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978-0-521-86438-1 - Africans: The History of a Continent, Second Edition

John Iliffe

Excerpt

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1

The frontiersmen of mankind

THE LIBERATION OF THEIR CONTINENT MADE THE SECOND HALF OF THE twentieth century a triumphant period for the peoples of Africa, but at the end of the century triumph turned to disillusionment with the fruits of independence. This juncture is a time for understanding, for reflection on the place of contemporary problems in the continent's long history. That is the purpose of this book. It is a general history of Africa from the origins of mankind to the present, but it is written with the contemporary situation in mind. That explains its organising theme.

Africans have been and are the frontiersmen who have colonised an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race. That has been their chief contribution to history. It is why they deserve admiration, support, and careful study. The central themes of African history are the peopling of the continent, the achievement of human coexistence with nature, the building up of enduring societies, and their defence against aggression from more favoured regions. As a Malawian proverb says, 'It is people who make the world; the bush has wounds and scars.' At the heart of the African past, therefore, has been a unique population history that links the earliest human beings to their living descendants in a single story. That is the subject of this book.

The story begins with the evolution of the human species in Africa, whence it spread to colonise the continent and the world, adapting and specialising to new environments until distinct racial and linguistic groups emerged. Knowledge of food-production and metals permitted concentrations of population, but slowly, for, except in Egypt and other favoured regions, Africa's ancient rocks, poor soils, fickle rainfall, abundant insects, and unique prevalence of disease composed an environment hostile to agricultural communities. Until the later twentieth century, therefore, Africa was an underpopulated continent. Its societies were specialised to maximise numbers and colonise land. Agricultural systems were mobile, adapting to the environment rather than transforming it, in order to avert extinction by crop-failure. Ideologies focused on fertility and the defence of civilisation against nature. Social organisation also sought to maximise fertility, especially through polygyny, which made generational conflict a more important historical dynamic than class conflict. Sparse populations with ample land expressed social differentiation through control

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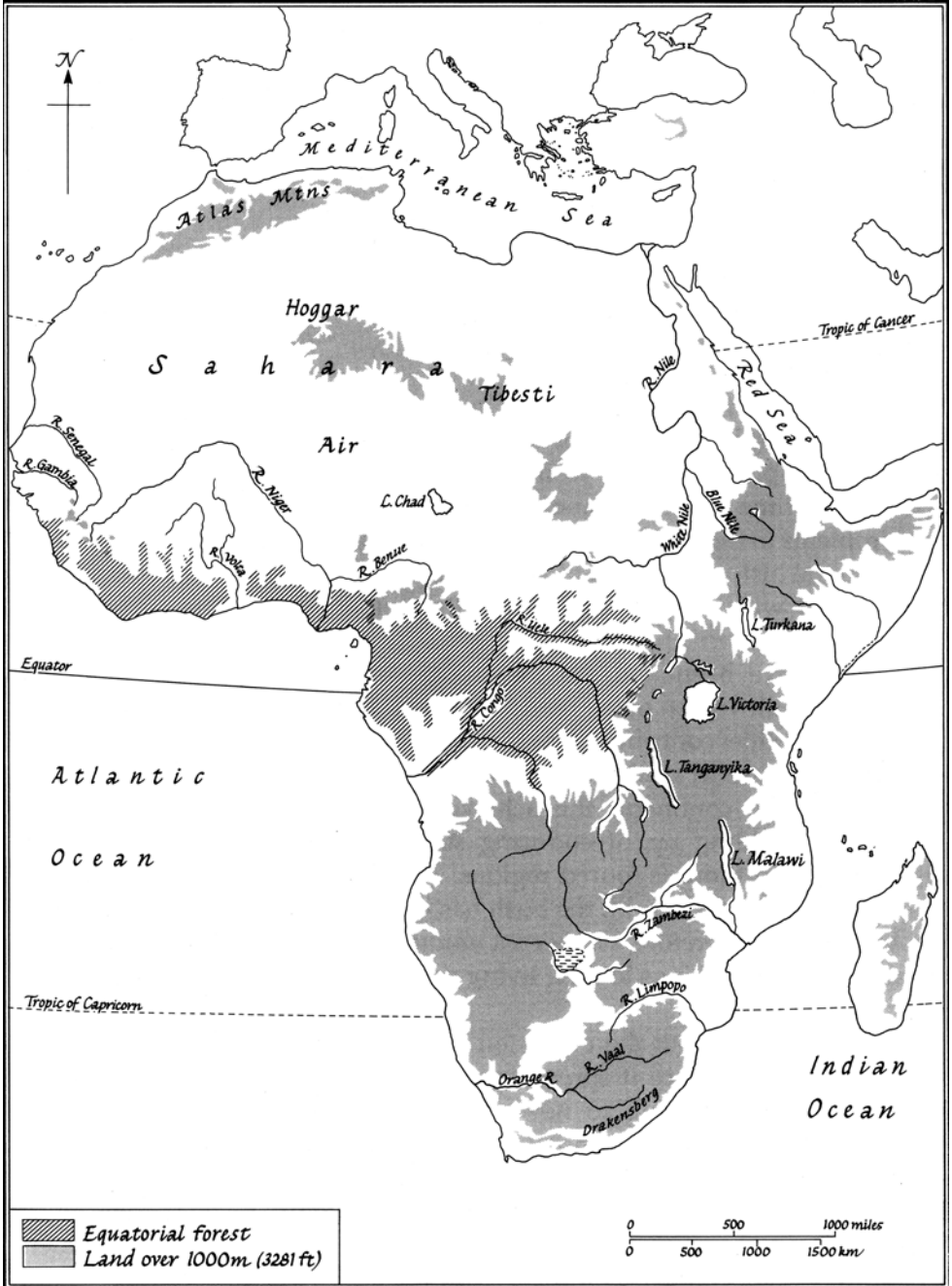
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over people, possession of precious metals, and ownership of livestock where the environment permitted it, especially in the east and south. Scattered settlement and huge distances hindered transport, limited the surplus the powerful could extract, prevented the emergence of literate elites and formal institutions, left the cultivator much freedom, and obstructed state formation, despite the many devices leaders invented to bind men to them.

