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Alumna is a new name in adventure

Cotsen grant helps student chase down her dream in Belize, Antigua—and finally the Sudan



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Working for nearly two months along the east bank of the Nile was a dream come true for anthropology alumna Idi Okilo '10 MA.

"It was the most amazing thing I had ever done," Okilo said this spring, just weeks after returning from a research expedition to the tiny village of Tombos in Northern Sudan.

Okilo, through the assistance of a [Cotsen Grant](#) in [Cal State L.A.'s Department of Anthropology](#), was invited by [University of California, Santa Barbara Professor and Egyptologist Stuart Smith](#) to join a joint Egyptological expedition with [Purdue University](#). While there, she said, they excavated an Egyptian/Nubian cemetery, unearthed an ancient pyramid and interacted with dozens of villagers to learn about their daily lives, customs and ancestors.

"I went there and automatically felt as if I had gone home," said Okilo, who is originally from a remote village in Nigeria. "When I was around the villagers without the rest of the team, they treated me as if I was one of them. I could not believe that I could be in another country and have it feel so much like my native country. It was familiar and alien at the same time."

Okilo's dream of venturing to the Nile was a long time coming—and the perfect culmination to the education and exposure she received while studying anthropology at Cal State L.A.

"I have been really fortunate," she said. "I have had the opportunity to follow my far-fetched dream, and to learn about anthropology, and to take part in field work because of Cal State L.A, [Dr. James Brady](#) and many of the donors that support the University."

Her desire to visit Northern Africa, study Egyptology, and more particularly,

Nubiology—the study of the ancient Egyptian colony of Nubia, now present day Sudan—sprouted as a young child when she visited a British history museum and saw an Egyptian mask, she said. The beauty and detail of the work, paired with the many mysteries the artifacts held about the people, cultural practices, language and way of life were intriguing, she said.

Still, despite her fascination, Okilo's goal of reaching the Nile seemed like nothing more than a pipe dream until she started in the master's program. It was there that she met Anthropology Professor Brady, and began to take the steps to make her dream a reality.

"I told (Dr. Brady) what I wanted to do when I first met him at a lecture," she said. "He listened, and then he just smiled at me and said 'Well, let's get going.'"

Her first stop, Brady said, was enrolling in an Egyptology course at University of California, Los Angeles with help from CSULA's five-year, \$200,000 Cotsen Grant. Since the grant was funded in 2006, it has formalized collaboration between Cal State L.A. and The Cotsen Institute of Archeology at UCLA, and aided a handful of students annually by covering the costs of field work expeditions, travel to conferences, courses and special training.

From the course, Okilo secured a position as a curator for the Egyptian collection at the Fowler Museum at UCLA—which eventually led to her introduction to UCSB's Smith. She also got her field work feet wet, going on her first two expeditions at Brady's invitation.

"Idi is extraordinary in whatever she sets her mind to," Brady said. "And she has been able to do so many things because of the support she has received along the way."

For instance, funding through the Cotsen Grant paid for Okilo to accompany Brady on a research expedition of the "The Midnight Terror Cave," a Maya burial cave in Belize, and excavation of a plantation home in Antigua.

"It was really 'Indiana Jones'-like," Okilo said, recounting one day in particular at "The Midnight Terror Cave" where she was attempting to collect pottery fragments in an alcove along the side of the cave's cliff.

