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December 2010 Newsletter

African and Africanist Archaeologists Voice Their Support of Anthropology at Howard University

By Flordeliz T. Bugarin*

President Sidney A. Ribeau is in the middle of deliberations regarding the future of anthropology at Howard University. After announcing on September 23, 2010 that he is considering closing the undergraduate majors¹ in anthropology and African studies, among other majors and programs, he set aside a period of discussion and requested responses and suggestions from students and faculty.² We are just coming out of this period and are waiting for the announcement of his final decision. We expect to hear news in January 2011.



1. Various representatives from the administration at Howard University have reminded us that the recommendation on the table is to close the anthropology major and not the program. The Anthropology Program at Howard University, however, currently includes only undergraduate students. We do not have a masters or doctorate program. Closing the major may inhibit students' abilities to obtain a concentration of courses in anthropology, particularly in archaeology and bioarchaeology.

2. See Bugarin et al. 2010 and <http://blog.aaanet.org/2010/10/28/an-impending-death-for-anthropology-at-howard-university>.

The last few months on campus have been a whirlwind of town hall meetings, visits by deans and the Provost to departments, and constructive discussions within the Howard community. During this process and in response to the President's announcement, the anthropology faculty submitted a document that highlighted the strengths of our program and the benefits we bring to Howard University in terms of research, funding, and service. As part of our contributions, we highlighted the projects and collections within our department that focus on the archaeology and bioarchaeology of Africa and the African Diaspora. Our program is well known due to the New York African Burial Ground Project. We also house the W. Montague Cobb Human Skeletal Collection. In addition, faculty direct projects such as the Buffalo Soldiers Archaeological Project, the Walter C. Pierce Park African American Burial Ground Project, and the Nicodemus, Kansas, Birth of an African American Town Archaeology Project. The archaeological projects in Africa include the James Island, Gambian Slave-Trading Site Project and work done on trade in the 19th century between the British and the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

Through our research projects and collaborations with colleagues, we have been able to offer many opportunities for students. In our response to the President, we outlined the internships, field schools, and jobs regularly available to Howard undergraduates, especially those who are interested in graduate studies and careers in archaeology and bioarchaeology. Just recently, reporters took notice of two of our undergraduates³, Shayla Monroe and Alex Brueggeman, who were hired by the National Park Service to help with excavations of the Best Farm Slave Village at Monocacy National Battlefield in Maryland. One of our alumni, Justin Dunnevant, recently completed a Fulbright in Jamaica and is now studying archaeology as a graduate student at the University of Florida. Many of our other students have also won awards, presented papers at professional conferences, participated in various archaeological internships and jobs, and moved on to doctoral programs.

While our faculty presented these successes and thus many reasons to maintain an anthropology major for Howard undergraduates, we also proposed alternative suggestions to

³ Shayla Monroe was interviewed in the Baltimore Sun and USA Today. Alex Brueggeman was interviewed by reporters from the Washington Post, NPR, and CNN. Authors from Essence Magazine expressed interest in talking to our students, but have not yet conducted interviews with them.

grow the program while working under campus budget constraints -- approaches that we felt would support the President's vision for an interdisciplinary curriculum, maintain a program of academic excellence, and enhance efforts to emphasize research. In addition to presenting the individual achievements within our program, we highlighted the unique role of anthropology in all programs of higher learning and the discipline's contributions to both national and international communities.

Perhaps strengthening our appeal to keep the anthropology major in tact were the many voices outside of our campus community. Along with colleagues, students, and other supporters, the African and Africanist archaeologists were united in their concern regarding possible changes at Howard University.

On November 5, 2010, delegates from all over Africa, the United States, and many other parts of the world convened in Dakar, Senegal for the 13th PanAfrican Archaeological Association Congress. The association was originally established in Kenya by the initial efforts of Louis Leakey. The first congress took place in 1947, and apart from a few postponements, it continued to meet every six years.

This year, the congress met jointly with the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, an organization that comes together biennially and is composed of international members who also share an interest in African archaeology and African societies. In Dakar, the combined meetings attracted many individuals interested in African history, archaeology, anthropology, and heritage preservation and management.

During the business meetings of each association, members were asked to consider the ramifications of the situation at Howard University. With resounding support, members voted in favor of a resolution that directed their presidents to urge President Ribeau to support the Anthropology Program and reconsider his recommendation to close the major. Many agreed to send a letter that expressed the importance of anthropology, particularly archaeology, as a fundamental part of academia.

