Archaeologists as Myth-makers:
Creating Oral History Among the Sandawe

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Abstract

Kigango discovered by Daniel last year while he was preparing his shamba in this area. Massive rock which provides an overhang shelter. Area immediately below the main painted area has been disturbed, i.e., excavated 30-40 cm depth, by Daniel. Asked why he dug and his reply "jaribu, jaribu" [testing or trying, in the Swahili language]. Believe his digging is due to his hearing of rumours of "German buried treasure." He did say that he had heard of others digging at rock painting sites, but I guess he didn't hear that those others found nothing, or perhaps he felt they were just unlucky. (field notes, 06 March 1986)

For an archaeologist, seeing the evidence of a pothunter or treasure seeker is always disquieting whether the site is prehistoric or historic. The mystery for me was in the question: "why are rock painting sites targeted?" In addition, how did the belief arise of "German buried treasure"? Not every rock shelter with paintings was disturbed, yet I noted several occurrences in Usandawe (the area occupied by the Sandawe, former hunters and gatherers) to query this phenomenon (see Figure 1: Map of Usandawe, and Figures 2 and 3: Site maps for Beseto and Takamase). The circulation of this "rumour" was later corroborated by a Tanzanian colleague, Fidelis T. Masao (pers. comm. 1984). He commented that he had heard the same while working in the neighboring region of Singida to the west.

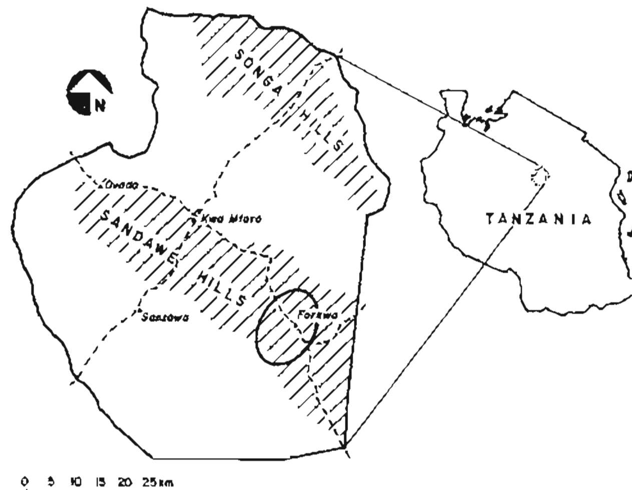

Figure 1. Map of Usandawe illustrating the area in which rock painting sites have been vandalized.

The other field experience I want to relate from this same period is a visit to a granitic mass known locally as Puma or Filigina. While making my way to this site, I managed to acquire a cluster of young boys as escorts. They described another site nearby in which I might be interested; it was a "shelter where stones were dug." After listening to their description, I realized they were referring to an archaeological excavation. It was a rockshelter that I had helped to excavate as a volunteer a number of years ago before I had even thought about graduate studies and/or returning to Usandawe as a research place. In the interval of several years, the villagers' encounter with archaeology had become a story about people digging for stones.

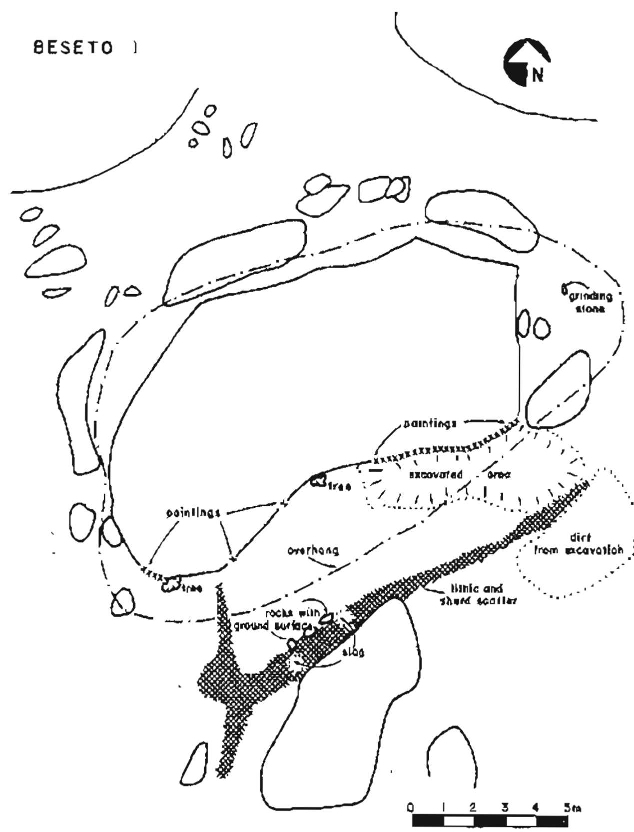

Figure 2. Site map of Beseto 1. Note the excavated area immediately beneath the main painted portion of the rock (shelter).