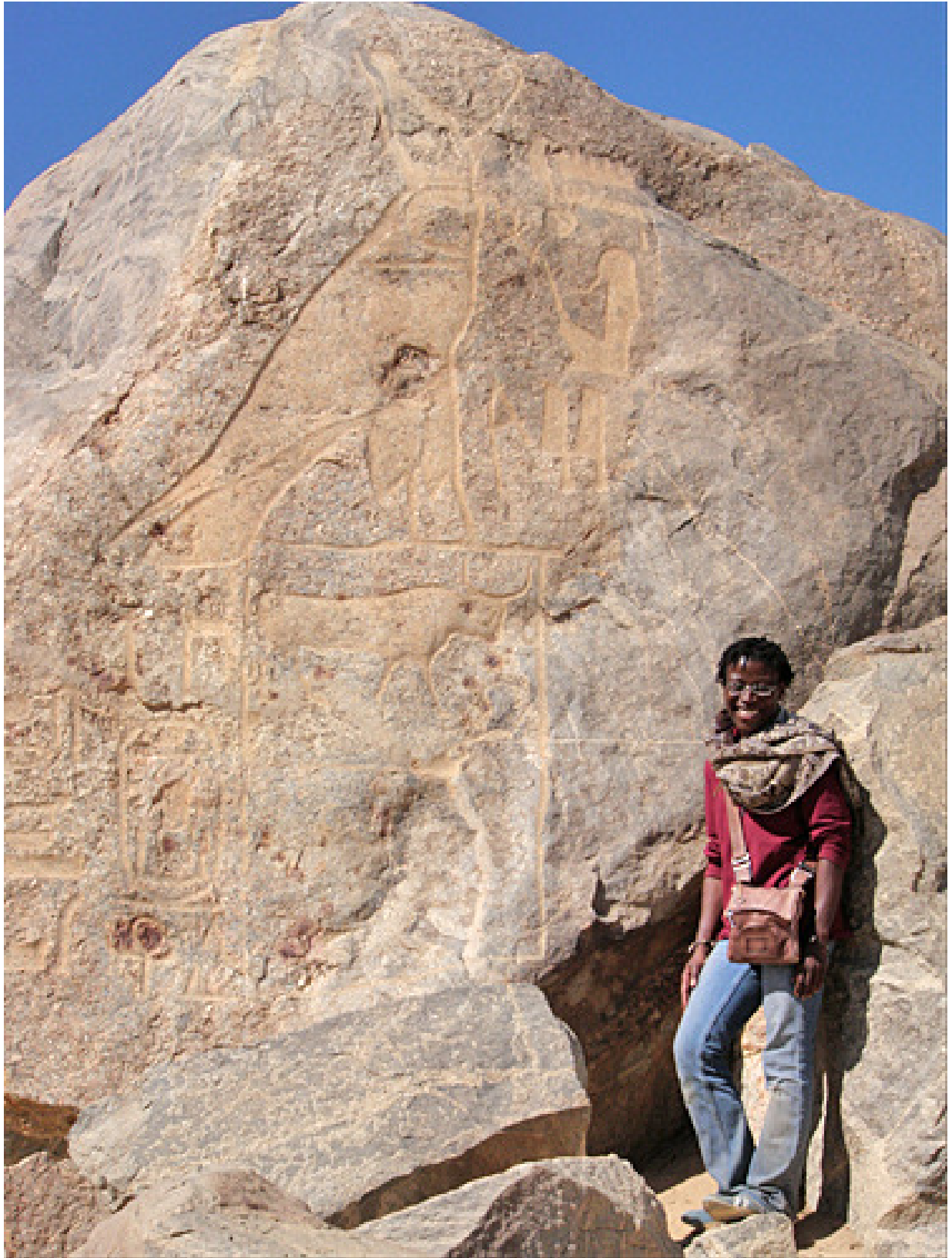
"I couldn't reach the pottery fragments and I was getting really frustrated. They were just out of my reach," she continued. "When finally one of the cavers suggested that I take off my shoes and pick up the pieces with my toes.

"I did," she said, grinning. "And there were more than 50 pieces that I collected that way."

This summer, Okilo is further exploring her interests in the United Kingdom where she attended the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies with the support of Cal State L.A. Trustee Professor and former CSU Chancellor Barry Munitz, who also helped secure the original Costen Grant.



Idi Okilo '10 MA surveys a tumulus, or a Nubian grave site, in an ancient cemetery in the village of Tombos.



Okilo stands before a large rock with ancient inscriptions in the village of Tombos.



Okilo was part of a research expedition, led by Anthropology Professor James Brady, of "The Midnight Terror Cave" in Belize. The cave got its name from nearby German Mennonites who were awoken one evening by looters who needed help