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Troubled Waters : developing a new approach to maritime and underwater cultural heritage in sub-Saharan Africa

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Preface

There have been five hinge points that have changed the way that I think about heritage and that have inspired me to undertake the research described here.

“I became a maritime archaeologist to impress a girl ...”

In the mid-1990s as South Africa transitioned into democracy from an apartheid government, I stood in front of an office door in the Archaeology Department at the University of Cape Town, rechecked the small nameplate and knocked softly. Having been invited to go in, I introduced myself and explained that I wanted to study maritime archaeology. I’d been interested in diving and the sea since my father had first taken me snorkelling when I was a child. I’d originally wanted to be a marine biologist. But now, I had visions of driving speedboats in exotic locations, diving with sharks, and scaring away giant octopuses to get to treasure chests buried amongst the wreckage of ancient East Indiamen. I was certain that the path on which I was about to embark would impress the girl whose attention I’d been trying to grab for some time.

In my first year of study my interest in maritime archaeology expanded from romance to include something different. I assisted my supervisor during the excavation of the Dutch East India Company ship *Oosterland*, wrecked in Table Bay in 1697 from which we recovered blue and white ceramics, jewellery and gold coins. But I found that I was drawn more to the personal belongings and other items of historical significance rather than those finds that “treasure” value. For me, the discovery of wooden planks, between which were what appeared to be fingerprints in the caulking materials that sealed the gaps, gave me a real sense of the past and brought me face to

face with the people who had sailed the eastern trade routes more than 300 years previously. Kneeling in the sand at the bottom of Table Bay, peering at those prints, I suddenly knew that the study of the past was, for me at least, significant. For the first time, I understood that people perceived significance differently. For some, shipwrecks held the promise of treasure, for others, like me, they provided a glimpse into the lives of people from the past. I realised that the way in which maritime archaeology had been practised in South Africa (and in the developing world), and how underwater cultural heritage was managed as a result, was inconsistent with how people differently understood their pasts. At the time I did not know how or why this contradiction existed, but I knew that the milieu in which maritime archaeology was being applied, and the resultant perceptions of what it meant were skewed. The maritime historical narrative was driven by treasure hunters whose interest lay in recovering precious objects, and archaeologists, like myself, who knew how to do archaeology, but not why it was relevant. We all failed to understand the difference between history and heritage, and we failed to appreciate why each was significant. What I was sure of though was that I wanted to be a maritime archaeologist.

“The problem with Africa ...”

“The problem with Africa...” he started, and I leaned back a little in my chair to listen to his analysis. Sitting in the cafeteria at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) building in Paris on a wintry morning in 2007 I listened to a list of African failings that I’d heard over and over again. Corruption, faulty bureaucracy, incompetence, lack of will, lack of capacity, and all the other common complaints levelled against the

development of African initiatives including in the heritage sector.

By 2007, I had moved from maritime archaeological practice into underwater cultural heritage management and was head of the Underwater Cultural Heritage Unit at the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). My job was to administer activities aimed at submerged archaeological sites (through issuing permits to applicants who wished to excavate sites or remove objects from them) and to try to justify why underwater cultural heritage was worthy of conservation efforts. Armed with national legislation, the 1996 International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) Charter on the Protection and Management of Underwater Cultural Heritage, the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage and its Annex, I attempted to explain why shipwrecks were as important as any terrestrial archaeological site. Within the political context of South Africa, and Africa in general, my arguments found little traction. I turned to UNESCO in the hope of finding some answers and found myself in a small cafeteria in the basement of their offices on the *Avenue de Suffren* listening to someone from Europe explain everything that was wrong with my home to me and his colleague.

African culture, politics, economy and society is as diverse as anywhere in the world, and yet it has become easy to lump together a set of stereotypes and apply them across the continent. The actions of one individual become, to my European colleague, representative of a billion people. It is common to think of Africa as a collection of failed states whose governments are plundering state coffers and whose citizens live in backward, unenlightened societies reminiscent of the Iron Age. The worst racial stereotypes are enforced with throwaway catchphrases like, “only in Africa...” or “African time.” Africans are perceived to be unwilling to commit, disinterested in engaging with development projects and unwilling to help themselves. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international aid programmes send experts and trainers, volunteers and academics to Africa to apply their knowledge to make Africa non-African. Inevitably initiatives

carried out in the name of development fail, despite the best intentions of incoming practitioners and institutions. Blame is invariably placed at the feet of individuals or communities who were identified as beneficiaries and who appear to have been unable to apply the knowledge that they have been provided. Considering the continued failure of international development interventions, is it perhaps the system that is deficient instead of the audience?

In an article on the Guardian’s Global Development Professionals Network¹, (Martin 2016) development professionals are challenged to look at their activities from the point of view of the recipients of development assistance. The article asked readers to imagine a student in Kampala, Uganda reading about school shootings in the United States and drafting a programme for gun control and awareness-raising. The issues surrounding school shootings are, of course, far more complex than understood by outsiders. Starting an NGO and hoping that an education programme will end gun violence is naïve.

