

Strengthening The Contribution of the Investigations of Basil Davidson's A History of West Africa 1000-1800



Issiaka DIARRA¹, Moussa BA²

¹Docteur, Maître-Assistant, Enseignant-chercheur, FLSL, Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB), Bamako,

²Docteur, Maître-Assistant, Enseignant-chercheur, FLSH, Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar, Sénégal

ABSTRACT: This article aims to assess the contribution of Black Africa to the progress of humankind at the time of the Great Empires and even before. To do so, Africans must immerse themselves in the knowledge of their past. The background of West African civilization and history must serve as a rear-view mirror for the advancement of the current generation. Indeed, Basil Davidson, who was an important recorder of information about Africa, edifies us on the main discovery of this older generation based on his study of African iron tools. This invention contributed enormously to the improvement of the population's well-being and the creation of families, and later villages. These were followed by the foundation of the first kingdoms, culminating in empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and other kingdoms like Senegambia, Mossi, Igbo, Asante, Bono, and Kanem-Bornu. During this period of prosperity, man belonged to his community. The people of the past were imbued with values that placed the interests of the group above those of the individual. Then came the interval between the end of the empires and the independence of West African countries. During this era, the influence of Europeans through slavery and colonization was a heavy weight on their heads. The methodology uses both descriptive and qualitative analyses. Utilizing the framework of Afrocentricity theorized by Molefi Kete Asante we will examine Davidson's orientation to the data he discussed in order to seek an African perspective on the facts. It is from this angle that this article enlightens on how the writer addresses this question of civilization and prosperity in his work.

KEYWORDS: African, civilization, empires, iron, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

In the ancient world between 3400 BCE and 2000 BCE, Africans had the most advanced civilizations and ruled much of the world from the Nile valley civilizations of Egypt, Nubia, and Axum (Asante, 2024) no civilization built anything comparable to the pyramids constructed by black people. Scientific research has shown that humanity originated in Africa. "The oldest known skeletal remains of anatomically modern humans (or homo sapiens) were excavated at sites in East Africa. Human remains were discovered at Omo in Ethiopia that were dated at 195,000 years ago, the oldest known in the world" (Walker, 2006 p. front flap) DNA studies have shown that the oldest Homo sapiens were 300,000 years ago in Africa. Before the migration of some homo sapiens out of Africa 70,000 years ago, everyone was black. Despite this new paradigm known as racism spreading in the world does not prevent a white British man called Basil Risbridger Davidson from highlighting the history of black people. It is to be expected by a large number of people that Black history is a new or even unfamiliar subject. Precisely, Davidson's book in collaboration with F. K. Buah, and J. F. Ade Ajayi has been written primarily for students of history in West Africa preparing for the General Certificate of Education and similar public examinations. In this vein, they said that:

We hope, however, that it will prove of equal use to many other persons who are interested in the historical growth and value of the civilization of West Africa. For a very long time, it was seriously held in certain quarters that Africa had no indigenous history; that her history started with the coming of Europeans to Africa (Davidson, 1965, p.6).

Resultantly, this paper seeks to determine why this great contribution of Africa is not yet well known. In whose favor is the spreading of this contribution? Our angle on Davidson's work is influenced by the Afrocentric school of thought started in 1980 by Molefi Kete Asante. Thus, this paper, builds on the theory of Afrocentricity and is structured by both descriptive and qualitative perspectives, and answers the above indirect questions. Afrocentricity, coined by Molefi Kete Asante, by the late 1970s is a cultural, political, and artistic movement that takes its inspiration from Negritude, Karenga's Kawaida, African personality, Marcus Garvey, Cheikh Anta Diop, and the philosophy of ancient Egypt (Mazama, 2003). It is broadly defined as "placing African ideals at the

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center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior.” (Modupe, 2003). It posits that Africa should imagine the terms of its own development.

Since 1980 Molefi Kete Asante published *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. This book, in harmony with *The Afrocentric Idea* (Asante, 1987) and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Asante, 1990), and *An Afrocentric Manifesto* (Asante, 2007), created tremendous referential and positive changes in the African and African American communities in Africa and diaspora. Ama Mazama said: “Today, Afrocentricity is widely discussed in the United States, of course, but also in Africa, Europe, South and Central America, and the Caribbean. In short, it has become a formidable Pan-African force that must be reckoned with.” (2001, p.387). The theory of Afrocentricity seeks to place Black people specifically in the center of their regional and global narratives. Black people are actors in history, not mere spectators to Europeans.

