

AFTERWORD

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST ON THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

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African cultures have been traditionally rooted in the past, with the cult of ancestry and the desire to perpetuate kinship and traditions. However, colonization and westernization and, most recently, urbanization have broken those ties. Nowhere has the break between the past and the present been more dramatic than in sub-Saharan Africa.

Except for a few well-known kingdoms, historians themselves are not very interested in the pre-colonial period. As this goes back only a little over a century, the history of the last five generations eclipses that of the hundreds of generations that preceded it.

This situation is more the result of the lack of knowledge of the richness and diversity of the pre-colonial past than indifference. On the contrary, when Africans become aware of the remains of the past and what they reveal about ancient civilizations, many of them are deeply interested.

Many African countries will be facing enormous challenges this century, not the least of which is a demographic explosion at a scale unprecedented in the history of humanity. By 2050, Africa will probably have 2 billion inhabitants. Today, one African out of three is under 25 years old. Africans are on the move, within their own country, across the continent, and outside of Africa. The demographic growth, combined with the rural exodus, will cause a dramatic increase in the number of city dwellers. In 2050, more than 60% of the population in Africa will live in cities. This demographic growth and the urban concentration of the population present an increased risk of conflict and catastrophic epidemics.

Africa's leaders, faced with these difficult choices, will prioritize education, health, food security, developing the infrastructure, controlling migratory flows, and fighting crime and terrorism.

At the same time, there is a promising outlook. A series of countries have seen significant economic development, progress in the democratic process, and an emerging middle class. This urbanization and the accompanying migration have generated a considerable intermixing of population without precedent. These economic and social changes are challenging the ethnic identities inherited from the past. There is a new class solidarity, whether between rich or poor. Inter-ethnic marriages are increasing, individualism is becoming more important, to the detriment of family or ethnic ties, and the level of education is greatly improving in many regions.

Parallel to this change, globalization brings about a search for identity and renewed interest in cultural heritage. Competition between countries to have their material and non-material monuments enrolled on UNESCO's World Heritage list is a striking example of this. With the urbanization of Africa also comes the emergence of an educated middle class, which has cultural aspirations and has begun to indulge in tourist travel. On other continents, the fast-growing African diasporas are in search of their roots.

The role of the archaeologist as the intermediary between archaeological data and the way the past is interpreted is locally changing. The idea of one's past on a local level is much more from the point of view of the city dweller than the villager. In addition, this point of view and these interests are no longer purely local. They result more and more from the interaction between national and global perspectives and have in fact become a blend of global, national and local.

There is a growing interest, on the part of the new middle class and their national leaders, in their own history and heritage; a desire to understand their roots and to glorify the accomplishments of their ancestors.

How can we archaeologists reconstruct a history that links the past to the present and, in so doing, respond to the expectations of a growing number of Africans? How can we contribute to placing ethnicity and autochthony in perspective, in order to downplay the ways in which these concepts have been manipulated to nourish hate and violence?

Our theories, our jargon and our meetings often give the impression that our research is targeted to our fellow academics. How can we better share the results of our work with general audiences, and with the African people in particular?

These are the greatest challenges confronted by African archaeology today. The development of contract and rescue archaeology is going to transform the way we work. It is a major opportunity that is not without risk. But it is up to us to step up to these challenges, to overcome the obstacles, and to seize the opportunities that will allow us to design the future of African archaeology.

May this manual be helpful in achieving this goal.