Northern Africa first escaped these constraints, but the Sahara isolated it from the bulk of the continent until the later first millennium AD, when its expanding economy and Islamic religion crossed the desert, drew gold and slaves from West Africa's indigenous commercial system, and created maritime links with eastern and central Africa. Yet this path of historical development was aborted by a population catastrophe, the Black Death, which threw North Africa into nearly five centuries of decline.

Instead, for most of tropical Africa the first extensive involvement with the outside world was through the slave trade, by whose brutal irony an underpopulated continent exported people in return for goods with which elites sought to enlarge their personal followings. Slaving probably checked population growth for two critical centuries, but it gave Africans greater resistance to European diseases, so that when colonial conquest took place in the late nineteenth century, its demographic consequences, although grave, were less catastrophic than in more isolated continents. African societies therefore resisted European control with unusual vitality and made state formation no easier for colonial rulers than for their African predecessors. Yet Europeans introduced vital innovations: mechanical transport, widespread literacy, and especially medical advances that, in societies dedicated to maximising population, initiated demographic growth of a scale and speed unique in human history. This growth underlay the collapse of colonial rule, the destruction of apartheid, and the instability of successor regimes. It was the chief reason for the late twentieth-century crisis.

That population should be the central historical theme is not unique to Africa. Every rural history must have at its core a population history. Frontiersmen were key historical actors in medieval Europe and Russia, China and the Americas. The modern histories of all Third World countries need to be rewritten around demographic growth. Yet some African circumstances were unique. Africa's environment was exceptionally hostile, for the evolution of human beings in Africa meant that their parasites had also evolved into unique profusion and variety there. Whereas Russians, Chinese, and Americans colonised by pressing forward linear frontiers and extending cultures formed in nuclei of dense population, Africa's colonisation was mainly an internal process, with innumerable local frontiers, and its cultures were chiefly formed on the frontiers – an experience compounded by Egypt's failure to export its culture to



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the rest of the continent in the way that the culture of the Ganges Valley permeated India. Africa had land-rich cultural traditions even where land was scarce; India had land-scarce cultural traditions even where land was ample.

