Education and Paleoanthropology in South Africa

Final Project Proposal

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Summary/Abstract:

This paper focuses on issues of public interest and access to paleoanthropology in South Africa relating to public education. Specifically, the politics of representation have seemed to play a key role in the way that the field of paleoanthropology in South Africa has historically been dominated by white, foreign scientists. This project aims to explore how education may affect how public interest in human evolution and archaeology is nearly nonexistent. Coupled with the history of colonialism, apartheid, racism, and developments in socio-economic stratification, this project aims to investigate the overt and underlying factors in representation of paleoanthropology in South African public education.

In my preliminary research, I have found that the history of apartheid and education policy-making are intertwined. The Christian National Education (CNE) system set in motion the same year the National Party came to power in 1948 established a foundation of racialized historical consciousness in South Africa. Racial segregation also geographically and economically divided the country. Even after the abolishment of apartheid in 1994, the economic and social disenfranchisement of black South Africans lingers. Social, economic, and agrarian studies of South African have led scholars to postulate a number of theories of why education inequality is prevalent in South Africa.

Paleoanthropology also has an interesting history in South Africa. Many major discoveries have been made in the last century, including the Taung Child by Raymond Dart, Mrs. Ples by Robert Broom, and very recently the discovery of Australopithecus sediba by Lee Berger. The University of Witswatersrand is home to a famous collection of fossils, yet preliminary anecdotal evidence has shown that there is little public interest in these fossils. Even with global interest in the fossil sites of South Africa, there seems to be a disproportionate interest in archaeology by South African natives.

This project hopes to answer some of these curiosities about the seemingly nonexistent overlap between paleoanthropology and public education. I plan to conduct ethnographic interviews with educators, museum curators, professors, and others as well as engage in participant observation to better understand the climate of public education. I hope to understand why there may be disinterest or even resistance to paleoanthropology in South Africa, the social implications of misrepresentation, and the current trends in paleoanthropology.

My project will contribute to a growing conversation of racial inequality, indigeneity, and academic representation in South Africa. In engages in a global discourse of power and colonialism, and may offer a different view of the role of paleoanthropology in social and political contexts. Existing literature on this subject consists of historical and economic analyses of South African education. I hope to provide a sociocultural and ethnographic perspective to the conversation.
Introduction and Background:

I first became interested in this topic when Dr. Bernhard Zipfel brought to light the problems of public interest in paleoanthropology in South Africa. Dr. Zipfel, who curates the collection of fossils at The University of Witswatersrand, mentioned the lack of South African public interest in the history of human evolution and archaeology. He attributed these trends to the current education and sociocultural climates in South Africa. The Ditsong National Museum of Natural History in Pretoria, South Africa also houses a collection of fossils that are publicly accessible to the South African public. Based on primary anecdotal evidence from Dr. Zipfel, there is a surprising lack of public interest in these resources.

These initial conversations sparked an interest in access to education and representation in South African paleoanthropology. South Africa today is situated in a political atmosphere with only two decades of post-Apartheid history, and there are many aspects of the social and cultural climate that have possible impacts on education. Furthermore, the history of paleoanthropology in South Africa is dominated by non-South African white men, dating from the early 1900s to recent times. This led me to wonder about the politics of access to paleoanthropology and possible roots in the South African education system.

First, I will outline a timeline of significant dates in South African paleoanthropology. In 1924, Raymond Dart published the discovery of the Taung Child, a famous skull of *Australopithecus africanus*, which is kept at the University of Witswatersrand today. In 1937, Robert Broom contributed to the field of paleoanthropology with his discoveries and published works on *Paranthropus robustus*, and in 1947 Robert Broom also discovered Mrs. Ples, an *Australopithecus africanus* specimen. In the 1960s, Philip Tobias contributed greatly to the growing field of paleoanthropology with his studies of Olduvai Gorge and published works on *Homo habilis*. In 1994, Ronald Clarke discovered “Little Foot” at Sterkfontein. And most recently, Lee Berger has been at the forefront of South African paleoanthropology, most notably with his 2008 discovery of *Australopithecus sediba*.

