



Rice Anthropology Nurtures Commitment to African Archaeology

Left to right: Jeffrey Fleisher, Tsholofelo Dichaba, Mamadou Cissé and Susan McIntosh

Rice’s Department of Anthropology has long had an interest in Africa. In 1977, anthropology professors Susan McIntosh and Rod McIntosh (who left Rice last year) discovered the lost city of Jenne-jeno, an archaeological site in what is today Mali that continues to reshape the way scholars think of urbanism in sub-Saharan Africa. McIntosh continues her work in the region with annual visits to the Rice Archaeological Field School in Gorée Island, Senegal.

Now McIntosh has been joined by assistant professor of anthropology Jeffrey Fleisher, whose research along the east coast of Africa complements McIntosh’s focus on western Africa.

“Rice has established a significant reputation in African archaeology,” McIntosh said. “A decision was made to build on our strengths in the field, with a special focus on complex societies.”

One problem for archaeologists trying to reconstruct the African past is the ongoing destruction of archaeological heritage due to development projects, such as dams, and the looting of sites for art objects. In Mali, where terra-cotta statuettes were fashioned in antiquity, this is a particular problem. Site destruction doesn’t affect just archaeologists. Because archaeological sites are cultural resources that

management of cultural resources is to educate future African leaders in the field. This year, two graduate students, Tsholofelo Dichaba from Botswana and Mamadou Cissé from Mali, have begun their studies in anthropology at Rice.

“We reinstated our graduate program to train Africans,” McIntosh explained. The students can take undergraduate as well as graduate courses at Rice and then engage in archaeological research in their home countries. An earlier Rice alumnus, the late Téréba Togola, rose to become Mali’s director of national heritage.

Meanwhile, the Rice Archaeological Field School continues to take small groups of U.S. students to Senegal every summer for excavation work. According to McIntosh, plans call for alternating between Gorée and Tanzania’s

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The complex societies McIntosh and Fleisher study differ significantly. For one thing, the earliest finds at Jenne-jeno date back farther than the city-states along the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts; Jenne-jeno is the earliest documented example of urbanism in sub-Saharan Africa. Still, it and the Kenyan and Tanzanian city-states were indigenous African urban societies that thrived for centuries and that now offer a wealth of information for scholars and researchers about how those societies were organized and how they interacted with other societies through trade and other activities.

can serve as a focus for tourism, their destruction also affects local communities that suffer a loss of economic opportunity.

“Susan and I are committed to the archaeology of Africa,” said Fleisher, “but we’re also worried about the cultural heritage.” While laws exist in many countries to protect archaeological sites, resources to enforce these laws often are lacking in the developing world. “We want development,” Fleisher said, “but we want people to keep in mind how to take care of cultural resources.”

One of the keys to ensuring more effective

Pemba Island. The program, which offers up to six credit hours, is open to both graduate students and undergraduates with prior course work in African history or archaeology.

Fleisher said the anthropology department’s commitment to African archaeology does not just amount to research for research’s sake. “We want our research to document a past that is important to the present,” he said, “but we also want the results to have a local impact by training African students to become good custodians of their cultural resources.” ■

—Franz Brotzen