



SPECIAL REVIEW

Out of Africa's Eden

Jonathan Spencer Jones

Out of Africa's Eden. By Stephen Oppenheimer. Pp xxi + 440. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball. ISBN 1 86842 173 2.

It is generally accepted that humankind had its origins in Africa, although whether in the so-called 'cradle of humankind' comprising Sterkfontein, Swartkrans and Kromdraai and environs, north of Johannesburg, or elsewhere on the continent is open to question.

Less widely accepted, however, is how the world was peopled, giving rise to the human race of which we are a part today, but there is now growing consensus that rather than having evolved regionally over the past one to two million years, all modern non-Africans descended from a small group of Africans who migrated from the continent relatively recently – no more than about 80 000 years ago.

This so-called 'out of Africa' theory is the topic of Oxford University paediatrician and researcher Stephen Oppenheimer's new book, *Out of Africa's Eden*. Its basis is the recent advances in genetics that allow the construction of gene lines, on the one side through mitochondrial DNA, which is inherited maternally (hence the origin of the 'mitochondrial Eve', the 'first mother' from whom we are all supposedly descended), and on the other through Y chromosomes, which are inherited by men.

Oppenheimer presents a compelling and at times forceful case for 'out of Africa' and he argues that the group, probably numbering no more than a few hundred individuals, left Africa from what is now Eritrea across the Red Sea to Yemen, forced away by dwindling food resources on the western shores of

Africa due to the evaporation and rising salinity of the Red Sea as it became effectively isolated from the Indian Ocean at that time. (One must bear in mind that the coastlines and landscapes of the continents were very different from the present, owing to the different climatic conditions, and the mouth of the Red Sea at that time was probably no more than a few kilometres across.)

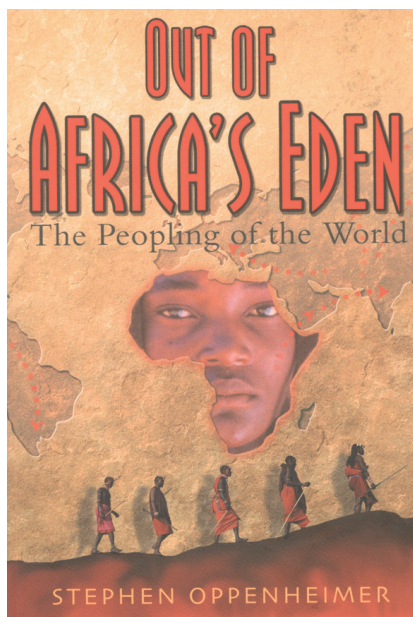
This 'out of Africa' group then spread out over time, moving down the coastline of India and Asia as well as gradually radiating inland, wiping out the earlier human populations, the Neanderthals in Europe and *Homo erectus* in southeast Asia, as they encountered them.

Oppenheimer makes the case that the group beachcombed around the coast relatively rapidly, reaching Australia within about 10 000 years, approximately 70 000 years ago. In contrast he suggests that Europe was populated only much later, starting 45 000 to 50 000 years ago, with the first group migrating when a fertile corridor opened from the Gulf up through Turkey, and a second group coming in from southern Asia through eastern Europe some 10 000 years later.

The final question that Oppenheimer considers is the peopling of the Americas, which took place across what was at the time a land bridge across the Bering Strait from Asia. Contrary to an old school of

US academia which maintains that this happened just after the last glacial maximum about 13 000 years ago, he argues for its occurrence just before the LGM, between 22 000 and 30 000 years ago.

This book makes for fascinating reading, but it is not light bedtime material and in parts is perhaps a little advanced for the popular reader, for whom it is intended. Oppenheimer admits that much of it is speculative, such as the beachcombing route to the colonisation of Eurasia and the late colonisation of Europe, and will require further genetic and archaeological studies to flesh out. Nevertheless it can be recommended to anyone with an interest in mankind's origin and history.



Jonathan Spencer Jones is a former news editor of the SAMJ and is now involved in publications on energy, mining and metering in Africa and South America.