CONTROVERSY

In its issue No. 119, 1982, the journal Diogenes *published an article by Cyril A. Hromník entitled "Recent Models of the African Iron Age and the Cattle-Related Evidence". By reason of its very particular specialization, this text was submitted to one of the foremost world authorities on ethnology. On the scientific level, the only one of interest to a journal of scientific and international vocation such as* Diogenes, *it judged Professor Hromník's work to be serious, well-informed and revolutionary.*

We are happy to publish the following text, which has been sent to us by the Comité scientifique international pour la rédaction d'une histoire générale de l'Afrique *in response to the article by Cyril A. Hromník.*

It goes without saying that the debate thus begun is now open, on condition, of course, that it remains within the limits of mutual tolerance, of the traditional courtesy of universities and of scientific reflection.

The publication of the article "Recent Models of the African Iron Age and the Cattle-Related Evidence" by Hromník in a journal sponsored by Unesco raises a number of serious issues which we,

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as members of the International Scientific Committee charged with the responsibility of preparing an up-to-date and scientific history of Africa purged of its mists of racist propaganda, unfounded assertions and misleading and dangerous misinterpretations, cannot ignore. These issues include the scientific accuracy or authenticity of the article.

The main conclusion of the article is that Africa was settled and exploited by Indians and Indonesians long before the appearance of the first Negroids around 1000 AD in eastern, central and southern Africa, and that far from being only marginally important, non-African elements are therefore of fundamental importance in the "make-up" of the Bantu-speaking Negroids and the Khoi. This apparently revolutionary and novel thesis which runs completely counter to the views hitherto held by most scholars on the subject, including archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists and historians, is based in the article on only two words, namely the proto-Bantu *x-gombe* and the proto-Khoi *x-koma* both meaning "cattle". Rejecting the views of Phillipson and Ehret[1], Hromník contends first that the Khoi word *gomas* (feminine singular) "cow" is like *gomas* meaning "beef" in "Indian"[2] and therefore that the Khoi term must be derived from the Indian one and all the more so since the breed of cattle kept today in eastern and southern Africa results from the crossing of the humped Zebu (of undoubted Iranian or Pakistan origin)[3] with a humpless longhorn autochthonous African breed. He then argues that the "truest form" of the reconstructed x-*(k)umbi* is x-*umbi* found in Zimbabwe (Zezuru) and in Madagascar which is the same as Malayo-Indonesian *ombi*[4] meaning "cattle" and therefore that the term *xumbi* also derives from Indonesia. And it is from this so-called identity of these two terms that he argues that cattle were brought to "Africa"[5] by Indians and Indonesians, the former

[1] D. W. Phillipson, "The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa", London, 1977; C. Ehret, "Cattle-keeping and Milking in Eastern and Southern Africa", *Journal of African History*, 8, 1, 1967, pp. 8-9.

[2] Hromník, p. 110. Is Indian Hindi? Or another of the many languages of this sub-continent?

[3] He says "most common in the Deccan" (p. 111) but does not give the origin here.

[4] Hromník gives evidence neither here nor in his own book, *Indo-Africa; Towards a new understanding of the history of Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cape-Town (Juta), 1981.

[5] Idem, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

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bringing *gomas* in the last millenium before the Christian era and the latter bringing *ombi* in the early centuries of the Christian era.

From the available biological, linguistic and archaeological evidence, the illogicality and speciousness of this conclusion seem so obvious to us that we find its acceptance and publication by a reputable journal such as *Diogenes* simply incomprehensible and extremely reprehensible.

Hromník is correct in stating that the *Sanga* cattle from eastern and southern Africa are a crossbreed but he confuses both Sanga (one African breed ancestor and one Asiatic) with Zebu (pure Asian breed) and he apparently attributes all cattle bones found in excavations to Zebu or *Sanga*.[6] He never considers that they might belong to longhorn or shorthorn humpless autochthonous strains domesticated in Africa. No palaeontologist so far has been able to identify a breed in the absence of the crucial cervicothoracic vertebrae[7] and no such vertebrae have been found as yet. So *we do not know* whether early cattle were humpless or humped. They might be either. But we do know that humpless cattle must have been present wherever Zebu mated with them to produce the stable *Sanga* breed somewhere in eastern or northeastern Africa.