It is obvious to notice that Afrocentricity argues that the principal issue of African people is our unconscious appropriation of the Western worldview, perspective, idea, taste, and even their attendant conceptual frameworks. To complete our point of view Mazama affirmed that: The list of those ideas and theories that have invaded our lives as normal, natural, or even worse, ideal is infinite. How many of us have really paused to seriously examine and challenge such ideas as development, planning, progress, the need for democracy, and the nation-state as the best form of political and social organization, to name only a few? Our failure to recognize the roots of such ideas in the European cultural ethos has led us, willingly or unwillingly, to agree to footnote status in the White man's book (Mazama, 2001).

Black men are currently relegated to the periphery, the margin, of the European experience, to use Molefi Asante's terms as spectators of a show that defines African people from without. In other words, and to use Afrocentric terminology again, we do not exist on our terms but on borrowed, European ones. Let us replace these unknown and disrespectful terms with ours. We are dislocated and have lost sight of our former way of living (Asante, 2007).

This paper, to bring this resurgence of African impact in history, stresses the need to spread out the contributions from the past. This paradigm shift centers around Davidson's *A History of West Africa 1000-1800* and will be theorized from an Afrocentric perspective. It is from the latter that this study investigates the book of Basil Davidson who had a direct influence on Molefi Asante and gave him many ideas for his work, *The History of Africa*, which came out in 2024.

During the past couple of decades or so revolutionary changes have been taking place in our knowledge of African history. Serious research is bearing healthy results which are finding their way into school textbooks and other publications meant for the general reader. This book is in line with this development. Thus, this study is divided into three parts. The first part hints at, alludes to the summary of the life of the author and some current developments of African civilization while the second part emphasizes the summary of West Africa AD 1000-1800, and last but not least tackles Basil Davidson's inputs to African Studies.

I. The Author and Certain Recent Parts in the Growth of African Civilization West Africa 1000-1800

a. The Author

This great contribution was written by Basil Risbridger Davidson born on November 9th, 1914, and passed away on July 9th, 2010, he was a White British journalist and historian. Basil Davidson's book makes people forget about his death because the book is written with his soul. His impact on African historiography continues to grow as he describes the growth of West African history. He was a man of numerous talents and multiple lives. After dropping out of school at sixteen years old, he was not technically supposed to shine all around the world based on his academic research, but his destiny was decided differently. He was able to be a soldier and in addition to that, he became a secret agent. After spending some hard period in this job, he decided to become a journalist. Exactly like Ernest Miller Hemingway who also was an American novelist, journalist, and short-story writer. An example for the future generation to understand is that 'where there is a will there is a way'. “The post-independence generation of Africans, who needed an intellectual anchor to the political sovereignty the colonialists formally relinquished to them in the 1950s and '60s, will be forever grateful to the British historian Basil Davidson”¹.

Perhaps the most important question Davidson answered on African history was whether Africa and Europe were equally guilty over the Atlantic slave trade. He wrote: “Africa and Europe were jointly involved. Yet... Europe dominated the connection, vastly enlarged the trade, and continually turned it to European advantage and to African loss” (Howe, 2012). For anyone who still looks to history for resources of future hope, Basil Davidson's life and work will remain an inspiration. If that had been written by an African, he would have been told he was in true denial. Davidson could say it and not give a damn. No wonder an African-American academic who read Davidson without knowing who he was remarked, “I assumed he was an African!” He gave his point of view about the enslavement of Africans by pointing out that both sides were implicated but the Europeans changed things to their benefit. Of course, if this part was written by an African, Europeans could say that he is in refusal.

The number of his books is estimated at thirty books at least on African history and politics. If Blacks were the only ones to talk about the existence of African history certain may doubt its credibility. When certain white British researchers like Basil Davidson stood up for the clarity of West Africa's specifically and entire African history others should keep quiet. That's why Basil

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/basil-davidson-historian-who-changed-africans-perceptions-of-themselves-2101854.html>. May 10th, 2024 at 10:35 a.m.

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Davidson said: "For a very long time it was seriously held in certain quarters that Africa had no indigenous history; that her history started with the coming of Europeans to Africa. One very unfortunate result of this was that what used to be designated in the textbooks as African history was nothing but accounts of European merchants and colonial activities in Africa" (Davidson, 1965, p. xi).

