

## Book Review

**Inventing Africa**

Author: Robin Derricourt

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*Maria Geusteyn*

Robin Derricourt introduces his latest publication as follows:

This book explores narratives of Africa's past, especially of its deep past, and how they have been created, used and misused. All such narratives are products of place and time, limited by context and intent as much as by available knowledge"<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, Derricourt's project is to detail the diversity of African narratives, and to present an account of the continent that is contrary to the ones where it is cast as "the victim of generalising statements, simplifying histories and pre-histories, stereotyping and imaginings from ancient times until today."<sup>2</sup>

The stereotypes and imaginings that Derricourt seeks to counter range from those of an Africa dependent on outside aid and intervention (whether economic, political or social aid)– to a romanticised "wild" Africa, with its unhindered fauna, flora and wildlife. To contrast these outmoded narratives, Derricourt details Africa's heterogeneous physical land social landscapes.

His careful research acknowledges how Africa's 50 nation-states are home to more than a billion people and that Africa supports "every kind of economic activity, religious belief, cultural sensibility and political structure"<sup>3</sup>.

Geographically, Derricourt points out that the space of the continent spans over 30 million square kilometres, and is an environmentally rich and diverse landscape ranging from extreme desert such as the Sahara to the Congo's tropical rain forests. In combination with this emphasis on Africa's physical and geographical multiplicity, Derricourt emphasises the social and the formation of social-narratives, the combination of which helps the reader decipher and assimilate a more complex story of Africa.

In the first chapter, Derricourt shows how the narrative of Africa changes depending on which perception is taken: be it Ancient Egyptian or Islamic, the perceptions held by African coastal islands, or those facilitated by Europe, the slave trade or Colonialism. In each case, Derricourt maps how each view of Africa depends on different (mis) uses of African narratives. The Ancient Egyptian perspective, for instance, is based on the dichotomy of " 'us', the Egyptians, versus 'them', the rest of Africa, i.e. all other groups of people spread outwards from the Egyptian heartland"<sup>4</sup>. Derricourt shows how this dichotomy has really stayed instilled in every subsequent view so that "there has always been an Africa of 'the Other'"<sup>5</sup>.

Chapter two sees Derricourt address the mystification, and mythification, of the African past. He explains that the various narrative perspectives on Africa depended, on the one hand, on certain realistic knowledges of the parts of the African continent with which contact was had— through trade, political relations or military encounter<sup>6</sup>— but beyond that, “imagination could develop without practical implication”<sup>7</sup>. This latter phenomenon led to the creation of Africa as a mystic space infused with travellers’ tales and stories of outlandish creatures and places. Using H Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She* as examples, Derricourt demonstrates the power of mythical narratives, showing how the boundaries between these types of stories and the actual historical past have become so entangled that for many outsiders, the genres of fact and fiction are blurred. So persistent are these mystical narratives, Derricourt suggests, that “the blurring between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality in Africa’s past may continue to bring its dangers”<sup>8</sup> especially with regards to the contemporary political landscape.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five, Derricourt writes Africa into the twentieth century. The discovery of the Taung fossil in Africa, for instance, sees the imagined exotic African past partially replaced by a more scientific construction. For Derricourt, the emergence of a new and viable scientific narrative allows Africa to not only take its place in human history but also makes world history an integral part in African identity. Be this as it may, Derricourt does problematise the figure of Raymond Dart, whose announcement of the Taung fossil as the earliest ancestor of humankind is coupled with his writings of mystical Africa. Derricourt writes that, ‘the enigma of Raymond Dart is of a scientist whose work straddled the old imaginings of the African past and the new discoveries’<sup>9</sup>. Despite this irony and the perpetuation of Imperialist discourses in the discovery of the Taung fossil, Derricourt points out that its discovery led to an influx in research into the study of fossil-hunting and human ancestry in Africa. Pioneers such as Robert Broom, Louis, Mary and Richard Leakey, and Donald Johanson all contributed to this study. In Chapter Five in particular, Derricourt explores debates surrounding human evolution as found in previous studies on human ancestry in Africa and compares geneticists’ studies of the skeletal DNA against what archaeological remains might suggest.

The last chapters of the book shows a slight shift from the archaeological and historical account of Africa’s past and presents a more theoretical, and perhaps academic discussion of Africa, its history and its ‘sign’. It is Derricourt’s presentation of the notion of “Afrocentrism” in these later chapters that I find most relevant and appealing since his discussion touches directly on an issue popular in local academics and academic administration. For example, Stellenbosch University, just outside of Cape Town in the Western Cape, is currently presenting a ‘Locations and Locutions’ Lecture Series entitled, *Whose Africa? Which Africa* in which academics critique the very issue of Afrocentrism. Derricourt’s latest contribution to the debate is therefore well timed. Moreover, his background as an archaeologist provides an interesting and informative backdrop to the complexity surrounding the definition of and

theorising of the term 'Africa'. Reminding the reader that 'there is no single Africa, with consistent boundaries through time'<sup>10</sup>, Derricourt stresses that,

...all simplified models and images have their impacts, and understanding the range of 'Africanisms' can warn us about these [...]. Today most people, when they refer to 'Africa', think they know the area to which they are referring, yet these may be quite varied. The boundaries of 'Africa' are fluid with different uses, a fact that is of particular importance in dialogues about African society or identity, African development or underdevelopment, political relations with Africa, African literature or culture<sup>11</sup>.

An area that Derricourt touches on and that I would have liked to see emerge more in his overall argument is the continent's own role in the construction of 'Afrocentrism', and its own perpetuation of the idea of a homogenous 'Africa'. Derricourt shows that Africa's history has long been constructed to serve certain needs, both for those encountering Africa as an outsider, and from those on the continent. And, as Derricourt mentions, familiar categories of 'Africa' and 'African' need to be constantly negotiated both from the 'outside' and from *within* in order for the narrative legacies to be challenged and reformulated. The extent to which these narratives have been perpetuated from within certainly deserves more attention, both from Derricourt and from the world of scholarly writing on Africa.

*Inventing Africa: History, Archeaology and Ideas* is in its entirety, a fascinating and timely study into the historical constructs of Africa, Afrocentrism, and the complexities surrounding the continent and its place in the global imagination. Derricourt's book will no doubt provide thoughtful and informative substance to the urgent debate on how to think and write about Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Derricourt, *Inventing Africa*. (London; New York: Pluto Press, 2011) p. vi

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. vii

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. viii

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*