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Editors

James Anquandah Benjamin Kankpeyeng Wazi Apoh

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Chapter 8

Historical Archaeology: Methods, Meanings, and Ambiguities

Christopher R. DeCorse

Origins and Definitions

Historical archaeology—as a field that utilizes documentary sources in addition to the archaeological record—has long been practiced in many world areas, though it has not necessarily been defined as such. Classical Greco-Roman archaeology, Islamic archaeology, Biblical archaeology, Egyptology, Medieval archaeology, Postmedieval archaeology, and Chinese archaeology may all be complemented by the use of documentary source material and so share the same interdisciplinary vantage and methodological challenges as researchers working on European sites and the archaeological record of the last five hundred years (see Andr en 1998). Yet, while sharing methodological concerns, each of these subdisciplines has its own definitional parameters that reflect specific time periods, area foci, and conceptual framing. Hence, while technically ‘historical’ archaeology, they represent their own defined sub-disciplines. Practitioners of classical archaeology and Egyptology, for example, identify themselves as such, and have their own disciplinary histories, journals, and professional meetings.

This review focuses on research that has been specifically identified by its practitioners as ‘historical archaeology’. Historical archaeology emerged as a discrete discipline in the mid-twentieth century, most visibly in the United States. A wide range of perspectives of the new discipline’s parameters were advocated at the birth of the Society for Historical Archaeology, founded in 1967 (see Schuyler 1978 and the special issue of the journal *Historical Archaeology* 27, 1 1993). At the time of its foundation there were perhaps 20 practicing, self identified historical archaeologists in the United States (Cleland 1993:13). In practice, the early years of the discipline were heavily defined by a focus on European colonial sites. Some of the more notable research was undertaken in the context of preservation and restoration work, archaeological data used as an aid in architectural reconstruction (e.g.

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Harrington 1955; Noël Hume 1983:10-11; Orser 2004:30-39). This applied focus remains an important component of some historical archaeological research both in the United States and elsewhere. Archaeology's contribution, therefore, was seen by some as modest: "It isn't earthshaking or such as to transform the whole mode of historical and architectural research. In fact, we may even admit it is a contribution of modest but definitely useful substance" (Cotter 1978:18). However, other early practitioners such as Robert Schuyler (1978:30) underscored historical archaeology's unique vantage as a subdiscipline of anthropology; the field's potential in understanding European expansion and the processes of culture change associated with that expansion.

As will be seen, many of these foci and ambiguities of definition remain with us today. Reviewing historical archaeology, Charles Orser (1996:23-28) placed definitions of the field into three categories: as a study of a time period; as a research method; and as the study of the modern world. Each of these perspectives is valid, each has its own limitations, and aspects of each have been applied to archaeological research in Africa.

Historical Archaeology as a Time Period

The archaeological study of the Historic Period has a long ancestry. Archaeology emerged as a defined discipline during the nineteenth century. Crucial to its emergence as a discipline was the recognition and division of a prehistoric past (e.g. Andrén 1998:1-2). Prior to the nineteenth century, human history was primarily understood through the written record; particularly classical Greek and Roman writings, as well as the *Bible*. Gradually the idea of a prehistoric past accessible through the material record was accepted. If prehistoric archaeology studied this unknown past predating the advent of written records, historical archaeology was the *de facto* archaeology of the period known from documentary sources. In this view, the varied sub-disciplines noted above—Classical Greco-Roman archaeology through Egyptology—are all 'historical' archaeologies. Grappling with this question, Schuyler (1977) suggested that historical archaeology has at least five subdisciplines. While these overlap temporally, each

is defined by a specific time period. 'Classical Archaeology', Schuyler suggested, begins with Minoan Civilization circa 3000 BC and ends with the late Roman Empire circa A.D. 527. 'Medieval archaeology', focusing on the period between A.D. 400-1400, is in turn followed by 'postmedieval archaeology' dealing with the period A.D. 1450 to 1750. 'Historic sites archaeology' concentrates on the period from A.D. 1415 to industrialization, with 'industrial archaeology' beginning with the industrial revolution, circa 1750. The ages of these different periods might vary depending on the presence or absence of documentary sources in specific local contexts. The key point, however, was their differentiation from prehistoric studies.

