

Migration, missionaries and contact: recent archaeological research in the Khwebe Hills, Botswana

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Field survey and excavation in the Khwebe Hills of Botswana form part of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship project on the Archaeology of Migrations in Africa. Here, the BA Postdoctoral Fellow describes the first two seasons of fieldwork, which concentrated on the investigation of two sites, one associated with the BaTawana, who migrated into the area in the early 19th century and the other a missionary establishment of the London Missionary Society that was occupied during the 1890s.

Work in the Khwebe Hills of Botswana was undertaken as part of a wider British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Institute of Archaeology (2007–2010) which is exploring the archaeology of migration in sub-Saharan Africa. The intention of this study is to explore the dynamics of human mobility, and in particular the relationship between host and immigrant communities.

Archaeology has historically had a strong engagement with migration as an interpretive device, although its role and prominence has dwindled considerably since the 1960s. As a result, migration is often overlooked, and particularly so in sub-Saharan Africa, where it often has connotations that relate it to European settlement and colonialism. However, migration is a key feature of everyday life in Africa, and recurs throughout its history, from the early migration “Out of Africa” to modern urban and economic migrants. This project has identified a number of case-studies where various forms of migration are known to have occurred, and is subjecting the associated sites to archaeological scrutiny to try and understand what the impact and effects of such migration may have been on the material record. The primary case study is that of the 19th century Khwebe Hills in north-western Botswana (Fig. 1).

Historical background and context

Fieldwork was undertaken in 2008 and 2009, with further research planned for 2010. As well as the author, staff and students of the UCL Institute of Archaeology, University of Botswana, UCLA international archaeology programme and the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery were involved.¹ The chosen area of study, the Khwebe Hills, is located c.30km south-west of the modern town of Maun, and in the frontier area between the Kalahari Desert and the Okavango Delta region (Fig. 2).

This area was chosen for research as it has never been subject to systematic archaeological investigation before. Furthermore, the historical records

(both written and oral histories) record significant mobility in the region during the 19th century and at least one large-scale migration into the area. In particular the impact of two phases of immigration have been identified and explored within this research: the migration of BaTawana into the region in the early 1800s, and the effect of incoming European settlers from the mid 19th century, in particular the role of missionary establishments.

The BaTawana, who now constitute the major ethnic group in the region, are a Tswana polity who migrated into the area c.1805 as a result of a succession dispute amongst the BaNgwato polity of eastern Botswana. Denied the leadership of the BaNgwato in favour of a younger brother, Tawana seceded from the BaNgwato and left the capital of Shoshong, taking a number of followers with him to found

a new polity, the BaTawana, in north-western Botswana, and establish the first capital in the Khwebe Hills.

Later, the legendary explorer and missionary, David Livingstone, travelled northwards from the London Missionary Society (LMS) base at Kolobeng, determined to reach the fabled Lake Ngami, arriving in 1849 (Fig. 3). Having opened up a route to the north, it was not long before other European travellers, including missionaries, traders, and hunters, arrived, and in 1892 it was decided to establish a new LMS station in the Khwebe Hills, which was led by the missionary Alfred Wookey, accompanied by Reid (artisan and craftsman) and Mogodi, a renowned Tswana evangelist. This mission was occupied until 1899 when the various effects of malaria and attacks by leopards drove the missionaries out.

Investigation of the Khwebe Hills therefore provides the opportunity to explore the impact of the incoming BaTawana on the indigenous hunter-gatherer and herding communities, whilst the later settlement by European missionaries provides an insight into early colonial contact and interaction.