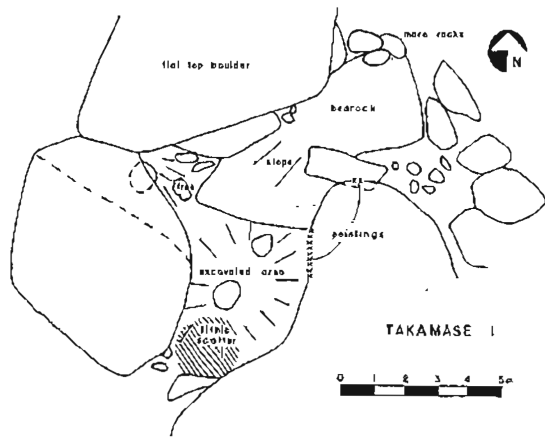

Figure 3. Site map of Takamase 1. Note the excavated area immediately beneath the main portion of the rock

Here are two different accounts from living and working with the Sandawe--nevertheless both are related to the issue at hand: archaeology and education. Explaining what archaeologists do (for that matter, anthropologists) can be a difficult task in Canada and the United States. To do the same in Africa is even more onerous where only a minority of the populace is exposed to National Geographic and other similar popular magazines. In addition, televisions and programming equivalent to these magazines, such as, Nova, that detail significant discoveries, are lacking for the majority. This is not to imply that the media in North America accurately portrays archaeology to those unfamiliar with the discipline. There remains an image problem created by Hollywood in the character of Indiana Jones. Perhaps some male archaeologists imagine themselves as Harrison Ford, but I doubt the majority accept the legitimacy of this representation of the discipline today.

Indiana Jones was more treasure seeker than archaeologist. In every case, Indiana Jones removed "treasure" from its country of origin. This is reminiscent of archaeology in its early days when excavation was more like plundering for the excavator's country of origin. We have only to look at the continuing debate over the "ownership" of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. As Sir Leonard Woolley indicated in his book, Digging Up the Past, archaeology provided museum shelves with specimens--"a perfectly good motive, because an appeal to the eye is the best way of awakening interest in a new form of knowledge - 'seeing is believing', and museums are a big factor in education" (1967: 39 [1930]). Yes, these treasures were brought back to the national museum and the items did introduce people to other cultures in different times and places. Nevertheless, they were also collected and displayed in the name of national prestige. This was the heyday of imperialism and colonialism.

This image of imperialism and colonialism continues to be associated with archaeology (and anthropology). It is this history of exploitation of both resources and people that public education programmes in archaeology need to overcome to be successful. In this paper, I suggest that we researchers create myths among those people with whom we work and live, especially in developing countries. The myth is based on origins--the origin and development of archaeology as a discipline.

History and Context

Prior to European contact in the 19th century, traders from the Near East and South Asia regularly visited East Africa seeking specific products, i.e., ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoise shell, spices, and coconut oil, as well as slaves (Sheriff 1981). Even though traders did not directly affect every people in East Africa, their activities were certainly known to all. As supplies became scarce around coastal trade centres, traders moved into the interior. One route bordered the extreme limits of Usandawe (Bennett 1973). The Sandawe were certainly aware of these trade caravans and the threat they posed. One Sandawe Alagwa leader, Amas, referred to these traders as one of the four great menaces faced by his people (Robinson 1957). Although a potential threat, these traders also created an awareness in people, like the Sandawe, of the worth of certain commodities. Items that previously had a lesser or no meaningful merit could now be traded for more desirable and/or valued objects.

With the intrusion of European countries into East Africa, indigenous people and resources were increasing dominated by these countries as they implemented their own style of governance. Initially, Tanzania came under German rule in 1885 (German East Africa) then British rule in 1916 (Tanganyika). This began a period of great change in all aspects of the indigenous people's way of life: economic, social, and political. For the Sandawe who had been hunters and gatherers, these new rulers encouraged sedentism and the practice of horticulture and pastoralism. In the eyes of British authorities the sale of stock and agricultural products was the only way to provide cash for the majority to fulfill their tax obligations (Iliffe 1973). In this way, the Sandawe were introduced to a monetary value system where barter and exchange had once been the standard mode of operation.

