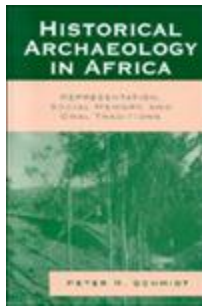


Book Review



Peter Schmidt. *Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006. xi + 316 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7591-0964-3; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0965-0.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Liza Gijanto, Syracuse University.

In his most recent text, *Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions*, Peter Schmidt compiles three decades of research in East Africa focused on iron producing communities. In particular, Schmidt presents an alternative approach to historical archaeology that embraces oral as well as written historical sources. He utilizes, and often includes entire sections of previous articles and his 1978 text, *Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in an African Culture*, where he initially addressed issues related to historical archaeology in the non-western world. Schmidt's new text demonstrates a well thought out approach that challenges not only the traditional sources of data which define historical archaeology, but also the dominant perceptions and narrow view of the field which centers on the west and European expansion.

The core of Schmidt's new approach is that archaeologists should incorporate all possible historical sources through: (1) the inclusion of oral histories and (2) the incorporation of social memory and mnemonics. Schmidt addresses each in turn and within his overall argument by dividing the text divided into two sections. The first section provides the historical background and components of Schmidt's new approach while the second section is largely focused on the process of making history including the appropriation of key locations on the landscape to assert political dominance. For Schmidt's purposes these locations were tied to iron production. To support this argument, he not only discusses his own work in East Africa but also addresses studies of iron smelting communities that have similar representations of human reproduction linked to technological and social practices revolving around the smelting process. Throughout the text key themes are emphasized and intertwined in Schmidt's overall argument that the 'unnatural' division between prehistoric and historic archaeology is largely defined by time rather than available sources as the name suggests. He furthers this argument by suggesting that this has lead to research framed within a western context of contact and later capitalism and colonialism, which denies numerous indigenous populations their history.

Schmidt argues most strongly for the incorporation of all available historical sources, emphasizing the importance of oral traditions. In Chapter 2, Schmidt revisits former essays to illustrate the historical development of the incorporation of oral sources in African archaeology as he perceives it. After presenting a brief history of the use of these sources Schmidt addresses the use of critical archaeology and the processes of making rather than discovering history. In particular, he demonstrates how his study of the Cwezi utilizes the 'tacking method' or moving critically between historic sources rather than using one source

to either validate or contradict another source (p. 53). He also stresses that oral histories, like written sources must be viewed within the contexts that they were created. He states that by being more open to sources such as oral histories and traditions, as well as being aware of historical representation and social memory tied to the landscape, archaeologists will be able to present a more complete image of the past.

Schmidt details the second component to this new approach, the incorporation of social memory and mnemonics, in Chapter 4. Again, he includes his original research to demonstrate the development of this application as it was initially applied it to understand the socio-temporal aspects of the Haya landscape. Schmidt theorizes that the connections made to the physical landscape -- natural and manmade -- are highly affected by the past and present political climate. This is then linked to the idea of tropes (Chapter 5) whereby these identified places then "function as a means of political domination, religious manipulation, and economic exploitation" (p. 99). Schmidt argues that by recognizing tropes, it is possible to identify periods of change, or sociopolitical disruption in the past. A central assumption of this point is that incoming groups seeking to gain political domination, thus reorienting the meaning of these spaces for their benefit, continuously usurp the same spaces. Schmidt notes that certain histories or traditions were known by some groups, but not others that resided in the region depending on the site's importance to their own political dominance. He illustrates this argument through a discussion of the role and status tied to ironworkers in African chiefdoms and kingdoms (pp. 111-17). He demonstrates how individual King's or clans would claim or legitimize their power by connecting themselves to iron production by physically occupying the same space where production occurs and using iron objects to symbolize their power.

The above points are ultimately reiterated through Schmidt's case study and critiques by demonstrating how tropes and mnemonics are interrelated through their contextual situation in oral traditions. Through detailed inquiry and investigation, it is possible to trace the development of tropes through time and thus trace change and conflict. Schmidt further suggests that by ignoring these sources of data because of a prejudice toward written colonial accounts, African historical archaeology is severely limited.

The final component of the first portion of the text addresses the physical components of the past highlighting the role of landscape in social memory (Chapter 6). Here Schmidt draws upon studies completed in North American historical archaeology as well as in Africa. However, he is aware that it is not enough to present an argument for this approach, or awareness of potential historical sources, but that an implementation of this is not possible unless one is also aware of the current context and recognizes that as researchers we are making rather than simply discovering history. Though it may not be intentional, his collaboration on several chapters with other researchers reiterates this, demonstrating the need for multiple points of view in interpretation of these layers created at various times by different groups seeking power in the region.

The second portion of the text is devoted to the discussion of what Schmidt refers to as a "historically informed archaeology" (p. 167). He highlights the impact of western thought (most notably the conceptualization of Africa as technologically backward), the impact of

colonial investigations, and African Independence on the development of archaeological practice in Africa. Again he incorporates previous works and a continued discussion of different aspects of his work with the Haya. This is supplemented by his own experiences as a foreign researcher in Tanzania and at the University of Dar es Salaam. In Chapter 8 Schmidt discusses the impact of the current and previous political climate on African archaeology including issues of funding. He argues that in order for archaeology to play a significant role, it must become an indigenous archaeology that incorporates all facets of history making beyond those favored in the west and by western researchers working throughout Africa. He also emphasizes an approach to historical interpretation that he refers to as the onion peel analogy, which stresses the fact that history is constantly recreated and therefore contains many individual layers within the whole. The complexity of the past is further emphasized by Schmidt's discussion of present-day politics and the role of African researchers in studying African archaeology.

Schmidt's final chapters implement his approach with direct application to his work on the Cwezi and Haya. Chapters 9 and 10 examine the interpretations of prominent Cwezi sites in Uganda (Bigo and Mubebde Hill) within a critical framework highlighting the past misuse of oral traditions, and their current reexamination within a critical historical archaeological framework as proposed in the first section of his text. Chapter 9 addresses the past interpretations of the Bigo site that was originally investigated in order to corroborate oral traditions that it served as a capital for the Cwezi. A critical reading of this study demonstrated a 'rerepresentation' of this site as Cwezi by colonial authorities who favored this group (pp. 226-28). Chapter 10 addresses the 'myth of statehood' created by the colonial government to legitimize the local kings they wished to hold power (p. 247). Here he discusses the past interpretations of Mubende Hill as a royal residence. However, recent research has demonstrated that the site was not a significant place of occupation during the Early Iron Age as previously believed. Again the former history was created for political legitimacy and the overall development of this Cwezi-centric past is ultimately placed within the larger eurocentric view of the Horn of Africa in Schmidt's final chapter.

Though Schmidt is careful, and ultimately successful in presenting his argument for a more informed historical archaeology of Africa, there is no final summation. Yet, it is clear if this is meant as a call for change throughout the field and not simply to raise awareness of the potential for a 'historically informed' archaeology in Africa. He provides several critiques of both historical archaeologists working in Africa and those that emphasize a capitalist definition yet also seems to limit himself in the same way by focusing on what he sees as non-traditional sources. Schmidt's work not only provides key insights to method in African archaeology, but also challenges historical archaeologists working throughout the world to utilize a wide variety of sources when interpreting the past as well as to move beyond the imposed prehistoric/historic period dichotomy as advocated by Lightfoot (1995) and others working in North America.

Reference Cited

Lightfoot, Kent G.

1995 "Culture Contact: Redefining the Relationship between Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology." *American Antiquity* 60(2) 199-217.