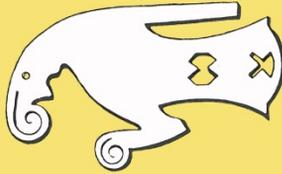


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The Archaeology of the Lowland Maya and in Eastern Africa

A Discussion of Some Selected Common Issues

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The article discusses a number of issues related to archaeological research in the lowland Maya area of Mesoamerica and in eastern Africa. Some similarities and dissimilarities in theory and practice are briefly touched upon, letting points be made in a fashion that would not have been possible without the stipulated, particular background of the discussion. An ever-critical attitude of the archaeologist is argued for.

Keywords: *Maya, East Africa, archaeological practice.*

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Introduction

Archaeological practice anywhere in the world faces problems of diverse natures. Sometimes these are similar in kind, while at other times they are typical of the specific region. In a recent issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Research*, a series of articles made an immediate impact upon me by stimulating some thoughts on rather delicate issues in archaeological research. The first of these articles, entitled "Where is lowland Maya archaeology headed?" (Marcus 1995), sought to isolate research trends by reviewing the last decade of lowland Maya archaeology, while the second, "The last 200,000 years (or thereabouts) in eastern Africa: recent archaeological research" (Robertshaw 1995), dealt with recent archaeological research in eastern Africa, trying to identify

specific research emphases in that region. These were thus very similar in their general form of contents, i.e. syntheses of archaeological research in a specific region, identifications of various research foci and suggestions about the direction which research will take in the near future. A third article, “Worldwide cross-cultural studies and their relevance for archaeology” (Ember & Ember 1995), added the final bridge between the two former, discussing a number of ways in which worldwide cross-cultural research may be used in archaeological inferences. Due to my personal – though modest – experience of archaeological research in the two regions, I saw the combination of these articles as an incentive to make a brief comparison between archaeological practice in Mesoamerica and in eastern (and, to some extent, southern) Africa.

I do not by any means lay claim to be a specialist in either field. However, I do have some experience in both allowing me to formulate some selected common issues that may be of interest either to those who are concerned with archaeological practice in either of the two areas or to the general, primarily Swedish, academic readership of this journal, who may not be very well acquainted with the material. For the latter, the article may serve as an introduction of the archaeologies of the two areas under consideration.

I have refrained from presenting summaries of lowland Maya and eastern African archaeology and chosen a thematic presentation and discussion of issues of particular interest. However, for the reader not familiar with the archaeology of the Maya area or in eastern Africa, some basic chronological concepts have been summarized in tabular form (Tables 1 and 2). It goes without saying that the selection of themes is not exhaustive, nor is the discussion of each of them. Yet the selection allows some quite interesting points to be made in a fashion that would not have been undertaken without the particular archaeological prerequisites of the present paper. Therefore, I have allowed myself to deal with very complex issues, making space for perhaps undeservedly tentative discussions. However, I expect that the image of the past, present and future of archaeology, painted with very broad strokes, will provoke my colleagues to critical responses, filling the intellectual gaps inevitable in an ambitious project such as this.

Table 1. The chronology of the lowland Maya (adopted and modified from Sharer 1994, pp. 46–47; Marcus 1995; Velázquez Morlet & López de la Rosa 1988, pp. 30–31).

