

BOOK REVIEW

John Kinahan. *Namib: The Archaeology of an African Desert*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2022. xxvi + 546 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$135. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1847012883.

Namib: The Archaeology of an African Desert is an extraordinary contribution. Readers will enjoy that the lengthy text—some 500 pages—is written in an engaging manner. Scholars, especially Africanists, will appreciate it as the first synthesis of the archaeology from this under-documented desert region. Its publication is notable, given that the cultural and environmental records of the Namib are not as well studied as those of the nearby Kalahari.

The author John Kinahan is a seasoned archaeologist with years of experience in the field, and his work is a page-turner that many will enjoy. He uses a contemplative narrative approach that weaves ideas from a wide corpus of surveys, ethnographic studies, scientific investigations, and reports. Kinahan recounts the deep history of the Namib since the Lower Stone Age (LSA) or Palaeolithic and details how humans have been able to survive and even thrive over the past million years.


The introduction sketches the basic geography, climate, hydrology, and landscape setting of the Namib, which sprawls 2,000 kilometers along the west coast of southern Africa between the city of Namibe in Angola and the Olifants River in South Africa. Also known as the Skeleton Coast, this arid environment is close to the southeast Atlantic Ocean, but its barren gravel plains and dunes receive only minute amounts of moisture as fog and dew. The limited available freshwater cannot sustain many plant foods or animals, delimiting cultural activity since antiquity. Kinahan describes how this expansive desert can instantaneously transform when a storm flash flood causes the ephemeral drainages to flow. Later, he links such rainfall events to important rituals recorded in rock art, which can be ethnographically reconstructed to contextualize ceremonies and deep traditions. In the Namib, traveling rain-makers were among the complex social networks that accessed and controlled resources, kinships, and power. Kinahan makes such connected

observations as he connects the elements of time, space, and people with rains and elephants within this desert place.

This book directly engages with modern themes, controversies, and even folklore to provide valuable insights for deconstructing the Namib's deep history. Kinahan honors the past as he summarizes some fundamental contributions from explorations and scientific studies, such as initial maps from 1590 and rock art discoveries made in the mid-twentieth century by the Jesuit Abbé Henri Breuil. The book's discussion builds thematically from "First Footsteps" to lifeway themes of nomadic pastoralism, gathering, foraging, farming, and hunting, which are introduced in a chronological manner, through the periods of colonial rule, epidemics and genocides, invasion, and military occupation by South African troops during World War I.

Kinahan must be commended for presenting such a long arc, and for integrating relevant indigenous perspectives. He also frames many discussions in the context of Holling's adaptive cycle of human systems, a 2002 conceptual model often applied to environmental exploitation and social collapse. In the chapter "Men in Hats," Kinahan reconstructs the dynamics of exploitation and adaptation as colonial mercantile capitalists engaged in whaling and fishing traded with different clans, offering goods, livestock, dried fish, shark oil, and shellfish.

Perhaps the most novel material is the recent archaeology in the Namib, including records of imperialist projects in German South West Africa from around 1885 to 1915 and the Third Reich period, and later military campaigns by South Africa. Kinahan addresses power plays fueled by Nazi and apartheid ideologies that underpinned horrific acts of oppression, including atrocities manifested in settlements, slavery, human trafficking, kidnappings, child abuse, relocations, dispossessions, and genocide. The book develops a historical discussion from missionaries to money, from railway developments to the concentration camps in Swakopmund, toward more genocides in modern memory. We need such documentation of how these appalling events came to be. As such, this book will be valuable as required reading for both archaeology and history classes, where we should have important nuanced conversations about the value of studying the past as we confront our future.

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