Dr. Paul Lane, former President of the Society for Africanist Archaeologists (2008-2010) entitled his letter "Expression of Concern over the Future of the Anthropology Program at Howard University." Reiterating the position of Howard faculty, he stressed that "the Anthropology Program at Howard plays a vital role in promoting and sustaining African and African American involvement in archaeology and anthropology. Both these groups are

woefully underrepresented at present in the broader discipline within the United States, yet they form the core constituency for the program at Howard.” He went on to say that our focus on bioarchaeology and the archaeology of Africa and the African Diaspora puts us in a “unique and extremely strong position” to recruit and train African Americans, Africans, and other minorities. He pointed out that our program, in comparison to other courses in the United States, uniquely offers perspectives regarding the history and cultural evolution of people of African descent.

Dr. Lane suggests that the Anthropology Program at Howard University plays an important role in fostering diversity within archaeology as well as other areas in anthropology. As we usher minorities into a discipline that facilitates understanding of cultural differences, we also help students appreciate why an understanding of the past can help us build a better future.

On November 18, 2010, Professor Benjamin Smith of South Africa, newly elected President of the Pan African Archaeological Association, profoundly wrote:

As Sir Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana noted in 1970. “It should now be our intention to try to retrieve what we can of our past. We should write our own history books to prove that we did have a past, and that it was a past that was just as worth writing and learning about as any other. We must do this for the simple reason that a nation without a past is a lost nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul.”

40 years on, the power of this message is, if anything, stronger. In the intervening years anthropologists and archaeologists have proven that Africa was the cradle of humanity, the place where our species, material culture, technology, language, art and religion began, flourished and then spread out to other parts of the world. For African Americans anthropology and archaeology therefore provide something even more profound than that of which Seretse Khama dreamed. These disciplines have shown that everything we see in the world today has grown up from African roots and upon a basis of African knowledge. This is a message for Africans and African Americans that can instil the strongest sense of place and purpose in the world today. And, in a socially divided world, being reminded by anthropology that all humanity shares common African roots, that we are all part of one single African human family, is also of huge value.

No other disciplines, no numbers of engineers, chemists, architects, mathematicians or geographers can provide such a powerful and empowering message upon which to build a new generation of African American leaders. For those of African descent, anthropology provides the sense of pride and of purpose that is so crucial to forge the leaders of tomorrow. Anthropology is therefore a subject that should be compulsory for every undergraduate at Howard and, given your special history, Howard should strive to be the world’s leading centre for

African anthropology. Any external pressures to constrain the growth and purpose of anthropology at Howard should be repulsed.

As President Ribeau considers new directions for the future of Howard University and forges a path that strengthens the prominence of our institution in an international arena, he will most likely face difficult decisions. In conjunction, many who are interested in the archaeology of Africa and the African Diaspora will probably continue dialogues regarding representation within our discipline as well as new approaches to preserving our profession regardless of the makeup of our practitioners.

Maybe we can gain insight from the words of Kofi A. Annan, the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations and recipient of an honorary degree from Howard University. On May 8, 1999, he presented a commencement address to the graduating class during the 131st Convocation.⁴ During it, he said:

As an African among African-Americans, I value deeply the legacy of Howard University. It is one of the great institutions of African and African-American learning in the world.

Howard University was established in the noble cause of educating African-Americans. Over the years, it has also trained many Africans who have gone on to make major contributions to their countries and to the world.

As Africans and African-Americans, we are joined in our debt to a pioneer of progress, for Howard and the United Nations.

Friends: Nowhere today is radical change more acutely needed -- or more dramatically in evidence -- than in Africa. Whether we find our more recent roots in Africa or not -- of course, we *all* descend from Lucy in Ethiopia -- all of us share the same mixture of feelings about the state of Africa today: pride in its past, disappointment with its present predicament, and hope for its future.

While the main points of his talk focused on political conflicts and social struggles within Africa, he set forth an underlying message. The poignancy of his words brings to mind the connection between the United States and countries in Africa and the interwoven bonds between the past, present, and future. The archaeology and bioarchaeology of Africa and the African Diaspora, as well as African studies, are an important part of that relationship. These areas of study reveal not only unique understandings of the past, but also how that past shapes the present

⁴ See <http://www.founders.howard.edu/commencement99/address.htm>.

and impacts the future. With a vibrant Anthropology Program and an intact major available to undergraduate students, Howard University has the potential to instill upon African and African American leaders the importance of African and African Diaspora heritage, archaeological sites, and a past that shapes the future.

Note

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