These milestones in South African paleoanthropology may have interesting connotations when lined up with South African political and social history of the same period. In 1948, a year after Broom’s discovery of Mrs. Ples, the National Party of South Africa formally implemented apartheid, a forced segregation of black and white South Africans. These political implications allowed for the National Party to also implement the CNE, or Christian National Education. The CNE established a segregationist pedagogy in South African public education that taught of a divine justification for white minority rule (King 2012). In 1976, the Soweto Uprising marked a time of civil unrest, where black students protested the Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974, which forced all black schools to use Afrikaans. Apartheid enforced insidious social associations: Afrikaans became associated with inequality, and English with power. Black students protested these structural forms of oppression and were met with police brutality. Scholars of South African education also argue that, at this time, anthropologists took an “ambiguous stance” on racialized histories and constructions of social inequality (King 2012).

In 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) won the election and effected the end of apartheid in South Africa. These political upheavals were followed by educational policy changes.
The OBE (Outcomes-Based Education) system was enacted, which was later changed to the Revised National Curriculum Statement in 2002. In 2001, lobbyists and social activists made waves in promoting archaeology in public education. Petitions for educational reform called for archaeology to be included in history curricula in schools, and scholars argued that paleoanthropology as a discipline was a way of educating children such that oppressive histories could be rewritten and national historic consciousness could be changed.

Apart from these historical legacies in public education, many other problems are present in the system today. A 2016 article published BBC News cites a “crisis” in the South African education system. Out of 800,000 children in Johannesburg, around 213,000 (roughly 26%) failed their end-of-year academic examinations (Nkosi 2016). In higher education, enrollment rates in South Africa are affected by economic difficulties, transportation to higher education institutions, and unplanned pregnancies (Matsolo et al. 2016). These rates are contextualized by the history of apartheid and resulting stratifications in socio-economic status. In 1994, with the election of Nelson Mandela and victory of the ANC, the legal parameters of education changed. Post-apartheid, students were legally allowed to attend schools anywhere, but financial factors affected populations that could afford moving to areas with quality education. Schools in African areas “seldom offered quality education” (Pienaar et al. 2014). In a study done in 2014, mapping socio-economic divides in South Africa onto the geographical distribution of schools with prized qualities in education showed that there are much higher pass rates in non-formerly African zoned areas, with linear relationships between passing student rates and cost of enrollment (Pienaar et al. 2014).

Furthermore, a 2002 study executed at the University of Cape Town explores a case study of developing archaeology curriculum in elementary schools. Even though researchers designed a comprehensive and accessible curriculum to both teachers and students, they concluded that teachers were not adequately prepared in their understanding of archaeological methodology and also could not “produce satisfactory methods of assessment” (Sealy 2002). It is evident that there are political and economic factors that have major impacts on educators and education.

The political sphere of education and public access is intertwined with the history of paleoanthropology discoveries in South Africa. Interest in paleoanthropology has grown tremendously in the years following 1994, and major contributors to the field include Ronald Clarke and Lee Berger. There is an interesting gap in discovery that coincides with the years of apartheid, though this connection could be attributed more to the specific circumstances that facilitate discoveries and less to the political climate of South Africa. And yet, recent discoveries in paleoanthropology has brought much global attention to South Africa. It seems that most research and interest in excavations, famous sites, and new discoveries have been spearheaded by foreigners. The politics of land, resource, and object ownership of human remains seems to be entirely controlled by the South African government.

Are there institutional or systemic structures that govern access to paleoanthropology? What vestiges or legacies of racism, Apartheid, and other sociocultural factors affect institutional memory and public education? The short history of archaeology in education could also stem from deeper roots in colonialism and tropes of scientific power and white authority. There seems
to be spheres of influence that culminate in current South African education that include the politics of race and representation, the sociocultural factors of education, and institutional and historical memory—this project aims to explore one or more of these topics to better understand the anthropology of representation.