To make the exchange more scientific we are going to share with others what can be read everywhere about the author and spread out with others what Europeans will not tell openly to Africans about the author. Africans' sense of hospitality cost them the worst human calamities never ever faced by any other race which is chattel slavery, colonization, and worst neocolonialism. We should double think about the fact that Basil Davidson's works are accepted in every single school in London and in 2023 again certain American states are refusing that we teach books written by Africans and African descent should raise self-consciousness.

b. Certain Historical Events Close to Present-day West Africa

The Revival of Islamic Culture when the nineteenth century opened, the once-powerful states of Western Sudan, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai had all disappeared. This decline affected all aspects of life in Western Sudan. The Moslem faith continued to be practiced in many parts of the territory but with no great fervor. And yet the opportunities that Western Sudan in its heyday had provided for Islamic education were still available and were now to serve West Africa well. By the close of the eighteenth century, an intellectual revolution was already in progress, and, although the new type of society that this Moslem cultural movement envisaged is not what we have now achieved, the political results of this revival proved lasting. All these current religions have their origin in Ancient Egypt in the principles of Ma'at.

Cheikh Anta Diop contends that: the African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective, nor unruffled; he is ignorant, cowardly, and neurotic (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). He wanted to make us understand that anyone can dare tackle the history of Europe without thinking to refer to Greco-Latin Antiquity and try to pass that off as you are doing scientific research. It is clear that the ancient Egyptians were Black Africans. Egypt and other countries of North Africa are today considered integral parts of the Arab world. The Arabs have dominated North Africa since their victorious jihad of 639-708 AD. Before that conquest, however, North Africa was basically Black, just like the rest of the African continent (Browder, 1992, p. 20). We had only Africa and there was no division until the arrival of Whites. When their so-called North Africa was under indigenous dominations, the most ancient monuments in this region were built. Pharaoh Djoser, the second king of the Third Egyptian Dynasty, ruled between 5018 and 4989 BC. He built the earliest monument in the world still celebrated today (Browder, 1992, p. 20). Every year, thousands of tourists visit his Funerary Complex in the city of Saqqara. Imhotep, his celebrated Prime Minister, designed the Complex. An outer wall, now mostly in ruins, surrounded the whole structure. Basil Davidson has contributed to enhancing and urging people to learn better the history of Africa.

II. Brief Overview of West Africa 1000-1800

A History of West Africa 1000-1800 is a new and revised edition published in 1977 by Basil Davidson. It mainly deals with the growth of African civilization that rediscovered the old West Africa. Our ancestors' ways of living are depicted as calculating and wealthy. The West African empire's evolution is tackled on the one hand and the arrival of the foreigners on the other hand. Adu, Boahen, J. F. Ade, Ajayi, and Michael, in Topics in West African History (1986, p.1), opined that: "The history of West Africa, like that of most regions or countries in the world, is the result of internal and external factors". For instance, the belts of varying land and climate dictated the social variations. The history of the native peoples of West African kingdoms and Empires could be different from one another in the way nature treated them, but it is also interconnected. As slow and steady wins the race, they go step by step to get a certain standard of living. They were very subtle because nothing had been done at random. Therefore, during the Stone Age, the early men used available materials such as: "lumps of chipped stone [...] This growing of food was one of humanity's most revolutionary discoveries. It introduced what is called the Neolithic or New Stone Age"(Davidson, 1977, p.7). The habit of harvesting the crops happened in the Middle East and spread all around the rest of the regions up to the nooks and crannies of the rich and fertile Sahara. Definitely, the more farming increases, the bigger the population will be. The growths of people lead to a complicated society because the more they have, the more they want. The ancient Egyptians made an important discovery about metals like iron, gold, and copper. Talking about the importance of iron, Basil Davidson states that:

The importance of iron was so great in those distant times that the reasons for this must be examined in more detail. The first reason was that it gave West Africans better weapons and tools. Iron-pointed spears were more useful than sharp sticks or stones. Iron-headed hoes, probably invented sometime after iron-pointed spears, were better than stone or wooden ones. Iron-headed axes could fell trees and shape wood much better than stone axes (Davidson, 1977, p.15).

