

IV. Book Reviews

Robin Derricourt 2011 *Inventing Africa: History, Archaeology and Ideas*. London and New York: Pluto Press; distributed in the USA by Palgrave Macmillan. Pages xi + 183. ISBN 978-0-7453-3106-5 (hardback); 978-0-7453-3105-8 (paperback).

Reviewed by Peter Robertshaw

This small book is a welcome and somewhat unusual addition to the literature of African archaeology. Its theme is a selective history of the creation of narratives about Africa's prehistoric past and how these narratives reflected and served perceptions of Africa and Africans. Drawing a comparison with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Robin Derricourt explores a variety of accounts of African prehistory, some touted as factual and others fictional.

Many of these narratives were constructed by people of European descent, for example, by Raymond Dart and the novelist Rider Haggard, but African authors, like Cheikh Anta Diop and Credo Mutwa, are also represented. The selection is eclectic and Derricourt makes no claim of comprehensive coverage. The author has also not constructed his book as a single developing thesis; indeed, he begins his book by disarmingly suggesting that the chapters can be read in any order, a suggestion that I as a reviewer felt obliged to ignore, though in hindsight I see its feasibility.

I found some chapters more relevant to the theme of *Inventing Africa* than others. The book is to some extent a compilation of journal articles that Derricourt has published during the last few years. It seems that after successful sequential yet linked careers in archaeology and academic publishing, retirement has allowed Derricourt the time to explore a variety of topics that piqued his interest. After publishing some of this work in journals, he appears to have discovered his theme for the book and thus assembled disparate strands of investigation into a book, that on the whole succeeds remarkably well, despite its piecemeal approach and the fact that some chapters reveal the invention of 'Africa' better than others.

After a short preface that introduces Derricourt's theme and outlines the book, the first chapter provides a history of changing perceptions, particularly among Europeans, of what constitutes Africa. A remarkably brief history of the settlement of the continent and its islands from the Australopithecines onwards is followed by summaries of what ancient Egyptians and the Classical world knew about the continent beyond the Nile Valley, including etymologies of terms like 'Africa, Ethiopia and Libya'. Then it is on to the spread of Islam and Medieval European perceptions of the continent, often filtered through Muslim sources and sometimes fixated on the legendary Christian king, Prester John. Finally, European views of Africa were inexorably altered by the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent colonialism that encouraged a racist view of African primitiveness that justified the exploitation of Africans as slaves and the expropriation of African resources, while also fostering the white man's burden of

bringing light to the dark continent through missionary Christianity. I think that it is fair to say that Derricourt offers no new interpretations of substance here, but I am hoping that his brisk narrative will enlighten my students in my African archaeology course for whom I have just assigned this volume as a textbook.

Proceeding through the book in the old-fashioned way brings us to Chapter 2 on 'Mythic and Mystic Africa', which focuses on the invention of various pasts for Great Zimbabwe and similar sites. Some of these pasts, such as Rider Haggard's and Wilbur Smith's novels, were marketed as fiction, others as scholarly works uncovering Africa's prehistory. The latter includes various works under the patronage of Cecil Rhodes that attempted to explain Great Zimbabwe's presence by Biblical references to Phoenicians, King Solomon, Ophir and the like, as well as more recent pseudo-archaeological and historical endeavors such as Cyril Hromnik's *Indo-Africa* and Credo Mutwa's *Indaba My Children*. All these accounts, including the fictional ones, served to divorce Africans from their cultural heritage and foster the ideologies of apartheid South Africa and its Rhodesian counterpart, as Derricourt makes abundantly clear by placing the Zimbabwean work within its colonialist context and showing how its fallacies were exposed by the careful excavations of Gertrude Caton Thompson. The author also provides the critical historical context for unmasking the nonsense promulgated by Mutwa and his followers.

