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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Conference Review: This Time for Africa: African Conference on Experimental Archaeology (ACE) 2018

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Author(s): Silje Evjenth Bentsen <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa.



Good news: The first African Conference on Experimental Archaeology (ACE) will be held in Johannesburg on the 20th to the 22nd of March 2018. Join us for presentations, posters, mini-workshops, demonstrations and round-table discussions of experiments in an African context!

## Prologue

“ Experimental archaeology in Africa is as diverse as the continent itself and applied on an archaeological time scale from the earliest evolution of humans to historical times.

Toronto, 2012: There is a session on experimental archaeology at the Society for Africanist Archaeologists' biannual conference. While waiting to upload our presentations to the conference laptop, my colleague and I pass the time chatting. “I am sure we could fill a whole conference on experimental archaeology in Africa,” my colleague says. I nod, say that someone will probably initiate such a conference soon and turn to tell the student volunteer where to find my presentation on the USB stick.

Johannesburg, 2016: I am applying for a new postdoctoral fellowship at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg. I have been involved in African experimental archaeology since 2009, but someone has not initiated a local conference within this field yet. I feel sure that there is a need for it; I could easily come up with 30 researchers who would be interested in such a conference and a Google Scholar search for experimental archaeology in Africa since 2007 returns 16 000 hits. “Ke nako<sup>1</sup>”, I think, and write in my fellowship application that I will initiate a conference. The results come back in October: I am awarded the fellowship. And that's how I became “someone”.

## Experimental archaeology in Africa

Experimental archaeology in Africa is as diverse as the continent itself and applied on an archaeological time scale from the earliest evolution of humans to historical times. For example, knapping and use wear experiments have been conducted to understand the earliest stone tool industries (e.g., McNabb and Kuman, 2015, Semaw, 2006, Toth, 1985, Toth et al., 2006) and fire experiments help us identify the signs of early human control of fire (e.g., Bellomo, 1994, Berna et al., 2012, Gowlett et al., 2017). Experiments examining heat treatment of stones and hafting (e.g., Brown et al., 2009, Wadley et al., 2009, Wadley and Prinsloo, 2014), the use of ochre (e.g., Hodgskiss, 2013, Rifkin, 2015) and the use of personal ornaments (e.g., d'Errico et al., 2015, Vanhaeren et al., 2013) have helped us understand early modern humans and their cognitive capabilities. Moving to the other end of the archaeological time scale, experimental studies, often including ethnographic studies, have helped us understand the processes of bead making, pottery making, iron smelting and food production (e.g., Chirikure, 2013, Iles and Lyaya, 2015, Killick, 2016, Mulder-Heymans, 2002). Indeed, I would argue that one of the responses to the current calls for decolonising archaeology (e.g., Pikirayi, 2015, Schmidt and Pikirayi, 2016) might be to incorporate experimental archaeology and local knowledge into more studies.

## The conference

After accepting my fellowship, I sent out several emails to find out how other experimental conferences are organised. Luckily, EXARC offered to be a co-organiser and brings much good experience to the table. EXARC has set up our website, is supervising the registration process and will also be represented at the conference by the chairman, associate professor Bill Schindler, Washington College, and secretary, Professor Javier Baena, Universidad Autonoma of Madrid.

Archaeology staff members and students at Wits have volunteered to be part of the local organising committee and are pitching in with ideas for the conference. We have already been fortunate enough to receive a positive answer from two keynote speakers: Honorary Professor Lyn Wadley from the University of the Witwatersrand and Professor Innocent Pikirayi from the University of Pretoria. Wadley is a renowned researcher within the African Middle Stone Age (approximately 300 000 to 25 000 years ago) and Later Stone Age (the last 25 000 years). She has conducted or supervised multiple experiments to further our understanding of the Stone Age and early modern humans. Her work includes heat treatment of rocks and hafting of stone tools (e.g., Wadley, 2005, Wadley, 2013, Wadley and Prinsloo, 2014). Pikirayi won the Humanities Researcher of the Year award in 2014. He integrates his research with community and public engagement approaches with the objective of transforming and decolonising archaeological practice in southern Africa (e.g., Pikirayi, 2015, Schmidt and Pikirayi, 2016). His main research interest is the complex societies in southern Africa after 1000 AD, and particularly Great Zimbabwe, where he has documented water resources (e.g., Pikirayi et al., 2016).

The School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies (GAES) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is hosting the conference. The first two days of the conference will be in standard format with posters and presentations at the Wits Club. The Wits Club is situated in the western part of the Wits Braamfontein campus, an area that prior to 1985 was the Rand Show fairgrounds <sup>2</sup>. In 1936, the Western Provinces' exhibition was housed in buildings designed as a farm in Cape Dutch style, and these buildings are housing the Wits Club today. The club has a restaurant where delegates will have lunch, included in the conference fee, on the first two days of the conference. The club's conference venue has rooms and facilities for anything between 50 – 300 people, and we hope to fill the space with as many as possible!

