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Preserving Knowledge as a Basic Human Need: on the History of European Archaeological Practices and the Future of Somali Archaeology. An Interview with Sada Mire.

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European Archaeology Abroad

Global Settings, Comparative Perspectives

edited by:

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CONTENTS

Notes on contributors	9
Foreword	17
Preface	19
European Archaeology Abroad: Global Settings, Comparative Perspectives <i>Nathan Schlanger, Sjoerd van der Linde, Monique van den Dries and Corijanne Slappendel</i>	21
PART ONE: HISTORICAL OVERVIEWS	33
1.1 Foreign schools and institutes around the Mediterranean Sea: relics of the past or renewed tools for scientific partnership? <i>Frank Braemer</i>	35
1.2 French archaeology abroad: a short history of its institutional and political framework <i>Sonia Lévin</i>	51
1.3 Belgian archaeologists abroad: from antiquarians to interdisciplinary research <i>Gertjan Plets, Ruth Plets and Rica Annaert</i>	67
1.4 Spanish archaeology abroad <i>Xurxo Ayán Vila and Alfredo González-Ruibal</i>	85
1.5 Polish archaeology in Egypt and Sudan: an historical overview <i>Patrycja Klimowicz and Arkadiusz Klimowicz</i>	105

1.6 Dutch archaeology abroad: from treasure hunting to local community engagement	125
<i>Monique van den Dries, Corijanne Slappendel and Sjoerd van der Linde</i>	
1.7 Warum in die Ferne schweifen? An overview of German archaeology abroad	157
<i>Nina Schücker</i>	
PART TWO: CASE STUDIES	191
2.1 French archaeology in Africa: historical, institutional and political frameworks	193
<i>Sonia Lévin</i>	
2.2 Archaeology in the Democratic Republic of Congo: old and current strategies for ancient issues	205
<i>Els Cornelissen</i>	
2.3 Communicating vessels: a Flemish experience with international collaboration in maritime heritage research	223
<i>Ine Demerre</i>	
2.4 Constructing from the south: a post-colonial perspective on scientific cooperation in archaeology in Uruguay	245
<i>Camila Gianotti, David Barreiro, Felipe Criado-Boado and José López Mazz</i>	
2.5 Building country-relevant programmes in the context of the implementation of the UNESCO convention on the protection of the underwater cultural heritage	267
<i>Robert Parthesius and Bill Jeffery</i>	
2.6 The socio-political context of Polish archaeological discoveries in Faras, Sudan	287
<i>Arkadiusz Klimowicz and Patrycja Klimowicz</i>	

2.7	Italian archaeology in Africa: the arduous liberation of a discipline from colonial ideology	307
	<i>Maria Pia Guermandi</i>	
2.8	The Delphi archaeological contract: looking through the eyes of the daily press of the nineteenth century	329
	<i>Eleftheria Theodoroudi and Kostas Kotsakis</i>	
	PART THREE: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS	347
3.1	Colonization and the development of archaeology in Senegal	349
	<i>Ibrahima Thiaw</i>	
3.2	Preserving knowledge as a basic human need: on the history of European archaeological practices and the future of Somali archaeology. An interview with Sada Mire	375
	<i>Sjoerd van der Linde and Monique van den Dries</i>	
3.3	Europe and the people without archaeology	387
	<i>Cristóbal Gnecco</i>	
3.4	Archaeological fieldwork in the Middle East: academic agendas, labour politics and neo-colonialism	401
	<i>Maria Theresia Starzmann</i>	
3.5	Norwegian archaeology and African competence building. An interview with Randi Håland	415
	<i>Sjoerd van der Linde and Monique van den Dries</i>	

3.2 PRESERVING KNOWLEDGE AS A BASIC HUMAN NEED: ON THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICES AND THE FUTURE OF SOMALI ARCHAEOLOGY

**AN INTERVIEW WITH SADA MIRE, SOAS, DEPARTMENT OF ART
AND ARCHAEOLOGY, UNITED KINGDOM AND HORN HERITAGE,
SOMALILAND**

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Abstract

This interview with Sada Mire starts with the history and legacy of European archaeological practices in Somalia, arguing how it has contributed to a situation in which archaeology is viewed by many Somalis as a distant, foreign phenomenon. Touching upon her personal experiences as a Somali-born Swedish archaeologist, living and working in the UK and Somaliland, the interview then delves deeper into the need for preserving knowledge and promoting community engagement and training as a way forward, ultimately arguing how cultural heritage and archaeological knowledge should be regarded as a basic human need. The paper ends with a discussion on the potential of collaborative practices in terms of bringing communities more closely together.