<i>Period</i>	<i>Chronology</i>	<i>Cultural developments</i>	<i>Sites</i>
Palaeoindian/ Archaic	c. 10 000– c. 2000 BC	First settling by hunters and gatherers of the lowlands in the coastal zone of Belize. Late in the period, early food production.	Ladyville, Colha, Pull- trouser Swamp
Early Preclassic	c. 2000– 1000/900 BC	Mixed economies. Early sedentism along the Belize River.	Cuello, Copán
Middle Preclassic	1000/900– 400 BC	Expansion of settlement, initially along rivers into the central lowlands and later into non-riverine areas. Initial monumental architecture. Origins of complex economic, social and political institutions.	Nakbe
Late Preclassic	400 BC– AD 100	Monumental architecture. Development of complex social, political and economic systems. Origins of state systems.	Lamanai, El Mirador, Cerros, Uaxactun, Komchen
Protoclassic	AD 100–250	Initial, sculptured, stone monuments with hieroglyphic texts and dates. Development of dynastic rule. Sudden decline.	
Early Classic	AD 250–600	Expansion of Maya elite culture to peripheries of central lowlands. Increasing competition and warfare among polities.	Tikal, Uaxactun, Rio Azul, Yaxha, Nakum, Calakmul, Becan
Late Classic	AD 600–800	Growth in size and population at many northern centres. Peak of population and size at most central and southern lowlands centres.	Dos Pilas, Aguateca, Altar de Sacrificios, Yaxchilan, Copán, Bonampak, Piedras Negras, Palenque, Xunantunish
Terminal Classic	AD 800– 900/1000	Puntun Maya expansion. Decline at many central and southern centres. Rise of Puuc centres in the north. Population loss and eventual abandonment of many central and southern centres. Domination by Chichen Itza in the north.	Seibal, Edzna, Coba, Uxmal, Kabah, Sayil, Dzibilchaltun, Chichen Itza
Late Postclassic	AD c. 1300– 1517	Fall of Mayapan. Political fragmentation in the northern lowlands.	Mayapan, Tulum

Table 1 (*cont.*).

<i>Period</i>	<i>Chronology</i>	<i>Cultural developments</i>	<i>Sites</i>
Early Postclassic	AD 900/1000– c. 1300	Chichen Itza abandoned. Domination by Mayapan in the north.	Chichen Itza, Mayapan
Late Postclassic	AD c. 1300– 1517	Fall of Mayapan. Political fragmentation in the northern lowlands.	Mayapan, Tulum
Protohispanic	AD 1517–1550	Initial period of Spanish conquest.	Lamanai, Tipu

Table 2. Chronological concepts of the later prehistory of eastern Africa (adopted and modified from Gabel 1992a; Gabel 1992b; Sinclair 1991).

<i>Archaeological entity</i>	<i>Chronology</i>	<i>Terminology-bound cultural traits</i>	<i>Sites</i>
Later Stone Age	c. 10 000?– c. 3/2000? BC	Hunting-and-gathering economies with a microlithic technology.	Lothagam, Lowasera, Ishango, Gamble's Cave, Prolonged Drift
Non-iron using food producing communities	c. 5000?– c. 0 BC	Economies based on the rearing of cattle or aquaric resources. Use of ceramics. Early cultivation.	Njoro River Cave, Narosura, Seronera, Kanjera
Early iron using farming communities	c. 500 BC– c. AD 1000	Sedentary crop growth. Iron production. Ceramic traditions: Urewe, Kwale, Lelesu, Uvinza. Growth of interregional trade.	Urewe, Kwale, Kataruka, Nyamsunga
Later iron using farming communities	c. AD 1000– c. 1700	Political centralization and state formation. Development of interregional trade. Extended metallurgical technology. Improved agricultural methods.	Taita Hills, Mubende

Primary themes

The themes under discussion are numerous, varied and diverse. Matters of consistency are sacrificed on the altar of variation. Nevertheless, the governing idea running through all of the themes will present itself to the attentive reader.

Theme I: The problem of terminology

A quick glance through the summaries in Tables 1 and 2 may give the impression that matters of chronology and terminology are concluded and fixed for the prehistory of the Maya and in eastern Africa alike. Besides giving a false impression, the construction of summaries is in general an act of vanity; for better or for worse, chronological tables present easily accessible, comprehensive accounts of the truly immense and *de facto* inconceivable ways of human life. On the other hand, of course, they are tools in the attempts of archaeology to grasp understandable aspects of prehistoric man, to interpret and present these within an explanatory framework, both in the academia and to the general public.

