On COVID-19 and Matters Arising

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The final phase of the editorial process that culminated in this issue of *African Archaeological Review* (Volume 36, 2) took place in the atmosphere of panic and uncertainties unleashed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. I must first thank our authors, reviewers, editorial team, and the Springer staff for keeping the clock of production moving despite the strains imposed by the pandemic on our working environment and mindset.

Five of the pervasive concepts in archaeology (and anthropology broadly) during the past 20 years are vulnerability, collapse, resilience, regeneration, and sustainability (e.g., Chase and Scarborough 2014; Lane 2010; Logan et al. 2019; McAnany and Yoffee 2009; Redman 2005). These concepts—for which I will use the acronym, VCRRS—are often invoked in discussions about how past societies have coped with (or failed to manage) climate change, natural disaster, conflict, ecological degradation, resource scarcity, and social inequality and the implications for the present and future. Infectious diseases are always in the background of our archaeological thinking, but these are not usually given as prominent a space as these other sources of perturbations. Unlike epidemical outbreaks, those other perturbations are easier to observe in the archaeological record. For example, natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes are similar to contagions in terms of their sudden and unpredictable

occurrences. However, natural disasters often leave much more detectable signs than epidemics, although the latter can last much longer. In some instances, we can receive forewarnings of impending natural disasters and therefore be proactive (e.g., through evacuation). It is not so with microbes. They do not give warnings of their arrival, and they cannot be seen with the naked eye. As a result, we are limited to a gradualist reactive approach to pathogens as they wreak havoc on our corporeal and social fabric. As it has been with COVID-19, past societies had to rely more on their political institutions and social systems than their medical know-how in breaking the chains of pathogenic spread. The coronavirus pandemic is relevant to the VCRRS concepts that have animated our scientific inquiry about social and cultural formation for several years. This ongoing pandemic is a stark reminder, on a grand scale, of human vulnerability. It is also a great test of societal resilience, and it presents us with the question of what to let go and what to keep. Although, in some instances, the virus has not given us the choice. In the long run, the COVID-19 crisis might force on us new ways of being, especially as we develop strategies of recovery and regeneration. But one thing is clear: epidemics will always be part of the human journey.

Exactly a hundred years ago, the world was just recovering from the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919 that took about 50 million lives worldwide. As many as two million people in sub-Saharan Africa possibly died from the pandemic (Patterson 1983, p. 501). Since then, we have developed the most connected, urbanized, and scientifically advanced global system in human history.

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Alas, we may not have been as well-prepared and efficient as one would expect in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. This first truly global pandemic in a century has not only halted business as usual but has also overwhelmed the resources of many countries around the world. According to the Johns Hopkins University coronavirus dashboard, the total confirmed number of infections globally is nearing six million, and over 350,000 people have died at the press time for this issue (1). The African Union's Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported over 119,000 COVID-19 cases and more than 3,500 deaths in Africa. About 50,000 have recovered as of mid-May. Overall, Africa's COVID-19 cases account for 2.1% of the global number and less than 1% of the worldwide COVID-19-related deaths (2). Several conjectures have been offered as to why Africa's numbers are low, considering the poor state of its healthcare compared with the global north (Moore 2020). Although this pattern may change as this situation evolves, we must also confront two realities. First, the advanced healthcare system of North America and Europe does not translate into healthy living for some segments of their population and access to good healthcare is uneven. Second, the aggressive efforts of most African governments helped to significantly slow the spread of COVID-19, as I witnessed in late February during my trip to the continent. The World Health Organization regional director for Africa, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, has said that the COVID-19 spread is unlikely to be as exponential in Africa as it has been elsewhere. However, she also warned that without proactive testing, tracing, isolating, and treating, COVID-19 could smolder in transmission hotspots across the continent for many years to come (3).

Coronavirus, like all zoonotics in history, is a product of ecological perturbations, an outcome of the interdependence between humans and fellow organisms (Vidal 2020; Vijaykrishna et al. 2007). And epidemics are no respecter of the visible and invisible walls that people and societies build to separate themselves into classes, ethnicities, genders, races, tribes, and other hierarchies of power and social difference. Hence, coronavirus has sneaked into spaces of power, from the White House to 10 Downing Street, and it has penetrated the cramped working-class tenements from Cape Town to New York. COVID-19 may defy social boundaries. However, social inequality—one of the staples of archaeological inquiry—has nevertheless mediated the brutal impacts of the virus. Not surprisingly, the poor and the

working class have higher chances to be exposed to and die from coronavirus because they have fewer opportunities for social distancing and must also work outside the home. Not only do they have higher chances of contracting and spreading the virus to family members, but they often also have the underlying medical conditions and historically poor access to healthcare that make them more susceptible to death from COVID-19 than the well-off. In the Western world, where class and race tightly overlap, infected black people and other minorities in the USA are dying at a higher rate than their white counterparts (Kendi 2020). The class and age patterns of contraction and death from COVID-19 are not yet clear in Africa, but there is no doubt that the first wave of the infected were those who had recently visited Europe, North America, and Asia. As a result, according to a British Broadcasting Corporation report, COVID-19 was initially perceived as the disease of the elite in many parts of Africa (4). These elite are still being blamed on the street for bringing the disease to their respective countries, a reflection of the sharp socioeconomic divides on the continent.

