

# African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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Volume 4  
Issue 1 October 1997

Article 5

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10-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Ward, Jeanne A. (1997) "Conference Report: "Four Rivers of Africa", " *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol4/iss1/5>

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## Conference Report: "Four Rivers of Africa"

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The National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington sponsored a one-day symposium on May 3, 1997 entitled "Four Rivers of Africa: Historical Archaeology and Art in Africa". The conference was part of the celebration marking the 10th anniversary of the museum and was well-attended by a diverse, overflow audience of both professionals and interested lay people.

Welcomes from Edward Lifschitz, Curator of Education, Roslyn Walker, Director, and Philip Ravenhill, Chief Curator of the Museum began the morning with an invitation to tour the museum which was featuring an exhibit on Nubia at the time.

Dr. Christopher DeCorse of Syracuse University, provided an introduction to the conference including a definition of historical archaeology in the African continent. While historical archaeology, as practiced in North America consists primarily of the archaeology of European expansion, in Africa it is a combination of oral history, documents, and archaeology which are being used to provide a sense of the diversity of Africa's past as the presenters at this conference fully exhibited.

Dr. DeCorse talked about his research in Elmina, Ghana. This community, which in the 18th century consisted of 1,000 stone houses, was leveled and turned into a parade ground in the late 19th century by the British colonial regime.

Dr. DeCorse was followed by Dr. Tereba Togola, of the National Museum of Mali, Institut des Sciences Humaines. She discussed the formation and development of complex societies in the Niger River Inland Delta. The Niger River Coastal Delta was discussed by Dr. Ekpo Eyo of the University of Maryland. His presentation focused primarily on the development of the Nok culture from its inception c. 600 BC through 1900 AD.

After lunch, Dr. Pierre de Maret of the Free University of Brussels in Belgium discussed the Zaire River Basin. He talked about excavations in Congo, Teke, and Alluba. Dr. George Abungu of the National Museum of Kenya presented results from his work in the Zambezi River Valley. He defined his study area as 3,000 miles of the Swahili coast from Zembezi to Umpopo in the interior. He argued that historic structures in this region, widely believed to be of Arab origin, are actually of native construction. Finally, Dr. Betsy Bryan of Johns Hopkins University presented a paper on the Nile Valley. She discussed the site preservation challenges presented by changing climate and due to rising water tables resulting from the construction of the Aswan Dam.

The day concluded with a panel discussion revolving around ways to preserve Africa's archaeo-logical resources. Because so much of the looting of archaeological sites in Africa is related to foreign trade in art objects, Dr. Eyo appealed to ways to curb Western demand for such objects. Much hope was expressed about improvements in the pace and severity of looting, and the fact that archaeology is giving something back to the local people in the communities where the presenters work.

While there was no talk of publication of the papers presented, the participants clearly thought the conference worthwhile and discussed the possibility of holding a similar session at some future date. The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, can be contacted at 950 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20560, (202) 357-4600.