The terminological discussion in African archaeology has recently been summarized critically very well (Sinclair, Shaw & Andah 1993, pp. 3–9). Central to the critique is the historical adoption of European terminologies for the description and interpretation of the African past, intimately linked to the colonial past and to the contemporary neo-colonialistic and imperialistic practice of archaeology in Africa by some European and American professionals. The abandonment of several labels has been suggested (for example, the neolithic), while the metamorphosis of others is quite illustrative of the complexity of the matter. The term “Iron Age” was introduced into southern Africa in the early fifties, in part to replace the racial connotations of the label “Bantu”. However, the racial link has continued to be embedded in the term: its use has led to the identification of supposed particular racial types on the basis of their possession of a particular technology. Alternatives have thus been proposed regularly: the early iron age industrial complex, the Chifumbaze complex, the Mwituu tradition and, quite recently, the early iron-using farming communities, all covering significant geographical parts of eastern and southern Africa during, roughly, the first millennium AD.

In Maya archaeology, an alternative to the very firmly established terminology has recently been proposed (Sharer 1994, p. 49). Here, the issue is quite different in detail, centring on the biased epithet “Classic”, to which a prefix denoting a temporal relation is joined (pre-, proto-, terminal or post-). Such a terminology suggests that there was a rigid, clear, single, temporally defined heyday when “Maya civilization” was at its height. Recent field research, however, suggests no such thing, but rather temporal and spatial oscillations of social, economic and cultural

ups and downs, transforming hegemony at various levels between different constellations of polities (Marcus 1995, pp. 21–23).

It is important that vital critiques should be put forward, questioning ad hoc explanations and taken-for-granted, at what ever level they may occur. One of the most important tasks may be to scrutinize continuously the chronological frameworks with their terminological expressions, containing openly expressed and hidden meaning and symbolism, providing, as they do, the (mis)conceptional frameworks in which everyday archaeological research problems are dealt with.

Theme II: Material culture equals ethnic belonging?

In the Maya area, an observed radical change in chipped-stone technology from the Archaic to later times has recently been discussed, employing the concept of ethnic replacement, i.e. the makers of the Archaic points were considered “non-Maya” and were later supposedly replaced by “Maya” peoples. This hypothesis of ethnic replacement, however, assumes a close link between Maya speakers and chipped-stone technology and has been strongly contested. Another line of argument has explained the change in terms of technological change, reflecting the shift from hunting and gathering to tree-felling for agriculture. Furthermore, recent research at a couple of sites has suggested a clear continuity bridging the technological change (Marcus 1995, pp. 6–8).

A direct parallel to the Maya ethnic hypothesis, the long-standing debate in eastern and southern African archaeology over a more wide than healthy acceptance of a close link between Bantu speakers and ceramics and the implications for migration and ethnic replacement in African prehistory, is currently increasing among the younger professionals in the field. As we have seen, terminological changes have been applied in order to escape the most evident abuses of a simple equation between a contemporary linguistic group and an archaeological entity. Recently initiated research in southern Africa has further emphasised a continuity bridging the supposed sudden break in material culture previously adopted as the signal of ethnic replacement.

Evidently, there are strong arguments and opinions against the link. The major reason for this is that, if technological change is simply explained in terms of population change, then, in one way or another, the

dynamics and initiatives of prehistoric man are taken away from him. Most Africans are heartily tired of having their past recurrently portrayed in such an absurdly wrong fashion. Furthermore, in both areas, archaeological theories of ethnic replacement run the risk of having serious political connotations and implications and, in particular, supporting an exploiting ideology. There is an extreme classic example: during the time of the fascist regime of the Republic of South Africa, simple arguments by advocates of apartheid used selected archaeological data in order to show that Boer immigration was no later than the Bantu-speaking peoples' settling of the land. Therefore, the argument ran, they had equal historical rights to the country.

Theme III: Whose past is being studied? Creating inequality among the dead

That mortuary practices in several archaeological cultures reflect inequalities in terms of social status is well known and has attracted a significant body of research. However, looking at a slightly different problem and using the same concepts, we notice that inequality was not only an experienced fact for prehistoric man but is also, through a biased selection of research topics, continually created by archaeologists. The argument is this: through the research emphasis on the upper halves of social hierarchies, these people are automatically adjudged as being more interesting as an object of study and thus having greater value than those in the lower tiers of the hierarchy. That is, inequality is being created; inequality in terms of whom it is worth spending research efforts on.