Most important of all, the peopling of Africa took place within a unique relationship to the Eurasian core of the Old World. This is the book's first subtheme. Until climatic change created desert conditions in the Sahara during the third millennium BC, Africa held an equal place within the Old World. Thereafter sub-Saharan Africa occupied a unique position of partial isolation. It was more isolated than Eurasian fringes like Scandinavia or South-East Asia, which gradually adopted Eurasian cultures. But it was less isolated than the Americas, which developed unique cultures unaffected by the iron-using technology, domestic animals, disease patterns, trading relationships, religions, and alphabetic literacy that sub-Saharan Africa partially shared with the Eurasian core. Partial isolation meant that cultural phenomena took distinctively African forms. Partial integration meant that Africans were receptive to further integration, which helps to explain both their receptivity to Islam and Christianity and their disastrous willingness to export slaves, just as the slaves themselves gained value because they possessed unique resistance to both Eurasian and tropical diseases.

The slave trade also illustrates a second subtheme. Suffering has been a central part of African experience, whether it arose from the harsh struggle with nature or the cruelty of men. Africans created their own ideological defences against suffering. Concern with health, for example, probably loomed larger in their ideologies than in those of other continents. But generally Africans faced suffering squarely, valuing endurance and courage above all other virtues. For ordinary people, these qualities were matters of honour; the elites devised more elaborate codes. Historians have neglected the notions of honour that frequently motivated Africans in the past and are still essential to understanding political behaviour today. To restore these beliefs to their proper place in African history is one purpose of this book.

Several general histories of Africa have appeared since serious study began during the 1950s. The earliest studies emphasised state-building and resistance to foreign domination. A second, disillusioned generation of historians focused on market exchange, integration into the world economy, and underdevelopment. The most recent work has concentrated on environmental and social issues. All these approaches have contributed to knowledge, especially to appreciation of Africa's diversity. All are utilised here, but within the framework provided by Africa's unique population history. The argument is not that demography has been the chief motor of historical change in Africa. That may have become true only during the second half of the twentieth century. Population change is not an autonomous force; it results from other historical processes, above all from human volition. But precisely for that reason it is a sensitive

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indicator of change, the point at which historical dynamics fuse into an outcome that expresses not merely the actions of elites, as politics may do, nor merely a surface level of economic activity, as market exchange may do, but the most fundamental circumstances and concerns of ordinary people. Nor is the choice of population as the central theme a concession to late twentieth-century preoccupations or propaganda for birth control. Rather, population change is the thread that ties African history together at all its different periods and levels.

Yet to choose this theme presses the sources for African history to their limits, and perhaps beyond. Reliable demographic data scarcely exist before the Second World War, except in privileged regions. The general history of the twentieth century can rely chiefly on written sources and the historian's standard techniques. In Egypt, written materials go back beyond 3000 BC. Arabic references to West Africa begin in the eighth century AD. But parts of equatorial Africa have no written records before the twentieth century. In their absence, knowledge of the past must rely chiefly on archaeology, which advanced dramatically during the second half of the twentieth century, especially its geophysical methods of dating by radiocarbon and other sophisticated techniques. Yet archaeology is so laborious and expensive that it has scarcely touched many areas of the African past. It can be supplemented by analysis of languages, folklore, oral traditions, ethnographic materials, art, and the biological evidence surviving in human bodies. All these have contributed to our understanding of the past, but they are often surrogates for archaeological research not yet undertaken. One of the most exciting things about African history is that much of it still waits beneath the earth.

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The emergence of food-producing communities

HUMAN EVOLUTION

AFRICA IS IMMENSELY OLD. ITS CORE IS AN ELEVATED PLATEAU OF ROCKS formed between 3,600 million and 500 million years ago, rich in minerals but poor in soils. Unlike other continents, Africa's rocks have experienced little folding into mountain chains that might affect climate. Lateral bands of temperature, rainfall, and vegetation therefore stretch out regularly northwards and southwards from the equator, with rainforest giving way to savanna and then to desert before entering the belts of winter rainfall and Mediterranean climate on the continent's northern and southern fringes. The great exception is in the east, where faulting and volcanic activity between about 23 million and 5 million years ago created rift valleys and highlands that disrupt the lateral climatic belts.

