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Buried inside the bones: The unfinished reckoning with palaeoanthropology's origins

Significance:

Unburied Season Two is a locally grounded science communication project translating the scholarly content of the *South African Journal of Science's* 'Taung Child' centenary special issue into a four-part audio documentary. The series brings to a general audience debate around South African palaeoanthropology's racist roots, the complicity of biological anthropology in apartheid-era race classification, and the persistent exclusion of local communities from palaeoanthropology's discovery narratives. Critically, it centres on the voices of local African communities (scientists, migrant labourers and heritage workers) who have a stake in the fossils and discoveries that underpin modern palaeoanthropology.

When Raymond Dart published his description of *Australopithecus africanus* in *Nature* in February 1925, he was not only arguing that the Taung skull represented a new hominin species. He was arguing that Africa, and specifically southern Africa, was the birthplace of humanity. Dart's argument took decades to be accepted, and today it stands as a cornerstone of modern palaeoanthropology. The centenary of that publication has generated both an important special issue of this Journal[1] and an ambitious audio documentary, *Unburied* Season Two, produced by ARC in partnership with the Human Evolution Research Institute at the University of Cape Town. Together, this content invites scientists and community members to uncover the hidden lives, buried stories and experiences of estrangement that lie behind one of the defining discoveries in African palaeoanthropology.

A discipline built on exclusion

The series opens in Taung itself, a small town in South Africa's North West Province. Listeners are guided by Bahidile "Mike" Dichaba, who grew up in the village of Buxton, a few hundred metres from the Northern Limeworks where the Taung Child skull was found. His presence sets the tone for much of what appears later in the podcast: *Unburied's* narration is deeply embedded within the local Buxton communities. Dichaba's intimate knowledge of the landscape (the old compound dormitories, the limestone cliffs, the plaque bearing Dart's name) grounds central questions that run through all four episodes: whose story is this, and who has been left out of the telling of that story?

It was not Dart who found the Taung Child. The skull was blasted out of the limestone by unnamed mine workers; the fossil was passed to a local quarryman named De Bruyn and personally carried to Johannesburg by geologist Prof. Robert Young. Josephine Salmons, one of Dart's anatomy students at Wits University, first sparked his interest in the Taung site when she recognised a fossilised cercopithecoid skull on the mantle of a Johannesburg home and brought it to his attention at Wits. In the acknowledgement section of Dart's 1925 *Nature* article[2], we see explicit mention of Miss Salmons and Prof. Young, but no mention of the unnamed mine workers who brought this discovery to light. This is not merely a matter of historical credit. It is a structural pattern we see more generally in science[3], and, specifically, in the story of Dart's discovery of the Taung Child.

Weij and colleagues demonstrate that the same erasure operated more broadly in South Africa, where mine workers unearthed many of the field's early fossil discoveries.[4] The tens of thousands of black migrant workers who physically excavated the limestone sites at Buxton and across the Cradle of Humankind, under conditions of racial segregation, at enormous personal risk, many of them dying, appear nowhere in the narratives of fossil discovery. Palaeoanthropologist Dr Dipuo Kgotleng, speaking in Episode 2 (titled 'Pride and Prejudice'), puts it plainly:

> *The whole narrative that comes with that discovery makes zero mention of anybody else except for the colonial masters of the mining business and the people who were heading the anatomy department as well.*

South African palaeoanthropology's fossil record is, in a very real sense, the product of these mine workers' bodies as much as of the minds of the scientists who described and eventually published it. That this is now being discussed openly, in the pages of the *SAJS* and in a podcast listened to across the world, represents a monumental shift in African palaeoanthropology's reckoning with its dark origins. But simply naming and airing the details of such exclusion is the beginning of a reckoning, not its end.

Race science and its scientific offspring

Unburied Episode 3, titled 'The Dark Side of Dart', tackles the most uncomfortable dimensions of Dart's legacy head-on. At the centre of the episode is a young San woman named /Keri-/Keri, whose body Dart arranged to "acquire", through official government channels, while she was still alive, dying of pneumonia in a hospital in Oudtshoorn in 1939. What makes this especially disturbing is that Dart was no stranger to /Keri-/Keri; she was among the 77 people he gathered, measured and studied during his 1936 Kalahari expedition, tagged with the number KAL 51. As historian Christa Kuljian documents in her contribution to the *SAJS* special issue[5], when the telegram arrived informing Dart of /Keri-/Keri's critical condition, he was familiar with her and her family. After her death, /Keri-/Keri's remains were taken to Johannesburg, cast, and displayed in the Department of Anatomy at Wits for six decades. What eventually happened to her skeleton remains unknown.