Listening to the preconceptions about Africa and simplified solutions to its challenges, I began to realise that realistic solutions required a deeper, local knowledge of the social complexities on the ground. The blind application of external, universal rules in all contexts was foolhardy and doomed to failure. What is applicable and understood in the context of the developed world might not be directly transferable to environments where social, economic and infrastructural differences abound. The ethos and ethics that the global rules articulate are unsound, they must be contextualised, adapted and applied to the local environment.

“The problem with me...”

As a white South African, I find myself caught between two worlds. Others perceive me as neither African nor Western. My interpretation of heritage or archaeological sites is met with resistance from all quarters. People feel that I am able to understand neither the African nor Western contexts fully.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/apr/23/western-do-gooders-need-to-resist-the-allure-of-exotic-problems>

“The problem with the Past...”

“That’s the thing about the past; it never belongs as much to the past as you think it does.” – Bernie Gunther, The Other Side of Silence (Kerr 2016:203)

For several years from the mid-2000s, SAHRA and the Consulate of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Cape Town had been in discussions to develop a shared heritage programme that focused on underwater cultural heritage. But it had proved difficult to draft a set of activities that would appeal to, and would have the support of, South African heritage officials at SAHRA or in South Africa’s Department of Arts and Culture. Since local management agencies appeared reluctant to put funding and energy into submerged heritage resources their Dutch partners were led to conclude that South Africa had little interest in underwater cultural heritage. In 2007, in a final effort, the Consulate invited Robert Parthesius of the CIE – Centre for International Heritage Activities (CIE) to assist me in developing a programme strategy and funding application that would be relevant to all stakeholders. Dutch funding would be made available provided the programme gained local support and was sustainable.

In my first meeting with Robert, I expressed my frustrations that my managers and government did not appear to see the value of developing effective management systems for shipwrecks. They were, after all, the vehicles that facilitated European expansion and trade which had a fundamental impact on the development of South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Also, it seemed to me that understanding the lives of people on board ships and interpreting the goods and technologies that they carried was the key to decoding a significant part of southern Africa’s antiquity. I understood that they represented a painful chapter in local history, but argued that this did not mean that they should be expunged from our past. I also argued that since the wrecks were old and because South Africa had transitioned to democracy they should not hold any power over modern South Africans. I felt like I was the only person who thought that shipwreck management was important.

Robert patiently shared his experiences in Sri Lanka and Tanzania and pointed out that while the past exists temporally in the past, its effects, and the perceptions of those effects, are not so easily put behind us. He also pointed out that this was the reason we manage heritage – not just because it is old, but because it is also meaningful in the present.

“The problem with Heritage...”

When we were young girls herding goats, there was a certain place from where, late in the afternoon, we could hear people talking under the water. We could hear the sound of guns and we could hear the sound of people inside the water; even the sounds that different livestock make. These people were invisible, but we could clearly hear them talking and singing, dogs barking, all of this under the water. – Madelekile Mtunasi, 2014²

When I started this research, I had a clear impression of what its outcomes would be. I believed that an amendment to legislative and policy frameworks would be all that was required to establish a better system for managing and approaching underwater cultural heritage. I thought that by outlawing treasure hunting, looting and commercial exploitation of shipwrecks and by carrying out archaeological projects as an alternative to commercial activities it would be possible to show that these were important archaeological sites because we could learn so much from them. This would show that archaeology and scientific exploration was a better alternative to salvage. I believed that it was up to heritage managers to identify sites that were significant, promote awareness of these sites and then attempt to elicit management and conservation assistance from individuals and communities who lived near those sites. I thought that awareness raising programmes would be sufficient to show people why the heritage that had been identified by experts was relevant, and why they should help protect it.

² From a recorded interview conducted in the Eastern Cape. See www.acha.co.za

As research progressed, and as various approaches to maritime and underwater cultural heritage (MUCH) were tested, it became clear that there was a diversity to MUCH that I had not understood. There were also many more reasons for individuals and communities to engage with their local heritage than because experts told them to.

Africa abounds in its heritage and rich archaeological record. From the paleontological sites of East Africa containing the very earliest evidence for human evolution, through built landscapes of the early civilisations of North Africa, to the underwater sites holding evidence for colonial expansion in southern Africa, the continent has been a captivating destination for researchers from all corners of the globe. I came to understand that the problem with heritage had not been a lack of awareness or a lack of interest or even a lack of desire to manage it, but instead a failure on the part of us individuals tasked with protecting it to understand that it existed whether we liked it or not. It was their responsibility to understand why people interacted with it and were shaped by it whether we thought it was relevant or not. For us to be better managers, we needed to find new pathways to allow heritage, and the people who engaged with it, to guide us in developing effective management strategies.

This PhD research begins to shift the way that MUCH is perceived. Instead of it being the domain of the heritage professional, it views MUCH as being positioned on a spectrum incorporating authorised and unauthorised heritage. It suggests that stakeholders peering at the spectrum lower the telescope that focuses their attention on a single point and view it in its entirety.

For me, this has been both a process of research and analysis and a personal journey. I recognise that my participation and my *own* development may have influenced the environments in which research has been conducted, but have made every effort to ensure that they did not influence outcomes. Where this may be the case, I have critically assessed my actions and mistakes.