This contrast between western and eastern Africa has shaped African history to the present day. At early periods, the extreme variations of height around the East African Rift Valley provided a range of environments in which living creatures could survive the climatic fluctuations associated with the ice ages in other continents. Moreover, volcanic activity and the subsequent erosion of soft new rocks in the Rift Valley region have helped the discovery and dating of prehistoric remains. Yet this may have given a false impression that humans evolved only in eastern Africa. In reality, western Africa has provided the earliest evidence of human evolution, a story still being pieced together from surviving skeletal material and the genetic composition of living populations. The story begins some six million to eight million years ago with the separation of the hominins (ancestral to human beings) from their closest animal relatives, the ancestors of the chimpanzees. The skull of the first known hominin, *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, was discovered in 2001 by an African student examining the shores of an ancient Lake Chad. Apparently some six million or seven million years old, this creature is thought to have stood upright and combined other hominin characteristics with a brain of chimpanzee size.¹ During the following five million years, a wide variety of other hominins, mostly known as Australopithecines, left remains chiefly in eastern and southern Africa. They ate mainly vegetable food, had massive facial skeletons but small brains, and probably did

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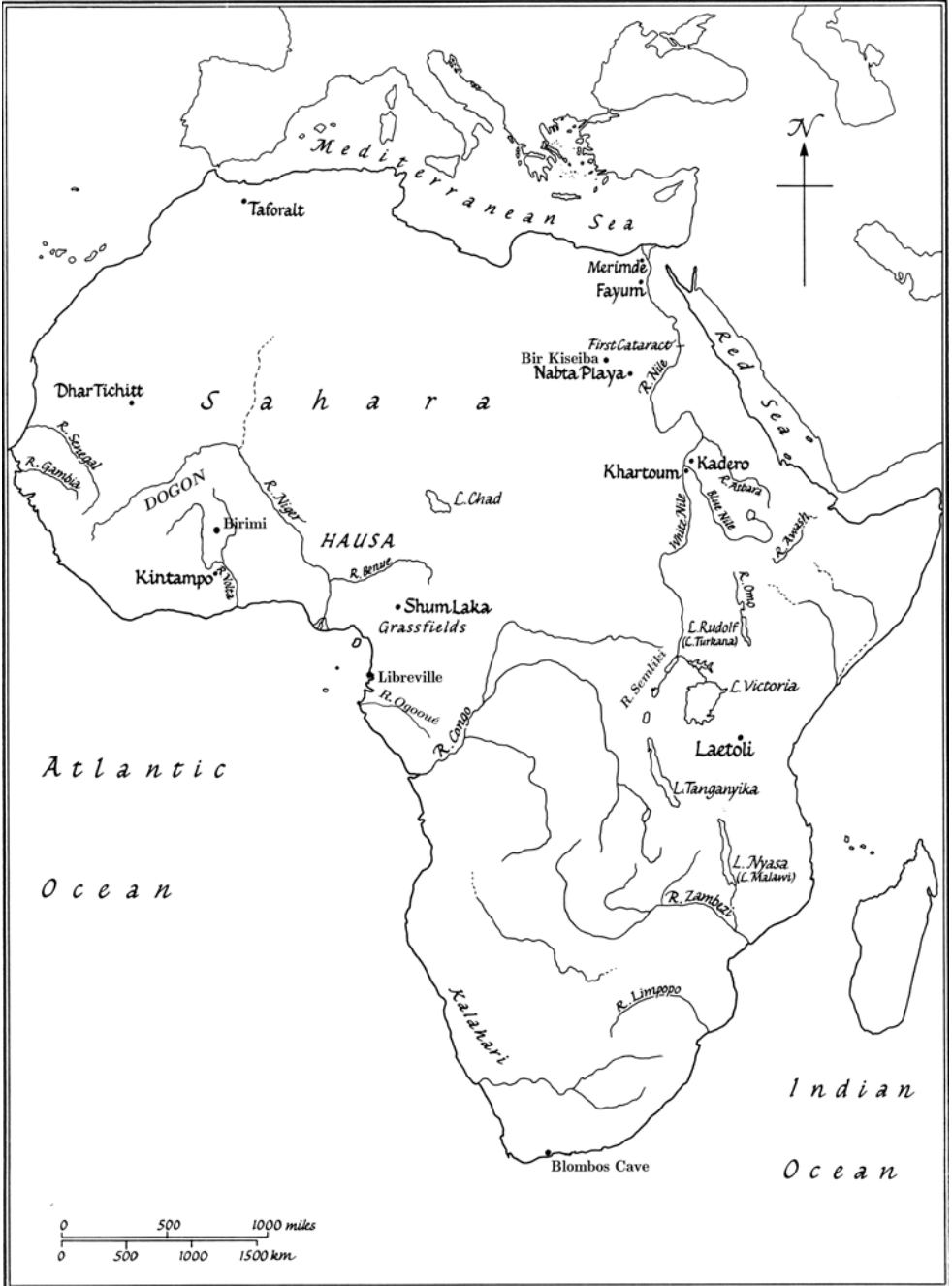
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much climbing but increasingly walked upright, as is demonstrated by their footprints astonishingly preserved from more than 3.5 million years ago in beds of volcanic ash at Laetoli in Tanzania.

