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Sibel Barut Kusimba. *African Foragers: Environment, Technology, Interactions.* New York: Altamira Press, 2002. xxi + 284 pp. $37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0154-8; $82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7591-0153-1.

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Inside Africa

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As a topic of general interest, it is hard to imagine something more central than African foragers, cross-cutting as they do questions of human origins, ecology, archeology, human genetics and biology, and cultural evolution–all in a sufficiently confined geographic space to make a comparative perspective meaningful. Africa is a large continent after all, but still just a single continent. More importantly, genetic evidence has made it clear that Africa is the continent in which human groups originated and continued to develop. This last point makes an understanding of the full scope of African Stone Age archeology critical to human evolution. Yet somehow it seems that "inside Africa" remains overshadowed by "out of Africa".

African Foragers: Environment, Techology, Interactions may best be seen in this light.Â Kusimba sticks largely to the archeological record from human orgins to the neolithic while including discussions of optimal foraging, the climatic conditions in Africa, the importance ofÂ social interactions between foraging groups, and the life style of extant populations.Â More general debates about the role of big game hunting in the subsistence of early humans and hunter-gathers as conservationists are largely missing.Â In fact, Kusimba seems to swallow the idea of foragers as conservationists whole-heartedly despite current arguments to the contrary.Â Nor is there any discussion of recent genetic evidence for the history of extant foraging groups.

Hence the merits of the book lie in what it has to say about the dynamics of human cultural and behavioral dynamics in prehistoric Africa. In fact, I would suggest that the key issue the book presents is reflected in the statement "that in Africa the transition from the Middle to the Later Stone Age was less a replacement of an obsolete behavior package than an autochthonous development of modernized behavior patterns" (p. 134). At first blush such a statement seems obvious, even trite. From where else would evolutionary change arise? Visiting aliens? But on deeper consideration, this is not a trivial statement. It is a reflection of anti-intellectual history that under-appreciates Africa. It responds to the same perceptual lens that led earlier archeologists to suggest that the Great Zimbabwe must have been the work of the Phoenicians, for instance.

In the case of the Great Zimbabwe those perceptions seem to be almost entirely cultural–the simple disbelief that Africans were capable of constructing the Great Zimbabwe. In the case of African pre-history the distorting perceptual lens is provided by a focus on the Paleolithic in Europe. In the latter case, intrusion by outside populations seems to have been the major force in creating patterns of population dynamics, cultural interactions, and technological change. The resulting rapid changes evident in the archeological record has led to the idea that modern human behavior was the result of a single revolutionary step.

In Africa on the other hand, no single process (such

as population replacement) is evident during the Middle Stone Age.Â Later with the Neolithic, the development of different subsistence modes led to interactions that forced hunter-gatherers into poorer environments, leading to a long debate about how suitable extant hunter-gather life styles are as models of the human evolutionary past. But what dynamic forces led to *in situ* change among foragers when they had exclusive occupation of the landscape? Was it climatic change? Local population growth? Interactions between different hunter-gather groups?

Kusimba is clear in pointing out variation in social structure and subsistence strategies in response to local resource availability among extant foraging groups of the Kalahari. Similar variation can be inferred from archeological sites such as Lukenya Hill, as well. Ecological conditions have an impact not only on subsistence issues such as hunting and gatherering strategies, but on related cultural strategies as well. For instance, Kusimba suggests that foraging groups in the Kalahari do not exhibit sharing networks where resources are too sparse to make them useful. There never was a single foraging lifestyle, but rather a foraging system that adapted to local conditions. Such an ecological perspective on forager subsistence strategies suggests a different rubric for interpreting temporal changes in the archeological record. Changes in stone tool kits are not simply a matter of changes in human technological capacity against the background of a static environment. Rather, they result from variation in social and cultural responses to local ecological circumstances and demographic demands.Â

Changes in subsistence technologies may have been as closely tied to fluctuations in environment as to longer-term changes in human technological capacity. The presence of bone points at Katande more than 75,000 years before the present are not necessarily evidence for the emergence of modern human behavioral capacity, but a response to the local availability of fish, technological strategies of exploiting their abudance, and presumably, mouths to eat them. When these conditions changed, so do the archeological traces of such behavior.

A similar ecological argument can be made for the early presence (ca. 70,000 years before the present) of Howieson's Poort microlithic blades at Nelson Cave and other sites in southern Africa. The specifics of blade production involve questions of raw material availability, potential trading networks, and the exploitation of available subsistence items. However, all of these factors are elements in a cultural strategy of subsistence responsive to environmental conditions. The fact that Howieson Poort industry starts around the time of a glacial period and ends during a warming period seems telling here.

Why should these questions matter beyond their simple technical interest to Africanist archeologists? Because, as McBrearty and Brooks have emphasized, the allegedly revolutionary origins of modern human behavior is an understanding heavily biased by its reliance upon findings from the Paleolithic of Europe.[1]Â Yet if modern humans originated in Africa, it is obvious that one should look there to understand the fundamental processes involved.Â Kusimba's book helps one to focus on the lifestyles and history of African foragersÂ in such a way that no one can escape the implications of this basic truth.Â Â

Note

[1]. S. McBrearty and A. S. Brooks, "The Revolution That Wasn't: A New Interpretation of the Origin of Modern Human Behavior," *Journal of Human Evolution* 39 (2000), pp. 453-463.