

■ CONFERENCE NEWS

The 10th meeting of the West African Archaeological Association (WAAA/OAAA) Porto Novo, Benin and archaeological publication in West Africa

Merrick Posnansky
Department of History
University of California, Los Angeles
USA, 90095-1473
E-mail: begho@earthlink.net

The Association convened its 10th meeting in Porto Novo from November 21-25th 2004. The meeting was originally planned to take place in Niamey, Niger in 2003. When arrangements for Niamey proved difficult, Dr Alexis Adande agreed to hold the meeting at short notice in Benin. The Association is the second (to the South African Archaeological Association) oldest continuous archaeological group in sub Saharan Africa and was established in 1976, holding its first meeting at Enugu hosted by the University of Nsukka at which Dr Ekpo Eyo was elected the first president. The association brings together both Francophone and Anglophone African scholars and was the successor to the rather informal gatherings of West African Archaeologists, largely expatriate (at its last 4th meeting in Jos only 3 out of 18 presentations were made by West Africans), that had met in Sierra Leone (1966), Ibadan (1967), Ghana (1969) and Jos in 1971. In 1977 the Association took over the publication of the *West African Journal of Archaeology* (WAJA) that had been initiated in 1968 at a meeting convened by Professor Thurstan Shaw at the University of Ibadan with direct monetary support from the Universities of Ibadan, Ghana, Ife, Cape Coast, and the Ghana Museum and Monuments Board. From 1973 the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities became an additional sponsor and for short periods the Universities of Zaria and Lagos were also sponsors. By volume 15, only Ibadan University and Nigerian Antiquities were sponsors. Its editorship was maintained at the Department of Archaeology at Ibadan with its first four editors being members of the department (Thurstan Shaw 1971-5,

David Calvocoressi 1976-7, Nicholas David 1978 and Bassey Wai Andah 1979-97). Professor Andah was the principal guiding force who ensured that the Journal appeared regularly during a time of great political stress and economic constraints, and was one of the most energetic and prolific contributors. The journal provided many new West African archaeologists with a venue for their first scientific presentations. One of the most important functions of the meeting in Porto Novo was to make plans for the 11th meeting when the Association will celebrate its 30th anniversary and the 35th anniversary of the Journal now in its 32nd number.

The theme of the meeting was "Taking the Best of the Archaeological heritage" (*Archéologie et mise en valeur du patrimoine*). There were presentations by 46 participants (16 in English and 17 in French), some read in absentia and several involving multiple authors. There were participants from Benin, Nigeria, Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali with only myself being from outside of West Africa. The attendance at most sessions was in the 40's with more than 20% of the attendees being women. More than half the presentations were accompanied by power-point illustrations. The opening presentation was by Professor M. A. Sowunmi of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology from the University of Ibadan. She outlined the achievements of the last 30 years which have included the award of 13 doctorates and 53 masters degrees in archaeology and a present establishment of 14 full time staff at Ibadan, 10 staff at Nsukka and 8 doctorates, 3 doctorates from Ougadougou and literally thousands of students from different West African centers who have taken archaeology at the undergraduate level in at least 15 different universities. She outlined the new courses being taught in West Africa including Forensic Archaeology, Archaeology and Tourism and various aspects of Cultural Resource Management. She stressed the opportunities opening up for archaeologists in environmental impact assessment and urged the participants to be the creators not just the seekers of jobs. She examined the challenges facing archaeology and encouraged the conferees to be more proactive in adult education and to make archaeology more competitive by emphasizing its breadth and usefulness in development strategies.

Of particular interest were several papers that dealt with the slave trade on the coast, the role of