In the history of eastern African coastal archaeology, this problem has had overtones of racism. For instance, it is fairly well known that Neville Chittick in his research at the site of Kilwa, off the southern Tanzanian coast, discarded the locally made wares as being of less importance and favoured the study of the imported ceramics. However, it can safely be stated that such a biased approach is among the rarities in contemporary research (cf. Matteru 1992).

For the archaeology of the Maya area, the creation of inequality has been quite an evident anomaly. By far the greater part of the work has been devoted to the top two tiers of the social formations, directing field

excavation primarily to monumental stone-built structures. Not until lately has it come to attention that not only the top levels of the state hierarchy need to be studied. A reconstruction of Maya life, society and polity, solely based on the perspective of the elites, remains biased and impoverished (Marcus 1995, p. 19). Therefore, studies of the lower levels and the settlement areas of the commoners should produce new and interesting results. Indeed, recent research has successfully encompassed a holistic view of the complex kinship-based social systems of the Maya (i.e. McAnany 1995).

Theme IV: The employment of a conjunctive approach

In the study of the prehistory of the Maya, there has been a substantial increase in the integration of multiple evidence, *the conjunctive approach*. This has been attested by the incorporation of the work of surveyors, ethnohistorians, ceramicists, epigraphers, palynologists, human osteologists, faunal analysts, ethnobotanists, chipped stone experts, etc. in quite a number of archaeological projects. A perfect example of this is the project entitled *Territorio y Poder: Estudio y Análisis Regional de la Zona Camino Real Alto (Provincia Ah Canul) en Campeche*, basically a social-systems project principally concerned with inter- and intra-site settlement-pattern data, in which the conjunctive approach has been taken through the inclusion of, inter alia, epigraphers and palynologists. Closely related to the increase in conjunctive approaches is a mounting concern with context and provenience, both vital to the development of convincing arguments from evidence (Marcus 1995, pp. 3–4).

In studying very tentatively the literature of Maya archaeology, I have tried to define the research according to the four archaeological paradigms once proposed by David Clarke (1972, pp. 6–7). Although my conclusions are more in the nature of qualified guesses than the results of a thorough analysis, and though Clarke's division may be criticized for being rather dated (however, I think that those general paradigms are still relevant and sum up pretty well the *de facto* archaeology of the 1980's and 1990's), they may add to the general picture of the direction which Mayan archaeology is taking. The analysis has been applied to the 400-entry bibliography of references and recent, lowland

Mayan archaeology published in Marcus (1995). About half of the studies could not be adjudged to be following any of the paradigms. Morphological studies were in the lead, while anthropological, geographical and ecological studies followed not far behind. It was quite clear that there is in this respect a widespread focus in the study of Maya prehistory.

A similar approach has previously been taken to the study of archaeological literature in Kenya (Isendahl 1993), showing that morphological studies dominate the history of Kenyan archaeology. Furthermore, the proportion that emerged from Clarke's classification was not at all as high as in the case of Maya archaeology. For the last fifteen years or so, it has been possible to infer an increasing interest in geographically and ecologically oriented research.

Theme V: Entities in a large-scale context

Two very fundamental and recently noticed issues, one in each area, concern the large-scale contexts of social formations. In the study of the prehistoric Maya, the conceptualisation of the position of the Maya, in the large-scale context in which it had a part, has oscillated between *unique* and *identical to the rest of Mesoamerica*, in much the same way as the study of the eastern African coast has been haunted by the *external–internal input* debate on urban origins (Marcus 1995, p. 25; Robertshaw 1995, p. 69). It is indeed time that these complex issues should be dealt with in a way that recognises the complexity of the matter. Luckily, in the archaeology of the eastern African coast, this has been successfully accomplished by research in the last few years (cf. Abungu & Mutoro 1993).

In social anthropology, economic history and archaeology, theorists have, for some twenty years now, discussed the nature and positions of world systems (for example, Friedman 1994 and Rowlands 1987). It is important not to let the interpretation of archaeological research issues be caught between the Scylla of uniqueness (or internal) and the Charybdes of its negation (or external). They are all concepts that may be exchanged for a more proper understanding through the employment of a holistic conceptualisation within a world-systems approach.

