

FROM SAMPLING TO INTERPRETATION TO COMMUNICATION: CHALLENGES OF ANCIENT DNA RESEARCH IN AFRICA

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The pace and scale of African ancient DNA (aDNA) research has increased rapidly in recent years, amplifying longstanding concerns about the ethics of sampling archaeological human remains. As the primary agents involved in obtaining samples for analysis, archaeologists and curators must make difficult decisions regarding the destruction of skeletal material, and must navigate potentially tense relationships among scientific, institutional, and public stakeholders. Previously, we published a set of best practices for aDNA research, designed to minimize harm to museum collections and engaged communities, while maximizing chances of research success and collaboration. Here, we expand upon this work by discussing the challenges of interpreting and publishing African archaeogenetic data. To do so, we must consider the history of anthropology and archaeology on the continent, from the early colonial years to present.

Focusing on our research in eastern and south-central Africa, we reflect on the challenges and benefits of collaborative research and co-publication, and on interpretation of genetic data in light of other sources of evidence, including oral history, linguistics, bioarchaeology, and archaeology. We also emphasize the current lack of legislative guidance or other protocols in many African countries regarding treatment of archaeological human remains, collaboration with descendant and guardian communities, and the roles of curatorial institutions. We point to South Africa as a potential model for many of these issues. Finally, we suggest strategies for public engagement in communities where aDNA research is taking place. Such engagement must not only consider descendant or guardian communities, but must also understand the historical and political contexts within which archaeogenetic findings may be received, interpreted, and potentially mobilized.