

Reflections on African Archaeology and the Ancestors

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This essay is inspired by the ideas of Bassey Andah, who nearly two decades ago wrote about what must now be one of the most prominent issues in African archaeology, or for that matter, world archaeology today—the need to better understand and communicate with the ancestors:

Africans need to be aware not just of the fact that the past exists in the present – but how and where and why precisely their pasts exist[s] in their presents [and] what value such presence holds for their future meaningful existence. We very much need to acquire a synchronous sense of tune which encourages as well as enables us to see ourselves co-existing peacefully, creatively, harmoniously and truthfully in all spheres of life, at all stages and times with our ancestors and our descendants, and this, with all of our neighbours—past, present and future. (Andah 1990:3).

A dilemma arises out of Andah's vision for many Western-trained archaeologists, who may feel compelled to ask, how do we engage ancestors when simultaneously we are enveloped within Western science with all of its expectations for objectivity? It is informative that Andah, as an archaeologist trained in the West, saw no contradictions between connections with the ancestors and the practice of archaeology. The absence of contradictions in his thinking in these matters causes us to pause and to consider more seriously how archaeology and ancestral agency might be re-thought in archaeological practice and theory today.

As we explore the variety of tensions that arise for some between the practice of a Western-derived scientific archaeology and a respect for and link to the ancestors, an instructive foreground to this discussion is the lesson to be taken from Chinua Achebe's (2007) short story, "Dead Man's Path". Achebe tells the story of an earnest young school teacher, newly appointed as headmaster of what he depicts as a "backward" mission school, the Ndume Central School. The new headmaster, Michael Obi, wants it to be the perfect, beautiful, and successful school in the mission system. Enlisting the help of his young wife, he transforms the school compound into an English garden, replete with flowers and hedges around the school buildings. When he comes to learn about a little-used path through the school compound that connects the village shrine with the place of burial, he constructs a fence to keep villagers from using the path through the school. Sure of his mission, Obi informs a concerned village priest that the fence will stay up, even though the priest informs him that "the whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it" (Achebe 2007:249). The priest also warns that if Obi interdicts the path, then he will cut "the path of children coming in to be born." Obi