Schuyler's definitions were pragmatic in attempting to situate the emerging field of historical archaeology within the broader context and temporal frameworks of existing subdisciplines. They were limited in not including archaeologies and historical sources beyond the European world, European industrialization, and European expansion. These categories might, however, have been added to and expanded as needed to incorporate other regional historical archaeologies. However, in practice the margins of historical archaeology had already been drawn much narrower in North America, its practitioners focusing on the archaeological record of the past five hundred years and on European sites (see comment by Schuyler 1978:2).

Historical Archaeology as a Method

As a field that deals with literate cultures, historical archaeology (of whatever ilk) is inherently interdisciplinary: It draws on varied information to fully interpret the past. Historical archaeologists must know the methods of archaeological research, and must also have the historical knowledge and ability to identify the distinctive trade materials recovered (e.g. Cotter 1978:18). Noël Hume (1983:12-13), in particular, was very critical of anthropologically trained prehistoric archaeologists who turned to the archaeology of colonial period sites with little understanding of the trade materials recovered or appreciation of the often nuanced stratigraphy present in sites of the more recent past.

In this perspective, demarcating historical archaeology as a specialized method, or series of techniques, makes a great deal of sense. For the prehistorian, material recovered archaeologically is the primary source of information. Written records often afford information pointedly beyond the reach of the prehistorian. For the historical archaeologist, the past is revealed in an array of tax records, church rolls, court documents, land deeds, and trade manifests, as well as contemporary histories and diaries (e.g. Deetz 1977:7; Beaudry 1988; Orser 2004). The historical archaeologist may know the names of the individuals he/she is studying, their occupations, and may have autobiographical accounts of their lives. The documentary record also allows for much more precise chronological control than is available to the prehistorian. Drawing on recorded patent dates, documentary information on manufacture, and known dates for site occupation historical archaeologists may know the age of their material record within decades, a few years, or even to the day of discard (as in recorded cases of destruction, sinkings, and burials, and dated artifacts). This chronological control allows historical archaeologists to grapple with site chronologies, change through time, and nuances in research questions that are impossible in contexts without written or oral source material.

In North American historical archaeology, the 'historical' component has principally referred to information provided by documentary sources. And research has, therefore, focused on European sites for which these documentary records exist, such as European settlements, outposts, and mission sites directly associated with the European presence. However, the importance of oral data is being increasingly recognized by some researchers, especially with regard to the recovery of information relating to Native American populations with whom the Europeans interacted. For example, in his reconstruction of the California frontier Kent Lightfoot (2005:16-17) underscores the potential use of oral traditions to provide a much needed indigenous perspective of colonial history. Notably, however, archaeological studies of Native American populations not directly in contact with Europeans have often been subsumed under ethnohistory, historical anthropology, colonialism, or even prehistory, rather than 'historical'

archaeology (e.g. Ferris 2009; Lightfoot 2005; Rogers and Wilson 1993).

Historical Archaeology as a Research Question

In contrast to the preceding perspectives, some North American archaeologists have increasingly defined historical archaeology as neither a period or as a methodology, but rather in terms of the research questions asked. This perspective was articulated by James Deetz in his 1977 book *In Small Things Forgotten*. Deetz observed that historical archaeologists study “the cultural remains of literate societies that were capable of recording their own history”, and further noted that “in America, historical archaeologists are concerned with the development of [Euroamerican] culture since the seventeenth century, the way it compares and contrasts with its Old World antecedents, and its impact on the Native American cultural tradition” (Deetz 1977:5). However, Deetz went on to say that: “A popular definition of historical archaeology is *the archaeology of the spread of European culture throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on indigenous peoples* [emphasis in original text]” (Deetz 1977:5; also see Schuyler 1970:84).