Fieldwork

Trial survey and test excavation were undertaken in November–December 2008, in conjunction with Mr Vasco Baiteseng of the National Museum and

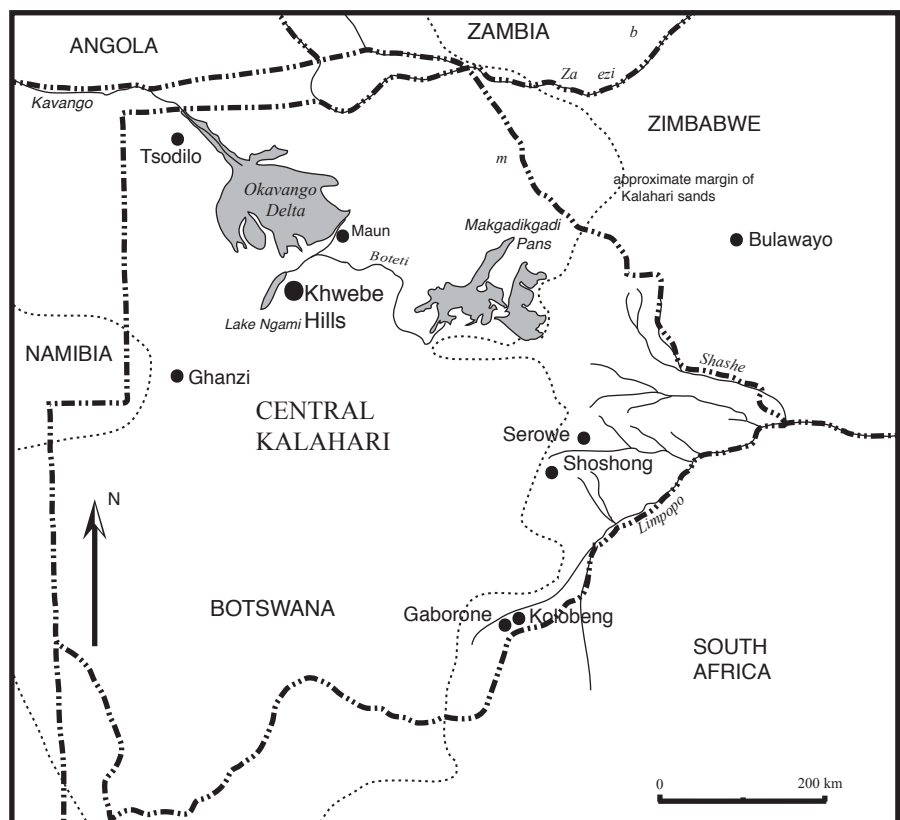


Figure 1 Map showing sites mentioned in the text



Figure 2 View of Thamalakane River in the Okavango Delta



Figure 3 Contemporary illustration of Livingstone arriving at Lake Ngami



Figure 4 Students from the University of Botswana excavating KWH1 in December 2008

undergraduates from the University of Botswana (UB) Archaeology Unit (Fig. 4). Following the successful pilot study, a full excavation season was conducted in August-September 2009, involving 15 students from the UCL Institute of Archaeology, Archaeology Unit of UB and a new collaborative field-school with the UCLA International Archaeology programme. In addition, Mr Phillip Segadika, Head of Archaeology of the National Museum joined the project, and two UCL graduate students, Jane Humphris and Nikolas Gestrich acted as supervisors. Two sites were subject to survey and excavation.

Excavation: KWH4

The site of KWH4 stretches approximately one kilometre across the hillside, commanding spectacular views to the north, east and west, and consists of hundreds of stone features (Figs 5, 6 and 7). Recorded in local oral history as the first occupation site of the incoming BaTswana, KWH4 has been subject to test excavations and ongoing planning and survey.

In 2009 a new programme of mapping was begun at KWH4 using a combination of GPS and Total Station survey. These results demonstrate a complex and intricate series of low stone walls that interconnect to form large scalloped outer-walls surrounding internal features and enclosures, and accessed through walled entrance-ways. This layout is highly reminiscent of typical Tswana settlement layouts recorded in the 19th century, where space is strictly organized, and focused around central cattle kraals or byres, with domestic activities taking place in the surrounding space. Thus each of the scalloped enclosing walls might represent a single household space,



Figure 5 View across Khwebe Hills from KWH4 (looking north)



Figure 6 Satellite image of KWH4 showing wall features. Courtesy Google.

including houses and grain bins, whilst the central enclosures were used for holding cattle and as a meeting place for the elders (the *kgotla*). Thus it would seem that the spatial organization of KWH4 conforms to the typical pattern in the homeland of the incoming BaTawana.

