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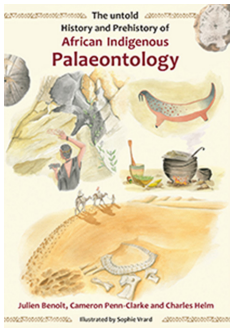
BOOK TITLE:
The Untold History and Prehistory of African Indigenous Palaeontology



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ISBN:
9781776474936
(paperback, 86 pp)

PUBLISHER:
Footprint Press, Cape Town; ZAR405

PUBLISHED:
2025

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HOW TO CITE:
Chiwara-Maenzanise P. Between restitution and representation: Indigenous knowledge in African palaeontology. S Afr J Sci. 2026;122(7/8), Art. #26961. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2026/26961

ARTICLE INCLUDES:
☐ Peer review
☐ Supplementary material

PUBLISHED:
29 July 2026

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Between restitution and representation: Indigenous knowledge in African palaeontology

The Untold History and Prehistory of African Indigenous Palaeontology presents a substantive and timely intervention into the history of science by demonstrating that African engagements with fossils long predate the formalisation of palaeontology as a Western scientific discipline. Structured across 28 concise chapters organised thematically and chronologically, the volume draws on case studies from 23 African countries to trace a *longue durée* history of fossil awareness from early hominins through precolonial societies and into the colonial period. In doing so, it challenges persistent narratives that locate scientific authority almost exclusively within Europe while positioning Africa as a passive site of discovery rather than intellectual production. At the same time, the volume's expansive scope raises important interpretive and epistemic questions that extend beyond its empirical contributions.

A major strength of the book lies in its transparent and consistent methodology. Each chapter identifies fossils or geological objects, situates them chronologically and culturally, describes their contexts of discovery, and specifies the nature of the evidence, whether archaeological, artistic, folkloric, toponymic or textual. This structure gives the book analytical clarity and allows it to function both as a synthetic scholarly intervention and as a useful teaching resource across archaeology, palaeontology and the history of science. However, the brevity of the chapter format occasionally limits the ethnographic and historical depth with which individual cases can be explored.

The empirical range is impressive. The case studies extend from the Makapansgat "Pebble of Many Faces", interpreted as a possible early example of symbolic engagement with natural objects, to trilobite manuports in southern Africa, the Ishango *Stegodon* molar from the Congo Basin, and fossil-inspired rock art in Namibia, Lesotho and South Africa. Particularly compelling are the chapters on ancient Egypt and Nubia, which demonstrate that fossil echinoids were recognised as once-living organisms and intentionally curated within ritual and funerary contexts long before similar conclusions emerged in European natural philosophy. Collectively, these examples support the authors' central claim that curiosity about fossils and deep time is not culturally bounded, but reflects a widespread human engagement shaped by local environments, cosmologies and systems of meaning.

The book is also careful not to romanticise Indigenous knowledge. The authors consistently distinguish between strongly evidenced, contested, and speculative interpretations, grounding their claims in existing peer-reviewed scholarship. This methodological caution strengthens the book's credibility while still recognising Indigenous knowledge systems as intellectually meaningful rather than merely anecdotal or mythic. Sophie Vrard's illustrations further enhance the text by functioning as interpretive tools rather than decorative additions. The discussion of Khoisan interpretations of dinosaur trackmakers as bird-like is especially effective in demonstrating how scientific interpretation is shaped by cultural assumptions rather than by a simple linear accumulation of facts.

At the same time, the book's decolonial ambitions reveal unresolved tensions. While the volume explicitly advocates greater recognition of Indigenous communities and knowledge holders, Indigenous African knowledge systems are interpreted and synthesised without the direct participation of Indigenous African scholars as co-authors. From a decolonial perspective, the book thus occupies a space between restitution and representation, functioning as a form of restitution by restoring visibility to African fossil finders, artists and knowledge traditions that have long been marginalised in accounts of palaeontological discovery. Yet this restitution remains partial, as interpretive authority continues to be located within conventional academic structures rather than fully redistributed. As a result, the volume remains closer to restitution than to full epistemic transfer, where Indigenous scholars would participate not only as sources of knowledge but also as co-authors and co-producers of theory, interpretation and disciplinary direction.[1-3]

A further omission concerns gender. Although gender is not an explicit analytical focus of the volume, its relative absence remains significant given the book's broader commitment to recovering historically marginalised knowledge traditions. In many African societies, knowledge relating to ritual, healing, material culture and oral transmission is structured along gendered lines, yet women remain largely implicit in the narrative. This is evident in Chapter 4, which discusses a fossil orthocere interpreted as a possible fertility-related object: while fertility symbolism is invoked, the analysis does not engage with gendered cosmologies, ritual roles or the social identities of those who may have curated or interpreted such objects. Similarly, Chapter 16 powerfully restores racialised and labour-based erasure by highlighting enslaved Africans as fossil identifiers in the Americas, yet does not consider gendered distinctions within enslaved communities, despite the gendered organisation of labour, knowledge transmission and recognition under slavery. Finally, the concluding Chapter 28 calls for greater collaboration with local communities and recognition of Indigenous knowledge, but does not explicitly incorporate gender into this forward-looking agenda. Taken together, these gaps reflect broader critiques within archaeology and the history of science, where the recovery of Indigenous knowledge has not always been accompanied by sustained attention to gendered power relations.[4]

These limitations do not diminish the significance of the book. Nor do these critiques stem from bad faith. The volume is written with care, political awareness and scholarly rigour, and arguably goes further than many comparable works in challenging the colonial assumptions that have historically shaped palaeontology. Rather, its decolonial project is perhaps best understood as incomplete rather than contradictory: it opens an important and long-neglected field while revealing the further work required to transform structures of knowledge production. *The Untold History and Prehistory of African Indigenous Palaeontology* convincingly dismantles the assumption that African engagement with fossils began with European discovery and replaces it with a carefully evidenced account of deep and diverse

intellectual traditions. Future work that incorporates Indigenous African co-authorship, gender-aware analysis and epistemologies articulated on their own terms will not diminish this contribution but extend and deepen the critical foundation it has established.

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