

## Society of Africanist Archaeologists

The Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA) had its beginnings in 1970 at a meeting organized by Charles Keller and held at a small conference center in the woods outside Urbana, Illinois. The meeting was attended by Desmond Clark, Glen Cole, Nic David, Leslie Freeman, Richard Hay, Glynn Isaac, Richard Klein, Maxine Kleindienst, Mary Leakey, Fred Wendorf, and many other North American archeologists, primarily those whose work focused on the African Stone Age. The membership of SAfA has now grown to nearly 200, with a 20% increase in the last two years.

Before 1994, the Society was known as the Society of Africanist Archaeologists in America, or SAAM. In that year the current name and acronym were adopted. It also was decided to alternate the biennial meetings between venues in North America and Europe. The fact that the meeting is now held in North America only once every four years has, perhaps inevitably, resulted in a dilution of American participation. While North Americans are still the most numerous, they now make up only 46% of the total membership; 37% of the members are European and 15% African. Part of SAfA's current mission is the recruitment and active participation of African members, and support, both tangible and intangible, for our African colleagues. A few members are drawn from regions as distant as Australia and the Pacific. Interest in the Society is increasing in Francophone West Africa. This year's meeting included reports on the African diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and North America.

At the Fourteenth Biennial Conference, held between May 20 and May 24, 1998, in Syracuse, after an initial plenary session of four invited thematic presentations, the papers given during the remaining two-and-a-half days were divided among two or three

concurrent topical sessions. An afternoon excursion visited the "Soul of Africa" exhibition at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, which features an outstanding collection of Central and West African art assembled by the Swiss collector Han Coray between 1916 and 1928. Throughout the conference, a series of African ethnographic films was screened. Films by Nic David (University of Calgary), Eric Huysecom (University of Geneva), and Peter O'Neill, Frank Muhly, and Peter Schmidt (all of the University of Florida, Gainesville) treated technical and symbolic aspects of African iron smelting. A film by Folorunso Olajire (Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife-Ife, Nigeria) traced the events of the ancient Yoruba Olojo festival.

The first three papers of the plenary session argued for the need to evaluate African archeological evidence on its own terms and to discard Eurocentric paradigms. In the first presentation, Alison Brooks (George Washington University) and Sally McBrearty (University of Connecticut) argued that the currently celebrated "human revolution," claimed to explain the origin of modern human behavior, is fatally flawed. In western Europe, modern human fossils appear late (c. 40 ka), relatively suddenly, and accompanied by Upper Paleolithic technology. Thus, archeologists have argued for a late and sudden appearance of modern humans elsewhere, and have used European Upper Paleolithic technology and behavior as a standard for modern human behavior. Anatomically modern human fossils appear early in the African record, but some archeologists, notably Klein,<sup>2,3</sup> have argued for a time lag in Africa between the appearance of modern anatomy at about 100 ka, and signs of modern behavior at about 50 ka. Klein and others<sup>4</sup> have portrayed behavior in the Middle Stone Age, the period during which modern humans appeared in Africa, as essen-

tially archaic. Brooks and McBrearty argued that this impression is based on a misreading of the evidence from a very small number of sites, and that when the total record is examined more critically a surprising picture of earlier behavioral modernity begins to emerge. Signs of modern behavior in the African Middle Stone Age include blades, bone tools, specialized hunting, use of pigment, and long-distance trade or transport of raw materials at dates ranging between 70 ka and >250 ka.

Diane Gifford-Gonzalez (University of California, Santa Cruz) presented a strong case for taking a fresh look at a later part of the African record. Southwest Asia has consistently been used as a global model for the development of food production, but patterns observed in Africa provide an idea of different trajectories. Pottery appears as early as the tenth millennium in some parts of Africa. Ceramic technology traditionally has been viewed through the lens of the Near Eastern record as a sign of sedentism, but ceramic vessels first appear in Africa among groups practicing mobile economic strategies. Citing the work of Hayden<sup>5</sup> and others, Gifford-Gonzalez noted that the intense elaboration of decorative styles and the occurrence of early ceramics in funerary contexts or in association with exotic raw materials suggest the use of pots as containers for prestigious food or beverages in display and competitive feasting. Cultivation of cereals may also have arisen among mobile groups. Gifford-Gonzalez referred to Haaland's<sup>6</sup> work in the central Sahara, specifically the observation that hand harvesting, by stripping or beating the grain head, obviates the need for plants with a tough rachis and the stone sickles used to harvest them, both of which usually are treated as hallmarks of cereal domestication. The African early Holocene also renders untenable the suggestion of Bar-Yosef and Khaza-

