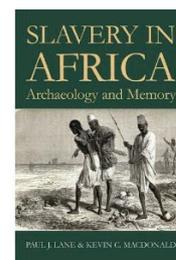


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## BOOK REVIEW

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**Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory.** By P.L. Lane & K.C. MacDonald (eds.). Proceedings of the British Academy. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, 468 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-726478-2. £ 75.00 (Hardback).

After five decades of political independence in Africa, there is precious little to celebrate. Compared to its colonial counterparts — Asia and South America — postcolonial Africa has underperformed. Some economic and political analysts have gone further and warned about Africa's re-colonization, courtesy of Asia: China, South Korea, and India. The recovery of Asian and South American political economies has seriously placed in doubt the taken for granted notion of European exceptionalism. That said, the causes of Africa's perennial underachievement continue to be debated.

Basil Davidson's passing robbed Africa of one of the foremost advocates of the continent's contributions to global history. The unabated ongoing destruction of heritage sites and the underfunding of research in African university and heritage management institutions have seriously marred local research initiatives. Regional studies aimed at understanding archaeological and/or ecological histories and landscapes are few and extremely expensive. Few knowledgeable informants exist to provide credible oral traditions that had such promise in the 1960s and 1970s. Most anthropological archaeologists and historians no longer invest heavily in learning local languages that are necessary for understanding the nuanced natures of lived experiences. The presence of NGOs and missionaries has made disinterested research nearly impossible in the countryside.

Internally, the push to democratize education has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of state and private universities. Today in African nation states, each region wants to have its own universities and train its own people. Thus, the few senior academics at one or two national universities two decades ago have returned to their home states or counties to found local, actually "tribal" universities. Academic standards have declined. Research is rare as research budgets are in

many instances unavailable. A dearth of teaching and learning materials are almost ensuring that the next generations of the continent's intelligentsia will be severely hamstrung.

The question of who speaks for the African past is a tenuous one. Beyond interest in human evolution, raising research funds to do research in Africa is often a difficult undertaking. Africanists are just not taken seriously enough! The few well-funded programs, for example, the Swedish Agency for Research and Economic Development's (SAREC) Urban Origins Program, directed by Professor Paul Sinclair of Uppsala University, have had a huge impact on the training of nearly two dozen African scholars; but this type of funding had all but dried up. The few ongoing long-term research programs are rich in theory and light in archaeology. Africa may be the only continent where one research visit lasting less than a month can spawn an academic career. Thus, it is in this context that we welcome this highly anticipated volume.

*Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory* arose from a conference held in London in 2007 to commemorate the bi-centennial anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade Act (*p. 1*). Slave trade and slavery were important elements in the post-sixteenth century experiences of Africans. Historians have traced Africa's long march from feast to famine to this period. For Western Europe and North America, the benefits of enslaved African labor and the Americas' wealth set in motion the transformation that has until the last two decades set Europe and Europeans apart from the rest of the world as an exceptional place and community (BLAUT 1992; FRANK 1998). Slavery, and especially transatlantic slavery, were such a transformative event in global history (OGUNDIRAN & FALOLA 2007). Its impact is so visible everywhere — in Africa the rapid transformation of settlement patterns, abandonment of towns and cities,

depopulation of vast regions, the kidnapping and selling of women and children, including one's own children, are all part of the memory.

Studying such an event should surely pose few problems. Slavery's impact is visible wherever descendants of the formerly enslaved reside. Besides, slavery — in all its manifestations — continues today. It is estimated that nearly 800,000 people, primarily women, children, and the working poor, are trafficked annually to work in sweat shops, agricultural farms, and in the sex industry world-wide. Many slaves literally operate under our noses (United States Department of State 2007; BATSTONE 2007; HODGE 2011). It should therefore follow that researching and writing about slavery and its impact is a "slam dunk". Yet surprisingly, nearly all the chapters in this volume echo John Alexander's rather unfortunate declaration that an archaeology of slavery in Africa is a "near-impossibility, in the present state of field techniques of recognizing chattel-slavery from material remains unassociated with documentary evidence" (ALEXANDER 2001: 56). This is a disappointing admission because the archaeology of slavery in other regions has been successfully studied.

The trouble with African archaeology is not so much that it lacks the tools for understanding the past. Over the past five decades, archaeologists have been engaged in understanding the African past. They have articulated key transformative events including the: (1) emergence of agriculture; (2) rise and expansion of pastoralism; (3) emergence, development, and use of metals particularly iron; and (4) emergence of social complexity, which culminated in the numerous chiefdoms, states, and empires. Archaeologists have further investigated and continued to examine important questions that congeal to provide answers to one of the most intriguing problems in the world today. How and under what circumstances did complex societies arise in Africa? Were Africans originators of the social and technological manifestations of complexity including the making and selling of iron and the development of urbanism or merely intensifiers of those innovations? And, how did the participation in intra-, interregional and international trade by African societies influence cultural and ecological transformations in the African landscape?

The question that has been least investigated is the subject of this volume. In what ways were African societies benefactors, victims or resisters of slave raids and trade before and after contact with Eurasia? What regions and communities were affected the most and how did they respond to regional instability? These questions are relevant to us as anthropologists and the

general public as we struggle to understand the vexing issues revolving around the politics of race, class, and gender in private and public spheres. Does *Slavery in Africa* address these issues?

In addition to the introduction by the editors, the book is divided in four parts. Part I deals with slave systems of production in the African interior; case studies from the Sudanic belt form five chapters by MacDonald and Camara, Sow, Haour, Edwards, and MacEachern. Part II deals with the archaeological dimensions of the Atlantic slave trade; evidence from Africa and the Diaspora is shown in four chapters by Kelly, Thiaw, Swanepoel, and Agorsah. Part III, entitled *Elusive slavery: Detecting enslavement in the archaeological record of Eastern Africa*, has three chapters by Finneran, Gonzalez-Ruibal, and Lane. Finally, Part IV contains five chapters by Wynne-Jones, Deutsch, Blench, Malan and Worden, and Sorensen, Evans and Richter.

A common thread in all the chapters is that slavery is an ancient practice that can be traced back more than two millennia in Africa and Eurasia. For centuries, humans were part of the cargo in trade conducted between Africa and Eurasia, along with ivory, gold, and other commodities of legitimate trade. Enslaved and free Africans were present in Asia before the European conquest and settlement of the Americas (e.g., Haour, MacDonald and Camara, Lane, and Blench). Virtually, all authors admit that oral traditions, ethnography, and archaeology are critical elements in the research of slavery and the slave trade. MacDonald and Camara, Sow, and Blench employ these methodologies effectively. The veracity of oral traditions coupled with inevitable issues of memory and stigma associated with slavery heritage will continue to negatively affect the reading and interpretation of slavery and its consequences (e.g., MacEachern, Thiaw, Swanepoel, Wynne-Jones, Deutsch, and Gonzalez-Ruibal). The impact of slavery and slave trade on African societies is explored by various authors (e.g., MacDonald and Camara, Sow, MacEachern, Finneran, Lane, Kelly, Swanepoel, Malan and Worden). Slavery's role in the underdevelopment of Africa through depopulation and warfare and the destruction of indigenous African technologies, cultures, and economies is also explored (e.g., Edwards, MacEachern, Agorsah, Lane).

With the exception of Agorsah's and Kelly's chapters, which have a combined five decades of research on slavery in Africa and the Diaspora, virtually all the other chapters are predominantly library research projects (e.g., Haour, Edwards, Finneran, Blench) or beginning projects implemented to commemorate the bi-centennial anniversary of the Slave Trade Act (e.g., Sow, Mac-