

Not So Hidden Treasures: Public Archaeology and Collaboration in Bukoba, Tanzania

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During summer I was able to take part in a public archaeology field school in Bukoba, Tanzania. The field school was instrumental in providing me with the tools to conduct competent archaeology, but it also presented me with experiences that I could not have begun to imagine prior to it.

One aspect of public archaeology is that it engages with the community in which the field site is located. However, what surprised me was that I did not have to take the archaeology to the community; the people brought it to me. We had the traditional field methods book and a handy historical archaeology text which provided us with a background to the history of the area and the type of objects we might find. Yet those texts paled in comparison to what I gleaned from the carpenters, who were reconstructing a palace at the same location as the field site, and local elders who knew the land along with the meaning of the objects residing in it.

These people acted as critical collaborators for the project. Many times I would be stopped and taught proper trowel, compass, or line level technique by a carpenter. On other occasions an elder would explain the meaning of a potshard and its use in the past. These were not trained archaeologists, but locals who were invested in the history and culture of their community.

The field school was a six-week affair and at no point were we working in isolation. We were consistently aided by local Tanzanians who had a stake in the histories we were pulling out of the ground. Even though we were the semi-professionals, and the members of the community were not formally



trained, we were steadily learning from the people who aided us. We were granted with an experience in collaboration that many are not privileged with.

I came to Bukoba to gain more insight into the intersections of trade networks that flow from coastal Tanzania into the hinterland. I was searching for connections that coastal Swahili culture may have shared with the culture(s) of the hinterland. Instead I encountered what I believe happens to most anthropologists in the field, what I was not seeking found me. I was able to gain insight into how people remember their own histories, who has stake in remembering, and what it means to remember.

Few hold the knowledge of the history of Bukoba. It is not taught in schools and the average young person would not be able to tell you the significance of the mnemonic devices that make up the names of their cities, streams, and rivers. That is a problem. It relates to the issues surrounding the politics of Swahili identity that play out in coastal Tanzania, where my primary

research interests lie.

How do we fix these problems? How can we bring subaltern histories from the margins? More importantly, how can we prevent them from sliding to the margins in the first place? My experience in Bukoba taught me that collaboration is a critical component of the solution to these answers. If we do not include the informal sets of knowledge with the formal then we will never have a complete whole.



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