Towards the end of the 2009 season a midden area was identified and subject to brief test excavation. Although limited in scale, this excavation produced useful material and subsistence data which can give some indications of domestic activities at KWH4. In particular, faunal remains

were well preserved and demonstrated a preference for domesticates, both cattle and sheep/goat, comprising 60–65% of the total assemblage. This includes evidence of marrow extraction, evidenced by cattle bones that have been cracked open. This emphasis on cattle and particularly the maximization of resources from cattle, fits with the known pattern of Tswana subsistence strategies at this time. As the settlement layout demonstrates, cattle were (and still are) a highly prized resource, both for their economic value, as well as their social meaning. Status and

wealth were typically articulated through cattle ownership, whilst key social transactions, such as the exchange of bridewealth during marriage, were paid in cattle. As such a valuable resource, cattle herds were carefully managed and only slaughtered for special events. Even after slaughter, the process of butchering a cow and redistributing its meat was closely monitored, with different cuts allocated to different members of the family/community according to status and tradition. Thus the evidence of cattle from KWH4 may suggest a continuation not just of the economic/subsistence structure from the BaNgwato homeland, but also wider socio-political and cosmological structures.

However, there are also important discrepancies within the faunal profile that suggest KWH4 does not completely conform to a typical Tswana model. Importantly, almost a third of the faunal assemblage remains wild. This contrasts to the 3–5% wild species found in the faunal assemblage at Ntsweng, a mid 19th century BaKwena capital from south-eastern Botswana, where there was an absolute dominance of cattle.² Furthermore, unlike Ntsweng, the range of wild animals exploited at KWH4 includes large ungulates such as buffalo and elephant. These large mammals are very dangerous and could not have been opportunistically hunted (unlike tortoise which was found at both Ntsweng and KWH4), and instead requiring specialist skill and knowledge (Fig. 8). This suggests that alongside the emphasis on domesticates and animal husbandry, there was a strong focus on wild animals and skilled hunting. Oral history records the presence of hunter-gatherer communities in the region prior to the arrival of the BaTawana,³ and it is probable that the community at KWH4 was in close contact with these expert hunters, either trading with them, or learning new hunting skills from them.

Material culture remains from KWH4 consisted primarily of ceramics, much of which conforms to a typical Tswana style, with red slipping and burnish and geometric patterning (Fig. 9). However, in addition to these ceramics, other examples of ceramics with lugs and pierced handles were also found (Fig. 10). These compare closely with Khoe ceramics identified at different locales in Botswana, including the nearby site of Toteng. Associated with semi-sedentary herder groups, the presence of such Khoe ceramics at KWH4 once again suggests contact between incoming BaTawana and pre-existing communities, and indicates how the migrants adapted to the local environment.



Figure 7 Stone walled feature in KWH4

The evidence from KWH4 therefore presents a complex picture of incomers bringing many facets of their home community with them, as well as adapting to the new locale, resources and people.



Figure 8 Some of the wild animals found in the faunal profile of KWH4 (tortoise and elephant)



Figure 9 Sherds of Tswana type pottery from KWH4



Figure 10 Vessel with lugs from KWH4)

KWH1

The second site subject to investigation is KWH1, which was identified as the LMS site of Wookey and others, and which was occupied between 1892 and 1899. Test excavation was undertaken in one of the associated buildings in 2008 (Fig. 11), with more detailed and extensive excavation continued in 2009 (Fig. 12). In all, foundations of four prominent rectangular buildings have been located and planned, and one excavated, revealing a 3-roomed building with stone foundations and mudbrick walls (Fig. 13). Two rooms were excavated as well as exterior features including the doorway and parts of a veranda.

