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Archaeology in the Nigerian University: International Lessons and Emerging Curriculum Issues

By Zacharys Anger Gundu*

Introduction

Scholars of archaeological research within regions of Africa and the African diaspora have increasingly emphasized the promise of comparative studies that includes research conducted by archaeologists trained within the nations of Africa. This promise will be best realized when the training and research designs of archaeologists in those nations become commensurate with that of researchers working at other sites world-wide. The education and training of archaeologists in Nigerian universities are still regrettably based on a curriculum that does not yet align with current technical or with emerging perspectives that require archaeologists to appreciate the public arena and the need to partner with the different publics in the study of the past and the production of archaeological knowledge. This lapse has adverse implications for the quality of archaeological approaches coming out of the Nigerian university system and has created an urgent need to rethink archaeological curricula, methods, and practice in Nigeria. This article presents an attempt to articulate this need and the salient issues for such an archaeological curriculum review process. Drawing on lessons in the training and education of archaeologists in other parts of the world, I propose that Nigerian archaeological practice will be significantly strengthened if training and education are predicated on a more robust curriculum that underscores archaeology as a field-based research discipline.

Compared to other parts of the world, archaeology is not a very common course of study in many African universities, especially in Nigeria. Out of a total of more than 100 universities in Nigeria, only three have full fledged 'Departments of Archaeology.' The oldest of these Departments was established in 1971 at the University of Ibadan under the direction of Professor Thurstan Shaw, who was then Research Professor at the Institute of African Studies, University

of Ibadan. The second oldest department, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, was established in 1981, while the most recently formed was established in 2006 at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.



Map of Nigeria (1993) with locations of Ibadan, Nsukka, and Zaria highlighted.

Archaeological curricula in these three universities are still heavily influenced by the initial concerns of archaeological practice in the country around art history underscored by the initial discoveries at Ife, Benin, Nok, Igbo Ukwu and other Nigerian sites (see Fagg 1977; Willet 1995; Garlake 1995; Lawal 1977; Adepegba 1983). Current archaeological curriculum content in Nigeria is tilted towards discovery, recovery, documentation and interpretation, with excavation as the central concern of field work. In many Nigerian universities, archaeology is still largely conceptualized as a ‘service discipline’ in the shadow of history and anthropology.

At both universities of Nsukka and Ahmadu Bello, archaeology was for a long time subsumed under history where it was taught and treated as a Cinderella of sorts. Archaeologists on the faculty of many other universities -- especially the universities of Benin, Jos, Port Harcourt, Maiduguri and the Benue State University, Makurdi -- are merely serving history and other anthropological courses. This has not only created a 'crisis of confidence' for the discipline in the country, but has also undermined the quality of archaeological training and education.

At the University of Ibadan, following the unpopularity of archaeology within and outside the campus, the desertion of students from the Department (to other disciplines) led to the near-collapse of the Department (see Ogundele 2007), and the name of the Department was hastily changed to Archaeology and Anthropology. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka responded to a similar challenge by changing the name of the Archaeology Department to Archaeology and Tourism. While these name changes underscore attempts at relevance and public appeal, they are not only cosmetic but entirely besides the point of a more significant issue: the extent to which current archaeological curricula are relevant to Nigeria's development needs and consistent with the range of existing and potential challenges in the field.

Current Challenges in the Education and Training of Archaeologists in Nigeria

Although there is a lack of empirical evidence from departmental, student, and stakeholder surveys, one can observe that the sociopolitical context within which archaeology is practiced in the country has changed significantly. While the number of Nigerian archaeologists being trained locally is increasing, the challenges of post-colonial archaeology and advances in the theory and practice of archaeology in other parts of the world are increasingly calling into question the capacity of Nigerian-trained archaeologists and the extent to which their training is consistent with good professional practices and the changing face of archaeology. A major challenge here is funding. Archaeology in all three Universities is funded primarily as a library research discipline in which teaching infrastructure is nonexistent or in a total state of disrepair. The absence of functional laboratories and other research facilities with fieldwork equipment in all three universities has not only created major skills gaps in the training and education of students but has also undermined fieldwork and capabilities for laboratory analysis. Poor archaeological scholarly output at the institutional level is also partially attributable to funding problems.

Another challenge is the lack of national benchmarks for archaeological education and training in the country. In other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, where national benchmarks exist for archaeology degrees, they exist to ensure that professional standards in archaeology are being met and “to provide employers and clients with a consistent level of confidence about the type of training graduates had received from university” (see Clarke and Davidson 2007). Lack of benchmarks has created considerable variations between the three Universities in entry requirements, equipment and facilities, student learning outcomes, content of core courses, including differential emphasis on competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform as archaeologists.