Indeed, the authority he quotes, H. Epstein,[8] thinks that a rock drawing near Mount Elgon represents humpless cattle. Epstein dates this evidence to 1200 AD. But this date is pure guesswork. Rock drawings cannot be dated by themselves and in this case, there is no other material convincingly correlated with the drawing. Therefore, we still have no site where incontrovertible evidence has been found to tell us which cattle was humpless and which was not.

Even less convincing is his linguistic argument. The two terms *x-gombe* and *ombe* as well as the Khoi *gomas* and southern Bantu *koma, homa*, all derive from *x-gombe*, a single ancestor and not the reverse. Whether that original word millennia ago meant "cattle"

[6] Idem, *op. cit.*, p. 111, fn 17.

[7] Humpless shorthorns are small and humped longhorns bigger and the palaeontologist can estimate height and weight of the animal. But there are small humped shorthorned beasts like the *Inkuku* variety in Rwanda and humpless longhorns were undoubtedly also heavier.

[8] H. Epstein, *The Origins of the Domestic Animals of Africa*, New York, 1971, Vol. I, is the only specialized work.

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or perhaps "buffalo" (sp.), we do not know. The usual assumption that if it means "cattle" now it must always have meant "cattle" is not a valid one since, in western Bantu, some people applied the term "buffalo" to "cattle" when they finally came to have cattle and there are numerous examples concerning other domestic animals.

Secondly, as Guthrie has shown,[9] all words with *g* initial of the root in Bantu languages always appear without the initial *g* in the same languages that have *-ombe* and not *x-gombe*. *x-ombe* therefore is *x-gombe* because in the languages where this is found, the initial *g* was dropped as a result of a soundshift. Such languages as Zezuru would not have the expected form if they had *x-gombe* rather than *-ombe*! If the expected form did not occur, that would only prove that the word was borrowed from another language after the soundshift had occurred exactly as the English *g* in "rouge" proves that it is a loan word from French. The very fact of having *-ombe* proves that the relationship with *x-gombe* is very old and that there is a common ancestral form here. This ancestral form cannot be both Indian and Indonesian and so Hromník cannot have both *x-gombe* of Indian derivation and *x-gombe* of Indonesian derivation.

Moreover, it is easy to show that the change was from *x-gombe* to *-ombe* and not vice-versa because the great majority of languages have a *g* or a consonant close to it resulting from specific soundshifts, but it would be hard to imagine the reverse, that is several languages independently developing a *g* from nothing. So Indonesia is out. The Malagasy form *ombi* is a loan from Bantu languages just as southern Malagasy dialects have *gombi* from *x-gombe*. If some Indonesian languages today have *ombi* (Malay does not) that is just sheer accident. After all, in Ehret's article we see that several Central Sudanic languages have *lE* (pronounced lé) for "milk" the same as French *lait*. Would the French have taught the people of southern Sudan to appreciate milk? In fact, most non-linguists do not realize that a high percentage of all wordforms in a given language are identical to wordforms in other languages.

The chances for such correspondences show how this can be

[9] M. Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*, Vol. 2, 1971, pp. 46, 50, 62.

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expected to happen given a limited phonological set in each and the very large numbers of words and languages that can be compared. In passing, we might note that Malayo-Indonesian is not a standard linguistic category referring to some proto-language of long ago, but a geographical designation referring to languages as they are spoken today. This is like taking the English word *cows* rather than *kine* when comparing forms in the first centuries AD.

What about *gomas* "beef"? Can that yield *gomas* "cow" in Khoi and *x-gombe*? It cannot. There is a general linguistic principle that one can show soundshifts from one sound to another, e.g. from *g* to *k* and even from a sound to its disappearance, e.g. from *g* to *Nil*. But one cannot postulate changes from *Nil* to any sound. Therefore *gomas* cannot yield *x-gombe* because *Nil* cannot be proven to become *b*.

From the same linguistic principle, it follows that the southern Bantu forms *-komo* and *homo* derive by regular soundshifts from *x-gombe* via *x-gome*. The *x-gome* term yielded both the southern Bantu forms and the Khoi *-goma*. The declensions of the latter give *gomab, gomas, gomai*.

x-*gombe* is in fact proto eastern Bantu.[10] Any other explanation will not do because the actual words found in all eastern and southern Bantu languages are regular derivations of x-*gombe*. It is quite likely that x-*gombe* was applied to humpless cattle to begin with. The source area of all eastern Bantu languages lies in the area of the Great Lakes. There we find today other terms (*-ka*, *-te*). Such terms are found also to the north and east of the Bantu languages in Uganda and Kenya. But x-*gombe* is also present in the area of the Great Lakes as an archaic form. Hence the logical explanation is that *x-gombe* designated at first humpless cattle and *-ka*, *-te* were the words designating humped cattle, when these breeds became available to Bantu speakers at a later date.

