# **Integrating African ethnoarchaeology**

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#### Abstract:

Michael West and William Martin have suggested that the African Studies in North America finds itself in moment of profound redefinition, caused by the combined influences of pan-Africanism, globalization and the reaffirmation of the traditional academic disciplines. Likewise, ethnoarchaeology's once celebrated role in the New Archaeology has floundered in the face of post-positivist critiques. In this paper, I seek to define a space for ethnoarchaeological work in Africa that is sensitive to the daily realities of peoples' lives while it simultaneously builds the types of knowledge necessary for ethnoarchaeology to meet its important epistemic role within archaeological research. Examples are drawn from research with potters and consumers in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali.

## **Introduction:**

Few could deny that integration is a desirable attribute in any field of science. In academic disciplines, topical forms of integration imply the potential for grand synthesis, methodological integration hints at a certain level of maturity, while theoretical integration suggests the emergence of ever-elusive objectivity. Yet, as Martin and West (1999) have shown through their analysis of the "Africanist Enterprise," integration is rarely total and almost always occurs because certain ties are forged at the expense of others. The African Studies Association in the US was originally formed to integrate scholars isolated by departmental divisions within the academy. In contrast to the universalizing tendencies of the traditional disciplines (especially at that time), African Studies promoted an interdisciplinary understanding of African experiences grounded in an intimate knowledge of Africa itself. In doing so, Africanist scholarship distanced itself from the traditional disciplines, African American scholars and pan-Africanists. The ongoing reduction in government funding for Area Studies programs since the close of the cold war has meant that many once potent Africanist programs are seeking to reconnect with these other fields of inquiry. In effect, they are poised to redefine the Africanist enterprise through new dimensions of integration.

One of the gems in Martin and West's discussion is the way that it uncovers how partial, transitory, strategic and, not infrequently, politically driven discussions of disciplinary integration inevitably are. This is a theme I wish to pick up on today in my discussion of the archaeological subfield of ethnoarchaeology. As a true inter-disciplinary research specialty that seeks to bridge the gap between archaeology and anthropology, ethnoarchaeology has always had available several different avenues of integration. Indeed, many recent discussions of ethnoarchaeology's perceived failures pivot on the suggested laps of integration is has with contemporary archaeology. I would suggest, however, that African ethnoarchaeology needs to think more strategically and less dogmatically about forms of integration. To make this case, I refer to my recent ethnoarchaeological study of ceramic exchange and consumption in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali.

## Ethnoarchaeology

Ethnoarchaeology's integration within archaeology and with archaeological theory has always been a point of conflict. Although ethnoarchaeology has been a recognized field of study in archaeology since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Fewkes 1900), it grew to prominence in America as

part of the positivist epistemology championed by the New Archaeology. The New Archaeology promised a scientific era in archaeology by seeking to excise the dual tendencies of "traditional archaeology" to create either speculative reconstructions or focus entirely on artifact physics. The solution to traditional archaeology's ills was found in the development of a positivist approach to archaeological interpretation. Cultural models developed by Julian Steward and Leslie White were used to generate deductive hypotheses about the past that could be tested against archaeological data (Binford 1962, 1965). However, these hypotheses referenced human behavior, which is not directly observable from the archaeological record. As a result, Binford encouraged ethnoarchaeology to produce middle range theories that translated human behavior into the material patterns archaeologists could see (Binford 1981, 1983; Binford and Sabloff 1982). Thus, ethnoarchaeology was to be a low-level and inductive form of study aimed at identifying isomorphic relations between behavior and material culture; what are now described as "unambiguous material correlates."

Few programs of research have failed as spectacularly as ethnoarchaeology's quest to identify unambiguous material correlates. In the light of ethnoarchaeological results that continually showed the variability and diversity in behavioral-material relations, many archaeologists felt that ethnoarchaeology had been delinquent in its obligations to the discipline. In a most memorable critique, Simms (1992) suggested that the field had blown itself off course to the extent that it was little more than an "obnoxious spectator" and a "trivial pursuit." For Simms and several others, the solution was to be found in bringing ethnoarchaeological research back into alignment with archaeology – of forcing a tighter integration with archaeological questions and theory (Kuznar 2001; O'Connell 1995).

It would be easy to dismiss these critiques as positivism's last foray. However, there lies a lesson to be learned in ethnoarchaeology's alleged failures. The quest for unambiguous material correlates is anchored in a pervasive assumption that ethnography and archaeology engage exactly the same cultural object. How else could we image correlates that were simply transferable from one field to the other? Ethnoarchaeology's failure at findings unambiguous material correlates points to at least two significant differences between archaeological and ethnographic approaches to cultural life. First, as much post-colonial anthropology now recognizes (Abu-Lughod 1991; Ferguson 2002; Rosaldo 1989; Said 1979), "ethnographic settings" are not pristine islands of traditionalism cocooned within a sea of modernity. Colonialism, capitalism and globalization have caused significant changes in even the most remote societies, prompting the ruptures, hybridities, and cultural innovations that have become the focus of contemporary ethnography. Analyses that treating "traditional" material culture as if it was a vestige of a pre-colonial past, unaffected by the modern world, flirt with unilinear tendencies and risk missing much of what makes the production of traditional material culture desirable today.