A similar perspective of historical archaeology has more recently been articulated by Charles Orser. Orser (1996:2-6) was particularly concerned with the descriptive, atheoretical nature of much of the historical archaeological research undertaken. While he did not feel that the preceding definitions of historical archaeology were wrong, he also felt that to define the field in terms of written records or to relegate it to methodology is a disservice to the discipline (Orser 1996:25). For Orser (1996:26), the means to address this crisis in historical archaeological theory was to provide a clear research focus on the global nature of modern life. More than the archaeology of literate cultures, it should specifically seek to understand colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism, and modernity (Orser 1996:27-28). In Orser’s view these four themes define the field of historical archaeology: “They exist at every site, on every laboratory table, within every map and chart made” (Orser 1996:57). His examination of these questions was linked to an interdisciplinary, mutualist perspective of social networks.

Orser's (1996:27, 2002:xiii) definition of historical archaeology as the archaeology of the literate cultures of modern times has been accepted by many American historical archaeologists and it is the definition given on the website of the Society for Historical Archaeology, which states:

“Historical archaeology is the archaeology of the modern world. Most historical archaeologists focus on the period after the 15th century. Historical archaeology is global in scope and deals with all groups of people, not simply those of European descent. Even though many earlier societies had writing: Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Olmec, and Mayans, specialists in other fields study the archaeological remains of these societies” (Veit 2013).

It is difficult to disagree with the desire to frame archaeological research around important, well articulated research questions. Understanding the impacts and consequences of expanding European capitalism, colonialism, Eurocentrism, and the origins of modernity are clearly important. Indeed, with regard to Africa, as well as much of the world, the intersection of Europe with the non-Western world marked a period of dramatic change. However, this perspective is problematic when considered in wider context than sites associated with European expansion and its impacts. Archaeologists in many parts of the world study the archaeological record of the last 500 years, at times with little or no documentary sources to draw on and with little if any concern for European contact or colonization. If historical archaeology is defined solely by the presence of written sources and the study of colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism and modernity, are all studies that *do not* include these things the foci of prehistory? In this respect, defining historical archaeology as a method is less exciting, but perhaps more pragmatic. Looking at the definition and study of historical archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa affords insight for all practitioners of the archaeological record of the more recent past.

Documents, Oral Histories, and the Material Record in sub-Saharan Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, the term historical archaeology has had very limited use, especially considering the amount of research that has been undertaken on the archaeological record of the past 500 years. It has primarily been used to denote a methodology; referring to contexts where documentary records and oral traditions can be used, as well as the archaeological record (e.g. Behrens and Swanepoel 2008; DeCorse 1996, 1997; DeCorse in Ellison et al 1996; Hall 1997; Horton 1997; Reid and Lane 2004; Schmidt 1978, 1983, 2006). Notably, in contrast to North America, the historical context has often been provided by oral source material, as opposed to written records. Other American definitions of historical archaeology, along with their definitional ambiguities, have also been applied to work in Africa, as well as to research undertaken in other world areas.

One of the challenges researchers face in reconstructing the sub-Saharan African past is the dramatic paucity of documentary source material prior to the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries. The vast majority of the pre-twentieth century written sources that do exist are provided by outsiders. There are examples of indigenous sub-Saharan African writing systems such as the Vai Script in Liberia, Bamum hieroglyphics in Cameroon, and the *Nsibidi* script of Nigeria (Andah, Bodam, and Chubuegbu 1991). To these might be added mnemonic devices or memory clues, such as the *lukasa* or memory boards of the Congo, the brass panels that once adorned the Oba's palace in Benin City, the *adinkra* symbols of the Akan and, at least in some instances, rock art. These systems are, however, very limited in terms of the areas covered, the time depths represented, and the information provided.

