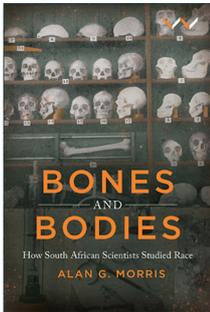




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BOOK TITLE:

Bones and bodies: How South African scientists studied race



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Physical anthropology through the eyes of the scientists

In *Bones and Bodies*, Alan Morris brings to life the historic narrative of how “the skeletons I study were once the frames of living people” (p. 2) and how “biological information can have no value without understanding the social and cultural context of the people” (p. 2). Morris ploughed through collections of correspondence between early researchers in the field and volumes of literature, and conducted interviews with seminal figures in the fields of physical anthropology, archaeology and palaeontology, among others, to eloquently narrate the contribution of scholars who shaped the physical anthropology landscape in South Africa.

Morris takes us on a deep dive covering the field of physical anthropology with insights into the people who collected, examined, and described skeletal remains, sharing the stories not usually found in scientific publications. One gets to experience science from the early 1900s with narratives on how science at that time set the foundation for examining the relationships of early inhabitants at the Cape, albeit through the eyes of mainly foreign scientists. Morris does this by including eight anthropological vignettes: Dr Louis Péringuey’s well-travelled skeletons (Chapter 1), Boskop: The first South African fossil human celebrity (Chapter 2), Matthew Drennan and the Scottish influence in Cape Town (Chapter 3), The age of racial typology in South Africa (Chapter 4), Raymond Dart’s complicated legacy (Chapter 5), Ronald Singer, Phillip Tobias and the ‘new physical anthropology’ (Chapter 6), Physical anthropology and the administration of apartheid (Chapter 7), and The politics of racial classification in modern South Africa (Chapter 8). Throughout these narratives we see how typology influenced classification of indigenous people in southern Africa, and how terminology used to refer to South African people changed over time.

The South African Association for the Advancement of Science (S₂A₃) meeting hosted in Cape Town in 1905 brought many foreign scientists to South Africa, which afforded scholars with an interest in the living people of southern Africa opportunities to collaborate with South African scientists. At the time there was already a growing body of anthropometrical data, comparative physiology, and psychology of the local people. There was also a keen interest in the link between behaviour and race. According to Morris, the 1905 meeting “had a special significance for developing the field of physical anthropology” (p. 18) in South Africa.

Starting with Dr Louis Péringuey, who served as the Director of the South African Museum from 1906 until his death in 1924, Morris acknowledges Péringuey for “breaking new ground in Africa” (p. 12) in the field of archaeology and for acknowledging the living San for their contribution to the archaeology in the region. This was perhaps the first time that a local population outside of Europe, from Africa, was seen as important in unravelling questions related to human origins. This sparked Péringuey’s interest in collecting human skeletons and he encouraged specialists and non-specialists to send him specimens.

Since there were no specialist anatomists in the Cape prior to 1911 when the University of Cape Town’s Medical School was launched, Péringuey sent specimens from his collection to Frank Shrubbsall in England to analyse. Sending specimens from South African collections to scientists overseas was a common practice and many of the scientists who held positions at museums or taught at medical schools were foreigners, predominantly of European ancestry. Consequently, methodologies used when analysing local specimens and interpreting them were based on European practices, and often resulted in reference to the African specimens in a derogatory manner.

After examining specimens from 43 “Bushmen” and 30 “Hottentots” and the “cave-dweller” specimens sent to him by Péringuey, Shrubbsall concluded that the “Strandlooper-Bush-Hottentots, formed a single group with great antiquity probably throughout Africa” (p. 24). Morris also noted that the article published by Shrubbsall made mention of “post-cranial bones” used to assess variation of Khoesan peoples (p. 24). This sparked an interest in craniological features among scholars, resulting in several publications describing the specimens and their interpretation of the relationship among the different collections.

In subsequent chapters in the book, Morris goes on to narrate how other scholars and their discoveries have built on the early work in the Cape, and elsewhere in South Africa, and how these studies have contributed to our understanding of the history of the indigenous people of southern Africa. We are reminded about seminal discoveries like the Boskop specimen discovered in 1913, some controversies that resulted with interpretation of data, and how the use of single specimens without proper comparative analysis can lead to misinterpretations. Morris also shares interesting accounts of the personalities and work of seminal scholars like Drennan, Dreyer, Singer, Dart, Broom, Tobias, and many more who contributed to the advancement of physical anthropology in South Africa (including his own research).

Morris addresses the question of the origin of ‘races’ by introducing us to the discovery of human remains from Chancelade in France in 1888 and the skeletons from the Grimaldi site in Italy in 1901 which were said to represent ‘Caucasoid’, ‘Mongoloid’ and ‘Negroid’ races, “suggesting that the origin of all modern humans must have been in Europe” (p. 40). Throughout the book Morris highlights and juxtaposes how interpretations based on description of skeletal remains (typology) had ‘race’ and racial implications, including a harrowing account on Dart’s interpretation (see Chapter 5), and later how Tobias tried to cover up Dart’s account and add his own thoughts on the subject (Chapter 6).

The first six chapters of the book set the stage for the last two chapters that delve into the reality of racial ideologies, racism and the way in which race classification supported the advancement of the political landscape of South



Africa. Morris outlines how race classification came about and how legislation around this classification system impacted on the lives and livelihood of non-white people and makes a case that those “responsible for the dirty work of classification were not scientists” (p. 251). Sometimes scientists were invited to have input on cases before the Race Classification Board; some accepted the invitation while others did not, due to ethical considerations. Those who did, like Tobias and Jenkins, would often use the broad spectrum of variation to not place subjects into specific categories, claiming that typology could not be used to classify subjects into one or another race.

With time, some physical anthropology scholars started to use multivariate computational methodologies like biological distance measure to analyse data, and it soon became apparent that “none of these techniques identified race” (p. 276). As serogenetic markers like blood groups and blood proteins were identified as useful tools to study population variation, these studies added to the knowledge of the affinities of southern African populations.¹ More recently, DNA studies have been used to study genetic variation among sub-Saharan African populations², lending further support for the ‘Out of Africa’ theory concerning modern human origins advanced by Rebecca Cann, Mark Stoneking and Alan Wilson³ using human mitochondrial DNA variation. Other studies, now including whole genome analysis, provide refinement on this theory.⁴

I had the privilege of engaging with Morris on this book during a webinar hosted by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) as part of ASSAf’s Heritage Month celebrations on 20 September 2022. Our paths first crossed at an Archaeological Society meeting in Cape Town in the late 1980s and since then we have engaged on several topics of mutual interest. It was quite amusing to hear his account of how the idea of the book came about (p. 3). He had submitted an abstract to the American Association of Physical Anthropologists to attend their

physical anthropology meeting in 1991 and it was rejected because it “lacked originality” (p. 3). Apparently, the reviewer felt that the topic was adequately covered in a paper published by Tobias in 1985.

This book is timely for a few reasons. Firstly, it reminds us that the post-apartheid era should be celebrated, given the plight of most people who were subjected to legislation that violated basic human rights of individuals following the colonial era. Secondly, scientific information has shown that there are no ‘pure’ populations and that we are all connected to the same origin as a point back in time, and that human variation is a consequence of adaptation over time to changing environments. Thirdly, while contemporary science cannot be separated from the politics of the time, every endeavour should be made for science to be based on evidence rather than succumbing to political pressures.

Morris is a bold and insightful scholar, whose attention for detail meticulously brings life to the narrative of physical anthropology from the early 1900s to the present in *Bones and Bodies*.

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