Those who administered the governance of Tanzania were outsiders, Europeans, until the country gained its independence in 1961. In many cases, these early administrators and officials moved about the countryside attempting to learn as much as possible about their domains. F.J. Bagshawe (1924/25), in particular, wrote extensively about a number of the indigenous peoples he came to know. Others, like William G. Aitken (1948) and P.M.H. Fozzard (1959) who were both geologists, as well as Bagshawe (1923), A.T. Culwick (1929, 1931), and H.A. Fosbrooke (Fosbrooke et al. 1950) who were administrative officers, wrote about rock painting "discoveries." In many instances, these provided the earliest documentary examples of Tanzanian rock art. Although these individuals did not seek to exploit the resources they found, others did. This is the legacy of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer.

The Image Of Colonizer

Europeans were clearly different in appearance, in language, and in their social system than the indigenous African people. As an outgrowth of Victorian attitudes and notions of social evolution, these colonizers exerted their notions of governance and societal norms as being superior. This is related to the idea of value as previously mentioned; Europeans exposed those under their rule to a different sense of the term. They found merit and a market for goods that were not necessarily acknowledged as such within the society in which these items originated. In this way, certain things became viewed by indigenous populations as being potentially valuable. This response was elicited by the exploration of Europeans or outsiders and their attention in these very items. The evidence of the "wisdom" of these colonizers was apparent. They were the "haves" and the indigenous people were the "have nots" of both resources and goods--a legacy that remains today. As noted by Haviland (1994: 689):

> In a world society about two-thirds of the population is nonwhite and one-third white. In the world as a whole, being white and belonging to the upper stratum tend to go together.

The argument has been made that this is a North-South issue, of "rich" and "poor," or "developed" and "developing" (Brandt 1980). In addition, this can be viewed as a condition of "global apartheid":

> which combines socioeconomic and racial antagonisms and in which (1) a minority of whites occupies the pole of affluence, while a majority composed of other races occupies the pole of poverty; (2) social integration of the two groups is made extremely difficult by barriers of complexion, economic position, political boundaries, and other factors; (3) economic development of the two groups is interdependent; (4) the affluent white minority possesses a disproportionate share of the world society's political, economic, and military power. (Haviland 1994: 690)Underlying the condition of "global apartheid" is the continued attitude of "superiority" or "chosen people." It propelled imperialism and colonialism as the foreign policy of many European countries at the turn-of-the-century and into this one.

Two questions arise from this argument in relationship to the issue of education and archaeology: 1) What does the image of the colonizer mean for archaeologists, or anthropologists, working in developing countries? 2) What does this mean in terms of imputing value in the work we do? Although of Chinese descent, I was referred to as a "mzungu" (in the Swahili language). This was the same term applied to all foreigners who typically were "white," or of European or European descent. I was not wealthy, but in their eyes I certainly was not poor. For those living the student life, you understand my meaning of "poor." Explaining one's poverty in a developing country was met with disbelief. Poor people did not 1) travel half way around the world to visit and live in another country; 2) own a new 4-wheel drive vehicle; 3) dress in relatively new clothes; 4) hire assistants and pay service with cash; and 5) have an apparent surplus of food. If someone like myself was "poor" then local residents would readily aspire to achieve my degree of poverty. Thus, in retrospect, my presence was suspect. Although, I had my appropriate letters of introduction from the Ministry of Culture and the National Scientific Research Council of Tanzania (UTAFITI), I now believe that my interest in rock paintings once more aroused a curiosity that had swept through the area as the rumour or "myth" of "buried German treasure."

Quite often when local inhabitants see outsiders, particularly foreigners, traipsing around the countryside--in the bush--they assume that these individuals are seeking something of value. As I have argued, a history or legacy of colonialism has been established. Given the early interest in rock paintings, the Sandawe are familiar with foreigners seeking them. Did these first investigators speak to the Sandawe about this interest? I do not know, but I can imagine that any explanation might have been met with skepticism. Among the Sandawe, people are aware that gemstones have been found in other areas of Tanzania and are of value. During my first visit to Usandawe as a volunteer for an archaeological excavation, people regularly brought coloured stones and quartz crystals for assessment. They believed that these were the hard sought objects of our labour. No small wonder that several years later, this same archaeological excavation had become known as the place "where stones were dug." Even though a presentation had been made at the local primary school, an explanation of archaeology and the purpose of the excavation had been lost in the intervening years.