Written sources for portions of sub-Saharan Africa begin in the first millennium AD with scattered accounts of the West African Sahel and the east African coast being provided by Arab travelers. These accounts afford the first non-archaeological glimpses of some African cultures and polities. Yet, while tantalizing, these sources are most striking in the limited information they provide. By way of illustration it can be

noted that the majority of pre-fifteenth century Arabic sources for West Africa can be conveniently surveyed in a single volume (Levtzion and Hopkins 1981). Early archaeological work on many of the sites referred to in these sources was simply aimed at verifying the sites' existence (see de Barros 1990:167; Insoll 2003:213-232).

European documentary records begin with the arrival of the Portuguese on the West African coast in the fifteenth century. In some cases, as with the site of Elmina in coastal Ghana, the amount of documentary sources is striking, beginning in the initial decades of contact and increasing in the following centuries (see DeCorse 2001a:2-4, 2008a). Yet even in these instances the documentary accounts are disappointing in terms of the information provided. Europeans were first and foremost concerned with their own affairs. While written records provide trade lists and accounts of the management of the European coastal outposts, they often say frustratingly little about the African peoples with whom the Europeans interacted. For much of the continent, African-European interactions—and European accounts of them—remained almost exclusively confined to the small European coastal enclaves. Until the late nineteenth century, European exploration of much of the West African interior can be conveniently illustrated by a few colored lines on a map.

In light of the limited nature of the documentary record, researchers into the African past have long turned to varied sources of information, integrating oral sources and archaeological data with the written record (Vansina et al 1964; also see Anquandah 1982:14-20, 1985; Agbaje-Williams 1986; DeCorse and Chouin 2003; DeCorse 1996; Feierman 1993; Mauny 1961; Philips 2005; Posnansky 2013; Schmidt 1978, 1983, 1990, 2006). Oral sources are particularly important in providing information, any information, on the pre-twentieth century African past (Andah and Opoku 1979; Miller 1980; Henige 1982; Vansina 1985). These sources are by no means uniform with regard to the type of information provided and, like written records, oral sources are not without their interpretive challenges. Yet, as Schmidt (2009:2) observes, they are crucial, not just in providing information but “in the recovery and use of subaltern histories that challenge and help

to deconstruct colonial narratives about the past, as well as provide truly multivocal views of the past.” Oral source material is a crucial aspect of African studies. Yet, in many instances, archaeology alone provides information for the reconstruction of the relatively recent African past. Implicit in much of this work is the view that history and archaeology are interwoven disciplinary sources, each looking at the reconstruction of the African past, encompassing varied portions of the first and second millennia AD.

Considering the limited information often provided by either documentary sources or oral traditions, the terms ‘Protohistoire’ or ‘Protohistoric’ have sometimes been used to describe the majority of West Africa during the second millennium AD (e.g. Atherton 1972; DeCorse 1980; Mauny 1967; Stahl 1989). Here it is also worth noting that the term ‘pre-Colonial’ is generally used in West Africa to specifically refer to the period prior to the formal partition of Africa into colonial territories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has sometimes caused confusion with researchers in other world areas, particularly North America, where the entirety of the post-European contact period is sometimes referred to as ‘colonial’ (e.g. Lightfoot 2005).

Historical Archaeology in Sub-Saharan Africa

While archaeological research in Africa has long integrated both written and oral sources, the term historical archaeology has had limited use, which is exclusively confined to Anglophone countries and Anglophone researchers. The term was first used in sub-Saharan Africa by James Kirkman in 1957 with regard to the study of sites on the East African coast known through oral narratives written down by Arab chroniclers. Ongoing research on these sites has, however, illustrated the need for an interdisciplinary approach in revealing the history of indigenous populations only ephemerally seen through documentary records written by outsiders. Early cultural reconstructions that drew on Arabic sources viewed Swahili culture primarily as an import, with little input from indigenous peoples. More recent work has revealed the long history of African populations on the coast

and the multicultural nature of Swahili culture (e.g. Allen 1993; Insoll 2003:148-205).

