modern, provide an inescapable political and ideological environment for any consideration of the historical study of African populations, by archaeologists or other researchers.

Thin description

A variety of other factors also generate challenges to historical understandings of the development of African societies comparable to those in other parts of the world. The already-noted rarity of archaeological data from much of the African continent, the origins of which are well known and involve the history of research in Africa (see, for example, Robertshaw 1990a, 1990b), renders much of Africanist archaeological interpretation quite 'thin' in the Geertzian (Geertz 1973) sense, comparatively deprived of conceptual linkages between datasets that might be used to (in Geertz's Gilbert Ryle example) separate 'tics' from 'winks'. Such linkages are certainly not absent, and archaeologists generate sophisticated interpretations from data all over the continent. However, in many areas, those interpretations exist in relative isolation from one another, and so are somewhat less likely to encounter external data that might afford different viewpoints and/or enrich contexts of explanation than might be the case in other parts of the world. This leads both to borrowing of data and interpretations from other historically oriented disciplines and a resulting anxiety about the applicability and relevance of such external sources of information (see for example Vansina 1995; Robertshaw 1999; MacEachern 2000). It is probably also in part responsible for the continuing influence of cultural-evolutionary models on the continent, as these provide a priori interpretive structures for the arrangement and understanding of sparse data (Stahl 1999, 2005; David and Sterner 1999).

Problems of 'thin description' are not unique to Africanist archaeology: indeed, they may be the rule rather than the exception in the discipline. On a continental scale these challenges are especially great in Africa, however, given the paucity of datasets already mentioned. The ability to integrate timescales in human history in a somewhat realistic manner – to reconcile the abstractions of long-term Big History and the hurly-burly of microhistory – relies upon relatively rich and at least somewhat compatible data-sources for these different timescales, or else researchers may merely be bouncing incompatible constructions off one another. The seminal research undertaken by *Annales* historians took place in southern Europe and the Mediterranean, areas where substantial historical documentation, including some quantitative data, relevant to environmental, socio-economic and sociopolitical processes were actually available. That documentation made possible Braudel's (1972) magisterial *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, and it is sobering to consider how much more data were available to Braudel in the late 1940s than would be the case in equivalent historical research in Africa today. Many of the archaeological attempts to use *Annales* perspectives on the *longue durée* are similarly based on European examples, or on cases with comparably detailed archaeological and historical records (compare the articles in Bintliff 1991). If some

'thickness' of archaeological and related data does not exist, how should a project of knitting together research on different timescales commence?

One persistent danger is that we begin to look at (pre)history through the lens of those cases where data are especially abundant and detailed. Le Roy Ladurie's (1982) Montaignou is perhaps the single best-known research site in Annales scholarship, but the circumstances in which data on social behaviours and relations were preserved for that village – inquisition records of interviews with accused Cathars, presented in a section called 'Archéologie du Montaignou' – might raise questions about its applicability to other, contemporary communities in the Pays d'Oc and beyond. In the Montaignou case, there are significant datasets against which Le Roy Ladurie's reconstructions can be evaluated. In archaeological cases where such datasets do not exist, do we end up expanding the conceptual influence of such reconstructions almost indefinitely? Should, for example, the Inland Niger Delta case stand in as the exemplar for processes of state formation across Africa, as noted above and as Chapman (2003) assumes? This can often result in a collapsing of cultural variability over large regions, in an attempt to use ethnographic data from one area in archaeological interpretations in another, with a consequent spatial homogenization of such interpretation – resulting in an archaeology of the *longue portée*, rather more than of the *longue durée*.

The problem of incommensurable datasets from different historical scales plays out in historical questions across the continent. In West Africa today, the vast majority of potters are women, and (as in many areas of the world) the archaeology of agriculturalists over the last 3000–4000 years at least is dominated by ceramic analysis and reconstructions based on that analysis. If ethnographic parallels hold, as supplementary data suggest they do in many cases, it seems likely women were producing most of this ancient pottery. This suggests that West African archaeology for this period is an archaeology largely of women, their lives, marriages, movements, accommodations and social relations – although this situation is not as widely recognized as it might be. Analysis of this phenomenon requires that we link two very different temporal scales of analysis: an ethnoarchaeological scale where modern ceramic production is understood, with an analytical time span measured in, perhaps, months in the field and the much longer timescales of prehistory itself, where we measure artefact change in centuries. However, evidence on cultural processes occurring at intermediate timescales, on, for example, community dynamics and sociopolitical relations through time, which might be expected to bridge this chronological divide, are derived from historical and ethnohistorical accounts. In West Africa, again as in many other regions, such accounts and the research that they generate are almost entirely preoccupied with the lives and activities of men. This makes it very difficult to produce interpretations of ceramic production on regional, long-term scales that are both realistic and dynamic.

What does archaeology do on a timeless continent?

