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‘The Minister will tell the nation’: the role of the media for archaeology in Mauritius

Krish Seetah

Abstract

This article presents four short case studies detailing the breadth of media engagement with archaeology on the island of Mauritius. Beyond exemplifying the varied roles of the media for an archaeological agenda, these case studies are used to discuss how to better garner media attention, how it may be possible to benefit from those who use archaeological data, why archaeologists should do this and the value of being better managers of our media image. Ultimately, the article advocates greater control over our side of the archaeology–media relationship, and questions whether archaeologists are taking advantage of the power of the media to advance public archaeology.

Keywords

Media; Mauritius; public archaeology; heritage; historical archaeology.

Do we have archaeology in Mauritius? Bringing archaeology to the masses

Imagine my chagrin on being asked what profession I was involved in, responding ‘archaeology’, and hearing ‘but there is no archaeology in Mauritius, that’s in Çatal’. This candid response from a bank clerk in the Port Louis HSBC in 2008, a reaction that I encountered on numerous occasions, made it clear that the perception of archaeology as the ‘pursuit of the past’ was seen as having a relatively minor role in a country that had such a short and well-studied history. The flourishing sub-field of historical archaeology has shown that archaeological heritage can still be rich, even in parts of the world with a short history of habitation. While this latter point formed the underlying stimulus for the work of the Mauritian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (MACH) project, it was the revealing comment from the bank clerk that served as the driver for seeking better ways to communicate with the public.
Focusing specifically on media coverage and the development of historical archaeology on the island, this article details how the national public have been able to keep abreast of – and reacted to – archaeological work based on the extensive coverage of excavations. The article also outlines how savvy inclusion of journalists and news teams during archaeological/heritage projects, such as the new interpretation centre for one of the Island’s UNESCO sites, has led to exponential exposure of the public to ‘heritage spaces’. One specific case, that of how the island’s first human aDNA results were publicized on national TV by the Minister of Culture, is presented as a way of highlighting the manner in which archaeological outcomes have been embraced thanks to public engagement through the popular press.

A short introduction to Mauritian history and archaeology

Detailed accounts of the historical background to Mauritius can be found in Teelock (1998, 2009), Allen (1999, 2003) and Vaughan (2005). In brief: the island (Fig. 1) was uninhabited when first settled by the Dutch in 1638. They had originally claimed the island in 1598, but some forty years elapsed before a sustained attempt at settlement was undertaken. Slave revolts, periodic cyclones and plagues of vermin led to the abandonment of the island in 1710, with the Dutch leaving behind some 300 slaves. Five years later the French claimed the island, although it was another six years before a small group from nearby Reunion Island settled it. From 1810, under the British, the island underwent its greatest ecological (Cheke and Hume 2008), economic, social and demographic transformations (Allen 1999), serving as the test case for the transition from slavery to indenture after abolition. Mauritius achieved independence from British rule in 1968, became a republic in 1992 and has a current population of some 1.2 million inhabitants. The island’s role in global diaspora has been recognized through the inscription of two UNESCO World Heritage Sites commemorating resistance to slavery and the advent of indenture.

As has been noted for many parts of the world, such as southern Africa (Segobye 2005), archaeological resources, and in particular the teaching of archaeology, have remained under-developed. Specifically for Mauritius, the subject has been based on the rich historical background that has so far provided the narrative for the island’s past. In particular, the work of Vijaya Teelock, an historian based at the University of Mauritius, has been invaluable in promoting research-led archaeology and soliciting the skills of archaeologists from Europe and India. These endeavours led to the creation of the first archaeology course in 1998 and grounded Bachelor’s and recently Master’s programmes in cultural heritage management (Teelock 2012, 101–4).

Since 2008, working with a host of heritage institutions, the MACH project (Seetah 2015a) has endeavoured to undertake a genuinely community-driven archaeological programme, within the ideology outlined in Marshall: ‘relinquishing of at least partial control of a project to the local community’ (2002, 211). However, ceding control does not absolve the archaeologist of inherent responsibilities (Hodder 2000, 11), not least the requirement for public dissemination. This, alongside providing a forum for public response and a means of bringing new heritage spaces into public awareness, is where media involvement has proved particularly beneficial in Mauritius, and potentially instructive for media involvement in public archaeology more broadly.
Popular media in Mauritius

In general, Mauritians are polyglot (Miles 2000). The official language is English, and locals will constantly shift between English, French and the local patois, Kreol, during normal conversation. Bhojpuri, Hindi, Mandarin and Hakka, among numerous other languages, are also commonly spoken, reflecting ancestral points of origin. Media coverage reflects this linguistic mélange, and news coverage is televised in English, French and Hindi. More recently, Kreol has also been added to this list (Lionnet 1993); in total the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation now transmits in twelve languages (http://www.mbcradio.tv/mbc/corporate). Similarly, the popular press is also multilingual. In this way, media coverage catches the entire demographic in one form or another.