In their 1986 review of “Historical Archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa”, Merrick Posnansky and Christopher DeCorse, also defined the field in terms of presence of written records, particularly European records, and this provided the frame for the material reviewed (also see Posnansky 1984). This perspective is inconsistent with more inclusive definitions that incorporate material primarily known from oral sources, and so this review provides somewhat restricted coverage. For example, while work on the European forts and castles of West Africa was discussed (Posnansky and DeCorse 1986:5-6), research on African settlements and fortified towns directly associated with slave raiding during the Atlantic period and partially known through oral traditions were not considered (e.g. DeCorse 1989, 2012). The scope of the 1986 article notwithstanding, both of the authors realized the desirability of broadening the definition to include sites known through oral sources, something that would incorporate the archaeology of the majority of sites of the last five hundred years (e.g. DeCorse 1996; Posnansky 2001). In fact, Posnansky had used the term historical archaeology in this broader sense beginning in 1959 with reference to his work on the inter-lucustrine kingdoms in Uganda (Posnansky 2013; also see Schmidt 1990).

The importance of oral sources as a defining aspect of historical archaeology has been made most forcefully by Peter Schmidt (1978, 1983, 2006) and is well illustrated by his research in East Africa. His work in northwestern Tanzania utilized oral traditions and ethnographic data to interpret patterns observed archaeologically. While the use of these data afford the greatest insights into the history of the past few centuries, in some instances oral traditions have been associated with archaeological features dating to the first millennium B.C. (Schmidt 1983:68). Similar instances of oral traditions linked to shrines and ritual landscapes millennia old have been noted in other parts of Africa (e.g. Chouin 2002; Insoll, Kankpeyeng, and MacLean 2009). It is this more encompassing definition of historical archaeology that was used in the courses taught by DeCorse in the Department of Archaeology (now the Department of Archaeology and

Heritage Studies) at the University of Ghana, Legon in 1985 and 1986. These were the first courses taught in sub-Saharan Africa specifically labeled 'historical archaeology'.

This holistic concept of historical archaeology—incorporating both written and oral sources—remains the predominate definition of historical archaeology in most of sub-Saharan Africa. Yet here it should again be noted that the majority of the archaeological research that might fall under this rubric has often not been identified by the researchers involved as historical archaeology. The vast majority of work on the archaeological record of the past 500 years has generally been subsumed under ethnoarchaeology, Islamic archaeology, late Iron Age Archaeology, pre-Colonial Archaeology, or simply 'archaeology'. To a large extent this trend continues in most of sub-Saharan African research. Not surprisingly, this has led some researchers to question whether the term historical archaeology is necessary or appropriate in Africa (Connah 2007).

Some researchers have, however, argued for narrower, North American definitions, which define historical archaeology in terms of the research questions asked. Peter Robertshaw draws on this perspective in his review of historical archaeology in Africa. He fittingly observes that "Historical archaeology is, by and large, an American creation that has been exported to Africa" (Robertshaw 2004:376). He further makes the important point that African historical archaeology is more than simply a geographical extension of American historical archaeology; it has evolved independently and affords its own insights for non-Africanists. Noting that historical archaeology, where it has been identified as such, has been imported to Africa in two main areas—West and South Africa—he states: "in West Africa historical archaeology's initial *raison d'être* was the African Diaspora; in South Africa it was the study of colonialism" (Robertshaw 2004:379).

Robertshaw's last statement is correct in some respects, yet misleading in others and requires more examination. The archaeology of the Atlantic period, including European colonial sites, is more developed in southern African than any other portion of the continent. This has produced a distinctive school of research that has afforded unique insight into colonialism and the social history of

colonial populations (e.g. Schrire 1988; Hall 1993). However, it is also true that some of the most engaging research on African-European interactions in southern Africa has not been labeled historical archaeology. As Behrens and Swanepoel (2008:25) observe, “If colonial contact, however broadly defined, delimits historical archaeology then much of Africa’s past is left outside of history (prehistory), or rendered non-historical.” Cases in point are studies of contact period San and Khoi Khoi populations, often poorly viewed in either European documents or African oral traditions. Research on these sites and their interpretation regarding African-European interactions has been the source of vibrant debates regarding the varied coigns of vantage provided by archaeology, ethnography, and the written record (e.g. Schrire 1996). These are significant questions, regardless of whether labeled historical archaeology or not.

