Review Synthesis Report

Toward a Historical Archaeology of West African Borderlands

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Abstract - The duo-field of historical archaeology is increasingly being recognized around the world for its contributions. However, most of the existing surveys have concentrated on the coastal and hinterland locations in West Africa. Whereas, the ethnographic cum archival study of West African borderlands abounds in the literature, there is the dearth of the comparative analysis of these sources in tandem with the archaeological findings of material culture. Thus, this paper seeks to open up a new dialogue on the importance of borderlands studies in historical archaeology and vice versa. It concludes that the historical archaeology of West African borderlands promises to yield new insights into the dynamics of the region's modern history.

Introduction

Archaeological surveys in West Africa have been executed mainly in coastal and hinterland regions. Thus, the analysis of cultural heritage in the region has been geographically restricted and lacking in regional dynamics. Indeed, it is now clear that societies cannot be narrowly defined as a static socio-cultural entity in the face of inter-regional relations and globalization. It is on this note that the current work examines the historical archaeology of West African borderland societies. In adopting this spatial approach, the aim is to explore the dynamic past of the region's history through material remains, writings, and oral tradition. As observed by Naum, 'tensions and dynamics of conflict, control and friendly relations were inscribed in these landscapes' (2010, p. 102). This total characteristic of the West African borderlands makes such a geostrategic area, a vital concern of this study.

Borderlands Theory in Historical Archaeology

Historical archaeology has been subjectively defined and redefined over time – as an archaeology of colonialism and nationalism (Deetz 2010; Govaerts 2014). Otherwise, as an archaeology of European occupied territories or areas of influence as well as methodologies combining material culture with oral and written data (Harrington 1979). According to Orser, 'historical archaeology may be summarized as a multidisciplinary field that shares a special relationship with the formal disciplines of anthropology and history, focuses its attention on the post-Columbian past, and seeks to understand the global nature of modern life' (2017, p.16). This conceptualization of Historical Archaeology presents major problems in the West African context. As noted by Holl, 'historical archaeology as it is defined and implemented is clearly the archaeology of "control", "subjugation" and "spoliation" of Africa and Africans' (2004, para. 20). This assertion reflects on the problem of intellectual imperialism in the field of Historical Archaeology. Indeed, scholars have affirmed the need to intellectually decolonize historical studies to enhance global understanding (Ogundiran & Falola 2007; Schmidt 2009; Faleye 2014). Considering the complexity of historical sources and the rich contribution of West African oral traditions, the extension of the timeframe of historical archaeology into the pre-contact period seems inevitable. This re-conceptualization of

historical archaeology technically liquidates the 'pre-historic' rationalization of history (Wesler 1998; Schmidt & Mrozowski 2013). This perception is underpinned by the fact that the relics of the pre-contact era still pervade the cultural complex of modern West Africa. Thus, this paper builds on the conception of history as a continuum and historical archaeology as a duo-field based on the historical explanation and interpretation of archaeo-historical evidence.

The comparative study of archaeological and historical data in the reconstruction of West African history is not new in the literature (Shaw, 1970; 1978; Andah & Okpoko 1979; Agbaje-Williams 1983; Gundu & Igirgi 1992; DeCorse 2001; Reid & Lane 2004; Ogundele 2004; Okpoko & Derefaka 2012). Indeed, the multidisciplinary approach involving the usage of diverse sources – tangible and intangible; artifacts, written sources, and oral tradition have yielded wonderful insights into West African history. This is the study of the urbanization and transcultural encounters in Gao, Savy and Quidah (Insoll 2004; Kelly 2004), cultural monoliths of Boka Botuom (Ray 2004), as well as the archaeology of European trade castles and settlements (Lawrence & Castles 1963; Ogedengbe 1998); Slave societies in the context of diaspora studies (Lovejoy 2000; Decorse 2001); metalworking industrial estates in North East Yoruba land (Aremu 1998); pottery making in Ilora and its relationship with old Oyo (Ajekigbe 1998); Ron abandoned settlements in the Jos Plateau (Maugut 1998); and the indigenous TIV architecture (Ogundele 1998). Thus, the bulk of the existing studies have been restricted to the hinterland and slave holding coastal locations in the region. Whereas, borderlands studies in West Africa have been deeply embedded on ethnographic and archival survey, it lacks possible insights derivable from a holistic perspective that embraces material culture. Indeed, the relevance of the borderlands to historical archaeology is the cross-cultural insights derivable from the periphery. The borderlands are geostrategic locations at the margin of distinct socioeconomic and political regimes where identity politics play a significant role in the negotiation of power. It is a landscape endowed with conduits of regional socioeconomic and political opportunities not available at the center (Baud & Van Shendel 1997; Asiwaju 2010; Nugent 2012; Coplan 2012; Naum 2013). As noted by Naum, borderlands are "complex landscapes [where] one can find evidence for many of the cultural processes [characterized] by hybridity in the sphere of material culture, the presence of multiple and seemingly contradicting identities, public and hidden transcripts employed in the dealings with authorities, and narratives of difference and racial/cultural prejudice employed in official state propaganda" (2013, p. 76).

