

Introduction

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Since the 1970s, selected fourth year students in the Department of History at the University of Botswana have produced long research essays on various aspects of Botswana's past (see introduction to *Pula* 13/1&2, 1999). Since 1994, about thirty have dealt with the archaeology of Botswana. This subject was introduced to the Department of History in 1977 when David Kiyaga-Mulindwa joined the staff. By 1986 an Archaeology Unit had been established in the Department of History, and by 1992 students could choose to take a single major in Archaeology. One of the requirements for this single major is the long research essay. The students end their third year with a research proposal which leads to fieldwork during the long vacation (May-August). By the time they begin their fourth year studies, they have started writing their research and a first draft is presented to the entire Department of History around late October. In late February, they present a revised draft, often after having spent more time in the field during December. The essay in its final form is submitted, at the end of the academic year, to the Library of the University of Botswana.

The nine papers in this volume are a fairly representative sample of the best archaeology student essays. They are arranged in chronological order. They include the first example from 1994, one example each from the classes of 1995 and 1996, two from 1998 and four from the particularly inspired crop of students in the class of 1999. Another possible arrangement of the papers would have been thematic by sub-discipline, with one section for archaeology, another for ethnoarchaeology and a third for experimental archaeology. But none of the papers concerns just one or the other sub-discipline, and the chronological order has the advantage of showing the improvements as each class learned from and tried to do better than those who went before.

Ethnoarchaeology, the practice of examining living traditional societies in order to gain insights which help interpret the remains of ancient societies, is a popular sub-discipline among UB Archaeology students. They are well placed to carry out such studies as they often have their own or a relative's home in a traditional community and thus privileged access to traditional activities. There have been several very good examples of ethnoarchaeological research. The selection presented here includes Patricia Lepekoane's study of Bakgalagadi settlements; Kabelo Matshetshe's study of traditional salt production in the Makgadikgadi Pans; Cynthia Mooketsi's comparative study of cattle butchery and meat distribution among different ethnic groups in Botswana; and Morongwa Mosothwane's study of initiation schools among the Bakgatla.

A related sub-discipline is experimental archaeology, where the investigator sets up a scientific experiment to observe how certain materials behave under certain conditions. The aim is to understand better the materials found on archaeological sites. As with the ethnoarchaeological studies, the more scientifically inclined students are well placed to use this approach. Two very good examples of archaeological experiments are presented in this collection: Lexy Baloi's research on the collapse of mud walls and Bafentse Peter's on the burning of livestock pens.

A purely archaeological approach is, unfortunately, relatively rare in the research essays. Partly, this is because fourth year students are not allowed to excavate sites by themselves. Excavation produces so much information that any one student could not possibly cope in the relatively short time they have to produce their research essay. But there are archaeological projects which do not involve excavation, and ones which can be designed so as to allow students to complete them in a short time. A good example is Princess Sekgarametso's mapping project of Ntsweng, a major contribution to Botswana's archaeology simply because it documents an important archaeological site. Milton Tapela's tightly focused research on size preference in ostrich eggshell beads contradicts some widely accepted ideas about relations between indigenous hunters and immigrant herders in Botswana's distant past. Donald Mookodi's research using the site register from the National Museum discovered a major change in the distribution of ancient settlements around AD 1300 in eastern Botswana. This unusual discovery should inspire much further research to unravel its significance.

So much archaeology remains to be done in Botswana that even a small and simple research project can often make a big contribution. In the early days, the history students could make a significant contribution by simply writing about the history of their village. Archaeology students never followed that route: hardly anyone wrote about the archaeology of their village. A pity, in my opinion, because there are a lot of villages in the huge blanks on the archaeological map of Botswana. Students could do a lot worse than sharpen their archaeological skills on limited surveys in neglected parts of Botswana: a straightforward task which would teach a host of useful things from library and archival research, to examining museum records and collections, to reading maps and devising sampling strategies, and of course the basic analysis and classification of artifacts. Then even the poorly executed projects could have the desirable side effect of at least partly filling a blank on the archaeological map of Botswana.

Notes

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