Nashada Ndango, a San community member and guide at the San Embassy !Khwa ttu, north of Cape Town, gives voice to what this history means for living San communities. Ndango, who is Khwedam-speaking and

from Platfontein, speaks of Dart's 1936 Kalahari expedition, where he set out to gather 77 people near one of the region's few remaining water sources. Dart issued each individual a numbered cardboard tag and subjected them to measurement, photography and bodily casting. Ndango speaks through the shadow of oral histories passed down to her. "He did not really respect the people's feelings," she says of Dart. "If you lose someone and then you don't bury them or you don't know where they are, it's going to haunt people, like, forever." Ndango studies archaeology at night and on weekends because she wants to document the history of her own people. But her story forces us to confront a painful irony shaping modern palaeoanthropology in southern Africa:

> *I can't tell, or I can't, like, write stories of my own people because somebody came before me and messed up. Now I have to come after that and then try to clean it up.*

What the podcast illustrates, and what Schroeder and colleagues[6] analyse in depth in their *SAJS* special issue contribution, is that these race science practices were not idiosyncratic to Dart. The skull-centrism that has guided palaeoanthropology since its origins – the obsessive measurement of crania, the collecting of heads and the privileging of brain size as a proxy for cognitive and cultural capacity – emerged directly from a 19th-century European programme of race science. Samuel Morton's 867 skulls and Hrdlička's field manuals were part of the intellectual and material bedrock from which palaeoanthropology developed as a discipline.[6] Dart was shaped by them, as were his contemporaries and successors. The postcranial bones of the Taung Child, still partially embedded in limestone, never fully prepared, and now with their location unknown, are a small but telling symptom of this history. To some, what mattered was the skull, the brain, the seat of "intelligence" and "humanness" as race scientists understood them.

Schroeder and colleagues show that 85% of the type specimens for currently recognised hominin species consist solely of skull or skull fragments.[6] This is partly a taphonomic effect, but it is also a legacy of what the discipline of palaeoanthropology was trained to see. A field trained to read humanness through the skull was, by that same training, liable to ask specific questions, or seek answers in incomplete readings of the fossil record, and, by extension, to mistake the limits of its evidence for the limits of the past.

The "living fossil" problem

Perhaps the most philosophically loaded aspect of Dart's career, one that connects his race science to his evolutionary thinking, is his use of living San and Bushman communities as analogues for early human ancestors. After returning from the 1936 Kalahari expedition, Dart described Bushmen as "living fossils, representative of the primitive state of all mankind, mementos of our primaeval past"[7]. As Nashada Ndango observes in the podcast, this view treated her ancestors as if they were a "bridge, like, between modern-day humans and the early humans", a view that is not only deeply offensive but, as the scientific literature has since demonstrated, entirely without foundation.

The "living fossil" concept has been extensively critiqued and formally abandoned, but the underlying analogical impulse persists in more subtle forms. In an analysis of claims linking contemporary San material culture to the late Pleistocene archaeological record in South Africa, Pargeter and colleagues[8] argue that such direct historical analogies rest on a fundamental misreading of how cultural taxonomies work. The "San" as an ethnic or cultural category is not an archaeological type; it is a fluid, historically contingent identity shaped by centuries of interaction, displacement, intermarriage and political change. To trace it into the deep past is not to uncover continuity. It is to mistake the essentialising of the ethnographic present for a stable object detectable in sediment layers thousands of years old. This matters not only as a methodological point but as a political one. Claims about cultural continuity in the deep past have historically been used to justify romanticisation, dispossession and violence. A discipline that emerged from race science must be especially alert to when it reproduces such primordial claims under a different name.

Community, heritage and the question of belonging

The final episode of *Unburied* ('The Myth of the Explorer') centres on voices that palaeoanthropology rarely reaches or privileges. The episode starts by asking why those voices have been excluded in the first place. The answer the episode proposes lies in the "explorer myth" – the idea, traced by Prof. Sheela Athreya, that palaeoanthropology inherited from colonial science a model in which a lone, typically white, typically male figure ventures into the unknown, finds something, names it, and takes the credit. The discipline, Athreya argues, has consistently valued fossil discovery over other forms of knowledge-building: "You're evaluated if you find something, if you discover something and name it." The mine workers who unearthed the Taung Child, the local guides, and the community members who have lived alongside these sites for generations do not fit the explorer template, and so none appears prominently in the story. As Dr Dipuo Kgotleng observes, this pattern remains largely unchanged in modern palaeoanthropology. The issue, Kgotleng notes, is not with any one individual but with the way palaeoanthropology shapes its discovery stories, which makes communities "not identify with the science" and therefore feel less connected to it.

