Professionals and Local Community Encounter: Heritage Education at the Mvita15 Site in South-Eastern Tanzania

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Abstract
Public engagement in the practice of archaeological projects and heritage studies has received a remarkable emphasis among archaelogists and heritage professionals world-over, in the name of 'public archaeology'. This paper, however, discusses an encounter revealing a resistance on the part of local communities to collaborate with professionals in Tanzania at the Mvita ancient settlement site in the Mtwara region of South-eastern Tanzania. The confrontations that took place at the site and education initiatives that were taken by the research team to educate the local community on the importance of cultural heritage and what exactly was taking place at the site, are at the crux of discussion of this paper. Moreover, the paper explores local communities' understanding of cultural heritage resources and what should be done to enhance collabarative conservation endevors for sustainable heritage management. The results of this study reveal that little effort has been made by archaeologists and cultural heritage professionals to create awareness among local communities on matters related to archaeology and cultural heritage resources. The paper also discusses the importance of communicating cultural heritage resources to the general public and the need to engage local communities in the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage resources.

Keywords: Public Archaeology, Heritage, Cultural Heritage, Archaeology, Local Community, Conservation

[15]An ancient settlement of the 19[th]century in Mtwara Region, Southeastern Tanzania.

1.0 Introduction

The term *heritage* refers to the human-made, natural and historical character of the material and symbolic elements of life as well as the intrinsic productivity of social action. It is most often a set of conditions adopted by a cultural grouping to meet the basic requirement of that group (Edson, 2004). It can be presented as a socio-cultural process in which negotiated relationships are formed between legacies of the past and stewards of the present, and the product of such relationship is an ethos of conservation and subsequent preservation for future generations (Milliken, 2012).

Thus, in this sense, heritage is not so much a thing, as a process in which we relate to things (Howard, 2003; Smith, 2006). In order to engage the term heritage, we must view it as an applied humanity (Howard, 2003). It is a thing which a past generation has preserved and handed on to the present and which a significant group or population wishes to hand on to the future generation (Herbert, 1995). Drawing on the idea of an inherited legacy, heritage has its roots in the past and continues to be meaningful to contemporary people. In this regard, heritage transcends time, drawing on the 'past' to create a 'present' to be protected for the 'future' (Watkins & Beaver, 2008). Picking from the above understanding, heritage is seen as such a valuable resource that is sustainably inherited from one generation to another, and calling for each generation's responsibility for conservation of the same.

The last three decades of the twentieth century has seen a widespread escalation of heritage developments and popular interest, sometimes described as a "heritage boom" or "the

heritage phenomenon," although many countries have histories of conservationist movements stretching back to the nineteenth century and sometimes earlier (Macdonald, 2013). While understanding that heritage bears both natural and cultural forms, this paper focuses on the cultural form of heritage resources within the context and philosophy of public archaeology. Cultural heritage refers to both tangible and intangible cultural resources including sites, structures, features and remains of archaeological, paleontological, historical, religious, cultural or aesthetic values contemporary indigenous knowledge and skills, language and living culture (Mabulla, 2000). It is a product of collective memories, values, practices, material and spiritual expressions that regulated lives and guided actions of the past society (Juma *et al.,* 2005).

1.1 Heritage as an Anthropological Discipline

Heritage began to emerge as a recognized field of anthropological study only during the 1990s (Macdonald, 2018). While heritage is new as a designated field of study, however, many of the issues and questions addressed by the anthropology of heritage are ones that have concerned anthropologists previously under labels, such as "Tradition," "Change," "Identity," and even "Culture." It was the interest of this study to undertake ethnographic inquiries, among other approaches, as part of anthropological engagement with the local community towards understanding their perceptions about heritage resources in their area.

Archaeological ethnography as noted by Lynn Meskell (2005) is a holistic anthropology that is improvised and context dependent. It might encompass a mosaic of traditional forms

including archaeological practices and museum or representational analysis, as well as long-term involvement, participant observation, interviewing and archival work (Meskell, 2005). It has been argued by some scholars that a number of approaches to community archaeology include those that relegate the interpretation of the bulk of the material evidence to archaeologists (Atalay, 2006, 2007; Marshall, 2002 & Pikirayi, 2011), those that employ a degree of ethnographic knowledge in dealing with communities (Pyburn, 2009), participatory action research and popular dissemination of archaeological knowledge.

