

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 9

Issue 3 September 2006

Article 2

9-1-2006

African Historical Archaeologies

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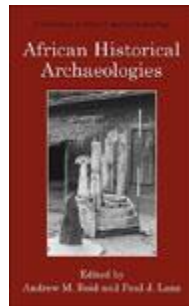
Recommended Citation

Reid, Andrew M.; Lane, Paul J.; and Mitchell, Peter (2006) "African Historical Archaeologies," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-SAfrica, <http://www.h-net.org/~safrica/> (August 2006).

Andrew M. Reid and Paul J. Lane, eds. *African Historical Archaeologies*. Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology Series. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004. 408 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$165.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-306-47995-8; \$77.00 (paper), ISBN 0-306-47996-6.

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All Archaeology Is Historical, Isn't It?

For those unfamiliar with the last forty years or so of archaeological theory this might seem a peculiar question since surely the answer to it is affirmative: both archaeology and history, though they employ somewhat different kinds of evidence, are concerned with reconstructing and understanding what happened in "the past." However, as this book makes plain, things can be more complex than that and the creative tension between different concepts of "history" and "archaeology" is a leitmotif of *African Historical Archaeologies*. The principal sources of the book are twofold. First, and developing from the rapid growth of archaeological research on Africa's recent past since the early 1960s, is the fact that Africanist archaeologists are used to drawing together multiple lines of evidence: alongside those that are extracted from the ground through excavation or obtained by archaeological surveys, that evidence includes data obtained from linguistics, comparative ethnography and, latterly, molecular genetics. Above all, however, these sources include a variety of textual sources -- some written by Africans, others not -- and historical traditions that have been transmitted and remembered not in writing, but in speech and song. The use of oral and documentary history is, therefore, a commonplace in African archaeology, one

that has helped negate many of the falsehoods that surrounded older views of the African past.

The archaeology of European colonial settlement in North America had a different beginning, colored by the search for material evidence that could be matched against and illuminate already known historical events. Many examples of the same approach could, of course, be adduced from Africa, and the fixation in some quarters on uncritically using written sources to direct archaeological attention toward a few royal centers or major monuments at the expense of gaining a deeper understanding of the lives of the majority has been suitably critiqued.[1] However, the fact (it is, of course, not a coincidence) that the advent of European settlement in the Americas was intimately bound up with the wave of globalization springing from the Portuguese and Spanish voyages of discovery gives a special quality to its archaeological study. As Charles Orser, editor of the series to which *African Historical Archaeologies* belongs, has forcefully argued, the origins of the world we currently inhabit took shape at this time and were marked by a series of interlinked processes: colonialism; Eurocentrism; capitalism; and modernity.[2] For him these themes mark off the archaeological study of the last 400-500 years as an intellectually coherent topic in its own right. Whether written or other historical sources are employed is almost an irrelevance, just as conducting archaeological research in a period or region (Pharaonic Egypt, the Classic Maya, or the medieval Sahel) for which written documents exist does not per se make that research historical archaeology of the kind that he has in mind.

African Historical Archaeologies reflects both these concepts of "historical archaeology," and perhaps this is no bad thing, for in so doing Andrew Reid and Paul Lane successfully represent the diversity that characterizes contemporary Africanist research. Most chapters emphasize the first of the two versions that I have sketched, illustrating for a wide range of areas the interplay between oral, written and material evidence: David Edwards in Nubia (chapter 2), Richard Helm, Jeff Fleisher and Adria LaViolette along the Swahili coast (chapters 3, 4 and 5), Timothy Insoll in the Sahel (chapter 6), Keith Ray in Nigeria's Cross River region (chapter 7), Innocent Pikirayi in Zimbabwe (chapter 9) and the editors themselves in their work on Tswana towns (chapters 10 and 11) all fall here. In contrast, the chapters by Kenneth Kelly on the African origins of the transatlantic slave trade (chapter 8) and Joanna Behrens on industrial archaeology in South Africa (chapter 13) emphasize Orser's definition, though they come at it from opposite ends of the chronological spectrum. These differences are brought out in greater detail by the editors in their introduction and by Peter Robertshaw in his concluding overview. A key point that emerges

from both is the importance of examining critically competition and dissonance between different viewpoints about the past, something best exemplified here by J. A. van Schalkwyk and B. W. Smith's chapter (12) on the 1894 Maleboho War between the South African Republic and the Hananwa Sotho in what is now Limpopo Province, South Africa. Such comparative study of oral history, documents, and material evidence can help to subvert the very cultural dominance that Euroamerican-led globalization sought to achieve and has so long imposed.

This, then, as its editors promise (p. 11), is a book of mixed contents and many voices. It offers new analyses of specific issues, whether the Maleboho war just mentioned, the centralization of population that marked eighteenth-/early-nineteenth-century Tswana society, or Helm's use of oral traditions and archaeology to revise views on the history of Mijikenda settlement in northern Kenya. Many chapters, such as Reid's emphasis on developing a cultural taphonomy that can complement etically grounded nutritional analyses of faunal assemblages (chapter 11) or the critiques of regional archaeological traditions by Insoll and Edwards, are relevant well beyond the examples to which they are applied here. But does the book constitute a coherent whole? Valuable as the individual contributions are, the answer is, I suggest, probably not. All employ and evaluate a mix of oral, textual and material sources, but is this enough? A clearer focus on theoretical, rather than methodological, issues would raise the level of the game. Orser's definition of historical archaeology carries greater punch, simply because it carves out a clearly defined set of themes that we can expect to have been processually interlocked, and Africa -- through the transatlantic trade, the implantation of African populations beyond the continent and the widespread adoption of powerful new American cultigens -- was at the heart of them all. Robertshaw (pp. 388-389) is right to suggest that the African context demands some temporal and spatial expansion of Orser's definition to take account of the multiplicity of ways in which the continent's peoples have interacted with the rest of the world.[3] However, an emphasis on colonialism, globalization and capitalism -- and on resistance to these processes--might identify an agenda that would make archaeology more relevant to understanding the origins of contemporary Africa. At the same time, it might allow African archaeology and African archaeologists (only four of whom are represented in the present volume) to contribute more vocally to the wider discipline.

Notes

[1]. T. Insoll, "The External Creation of the Western Sahel's Past: Use and Abuse of the Arabic sources," "Archaeological Review from Cambridge" vol. 13,

no. 1 (1994): pp. 39-50; A. B. Stahl, "Perceiving Variability in Time and Space: The Evolutionary Mapping of African Societies," in "Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa", ed. S. K. McIntosh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 39-55.

[2]. C. E. Orser, "A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World" (New York: Plenum Press, 1996).

[3]. P. J. Mitchell, "African Connections: Archaeological Perspectives on Africa and the Wider World" (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2005).

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