Résumé

Préserver la Connaissance comme un besoin humain fondamental : l'Histoire des Pratiques Archéologiques Européennes et l'Avenir de l'Archéologie Somalienne - Un Interview avec Sada Mire, SOAS, Département d'Art et Archéologie, Royaume-Uni et Patrimoine de la Corne de l'Afrique, Somaliland

Cette interview de Sada Mire commence avec l'histoire et l'héritage des recherches archéologiques européennes en Somalie, en expliquant les raisons pour lesquelles l'archéologie est vue, par beaucoup de Somaliens, comme un phénomène lointain et étranger. En évoquant ses expériences personnelles d'archéologue suédoise, d'origine Somalienne, qui vit et travaille au Royaume-Uni et en Somaliland, Sada Mire aborde plus profondément la nécessité de préserver la connaissance et de

promouvoir l'engagement communautaire et la formation comme une voie de progrès, en faisant valoir, en définitive, que l'héritage culturel et la connaissance archéologique devrait être considérée comme un besoin humain fondamental. L'article se termine par une discussion sur le potentiel des pratiques basées sur la collaboration lorsqu'il s'agit de rapprocher des communautés.

Extracto

La Preservación de Conocimientos como una Necesidad Humana Básica: Sobre la Historia de las Prácticas Arqueológicas Europeas y el Futuro de la Arqueología Somalí - Una entrevista con Sada Mire, SOAS, Departamento de Artes y Arqueología, Patrimonio del Reino Unido y del Cabo de Hornos, País Somalia

Esta entrevista con Sada Mire empieza con la historia y el legado de las prácticas arqueológicas europeas en Somalia y argumenta cómo han contribuido a una situación en que la arqueología es vista por muchos somalíes como un fenómeno lejano y extranjero. Tratando in primera instancia su experiencia personal como una arqueóloga sueca nacida en Somalia, la entrevista luego profundiza en la necesidad de preservar conocimientos y de la promoción de la participación comunitaria y de la formación como un camino hacia adelante. En última instancia argumenta cómo el patrimonio cultural y el conocimiento arqueológico deberían ser considerados una necesidad humana básica. El artículo termina discutiendo el potencial de las prácticas colaborativas en términos de juntar más intensamente las comunidades.

صخلم

ةيرثألا تاسرامملا خيرات نع :ةيساسأ ةيناسن! ةجأحك ةفرعمل اىلع ظافحل
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ادنلوه ،نديال ةعماج ،راثألا ملع ةيلك

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ضعبلا اھضعب نم تاعمتجملا بيريقت ثي ح نم ةينواعتلا تاسرامملا ةيناكم!
قتو لكشب

Keywords

Somali archaeology, knowledge, collaboration, development

Background

You have published before on the history of Somali archaeology (Mire 2007; 2011). Could you explain, in short, the history of foreign archaeological practices and influences in Somalia?

During colonial times, Somalia was divided into two regions; southern Somalia, known as Italian Somalia, and northern Somalia, which was the British Protectorate of Somaliland. Focusing first on the British Protectorate of Somaliland, you initially had colonial officers who were not necessarily archaeologists, but who were interested in the remains of the past, and who traveled in vehicles that allowed them access to places where usually people didn't get to.

These officers also visited ruins that were close to villages, but local people traditionally didn't know much about these ruins; they just associated them with past civilizations, past people. The surveys by the colonial officer Alexander T. Curle in 1937 for example, were triggered not because he was there as an archaeologist, but because he was surrounded by ruins in the field, so he started gathering information and doing tests with excavation, and ultimately he wrote an article on his findings.