The politics of the island form a major component of news coverage, indeed, relatively pedestrian topics tend to be politicized, and, as elsewhere (Selvakumar 2010), neither history nor archaeology is immune from this phenomenon. Furthermore, and again as noted in other regions, archaeological sites and outcomes themselves have become a stage for politicians

Figure 1 Map of Mauritius, capital starred.
(Hodder 2003, 166). However, this has not necessarily been to the detriment of, or even distracted from, the archaeology. Despite the relatively short record of archaeological endeavour, the tangible nature of archaeological heritage has been recognized as having substantial potential for attracting public attention through the media (Teelock 2012, 102). Speaking specifically from the perspective of the work undertaken as part of the MACH project, televised broadcasts of initial reconnaissance work in 2009 and subsequent excavations up to the most recent campaign in the summer of 2014 have resulted in a season-by-season exposé offering the general public concise but detailed snap-shots of each site. In this way, a (rare?) case exists where the general public have kept pace with the entire breadth of archaeological research on the island’s key sites, based purely on the extensive media coverage. While dissemination and an opportunity to present the objectives of each season to a national public have been critical uses of the press, the extensive nature of coverage has meant that the power of the media for ‘public archaeology’ has gone far beyond basic publicity. I present four brief vignettes that illustrate the diversity of media engagement geared towards reporting of archaeology.

Exploiting media for an archaeological agenda

Valorizing archaeological methods and outcomes

The Le Morne Cultural Landscape was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 to commemorate resistance to slavery, and was one of the first nominations to be based purely on intangible heritage (Bakker and Odendall 2008). Although it was a poignant oral history that formed the basis for inscription, the Le Morne Heritage Trust Fund (LMHTF) was mandated to recover tangible evidence that would support inscription. Since 2009, work undertaken by MACH in collaboration with the LMHTF on an abandoned burial ground, the Le Morne ‘Old Cemetery’, has provided this much needed and necessary tangible evidence. Critical elements of slave/emancipated lifeways are being revealed from the adult and juvenile (Appleby et al. 2014) remains, as well as details of the material culture from the site in general (Seetah 2015b). Le Morne has special significance for those members of the contemporary population who are the descendants of former slaves, a feature reinforced by inscription, but that had been deeply rooted well before. Of particular relevance in this regard was the desire to know the ethnic origins of those interred, an obvious area for molecular assessment. Thus, following the 2010 season and for the first time on the island, aDNA analysis of human remains was undertaken, the results demonstrating concretely that the recovered individuals had been of Malagasy and Mozambican origin (Seetah 2015a). Despite a delay in achieving results (the specific circumstances of the burial, a tidal sandbank, required a number of attempts to extract DNA), their significance was not lost on the chairman of the LMHTF. The results were confirmed, coincidentally, during the 2012 season of excavations. On receiving the results, the chairman immediately conferred with the Minister of Arts and Culture. The minister convened a press conference for the following day, and announced to an assembled media the outcome of the aDNA analysis (Fig. 2). This was televised as part of the national news on the evening of 16 December 2012.

Space prevents a detailed dissection of the significance of this occasion, much of which is of local rather than international relevance. Suffice it to say that the minister and chairman recognized the need to demonstrate to a community that feels disenfranchised (Boswell 2006), with little economic or political power, that within the context of archaeological heritage
their connection with the past would not be marginalized. Not only was this expression significant because of the type of media employed (televised broadcast), but also because it was aired during peak viewing, expressing subtleties vis-à-vis the nuances of how to maximize the utility of the media, in this case in terms of coverage.

