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African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora

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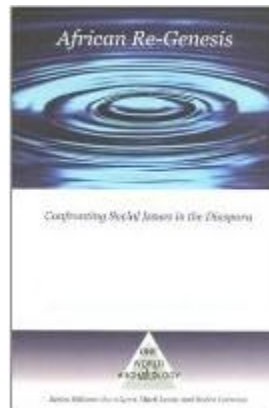
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Book Commentary



Jay B. Haviser and Kevin C. MacDonald, editors. *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora*. London: UCL Press/Walnut Creek, CA.: Left Coast Press, Hardback (978-1-59874-217-6) \$79.00, Paperback (978-1-59874-283-1) \$34.95, 294 pp., May 2006.

Commentary by John P. McCarthy, S&ME, Inc., Mt. Pleasant, SC.

Personal Observations on the Expanding Scope of African Diaspora Archaeology Publications

At the outset I need to acknowledge a certain conflict of interest in offering this commentary, and that is why I titled it "personal observations" rather than "a review." I happen to be one of the contributing authors of the volume discussed herein. My paper, "African community identity at the cemetery," is included on pages 176 to 183. I offer the following by way of explanation: The way in which this volume was published and distributed made it very difficult to obtain a copy. While published for the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) by the UCL Press in London, the volume is now available through Left Coast Press, the current publisher of two book series for WAC: Research Handbooks in Archaeology and the One World Archaeology Series. I believe that the current arrangement offers much improved access for those of us in North America. But given what I feel is the significance of the volume, I choose to offer my observations on the book rather than wait to see if I could obtain a copy to give to a reviewer. If another copy is provided (are you reading this Mitch Allen?), I will happily commission a more independent review (noting that there is really no such thing as a completely independent review given how small our community is and each practitioner's history with everyone else).

That said, One World Archaeology Volume 23 presents a selection of papers inspired by the WAC Intercongress on the African Diaspora held in Curacao, Netherland Antilles in May 2001. I write "inspired" because this is not really a proceedings volume. While centered on papers delivered at the conference, the volume also includes papers

commissioned after the conference, some conference papers have been significantly revised, and some conference papers that I was expecting would be published are not included.

The overall theme of the volume is one with which the readers of this newsletter are already quite familiar: that despite hardship and brutality, African culture was not extinguished in the Diaspora, but was transformed by contacts with new cultures and environments to survive and re-emerge, phoenix-like, but yet still a part of the continuum of African traditions. It is however, rewarding to see what we have taken for granted for some time recognized and celebrated on the broad international stage that WAC represents.

What is news is that the study of the African Diaspora is maturing and efforts to identify and explore cultural survivals (retentions such the Colonoware of the Carolina Lowcountry) have shifted to studies seeking to document syncretistic processes such as the creolization that resulted when Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans came into contact. We are shifting increasingly from *what*, to *how* and *why*, becoming less description "bound" and more interpretive in what we do. What is becoming evident is that archaeology's ability to bridge time and distance, and its comparative focus, places our discipline in a unique position to support such efforts. Accordingly, our research efforts need to expand temporally, geographically, and conceptually if we are to succeed in documenting the variability and transformative processes of African cultures in the New World.

The editors provide a succinct introduction to the volume that identifies key themes and weave a web connecting the various essays that follow. The 20 papers that comprise the body of the volume are divided into four groups: I. Heritage and contemporary identities; II. Historical and anthropological perspectives; III. Archaeology and living communities; and IV. Slavery in Africa: other Diasporas. It is impossible to do these papers justice in a brief review. However, the vast scope of the volume, which includes papers based on work throughout the New World, West Africa, and into the Indian Ocean basin, provides a refreshing change of perspective for those whose work is mostly on the North American continent. Slavery and the African Diaspora are brought home as world-wide phenomena, the continuing analysis of which requires a comparative perspective that is as broad as is the phenomena itself.

There are two additional issues that I think are significant and worthy of comment here. First, this volume addresses the essence of the African Diaspora not only in archaeological terms, but also in interdisciplinary terms with contributions by cultural anthropologists, folklorists, historians, and linguists allowing, perhaps for the first time, a unique perspective on broader trends in the transformation and (re-) emergence of African Diaspora cultures. I also think those non-archaeologists walked away from the WAC conference with a deeper understanding of the contributions archaeology is capable of making.

Finally, as most readers of this newsletter know, research on the African Diaspora is relevant to modern communities. In fact, two of the papers in the volume are explicitly

concerned with the experiences of African-American tourists in Africa, but less is said about the impact of that tourism on the communities visited. But this issue for me always comes back to trying to understand what my responsibilities are and a need to balance the interests of both the living and those who have gone before. What we do as researchers working on issues related to the African Diaspora requires sensitivity to the interplay of our interpretations of the past with contemporary racial and cultural identities and political realities. What we do is not academic in the pejorative sense of being irrelevant; but rather needs to be academic in the best sense of intellectual rigor and close attention to detail.