Second, ethnographic and archaeological perspectives on cultural life seem to temporalize culture and perceive change at radically different scales. These scales can be theorized in several different ways: as the distinct durées of Annales history (Bintliff 1991; Braudel 1976) or more recently as the interplay of agency against a structural backdrop (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). Ethnographic experiences unfold as a series of meaningful actions by human agents, all taking place in the fluidity encountered as daily practice. Structures and systems can rarely be seen directly here and instead must be painstakingly assembled. In contrast, the partial and incomplete archaeological record has meant that archaeology rarely sees individual agency. Instead, understanding even the smallest component of a single site normally means placing it within its broader context, typically drawn from other sites in the region that date to the same period. Because it is impossible to know whether the same individuals were on all of these sites, it is necessary to link them though supraindividual cultural phenomena for which these sites all stand as evidence. This leads archaeology to focus on structural questions and employ structural concepts such as ethnic groups, cultures, and adaptive systems. While these differences have occasionally been attributed to ad hoc theoretical

conventions – the often cited 20 year lag between new ethnographic theory and its adoption in archaeology – their durability in the face of persistent research suggests they may be a consequence of each field's respective datasets. Even the studies of agency growing popular in archaeology typically must start from a known structural backdrop against which some aspect of material variability stands out as evidence of human agency (Gosden 2005; Pauketat and Alt 2005).

### Ethnoarchaeology of Ceramic Exchange and Consumption.

The implication, I believe, is that ethnoarchaeology probably should not be totally integrated within archaeology or ethnography, but instead must engage in strategic forms of integration with both. This integration is strategic because at certain points, it must forge integration one direction while allowing fragmentation to occur in the other.

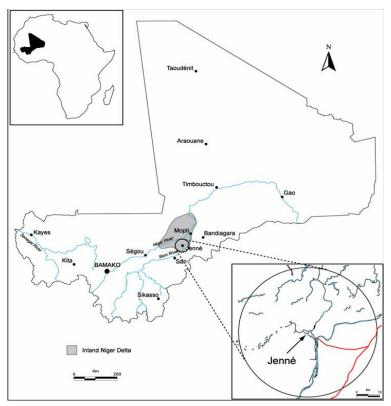


Figure 1. The study area.

For example, in recent ethnoarchaeological work I conducted in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali, I focused on the thorny issue of "style" in ceramic variability. Ceramic style is most typically associated with non-functional attributes in pottery – typically decoration – that demonstrate regional patterning indicative of ancient identity. As a concept, style is seductive because it makes intrinsic sense when an assemblage of sherds from a given phase or region is organized in a lab. However, in daily practice, the processes that lead to such patterning in ethnography reflect no less than three well acknowledged and dedicated research foci in economic anthropology (production, exchange and consumption), in addition to taphonomy. So what appears to archaeology as a relationship between artifact style and identity would need to be examined ethnographically through several detailed studies directed at elucidating finer-scale processes.

Armed with this realization, I focused my analysis on just two parts of this system: pottery marketing strategies and consumer purchasing choices. These were chosen because they seemed most likely to inform me about the processes of distribution. Additionally, for at least the last 50

years, plastic, aluminum and enamel dishes have been routinely integrated into women's daily tool kits. As a result, pottery and new materials had to be treated together in the study of consumption. At this point, the study effectively broke its archaeological ties and reoriented itself within an ethnographic tradition, including the use of qualitative data analysis and anchoring theories drawn from substantivist economics and the anthropology of consumption. The project itself was centered on the town of Jenné in the upper part of the Delta. Over a span of 9 months, I interviewed over 125 potters and 100 consumers and conducted an economically focused census of domestic vessels in consumer households, all within a region spanning 2,700 km² (Fig. 1).



Figure 2. Enamels in a trousseau display.

What emerged from this more practice-focused engagement with potters and consumers was a highlighting of the persistent relationship between domestic vessels and household political economies (see Cunningham 2005 for details). For consumers, definitive women's objects such as household vessels play an important role in their negotiations of what is one of the most salient aspects of their social lives: namely, domestic power structures. The most important moment of household provisioning occurs when young women are first married. Young women move to major centers and work as domestic servants several years before marriage in order to gain the income they need for an adequate trousseau. The trousseau provides them with all the tools needed to do "women's work", defined widely as cooking meals and hauling water for both her nuclear and extended families. While older women felt enamelware vessels were "extras" in the trousseau, young women made enamels a focal point of their trousseau purchases, often allowing their mothers to purchase other items for them so they could focus on enamels. These objects would be placed in displays used decorate the front room of newlywed's house (Fig. 2). They would remain on display for up to five years, by which point the new bride – who by this time had usually given birth to several children – would give away any pieces from her collection as marriage gifts for use in other

trousseaus.

