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## Archaeology, Language, and the African Past

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*Mallam Dendo Ltd.*

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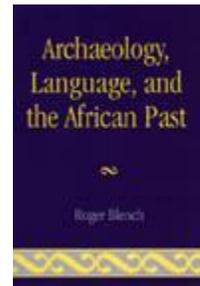
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## Book Review

**Roger Blench. *Archaeology, Language, and the African Past*. The African Archaeology Series. Lanham, Maryland: Altamira Press, Hardcover ISBN 0-7591-0465-4, Paperback ISBN 0-7591-0466-2, 388 pp., April 2006.**



**Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Kevin C. MacDonald, Institute of Archaeology, University College London.**

The enormous linguistic diversity of Africa, and its impact upon the transmission of ideas and technologies, has been considered all too rarely by Africanist archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians. In Diaspora studies monolithic 'West African' culture concepts which plagued the beginnings of the sub-discipline, could perhaps have been tempered had researchers realised that coastal West Africa holds far greater linguistic (and therefore cultural) diversity than the whole of Europe. On the other hand, the continuity of African languages in the New World, particularly via the existence of African-American Pidgin and Creole dialects, is something which has been fully appreciated since the time of Herskovits and before. Therefore, there is much to be gained in seizing a better understanding of African linguistics, whether one is interested in weighing the effects of cultural randomisation in the New World or scrutinising aspects of linguistic continuity with the African continent. Yet, for the average academic non-linguist, linguistic tracts can appear well nigh impenetrable, and the sheer scale of Africa's linguistic diversity (at least 2,000 distinct languages and four massive phyla) is similarly daunting. For example, Bendor-Samuel's (ed., 1989) tome on *The Niger-Congo Languages* is a fine, up-to-date reference on the phylogenies and many linguistic families of the Niger Congo Phylum, but aside from distribution maps and language lists it possesses little accessible to the non-specialist. It is for this reason that inter-disciplinary endeavours like *Archaeology, Language, and the African Past* are welcome additions to the literature.

Roger Blench, with whom I have had the pleasure of collaborating previously (Blench and MacDonald 2000), is a rare polymath in an age of hyper-specialism. Having been formally schooled in social anthropology and ethnomusicology, he is largely a self-trained linguist, and his disregard of disciplinary boundaries allows him to make connections that would elude most researchers. As Blench states (2006:6) "The African past can be pursued with a generous vision or a more limited perspective." In other words, there are archaeologists and historians who make allowance for living reflections of the African past, via oral histories and language, and those whose vision is fixed upon empirical data, whether from the excavation or the archive. Blench is clearly of the former type as are, thankfully, a steadily growing number of contemporary Africanist scholars.

*Archaeology, Language and the Africanist Past* is divided into three sections. The first section concerns linguistic methodologies, ranging from a well-considered critique of glottochronology and lexicostatistics, to the use of loanwords as indicators of the sequence of spread for new technologies, crops, and animals. The second section comprises reviews of the current state of research, as well as some of Blench's own hypotheses, regarding the

major language phyla of Africa and the history of their speakers. This section is particularly useful in that it traces how much classifications have changed over the past century, and shows which terminologies have dropped from use. The final sections deal with information which can be derived from linguistic and archaeological sources for the origins and spread of a wide range of domestic animal and plant species in Africa. All of the sections are liberally illustrated with maps and cladograms to explain the points being made. To cover such vast ground the book is oftentimes almost painfully brief on some passionate subjects, but rest assured that referencing is extensive, allowing the reader to further investigate contentious issues.

Some of the case studies addressed in the second section of the book are of particular interest to this reviewer. For example Blench details the 'lost languages' of Africa  language isolates which probably reflect an earlier radiation of hunter-gatherer languages overlain by the spread of the current major phyla (Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afroasiatic). He also looks into deep-time technological issues which may have facilitated the wide spread of Niger-Congo languages, suggesting linguistically-attested precocious bow and arrow technology as a possible catalyst. He is also not afraid to grasp the nettle of the early dispersal of Afroasiatic (ex-Hamito-Semitic). Blench is sometimes radical, but, in my experience, it pays to consider his arguments carefully. I have the suspicion that what might now seem unorthodox might simply be a few generations ahead of current research.

For what it sets out to be -- an introduction to the use of linguistics as a means of developing our knowledge of Africa's past -- the book is a *tour de force*. However, researchers of the Diaspora may be disappointed that there is very little coverage of African language survivals and pidgins in the New World (less than two pages:122-123) . Nor is this book a comprehensive reference catalogue of individual African languages and their distributions (such as Bendor-Samuel [1989] is for the Niger-Congo languages). Rather, it is Blench's own very personal take on the deeper time (pre)history of African languages, liberally interlaced with archaeological data. All archaeologists of the continent should be obliged to read it -- even if they only accept a fraction of the hypotheses being advanced.

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