nov<sup>7</sup> that specialized pastoralism has arisen only in the presence of state-level societies. Herd numbers can be maintained by restraints on slaughtering. The intense reliance on cattle for milk and, in the East African case, blood rather than meat, can therefore be seen as a tactic to favor herd recovery in the face of unpredictable but recurrent herd decimation. Finally, Gifford-Gonzalez outlined the remarkable emerging picture of the long, complex coexistence of foraging populations with food producers in Africa. There is a thousand-year lag between the initial introduction of small stock and ceramics into sub-Saharan Africa and the subsequent development of cattle-based economies. Gifford-Gonzalez reviewed the dates and geographic trajectory of the expansion, arguing convincingly that, besides trypanosomiasis, many other parasitic diseases endemic to sub-Saharan ungulate communities, particularly wildebeestes, were major threats to cattle and the human populations that relied on them. A long time was required for the new pastoralists to develop the acquaintance with the landscape and the herd-management skills required in the new habitat. During this time, when the intergroup ties that characterize modern pastoralists had not yet been established, and when the ultimate success of the new economic adaptation was by no means a foregone conclusion, the immigrant herders and resident foragers may have had more peer-like and interdependent relations than the recent ethnographic record suggests.

Models for the development of urbanism derived from the Mediterranean region or southwest Asia also have failed to explain events in sub-Saharan Africa. Augustin Holl (University of California, San Diego) reviewed the record for the earliest cities in West Africa, which differs markedly from that observed elsewhere. When viewed on a regional scale, large sites such as Dhar Tichitt, Mauretania, or Jenne Jenou, Mali, reveal the in situ development of an urban tradition without any sign of strong central authority.<sup>8</sup>

In the final plenary session presentation, Nic David (University of Calgary), building on the bibliography of

ethnoarcheology that he has long posted on the internet,<sup>9</sup> presented a history of the discipline since an inception that he traces to Kleindienst and Watson's<sup>10</sup> 1956 call to "action archeology." An initial rate of 1.4 ethnoarcheological publications per year in the 1950s and 1960s has increased to 29.6 publications per year during the 1990s. A large portion of this research has been performed in sub-Saharan Africa. In the 1990s, 237, or 42.6% of the contributions, have dealt with this region. This diverse body of work, treating issues from foraging behavior and site formation processes to craft production, settlement patterns, trade, and the role of symbols in the creation of the material record, has application from the remotest to the most recent time periods.

The main body of the conference consisted of 103 contributed papers delivered in 20 sessions, four of which were organized as topical symposia. Here I can only highlight some of the contributions. Only four sessions were devoted to the Stone Age and only three of the contributed papers dealt with a period more ancient than the Middle Stone Age. Two sessions were devoted explicitly to ethnoarcheology and two to technical and methodological issues.

At one interesting symposium entitled, "Rocking the Bantu Cradle," Philippe Lavachery, Baudoin Janssens, Pierre de Maret, and Olivier Goselain (all of the University of Brussels), and Alain Assoko Ndong (Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren) brought together evidence from archeology, comparative linguistics, and ethnography to create a complex picture of technological change, intensification, and population movements from a probable Bantu "homeland" in western Cameroon. A symposium organized by Steve Brandt (University of Florida, Gainesville) considered the development of complex societies in the Horn of Africa. Here there was great interest in the last five years' work at the ancient city of Axum, described by David Phillipson (University of Cambridge) and his colleagues, as well as the description by Matthew Curtis, Steve Brandt, and Peter Schmidt (all of the University of Florida, Gainesville), of the recent ex-

ploration of Eritrea, where political upheaval had interrupted the field season only days before the meeting.

