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FORUM

Ethnoarchaeology

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Introduction

Ethnoarchaeology's emergence in the 1950s–60s contributed to archaeology's emphasis on model-building, universal laws, and hypothesis testing at that time. With its mission to document material practices of contemporary people whose lifeways, it was then argued, had tangible correlations with those of past societies, studies typically focused on core archaeological interests such as technology, craft production, and subsistence but these were often detached from larger social contexts. Researchers paid less attention than was warranted to historical realities of the contemporary societies in question and their transformations during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Critical theory-building in ethnoarchaeological research gained steam by the 1980s and continues to this moment. The potential and possible pitfalls of juxtaposing ancient and modern people were the crux of the discourse. Was this pursuit contradictory to archaeologists' expertise at studying change, and historically unsupportable a priori (Gosselain, 2016; Hamilakis, 2016)? Yet while each study using ethnoarchaeological methods must be evaluated on its own strengths and weaknesses, the critiques, many from Africanist and African practitioners, have helped transform (ethno)archaeological practice for the better (e.g., Chirikure, 2016; Cunningham & MacEachern, 2016; Fredriksen, 2023; Gifford-Gonzalez, 2010; Lane, 2006, 2011; Lyons & Casey, 2016; Lyons & David, 2019). Ethnoarchaeology has produced rich and important results which should continue to contribute to archaeology, material culture and heritage studies, and more—that is the central message of this essay. I can cite only a tiny sample of the excellent theoretical and methodological literature that continues to transform ethnoarchaeology, including collaborative, historically situated, coproduced, and heritage-oriented case studies. I begin by considering nomenclature/framing and what that suggests about changes in the field. I follow with some intermingled trends that will likely take us into the next quarter-century, including just a few examples of recent research spanning a continuum of approaches.

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What's in a Name?

Naming in post-colonial research is never a small issue. Ethnoarchaeology as a term has had its detractors, as it can conjure processual archaeology's universalist goals to which few still subscribe. Hamilakis (2016), among others, suggested rehabilitating the term "archaeological ethnography" as coined by Watson (1979), a founding proponent of ethnoarchaeological research. While this proposed switch foregrounds the technical and social relations of practice rather than archaeological traces, it has not been widely embraced in African usage. Nor

is the term "ethnography" a neutral one (Chirikure, 2016). While there is no need to prescribe a single term, González-Ruibal (2016, cited in Fredriksen, 2023) suggests picturing a terminological continuum, depending on whether the focus is on developing analogy on one hand, or historical context on the other: with "ethnoarchaeology" on the former end, and, interestingly, "archaeology" on the latter. These goals can surely coexist, as much recent work in Africa has shown (e.g., M'Mbogori, 2015; Pikirayi & Lindahl, 2013; Sahle et al., 2012; Woldekiros, 2023). Archaeology writ large, with contributions and urging of Indigenous and other minoritized practitioners, is working to decolonize, queer, and decenter intellectual authority, and break down the residual binary between "researchers" and "local community members" to reflect the coproduction taking place in research. Much of what has been labeled ethnoarchaeology as a subfield could also be considered "archaeology" (Fredriksen, 2023; González-Ruibal, 2016; Schmidt & Kehoe, 2019). In this way, the best practices of the subdiscipline are those of the discipline, and vice versa.

Historicized Material Culture Studies

Future research will continue to feature studies that combine craft, technology, and daily practice in foodways/cuisine, and will coordinate closely with and be coproduced with local specialists (e.g., Lyons & D'Andrea, 2003; Logan & Gokee, 2014). This will represent a great diversity of research questions and heritage goals but include material culture's active and reflexive role in maintaining communities, social memory, and history, and the ways in which material culture draws environmental and other non-human entities into daily life. Increasingly, local people initiate and influence what is documented in specialist traditions and how that documentation can be coproduced and usable for local agendas (Lane, 2011). Localized knowledge, collective memory, community economic growth, gender equity, environmental justice, and other concerns must and will be on our collective agendas. Such studies will sometimes continue to concern material correlates of production and social and economic organization, but in increasingly richly understood contexts, and will also document contemporary practices without ties to ethnoarchaeology's traditional agendas. It is noteworthy that this trajectory is recognized in the British Museum's "Endangered Material Knowledge Programme" (EMKP), begun in 2018, which "aims to call attention to, research and preserve the crafts, skills, practices, and knowledge of the material world that are in danger of disappearing," and providing training and funding for such goals (https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/africa-oceania-and-americas/endangered-material-knowledge-programme).