Salient contributions of borderlands studies to historical archaeology have been recorded in surveys conducted in Europe and America. For example, in his study of Lolland and Falster in the Danish-Slavic borderland during the Middle Ages, Naum (2013) observed the misconception of this region (in archival sources such as the *Gasta Danorum*), as a perfectly geographical and cultural divided societies of Danes and Slavs. This misrepresentation of history was corrected by postwar archeological findings and new historical interpretations that unveil the dynamics of intra/interregional trade, and cross-cultural encounters involving dynastic intermarriages and pottery technological-transfer between Danish and Slavic Societies. Also, the place of geographical elements such as sea as a bridge rather than a barrier as erroneously perceived by written sources has been uncovered. The subjugation of these historical realities in "official narratives" likens pre-colonial borderlands to colonial landscapes whose reality are revealed through intellectual decolonization and multidisciplinary endeavor. In a similar development, Hare (2015) attempts an archaeological study of the Jutland Peninsula in the German-Danish borderlands since the nineteenth century. Based on the historical analysis of archaeological discoveries of the *Danevirke* walls and the *Haithabu* Viking settlement, this work re-enacted the relevance of an ancient hybridized Danish-Germanic civilization to the modern era. In particular, Hare demonstrates the weakness and often misleading state-centric construction of nationalism and showcases the important contribution of borderland archaeology in the representation of the "complex interactions among various forms of identity" across modern state boundaries (p. 11).

In the Americas, a archaeo-historical analysis of the cultural and biological implications of intercultural encounters between Spanish colonialists and American Indians in the South Eastern part of the United States uncovers the pattern of migration cum disease processes, hybridization of food production based on local and European subsistence system, demographic and cultural change as well the local responses to European exploration and imperialism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Thomas 1990). Motivated by these pioneer studies, this paper revisits the prospects of historical archaeology in West Africa through the lenses of the region's borderlands.

Toward a Historical Archaeology of West African Borderlands

The interconnectivity of West Africa to the wider world is rooted in antiquity. As observed by Decorse, 'West Africa did not exist in isolation during the millennia preceding the advent of the Atlantic trade. By the fifteenth century, when the first European arrived on the coast, West Africa was already linked by trade networks that extended throughout the coast and hinterland', that is, the interregional trans-Saharan trade as well as intra-regional East-West trade patterns (2001, p. 4). However, the region witnessed a new trend of inter-connectivity at the end of the Middle Ages marking the dawn of the modern era. This era marked the demise of the Trans-Saharan Trade and the old empires. It witnessed the rise and fall of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, new pattern of warfare and diplomacy, a drastic change in the system of production and distribution as well as colonialism and de-colonialism. As observed by Hardesty, 'the modern world is marked by accelerating global population movements and more effective technologies of transportation and communication, all bringing about increasing contact with others…Historical archaeology is well-positioned to explore such encounters and their consequences' (1999, p. 54). A geostrategic location that embodies this global vigour and inter/intraregional transformation are borderlands.

A significant impact of West African relations with the outside world is the configuration and reconfiguration of the region's spatial order and territoriality over time. While its borderlands symbolize the theatres of regional socioeconomic and political dynamics, they are repositories of the negotiation of regulations and intercultural exchange (Asiwaju 1984; 1985; 2010; Walther et al. 2015). The location of these landscapes at the intersection of distinct spheres of political and economic authorities makes such areas a haven of regional intercourse. These sites when subjected to archaeo-historical analysis promises new insights into the regional pattern of architecture, urbanisation, industrialisation, conflict and warfare, agriculture, labour, infrastructure, trade and social networks. A well flogged theme in this respect is the historical archaeology of the West African maritime borders otherwise known as the Slave Coast. For instance, in the ancient city of Badagry, the 'relics of the enslavement system have been preserved to the present from the time of the abolition of the slave trade in the area … These material remains and current activities include the display of slave chains and

shackles, cannons, barracoons quarters, seventeenth-century wells, a seventeenth-century Portuguese umbrella and pottery gifts, a slave route door post called the "door of no return," a slave ship anchor' (Simpson 2008, pp. 2-3). Indeed, based on local oral traditions, written sources and archaeological findings in copious slave societies and shipment deports, Decorse (2001) reveals the impact of the West Africa's international relations with Europe during the transatlantic trade – a transcultural encounter with a consequent unprecedented transformation of the region's culture, economy, politics and social structure. In advancing this discourse, this work rethinks the prospects of historical archaeology in West African borderlands through the lessons learnt from Essouk-Tadmakka in the Sahel-Saharan frontier as well as the Chad Basin.