Probably the most exciting papers for Stone Age aficionados were those by Judith Sealey and Chris Henshilwood (both of the University of Cape Town) who described their new finds from the Middle Stone Age site of Blombos, on the western Cape coast of South Africa. Here a bone tool industry and quantities of red ochre have been found in firm association with bifacial foliate Middle Stone Age Stillbay points. The bone artifacts include two formal bone points as well as about 20 less standardized bone tools resembling awls or borers. C/N analysis clearly separates Middle Stone Age bone from Late Stone Age bone at the site.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the bone implements all clearly cluster with the nonartifactual Middle Stone Age bone. Nearly all are made of dense compact bone finished by grinding and polishing. One example executed in softer bone exhibits a series of indentations that probably are the result of hafting. Several of the bone tools preserve traces of red ochre. This pigment occurs at the site in large chunks. Twenty-one pieces of ochre show signs of drilling; in some, there are rows of drilled perforations. The drilled ochre has been studied by Richard Milo (University of Chicago), who concludes that the holes were made by bone or wooden drills. Various dating techniques are being applied at the site. Dates are preliminary, but an age range of 70 ka to 100 ka is reasonable for the Stillbay occupation at Blombos. These results go far to show that the bone points from Middle Stone Age sites at Katanda, Congo<sup>12-14</sup> and the red ochre from Middle Stone Age contexts at Klasies River, South Africa<sup>15</sup> and Mumbwa, Zambia,<sup>16</sup> are not isolated occurrences.

A paper that is sure to elicit responses was that by Andy Smith (University of Capetown), who neatly set out the archeological and ethnographic data to show that the revisionist view of Ju/'hoansi (San) history argued by Wilmsen and Denbow,<sup>17</sup> among others, is not borne out by the evidence. The revisionist position views the Ju/'hoansi as part of the world economic system, and argues that most of them were forced into subservient roles

through intensive contact with their agropastoralist neighbors during the last 1,500 years. Thus, their foraging mode of existence is seen as an expression of their disenfranchisement. Woodburn<sup>18</sup> has argued persuasively that the social and economic systems of African hunter-gatherer groups exist in spite of, rather than because of, their agricultural or pastoral neighbors. Archeological evidence clearly indicates a forager presence in Botswana and Namibia throughout much of the Later and later Middle Pleistocene.<sup>19–22</sup> However the degree and nature of the contact between foraging and food-producing groups in the Holocene have been open to question. Smith's evidence shows that the trade for exotic commodities at several points of external exchange did not involve pronounced social inequality, that the goods made their way into the interior of the Ju/hoansi territory by way of traditional hxaro exchange networks,<sup>23,24</sup> and that this waterless area did indeed remain very isolated until the end of the nineteenth century.

Kennedy Mutundu (Washington University) described his interesting ethnohistoric and archeological study of a rockshelter in the highlands of north central Kenya that was inhabited by Mukogodo foragers prior to and during their transition to pastoralism about 50 years ago. Mutundu sees the Mukogodo's specialized subsistence focus on small mammals as a "delayed return" system,<sup>18</sup> and thus as a preadaptation to the adoption of food production.

David Killick (University of Arizona) and Hamady Bocoum (Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, Dakar) described metallographic, petrographic, and chemical analyses of ores, slags, and iron bloom from a series of iron-smelting furnaces in the Middle Senegal River valley dated to about 950 to 1200 AD. The Middle Senegal smelters had access only to poor-quality iron ore, and their abandonment of slag-choked furnaces after a single smelt has resulted in the staggering 40,000 small furnaces encountered in the 50 km<sup>2</sup> survey area. Nonetheless, Killick and Bocoum do not believe that the

scale of this operation was adequate to have caused the present near-total deforestation of the region. Rather, later agricultural and pastoral activities seem to be responsible for removal of the tree cover.

Among the beauties of the SAfA meetings are the richness and diversity of the presentations and the breadth of coverage of issues from all periods of African prehistory.

Although some SAfA members expressed concern at the sparse coverage of Stone Age Africa at this year's meeting, it is to be hoped that those who study the early portions of the African archeological record will continue to support SAfA and its goals, and that future meetings will be truly representative of Africa, temporally as well as geographically. The next SAfA meeting will be held at the University of Cambridge in mid-July of the year 2000. David Phillipson, organizer of that meeting and the newly elected SAfA secretary, informed us that an excursion has been arranged to Stonehenge, and that attendees will be permitted to enter the inner stone circle for an unobstructed experience of the monument. Perhaps this will serve to motivate those who could not attend the 1998 meeting to fix the 2000 event firmly in their calendars.

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