Australopithecines eventually became extinct, but human beings are probably descended from lightly-built Australopithecines or an ancestor shared with them. An important stage in this evolution was the deliberate chipping of stones to use for cutting. Found at Rift Valley sites in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania from 2.6 million years ago, these tools are associated especially with remains of a hominin known as *Homo habilis*. Some believe him to be on the main line of human descent, although others group him with the Australopithecines as one of several near-human creatures of the period.²

Some 1.8 million years ago, a more clearly human creature entered the archaeological record. *Homo ergaster* (from a Greek word meaning work) was to survive with remarkably little development for over a million years. Of modern human height with an easy walking posture and a larger, more complex brain, these creatures were adapted to life in open woodlands, may have learned to use fire, and made the more sophisticated stone tools known as hand-axes that were to remain the chief human implements in durable materials until some 250,000 years ago. The earliest examples of *Homo ergaster* and hand-axes come from lakeside sites in eastern Africa, but similar stone tools have been found widely in the continent, although seldom in tropical forest. At an early stage in his history, *Homo ergaster* is also found in Eurasia. Each Old World continent now became an arena for evolution. Europe produced the Neanderthals, with brains of modern size but distinctive shape. In Africa a similar transition, beginning perhaps 600,000 years ago in Ethiopia, gradually produced anatomically modern people. The earliest, still with many archaic features, have been found in the Awash Valley from about 160,000 years ago. Later examples have appeared at other sites chiefly in eastern and southern Africa. Alongside this physical evolution went changes in technology and culture as hand-axes gave way to smaller and more varied stone tools, often designed to exploit local environments. Some specialists attribute this growing adaptability to the need to respond to the extreme fluctuations of temperature and rainfall that began about 600,000 years ago, owing to variations in the earth's proximity and angle towards the sun.

At this point, the study of human evolution has interacted with two lines of research into the genetic composition of living populations. One line concerns mitochondrial DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), one of the bodily substances transmitting inherited characteristics. Because this passes exclusively (or almost exclusively) from the mother, its lineage can be traced back without the complication of mixed inheritance from two parents at each generation. In addition, mitochondrial DNA is thought to experience numerous small changes at a relatively regular pace. Scientists have therefore compared the



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mitochondrial DNA of living people in order to estimate the point in the past at which human beings shared a single female ancestor. Although the details are controversial, most researchers believe that this was between 250,000 and 150,000 years ago, or in the broad period when the first anatomically modern people appear in the fossil record. Initially, these ancestors of modern humans spread within the African continent, where the oldest surviving lineages of mitochondrial DNA exist among the San ('Bushmen') of southern Africa and the Biaka Pygmies of the modern Central African Republic. About 100,000 years ago, some of these anatomically modern people from eastern Africa expanded briefly into the Middle East, but apparently they did not establish themselves permanently there. With this exception, anatomically modern people appear to have been confined to Africa for some 100,000 years, spreading from the east to other parts of the continent. A subsequent expansion took them to parts of Asia by at least 40,000 years ago and from there to Europe. Gradually they absorbed or replaced earlier hominins throughout the world.³

