

The fossil skull that ROCKED THE WORLD

The Taung child skull.

Dieder Descouens (Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0)

100 years later, scientists are grappling with the complex colonial legacy of the Taung Child find.

Here's how the story of the Taung Child is usually told:

In 1924 an Australian anthropologist and anatomist, [Raymond Dart](#), acquired a block of calcified sediment from a limestone quarry in South Africa. He painstakingly removed a fossil skull from this material.

A few months later, on 7 February 1925, he published [his description](#) of what he argued was a new hominin species, *Australopithecus africanus*, in the journal *Nature*. It was nicknamed the Taung Child, a reference to the discovery site and its young age.

The international scientific community rebuffed this hypothesis. They were looking outside Africa for human origins and argued that the skull more likely belonged to a non-human primate. Dart was vindicated decades later after subsequent similar fossil [discoveries](#) elsewhere [in Africa](#).

Dart is [portrayed](#) as prescient in most retellings. He's hailed for elevating the importance of Africa in the narrative of human origins.

But is this a biased and simplified narrative? The discovery played out during a period marked by colonialism, racism, and racial segregation and apartheid in South Africa. The history of human origins research is, therefore, intertwined with inequality, exclusion and scientifically unsound ideas.

Viewed against this backdrop, and with a contemporary lens, the figure of Dart, and palaeoanthropology on the African continent more broadly, is complex and worthy of reflection.

The *South African Journal of Science* has [published a special issue](#) to mark the centenary of Dart's original paper.

A group of African researchers and international collaborators, ourselves among them, contributed papers offering perspectives on the science, history and legacy of palaeoanthropology in South Africa and beyond.

We were particularly interested in exploring how the history of the discovery of early hominins in South Africa influenced the scientific field of palaeoanthropology. Did it promote or limit scientific enquiry? In what ways? What were its cultural effects? And how do they play out now, a century later?

The papers in the special issue unpack a number of issues and highlight ongoing debates in the field of human evolution research in Africa and beyond.

Our goal is to celebrate the remarkable science that the discovery of *A. africanus* enabled. At the same time we are probing disciplinary legacies through a critical lens that challenges researchers to do science better.

The marginalisation and erasure of voices

Several key themes run through the contributions in the special issue.

One is the unheard voices. The colonial framework in which most palaeoanthropological research in South Africa took place excluded all but a few groups. This is particularly true for Indigenous voices. As a legacy, few African researchers in palaeoanthropology are first authors on prominent research or leading international research teams.

Too often, African palaeoanthropological heritage is the domain of international teams that conduct research on the continent with little meaningful collaboration from local African researchers. This is "helicopter science". More diverse teams will produce better future work, and those of us in the discipline must actively drive this process.

The dominance of Western male viewpoints is part of the colonial framework. This theme, too, threads through most of the work in the special issue.

In a bid to redress some of the imbalances, a majority of the authors in the special issue were women, especially African women, and Black Africans more broadly. Many of the papers call for a more considered and equitable approach to the inclusion of African researchers, technicians and excavators in the future: in workshops and seminars, on professional bodies, as collaborators and knowledge creators, and in authorship practices.

Community and practice

Colonial legacies also manifest in a lack of social responsiveness – the use of professional expertise for a public purpose or benefit. This is another theme in the special edition. For example, Gaokgathe Mirriam Tawane, Dipuo Kgotleng and Bando Baven consider the broader effects of the Taung Child discovery on the Taung community.

Tawane is a palaeoanthropologist and grew up in the Taung municipality. She and her co-authors argue that, a century after the discovery of the fossil, there is little (if any) reason for the local community to celebrate it. They argue that more must be done not only to give back to the community, which is beset by socio-economic struggles, but also to build trust in science and between communities and scientists.






Researchers need to understand that there is value in engaging with people beyond academia. This is not merely to disseminate scientific knowledge. It can also enrich communities and co-create a scholarship that is more nuanced, ethical and relevant. Researchers must become more socially responsive, and institutions must hold researchers to higher standards of practice.

Resourcing

Another theme that emerges from this special issue is the value of and the need for excellent local laboratory facilities in which to undertake research based on the fossils and deposits associated with them.

Increased investment in local laboratory facilities and capacity development can create a shift towards local work on the content being led by Africans. It can also increase pan-African collaboration, dismantling the currently common practice of African researchers being drawn into separate international networks.

It is important for international funding bodies to increase investment within African palaeoanthropology. This will facilitate internal growth and local collaborative networks. International and South African investment is also needed to grow local research capacity. Fossil heritage is a national asset.

Article written by Rebecca Ackermann , Professor, Department of Archaeology and Human Evolution Research Institute, University of Cape Town; Lauren Schroeder , Associate Professor in Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Toronto; and Robyn Pickering , Senior lecturer, University of Cape Town. This is an edited version of an article in the South African Journal of Science. Yonatan Sahle , Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town, South Africa and Department of History and Heritage Management, Arba Minch , University, Ethiopia, co-authored the academic article. This edited article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license, where it was first published on 7 February 2025. It can be found here.