

Exploring the traces of Ancient Indonesians in Africa

Book review: *The phantom voyagers: evidence of Indonesian settlement in Africa in ancient times* (Robert Dick Read)

The phantom voyagers: evidence of Indonesian settlement in Africa in ancient times

Robert Dick-Read

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Towards the end of the 1950s, as African History became firmly entrenched as an important branch of academic historical studies in the developed world, numerous discourses on the past of the continent and its peoples were subject to compounded waves of postcolonial, nationalistic and pan-Africanist revision. One discourse specifically focused in on the manner in which Africa had interacted with the rest of the world. In an effort to cultivate a sense of African identity that was firmly entrenched in the accomplishments of the indigenous cultures of Africa, little room was left for speculation on themes that tended to take away the limelight from what Africans had accomplished in the distant past on the continent.

In recent years there have been increasing shifts in academic thinking, aimed at locating many of the roots of 'indigenous' African culture. Surprisingly then, Africa's accomplishments do not appear to have been in such splendid isolation as people have successive generations of scientific historians have been given to think. To a large extent the more recent gearshift in thinking is the result of the process of globalisation. Especially since the 1980s scientists have increasingly been faced with the problem of catching up with the ideological and functionalist foundations of democratic liberalism that has been pervasive all over the globe. The Cold War mandarins of East and West slow at the time in their attempts to try and subvert nationalist and continental myths of origins. Somehow it was just easier to manipulate national societies in all parts of the world, to explore their myths of origin as they saw fit.

Fortunately, in the 1990s there were different strains of thought in the lobbying portals of socio-economic and political sciences in academia. This opened up the way for the re-discovery of some heterological discourses that had so prominently influenced foreign intellectual thinking about the continent of Africa.

Robert Dick-Read's work is part of the revivalist movement on the African past. In *The Phantom voyagers: evidence of Indonesian settlement in Africa in ancient times*, the reader is subjected to some provocative thought about the manner in which Africa interacted with the East in particular. Dick-Read was himself a student at the London School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) under Roland Oliver and John Fage in 1959-60. It was a time when fascinating ideas circulated among students in one of the major former training and research institutions of British colonial officials. Dick-Read's generation of students were studying at a time when Britain had to reposition itself in the wake of the worldwide process of decolonisation.

His preoccupation with Indonesian culture and its impact on Africa has been shaped by more than four decades of post-1959 residence and research in both regions of the world. He has a clear sense of intercontinental contact Africa and other parts of the world. It is however the East that is a magnet of interest. As the reader is introduced to a somewhat different perspective of ancient Indian, Chinese and Indonesian seafaring history in the Indian Ocean, there is a shift in the focus – Africa.

Why is it that Madagascar's indigenous language has a firm Indonesian root? Why is it that cultural traditions in some parts of Africa tend to be similar to those of the East? Dick-Read argues that we need to take a look at ancient Indonesia and recognise a remarkable culture that had more than a superficial impact on Africa. He goes as far as suggesting that we are here dealing with Africa's own version of the Vikings.

After giving a comprehensive account of the ubiquitous Indonesian influence on the Malagasy the same cultural roots are traced in Africa. This is where the 'origins' of the enigmatic architecture of the Zimbabwe Ruins kicks in. Since the discovery of these ruins by explorers of Europe in the nineteenth century, speculation has been rife on who the Zimbabweans really were. Dick-Read revives many of the old narratives and spices it with some of his own perspectives, based on more recent specialist research.

There is evidence – right from the outset – that the seafaring vessels plying the waters of the eastern seaboard of Africa, up to the present, have a long history. It is a history of interaction and cultural mutation that provides fertile material for the inquisitive and creative historian of sailing culture. Moreover there is an interpretation that the ancient Indonesians in fact circumnavigated the Cape of Storms from the Indian Ocean, long before the Portuguese and other European nations tried it from the Atlantic side. We are then given to accept that the Indonesian influence could have extended up to West Africa.

Dick-Read presents a convincing argument on the history of musical instruments in Africa. The xylophone, one of the foundational instruments of the continent's music heritage appears to have some Indonesian

relatives. That is not all. Dick-read goes into the history of the banana and yams in Africa. Furthermore, there are telling traces of the fascinating history of maize in Africa and how it was brought to the continent that relies so much on this noble product to feed us peoples. Who carried it over from the Americas? To what extent are the famous Yoruba beads really indigenous to Africa alone? It is in the ever-present creative environment of art that Dick-Read, clearly a connoisseur in his field, is convinced that there are traces of an Indonesian influence in Africa.

Some of the arguments have a very logical and acceptable factual content. There are other arguments that can be contested. Throughout the work there are good references, suggesting that the author has done his homework and managed to collate a lot of contemporary research that has been done in Australasia, south-East Asia and the United States.

The phantom voyagers is largely a creative investigation into the past. It is in a similar, but perhaps less sensationalist style to Gavin Menzies' work on the Chinese discovery of the world in 1421. Locally, in southern Africa Cyril Hromnik was up front with his theories on the Dravidian influence in southern Africa. They add spice to the Columbus discourses of Felipe Fernandez-Armesto. Moreover, they do – as Dick-Read certainly does – touch some fine fibres of the cultural web of life and human interaction that make for some interesting speculation and creative thought on the African past. It is a continent which evidently was not as culturally isolated we imagined it to be.