
TAKING STOCK: A CRITIQUE OF STUDIES ON IRON PRODUCTION IN AFRICA

Shadreck Chirikure

INTRODUCTION

This chapter evaluates the major themes and trends in studies of iron production in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not meant to be a review of the literature; for general reviews the reader is referred to Miller and van der Merwe (1994a), Kense and Okoro (1993) and Holl (2000). Instead, it is meant to critique the major ideas that have shaped our current perception of ferro-metallurgical studies and in the process identify gaps and inadequacies for future research engagement.

Iron technology played an indispensable role in the cultural developments of the last 2000 years of sub-Saharan African prehistory (Miller 2002; Schmidt 1997; Haland 1985; Phillipson 1985; van der Merwe 1980; Oliver and Fagan 1975; Goody 1971). After successful smelting, iron was fabricated into items for everyday use as well as expressive items used in social activities like maintaining kinship (Childs 1991a and b, Herbert 1993, 1996) and negotiating gender and social relations (Schmidt 1996; Childs and Dewey 1996; Barndon 1996).

The use and fabrication of metal during that period was associated with complex socio-cultural processes that led to the emergence of some state systems in sub-Saharan Africa (De Barros 1986, 1988, 2000; Miller 2002; David et al 1989; Pwiti 1991, Hall 1987; de Maret 1985). With this significance the metal had in prehistory, several scholars have devoted their efforts towards the understanding of African iron production (Miller 2001a, 2002; Schmidt 2001, 1997, 1996; Haland and Shinnie 1985; Kense 1983; Shinnie 1966; Cline 1937; Rickard 1939; Roscoe 1923; Gowland 1912; Bent 1892). Iron production in Africa has been the focus of considerable studies both by peripatetic scholars and by professional archaeologists and ethnographers since the late 19th century.