various urban communities, the value of oral testimonies and the concealment of slaves. This had been proposed as a priority for research at the 1994 meeting. Of particular interest was the paper by Dr Michel Goeh-Akue dealing with his work in the Togoville area of Togo. There were several papers dealing with site management and one by Franck Ogou and Francois Godonou of the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain in Benin, that elicited a great deal of discussion, on the importance of photographic archives. Dr Emmanuel Olufemi Omisore detailed the problems of managing 22 museums, 220 registered sites and a staff of 2730 comprised by the Nigerian Commission for Museums and Monuments. The sheer size of Nigeria and its disparate regions has led to problems of supervision and the need to involve many local heritage authorities to monitor the sites. The excavations at Wargoandga, south of Ougadougou in Burkina Faso, that the National University has developed as a training site, were of particular interest revealing a large site with both residential and religious aspects, where pavements, iron working and agricultural activities have been traced back through two major horizons to an earliest occupation some two thousand years ago. The sophistication of the ceramic analysis and by Professor Jean-Baptiste Kiethega and Dr Lassina Kote from the Université de Ougadougou was particularly impressive. Though Dr Angele Aguigah, who presided over the last meeting of WAAA in Lome in 2001, was unable to attend she sent an interesting paper on potsherd pavements and her work in recording the women who still remember the traditional skills and who prepared new pavements as an exercise in experimental archaeology.

The meeting, which met in the National Archives building, featured a small display on recent archaeology in Benin of which the most spectacular discovery has been that of subterranean chambers beneath the royal sites of the Kingdom of Dahomey. Discovered and explored by a joint Danish and Beninois team they are thought capable of housing literally thousands of people, possibly slaves. Other panels provided information on new iron working sites many with exceptionally large slag heaps. Iron production flourished from the first millennium AD. A CD on American Archaeology in Benin had been prepared by Dr Cameron Monroe (University of Washington, St Louis) and included recent theses, dissertations, book chapters and journal articles on

archaeology in Benin by American scholars in the past 10 years and was presented to all scholars who were interested. A CD by Professor Nicholas David on the Mandara Archaeological Project for 2004 in Cameroun was also made available. Both CD's highlighted the ease of future access to research by Americans, which had previously been difficult because of limited library resources, and access to those libraries. The general meeting lasted until after midnight on November 24th and covered such topics as increasing the paid-up membership; a discussion of research priorities; initiating a biennial award for outstanding scholarship; interaction with other regional groups; the production of the WAAA newsletter of which only two issues had appeared since 1994 and making use of the vigorously achieved non-governmental organization status of the association in order to make the association more effective in long term regional planning activities. The invitation made by SAfA at its meeting in Bergen in June 2004 to encourage greater cooperation with the WAAA was greeted with enthusiasm and the writer gave a paper on "Linkages, webs and global interdependencies: West African archaeology and the wider African World of Archaeology" in which the advantages of greater international cooperation using modern advances in international telecommunication and specialized web sites were discussed. More than 20 members of WAAA joined SAfA under the provision that allows free membership of SAfA by members in Africa with full access to the SAfA web and *Nyame Akuma*.

The next meeting of the association will be hosted by the Université de Ougadougou in 2006. It is hoped that the proceedings of the meeting will be published. The association has a good track record in making its proceedings available, one volume which contains exceptionally valuable material followed the Ougadougou meeting in 1992 and was published in Benin as *Perspectives de coopération regionales, Actes du Ve colloque* (pp 258) edited by B. A. Adande, Aziz Ballouche and B. Bagodo, Porto Novo 1994.

West African archaeology has an interesting publication history. Before the publication of WAJA, Professor Thurstan Shaw had edited the *West African Archaeological Newsletter* (WAAN) of which 12 numbers, also like *Nyame Akuma* with a yellow cover, were produced at Ibadan from 1964 until March 1970 with several issues comprising more than 50 pages

and with 33 entries by Shaw himself. Though WAJA provided a forum for substantive papers it was felt that there was still a need for a newsletter and from May 1970, 15 issues of *Underground West Africa*, a less authoritative and much thinner (the longest issue being 8 pages) forum than WAAN were edited and circulated first by the Centre for West African Studies at the University of Birmingham and from issue no 4, in January 1972, by Professor B. K. Swartz of Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana until November 1977 when it had clearly lost its purpose with the

creation of the WAAA and the success of *Nyame Akuma*. Nyame Akuma first appeared in October 1972 and was edited and circulated by Professor Peter Shinnie from the University of Calgary until November 1981 (no.19). Unlike WAAN it included material, normally in the form submitted, from the whole continent. It was a response to the needs articulated by the first meeting of African Archaeologists of North America held in Urbana in April 1971 that was the precursor of SAfA.