1.1.1 A theoretical overview to public archeology

Public involvement in heritage conservation and management is a concern that was raised in the 1970s, when the publication entitled Public Archaeology was launched by Charles McGimsey III, and Pamela Cressey. The 1980s saw more concrete works with regard to public engagement, especially the notion of community involvement, when a handbook on community archaeology was first published in Britain. The basis for engaging the public in archaeology was described as being caused by socio-economic development projects, which prompted the feeling that heritage was fragile, finite and non-renewable (Tunprawat, 2009).

Public archaeology thus embraces all actions generating from the professional archaeology side towards public outreach, as well as discussions concerning archaeological resources among non-professional groups who are stakeholders of archaeological heritage. Some scholars note that involving, interacting and collaborating with ‘Indigenous’ people is critical for the success of community and public archaeology (Mafune, 2010).

Indigenous people the world over have been engaged in the theory and practice of archaeology. They are becoming increasingly vocal about issues of sovereignty and cultural heritage as part of a concerted effort to gain control over archaeological and political uses of their past (Ndlovu, 2010). A general aspect of archaeology which intersects with the public takes the form of outreach through museum displays, researchers presenting their work in schools and through the media. The idea is to educate the public about the past so that its relevance is appreciated (Blume, 2006).

1.1.2 Professionals and public engagement

Various ideas exist on what constitutes public and an interest in the public and its relationship with archaeology has led to the emergence of both the sub-discipline and journal known as public archaeology (Matsuda, 2004). The term public as used in this study refers to both professionals and non-professional community members. It encompasses both 'Educated' academics and the community of illiterate men and women. Other literature defines publics by the lack of something experts have, thereby predicating that experts should educate publics by sharing expert knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. These are generally those that paint experts' work in a positive light, hence Holtorf and Matsuda and Okamura's 'Educational' and 'Public relations' approaches to public archaeology (Holtorf 2007; Matsuda & Okamura 2011).

In their critique of Schofield's provocatively titled book *Who Needs Experts* (Schofield, 2014), Herdis Hølleland and Joar Skrede identify that heritage scholars' arguments against the authority of technical experts are based on a normative

question: 'What can and should heritage scholars do to develop more inclusive heritage practices' (Hølleland & Skrede 2019). Yet, this idealist hope of a more democratic heritage does not by itself change heritage professionals' perceptions of expertise. While the rise in participatory approaches is causing scholars to declare a shift in the role of the heritage professional from one of subject expert to expert mediator or facilitator (cf. Thomas 2004; Proctor 2010; Macdonald & Morgan 2018; Onciul 2019), research into perceptions of expertise tells a more complicated story, as several of the sources cited above also recognize.

2.0 Scenario and Consequences of the Encounter at the Mvita Site

This encounter was between the author of this paper with his fellow archaeologists on one side, and the local community of the Mvita ancient settlement on the other side, when an archaeological excavation was about to take place at the site. What happened? This is an interesting question to which this article brings answers. Here follows the story that the Mvita ancient settlement is an off-shoot of the Mikindani historical site (although it has mistakenly remained isolate from the Mikindani site) almost two kilometers on the eastern-side of the Mikindani township. It is mainly characterized by mass-graves (Figure 2.1) and other Swahili architectural monuments including the old mosque (Figure 2.2). Oral history has it that the settlement at the Mvita area started as an off-shoot of the Mikindani Township, currently known as the Mikindani historical site. Mikindani is a fascinating old town in Southern part of Tanzania with winding streets and an interesting blend of thatched mud houses and coral stones influenced by foreign

architecture (Figure 2.3). Mikindani was an important trading centre as far back as the 15th century and the famous explorer David Livingstone quoted it in his diaries as being "the finest port on the coast." Since then, its fortunes have fluctuated but it still reflects its multicultural Arabic, African and European history (Kigadye 2011).

Figure2.1: Author viewing Mass-graves at the Mvita ancient Settlement Site.

Figure2.2: Dweller showing Dilapidating Mosque at the Mvita Ancient Settlement Site.