The third day of the conference is a day for practical work and in-depth discussions. Participants can demonstrate their skills, discuss important issues and organise mini-workshops on their specialities. We have already confirmed some activities: Dr Jerome Reynard is organising a mini-workshop on bone tool modification, focusing on experimentally reconstructing bone flakes using knapping and other bone-modifying techniques. A workshop on ochre and the use of it is organised by Dr Tammy Hodgskiss. I am organising a round-table discussion on teaching experimental archaeology in Africa, and this will be a half day event so

that participants can also catch some of the other events on the day. The current suggestions for demonstrations include bead making, knapping and musket ball making. We hope to receive even more suggestions from prospective participants, and have space to house your event in the GAES seminar rooms, a brand new lab or the outdoor experimental area.

“All work and no play” will not be the motto for the conference, and we are planning social events as well as the conference programme. We will host a welcome reception at the Origins Centre Museum on the Wits campus on the 20th. This museum is dedicated to exploring and celebrating the history of modern humankind, and has an extensive collection of rock art. On the 21st (the second day of the conference), conference delegates get the option to participate in a South African braai (barbeque). There will also be a conference dinner at the Wits Club to end the conference. Participants will, in addition, have the option to stay for an extra day and go on a half day excursion to the Sterkfontein Caves, in the Cradle of Humankind, just outside Johannesburg.

## The local organising committee

Maybe you want to know who “we” are? Here’s an overview in alphabetical order:

- **Dr Silje Evjenth Bentsen**, Claude Leon postdoctoral research fellow. My main research interests are combustion features and fire-related behaviour. I currently work on fire-related behaviour in the Middle Stone Age at Klasies River main site, South Africa, examining burning properties of local plants and heating of locally sourced quartzite through fire experiments. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Silje\\_Bentsen](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Silje_Bentsen)
- **Dr Sam Challis**, Senior researcher. Sam is a rock art specialist. He teaches, runs a multi-disciplinary research programme with communities in the Eastern Cape, and studies the meaning of rock art in pre- and particularly post-contact periods [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sam\\_Challis](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sam_Challis)
- **Dr Tammy Hodgskiss**, Research associate to Professor Christopher Henshilwood, Evolutionary Studies Institute, Wits. Tammy’s research focus is on ochre use in the Middle Stone Age. Experimental ochre use has been imperative in her research, giving her an understanding of how markings form on ochre pieces and how ochre may have been used in the past. She is currently looking at how the Klipdrift Shelter and Blombos Cave ochre use trends are linked with environmental fluctuations. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tammy\\_Hodgskiss](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tammy_Hodgskiss)
- **Mr Joshua Kumbani**, PhD student. Joshua worked on faunal studies for his Honours dissertation and on archaeomusicology for his MA. He is currently doing a PhD on archaeomusicology, and among his other research interests are the Stone Age and heritage management. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joshua-kumbani-48572b85/>
- **Dr Jerome Reynard**, Lecturer. Jerome focuses on fauna in his research, and uses experimental archaeology to examine butchering marks and trampling evidence on

bone. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jerome\\_Reynard](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jerome_Reynard)

- **Dr Chrissie Sievers**, Senior lecturer, Archaeobotany. Chrissie's main research interest is the identification of fruits and seeds, and she has conducted experiments to examine the carbonisation of seeds and the burning of bedding material. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christine\\_Sievers](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Christine_Sievers)
- **Ms Kelita Shadrach**, MSc student. Kelita specialises in Earlier Stone Age technology in southern Africa and the application of multi-disciplinary geoarchaeological techniques. <https://wits.academia.edu/KelitaShadrach>
- **Dr Dominic Stratford**, Senior lecturer. Dominic is a geoarchaeologist with research interest in the application of multidisciplinary approaches to archaeological and palaeoanthropological sites to better understand site formation processes and stratigraphic histories. <https://wits.academia.edu/DominicStratford>
- **Associate professor Sarah Wurz**. Sarah is a lithic specialist and her interest in experimental archaeology stem from her research on technological developments and early modern humans. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sarah\\_Wurz](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sarah_Wurz)

## Epilogue

We have set up the website <https://exarc.net/meetings/ACE2018>, the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/ACEJoburg/>, the Twitter feed @ACEjoburg and the email [ACE2018@exarc.net](mailto:ACE2018@exarc.net). Ke nako - now it's time for you to send in your abstracts or register for the first African Conference on Experimental Archaeology – ACE2018. We can't wait to see you!

1 Ke nako means "It's time" in the Sesotho language. The term was part of the slogan for the 2010 FIFA world cup in South Africa.

2 The Rand show is even today one of the largest consumer exhibitions in the world. It is usually arranged over Easter and is today placed in a different venue. See [www.randshow.co.za](http://www.randshow.co.za)

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## Corresponding Author

**Silje Evjenth Bentsen**

School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies

University of the Witwatersrand

Private Bag 3

Wits 2050

Johannesburg

South Africa

[E-mail Contact](#)

## Gallery Image



FIG 1. GRINDING OCHRE. PHOTO BY RIFKIN



FIG 2. MUSKETS



FIG 3. OCHRE USE TRACES. PHOTO BY HODGSKISS



FIG 4. OVAHIMBAOTJISE. PHOTO BY RIFKIN



FIG 5. TEST EXPERIMENTAL SETUP



FIG 6. WITS GREAT HALL EAST CAMPUS