The architecture of these buildings immediately indicates a strong European influence, with the use of rectangular buildings and stone foundations rather than the more typical local use of mud or dagga walls in circular formations. Plate glass was also found in abundance, suggesting the importation of fragile glass for glazing windows. Others indications of a strong European influence come from the finds retrieved during excavation. These included building materials such as metal nails, screws, nuts and bolts, which are not used in traditional Tswana buildings, as well as a range of domestic goods. Objects such as tins and broken bottles (gin, Worcester sauce) tell of the importation of European food and drinks, whilst the presence of several pieces of a tea set suggest that imported foodstuffs were also consumed on imported china. Even medicines and treatments seem to have been sourced from outside with the recovery of a labelled balm container. However perhaps most interesting are the personal items that were recovered, that begin to present a picture of the individuals living at the site, their



Figure 11 University of Botswana students during test excavation at KWH1 in 2008



Figure 12 Institute of Archaeology students working at KWH1 in 2009

interests and how they spent their leisure time. For example a chess piece was found (Fig. 14a), as well as children's toys that included a marble and part of a small cup from a child's toy tea set (Fig. 14b). A final intriguing item was the recovery of a piece of blackboard chalk (Fig. 14c), suggesting that perhaps the building may also have served some sort of educational purpose, although it is unclear whether this was for the children of missionaries or those of the local community (or both).

The evidence from KWH1 therefore clearly indicates a settlement where every attempt is being made to recreate a European model of society; indeed, not a single locally produced artefact has been recovered during excavation. Every facet of life seems to be affected, from the very outward display of European architecture through to the very private.



Figure 13 Rectangular building with some foundations at KWH1

Even the lives of children, who more easily adapt to new environments, seem to have been controlled and structured around European norms, with toys and play replicating European practice. This picture fits well with wider anthropological research which suggests that missionaries in Botswana, and southern Africa in general, were anxious to re-define every aspect of social life, not just religious or moral conversion, and thus emphasized western practice at every social level.⁴ Ultimately however, the success of this venture must be questioned; despite the wholesale importation of a new model of life based on European society, the mission lasted only five years, and succumbed to the realities of African life with the missionaries beset by disease and attacks from wild animals.

Conclusion: future plans

Work on the Khwebe Hills is ongoing, however, even at this preliminary stage, it is clear that the process of culture contact, migration and colonization was not simple or clear-cut. Relations between immigrants and the indigenous community was not one of simple suppression by the incoming colonizers; rather, the new lands and resources of the Khwebe Hills forced the migrants to adapt and work with local communities. Even the missionaries of KWH1, who tried valiantly to impose a new social order and replicate their home lifestyle were defeated. The process of culture contact is thus seemingly multi-faceted and dialectical – the host communities and cultures can equally infiltrate immigrant or colonizer communities, creating a new hybrid society, which is neither a mirror of the immigrant homeland, nor of the indigenous community.



Figure 14 Finds from KWH4: a – chess piece; b – fragment from child's teaset; c – piece of chalk

The Khwebe Hills clearly therefore holds huge archaeological potential, and as such, fieldwork will resume in 2010, working once more with colleagues from the National Museum and students from the IoA and University of Botswana. New initiatives planned for 2010 include extending excavation at KWH1 to other buildings within the Mission station, with a possible church/high status building already identified from survey in 2009. For KWH4, excavation will continue alongside intensive planning and mapping. This latter aspect is vital, as it will help explain the articulation of space/activity within the site, as well as identifying areas for future investigation. A final component for 2010 will be a more general landscape survey, which will hopefully allow the detailed excavations of KWH1 and KWH4 to be seen in a broader cultural landscape. This endeavour is also important for a deeper-time understanding of the Khwebe Hills; whilst wider research from surrounding Ngamiland has demonstrated human activity from the Early Stone Age onwards, no systematic or sustained archaeological work has ever been carried out in Khwebe. The results from this work will be published in a range of local/regional and international journals, and will form the backbone of my British Academy Fellowship.

Notes

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- 2 A. Reid, "Access to cattle resources in a Tswana capital", in *African historical archaeologies*, D.A.M. Reid & P.J. Lane (eds), 301–24 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004).
- 3 T. Tlou, *A history of Ngamiland 1750-1906: The formation of an African state* (Gaborone: MacMillan Botswana Publishing, 1985.)
- 4 J. Comaroff & J. Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: the dialectics of modernity on a South African frontier, Volume 2* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997).