The crisis in confidence that led to Departmental name changes at both the Universities of Ibadan and Nsukka is also a significant development. Recent attempts to change the name of the Department at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to Archaeology and Tourism did not succeed but indicate the extent to which even at the Ahmadu Bello University, archaeology is suffering from a crisis in confidence. In Ibadan and Nsukka, the name change underscored the inability of archaeology to stand alone and still attract students and sufficient funding from the universities. At the University of Ibadan, Archaeology and Anthropology sit in both the Faculties of Science and Arts, offering Single and Combined Honors with Geography, History and Religious (Christian and Islamic) Studies. At the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Single and Combined Honors with History and Tourism are the main offerings, while at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Single and Combined Honors with History have been offered since 1983. Considering the fact that the different offerings of these Departments entail different mixes of competencies, skills and abilities, they raise the question as to whether the Single and Combined Honors as different degrees confer full professional status with sufficient specialized and demonstrable skills in archaeological resource identification, survey and map-making, protection and preservation of sites, excavation, laboratory work, and report writing.

A cursory skills audit following a study of the course offerings and degree level curricula for archaeology at the three Universities indicate major skills gaps in the archaeology program in the country. These gaps are conspicuous in the areas of field work and excavation competencies, preservation, treatment and maintenance of cultural resources, laboratory processing and analysis, archaeological science, ethics and communication.

The changing face of archaeology is also proving to be a major challenge in the training and education of archaeologists in Nigeria. Archaeology now relies heavily on technology and science. There is at the moment a wide array of techniques and methods from the physical and natural sciences that have application in geoarchaeology, geochronology, archaeobotany, paleobotany, archaeozoology, and human biology. In addition, focus in archaeology is also currently shifting away from excavation as the main activity to archaeological survey and landscape studies. The increasing use of geographic information systems (GIS) in archaeological survey and landscape studies is enabling us to “answer important questions about self sustainability and the use of landscape by communities” (Fagan 2006). Archaeology is also increasingly crystallizing around four major fields of endeavor. These are research and report writing, teaching, management and outreach (see McGimsey 2003), each of which requires indepth study and understanding by students. Current trends are also about managing sites and cultural resources, communicating archaeology, and partnering with different publics on research. In many parts of the world, Cultural Resource Management (CRM) and Archaeological Resource Management (ARM) have developed to underscore this shift. Nigerian archaeological curricula are lagging unacceptably behind these and other changes, thus underscoring the urgent need for curricula reviews. Such a review would not only improve the content of the curriculum, but also make it flexible enough to adopt its offerings to provide more practical and professional training, equipping students with the requisite skills and competencies with which to take advantage of archaeological science, and meet public expectations in the promotion and protection of archaeological resources.

The educational vehicle of the field school is also a big challenge at universities in Nigeria. Although the field school is recognized as a platform for the introduction of students to archaeology, lack of funds coupled with growing student numbers have continued to affect the quality of the field school experience in all three universities. Basic camping and field equipment are in short supply or in a poor state of disrepair in each of the three universities. In all three universities, a field school rarely exceeds two weeks and is sometimes carried out in the rainy season when conditions for fieldwork in Nigeria are not exactly ideal. Typical student/teacher ratios in the field are also very high and student learning outcomes are hardly clarified upfront at the different levels of participation. Given the nature of this challenge, it is not uncommon to find students going through several field schools and still unable to

demonstrate acceptable field competencies in mapping, excavation, note taking, laboratory analysis, and related uses of technology.

Nigerian archaeology curricula also lack a viable ethics component. In all three universities, archaeological ethics are not taught as a distinct course at any level of the archaeological program. This has adversely affected training and archaeological practice in the country to a point where self-regulation, underscored by professional morality, responsibility and competence, are nonexistent. The archaeologists' responsibility to archaeological resources, the public, and employers, in addition to standards of field performance, are not sufficiently clarified and taught, nor are they emphasized and adhered to during fieldwork. Foreign archaeologists working in the country are increasingly exploiting this ethical void to cart away valuable artifacts, and to retain their field notes and other recovery records which otherwise should have been deposited in the country.

International Lessons and Good Practices

A number of lessons and good practices exist in different countries that are relevant to our response to some of these challenges. For example, in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, professional archaeological bodies are in the forefront of the efforts to promote curricular updates. Such efforts are normally made through workshops, planning sessions, annual meetings, publications and other resources. *Teaching Archaeology in the 21st Century*, edited by Susan J. Bender and George S. Smith, represents one such effort by the Society of American Archaeology (SAA). The SAA has articulated stewardship, diverse interests, social relevance, ethics and values, written and oral communication, basic archaeological skills and real-world problem solving as principles for curriculum reform. While recognizing that these principles are not exhaustive, they set the basic context within which archaeology can be taught and their adoption within the Nigerian context can improve curricula content and expand the range of course offerings in the archaeology programs of the three main universities in this country.

In Australia, the joint submission (see Smith et al. 2007) of the Australian Archaeological Association with the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) to the Minister of Education, Science, and Training on "A past for all Australians: Archaeology in Australia's National History Curriculum" represents yet another effort by professional bodies to impact

archaeological curricula. The Archaeological Association of Nigeria (AAN), which is a lone umbrella body of archaeologists in the country, can also begin to champion debates and engage the different stakeholders on the need to review the archaeology program in the different universities.

Internship programs designed to give archaeology students hands-on experience in cultural institutions and Culture Resource Management companies, especially in the United States, have strengthened students' knowledge and skills. Although Nigeria does not have CRM companies or private cultural/archaeological institutions, the education and training of Nigerian archaeologist will be significantly strengthened if provision is made for some period(s) of attachment in museums where practical hands-on training in field and laboratory analysis and conservation can be provided to students as part of their overall training.