But during colonial times, these archaeological interests did not lead to systematic studies. Rather, it was more of a sporadic approach whereby people would record the things they found, and whereby they would often bring everything back to for example the UK, or in the case of southern Somalia, to Italy.



Figure 1. Sada Mire (Photo: courtesy by Sada Mire).

Was there a local institutional infrastructure in the field of archaeology or cultural heritage supporting these investigations?

In southern Somalia, there was one important initiative by the Italian colonial administration, when they basically built the first sub-Saharan, African museum in Mogadishu in 1934; the Garesa Museum. They collected a lot of ethnographic material, and they also collected a lot of information from those coastal towns that connect to the Swahili coastal towns in East Africa, such as historical tablets with texts carved on in Arabic. But mostly, the museum's collection was ethnographic; things that were kept in people's homes, things for cooking, for cleaning, for wearing to ceremonies, things from people's households. Such items weren't at all associated with the past for Somalis, but for the Italians, these artifacts adhered to an essentialist image that they had of local people.

Until when would you say this colonial approach to archaeology and heritage continued?

Well, the interesting thing is that in 1960, both British Somaliland and Italian Somalia formed a nation, called Somalia. Mogadishu became the capital, and there was a massive nationalist project to establish educational institutions which led to the first universities being built in the 1970s, and soon after to what we can call the arrival of the first professional foreign archaeologists.

What happened to the museum in this period?

As I said, I think there was this essentialist element of preserving a past within the Italian museum that didn't fit the post-colonial context at all. This is important, because this was a very critical time when Somalis were fighting for liberation - so they were not interested in foreign people choosing objects that they felt were inferior, and to be put in a museum and immortalized as Somali culture.

Of course, these objects belonged to our culture, but it was something that people wanted to go beyond. They wanted development; they wanted to drive cars themselves, go to universities, learn new languages, build roads, hospitals. Although I can understand the Italians' perspective of trying to preserve artifacts, I actually think they rather displayed their own traditional image of Somali culture - but local people, especially in the cities, felt that these objects stood for backwardness.

What was the result of this clash between foreign and local perspectives?

Well, first of all, we can see how the museum had been left to deteriorate completely, as I understood from interviewing a few former directors of the museum, some of whom stated that they had not interest in preserving such 'backward' collections made by outsiders.

In the 1970's, you had UNESCO come in for the first time to Somalia to advise on the development of the museum that we had inherited from the Italians. When the consultants came, they noted that it had a lot of problems in terms of storage and maintenance, but also in the sense that most of the important collections had already been taken back to Italy; some of the most important objects were not in the museum, and the rest was mainly ethnographic material.

In the framework of subsequent Swedish influences in the region that started important capacity building programs, some additional consultancy reports were written that stated that none of the archaeologists who had come before 1980 had left documentation reports, and this is whether they were working in colonial times or post-colonial times. What this means, is that it is still very difficult to get hold of materials.

Changes

What happened after these recommendations and consultancy reports? Were there any changes?

Well, in the mid-1980's there were some important Swedish initiatives that I mentioned before, that were trying to involve Somalis and that were hoping to train them in archaeology in Sweden, or paying for them to be trained elsewhere. So this new vision towards collaboration was forwarded not so much by British, nor the Italians, but rather by the Swedish in the whole of Eastern Africa, which is interesting. But then the civil war started, so everything collapsed.

Can you explain a little more about what happened during the civil war? What was the impact on archaeology and heritage management?

Well, basically you have this Swedish initiative just taking off but then because of the war, it stops, and then you have a civil war taking place in which archaeology is no longer a concern for anybody. On the contrary - the first things that got looted were the museums, whereby objects were mainly sold to ex-pats, even humanitarian workers. In addition, during the famine in 1992 and 1993, there were a lot of people who had absolutely nothing. When the UN left in 1993, the warlords started to commission illicit excavations of archaeological sites, in order to fund their war. So, the already established connection with selling things to foreigners developed into a full-blown business, which brought in more weapons and gave the warlords more power, but which also meant that extremely poor people started to see the archaeological resource as a source to feed upon.