**Protecting heritage**

Since 2003, the National Heritage Act in Mauritius has ostensibly been in place to protect monuments and other heritage structures and sites. However, enforcing this act has been problematic, particularly due to limited resources (on the part of both the National Heritage Fund and the police) and awareness (on the part of the public). In 2011, during survey work on French Batterie Dumas, a listed and protected monument in Plaine Verte, Port Louis, an act of destructive vandalism (Figs 3, 4 and 5) was captured on camera and brought to the attention of the National Heritage Fund and police. The press were alerted through a local NGO, SOS Patrimoine en Péril, based in Curepipe, and a leading article was published on 12 July detailing the events (http://www.lexpress.mu/node/1016736).

A number of features of this act were particularly disturbing, not least the fact that it was carried out in broad daylight and without any attempt at concealment. The archaeologist was ignored when he approached the perpetrators and asked them to desist, explaining that this was protected heritage. Most worrying, the perpetrators returned the subsequent day, and when I spoke to them and explained that their details had been passed onto the police, it became apparent that the destruction was undertaken not for economic gain, but simply to have the well-cut basalt blocks as a ‘garden feature’. Despite this being a singular case, in the sense that photographic evidence was present and could be tied to the actions of specific individuals, more important for the purposes of this article was the way that media
attention was immediately generated to alert the public to the need for vigilance and protection of local heritage. While it was not possible to evaluate the public’s reaction to this particular incident, it was seen within the heritage sector as a major acknowledgement of the frailty of current measures to safeguard monuments. The media attention resulted in SOS Patrimoine identifying *vols de pierres* (theft of stone blocks) as a major conservation issue for this monument on its inventory of heritage sites (see [http://www.patrimoineen-peril.mu/inventaire/item.php?itemId=427](http://www.patrimoineen-peril.mu/inventaire/item.php?itemId=427)).
As a feedback mechanism

We know that Mauritius is known for its unique place in the world as a ‘natural experiment’ for its rich pickings for anyone from ‘foreign’ universities to do research, sometimes without the appropriate ethical and good practice credentials. Do we know which Mauritius government departments are involved? Will Krish Seetah be the first named author in any report or [his] collaborators from overseas?

This reactionary blog was in response to a news article in L’Express (article and unabridged response available at URL: http://www.lexpress.mu/node/101661) on work undertaken at Bois Marchand, a large and still-functioning cemetery established in 1867 (Pike 1873) to deal with the massive death toll from malaria and other epidemics. Blogs such as these provide a valuable outlet for public discourse, and in this instance exposed the feeling that locals had towards the role of ‘outsiders’. Despite inaccuracies the response is telling, and speaks of a desire to protect local archaeology (and archaeologist). Unfortunately, the sentiment is not wholly unjustified, and is also a rather complex one. My own experience as a Mauritian archaeologist trained overseas, at least initially, was of having to justify my credentials. This was often to those who had no expertise in the subject whatsoever, but felt ownership of the right to work on the island’s heritage, even if they were not themselves Mauritian. More troubling were sentiments expressed very openly to me that included ‘Mauritians have no passion for the subject [archaeology], I don’t work with them’ by Europeans working on the island in what can only be described as pseudo-archaeology. Such sentiments have an incredibly negative impact on the development of the subject and reinforce ideas that the discipline is essentially Western, and led by external experts. Although this is fundamentally true in this case, there should not be inherent negativity projected onto overseas academics. Giving due credit to Vijaya Teelock for her efforts to bring the subject to the island, it has been external archaeologists who have provided...
expertise and training in the subject: Geoffrey Summers, Pieter Floore, Amitava Chowdry and recently George Abungu all gave courses at the University of Mauritius, and where possible have involved local students on their excavations.

Although the blog response (demonstrating a local view of outsider influence) and anecdotal comments (expressing outsider views on local participation in heritage) presented above are idiosyncratic, they represent a situation that complicates the role and perception of archaeology, a subject that should be inherently neutral and embracing. They also demonstrate the idea that the proficiency and drivers for archaeological projects could not be ‘Mauritian’, which in itself harms the development of this nascent subject. Thus, while it is a complex issue to separate the perception and reality of the subject, clearly the media provided a useful vehicle through which the local community can express their opinion.

