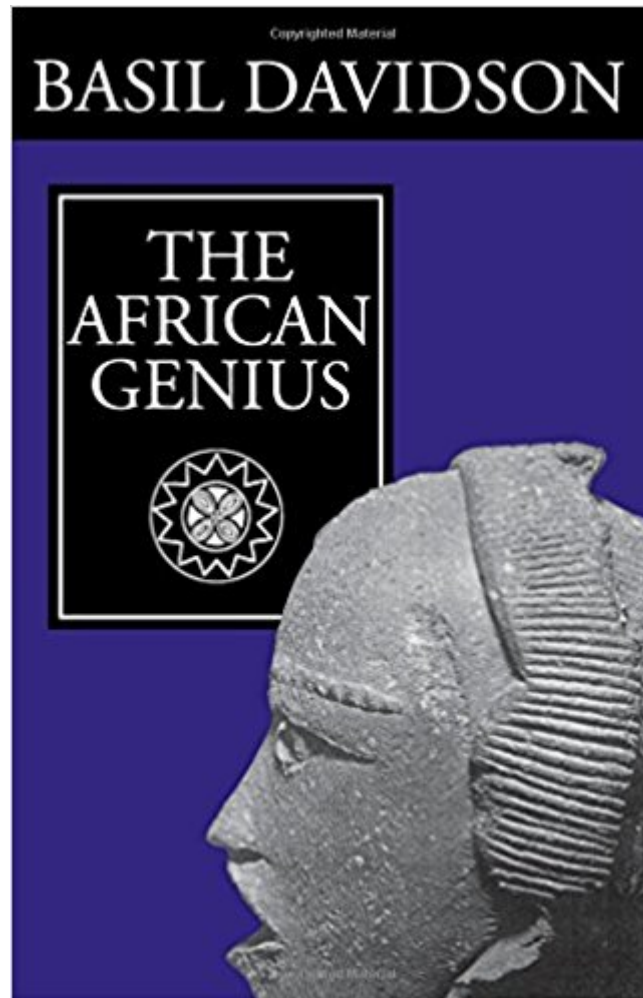




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The African Genius



Synopsis

The African Genius presents the ideas, social systems, religions, moral values, arts, and metaphysics of a range of African peoples. Basil Davidson points toward the Africa that may emerge from an ancient civilization that was overlaid and battered by colonialism, then torn by the upheaval of colonialism's dismantlement. Davidson disputes the notion that Africa gained under colonialism by entering the modern world. He sees, instead, an ancient order replaced by modern dysfunction. Davidson's depiction of the sophisticated "native genius" that has carried Africans through centuries of change is vital to an understanding of modern Africa as well.

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Customer Reviews

Both learned and readable, it forms a valuable contribution to a better composite understanding of modern African problems...THE ECONOMIST (Basil Davidson) is able to set out a splendidly wide-ranging view of African cultural history with admirable clarity and his special gift for synthesis. THE SUNDAY TIMES ...a unique synthesis: the first attempt, in a sense, at a general religious and social history of Africa. The author's talent for making African society intelligible to the lay reader is indisputable... LIBRARY JOURNAL IN BRITAIN Davidson is the often-overlooked fourth man in the group that includes his contemporaries and fellow historians, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson (a close friend of Davidson for many years). These men's committed, left-wing approach to writing history opened up the stuffy, chauvinist world of British professional historians and reached a popular audience far beyond academia. But whereas the others wrote about the British or European past, Davidson studied Africa and put his political energies into the struggle for Third World liberation. - Michael Bygrave in THE GUARDIAN --This text refers to an alternate

Paperback edition.

Book came super fast need it for an online Cass.

This is a great book. Its a little hard to follow in the beginning. But once I realized Davidson was speaking from his personal experience in Africa, I begin to understand and follow his journey.