Related to this issue of economic value is a difference in viewing history. A history of the past for the majority of "western" cultures is validated and reified through the evidence of material objects. Although not limited to societies found in sub-Saharan Africa, history, for many of them, is not something "dug" from the ground. It comes from the living culture--from oral historians and traditions passed from generation to generation. Therefore, when the archaeologist excavates or surface collects (an) object(s) with the intention of reconstructing and/or

understanding history, there is the potential for disbelief on the part of the local population. Exploitation by outsiders continues to be a consideration, especially when objects (artifacts) are removed by an outsider. There are questions of perception: Among the people whom we live and work, do they know what archaeology is? Do they have an opportunity to visit museums (another "western" institution) to see the results of an archaeological investigation?

The reputation of foreigners exploiting indigenous populations for economic gain tends to supersede explanation or education in the sense of presenting the purpose and value of archaeology. Part of this problem is a matter of presence within the community: Is the commitment one-time, or intermittent and irregular, or long term? As a foreigner, one's appearance may alone elicit demands of remuneration. At one village visited with Sandawe neighbors, a participant told me outright that I would have to pay several thousand shillings if I was to photograph or record in any way that particular activity. Obviously, there are Sandawe who are aware of books published and sold with people's photographs. Yes, those glossy-paged coffee table books do exist. For many of us, we admire the photography but cannot afford them. How are we as researchers to be viewed differently from other foreigners who do exploit either the resources or the people themselves?

Education and Archaeology

The answer lies in education. The role of education is twofold: 1) to explain archaeology in a way that is meaningful to the public, and 2) as a means of protecting and conserving archaeological sites, that is, the history or heritage of a people or community. Yet, how do we get to this point? During the many sessions of this conference, the "public" has been characterized according to context. In Africa and other developing countries, there are more important priorities to consider in the daily lives of the populace than archaeology. Usandawe is a semi-arid area prone to famine and drought. During my tenure of field research, as a "villager," I was a recipient of a United States of America food aid programme (a bimonthly distribution of powdered milk, soy oil and cracked wheat). In addition, money is now an imperative of Sandawe life--for some more, for others less. It provides for goods that are not found in the bush, such as batteries, radios, kerosene, lamps, clothes, etc. Yet there are few sources of wage income in the village; for many with wages, their jobs are outside the village away from Usandawe. The need and desire for cash explain two incidents in which I was sought as a potential buyer for specific items--items they would not be sold to a Sandawe person. These were things they knew to be valued by foreigners: ostrich egg and rhinoceros horn. This supports my contention that foreigners and the legacy of imperialism and colonialism are intertwined as one. Our presence or interest in certain commodities has created a value that persists.

We need to address this issue of the relationship between archaeology and the public. If there is no natural interest in archaeological sites, then there is little reason to assume that protection and conservation by our definition or standards will occur. An archaeological site could equally be one of contemporary use. If so, its use may be in conflict with archaeological conservation. Do we force people out of a rockshelter that has painting because their occupation (open fire, cattle) may have an adverse effect on the "art"? Rock shelters are traditional Sandawe habitation sites. In addition, some continue to be used for sacrifice where chyme is sometimes spread on the rocks. At other rock art sites in southern Africa, "new" populations have re-used these sites as sacred places. In some cases, they have continued to sacrifice and paint (Tom Huffman, pers. comm. 1995), while in others they have chipped portions of paint for its "potency" (Frans Prins, pers. comm. 1994). Is contemporary use "vandalism"? The relationship between archaeology and public is not necessarily an easy one.

I could say that with the magic wand of education the two-pronged dilemma of archaeology in the developing world would be resolved. The image problem of archaeologists (and anthropologists) will be resolved in time, but we need to be cognizant of the legacy of our origins as colonizers within Africa and other developing countries. Although we cannot necessarily rectify the wrongs of the past, we do need to acknowledge this influence. It will help in understanding the perception that others have of us. Such an awareness is required to successfully implement educational programmes that create a different sense of value in protecting and/or conserving archaeological sites. If we do not, we will continue be myth-makers creating myths among those with whom we live and work.

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