Archaeological research in Africa is certainly not disseminating assumptions of evolutionary stasis and timelessness among sub-Saharan African populations in the

ideologically loaded manner noted for some of the research agendas in other disciplines, especially psychometrics. On the other hand, it does not seem that the broader discipline of archaeology has done much better than have genetics and palaeoanthropology in placing more realistic and detailed views of Africa before the general public, or for that matter incorporating them into their own research paradigms. Students reading undergraduate textbooks of world prehistory would (and do) come away with a view of African history not greatly different from that promulgated in those latter disciplines (Wenke 1999; Fagan 2003; Price 2005; Feder 2007; Scarre 2009). Such textbooks are in fact highly standardized cultural productions, with a relatively invariant format. They devote very little attention to events in Africa between the departure of anatomically modern humans from the continent and the arrival of Europeans in the second millennium AD, when they cover such periods at all. The dominant narrative in such texts involves a successful conquest of the rest of the globe, first in the Old World and then in the New, by anatomically modern humans who have had the wherewithal to expand away from Africa, and then the invention of agriculture and the state in the Near East, Mesopotamia, the Far East and successively in other areas of the world. African societies during the late Pleistocene and Holocene are treated essentially as afterthoughts, with perhaps references to Jenné-jeno and/or Great Zimbabwe, even though, as noted above, similar kinds of cultural processes took place south of the Sahara as well. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that many archaeologists later in their careers fail to engage with African comparative cases: where would they originally have learned anything about the place?

More broadly, what does a discipline preoccupied with time and its passage do on a timeless continent? It is notable that the areas of archaeology in which sub-Saharan African data and models are influential largely evade questions of time, and of human activity across comprehensible timescales. Palaeoanthropology almost inevitably deals with time spans that are entirely divorced from quotidian human experience, rendering any understandings of hominin agency in hominin evolution somewhat formal and idealized (even without considering the complicated question of what hominin agency actually might mean). Evolutionary anthropology treats timescales in roughly the same way, although in a rather less systematic manner, with its periodic appeal to the *deus ex paradiso* of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness. Ethnoarchaeology inevitably collapses time distinctions between modern and ancient communities to varying degrees, depending as it does upon some overarching assumption that present-day populations are doing things in comparable ways to people in the (sometimes very distant) past. If this assumption is unnecessary, one is probably doing experimental archaeology, and this assumption may in fact be what ultimately distinguishes one of these avenues of research from the other. For practitioners of all of these disciplines, timelessness is to some degree a necessary aspect of research, and the attractions of work on a timeless continent are evident, especially when that continent is the birthplace of hominins and of modern humans.

On topics where human agency across comprehensible timescales may be more relevant, research in sub-Saharan Africa is accorded correspondingly less importance.

Thus, studies of agricultural development, sociopolitical complexity and state formation deal with the dynamics of cultural change over historical timescales, very often of centuries. Such timescales, which can encompass both medium-term socio-economic and the short-term sociopolitical cycles of Braudel's *conjunctures* and *histoire événementielle*, may at least potentially be grasped according to the logics of conventional historical analysis, through comparison with details of oral or written traditions, for example, and articulate much more directly with human experience. They are thus more difficult to reconcile with assumptions of timelessness and their institutional residues. Archaeologists are not immune to the cultural milieu in which their scholarship has developed: absent some detailed knowledge of the particularities of historical process in past African communities, widespread Western assumptions of timelessness will probably dominate their expectations of the past on the continent, as is the case in other disciplines. Under such circumstances, it is not especially surprising that African cases play only a minor role in global models of cultural process.

This problem is sufficiently vexing today, but it could become worse in the future. Africanist archaeologists have perhaps been too complacent about Western portrayals of the places where we work and the communities that we work within. There exists throughout many of our own synthetic works (e.g. the articles in Robertshaw 1990a and Shaw et al. 1993) an assumption that the Western world is (finally) in the process of transcending the racialized assumptions about Africa that dominated the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, and moving toward a more realistic understanding of the continent's history and potential that disregards irrelevant considerations of biological variability. It makes a certain rhetorical sense that such synthetic works will place racialized assumptions in the recent past, while looking toward a more hopeful future. Almost no one expects (or at least says openly) that Western perceptions of Africa in the future might be more centred on biology and biological/cultural difference than is the case now or than has been the case in the recent past. Nor does anyone expect that sub-Saharan Africa is more likely to be portrayed as primitive, timeless and culturally archaic in the future, to a greater degree than was the case perhaps thirty years ago (see above).

However, it seems at least possible that that will be the case. Western governments and commentators are increasingly frustrated with the perceived failure of 'underdeveloped' countries to fulfil postcolonial expectations of good governance and development, and with the expenditure of billions of dollars in various forms of foreign aid to little obvious result. There is a cottage industry of books dedicated to this topic, and the vast majority of this literature is directed toward the analysis of conditions in African countries. This literature frequently ascribes modern circumstances in Africa to the persistence of ancient customs and institutions, holdovers from a precolonial past (see for example Calderisi 2006). Timeless Africa – and its corollary, the idea of the 'lucky latitudes' of Eurasia within which civilization starts (Morris 2010) – provides a powerful diagnosis for modern Africa's ills, one that holds the West more or less blameless in those ills.

