



Training and Collaboration in African Archaeology

Elgidius B. Ichumbaki

Published online: 9 November 2023

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2023

Introduction

As is the case for other disciplines, the future success of African archaeology depends on the ability of the current scholars and practitioners to forge collaboration with future discipline leaders through training and other capacity-building efforts. For these efforts to yield long-lasting results, the parties must contribute equally. How has collaboration and training in African archaeology happened over the last forty years? Who trains whom, and how? Who collaborates with whom, and how? What is the future of training and collaboration for improving and enhancing African archaeology? This essay attempts to answer these questions by reflecting on the history of training and collaboration over the past four decades and proposing initiatives for better practices.

I examine how the two practices—training and collaboration—have succeeded (and failed) and what can be improved. Acknowledging the diversity of local experiences across Africa, I use East Africa, particularly the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania, as a case study (though my arguments

may be applicable elsewhere across the continent). My reasons for highlighting this region are four-fold. First, it is amongst the regions that have experienced continuous archaeological research for nearly a century. Second, the region has an extremely deep archaeological record that attracts a wide variety of training and collaboration. Third, UDSM is one of the few academic institutions in Africa where teaching archaeology began relatively early and remains strong today, attracting training and collaborations worldwide. Finally, the nature of collaboration and training in East Africa is hybrid: North–South and South–South collaborations exist.

Current trends of training and collaboration in African archaeology are difficult to assess, but they clearly remain dependent on the global North. Authors may have different views about implementation, depending on where they are based and the type of training and collaboration they are doing. Given this, I write as an educator based in Africa who pursued all my degrees at UDSM and now trains students from different African countries. I have been privileged to collaborate with researchers from Africa, Europe, and North America, and have visited various academic institutions abroad to exchange ideas with diverse faculty and students. My career has also benefitted from participating in various international conferences and organizing the 2022 Pan African Congress in Tanzania. My perspectives on training and collaboration draw on my 15-year experience as a student, educator, researcher, and collaborator on multiple projects.

E. B. Ichumbaki (✉)
Department of Archaeology & Heritage Studies,
University of Dar es Salaam, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
e-mail: ichumbaki@udsm.ac.tz

E. B. Ichumbaki
School of Archaeology, University College Dublin,
Dublin, Ireland

Past and Present Training and Collaboration in African Archaeology

The establishment of archaeology teaching programs in Africa is relatively new compared to Europe, North America, and Australia. At some African universities, a few courses with archaeological aspects were introduced to the curricula of History departments between the 1960s and 1970s, though more focused courses began to appear in the late 1970s and 1980s.

For example, at UDSM, students in History were able to take comprehensive archaeological courses, including theory and methods, by the mid-1980s (Schmidt, 1995). However, this established program was for undergraduates only. It was initially difficult to recruit students, but this problem ended when the government staff working in antiquities and museum departments began to enroll, bringing new skills back to their professional positions. At first, there were few students, rarely exceeding five in a class, so they received excellent theoretical and practical mentorship, including the ability to take courses in geology, zoology, botany, and development in other departments (Schmidt, 2005, p. 49). Archaeology students developed their own long-vacation research projects to put into practice the theories and methods learned in their courses. Consequently, many of these students became independent thinkers and established academics and leaders in archaeology. Some of the students in the first three cohorts of the archaeology program at UDSM include Bertram Mapunda, Felix Chami, Paul Msemwa, and Audax Mabulla—all of whom obtained their PhDs by the mid-1990s and returned to Tanzania to build an outstanding archaeology program at UDSM.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw changes regarding the training and collaboration of archaeologists at UDSM, as was the case across Africa, for two main reasons. First, the number of graduates at all levels increased, with some returning home after earning degrees abroad to join academic and other research institutions. Second, those graduates who returned home initiated collaborations, some with their former Ph.D. supervisors, some with other academics based at institutions in the global North or further afield, and some with other scholars they had met abroad. Broad new initiatives included starting a graduate degree program and launching research and training

curricula in archaeology. One of the most successful examples of these programs and initiatives was the African Archaeology Network (AAN). Based at UDSM and funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA-SAREC), the AAN supported early- and mid-career researchers in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Madagascar, and Uganda. The program also sponsored students from those countries to pursue M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in archaeology. The AAN made it possible for scholars from the region to apply for research funds, conduct joint fieldwork, and attend conferences on various aspects of African archaeology. Many beneficiaries of these initiatives, including me, are now researchers and academics scattered across Africa and beyond.

A few African universities have now established departments that offer degree programs in archaeology and/or cultural heritage management. Some of these are pure archaeology departments, but most combine archaeology and history (or history and archaeology), archaeology and heritage studies, and archaeology and anthropology. These departments typically offer a three-year bachelor's degree program, an 18-month to two-year master's degree program, and a three- to four-year Ph.D. program. Bachelor's students attend theoretical and practical courses exposing them to archaeology practices (Mehari et al., 2014), while master's students often engage with more theoretical courses and a few months of research. At UDSM, Ph.D. students spend the first six months to one year developing their research proposals, then conduct research for one year, and write their theses for one to two years.