The archaeological evidence does not support Hromník either. For instance, Phillipson who has used the available evidence from excavations, did not find terms relating to cattle crucial at all (that was just an invention of Hromník) and his conclusions regarding

[10] Evidence in M. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, v. 3,under the entry and C. Ehret, *op. cit.* For "eastern" and "western" Bantu, cf. J. Vansina, "Western Bantu Expansion", *Journal of African History*, v. 25, 1984.

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the spread of agriculture, herding and metallurgy from eastern to southern Africa are not only valid but have been accepted by all other specialists. What appears to have happened is that shortly after AD 1, a migration of metal-using farmers brought what was probably humpless cattle with them as they moved to settle in eastern and south-eastern Africa. At an unknown later time, another breed of cattle, presumably the *Sanga* in at least two local varieties [11] was introduced from the north. The presence of *-ka* and *-te* in the Bantu languages of the Great Lakes is evidence for this. From the Great Lakes area, the new breed being more robust than the older humpless longhorn and more efficient than the much smaller shorthorn gradually ousted these and absorbed them through interbreeding.

The new breed then slowly travelled south as animals were passed from hand to hand and found their way into south-eastern Africa while the genetically different animals were continually crossbred with the older strains. *Sanga* is a label in the south-east for the products of such crossbreeding. But the Khoi, practising selective inbreeding, developed a new variety, the Afrikander, which is much better adapted to life in the Karrao and the desert than are the Sanga types, while the south-eastern Bantu speakers kept Sanga.

Many questions about when, where and exactly how do remain because the osteological evidence is so hard to obtain from archaeological sites. We know, however,[12] that humped cattle must have been present in Zimbabwe and Zambia early in the second millennium AD because clay models of humped cattle are found in sites of those times. And one is tempted to attribute the great Khoi expansion to the acquisition of the Afrikander breed; the distribution of the Khoi languages indicates that there was once a rapid expansion from an area in southern Angola or in Botswana.[13]

[11] Ankole is a variety of large cattle with humps, all crosses between Zebu and humpless longhorns. This strain is quite variable as breeding occurred without much control for most cattle as opposed to the *Inyambo* variety, a well-controlled strain. Then the *Inkuku* are the product of small humpless cattle and Zebu. On this, cf. Sirven C. Prioul, *Géographie du Rwanda*, Brussels, 1974.

[12] B. M. Fagan, *Iron Age Cultures in Zambia*, London, 1967, 1969, ((2 vols.); T. N. Huffman, "Africa south of the Zambezi" in *General History of Africa, From the Seventh to the Eleventh Century*, Vol. 3, in preparation, Unesco, Paris.

[13] L. D. Ngcongco, "Southern Africa: its peoples and social structures", in

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The archaeological evidence shows a rich pastoral development in Botswana between 800 and 1300 AD followed by a drastic decline of sites. We think that the Afrikander breed was developed here between 800 and 1300 and that this enabled the Khoi to expand quite rapidly in the barren expanses to the west and south.

As to the general role of Indonesians and Indians, the former are among the settlers of Madagascar but there is no firm evidence that they ever resided on the East African coast, although trading went on between the Swahili towns and emporia on Madagascar, probably from c. 1000 AD onwards.

India's relationships with Africa are very old but were centered at first on the coasts of the Horn and along the Red Sea. Thus, Indian influence can be found in Meroe and later in Ethiopia.[14] As the Indian Ocean trade developed and as the gold-mines from Zimbabwe began to be exploited after c. 1100 AD, Indian beads and a few other objects were sometimes acquired by the miners and are found near the mines.[15] But that does not prove Indian settlement any more than sherds of chinaware indicate Chinese settlement. Hromník claims that there was a more massive settlement here by Indians than even in South-East Asia. Yet from Burma to Cambodia and Vietnam, and from Sumatra to Bali, one finds many traces of the Indian presence. And even here there was no major Indian settlement. The few—and they are very few—bits and pieces that Hromník lists in *Indo-Africa* are stray objects of trade. There is also evidence about Indians in Portuguese service trading in the Zambezi area but very few of them settled there.