More problematic is Robertshaw’s suggestion that the initial *raison d’être* for historical archaeology in West Africa was the African Diaspora. While the study of the African Diaspora has emerged as an important focus of research (see Ogundiran and Falola 2007; DeCorse 2014), its role as the “initial *raison d’être*” for West African historical archaeology, as well as its current role, is limited. Work on the European outposts and forts in coastal Ghana and elsewhere in the decades following World War II can be viewed as the beginnings of historical archaeological research in West Africa (e.g. Posnansky and DeCorse 1986). Many of these outposts played important roles in the Atlantic slave trade. Yet the majority of the research undertaken was not about the African Diaspora, at least not explicitly so. Rather, it was much more about the Europeans and their forts. To an even greater extent, it was about restoration and preservation work undertaken on the structures. Indeed archaeological fieldwork often played a limited or non-existent role in much of this research, in some cases archaeological materials were left unreported or simply cleared away to facilitate mapping and reconstruction. To some extent, work on European sites in Africa can be criticized as particularistic and atheoretical, akin to the criticisms leveled at early work on colonial sites in North America (Holl 2009:140). This research also was not labeled historical archaeology by its practitioners.

The majority of the initial, more substantive archaeological research associated with the European outposts did not directly deal with the European contexts or the African Diaspora, but rather focused on the impacts and transformations in the associated African communities (e.g. DeCorse 2001a; Kelly 1997, 2001). In a similar vein, the contributors to the 2001 edited volume *West Africa during the Atlantic Slave Trade: Archaeological Perspectives* sought to understand the impacts of that trade on West African populations (DeCorse 2001b). Yet, one of the observations made in the volume's introduction was that one of the challenges in assessing Atlantic impacts is the fact that the vast majority of work undertaken on the West African archaeological record of the Atlantic period has often not been undertaken with European contact or the Atlantic trade in mind—nor referred to as historical archaeology (DeCorse 2001b:1-3).

With regard to work specifically on the African Diaspora, Bunce Island in Sierra Leone may have been the first European fort in West Africa to be proposed as a monument to the slave trade. In 1922, J. B. Chinsman suggested that the City Council of Freetown purchase the island from the British Colonial government “so that its caves and tombstones could be preserved as historical monuments of the slave trade” (quoted in Wyse 1990:24; also see DeCorse 2007). Nothing, however, came of this proposal and efforts to preserve the site are still underway. Doig Simmonds (1973) limited excavations in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, Ghana was unique in focusing specifically on the slaves' living conditions. The West African Historical Museum that Simmonds established in Cape Coast Castle dealt with the slave trade, but much more widely with the African past (Simmonds 1972). Similarly, through the early 1980s the displays in the *Musee Historique* in Fort d'Estrées, Goree Island Senegal, primarily dealt with Stone Age archaeology and there was little attention paid to the 'House of Slaves' (DeCorse 2008b).

Since the 1990s, Goree Island, James Fort in the Gambia, Ouidah in Benin, and the forts and castles of coastal Ghana have increasingly been seen as places of memory for Africans in the Diaspora (e.g. Anquandah 2008; Osei-Tutu 2009; Schramm 2010). The growing interest in heritage tourism has been concurrent with increasing archaeological

research specifically seeking the intersection of the archaeologies of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora. Consequently, the past decade has witnessed increased archaeological work specifically on European outposts, as well as the contexts from which enslaved Africans were taken (e.g. Agorsah 1993; Apoh 2008, 2013; Boachie-Ansah 2009; Bredwa-Mensah 1996, 2002, 2004; Gavua 2008; Kankpeyeng 2009; Kelly 2004; Monroe 2007; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Stahl 1999).

