Isolation and the Origin of the Khoisan: Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene Human Evolution at the Southern End of Africa

The debate between the proponents of the Recent African Origin and the Multiregional Evolution models for the origin of anatomically modern humans has not been of great importance to the interpretation of late Pleistocene human fossils in South Africa. The main reason is that both models propose that evidence of anatomically moderns should happen in South Africa at an early date. A more important issue to the African context is whether or not those early transitions to modernity were accompanied by the development of the distinctive local populations known today as the Khoisan. Serogenetic evidence suggests a relative antiquity for the origins of living Khoisan peoples, but this may simply reflect the longer time that anatomically modern peoples have lived in the sub-continent. A search for features of distinctive Khoisan morphology in the early remains may be of more value as it might indicate the presence of a local adaptive pattern to the special environment conditions of the region.

Introduction

The presence of an ancient broad distribution of Khoisan populations throughout both East and South Africa is a notion that has been present in the anthropological literature for decades. Its importance to the discussion of Khoisan origins is because it implies that the Khoisan morphological pattern is more fundamental than just a local adaptation to the specific environmental conditions in southern Africa.

Using the serological similarity between modern Negro and San populations, Tobias (1972, 1978) has suggested that the “exaggeratedly African” genetic character of the San may be evidence of their closer genetic relationship to the ancestral African peoples than other living Negriform groups, and that despite their similarity, Khoisan and Negro populations had been genetically isolated from each other for an extensive period of time. Such conclusions have been enhanced by more recent genetic research (Vigilant et al 1991), which has shown mtDNA variations amongst the Khoisan to be the most deeply rooted of all living African variants studied.

Although the belief in Khoisan peoples as the aborigines of East, South and Central Africa has come to be accepted by prehistorians in general, the model has some serious flaws. Given a presumed geographic range from the Cape to near to Cairo, living Khoisan groups and their archaeological progenitors should have developed some strong regional differentiation, but this does not appear to have been so. There are also no logical reasons why gene flow should not

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have occurred with presumed Negroid populations to the west despite no geographic barriers preventing this. Where gene flow has occurred, for example in northern Botswana (Nurse 1983), the pattern is clearly modern.

Some recent work has criticised this model and the evidence that has supported it (Brauer 1980, Rightmire 1984, Schepartz 1988, Morris 1994). The bulk of the evidence was drawn from archaeological similarities of East African Later Stone Age technologies to their South African counterparts, the presence of two groups of living “click-speakers” in what was then the Tanganyika Protectorate, and the presumed “Bushman” characteristics of human skeletal remains found in association with LSA archaeological sites in East and Central Africa. The object of this paper is both to demonstrate the reasons why Khoisan populations were probably not indigenous to areas outside of southern Africa, and also to propose a new theory that could account for the distinctiveness of Khoisan populations without implying that they are ‘living primitives’.

The osteological evidence from East and Central Africa

The earliest osteological discussion of the evidence for Khoisan peoples in East Africa comes from the work of Galloway (1933) in his description of the Nebarara cranium from the “Masai Steppe” country of northern Tanzania. The features of this cranium fulfilled “all the metrical and descriptive criteria laid down for the skulls of the Bush race” (p.592). Galloway mentions another cranium of an “unmistakable Bushwoman” found in an old beach on the north end of Lake Nyasa (now called Lake Malawi), but this information is drawn from Keith (1933), who neither described nor apparently even saw the specimen. Although Galloway feels this supports his East African Khoisan hypothesis, Keith is dismissive and terms her a “stray” individual. The Nebarara cranium has not been reanalysed, but crania from similar Iron Age graves, northeast of Lake Eyasi, show no features of Khoisan crania (Brauer 1976). These crania were analysed by multivariate statistical techniques which provide much more realistic biological distances than do the old typological assessments.

Further so-called Khoisan material was recovered through the work of Louis Leakey from Homa in 1932 on the eastern shore of Lake Victoria and in 1927 from the Rift Valley sites at Elmenteita. Leakey’s preliminary description of the Homa skeletons makes only a brief comment in passing that Skeleton No.4 has some cranial features also found on the “skulls of Standloopers and certain Bushman types” (Leakey 1970:92). The Rift Valley sites at Elmenteita produced more skeletons of which individual F1 was said to have had some “Bushman” affinities. Although the Khoisan morphology of these individuals was not stressed by Leakey, the linkage between these specimens and a ‘strandloping’ diet (Homa) and Wilton archaeological assemblages (Homa and Elmenteita) have been taken as proof that the populations were “Bushmen” or “Bushman-like”. Recent re-analyses of the Elmenteita remains (Brauer 1978, De Villiers & Fatti 1982) reject any similarities of these individuals to Khoisan populations, and Schepartz (1988) has found little in the fragmentary Homa crania which could allow linkage with Khoisan groups.

The other East African hominin specimen that was usually stated to represent the ancestral Khoisan populations of the region is the Singa skull from the Sudan. The original description (Woodward 1938) focussed on the so-called “Bushman” features of the cranium and the re-examination of the specimen (Wells 1951) basically concurred with the earlier analysis. New attention to the specimen (Stringer 1979, Rightmire 1984, Stringer et al 1985)