Theme VI: Early European colonial expansion. Implications for ethno-archaeology and as a theme of study

To many professional European archaeologists, African archaeology simply equals ethno-archaeology, defined as “the study of contemporary non-western societies for analogue comparisons with archaeological material culture”. As African archaeology exists in its own right, this is a regrettable position. Furthermore, the critics of ethno-archaeology argue that such an approach is invalid, as it prevents contemporary societies from having dynamic histories, condemning them to be nothing more than objects in a living, prehistoric museum. Additionally, and this is important, it has been argued that no society has been left unaffected by European or other outside influence (Ember & Ember 1995, pp. 95–96), a position that leads to a fundamental research question: how, where and why did European expansion have the impact that has been ascribed to it?

The year 1992 was marked globally by the commemoration of the quincentenary of Columbus’s landfall in the Americas. Passions ran high, and history was often used for political ends. However, it is time to set the record straight and to study the detailed effect and consequences of the conquest. According to popular belief, more or less the entire native population of Mesoamerica was wiped out by diseases, war and exploitation soon after the European arrival. Although the conquest had devastating effects in all of these areas, such a general, all-encompassing image of the effect of European expansion in the Americas does not hold true when studied specifically at the local level at particular sites (cf. Pendergast 1993).

Accordingly, a detailed comparative analysis, using a conjunctive approach, of the objectives, realisation and gains of late 15th and 16th century European expansion, on the one hand, and local and regional responses, adaptations, gains, resistance and effects in the economic and social spheres of the Maya and the eastern African populations, on the other, would form a research theme that would enable new data to come through, new and re-interpretations to be made, and the theory of the basic, historical, economic and social foundations on which the world of today rests to be re-activated.

Theme VII: Making archaeology relevant to people

In performing the field surveying, mapping and excavation within the project entitled *Territorio y Poder: Estudio y Análisis Regional de la Zona Camino Real Alto (Provincia Ah Canul) en Campeche* at a post-classic site in Mexico, archaeologists were assisted by men from the Maya village of Halál, situated about 4 kilometres from the site, with the clearing of the thick vegetation. Most of the men of the village had at one time or another been at the site, perhaps tending the cattle in the shrubbery covering part of the site, and had some sort of idea what it represented. However, one day we invited all the villagers, including the women, who had not been there before, and their children, to see our work. We also arranged a guided tour of the more spectacular parts of the site, including a magnificent carved stone stela portraying a ruler, a ground chamber for water storage (a *chultun*), and an impressive stone structure, some 30 metres in height and a little short of 100 metres at the base. One of our assistants, who was acting as interpreter, narrated an impressive vision of the past and of the accomplishments of the forefathers of his fellow-villagers. It was one of those rare moments when archaeology fully makes sense.

In a time of general, global, economic recession and social unrest, not least in Mexico and eastern Africa, it is of mounting concern to discuss the relevance of archaeology. Sometimes, as in the example cited above, a brief, impressionistic moment of clarity may be illustrative, while at other times it needs to be discussed more seriously, identifying the context and concepts of the problem. This, however, will be the object of a detailed analysis and the subject of a subsequent paper.

Conclusions

The various themes discussed throughout this paper have touched upon a series of problems found in archaeological research. I have tried to show that quite a few archaeological issues discussed in one part of the world have also been discussed in another, though the details have been different. Some issues that seem to be endemic, may be quite analogous to a particular issue elsewhere. In order to avoid the continuously biased

interpretation of data, originally collected in order to gain better insights into the living conditions of prehistoric man, the tools we use need to be repeatedly scrutinized. We also need to cogitate upon which kind of data that we look for, why we do that, and what we expect to find. We have to look for still better concepts to mirror our data.

I have suggested an original research topic that would need the incorporation of research in both of the archaeological regions discussed in the present paper. It is an issue that would enlarge our knowledge of the past and, thus, of the present.

Grand in scheme, what it all comes round to in the end is, indeed, reflection.

English revised by Neil Tomkinson

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