Apart from these objects being sold to foreigners, do you see a link between these activities and the previous western, colonial approaches to archaeology and heritage management in the region?

Yes. My first impression was, 'why are people looting their own heritage'? But if you look more closely at the past approaches to archaeology and heritage management you can see that in the eye of local people, these sites have never been seen something that was protected, or cared for.

Archaeological heritage has also been something that belonged to the foreigner, as a souvenir – it was not something that belonged to 'us'. In addition, during colonial times, our ruined-towns were accredited to have been built by Arabs. Our forts were said to be built by ancient Egyptians, and our own religion, our own myths already attributed to us being Islamic, coming from Arabia. So, people have never had a link with the archaeological heritage to identify with as a source of pride or as a source of anything – they think 'archaeology is the foreigner's business, it's not us, and it's not even our culture; we come from Arabia'.

You talked about looting and the civil war, and then the issue of the local population not regarding archaeology as something that belongs to them but as a foreign influence. Did this change after the civil war?

Well, I suppose it took until about 2000 before foreign people actually started to feel safe enough to go to Somaliland. From this time onwards, we also see that foreign archaeologists started to return, such as the French expedition out of Djibouti. Still, I believe that many local people saw this return as an opportunity to again sell locally collected artifacts to foreigners; a real awareness about a care for Somali archaeology was not existent yet.

When I came to Somaliland in 2007, to do my first archaeological research after having fled the country during the civil war, a public opinion started to appear on the basis of a publication of an article about me by University College London. The Horn Tribune published the UCL article on its front page two days later. Everybody was basically looking for me when I was doing my research in the field, so when I returned, I was approached by several deans and vice-presidents of university departments, asking me to set up archaeological courses. I found it very strange that there was so much excitement about the fact that there was a Somali person who knew this science called archaeology and who was a PhD student who was coming back.

So as soon as there was a person from Somaliland who was knowledgeable about archaeology, all of a sudden there appeared to be a local interest in a field that was previously regarded as belonging to foreigners?

Yes, I guess so. I mean, the capital Hargeisa is a tiny place in some ways, with a population of about 500,000. Actually, it started with the media. The media got first interested in the French mission. But the French mission couldn't commit to being there all the time, so there was this curiosity - Somaliland was a place where not many foreigners were coming at that time.

So I think that people were somehow waiting for somebody to actually explain to them what archaeology was really about, why foreigners were investigating these things. The interesting thing was that when I did my fieldwork, I saw that there were local people just looting sites who thought that that was fine. They brought their objects to me and thought that I could use them for my research, because that is what they expected. After that I had to take every TV opportunity explaining the problems of illicit digging, how archaeology works and the importance of scientific excavation, stratigraphy and so on.

Challenges and opportunities

This misconception about excavating things seems an important issue for the development of Somali archaeology. What are the other challenges and opportunities facing archaeology and heritage management in Somaliland for instance?

I think there are several major issues. First, you have a lack of infrastructure, which means you can't get to sites. The second problem is financial; there are very little financial resources for archaeology, almost none. Thirdly, you have a lack of effective heritage legislation. This latter issue is something I have tried to address as a government person, but because we've had two governments in the last four years, this means there is a very short institutional memory. So you lose documents, you lose people, and the people who are brought in, you have to start from zero with them. Somaliland is also a country where land rights and land distribution is a massive issue. If you want to mark an area as a national heritage site, regardless of land ownership, there must be legislation facilitating that. But we don't have those policies; there is not even a national heritage law at the moment. Finally, a major problem is a lack of skills and training. We don't have the people that can do the work.

Are you the only Somali archaeologist?

At the moment, yes, but in the last four and a half years, I have trained about 50 people, who are now able to protect sites, who have basic knowledge of archaeology, using basic materials in terms of site protection, tourism management, archaeological survey, archaeological photography, reports writing and IT skills,

archiving, things like that. These 50 people are based throughout the country. They are community people who live next to the site. It's not somebody who's been trained in Hargeisa and then been sent to work in a remote place.