If not necessarily labeled historical archaeology, research on the European forts and castles would clearly qualify as historical archaeology under any of the proffered definitions. Yet what about archaeological work undertaken on other sites of this time period for which no written sources exist? As Posnansky observed in his 1982 article titled “African Archaeology Comes of Age”, much of the archaeological research undertaken during the 1960s, 70s and 80s increasingly concentrated on the archaeology of the component populations of the newly independent African states, rather than the more temporally distant Stone Age. This trend toward a focus on the more recent past has continued to the extent that Augustin Holl (2009:140) has observed that, in West Africa, study of the Early and Middle Stone Age is becoming extinct. Drawing on oral traditions and ethnography, as well as archaeological and documentary source material, this research often provides quite rich reconstruction of African populations of the past 1000 years. It thus provides local history and important insight into African populations of Africa in the Atlantic World. Yet this research often includes little or no discussion of written sources, the Atlantic World, the slave trade, capitalism, European colonization, or Eurocentrism. Situating African history in its deeper past—unbounded by the advent of the Atlantic world—has been a widely used vantage in West African studies of the later Iron Age (e.g. Chouin and DeCorse 2010; Connah 1975; N’Dah 2009; Ogundiran 2000, 2005; Stahl 2001). This perspective has been characteristic of the Syracuse School (e.g. Chouin 2009; Gijanto 2010; Kankpeyeng 2003; Smith 2008; Spiers 2007; Richard 2007).

Conclusions and Criticisms: Is Historical Archaeology Needed?

It is difficult to disagree with the quest to ask important questions. The expansion of Europe into the non-Western World and the cultural exchanges and impacts it engendered is unquestionably one of the most dramatic events of the past 500 years. Africa's role in shaping the Atlantic World and the associated transformations on both sides of the Atlantic are among the most tantalizing research questions to be addressed. The question of the impact—specifically with regard to the Atlantic slave trade and its abolition—has been widely debated by African and Africanist historians, some arguing for dramatic consequences, others for more limited or even beneficial impacts (e.g. Eltis 1987; Fage 1969; Lovejoy 1989; Rodney 1972). Archaeology forcefully addresses these issues: It has revealed the advent of the Atlantic World—including the slave trade, European hegemony, and the eventual imposition of colonial rule—to have been a period of dramatic change (e.g. DeCorse 1991, 2001b; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012). Increasing archaeological research on this topic has focused on the wider impact of the Atlantic world revealing a diversity of local responses.

Archaeological research can and must play a key role in examining these questions. Orser's defining aspects of historical archaeology: colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism, and modernity should all be important foci of archaeological research. Yet do we need the term 'historical archaeology'? The ambiguities and varied perspectives noted above hinder the term's explanatory value and limit its utility. Of greater concern, however, is what the term implies about the research represented. Labeling this or that research 'historical' implies that other studies are something else, are ahistorical. These categories inherently shape the lenses through which we view the past and how we conceive modernity. As Schmidt and Walz (2007) point out, exclusionary silences are themselves illuminating.

Examining the conceptual framing of historical archaeology is more than academic musings: its definitional parameters have important implications about the research foci, the work undertaken, and our views of the past. Africa's past extends long before the arrival of the

Europeans on the coast. Pre-Atlantic history provides an array of research foci, as well as contexts for understanding the transformations that have occurred in the past 500 years. In failing to consider Africa's long pre-Atlantic past we run the risk of beginning our historical narratives with the arrival of the Europeans, the documentary record, and the particular views of the past that these engender. Recognizing the need to place developments of Atlantic Africa in these wider contexts there is a growing recognition of the need to avoid terminology that arbitrarily divides the African past. Akin Ogundiran (2005), for example, discards the outmoded use of traditional dichotomies of historic/prehistoric and colonial/pre-colonial to reveal the complexities of the past. Many researchers have articulated theoretically nuanced research agenda without the conceptual margins of the label 'historical archaeology'. As Agbaje Williams (1986) observed with regard to the prehistoric/historical dichotomy, there is only one analytic frame. Archaeological research should indeed be about the questions asked, not generic heuristic labels.

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