Davidson's book is not the heavy politically correct tome that might be expected but adds some needed corrective to certain myths surrounding Africa. He hardly expects readers to "fall over themselves" ascribing genius to Africa. Instead he realistically notes Africa's environment, and its limitations, and produces a fairly balanced picture. The simplistic notion that Pre-Islamic African cultures fall far short of European cultures is decisively dismissed in this book. Indeed, such cultures included Egypt and Nubia, which on some counts at the height of their power, were more productive and prosperous than European cultures of the same era. The same could be said of Chinese culture over several centuries, as noted by conservative scholar Thomas Sowell in his "Race and Culture." Davidson avoids the simplistic trap of "racial" rankings that so obsess many Western minds today, and the central fallacy of taking one part of Europe with some advanced technology at a particular era, and using that as the "perfect" standard to represent all Europe, or to compare everyone else with. Such a fallacy fails to see that in fact Europeans were at widely varying levels in technology, literacy etc, over their history and hardly a monolithic bloc. Davidson tackles several simplistic claims: (1) Pre-Islamic Africa as "anti-scientific" ----- This same claim could be said of a lot of European cultures, even centuries after Galileo- from tribal entities of Eastern Europe, to the peasants of the West, to the hostile Catholic authorities in supposedly more sophisticated parts. Pre-Islamic Africa was very familiar with practical observation and knowledge needed for daily life, just like comparable cultures in Europe at the same time. Davidson shows such daily "practical" science as taking priority over the more abstract. A concern for "practical" matters is hardly unique to Africa. It marked Italian immigrants to the US in the 19th and 20th century according to conservative scholar T. Sowell. (2) Knowledge was not accumulated from generation to generation (p. 59), mainly because pre-Islamic Africans were illiterate (pp 28-9, 222, 257). Simplistic notions of knowledge accumulation fail to understand that knowledge used locally was effectively transmitted via oral tradition, and that various European cultures also varied in their acquisition of literacy, right down to the 20th century. Factually, the peoples of Meroe and Cush were literate long before the pre-Islamic era, and that is not even counting Egypt, which according to equally one-dimensional

notions, is located somewhere outside Africa.(3) The ideal tribal organization was "static" (p. 55). Davidson shows that actually Africans tribal structures were quite dynamic, as even a cursory knowledge of say West Africa will reveal. Ironically, a number of European writers complain about static European cultures as well, such as Marx's criticism of backward Slavic peoples, and the frequent criticism of certain Northern Italian writers that Southern Italians were a backward, "different race".(4) Beliefs and actions of Africans were "irrational" and "ghost-ridden" (p. 80). Davidson dismisses this naïve claim by showing the sophistication and internal consistency of many African belief systems. Ironically, the beliefs of many European cultures and religions have been criticized as "irrational" or "pagan" not only by "established" religious regimes, but by today's atheists as well who dismiss much of Europe's religious heritage.(5) New African dynasties rewrote or suppressed their histories (p. 115). In this case, Africans were just like Europeans Davidson shows. The genius Davidson refers to is political genius in nation building. The Asante "golden stool" is an example of such, just as the genius of certain European kings manipulated histories to enhance their power. Davidson dismisses naïve notions that Africans had "no basis" in science, no scientific method, no permanent knowledge or institutional learning, and no path to betterment. Other historians note that similar statements have been applied to various European peoples like the Slavs, the Balkan peoples, or the Irish, and are likewise equally naïve and lacking a sound grasp of history. Naïve claims allocating all advanced technology and knowledge to Europe also fail to take into account the massive borrowing from other cultures that has occurred by Europe, whether it be gunpowder, printing, paper or the compass from the Chinese, or algebra from India, or the movement of vastly important crops and animals like wheat or horses from Asiatic areas to Europe. Contrary to the notions of one-dimensional critics of Africa, all these things did not originate out of thin air, simplistically satisfying as such explanations are to Eurocentric writers. Much has been made historically and by some contemporary critics of such practices as female circumcision, infanticide, etc that occurred in SOME African cultures. Such things also occurred in various tribal cultures of Europe as well. Cannibalism for example and human sacrifice appears both in Germanic and Slavic culture at various times, among various peoples. Sodomy makes a regular appearance, from the high sounding Greek philosophers in their "Symposiums" to the couplings of the Thracian Sacred band, to the fighting men of Sparta. On measure after negative measure, (kleptocracy, low standard of living, human rights abuses, tribalism, etc) it is equally easy to point out the same things in European cultures as well. The Irish for example have long been stigmatized for high levels of violence and substance abuse, and the Germans blessed Europe with mass genocidal

slaughter. Davidson emphasizes the diversity of African culture, that it is not a single one-dimensional monolith, but quite varied. In other words, African peoples differ just like European peoples at various eras and places, hard as this is to grasp by simplistic critics of the continent. Davidson's book helps set the record straight.