The approach is to identify a site, and then identify a person with the help of the community to become a guardian, a custodian of the site, and this person will be getting a salary from the government to do this work. Most of these guardians could not read or write, so they would be on the lowest scale of government work, but still this would be helping their families to have a source of income.

What is the impetus for the government and the local community members to support this archaeological heritage approach?

The interesting thing is that it's not so much about identity – quite often it is because I start talking about the possible economic benefits of archaeology, such as for tourism. But more importantly, there is the element of local knowledge. I work with what I call the knowledge-centered approach, which means that I, as an archaeologist, have certain skills to enable people to understand the site from a scientific perspective, but I also identify a role for the community in the sense that our approaches should be about preserving their knowledge.

Can you explain a little more about this 'knowledge-centered' approach?

When you ask Somalis what their heritage is, they do not talk about objects or monuments – rather, they will talk about the landscape, about the things that they know, about their skills. So if I show a picture of a pot, and I say this pot is 10,000 years old, found in this region, and probably made by people who used to live this way, they will answer me by telling what they know about the pot. They tell me about how their grandmother used to make pots, where she would get the best clay, how she made these pots, and how she taught them how to make them.

By identifying and acknowledging their skills and what they can teach me as an archaeologist, I can subsequently tell them about the archaeological information. This is, so far, how I approached working with communities. This also involves women, because women are always excluded - but traditionally, our women are the ones who create a lot of things, the craft work for the house, who build the huts, nomadic buildings – women actually have a lot of this knowledge, a lot of skills.

It sounds like your approach tries to bridge the divide between archaeological heritage and cultural heritage, by emphasizing the knowledge element and the more socio-economic benefits of archaeological sites and objects. In this respect, how do you relate this to some of your remarks that cultural heritage is a basic human need?

Well let me first say that I didn't start off studying archaeology thinking that cultural heritage was a basic human need. It's something that I gradually realized, mainly by reflecting upon my own experience as a refugee. When I first started studying archaeology in Sweden, it wasn't because I wanted to go back to Somalia

at some point to do archaeology. I never thought I would. That was not the point. I was studying archaeology because I was interested in Scandinavia, where I was living, and it helped me to adapt and survive.

I was reading a lot, I loved literature. I was trying to read a lot about what happened in nineteenth century Sweden, because I thought it would help me understand my own experience as a refugee in Sweden, and the experience of poverty. In nineteenth century Sweden, people also had to flee poverty. A lot of people migrated, and had to deal with a new life, where people started living in cities, trying to get jobs. So what was happening in Sweden in the nineteenth century was parallel with my experience of living in Somalia, which made me feel that I somehow fitted into Swedish society.

When you come from a refugee background, and all of a sudden you end up in a new place, everything is like a new planet, a new language, new people. They're all white, they look different, they act different, they speak different, they eat different, they walk different, everything is different. Their buildings are different, their trees are different, their animals are different.

So, there is this intimidating element where you feel a sort of inferiority because you arrived as a refugee. What are my rights, what's the humanity within this context, what do we have in common? In addition, the Swedish people all looked as if they were super humans, and you come from a failed place, a failed people, and you being there is an example of that failure. So for me, by understanding the development that Sweden made in a very short time, from extreme poverty to a welfare state, helped me fit in. Archaeology was something that made sense to me because it made my surroundings make sense to me. It was a way for me to understand things.

Towards a future of Somali archaeology

Can you explain how this influenced your knowledge-centered approach in Somaliland?

Well, when I first started studying Somali archaeology, I first didn't understand why they were not mad about their objects being destroyed, about their museums being looted. But then I realized that their heritage was not in a museum or in a building. It was about their experiences. The things that they knew - the knowledge itself was the heritage. To know how to build that pot, to know what it was used for, to know simple things that actually would help them survive.