**Valorizing heritage spaces**

On a more positive note, work at the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund (AGTF) has taken full advantage of the island’s particular relationship with the media to great effect. The AGTF was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006, and commemorated the transitions from slavery to indenture, termed the ‘Great Experiment’, and initiated by the British (Drescher 2002). The MACH project and the AGTF have worked hard to pioneer and promote the ‘archaeology of indenture’, with Mauritius serving as the ideal test-case for this endeavour (Seetah 2015a). Despite the fact that some 70 per cent of the island’s current population are descendants of labourers, from the perspective of archaeology it is hard to evaluate objectively the extent to which this facet of local heritage has been valorized at the national level. The recently unveiled Beekramsing Ramlallah Interpretation Centre for the Aapravasi Ghat site, incorporating archaeological features that help reveal the story of the depot (a first for Mauritius, Figs 6 and 7), will no doubt provide a nerve centre from which dissemination to the public can take place.

However, one area has already shown the extent to which shrewd engagement with media outlets can serve the purposes of heritage management, and in particular promote access to heritage spaces. The percentage increase in visitors to the AGTF, consequent to media coverage and efforts to increase participation by all sections of the local demographic, has been exponential: from 2,588 in 2003 to 25,000 in 2011 (Mugon 2011, 35). The majority of these visitors were primary-school students, and, as the history of indentured immigration now forms part of the national curriculum (Mugon 2011), heritage, including archaeology, is effectively being embedded into pedagogical development. On a more general level, the inclusion of archaeology within the remit of the AGTF, and its subsequent dissemination via the media, has been a boon for promotion of the subject, and ‘indentured archaeology’ in particular. Careful development of the heritage potential of Trianon, an indentured labourer barracks and itself a national monument since 1974 (Seetah 2010, 2011), will add another important physical focal point marking this diaspora. While media involvement has been crucial for the Mauritius case, the true litmus test for this budding aspect of archaeological research will be whether it is adopted as a topic of study elsewhere in the world, and whether archaeologists from locations that formed the locus of labour export integrate ‘indenture’ into their own archaeological remit. In this regard, the lessons learnt from Mauritius may be instructive at an international level.
Discussion: what is the role of media in public archaeology?

The role of the media is increasingly important as the discipline inherits political responsibility, and connects more strongly to modern populations on issues surrounding ethnicity, identity and socio-politics (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell 2002). As archaeology gains dimensions of

Figure 6 The stone steps that led to the French-period loading area; main archaeological feature incorporated into the AGTF Interpretation Centre.

Figure 7 Finds clusters incorporated into the Interpretation Centre, retained to enhance public appreciation of the material culture from the site.
complexity in relation to its role in popular culture (Holtorf 2007a), not to mention the increasing visibility of heritage and post-colonial archaeologies at the national level (see, for example, Weiss 2005; Meskell 2012 for South Africa; Funari 2001 for Latin America; Patterson 2010 for Australia), the utility of media also becomes more apparent. In this regard, and building on the specific case studies discussed above, the following outlines a number of areas where, as archaeologists, we might better exploit the subject’s prodigious tangible capital and better control the way we interact with media.

One area that is likely to be more accessible in a setting like Mauritius than in other regions is politics. More generally, if politicians will use archaeology as a public forum, then it is incumbent on the archaeologist to make sure we have a better relationship with them, though this is not easily achieved. Clearly, it will not always be possible to have direct contact with a cabinet minister, but channels are usually in place to engage with a minister’s permanent secretary or similar official. In Mauritius this has been critical as it provides an avenue through which the archaeologist can both describe the long-term ideology that underpins any project and, more importantly for media engagement, provide some directive for what can be divulged for public consumption. This might seem a rather naïve proposal to those working in larger continental countries, given the immensely complex relationship that ‘the past’ increasingly has with the modern world (see Shepard 2002 for an African perspective), not to mention that politicians have their own agenda. However, the suggestion is made in order to integrate some benefit to the archaeologist, particularly those working on island states, as political involvement becomes inevitable. The role of politics in valorizing archaeology is but one side of the coin. What is needed is a more concrete and enduring relationship to promote better communication and understanding of the subject as a whole. For Mauritius, where sadly there is still no legislation to protect archaeological sites, improved political relations may eventually provide a platform for legislative change.