Figure 2.3: **Monuments at Mikindani Historical Site: (a) Old Prison and (b) the Old BOMA Built of Coral Stones.**

Having fulfilled all preliminary arrangements and consultations with responsible regional and village/local authorities, the project team set for archaeological excavation. This was done in collaboration with four (4) young men from the same community who were recommended for research assistantship by the chairman of the village. The project team went to the site ready to start up the excavation procedures. After a short on-surface survey, an excavation point, twenty-five (25) meters from the grave-yard was ear-marked. When the team started clearing and setting dimension for a two-by-two meter excavation trench, the Principal Investigator (PI) received a phone call from the village chairman, claiming to have been notified by some community members that the team was exhuming human bones from graves! This information came not only as a surprise but also as a shock to the research team as it was contrary to what was going on at the site. The PI kindly requested the chairman to come at the site with any other members with suspicion about the research. The chairman complained about the ignorance of his people and excused himself that he was attending another commitment. It hardly took ten minutes before a group of men and women came at the

site, some with traditional weapons and full of angry faces. Some of them went around the site especially in the grave-yard to verify whether there were any dig-outs of the graves while others queued around the excavation trench to see what was going on.

3.0 Heritage Education at the Site

Surely, this was an encounter of its own kind as the research team found itself amid a freeze silence looking on what the people could say, while continued working. It was not until the PI broke the silence by inviting the unexpected guests to ask any question if any. This opened the door for sharing with them on what was going on and the objective behind the research. This interaction reminds of Larry Zimmerman's views that:

> *As heritage professionals, our community-facing projects are embedded in the politics of cultural heritage and reverberate throughout the communities where we work. The only way to know if archaeological outreach and community engagement are working is to ask stakeholders, and there is growing support in our community of practice to further develop this aspect of the field* (Zimmerman, 2008:76).

The discussion with the local community focused most on educating them on the importance of the research that was in progress. Some of them having noted that the project had no any harm to the graves (which was the main source of their anger) and having heard from the research experts about the mission of the project they left the site while regretting that they

were misled by their colleagues. Some of them could be heard saying, "*We have left our works for nothing while things are just like this! Where are the graves we have been told were under excavation?*"

Few others, especially women and few men maintained the resistance calling for stopping the project under the claim that graves were scattered all over the site, which was not true anyway. The research team requested for their suggestion on which part of the site should the excavation take place. Surprisingly, their position remained that the project should stop until they convene a village meeting and agree on the destiny of the project. One old man who seemed mostly respected by the villagers advised the research team to postpone the project with a promise of notification after the village meeting.

Two days later, the PI received a call from the village chairman inviting the research team for a village public meeting. In the meeting, the PI was given a chance to explain the aim of the project and the importance thereof. The session was actually a class-like interaction, whereby a detailed education was given for the purpose of awareness and need for engagement. Examples were given from similar projects in other parts of the country and how the project was important to the understanding and reconstruction of their histories. After a long session of dilly-dallying questions, the old man in-charge of the group revealed the worries of the villagers. In a more authoritative and conclusive voice, supported by a landmark of attention from his followers, he had the following to say:

> *Guys! We have listened to your explanation so attentively. But for the time being one should not trust anyone. You have a hidden agenda behind your research. Why are you digging the land? We know that you are after our land. Especially you people from Universities are so cleaver. Up to now the whole strip of the beach area at Mtwara has been expropriated by investors except ours. In short we are not ready to allow that to happen and we don't need any more explanation. Leave us with our land.*

4.0 Lesson from the Encounter

The final statement from the local community was not only shocking but also a challenge to the archaeological practice, in that, the research team had to close the project and 'leave the land' as instructed. The main lesson worth learning from this encounter is lack of awareness among the local communities about the importance of archaeology and heritage. This leads to a state of local communities' distrust upon archaeologists and their projects. Following this lack of awareness, it is good to emphasize that archaeologists need to keep engaging local communities more closely in their archaeological research projects. Moreover, there is a great need to explore the local perceptions on heritage as well as equally understanding the value of heritage sites from the indigenous communities' point of view.

Also, learned was the political antagonism between some members of the community and the village authority. For instance, during the meeting session with local community, some people used words that clearly showed their political affiliation

when accusing the village chairman (whom by then was from the opposition party) for allowing the research team to conduct research on their land. Furthermore, the local community wrongly suspected the research team as having interest with their land. It was very unfortunately that by the time this research was in progress, there was a stiff gas saga between the Government and the community in Mtwara region. This followed the discovery of gas which triggered the economic direction of the region and the country at large leading to the in-flow of investors in the region. This in a way catalyzed the fierce resistance to this research from the local community as some of them were even citing some areas in the Mtwara region that were taken by investors.

