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## Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures, and Environments

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## **Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures, and Environments**

**Joseph O. Vogel (editor), Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 1997. 604 pp., 70 figures, 24 tables, list of contributors, references, index. \$125.00 (cloth).**

*Review by Sam Spiers, Syracuse University*

This encyclopedia affords a welcome, if ambitious, summation of the multidisciplinary scholarship of precolonial Africa to date. Joseph Vogel successfully brings together 81 specialists covering archaeological, historical, linguistic, socio-cultural anthropological and environmental data and research. The volume covers a range of issues that will be of interest to the Africanist and non-Africanist alike, helping to dispel many of the myths and mysteries surrounding the "Dark Continent" (p. 17). Such introductory essays will hopefully be of use in addressing the lack of African material used in comparative research and anthropological theory building (for example on state formation or urbanism), and the Eurocentric view that historical archaeology begins with European expansion and colonization in the 15th century in most world areas.

Unlike the alphabetical listings of other encyclopedias, this volume is organized along thematic lines, with the first four sections providing useful background information and context on the environment, the history of research in Africa, technology, and a more general section on peoples and cultures which includes languages, foodways and ethnoarchaeology. The final section of the volume, under the heading of the Prehistory of Africa, deals more specifically with case studies and regions, from hominid origins to social complexity and historical archaeology. Overall this organization works well, though reading from cover to cover there is naturally some repetition. This enables each entry, however, to stand alone. Jargon is kept to a minimum, and where used is generally explained. Short bibliographies at the end of each essay direct the reader to the pertinent literature in that field.

In the Technology section, Driskell and Motz's article on stoneworking provides a useful summary of terms, techniques and definitions, though does not problematize the use of European nomenclature for African traditions, especially for the Upper Palaeolithic/Late Stone Age industries (to some extent, however, this is treated in later specific entries, for example Holl's (p. 307) discussion of the West African Neolithic). The sections on ceramic, copper and iron production provide good examples of ethnographic, ethnoarchaeological model building, with de Barros essay on Ironworking in its Cultural Context providing a highlight. Much of the work summarized in these sections has proven to be of use in interpreting historic period smelting/smithing sites in the Caribbean. Huffman's cognitive analysis of architecture

and settlement pattern seems somewhat out of place in this section, as it deals specifically with variations in Bantu settlement pattern, and less with technology, other than to suggest that spatial locations provide "physical backdrops for social behavior and in many cases help to shape it" (p. 150).

In the People and Culture section, the linguistic articles help to stress that the relation of languages descended from a unique proto-language can help to trace migration patterns beyond the framework of oral history, and possibly correlate these patterns with that of the archaeological record. Such an analysis is not without its problems, as Nurse illustrates for the languages of eastern and southern Africa. The remaining entries in this section deal with modes of substance or production.

While there is some overlap between essays, each deals with a specific problem or mode of analysis, from social organization to questions of technology. For foraging lifeways ethnographic models are drawn predominantly from Eastern and Southern Africa, and the discussion of pastoralist lifeways is confined to the north-eastern, eastern and southern portions of the continent. The section on farming techniques and food crops by Harlan will be of interest to those studying the African Diaspora in the Americas, where at the most general level similarities between agricultural practices have been stressed, for example with rice cultivation in the American south. The two excellent articles on ethnoarchaeology in this section seem out of place, and should have perhaps been included in a methods or technology section with the case of Levy on pottery production, or in the history of research section with the case of MacEachern on ethnoarchaeology in Western Africa. It is interesting to note that the distribution of sites and traditions of research have led to a focus on analogies drawn from hunter-forager and pastoralist groups in the eastern and southern half of the continent and the implications this has for palaeoanthropology, while a focus on agricultural societies has been much more the norm in western Africa ethnoarchaeological studies, partly due to the relative absence of early hominid sites (p. 240).

The final section, the Prehistory of Africa, follows a general temporal (and then within this topical and regional) framework, with the welcome additions of sections on rock art and an entry on maritime archaeology. Consisting of over half of the volume, it is impossible to review in its entirety here. One general observation is that while the focus is predominantly on sub-Saharan Africa, the inclusion of northern Africa, through its relation to the rest of the continent during various periods, helps to move away from seeing the continent south of the Sahara as isolated, while still emphasizing regional diversity, inventiveness and continuities. Key essays which will probably be of interest to A-A A readers include MacEachern's Western African Iron Age; Vaum's Western African States; two essays by Kelly: Western African and Western Saharan Trade, and Slave Trade in Africa (though the latter is, unfortunately,

more a review of the ethnographic and historical literature, rather than the archaeological); and DeCorse's *Western African Historical Archaeology*.

Overall, I think this is an extremely thoughtful and useful collection of essays; one which manages to convey the complexities of historical research, in the broad sense, in Africa: a diverse history which draws on multiple sets of data, research traditions and environmental contexts and adaptations, without losing sight of the peoples and cultures who we seek to understand as anthropologists.