Documenting the roles of material culture and its creators through *chaîne opératoire* research will play a continuing and central role (Fredriksen, 2023; Gosselain, 2018; Livingstone Smith, 2010; Lyons & David, 2019). Not all material culture studies focus on the logic of production sequences. But the deep contextualization of *chaîne opératoire* work—e.g., illuminating decision-making and taskscapes of daily life, transmission of specialist knowledge within communities of practice, networks of social ties and their connections to landscapes and environment—will be a leading edge of research. This agenda is increasingly embraced by African scholars, many of whom come to it with community ties and cultural knowledge, rather than as outsiders seeking to learn beyond their own cultural traditions.

Slow Science

Support among Africanist archaeologists for "slow science" has emerged as an alternative to the gravitational pull of "fast," big-data, lab-based science. Archaeology clearly includes both kinds of research, though fast-science research is growing disproportionately. As a counterpoint, however, slow science commits to ethical conduct in the human relations of research, collaboration/cooperation at all levels of research expertise, and long-term engagements with people and places. Linking archaeological study to critical ethnographic work has always been "slow science," the results of which can form the basis for an alternative excellence, based on sustained ethical collaborations with people and their knowledge (Cunningham & MacEachern, 2016). This slight reframing of what ethnoarchaeologists have long done has the potential to influence more scholars and heritage professionals to adopt a slow-science perspective in archaeological ethnography and may encourage a greater diversity of scholars to embrace such research.

Decolonizing Practices and Diversifying Outcomes

Ethnoarchaeology can be part of broader attempts to engage decolonizing practices that recognize the historical specificity of all people, and the material and non-material patterns that shape lives today and in the past. As a discipline working within a large and diverse world region, Africans and Africanists have been increasingly doing more critical and contextualized research that requires engagement with ethnographic ethics and practice, and consideration of Indigenous community heritage concerns. This includes especially the idea that now, and in the future, the active role of African scholars must be prioritized (Chirikure, 2016; David, 1992; Lyons & Casey, 2016).

I mention here just a small sample of recent work that illustrates the future potential of recent approaches. Sahle et al. (2012) recorded the practices of Hadiya hideworkers in Ethiopia, who regularly make and use obsidian scrapers. In addition to documenting an increasingly rare technology, they show how the availability of raw materials affects the intensity of scraper use, use-life, and curation. Stahl has consistently maintained partnerships with contemporary people in Banda in addition to conducting long-term archaeological research there. With local community members, she is carrying out an EMKP project on fiber, wood, and clay traditions (https://www.emkp.org/the-earthen-and-organic-materials-technologies-of-banda-ghana/). Through reflexive methodologies including participant observation, survey, and excavation, Woldekiros (2023) published a fascinating monograph on the camel caravans of the Ethiopian salt trade in the Aksumite, medieval, and contemporary periods. In it, she argued for the agency of people in low-ranking social positions, including pastoralists, in a trade nominally controlled by people in the top tiers of society now and in the past. M'Mbogori, Lane, and collaborators are currently conducting a project that juxtaposes pastoralist biocultural heritage, wells, and community archaeology in the service of sustainable development in Kenya and Ethiopia (https://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/current-projects/well-being-indigenous-wells-pastoralist-biocultural-heritage-and).

Concluding Thoughts

I came to this essay having engaged in long-term ethnoarchaeological research in the 1980s (LaViolette, 2000) but not since. During my tenure as editor of *AAR* (2008–18), I published articles on the topic and followed its trends and concerns about the marginalization of the subdiscipline (Lyons & Casey, 2016). Yet there is clearly a renewed and energetic dedication to research with contemporary people under a continuum of rubrics, with ties to Indigenous, historical, community, contemporary, and other archaeologies (e.g., King, 2020), that helps me imagine a healthy future for merging ethnography, archaeology, and heritage agendas in Africa. Nicholas David's (e.g., David, 1992; David et al., 1988) influences on ethnoarchaeological method and theory and long-term research on ceramics and their complex social contexts set an early standard for renewed framing of archaeologically-minded research in collaboration with ethnography and heritage in Africa, and are here to stay. Researchers will continue to prioritize material culture studies that engage tradition, memory, and heritage--studies that are defined by and that add value to local communities. Critical debates may well continue but will keep method and theory in the disciplines of archaeology, African heritage studies, and cognate fields moving forward into the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

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