It is noteworthy that as early as February 2020, many African countries were at the forefront of proactive actions to stem the spread of the pandemic at the very time that many countries in the global north were in denial and foot-dragging about the disease. Many scientists on the continent are also working to be part of the solution rather than waiting for what the global north can do for them. Senegal, for example, is developing a \$1 COVID-19 testing kit as part of the strategy to help flatten the curve of infection. Amadou Sall, the director of the Pasteur Institute in Dakar where the test kit is being developed, reportedly said that his laboratory could analyze 500–1000 tests a day and produce 4 million test kits a year (Yeung 2020). Currently, each coronavirus test costs hundreds of dollars, and analyzing one test would take several hours. In Nigeria, a group of scientists at the University of Ibadan is investigating the efficacy of a local herb, *Euphorbia hirta*, for treating the respiratory conditions associated with COVID-19 (5). Many other examples abound in different parts of the continent. These efforts call attention to the need to support capacity building in Africa rather than the usual benefactor gestures that merely reinforce the dependency syndrome in the continent. We are reminded that the most effective and lasting solutions to some of the contemporary medical problems in the world may originate in Africa, as they did in the past. African herbal

medicine and healing knowledge, for example, have made significant contributions to the advances in Western science, from treating malaria to eradicating smallpox. The race by Western scientists and drug companies to appropriate African knowledge of herbal plants for developing patented drugs has been ongoing for more than a century (e.g., Osseo-Asare 2014).

All of these reinforce the need to expand the archaeological framework for heritage studies in Africa beyond the valorization of places and monuments. Of course, the agenda for archaeological heritage will always include the preservation of archaeological sites and landscapes, conservation of artifacts, and the use of these artifacts and sites for public education (Volume 28, 1 of the journal was devoted to this topic almost a decade ago; Sulas et al. 2011). But these cannot be the stopping point. Heritage studies must take advantage of the interdisciplinary approaches of archaeology so that it can be relevant to the needs of African peoples, especially by supporting the quest to liberate Africa from economic and intellectual dependency rather than perpetuating that dependency. Therefore, one would hope that the documentation, analysis, and application of indigenous knowledge and epistemology will be an integral part of the burgeoning archaeological heritage studies on the continent (also see Mire 2011). As I have advocated in a recent editorial, those archaeological programs invested in heritage studies need to collaborate with experts in other fields so that the body of heritage-related knowledge they are collecting can inform scientific and policy efforts to improve human conditions in Africa and elsewhere (Ogundiran 2019). This echoes David Phillipson's much earlier observation of the purpose that African archaeology must serve in generating bodies of knowledge that would contribute to the appropriate "policies for... health, food, sustainable exploitation of natural resources, and... fostering a sense of pride and self-reliance" on the continent (Phillipson 2003).

COVID-19 is challenging us to rethink how we do business and engage in archaeological inquiry. If history is a useful guide in this instance, we know that epidemics never traveled alone. They were always accompanied by other ecological, economic, and sociopolitical upheavals that have altogether changed or shaped the course of human history (e.g., McNeill 1998; Oldstone 2009). The short- and long-term impacts of coronavirus on global politics and power relations are still not clear.

Nevertheless, almost every economist is predicting recessions, and the unemployment rate has exponentially risen in many countries, while the trains of global supply chains have also been derailed significantly. Drastic budget cuts by national and subcontinent governments in the next fiscal year are all certain. For most African countries, the reliance on single commodity export and importation of almost all essential infrastructure, including medical supplies, portend significant economic and social trouble. But these also present opportunities for African countries and regional blocs to think creatively about local production and innovations.

How might these knowns and unknowns affect human lives, archaeology, and heritage issues in Africa? A forum has been convened for future publication in the *African Archaeological Review* that will explore some aspects of this question while also providing a platform to discuss what we are learning in African archaeology and heritage studies from the social, political, economic, and ecological dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The forum participants have been tasked to explore how the pandemic is affecting the way they conceptualize and think about the African past with reference to their scholarly interests in social formations and social emergents. The participants will also reflect on the insights that archaeology can provide to inform the ways current pandemic is being managed on the continent. We hope to publish 6–8 short essays on these and related topics in the coming months.