Apart from the linguistic and archaeological material, the exposé of the thesis in this article is riddled with flaws. First, the thesis is not at all novel. It derives from the 19th century speculation about the builders of Zimbabwe then held to be Phoenicians, or Indians, or Arabs, in any case *foreigners*, attracted by the gold of the Biblical Ophir[16] or its equivalent. The argumentation consists of reducing

General History of Africa, vol. 4, 1984, pp. 592-5, Unesco, Paris; R. Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*, New Haven, 1977, p. 8-21.

[14] Unesco *General History of Africa*, vol. 2, ch. 11.

[15] R. Summers, *Ancient Mining in Rhodesia*, Salisbury, 1969.

[16] Zimbabwe's structures date from the 13th through the 15th centuries and hence none of these exotic speculations could be correct although Smith's Rhodesian government propaganda upheld them until the end. Cf. B. A. Fagan,

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the complexity of the problem to a question where in the end civilization is reduced to the fate of two words. This reducing process is accompanied by an equal amount of extrapolation since from the words flow conclusions about farming, metallurgy and other elements of technology, as well as about the migration of people. Indeed, two words are meant to tell us about the biological make up (revealingly labelled "ethnic")[17] of the people involved! (*Non valet illatio* say the scholasticists). The equation of categories of human biology with categories of language and of other cultural features not only shows the utter confusion in this article, especially in its opening pages, but also exposes its racist nature. On p. 104 it is neatly summed up as "one physically and culturally dominant group of Negroid Bantu speakers". Moreover, the reader should remember that each category of evidence (written, linguistic, biological, oral, etc.) has its own rules of valid proof. Thus, a single skull *cannot* be Negroid[18] because genetic evidence deals with populations and must be based on a sufficient number of specimens to represent the variability found within a population that shares the same gene pool. So whether the author is C. Hromník or the anatomist P. V. Tobias whom he cites, does not matter. Proof *cannot* be given. The skull might belong to an aberrant Whitoid! Nor, finally, can one generalize from proof in one field to proof in another.

Misrepresentation and factual inaccuracies abound in Hromník's article. The region "West of Lake Mobutu" is wrongly described as that lying between Lake Chad and the White Nile; note 9 on p. 108 deceives the reader into believing that the quote was from Huffman's article whereas in actual fact it is from Hromník's own book. Instead of "copper" we have "bronze";* the gold of eastern Africa is mistaken as being Zimbabwean and not Ethiopian (Sasu); one does not find any mention in Cosmas, so authoritatively

"The Zambezi and Limpopo basins -1100-1500" Unesco *General History of Africa*, Vol. 4, ch. 21, p. 532-550.

[17] C. Hromník, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, 105.

[18] Idem, *op. cit.*, pp. 104, "If, for example, a skull of a definitely Negroid type...".

* This criticism refers solely to the French translation of the article. The word used by the author in the original English text is, in fact, "copper" which was erroneously translated into French as *bronze*. We apologize to Professor Hromník and to our readers for this gross mistranslation, for which we naturally assume the entire responsability. *Editor's note.*

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quoted by Hromník, of the importation of Indian cattle on the hoof or trade in Indian beef. In this last example, Hromník is quite careless or worse still deliberately misleading his readers. It is not necessary to continue this catalogue of errors. The point, we hope, is made.

Besides the above, it should be emphasized that the scholarly community has totally rejected Hromník's thesis. Ehret has called it "a dangerous travesty of scholarship" in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, while C. P. Ownby has also concluded that there is no room for this type of view now as there perhaps was in the last century.[19] The question, then, is why was this article published. Our view is that it was meant primarily to draw attention to Hromník's dangerous book (*Indo-Africa: Towards a New Understanding of the History of Sub-Saharan Africa*) and to give publicity and respectability to the racist and misguided propaganda preached in it. It is a fact that this book has been hailed in South Africa and that Hromník is being lionized now in racist, apartheid and anti-black circles. This is not surprising! What does surprise us is that some European intellectuals can still be deceived by such an obviously racist propaganda.

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(*Unesco, Paris*)

[19] C. Ehret in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15, 1982, p. 548-550; C. P. Ownby, "The Indian Ropetrick", *Journal of African History*, 23, 1982, pp. 415-416.

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