I remember when the war broke out in Mogadishu and we had to leave everything in our house - we just had to flee. When I talk about the knowledge-centered approach, it's basically about preserving knowledge, not objects. This is the lesson I've learned. When we were refugees, we were all of a sudden in the middle of the nomadic landscape with nothing. No cups to drink from. And there was no help then, in the beginning.

But what helped us was the knowledge that we had learned from our grandparents. My mother had sent us to our grandparents while we were in school in Mogadishu in the 1980s, although we wanted to be at home and watch TV. We were sent to the nomadic landscape, and at the time it felt useless, but when we were refugees, we were able to build nomadic huts to live in. We could do so many things that we had learned by being in that environment. For me, that element, that experience, of actually using my own knowledge, my own heritage, to survive in the war, to know which trees to use, to know what to eat, to know how to find water - these are the heritage skills worth preserving.

This is an example of what I mean when I say that cultural heritage is a basic need. And the main thing is to sustain those values, and to sustain them very early on. We should deepen the cultural values that hold communities together. For instance, knowing about your past can help people be more open minded and accept the other in a reconciliation context. Currently there is a religious conflict in the Horn of Africa within Islam itself and with other religious groups. By unearthing the multiple heritage that the past represents we can advocate for peace and acceptance. If I accept that my ancestors were perhaps Christians or even 'pagan' a thousand years ago, then I may not have a problem with my neighbor being Christian or something else. For instance, some fundamentalist groups are destroying Sufi shrines and these desecrations of revered ancestral shrines are traumatic for those who venerate these sites. Such heritage is their basic human



Figure 2. Community outreach and capacity building in Somaliland (Photo: courtesy of Sada Mire).

need. We do not need only food and shelter, we are beings who think, with feelings and beliefs. The knowledge-centered approach takes into account these forms of heritage - both intangible and tangible heritage.

How do you see the role of archaeology in deepening this cultural value?

By getting away from thinking about archaeology purely as sites, object, or monuments. Ultimately, it's about knowledge, and archaeological knowledge can really help people in those contexts.

Is it difficult to make international collaborations in archaeology based upon this new kind of heritage approach?

It is. First of all, I should note that the potential for international collaboration has been very limited because I'm a government person, and I'm a government person from a government that's not recognized, and Somalia itself never ratified the World Heritage Convention. So it's been very difficult to gain funding for projects in Somaliland.

Nevertheless, we have had some important international collaborations in the last decade. But some approaches are remnants of the past. Some people still hold an idea of entitlement to places where Europeans once ruled, and this is a very one-sided approach. In my experience, there are certain international approaches that show a self-interest - if you are going to get something, you have to give something in return.

But there are also some funding bodies where you are purely getting this sort of 'humanitarian support'. Without naming names, some of the foundations are really innovative in the sense that they see cultural heritage as a basic human need, and I want to be associated with that. For them, it is about bringing communities closer, and that type of approach tends to attract me more in my search for funding, in my search of collaboration.

Luckily, there are many other archaeologists who have changed their approach to collaboration. And there is a massive potential nowadays because we are dealing with a world where there are so much opportunities. For example, the internet has made communication easier for digital interaction between foreign and local people.

Do you think that social media and digital communication can lead to better collaborations?

Telecommunications is one of the most developed technologies and economies in Somaliland. I know nomads who are using smart phones. So yes, these technologies allow you to easily access the community. You can speak to them, you can have information, you can work with them, and it's not as costly as before. So, it should be much easier to move on towards a situation in which international teams can actually work much closer with local teams, build relationships, and also re-

approach the significance of archaeological heritage - because the significance of archaeological heritage has been, from the experience of Somalia, something that is just for the Westerners.

From this perspective, do you think that there still is a place for international collaboration?

Yes, but international groups really have to make a case for their relevance in this, and the way to make it is to share, and to actually tell people about their own experiences. For instance, I use English and Scandinavian sites to explain to people about archaeology. We really have to share why we, as foreigners, find their culture interesting as well. Clearly, we are talking here about world heritage. The world is really small, but full of experiences. We share so much, everything that happens impacts all of us. Environment, piracy, war - but cultural heritage is a core, something that can really help people come closer.

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