It is against this backdrop that we hear from several of the podcast's most striking local voices. Lungile Ronald Keswa, who describes himself, with characteristic flair, as a "creative anthropologist", has covered the walls of his house in Taung with paintings depicting Charles Darwin, Raymond Dart, the spiritualist Credo Mutwa, and a mine worker from Buxton. Keswa describes these figures seated together in an imaginary conversation he calls Dipuisano, a Setswana word meaning "negotiations". Keswa runs local study groups on evolution and the Taung Child, debates their implications with his neighbours, and has come to feel, he says, that the skull has "extended my umbilical cord to the other nations of the world". The painting is not a celebration of Dart. It is a graphic demand for accountability. Keswa states this clearly when he says:

> *We admire the greatness that Raymond did for this country. But at the same time, we say that it's a time to say that let's correct the wrongs that he did, ethically.*

A few kilometres away, Kgosi Letsogile Lekwene, the local chief, offers a related account. If you go into Buxton village and ask what people know about the centenary, he says, "you are going to get one answer: we don't know nothing about the centenary". He has yet to see the skull himself, only photographs. His community, he says, feels like "tools to build for someone else", dislocated and uninvolved in decision-making, excluded from a site that occupies their ancestral land.

Both responses, Keswa's sense of connection to the science and the chief's sense of exclusion, are real, and both are documented in the *SAJS* special issue. Dr Mirriam Tawane writes from the dual perspective of academic palaeoanthropologist and Taung local, describing a community that has received almost no benefit (economic, educational or social) from living adjacent to a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[9] Tawane, who grew up in Taung, became one of the first black women in South Africa to earn a doctorate in palaeoanthropology, and she now works for the National Heritage Council. She is a scientist whose connection to this history is immediate, and who has returned to study and advocate for communities that the discipline of palaeoanthropology has overlooked. Tawane asks us a direct and poignant set of questions:

> *This wealth of knowledge, is it for us to learn it, or is it for us to share with the people on the ground? What are we doing to bridge that gap?*

She correctly states that "science needs to be inclusive".

In their *SAJS* special edition contribution, Kgotleng and colleagues[10] provide details on the broader structural pattern at play here. The demographics of who holds research permits, who leads field teams, and who is first author on publications remain stubbornly skewed toward researchers from the Global North. In their analysis of the

"explorer myth", Ackermann and colleagues[11] argue that the discipline has consistently awarded the prestige of discovery to individual Western male scientists while rendering invisible the African workers, community members and local researchers on whose knowledge and labour the science begins and ends.

Where palaeoanthropology goes from here

None of the critiques outlined in the ARC podcast and the *SAJS* special edition diminishes the extraordinary scientific achievement that the Taung discovery represents. The evidence that humanity evolved first in Africa is, a century on, overwhelming. *Unburied* Season Two is a model of what it looks like to take these critiques seriously by engaging the public, and to do so by placing local African voices at the centre of the inquiry rather than at its margins. Bahidile "Mike" Dichaba, Lungile Ronald Keswa, Nashada Ndango, Mirriam Tawane and Kgosi Letsogile Lekwene, all play central roles in the podcast. They bring to life the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations that are left in the wake of a fossil "discovery". Their knowledge, their anger, their pride, and their unresolved relationship with a heritage built in part at the expense of people like them, constitute the most important conversation that the centenary of the Taung Child has generated. That conversation, with all of its uncomfortable, unresolved, but necessary implications, is the one our field's next century of work should carry forward.

Unburied Season Two is available at arcdocs.org and on all major podcast platforms.

A brief note on the author's positionality is warranted. The author writes as a white, male, South African-born archaeologist – a positionality that carries its own relationship to the histories of exclusion and epistemic privilege this article describes, and that inevitably shapes what is noticed, what is foregrounded, and what remains invisible in this account.

Declarations

I have no competing interests to declare. Grammarly was used to assist with grammar and spelling checks during the writing of this article.

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