These vessels seem important to young women for several reasons. On the one hand, they reflect a significant store of wealth that women alone control during the early and uncertain years of marriage. Several women noted that they would sell these vessels off as needed to address economic hardships. Additionally, both men and women noted that creating a beautiful and extravagant enamel display was the most important public statement that a young woman could make about herself during her lifetime. Because young women either worked to buy her enamels or received them as gifts from friends and family, the size of a collection symbolizes both her industry and the extent and wealth of her social network before the entire community. Such displays seem to effectively shield women from overt forms of exploitation by reminding her husband and his family that she possesses wealth, has proven her work ethic and is part of an extensive social network.

The importance of enamels is reflected materially in the distances they move between the point of purchase and the household. Despite the fact that they are readily available in the weekly markets at Jenné, San and Mopti, enamels moved an average distance of 235.4 km. In stark contrast pottery which travels the lowest mean distance of the four compositional classes of domestic vessels (5.6 km) and, in fact, travels on average less than the average distance consumers normally go to visit their nearest market (6.7 km). Most consumers demonstrated a notable disinterest in ceramics and stated that they usually purchased pottery from whoever was available. The interesting exception is water jars purchased by a mother for her daughter's trousseau. Marriage jars traveled three times the average distance for other types of pottery (17.0 km) and were often purchased through special orders commissioned by a bride's mother. Women suggested that a beautiful water jar was essential to a sound marriage because a beautiful jar encourage a husband to "drink" the water she has brought into her household. As with enamels, water jars thus seem to stand as an overt metaphor for a newlywed. It is also important to note that these both are the vessels used to transfer the products of women's work – the meals she's cooked and water she's hauled, to her husband and his family. Thus, those vessels that travel the longest distances and were reported to be the most valuable are also those that physically transfer the products of women's labor to their husband and his family.

One consequence of the low overall value for pottery is that potters were primarily responsible for their distribution throughout the region. Five distinct marketing strategies are currently employed and are listed here in descending order of distance. Two forms of itinerant potting have been practiced in the region. First, potters may produce a surplus of pottery throughout the year and then, during the annual flood, they circulate with their pottery in shallow draft river boats throughout the Delta. Alternatively, potters may relocate themselves with their tools to a new area and produce pottery using local raw materials. While the region is quite famous for such itinerant work, both have been all but abandoned in the last 20 years. Instead, potters have shifted to a form of franchising in which they drop-off wagonloads of pots with acquaintances in neighboring villages who then sell locally on their behalf. Potters also sell through day-trips to local villages, in weekly markets and to friends and family out of their households & firing locations (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Pottery deposited with a franchise.

Household political economies are a key determinant of these marketing systems because potters make and sell pots within the broader context of their domestic obligations. Changes in these obligations directly impact on how and where they can market their pottery. To provide three brief examples, women who spend more than half their week cooking and hauling water for their husband's extended family – usually his parents – have smaller marketing ranges than those who have more freedom from domestic work. Women who must work for the extended family more than half the days in the week usually sell in marketing ranges that are half that of women who can dedicate most of the week to potting (mean of 5.7 km vs. 13.1 km). In a second example, junior women who typically are expected to transfer a portion of any income to senior women in their extended families under the guise of showing respect tend to limit their investment in ceramic production and marketing. Instead of the 3-4 large firings per year typical of other potters, younger potters prefer to sell smaller amounts of pottery in weekly markets. This strategy garners less of a return, but it has the advantage of allowing young women to enjoy the market as they work and, if sales are particularly good, to convert some of their proceeds into consumer items before they return home and dutifully transferring the remaining proceeds to their husbands or mothers in law. In a third example, shifting obligations allow/force potters to employ more intensive marketing strategies. As their daughters approach marriage potters usually are freed from the domestic labor obligations that restrict their use of itinerant production. Because mothers are responsible for outfitting their daughters, potters are generally allowed to spend most of their time potting and are given full control over the proceeds of their production. At this time, potters may increase their production by more than 50% and market to clientele in a larger sales region.

## Conclusion

These findings show the pervasive impact that household political economies have on domestic vessel movements in daily practice. While there is no simple material correlates here for style, the study does illuminate some of the underlying mechanisms that determine the sorts of pottery distributions archaeologists routinely encounter. Notably, the study supports the age-old archaeological maxim that says objects with higher "value" tend to travel further in exchange. However, as we've seen, "value" is primarily an outgrowth of an object role within domestic negotiations of patriarchal control. Patriarchal structures of obligation similarly impact potter marketing strategies by determining how widely and intensively ceramics may be sold.

What is particularly important here is the way that strategic integration and dis-integration between archaeological and ethnographic gazes allow for more nuanced readings of material process. Ethnoarchaeology has a real possibility of assisting the development of a more humanized (or, in Kus's [1997] terminology) sensualized pasts by developing theory about the rupture between

archaeology and ethnology. Well developed, such knowledge could allow archaeology to move from structural tendencies to more experiential narratives of the ancient life. As I have argued, the key here is not to adhere to an idealized vision of disciplinary integration, but to use various forms of integration to flexibly engage the different empirical contexts available to us in our ongoing study of human society.

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