

**The
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*Morpheus Evolution
by Morpheus
Guest Commentator*

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*In "Evolution of Lies," a piece published in **BC's** October 6, 2005 issue, Harold M. Clemens asked, "Why have I never seen a brown personage at the end of the line of more and more erect–standing creatures" in illustrations that depict the evolution of humans?*

*The subject is also of great interest to Morpheus, another **BC** contributor (see Think Piece, September 29, 2005).*

Harold M. Clemens article "An Evolution of Lies" is a timely piece, given the current court battles in American culture over Evolution and so-called Intelligent Design.

Modern humans reached Australia possibly around 50,000 years ago. They were most probably migrants, like all other humans, in the dispersal(s) out of Africa which had begun anywhere from 10 to 30 thousand years prior. The earliest modern humans would be located in Africa proper. Genetic contenders so far have been the !Kung San of Southern Africa and ethnic groups in East Africa (from where it is thought the San themselves migrated).

Clemens has touched on a serious issue that I myself have noticed while gazing at several exhibits on hominid evolution, even at top museum institutions in the country. For some reason, the pictorials or mannequins often depict several hominid types that eventually evolve into a male (and almost always a male) that is in phenotype "white" – to use our modern social construct terminology.

I have pondered the reasons for this. Of course at first the most obvious answer is the one Mr. Clemens gave, which is a race-based need (conscious or subconscious) to reproduce early modern humans as "white." Technically after all, they aren't claiming an untruth. Eventually *some* modern humans will look like that. However such depictions skip over the earlier modern humans and gives a false impression that often contradicts the supporting text/panels which will state plainly their African origin. While I think that answer is certainly probable, there is another I'd like to submit. And ironically enough, it has to do with an attempt by these exhibit makers/curators to actually avoid racism.

The Black Commentator – Morpheus Evolution

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scientific racism hijacked Darwinian evolution and perverted its fundamental principles to assert the domination of the "white race" – classifying all else as "the other." Pseudoscience and measurements of varied peoples resulted in endless literature where evolutionary theory was stood on its head, twisted about and made to serve a white supremacist discourse. By the time the discipline was rescued and redeemed from the scientific racists, infamous incidents like that of Ota Benga (the so-called "pygmy" kept in the Bronx zoo in the early 1900s) had already been carried out. The idea of Africans being somewhat closer to the living apes, or part of some lesser sub-human species had filtered into larger society. Thus even as hominid evolution, both physical and genetic, began to find its way into Africa, there was a fear that portraying "black Africans" as the first modern humans would not only upset the larger white society, but could also look like a revival of scientific racism – depicting earlier hominid ancestors evolving from ape-like ancestors into modern Africans. So, rather than stick with the science, many of these exhibits and museums seem to have opted to insert an obviously looking "white male" as the recent end-product of hominid evolution. It is politically expedient on multiple levels, but ultimately scientifically flawed, and opens itself rightly to the criticism leveled by Mr. Clemens.

That being said let us also understand that often there is a gulf between what one witnesses at a museum exhibit and what is normally accepted in scientific circles. Scientists are often consultants to these exhibits, but do not work at putting them together. And too many of them simply try to stay away from politics – which is one of the main reasons the Creationists and Intelligent Designers, who wage a non-scientific but very political war, have wreaked such havoc in the past decades. It is time for scientists, black or otherwise, to step out of the laboratory/field and into the political spotlight. Perhaps it's also time for some of them to accept they are as affected by social issues like race, as much as everyone else.

But none of this is to say of course that the idea of the African ancestry of humanity hasn't been marketed to the larger public.

Anthropologist Christopher Stringer in 2000 released his popular work *African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity*. The front cover of the book features a person of African descent and the text is clear on Stringer's theory for hominid evolution. There is even a chapter in which he asserts that humans are "all African" beneath the skin. Geneticist Stephen Oppenheimer's work was featured in a Discovery documentary in 2002 called *The Real Eve: Modern Man's Journey Out of Africa*. Both the film cover and book edition, which traces modern humanity's origins through the X chromosome, feature African actors/faces. The same can be said of geneticist Spencer Wells' documentary and accompanying text *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*, which takes a global tracking of human origins through the Y chromosome – beginning in Africa. All three scientists are "white" Europeans.

