

## ■ CONFERENCE REPORTS

### **EAQUA 4, Nanyuki, Kenya July 23-27th 2013**

Merrick Posnansky  
Cotsen Institute of Archaeology  
University of California, Los Angeles  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510  
Email: merrick@history.ucla.edu

EAQUA is the East African variant of INQUA, the International Quaternary Studies Association. There are regional variants of INQUA in all four regions of Africa. EAQUA is possibly the best developed and its 4<sup>th</sup> meeting was held at Nanyuki in Kenya from July 22-27<sup>th</sup> 2013. Previous meetings of EAQUA had been held in Uganda, Ethiopia and Zanzibar (for Tanzania) and the next meeting would begin a new round in Uganda in 2014. They are held every two years and for Africa north of South Africa they are the nearest approach to a regional archaeological conference though the emphasis is heavily on the Pleistocene and on the environment rather than on cultural responses.

The Nanyuki meeting was held near the Mount Kenya National Park but though an excursion was made to the park the mountain was shrouded in mist and cloud during our whole stay. The conference was flawlessly coordinated by Dr. Christine Ogala from the Kenya National Museum who had managed to obtain funding from Kenya Airways, the French Embassy and various research organizations, including INQUA, that helped pay the travel and/or living expenses of several of the delegates. One great advantage of the conference was that the whole group was able to meet in consecutive rather than in parallel panels so that everyone had an opportunity to listen to and appreciate all the presentations. There were also ten extremely well prepared panel poster presentations, though

some of the explanations were rather wordy and the lettering too small discouraging easy comprehension. There were 55 participants from 15 countries; 68% were from African states. More than half of the participants were from eastern Africa and 13 from Europe.

The most inspiring aspect of the conference was that it was being held and the principal participants were Africans trained in Africa giving papers on palynology, dating, phytoliths etc. subjects that were little known 50 years ago. I was particularly impressed by the quality of the papers, no one took up more than their allotted time and all the speakers spoke off the cuff using excellent power point presentations. Fifty or so years ago such a conference would have been inconceivable as the very few archaeologists (never more than six over eastern Africa) were all white and somewhat colonial and had little in common. There was neither a universal time scale nor few ideas about continuities between the deep past and the near present. More than half of the papers were team presentations often with both African and European team members. The overriding theme was Eastern African climate change and variability: a view from the Highlands. Each of the six sessions had a longer keynote address that provided some overview. Fourteen of the papers dealt with climate change and environmental reconstruction, nine with cultural resource management and others with both human and animal taphonomy, and human interaction. There were only five papers that dealt completely with Holocene topics the majority with Pleistocene contexts. The preserved area of the Karura forest on the outskirts of Nairobi provided an interesting approach to a holistic study of the area including vegetation change, ceramic use and the interpretation of faunal remains from historic sites. All the Karura papers stressed the importance of community involvement in the work.

A fascinating paper, with absorbing implications of how we should view sudden major climatic change, was that given by Stanley Ambrose on ash from the Toba volcanic eruption in Indonesia discovered in cores from Lake Malawi. The erup-

tion originally dated to 74ka years ago, but possibly dating to 64-60ka years ago, may have led to 5 to 6 year volcanic winters and even to a 200m drop in lake levels. There was lively debate on “out of Africa” scenarios with a majority of opinion favoring the 70-80ka dating.

Jack Harris, who has worked in Kenya for 40 years, gave a major keynote address. He provided a masterful survey of recent hominid discoveries, and confirmed dates for early use of stone tools in Ethiopia back to 2.5-2.6 millions years ago. He also praised the accomplishments of the late Berkeley Professor Clark Howell who had brought many disparate disciplines together in developing the landscape approach that is now pervasive in hominin studies. He particularly demonstrated the advantages of habitats on bank levees as opposed to distal flood plains. Julius Lejju, the co-author of four papers, a keynote speaker and session chair was the most active participant and from his base at Mbarara University in Uganda has refined environmental approaches that have proved a model for many other scholars using palynology, phytolith studies and dating techniques. His abilities were recognized when he was invited to be a key member of the INQUA Council.

Kilombe, a site on the western slope of the Rift Valley near the extinct Kilombe volcano indicates every possibility of rivaling in wealth of data and stratigraphic sequencing, many of the Tanzanian and Ethiopian lacustrine series of camp sites. Large numbers of hand axes have been found and a sequence demonstrated that they covered much of the Pleistocene.

The conference was rounded off by an excursion that took in the open air site of Kariandusi, first exposed over eighty years ago but still showing off a vast array of hand axes and a few cleavers. A museum has been added as well as several walking trails and the site now has a permanent staff of ten. One of the exciting aspects of any visit to Kenya is the growth of services conserving the past. Kenya now has some 16 regional museums in addition to conserved sites like Kariandusi. Its National Museum employs over 1000 staff.

I personally believe that organizations like EAQUA need to be encouraged by associations such as SAfA and the Pan African Prehistory Association. Local associations are basic to the creation of regional knowledge. Somehow there must be a mechanism for providing more interaction between the large associations that attract greater foreign participation and are often more generously funded and the smaller but nevertheless very enthusiastic regional research groups. One disappointment at EAQUA 4 was that the British Institute in Eastern Africa, that publishes *Azania*, sent neither an observer nor a participant. One outstanding aspect of East Africa’s past is its long sweep from Pleistocene times through to the present. Biogeneticists and historical linguists are tracing lines of continuity back to 10-15000 years ago. Such continuities hold out the hope of delineating links from the Quaternary past to the events of the last millennium, events that helped shape the Africa with which we are familiar from documentary sources.