Chapter 3 examines the career of Raymond Dart, famous for the discovery of the Taung skull that confirmed Darwin's hypothesis of the African origins of humanity. What is perhaps less well known is Dart's championing of numerous other ideas, most of which can be described as half-baked, at least as seen with the benefit of hindsight. In broader context, Dart's work exemplifies concerns with racial typologies in the analysis of human remains in the first half of the twentieth century and with theories of exotic origins to explain (away) African cultural achievements. However, the emphasis on Dart himself throughout this chapter is less relevant to the book's theme and reflects the chapter's origin in an earlier and longer biographical article.

Following in Dart's paleoanthropological footsteps, the next chapter on 'Egos and Fossils' captures the excitement of discovering early hominids and the celebrity status enjoyed, in his later years, by Louis Leakey and subsequently by Donald Johanson. Some of this chapter, with its emphasis on Leakey's life, seems somewhat tangential from the book's theme and it perhaps misses the point in terms of the impact of these researchers on the construction of perceptions of Africa by European and particularly American readers and viewers of the output of National Geographic Society media. These media glamorized the discovery of human ancestors by science's version of the Great White Hunter, risking his (rarely her) life in the African wilderness with its lions, leopards and elephants

to reveal our (white people's) human ancestors. If black Africans appeared at all in these media, it was simply as diggers in the background, never as scientific experts. Derricourt skips over this insight, perhaps because it was too obvious, offering instead too much biography. However, the chapter was partially redeemed for me by its succinct explanation of how archaeology really operates and how this differs radically from the discovery-driven (and ego-driven) field of paleoanthropology.

Chapter 5, 'Stirring the Gene Pool', examines modern human origins in Africa, paying particular attention to the possible migration routes out of the continent. This chapter is like a fish out of water in the book; it simply doesn't fit the theme and hence doesn't belong. It appears to be the case that Derricourt had recently published a paper on this topic and thus could not resist the temptation to shoehorn it into his book.

Happily, the author gets back on track in the following chapter on 'Ancient Egypt and African Sources of Civilisation'. Here he avoids the trap of wasting his time on the lunatic fringe that is irresistibly drawn to the Giza pyramids and instead leads us briskly, as always, through the work of several authors whose hypotheses have at times attracted considerable attention and merited scholarly rebuttals. Discussion of the Hamitic hypothesis, as articulated by Seligman in his *Races of Africa*, is followed by a synopsis of Grafton Elliot Smith's hyperdiffusionism, which can be seen perhaps as the intellectual precursor to the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, in turn one of the founding fathers of Afrocentrism which continues to attract adherents among African American scholars. Derricourt provides a respectful discussion of Diop's ideas and, in the last part of the chapter, of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, but he is rightly critical of many aspects of Diop's and Bernal's work.

From Diop and Bernal to the writings to Basil Davidson may seem like a rather unusual path to take, but Derricourt is correct to recognize the terrific contributions that Davidson made in presenting accurate information to the public about past African achievements in a lively

and engaging style, both in popular books and a magisterial eight-part television series. Davidson's enthusiasm for pre-European kingdoms and their associated pomp and ceremony led some to accuse him of constructing a façade of 'Merrie Africa' but Derricourt's thoughtful journey through the changes to the various editions of Davidson's enduring books brings out Davidson's commitment to Africa, sorely tried as it was by the failings of many of the continent's post-independence states.

The final chapter, 'The Present of the Past', examines the uses and abuses of our understanding of the African past in modern politics. From 'patriotic history' in Mugabe's Zimbabwe and Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' to the role of tribalism in the Rwandan genocide, Africa's politicians have harnessed the past to the present, often with scant regard for historical accuracy. For outsiders to Africa, Derricourt argues, an alternative to modern 'Afro-pessimism' lies in a romantic primitivism that is enraptured by images of people like the Tuareg and Maasai surviving in spectacular scenery. These in turn are eclipsed by those of the Bushmen, whose genes have revealed that miraculously they *are* the world's first people somehow frozen in time and thus doomed to be forever 'primitive', despite all evidence to the contrary. Derricourt concludes that we must continue to mount challenges to simplified narratives of Africa's past, replacing them with accounts based on sound scholarship.

Inventing Africa follows the historian's style of using endnotes for references and has a useful index. The only frustration is the lack of a bibliography, forcing the reader to look back through numerous notes to search for full citations.

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