4.1 Community Engagement Strategies for Sustainable Heritage

Due to an increase in threats to cultural heritage resources (Gabriel, 2019), the UNESCO General Conference meeting in Paris at its 17th session adopted a special convention in 1972 to manage and protect these resources (UNESCO, 1972). This convention, whose aim is to protect both natural and cultural heritage resources of outstanding value, is known as Convention Concerning the Protection of Natural and Cultural Heritage. Modern heritage conservation and management in Africa is a recent phenomenon and dates back to the 19th century. From this period the mandate to manage, conserve and present cultural heritage resources were, and still are, vested in national museums, universities and Antiquities departments or shared between these institutions/ departments (Gabriel 2015; Ndoro, 2001).

Dominant in the UNESCO conventions and documentation is a characterization of heritage as "At risk" and "In danger" and therefore, as requiring "Protection" and "Conservation." While connotations of precariousness are not necessarily as explicit or pronounced in all heritage discourse, the idea that heritage needs to be and should be preserved is integral to how it is usually understood (Harrison, 2013). This means that, as soon as an object or practice is identified as "Heritage," it becomes surrounded by a set of assumptions and practices concerning its need for protection in order to ensure that it endures into the future. As such, this preservationist discourse and practice typically "Freezes" the cultural forms that are designated as heritage. Heritage, in other words, is imagined and produced as enduring unchanged over time (Macdonald, 2018).

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

From the presentation of facts and discussion, one finds local community awareness and engagement gaps in the practice of archaeological and heritage projects. This is revealed by the resistances and or passive cooperation that archaeologists and heritage experts encounter when conducting their projects. The incident discussed in this article is a lesson and a call for archaeologists and heritage professionals to go extra miles in their endeavors to realize local community awareness and engagement in conservation of cultural heritage resources. From the Mvita site encounter, a lot can be learned not only with regard to local community collaboration in undertaking archaeological research but also their understanding of the value of and need for conservation of heritage resources. It is, therefore, crucial that for the sake of sustainable conservation of heritage resources, continuous public education to local

community is mandatory. Together with other discussions, this article attempted a list of suggestions that if put into practice would be another milestone towards empowering local communities participation in conservation and preservation of heritages for the benefit of the current and future generations.

While acknowledging engagement initiatives being made by archaeologists and other heritage practitioners, there is a great need for them to give to their research projects a more participatory lens. Much of what has traditionally been practiced is more exclusive than inclusive. That means, only a small part of the local community, especially the local authorities and local assistants get chance to know what is going on in archaeological and heritage projects. So, there is a *lacuna* of inclusion as far as the entire community is concerned. That is actually what came out as a fact in this encounter under discussion. It is for that reason that the following suggestions are hereunder listed for consideration if we are to realize local community inclusion and participation in the practice of archaeological and heritage projects:

Public talks prior to the undertaking of archaeological and heritage projects is of utmost importance. Conventionally, there have been 'vertical' approaches to public engagement in expense of 'horizontal' approaches. The former refers to the engagement of only local authorities and assistants, while the later calls for engagement of broader community representatives. Negotiating the meaning of cultural heritage according to local community perspectives – it was observed in this encounter that the professional understanding of cultural heritage may not necessarily be the same as the local community's perceptions.

The reflections on cultural differences regarding the way of dealing with contentious heritage should also be considered. During the interaction with locals at the site, it was observed that there were divided perceptions on the importance of conduction excavation at the site. While some members of the group agreed, some other members resisted the project.

Explore precarious political relations and affiliations among the locals that could lead to uncommon ground of understanding the importance of heritage protection. This was so vivid in this study whereby the village chairman (from the opposition party by then) was put under pressure by those who were affiliated to the ruling party on the ground that the chairman did not see the importance of informing his people about the research project in their area; and continuous awareness programmes while the research is in progress. Admittedly, this was among the weaknesses that happened in conduct of the research project as no much of awareness sessions were done prior to excavation stage of the project.

Apart from the regional/district research clearance(s) that are normally taken to the villages/wards government authorities as part of introduction for the researcher(s) and their project, it is also important to equally get clearance document from the local authorities. If this could have been the case in this study, it is obvious that the resistance from the locals would probably have been minimized. Post-research dissemination public talks programmes. Among the silly mistakes that most of archaeology and heritage researchers do is to ignore dissemination part of their research projects. It is, therefore, advised to conduct publics meetings after research completion for dissemination purposes.

That is to say, working closely with media (Radio and Television) for easy communication of heritage information to the local community and education on the need for conservation of heritage resources.

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