Research Question:

How does public education affect the lack of popular interest and diversity in South African paleoanthropology?

Preliminary Results:

My project is ethnographic in nature. In my preliminary research, anthropologists have used a number of methods to assess the social and political climate of education inequality in South Africa. Rachel King published an article in 2012 detailing a social history and theory of considerations of contemporary archaeological education. Julia Tischler published an article in 2016 that used ethnographic and historical research to claim an agricultural theory of social inequality. And a scholarly disseratation published in 2001 by Thomas Hertz used mathematical and economic research to propose economic explanations of school dropout rates based on economic inequality among Africans.

King’s social theory suggests that education policy in South Africa during and after apartheid has created a legacy of oppressive narratives of indigeneity and majority/minority relations. Historical paradigms such as divine justification of rule have led to the erasure of indigenous forms of social and historical consciousness (King 2012). Tischler argues that, from a different standpoint, urbanization and segregation that coincided in the 1940s necessitated a system favoring whites in education. Standards of agrarian needs and income inequality determined that black Africans’ history be subjugated to the white minority rule (Tischler 2016). And Hertz suggests that economic theory shows that dropping out of school is economically favorable to families in poverty in South Africa, and that economic inequality does not favor black Africans (Hertz 2001).

With this political, economic, and social background of South African history, it is not surprising that paleoanthropology is underrepresented in the South African public education systems. A public ignorance or disinterest in human evolution stems from an absence of it in historical consciousness, weighed by racial discrimination and a slow regeneration of political and economic equality. If history and culture can be shaped and chosen by those in power, policy-makers, educators, and other influencers of education have only had about 20 years to reset institutional memory in public schools. It is apparent that education is inextricably linked to racial inequality, and therefore it is possible that South African education is resisting the inertia of social change that narratives of indigenous history that archaeology might have the power to create.
Methods:

The first key question to address is the degree of public sentiment and awareness of South African paleoanthropology. I plan to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa in the various populations we will be interacting with. I will conduct interviews with Dr. Bernhard Zipfel and other staff and students at the University of Witswatersrand, Ms. Bonita Birch of the Mini Wena education program, as well as reach out to other connections at the Ditsong National Museum of National History and the Maropeng Museum in Johannesburg. My main goal is to obtain numerical and qualitative data on the amount and types of visitors to the fossil collections in South Africa, in order to understand the current visitor climates of the two largest and most accessible fossil resources in South Africa.

Then, I hope to interact with South Africans at all the sites we visit—the university, museums, archaeological sites, national parks, public spheres, etc. and conduct ethnographic interviews. I will aim to understand their 1) personal awareness of paleoanthropology in South Africa, 2) interest in paleoanthropology, 3) socio-economic and racial backgrounds, and 4) representation of scientists in education and other media. I also hope to interview educators—teachers, administrators, and public education workers—on their view of paleoanthropology and current trends in public education related to South African education policies, geographical distributions of wealth, and representation of scientists in education and other media.

My current plan of action includes qualitative ethnographic research. Some areas I wish to develop more are specific areas of study that inform my research questions on South African politics of representation and opportunities for more long-term or in-depth ethnographic fieldwork (ex. case studies or longitudinal studies). For this project, I will summarize my findings in a culminating ethnography.

Intellectual Merit:

South Africans are already engaging in a public discourse of what is means to “be African” in a post-apartheid society (King 2012). This project engages also engages in global discourses of racism, post-colonialism, and structural inequality in the South African public education system. Existing literature on this subject consists of historical and economic analyses of South African education. I hope to provide a sociocultural and ethnographic perspective to the conversation.

Statements of Broader Impact:

1. This project contributes to existing anthropological literature on education and inequality.
2. This project advises South African educators and policy-makers on the future of archaeological curriculum in public education.
3. This project advocates for public engagement in debates on indigeneuity, colonial legacies, and trends in public education.
Bibliography