The mitochondrial and fossil evidence for this 'Out of Africa' thesis has been reinforced by a second line of genetic research. The Y-chromosome that determines male gender is inherited only from fathers and consequently can also be traced back to a common ancestor, generally estimated at between 150,000 and 100,000 years ago. The oldest surviving strains of the chromosome are confined to Africans, especially San, Ethiopians, and other groups of ancient eastern African origin. After a long period of differentiation, strains derived from these groups diffused through the continent before being carried beyond it. All men outside Africa have Y-chromosomes sharing a mutation that is estimated to have taken place in an African ancestor at some point between about 90,000 and 30,000 years ago.⁴

If anatomically modern people emerged in Africa and expanded to repopulate the world, a fundamental problem is to identify and explain their modernity, the advantage they enjoyed over earlier hominins. Some specialists suspect that a crucial breakthrough – perhaps in the functioning of the brain – took place during the period of expansion between 60,000 and 40,000 years ago. More point to an accumulation of smaller advances over as much as 300,000 years. The best-documented accomplishment was the replacement of heavy, standardised hand-axes by smaller, specialised tools, eventually mounting tiny, sharpened stones (microliths) in shafts or handles. Such industries might use materials brought from scores or hundreds of kilometres away and establish distinct regional styles, the most remarkable being the Howieson's Poort Industry in southern Africa some 80,000–60,000 years ago, whose makers collected fine-grained stones from long distances to shape the earliest known microlithic tools. The first bone tools appeared at much the same period, possibly as barbed fishing harpoons on the Semliki River in the eastern Congo – although the dates there are disputed – and as shaped points at Blombos Cave on the

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southern coast of South Africa. Marine environments were among the first specialised resources to be exploited, from at least 100,000 years ago in Eritrea and South Africa. Less tangible innovations included the deliberate collection of coloured pigments (found at a Zambian site more than 170,000 years ago) and the use of red ochre and eggshell beads. Many archaeologists regard such ornamentation as an example of the symbolic behaviour that is a key component of human modernity. Another component is artistic decoration, which may have appeared some 70,000 years ago in scratched engravings on bone and ochre at Blombos Cave. The most important form of symbolic behaviour may have been language, but although some believe that human ancestors were physically capable of speech by about 300,000 years ago, it is not yet known – although widely suspected – that language was the crucial advantage enabling anatomically modern people to repopulate the world.

These advances towards behavioural modernity progressed further within Africa during a period beginning about 40,000 years ago. Early in that period, men in the Nile Valley undertook complex underground mining for the stone preferred for their tools, much the earliest industry of its kind known anywhere in the world. Microlithic tools were then in use on the fringes of the equatorial forest. They became common in the East African highlands by 20,000 years ago, appeared at that date also in southern Africa, spread into western and northern Africa during the next 10,000 years, and thereafter became ubiquitous. Arrow-heads, appearing about 20,000 years ago, enabled hunting bands to add birds and the more dangerous animals to their prey. Forager-hunters, probably ancestral Pygmies, established themselves permanently in the equatorial forest. Fishing became an increasingly important activity. Human settlements were generally still transient, or at best seasonal, but the increasing care given to burials – appearing in southern Africa about 10,000 years ago – suggests a growing territorial sense. The remains of some 200 people of this microlithic period excavated from a cave at Taforalt in Morocco show few signs of violence, but they do show close interbreeding, high mortality among children and infants, and many routine miseries such as arthritis.

The most striking evidence of symbolic behaviour during the microlithic period was rock-painting, which dates back at least 28,000 years in southern Africa. For the future, however, the most important development was the formation of Africa's four language families. These are so distinct from one another that no relationship among them has been reconstructed, implying separate development over many millennia. They coincide to some extent with genetic differences and perhaps with physical characteristics arising from natural selection of those best fitted to survive and reproduce in particular environments. Thus the San forager-hunters of southern Africa possessing the oldest strains of Y-chromosomes and mitochondrial DNA – together with probably related Khoikhoi pastoralists – speak distinctive 'click' languages possibly forming a