This African studies classic was first published in 1969. It is the first academic book on Africa that I ever read (about 1970), and I am assigning it to my students next fall. Davidson is a great friend of Africa, and a highly respected historian. His anthropology is sometimes off the mark, but he communicates each of his little lessons in an engaging style. Read one Davidson book on Africa and you'll want to read his others.

Mr. Davidson has written a very disappointing, very flawed book. He seems to think that we, the readers, will fall all over ourselves to ascribe "genius" to African civilizations merely on his say-so and out of fear of being perceived as non-P.C. Uh-uh; no way. We are past that point. Examine Mr. Davidson's own book critically and the truth becomes obvious: pre-Islamic African cultures in general fall well short of the cultures of Europe, Asia, and the New World. Proof of this includes the following. (1) Pre-Islamic Africa was "anti-scientific" (p. 59). (2) Knowledge was not accumulated from generation to generation (p. 59), mainly because pre-Islamic Africans were illiterate (pp 28-9, 222, 257). (3) The ideal tribal organization was "static" (p. 55). (4) Beliefs and actions of Africans were "irrational" and "ghost-ridden" (p. 80). (5) New African dynasties rewrote or suppressed their histories (p. 115). Now we must admit that European, Asian, and New World dynasties have done this too, but it's hardly the mark of "genius." (6) "The moral order was robustly collective" in pre-Islamic African societies (p. 70), and "individuals might have rights, but they had them only by virtue of the obligations they fulfilled to the community" (p. 57). All this points to a people who had no basis in science, no scientific method, no permanent knowledge or institutional learning, and no path to betterment. What is even more frustrating, however, is Mr. Davidson's apologetics and elision over uncomfortable aspects of African culture. Here are some examples. (a) Mr. Davidson willingly omits descriptions of "female circumcision" (p. 172), which is a barbaric, anti-woman practice, and seen through a feminist critique, is merely a ritual designed to enforce patriarchy. (b) Mr. Davidson makes no mention of infanticide as a method of birth control or the widespread practice of twin infanticide (see "Things Fall Apart" for an interesting discussion on this point). (c) Mr. Davidson makes no mention of the practice of human sacrifice, often by horrible means, that accompanied some of Africa's larger civilizations (for a brief discussion of this in the Nigerian-Benin context, see

"Lugard--Years of Adventure"). And after failing to mention all this, Davidson claims that pre-Islamic Africa was "materially simple but not morally defenceless" (p. 67). Oh? Additionally, Mr. Davidson turns from scholar to apologist in this book. Apparently to show that African cultures are not so far behind European cultures, he gives us a mini-exegesis on the witch hunts in England and Scotland (pp. 124-5), then shows us the irrationality of Italian Catholics (p. 176). He bemoans the fact that European (and I suppose American) culture invented nuclear weapons (pp. 114-5) and degrades the importance of science in the modern world (p. 115). This is part of "The African Genius"? Nonsense--it's pure apology, and contributes nothing to Mr. Davidson's supposed thesis of the greatness of Africans. Are we to believe that Africans are geniuses because they failed to build complicated weapons? If so, then Mr. Davidson will have an uncomfortable time explaining Rwanda 1994, when low-tech weapons like sticks and machetes were used to kill more people than all nuclear weapons ever have. Mr. Davidson needs to realize and then address the problems that existed, and still exist in African culture: kleptocracy, low standard of living, human rights abuses, tribalism. He cannot sweepingly say that because a culture is unique and ancient that somehow it is "genius." That is intellectually dishonest and paternalistic, and paternalism is only one step removed from racism.

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