This book explores the material manifestations in the African archaeological record of diverse sociocultural practices. Timothy Insoll emphasizes ‘the archaeology and materiality of potentially more ephemeral traces of past lives and beliefs’ of sub-Saharan Africans (9). The introductory chapter sets up the themes and conceptual frameworks of the book. These include ‘the power of things in their ability to structure human existence, ontology, and understanding in the African past’ (5). Other conceptual processes that Insoll presents relate to how material remains are entangled in a dialectical relationship between people and objects; how objects become functionally ‘bundled’ within larger webs of entanglements; and how material culture and associated rituals serve as mnemonic devices and reinforce memory processes (7). The use of metaphors and metonyms to describe objects as exotic or anomalous, enigmatic or enchanting, are also briefly discussed.

In Chapter Two, the author investigates the creation and transformation of personhood through bodily transformations during birth and death rituals, medicinal healing, sacrifices (including human sacrifice), initiation rites, and other practices. Human bodies are transformed through scarification, cicatrization, dental modification, piercing, painting, hairstyles, and accoutrements such as beads and cowries (13). Using examples from a wide array of African societies, Insoll explores the social significance of body modifications and their figural or artistic representations, such as in rock arts, in various communities of practice. Insoll points out that material objects such as stones and figurines can convey metaphors and metonyms about the human body. Accordingly, the external and internal forms of figurines and their deliberate fragmentation ‘capture and transform qualities and essences of persons and bodies, function as agents to cohere memory across generations’, and thus serve as didactic instruments, or as objects of power and agency (40, 47). The author acknowledges that archaeological signatures of bodily transformation vary considerably in material culture and that some practices may be difficult to recognize or identify archaeologically. Still, Insoll stresses the need to search for the tools used to make bodily modifications, and their associated figural or other representations within mortuary practices and other contexts.

The materiality and archaeology of death, which in many cases is difficult to neatly separate from the materiality of the living, is the topic of Chapter Three. The author argues that ‘the ancestor’ and its material entanglements stretch far beyond the physical body and its transformation. The chapter offers deep insights into death rituals, funerary, and mortuary practices, as well as potential archaeological signatures of ‘good death’, ‘bad death’, and commentary on the place of ancestors in African societies. Human-animal relations are the subject of Chapter Four, which examines their archaeological implications. This investigation considers the cultural appropriation of animals as totems or taboos,
and the many metaphoric, metonymic, symbolic, representational, apotropaic (protective) medicinal, sacrificial, and other rituals for which domestic and wild animals were used in sub-Saharan Africa. Archaeological indicators of animal sacrifice, for instance, could include the recovery of specific species or selective body parts arising from ‘sacrificial division’ in ritual contexts (138).

Insoll explores both the utilitarian and ritualized uses and meanings ascribed to categories of lithics, including standing stones, megalithic monuments, polished and perforated stones, and rock gongs in Chapter Five. Chapter Six considers the exploitation of earth and clay for medicinal, symbolic, ritual, and practical purposes in the African past. Apart from its widespread use for making pots, statues, and other objects, earth and clay can also be ingested, appropriated in earth shrines, or used to negotiate ‘settlement locations and rights, frontiers, and social relations and identities’ (206). The focus of Chapter Seven shifts to religious shrines and the ritual activities and performances associated with their success and preservation, or their failure and destruction. Based on case studies drawn from the Tong Hills shrines in Northern Ghana and other West African sites, Insoll provides interesting insights into the diverse ways that sacred, profane, as well as mundane objects get deposited and curated at shrines, and how these various artifacts can be studied archaeologically. Following that, Chapter Eight explores the complex relations between Africans and landscapes (including pits, middens, vegetation, rivers, paths, caves, and hills) and considers how peoples’ experiences of these landscapes can be reconstructed using ‘phenomenological approaches’ (294). Chapter Nine discusses the rituals, representations, metaphors, and other practices relating to disease and its diagnosis, healing, and medicinal practices. The book ends with a brief conclusion that highlights the intersection of the themes discussed in each chapter.

Overall, Insoll’s book brings together a vast array of comparative data from diverse regions around the continent. Its extensive literature review provides useful insights into the complex sociocultural practices of past African societies, their engagement with their material and spiritual worlds, and the ways in which these practices may manifest themselves in the archaeological record. Insoll further suggests a diversity of conceptual and interpretive frameworks that can be used to study these processes and relationships. The book highlights the landscapes of the African past and their entanglements with people, bodies, animals, and things (particularly stones, figurines, ceramic vessels, and metal tools). The author rightly suggests that these processes should not be considered as timeless, but rather as the result of particular historical circumstances relating to material availability, ‘traditions’, and personal choice. The book is a useful addition to scholarship on ‘materiality’ and ‘material culture studies’ in African archaeology, and will be of interest to archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike.

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