

Examen écrit- Session 1 - Semestre 1 2020-2021

Langue : Anglais	Niveau : 5	Date : Janvier 2021	Durée : 1h30
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Here's why we need more African archaeologists

By Sada Mire, published in The Guardian. 31 Oct 2020

§1 Cultural heritage is a basic human need. Yes – humans don't only need food and shelter, culture is required for them to survive and thrive. Our cultural values glue us to one another and help us create security and a community. I believe that cultural and archaeological sites can be part of that basic human need, too. Cemeteries and sacred places form part of our identity. Often these places are even more critical in times of crises as people search for solace¹ and answers.

§2 History keeps us in touch with this identity and sense of community, yet in Africa it has been the preserve of the white investigators. In colonial Africa, archaeology evolved in a different manner to the archaeology of Britain and France, the colonial powers. In Britain, it started as a grassroots project in the 18th century, run by regional societies (...), which formed clubs and built collections and libraries. It went from focusing on religious art and ruined monasteries to the Roman era and antiquities, before later becoming more democratic and common in the 20th century.

§3 In colonial Africa, in contrast, archaeology's slogan was "what have natives got to do with it?" Research teams were strangers to the places they studied. The white district commissioner would order local chiefs in the relevant areas to provide labourers. Other locals stayed away from the sites. The research focus was on natural science and colonial history. African archaeology changed somewhat during independence, to include Islamic states in west Africa and Swahili sultanates in east Africa. This new focus mainly reiterated the "civilising" element of outside connections (in these cases Arab ones), rather than any local cultural achievements. Only in the 1980s did native archaeologists start entering the picture. However, even today archaeology, in Africa and elsewhere, is a field almost completely dominated by white people, more often than not from the upper and middle classes.

§4 I studied archaeology in Europe, and when I went back to Africa I assumed that the methods I had learned applied universally. However, I quickly realised that locals had traditional ways of preserving their heritage. Their approach preserved knowledge and skills rather than objects or monuments. It is easy to take for granted our way of keeping things in museums. Yet many cultures do not have the tradition of museums as a concept. They are a

¹ comfort, consolation

European transplant in much of the world. Instead, knowledge is passed on through oral culture, festivals, songs, poems, commemorations and casual conversations and observations. Heritage can be just as much about relationships and performance.

§5 Though I know of colleagues who live and work long-term with the communities they study in order to gain as much knowledge as possible to improve the work, they are very few in number. I realised locals did not relate to the kind of archaeology that many did in Africa, with its focus on the origin of things or how old something was. This is because history is a living part of culture and it has an active role in current social issues, often involving ongoing rituals and performances. Studying this involves more than excavating objects from the ground.

§6 Bassey Andah, the late Nigerian archaeologist, introduced training programmes in the late 1970s that were adapted to the interests of contemporary African societies. Inspired by his work, I learned that by studying ideas and how they are related to everyday cultural objects and oral history we can gain a better understanding of, for example, statehood and ideologies in the Horn of Africa². We need, then, not only an archaeology adapted to African needs and aspirations but also more African archaeologists, who can enrich the science.

§7 African archaeologists have much to offer. Beyond their archaeological training, they can tap into cultural knowledge and approaches that foreign archaeologists may not have access to. Often, they have different questions for the past, shaped by intimate familiarity with their societies and cultures, and these can contribute to advances in the field. When my team's cosmology and archeoastronomy work was showcased in a documentary, we did not realise we were part of something unique: archaeology offered up to millions of global viewers by a local black team. People were very excited to be presented with their heritage by local researchers. Similar excitement was evident when an Egyptian mission recently discovered 58 mummies. There was clear pride over the fact that it was "an Egyptian mission" and "Egyptian hands" that had made the discovery of what was called "the gift of the century". Egypt, of course, is a country whose archaeological heritage was until the mid-20th century only associated with foreign teams, with Egyptians only featuring as "workers".

§8 It isn't always easy for African archaeologists, of course. Their ground-breaking research is often either appropriated or ignored, and that comes on top of disparities in funding and publications. And not all locals are happy that Africans or even their own men and women are doing archaeology because they are used to seeing white people do it, and might have internalised a certain level of prejudice.

§9 Despite this, African archaeologists have the potential to change their field and how it is seen, as well as advancing our knowledge of African culture and history. Hopefully more will be drawn to the field, and discover the delights of this unique profession. That is surely something to look forward to.

Dr Sada Mire is a Swedish-Somali archaeologist, art historian and presenter

² Region of eastern Africa, home to the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

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DO NOT WRITE ON THIS DOCUMENT. EVERYTHING SHOULD BE WRITTEN ON THE EXAM PAPER SHEET. THANK YOU!

PART 1: COMPREHENSION (10 pts)

*In your own words, answer **the two questions** in 80-100 words each.*

- 1) Explain why the methods and concepts developed by European archeologists to preserve heritage are ill-adapted to the African context. (5 pts)
- 2) What are the obstacles to the advancement of “an archeology adapted to African needs and aspirations”? Why are these obstacles difficult to overcome? (5 pts)

PART 2: WRITTEN EXPRESSION (10 pts)

*Choose **one** of the following subjects and write a 250-word essay (+/- 10%). Your essay should be well-organized and contain appropriate arguments and examples.*

Please note that, when relevant, you are expected to use other references from the documents you have read/studied on the topic of ‘The preservation of heritage in the 21st century’.

A) According to Dr Sada, “Cultural heritage is a basic human need. (...) culture is required for [humans] to survive and thrive.” Discuss this idea.

B) In a Tedx Talk broadcast in 2014, Dr Sada Mira further explains that for the Somali diaspora women she interviewed, heritage is the memories, the experiences rather than the objects and the museums you put them in. As a result, they don’t experience a sense of loss as long as they can pass on that knowledge. By comparison, would you say that Westerners are too focused on the materiality and monumentality of heritage? Discuss.