At the same time, genetic and evolutionary-biological understandings of human behaviour and potentials have over the last two decades become extremely influential

in shaping media and popular understandings of the human past, more so than the social sciences. These disciplines provide powerful origin stories for Western societies hungering for stability and rootedness, in a modern condition where those characteristics are in short supply. They generate immediately persuasive connections between past and present through metaphors of biological continuity, even when in strict biological terms those connections may not be particularly informative (cf. Shriver and Kittles 2004, on lineage-based personalized genetic genealogies). Those metaphors are not available to archaeologists, and still less to the ethnographers who work among modern African populations. Such stories of human biological origins need a point of departure, from which the narrative can begin; if that point of departure is in Africa, then it appears that those modern African communities mined for data on human origins and evolutionary development will continue to be located in the very distant past.

In geopolitical terms, Africa today occupies a role in the world much more akin to its place in Western worldviews a century ago than the role it played say fifty years ago. It is still widely perceived to be peripheral to global trends, as a place that things happen to and a place where outside forces work. In many ways, it seems that we are moving backward toward a new set of imperial relations on the continent, with American power and its Western and non-Western proxies operating across Africa against competitors both real and imagined, large and small: 'radical Islam', China and so on. The increasing reach and militarization of these operations is quite striking: in the Lake Chad Basin, the growing American involvement in shadowy and ill-defined counterinsurgency efforts directed against claimed al-Qaeda affiliates like Boko Haram seems eerily reminiscent of colonial concerns about Mahdist infiltrators in the same region more than a century ago. In an imperial age, it may be expected that the scientific understandings of peripheral populations will become increasingly imperial as well: generalized, abstracted and to be evaluated in terms of the agendas of the dominant centres (Trigger 1984 is still relevant here). The intersection of these different processes may lead Western viewpoints on the African past over the next decades to look rather more like those of a century ago than of more recent years.

Conclusions

It is possible that more sophisticated and realistic views of the African present and the African past will become prevalent among both researchers in a variety of disciplines and in Western media and the general public. However, that happy state of affairs should probably not be taken for granted, as it so often is in progressivist archaeological accounts of the development of the discipline in Africa. Africanist archaeologists must become more proactive in situating the work that we do within a number of wider milieux. This must happen first within archaeology itself, where we need to inform both incoming undergraduates and professionals theorizing on a global scale about ancient cultural processes on the continent. Second, it needs to take place in conjunction with disciplines that also study the African past like

human genetics, where archaeology is too often treated as a technical adjunct, supplying chronological frameworks but with minimal value in interpretation. Third, and most difficult, involves continuing attempts to place realistic archaeological reconstructions of the African past before the general public, in order to supplant the pervasive views of Africa as timeless and archaic that dominate the Western imagination. The goal of 'Locating Theory' in Africa is a valuable and necessary one, but too much emphasis on local knowledge and local models misses the larger interpretive contexts through which we understand the history of all humans. Africanist archaeologists should not ignore the challenge of making African models and African theories central to a global archaeology, and to global knowledge of Africa more generally.

Notes

- 1 Given the diversity of sources of topics covered, this chapter is more or less limited to discussion of the anglophone scientific literature and, to a lesser extent, media. I believe that the broad patterns described also hold for francophone research, albeit with some changes in emphasis (for example, questions of heterarchy have not been as important in recent discussions of African political systems by francophone researchers [Gally 2011: 28]), but the scope of the present chapter is already very large and I did not want to further increase it.
- 2 'Le drame de l'Afrique, c'est que l'homme africain n'est pas assez entré dans l'histoire. Le paysan africain, qui depuis des millénaires, vit avec les saisons, dont l'idéal de vie est d'être en harmonie avec la nature, ne connaît que l'éternel recommencement du temps rythmé par la répétition sans fin des mêmes gestes et des mêmes paroles. Dans cet imaginaire où tout recommence toujours, il n'y a de place ni pour l'aventure humaine, ni pour l'idée de progrès. Dans cet univers où la nature commande tout, l'homme échappe à l'angoisse de l'histoire qui tenaille l'homme moderne mais l'homme reste immobile au milieu d'un ordre immuable ou tout semble être écrit d'avance. . . . Le défi de l'Afrique, c'est d'entrer davantage dans l'histoire'.
- 3 The 'Vasikela Kung' and 'Sekele Kung' comparison groups of Chen et al. (2000) are actually a single group of !Kung-speakers from Angola, sampled once at the SADF Omega Base in Namibia during the independence war there, and later at Schmidtsdrift in South Africa (see also Mitchell 2010).

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