National benchmarking for the archaeological programs as practiced in other countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, if adopted, can also strengthen the Nigerian archaeological program. While many courses are similar in title and content in all three universities, it is doubtful whether archaeology graduates from the three Nigerian universities attain comparable quality in terms of theoretical and practical knowledge of the discipline. National benchmarks will raise standards and improve regional and international competitiveness of the country's archaeological program. Benchmarking will also help regulate the education and training of archaeologists in the country by emphasizing core areas of knowledge and skills and acceptable levels of attainment and student learning outcomes.

Field school certification is also an international good practice that can benefit archaeology in the Nigerian university system. In the United States, where field school certification exists, its four goals include:

- i. Creating a context for disseminating information on the current professional standards for archaeological field schools.
- ii. Enhancing improvements and innovations in existing field school programs.
- iii. Benefitting students and employers with a fuller knowledge of field programs meeting established professional standards.
- iv. Allowing peer review of research designs and field methodologies leading to increased exchange of ideas and suggestions regarding field school research methods (see Adler 2001).

If adopted, certification can benefit and strengthen the field school archaeology program in Nigeria. Stakeholders can jointly agree on standards concerning the duration of field schools, student learning outcomes at the different levels of participation, and the minimum hours of engagement for each field session. This will be in addition to improvements in the ratios of students to teachers, operational and field procedures, basic field equipment and facilities, as well as protocols for peer review visits.

Another good practice is the integration of archaeology at the lower rungs of education. In Australia, Ireland, Canada, and Spain, archeology is integrated at the introductory levels of education prior to the University. Australia provides opportunity at all levels and all ages for the study of archaeology as a life enhancing experience designed around ten principles (see Smith et al. 2007). At the lower levels, the study of archaeology is argued to enhance literacy and numerical skills leading to “familiarity with mathematical skills of estimating and measuring size, shape and form, scale drawing, systematic description including precise definition of vocabulary and creative fact based writing.” Integrating archaeology in curricula at the lower levels of education also means that well before entry into the university, students have an opportunity to learn about and appreciate archaeology. Such background prepares them better for university level archaeological education and training. In Nigeria, where archaeology is not properly integrated at the lower levels of either history or social studies curricula, many students begin to acquire knowledge of the discipline only at the university level, thus adversely impacting their preparedness to study and make a career out of the discipline.

Emerging Curriculum Issues

It is my argument that for Nigerian archaeology to successfully overcome these challenges and learn from international good practices in the education and training of archaeologists, the three universities that currently run archaeology programs in the country must review their curricula urgently. While individual universities may attempt the review in line with their goals and focus for the archaeological program, there is also the need for them to partner with stakeholders to develop national standards and benchmarks that would strengthen the theoretical and practical content of their programs. Emphasis must shift to what archaeology students need to know and be able to do after graduation. Student learning outcomes must be

predicated on cross disciplinary skill sets and competencies, including demonstrable abilities in different aspects of field and laboratory work as well as communication.

While recognizing that different transformations in archaeology are not only impacting research designs and methodology, but calling into question how we educate and train archaeologists, it is important for curriculum review efforts to isolate some of these transformations and to integrate them into curriculum maps capable of closing the wide knowledge and skills gaps that currently exist. The first of such transformations is the shift in fieldwork from excavation to the protection and management of archaeological resources and sites. While not disputing the significance of excavation in archaeology, the shift underscores the increasing importance of preservation and protection of archaeological resources and the need for archaeological training to focus on impacting the skill sets that can enable archaeologists to discharge this role creditably in the public interest.

Gender considerations are increasingly becoming an emerging issue in archaeological curricula with implications on how we teach and do archaeology. While entirely new courses dedicated to the archaeology of gender can be mounted with specific student learning outcomes, depending on the focus of each archaeology program, we can do more. An alternative would be to mainstream gender into existing courses and ensure that training and education in archaeology is gender sensitive and designed to pass on those skills and competencies that would challenge existing paradigms and ensure that archaeologists of whatever persuasion are not gender blind in the production and communication of archaeological knowledge.

The interface between archaeology, science and other disciplines has always presented a challenge in the education and training of archaeologists world-wide. The ability of universities to meet this challenge has been limited, particularly in regions of Africa and elsewhere in which there are limited funding and facilities for archaeological research. While recognizing that it is impossible to integrate all archaeological science (new technologies) in an archaeology curriculum, curricular review must identify and promote those new technologies that most impact research design and methodology as a way of creating new directions for research and equipping students with the requisite suite of skills and competencies to drive research. Legal and ethical considerations around the study of the past also require curriculum adjustments to expose students to an exploration of the legal and ethical questions surrounding the ownership of the past, intellectual property rights and archaeology.

Conclusion

There exists a strong case for an archaeological curriculum review in Nigerian universities. The challenges identified in the current curriculum can be overcome if attempts are made to adopt international good practices in the training and education of archaeologists in other parts of the world while integrating particular emerging issues within existing archaeological programs.

Note

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