African students and staff in these programs often collaborate with colleagues at research institutions in the global North. Graduate students and junior academics attend jointly organized fieldwork to interact with established global North scholars. This allows them to access and learn to use research equipment. Certainly, these kinds of joint fieldwork opportunities give African students the skills and knowledge unavailable at their home institutions and prepare the ground for further studies and collaborations. However, these North–South interactions are short, mostly transient, and insubstantial relative to the research goals of local scholars and their acquisition of enduring skills.

Challenges in Training and Collaboration and What to Do to Improve the Situation

African countries have a rich and diverse archaeological record, so it is no surprise that many international researchers initiate research projects in Africa and develop collaborations with other scholars within and outside the continent. Unfortunately, there is a lack of balance in power among the “collaborators.” Whereas those from the global North direct and dominate the research agenda, those from Africa tend to be relegated to logistical roles—processing research and data export permits, recruiting field laborers, and creating good social relations among northern archaeologists, government officials, and community members in the research areas. Southern collaborators are also instrumental in organizing transport, arranging relevant meetings, and collecting data inaccessible to Northern collaborators due to language barriers and other cultural differences. Tilley and Kalina (2021, p. 540) describe these roles as a “gatekeeping burden of the African academic” who is rewarded with the inclusion of his/her name in the resulting scientific publications. Another (infrequent) reward is the offer of scholarships for one or two students to pursue a doctoral degree in a global North institution. Sadly, these students are often encouraged to pursue topics that advance research of their sponsors but which cannot be continued after their doctorate due to limited research facilities. As a product of this, many African archaeologists trained in Europe and North America end up contributing minimally to knowledge production despite the research being done in their home countries. A similar scenario is recorded in archaeology cognate disciplines such as conservation and paleontology where parachute science has become a norm (Bhaumik, 2023; Raja et al., 2022).

This dependence on funding and scientific paradigms flowing from the global North means that many African archaeologists do not have research agendas to guide training and collaboration. There is every possibility that this shameful problem will continue unless African scholars take ownership of knowledge production by initiating research projects that are meaningful to Africa. Here, I suggest four initiatives to make training and collaboration in African archaeology strong, profitable, and sustainable.

First, we must consider establishing hub institutions in Eastern Africa, Western Africa, and Southern Africa for training and spearheading an African agenda for archaeological research. Each hub would be underwritten by multi-national philanthropic organizations for an initial five-year funding period to establish laboratories for archaeological and material science analysis—for example, isotopic analysis, ancient DNA, metallography, and scanning electron microscopy (SEM). This investment would enable researchers to develop analytical skills and produce ground-breaking research without depending on labs outside Africa. This would also prevent graduates trained in the global North from becoming idle scientists once they return to Africa, as is too often the case today (e.g., Thondhlana et al., 2022).

Second, we would need to sustain these hub institutions by leveraging future international funding and long-term commitments from African national governments. Having a sustainable financial base—a financial pool where Africa-based researchers would compete for research grants—would solve the problem of the significant power imbalance that arises when African archaeologists are forced to collaborate with those in the global North to access funding.

Third, our professional associations—including the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA), Society for American Archaeology (SAA), European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), and Pan African Archaeological Association (PAAA), among others—should consider revising their codes of ethics to mandate equal power when researchers from the global North and global South decide to collaborate. For example, the codes could stipulate that major research projects in the global South lasting more than two years must train local graduate students.

Fourth, and finally, there is a need for substantial review of curricula and research agendas. In many archaeology programs, the curricula still contain courses that are irrelevant to African contexts or continue to embrace and glorify colonialism. For example, courses such as “precolonial societies” and “the archaeology of hunting, gathering and foraging communities” are not meant to understand the African past and solve present and future problems. Instead, such courses mostly serve to show people had no history prior to colonialism and that some communities still experience barbaric lifestyles. A

revision of these courses could make them more relevant to contemporary African archaeology. Such revisions should go hand in hand with setting up long-term research agendas in which academics from the global South could implement own agendas and curriculum rather than simply fulfill the desires of researchers from the global North.

References

- Bhaumik, V. (2023). Global inequities in local science. *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, 7(793). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-023-02064-2>
- Mehari, A. G., Schmidt, P. R., & Mapunda, B. B. (2014). Knowledge about archaeological field schools in Africa: The Tanzanian experience. *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, 49(2), 184–202.
- Raja, N. B., Dunne, E. M., Matiwane, A., et al. (2022). Colonial history and global economics distort our understanding of deep-time biodiversity. *Nature Ecology and Evolution*, 6, 145–154.
- Schmidt, P. R. (1995). Using archaeology to remake African history. In P. Schmidt & T. Patterson (Eds.), *Making alternative histories: The practice of archaeology and history in non-Western settings* (pp. 118–147). SAR Press.
- Schmidt, P. R. (2005). Teaching revolutionary archaeology: African experiments in history making and heritage management. *Archaeologies*, 1(2), 46–59.
- Thondhlana, T. P., Lyaya, E. C., & Mtetwa, E. (2022). The politics of knowledge production: Training and practice of archaeological science in Africa. *African Archaeological Review*, 39(4), 461–477.
- Tilley, E., & Kalina, M. (2021). “My flight arrives at 5 am, can you pick me up?”: The gatekeeping burden of the African academic. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 33(4), 538–548.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.