Part of the problem faced here may of course lie in the debates that continue to rage in human origins theory. The theory held by those such as Stringer, Oppenheimer and Wells is the Recent Out of Africa theory (ROA model). The ROAm asserts that Africa was the original home of earlier hominids like *Australopithecus*, *Homo habilis*, *Homo erectus*, etc. And while they accept that *Homo erectus* left Africa and dispersed to varied parts of the globe, they contend all of these dispersals were evolutionary dead ends (i.e., *Homo sapiens neanderthalis*). The ROAm states only one branch of the hominid tree survived, in Africa, becoming modern humans and thus leaving the continent anywhere from 80 to 60 thousand years ago as modern humans, populating the globe, adapting as they went, and accounting for every person that exists today and that has existed since. The ROAm has fought its way, through genetics and fossil evidence, to become the most accepted in the human origins field – with some variation and inner disputes of course.

Competing with the ROAm however is the Multi-Regional theory (MRm). This model agrees that earlier hominids have their origins in Africa. However the MRm contends that waves of *Homo erectus* who left Africa developed into modern humans *outside* of the continent just as they developed inside. At one point, the MRm even asserted that close hominid cousins like *Homo sapiens neanderthalis* (who were admittedly quite

The Black Commentator – Morpheus Evolution

advanced) were direct ancestors of some human populations in parts of Eurasia.

Modern science however has not been kind to the MRm. Both genetic and fossil evidence has forced it to give up a lot of ground. Many MRm theorists now concede that the earliest modern humans arose in Africa. And they no longer hold out for the possibility of an independent Neanderthal origin for any modern populations, as genetic samples from Neanderthal are too distinct from any living humans. But they continue to assert that the single line Out of Africa theory cannot account for all modern humans, and balk at the idea of so many evolutionary dead ends. They instead contend that at the least, in limiting degrees, populations of modern humans emerging from Africa interbred/shared genetic material with other more archaic Homo sapiens still alive in parts of Europe and Asia. It is this intermingling, they assert, which gives us the diversity of modern humanity.

Today the human origins fields are split among those in the majority ROAm camp, those still in the MRm and those seeking a middle ground. However the ROAm camp is the most currently accepted, though for some reason certain museum exhibits seem behind the times of the television documentaries, etc.

At the moment genetic evidence continues to point to Africa, namely Eastern Africa, for the origins of modern humans. When cross-referenced with fossil evidence, the results have been startlingly accurate. Take for instance the announcement of the Herto skulls from Ethiopia in 2003. At the time, they accounted for the oldest human remains on record, dated at 160,000 years old. The Herto skulls were thought to be representative of a population of humans on the very cusp/verge of modernity. They were the best and closest examples to "us" that are known to exist. And they were found precisely where both the genetic and fossil evidence predicted they should be.

Mr. Clemens will be happy to know that the Herto skulls were published first in the 12 June 2003 issue of the science journal *Nature*. The front cover was titled "African Origins: Ethiopian Fossils are the earliest Homo sapiens." And the artist's rendering left little doubt on who or what *Homo sapiens idaltu* resembled.

Hopefully, as Mr. Clemens alludes, our social culture will continue to evolve as well.

[Note: a re-dating of the skulls Omo I and II in 2005, originally found in 1967, places them as older than Herto at about 195,000 yrs. Both Omo I and II were found in the Kibish region, near the Omo river, in Ethiopia.]

In discussion in "Origins of Modern Humans: Multiregional or Out of Africa?" Donald C. Johanson, director of the Institute of Human Origins at Arizona State University, summed up the prevailing view among his fellow Paleoanthropologists:

"For the moment, the majority of anatomical, archaeological and genetic evidence gives credence to the view that fully modern humans are a relatively recent evolutionary phenomenon. The current best explanation for the beginning of modern humans is the Out of Africa Model that postulates a single, African origin for Homo sapiens. The major neurological and cultural innovations that characterized the appearance of fully modern humans has proven to be remarkably successful, culminating in our dominance of the planet at the expense of all earlier hominid populations."

Morpheus has undergone several incarnations: Morpheus_Revolutions, formerlyMorpheus_Reloaded & Morpheus of Playahata.com. Somewhere out there, he is an educator.