While enquiry into our relationship with politicians per se might be considered nascent, that with journalists has come under closer scrutiny (Scherzler 2007). Once again, archaeologists need to take on board practical approaches for engaging with journalists and managing their own exposure: ‘archaeologists should pay more attention to how they, too, tell stories’ (Finn 2001, 261). At the risk of being both self-evident and redundant, the following presents some food for thought on this topic. For some time now (Brittain and Clack 2007, 18) archaeologists have been public figures. However, this has not necessarily translated into being better prepared for interviews with the press, or into improved management of the story that will be told. From the initial press call, the archaeologist should make sure they have had input into the text of the call, laying the groundwork for what will be discussed. It is also important that the archaeologist is explicit, so that there is less scope for misunderstanding. In general, journalists are either writing rapidly, in shorthand, or making a voice recording. While the latter is more precise, errors may arise during the summation and in the published text. Thus, the duty falls on the archaeologist to be clear about facts and figures. Beyond these obvious and fundamental points, on a broader level there are a number of issues that we tend not to think of as being within our purview, or control, as archaeologists. First, we should be the ones being creative, not the journalist. Our level of creativity regarding a site or outcome is likely to be several degrees less than that of the average journalist. Thus, it is beneficial to give the journalist something concrete to print, rather than just the details of the site/find/outcome, leaving them to construct the final narrative (whether this helps prevent or encourages further embellishment is hard to say). The archaeologists should also think about ‘leaving them wanting more’, so that there can be scope for a follow-up, rather than a story being discarded (Finn 2001) once the scoop has been published. Drawing on personal
experience, I have at times said that I cannot comment on one or more specific issues, even in the complete absence of any sensitive matter. Instead I have indicated that future excavation and analysis will reveal precisely what the journalist is questioning. Although this seems contrived, in fact it allows the pace of dissemination to remain under the control of the project and its partners, and hopefully stimulates interest on the part of the journalist. Aside from controlling pace, it is important to have some measure of the breadth of detail that is outlined: a) to any one journalist and b) for any particular season. Archaeological data are complex, opening the potential for varied ‘facts’ to be concatenated, and ultimately resulting in misrepresentation. An approach that has worked for our case has been to divulge a synopsis that the local heritage institution and the MACH project feel happy with for general dissemination. Giving specific, and often different, details to each main newspaper or news broadcast, for example, then functions to complement this initial précis. This serves the public by providing a proper contextualized background, and at the same time helps reduce – though certainly not eliminate – repetition and redundancy. In effect, the above is an attempt to reach a reliable and measured equilibrium (Finn 2001) with press coverage and to collaborate and interact with journalists (Scherzler 2007). Ultimately, we need a better understanding of how to retain control of our results and how better to use our research for public and community engagement.

This last point is perhaps the most important in terms of the role of media. A complicated relationship exists between ‘dissemination to stimulate public interest’, communication across a range of stakeholders (Levy 2007), including politicians and journalists as well as heritage specialists, and an ideological duty to provide an unbiased view of the work undertaken to a wide community audience. The practical complexity that underpins communication via the media has been well assessed (Harding 2007; Holtorf 2007b), with two key roles surfacing: the first and most obvious being actual dissemination, and the second to better understand what people know about archaeology (Sánchez 2013). While the former seems clear enough, managing the inevitable ripple effect, new and often embellished narratives being developed from the archaeologist’s initial one, is near impossible, which is why more control at the outset is advocated for here. Beyond this, can dissemination serve a purpose, political, ideological or otherwise? Archaeologists must recognize that media as a vehicle for public engagement have utility for deconstructing narratives borne out of a purely historical perspective (Shepherd 2002), adding detail and complexity about peoples who do not feature strongly, or positively, within the literary record: a history of the masses, created by the masses. Finally, while little has been written on the public perception of archaeology (Sánchez 2013), there are still clear notions as to what archaeology is good for, principal among these being for ‘knowledge’ and ‘heritage’ (Sánchez 2013). Where media, and to this we must add the increasingly important internet-based modes of communication and ‘new’ media (Kristensen 2007), may have greatest utility for ‘public archaeologists’, aside from dissemination, is for the essential feedback that should be forming part of a reflexive research process. In essence, media allow for better ‘public engagement with archaeology’, bringing the discipline and its consumers (public, heritage sector, tourism, etc.) closer together.

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Notes

1 Site reports and all other published works, i.e. more detailed accounts of the archaeology, are freely available from the MACH project webpage; thus, different levels of information are accessible to a wide audience.

2 All permits were granted; the excavation was initiated by the now-defunct Truth and Justice Commission and has since been incorporated into the remit of the Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund. Finally, I am Mauritian; thus, in virtually all regards this was a locally driven project.

References


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