Essouk-Tadmakka is the site of a major entrepot on the trans-Saharan trade network (Insoll 2003; Nixon 2008). Located in the Malian region of Kidal, bordering Algeria and Niger, Essouk-Tadmaka was an important node in the inter-regional trade between West Africa and North Africa. As noted by Nixon, 'While Timbuktu was almost unheard of before the 13th century, Tadmakka was first recorded in Arabic texts in the 10th century' (2010, p.41). As observed by Nixon, despite the acknowledgement of its importance to the trans-Saharan trade in the oral tradition of the Tuaregs, the site remained unexcavated until recently (Nixon 2009; 2010). Thus, revealing the paucity of archaeological data in West African borderlands studies. The archaeological study of Essouk complements existing historical sources by revealing the existence of a large-scale trade between North Africa and the Western Sudan, which dates back to the 8th century A.D, and differing from the generally accepted 10th century A.D. as recorded in primary Arabic scripts. Further still, the archaeological survey uncovered the impact of inter-regional migration and its attendant external invasion of an emerging border boom town which resulted in a change in trade network in the 14th century – marking a permanent decline of Essouk-Tadmakka. Amongst others, Nixon's study unveils the importance of the urban impact of the inter-regional trade in West Africa. This is often the case of the establishment of a permanent built environment in a frontier region as a potent indicator of a thriving node and hubs of inter/intraregional trade networks. Indeed, the study of Essouk-Tadmakka in the transit corridor between North and West Africa reveals new insights into the pre-modern history of West African relations with the outside world – north of the Sahel. This approach, if adopted for further studies in the modern era would yield new insights into the history of West Africa.

Established by nomads around the bank of the River Niger in the eleventh century, Timbuktu soon overcame Essouk-Tadmakka as the major hub of inter-regional commerce and learning, linking the sub-Saharan West Africa with the Sahara until its invasion and destruction by the Moroccan marauders in the sixteenth century. The existence of pre-colonial manuscripts in Timbuktu creates a fertile ground for the comparative analysis of historical and archaeological data of border towns such as Tessalit in the modern era. As observed by Jeppie, 'In the various archives of Timbuktu we find numerous texts, often in beautiful and careful handwriting copied onto ruled sheets, scraps of paper from an old school-book, the ordinary French bloc, with a content going back decades, if not centuries earlier' (2008, p. 14). The Timbuktu manuscripts (*Tarikh-al-Sudan, Risala, Shifa*, and *fatwas*) are artefacts and fossilised history in their own rights. Indeed, Jeppie emphasized the importance of placing 'the African written record firmly beside the oral traditions of the continent' (2008, pp. 13-14). This approach, when ingrained in the tangible records of societal living would unveil aspects of material culture, sites of industries and religious learning as well as intercultural encounters in modern history.

The existing studies in the Chad Basin have focused mainly on the pre-modern era. Archaeological surveys carried out in the area have established prehistoric chronological sequence of human habitation in West Africa dating up to the end of the second millennium B.C. The settlement pattern sheds light on the region's strategies and movements of colonisation as well the intra/inter-regional encounters between the tropical rainforest and the Sahara desert and adaptability to environmental variability (Andah 1995; Connah 1976; Holl 1995). This is a borderland inhabited by multicultural communities. This area became clusters of the British, French and German colonial estates at the incursion European imperialism in West Africa (Lake Chad basin Commission, n.d). A green area in this regard is the historical archaeology of this colonial encounter and its consequent local responses. As noted by Reid and Lane, 'a marked shift in the focus of archaeological research across the [African] continent occurred from a concern with earlier time periods of the "Stone Age" to the "Iron Age" during which farming systems were established and complex societies emerged' [this over-concentration on the pre-historic period at the detriment of the modern era] 'well explain, at least in part, why archaeology remains a sorely underutilized resource throughout most of the continent, one that is perceived to have little relevance for the development of

African countries' (2004, p. 2). Thus, the study of ancient populations around the Lake Chad has already reached a plateau, especially in the face of the availability of other historical sources that could corroborate archaeological findings in the modern era. Indeed, written culture developed in the Lake Chad region during the pre-modern era. The Kanem-Bornu Empire, which emerged in the Lake Chad region in the ninth century thrived on the Trans-Saharan trade. By the twelfth century, this inter-regional trade network between the Arabian caliphate and Kanem-Bornu metamorphosed into cultural diffusion and intellectual exchange marking the institutionalisation of Arabic writing tradition in the region (Hunwick 1964). By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the sophisticated Arabic literature by scholars that emerged in Kanem-Bornu was sold in the market of the Arabian peninsula (Shareef, n.d). Hence, the presence of writing culture in this part of West Africa makes the approach of historical archaeology to the reconstruction of history a very potent mechanism to harness new historical insights. Hence, the historical archaeology of the later trans-Saharan trade of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, conflict archaeology of the West African Jihad as well as European encounters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are very promising in this regard. This interdisciplinary approach embracing tangible and intangible evidence is more potent in the nodes and hubs of inter-regional networks such as borderlands in West Africa.

Concluding Remarks

This paper examines the prospects of the historical archaeology of West African borderlands. In doing so, it examines the interdisciplinary relationship between African history and archaeology. It particularly illustrates the progress made so far in the deployment of an archaeo-historical method to the study of African history and questions the predominant focus of earlier studies on the hinterland and coastal locations of human settlement as well as on the pre-modern era. In advancing this discourse, the present work argues that West African settlements located across spheres of cultural, political, economic and social boundaries are the embodiment of regional and global historical dynamics. The historical archaeology of such location promises to yield new insights into the nature of intra/intercultural encounters, colonialism and local responses as well as the pattern of adaptability to sociocultural, economic, political and environmental change in the modern era.

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