Disruptions

COVID-19 has disrupted most archaeological plans for the summer and early fall of 2020, especially fieldwork travels. Most important, the much-anticipated biennial conference of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists (SAfA) scheduled for September 21–24, 2020 in Oxford (UK), has been postponed till next year—August 15–20, 2021, and this will still take place in Oxford University. One must commend the sagacity and consultative approach of the SAfA executive and the conference organizing committee, led by Elisabeth Hildebrand and Peter Mitchell respectively, in the way the decision to postpone the 2020 conference unfolded. It is a template for future crisis management by the association, and the sequence of events deserves to be summarized here (6).

- April 24: The SAfA president, Elisabeth Hildebrand, announced the inauguration of a six-member “Covid Matters Committee” (CMC), in consultation with Peter Mitchell, “to gather perspectives and, in the next few weeks, decide whether or not we should postpone” the 2020 SAfA conference. The CMC members include two representatives from each of Africa, Europe, and North America: Alemseged Beldados, Munyaradzi Manyanga, Timothy Clack, Paul Lane, Catherine D’Andrea, and Brian Clark.
- April 27: The SAfA members were given the opportunity to contact the CMC with ideas and suggestions on what should be done with the scheduled 2020 SAfA conference. Hildebrand specifically charged CMC to determine the timing(s) and mechanism(s) for the 25th Biennial Conference and consider the maximum health, safety, and opportunities for participation across the SAfA membership.
- April 29: Events were moving very fast, and the alarming rate of new COVID-19 cases and death in North America and Europe, coupled with other factors, made it necessary for Peter Mitchell to announce, on behalf of the conference organizing committee, the postponement of the conference until mid-August 2021.
- May 1: The co-chairs of CMC, Paul Lane and Catherine D’Andrea, reported the committee’s first meeting to SAfA members. The committee made two important decisions. First, the CMC did not recommend holding the 2020 conference in September in “an entirely online format” because of unequal access of SAfA members to the internet. Second, the committee plans to explore the viability of holding limited and small-scale online sessions in September 2020 “as a ‘test drive’ for incorporating more online access to full SAfA meetings in the future.”
- May 12: The CMC co-chairs contacted SAfA members again to report the outcome of the committee’s May 7 meeting. They announced that the committee had reviewed and approved a Google-based survey “to gather opinions from our membership on online options for September 2020 and future SAfA meetings” (the survey was released on May 22). The co-chairs also informed members that “a series of online events will be hosted by the SAfA Oxford Organizing Committee in September 2020, not as a replacement of the 2020 conference but to provide

students and early career researchers with workshops on grant preparation and publications development. And, these junior scholars will also have the opportunity “to present aspects of their research in a poster format.”

The SAfA executive, the SAfA 2020 organizing committee, and the CMC members are to be commended for their hard work in leading the association through this uncharted path, although there are still several emerging questions yet to be answered. COVID-19 no doubt challenges many of the ways in which we engage our sociality as scholars and professionals. The digital technology is playing a significant role in the ways we cope with these challenges. It is too early to understand the long-term effects of this technology-enhanced coping strategy on our future communication, interaction, knowledge sharing, and social networks, not to talk of global health, economics, and politics.

In This Issue

COVID-19 and its uncertain future notwithstanding, Cameron Gokee and I had the great pleasure of working with the authors whose articles appear in this issue of the journal. The lead article is the conversation that two senior African archaeologists, Chap Kusimba and Innocent Pikirayi, had with Peter Schmidt about his 50-year career (and still counting!). The interview covered a lot of ground, and we are pleased to feature Peter Schmidt’s experience, accomplishments, and challenges in the following pages. His story is a significant part of the history of African archaeology. It offers many takeaways.

Also, this issue includes an article on new advances in archaeometallurgical study in Senegal, with emphasis on the transformations in iron technology in the Falémé River valley region between the fourth century BC and seventh century AD. The next article focuses on Schroda, a tenth- to eleventh-century farming settlement in the middle Limpopo Valley (South Africa), where a functional analysis of ceramic vessels was undertaken to answer questions of site use and social organization. Two articles are based in Tanzania. One is a synthesis of the archaeological profile of the Iringa Region, from the Early Stone Age to the colonial period, a product of 14 years of fieldwork. The other article explores the development of cognitive thoughts, planning depth,

and cultural innovations by anatomically modern humans during the late MSA and early LSA transitions in the famous Mumba site. Paul Lane sent in a reflective commentary on the roles that the Shanghai Archaeological Forum has been playing in world archaeology since 2013 and the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Africa's archaeological heritage. This issue also features three book reviews. The reviewers noted the significant contributions of each book to Africa's cultural history. The first book revisits the epistemology and methodology of sources in the study of West Africa's history. The second provides the first book-length assessment of the state of Middle Stone Age studies in Nigeria. And the third examines mortuary culture, patterns of migration, and dynamics of identity in the ancient Sahara region.

On behalf of the editorial team of the *African Archaeological Review*, I wish you safety and well-being in this uncertain time.

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