The improvement of tools allowed West Africans to move on easily in the forest. This movement from one place to another brought diversity to their diets and improved life expectancy. Therefore, the strength of the community required the establishment of law and order. Besides, people were gathered together in families or clans and created the first prototype of government according to their needs. Also, the belt with strong government did not necessarily prove that it was more intelligent than the others but it was

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much linked to the resolution of their matters. For example, those who lived next to the significant trade routes tended to build a structured leadership in the form of a kingdom or governmental one. Though, Davidson taught us about:

The earliest of West Africa's big states was named Wagadu, although the Berber traders of the Saharan trading called it Aoukar. We know it as Ancient Ghana, for Ghana was the title of its king [...] Soon after AD 770, Al-Fazari named it as 'the land of gold'. In about AD 830 Al-Kwarizmi marked it on a map (1977, p.20).

The ancient Ghana also called Wagadu by the native West Africans was as centered as the mango stone due to the genius of the head of groups. They were started by calculators because, from their big cities, you could get goods or barter for them and exchange them against other types of articles that you need. This trading between Wagadu and the Sahara contributed to the improvement of lifestyle on one hand and was an advertisement for the Ghana Empire to be well-known.

The Ancient Egypt has influenced the people who lived along the river Niger and their neighbors, politically, economically, socially, and culturally. Later on, the medieval period appeared with the setting up and the fall of the three greatest empires and other smooth empires and kingdoms later known in West Africa like Ghana, Mali, Senegambia, Songhay, and Kingdoms like Mossi, Igbo, Asante, Bono, and Kanem-Bornu. The unity of these kingdoms, which later on became Empires made Africa powerful at that moment in history, has facilitated slavery and colonization. The current people in this part of Africa may have been influenced by them.

A large number of empires developed in the area of Savana, Sahel, and Sahara around the late third up to the sixteenth century such as the one of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. After a deep analysis of the situation, it can be noticed that all of them owed most of their prosperity to the trans-Saharan trade that they had developed. During the period of big empires, the exchange was based on gold, leather, cotton loincloth, and slaves supplied by West Africa and linen, wool, and silk clothes, arms, bars of copper, and salt supplied by North Africa and Europe. Even if the model has been improved, the Sahara has become a place where drugs and armaments are conveyed in transit and it is considered as a strategic zone.

Mali and Songhay Empires, as well as the smaller kingdom of Ghana before them, were once great trading kingdoms famous for their gold. Yet, despite their greatness, each declined for almost similar reasons and more or less through the same ways or mistakes which were internal quarrels giving opportunities to those from outside to win their battles. Indeed, the ancient Empires did not learn the history of the previous ones before they started any new actions. As a result, the rise and the fall of the ancient trio were similar due to their lack of realism and strong analytical skills. Basil Davidson brought a lot of input to African studies.

III. Basil Davidson's Contributions to African Studies

Basil Davidson is among the greatest white writers who showed and explained the true civilization that existed in Africa before enslavement and colonization. White people thought they were human and Blacks were subhuman. The ideology of imperialism was ultimately reducible to an article of faith that underlined the work of the intellectual agencies of imperialism. They regarded Africans as humans who were qualitatively different from Europeans and who did not share fully in the human nature that served as the springboard for Europe's spectacular achievements. That explains the reason why it was acceptable to govern colonial Africa in ways that would be objectionable in Europe.

The moral debasement of Africans and their cultures, with the use of insulting epithets like "primitive" and "simple societies" in the titles of serious publications on Africa, was readily accepted across the entire spectrum of African studies up to the mid-1950s. In the introduction to *The Lost Cities of Africa*, his first major book on Africa, Davidson (1959, p. ix) derided those reckless views that held that "these [Africans] . . . were naturally inferior or else they were 'children who had still to grow up'; in either case, they were manifestly in need of government by others who had grown up." In a series of provocative book publications, Davidson engaged in what may be called the psychological release of Blacks and their cultures. The description of African peoples as tribes has been replaced by 'nation-states' by Davidson. Nowadays a large number of researchers call these African peoples area regions instead of tribes. Davidson's European colleagues denigrated Africa by using the term "tribalism", whereas Davidson used the inspirational construct of "nationalism" to portray the African political strategies in search of their true liberty as a nation. Molefi explained in *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* published in 2003 that:

Understand this point, a nationalist is not necessarily a racist; indeed, the true nationalist is never a racist. Muhammad was a nationalist who strove to bring about a cohesive spirit among his people; notwithstanding the fact that his teachings are accepted by some non-Arabs...the message of the nationalist is always to his people (p.9).

Afrocentricity is placing African people at the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Africans are questing after their freedom from both Europeans and Arabs as Molefi opined:

Coming across from Arabia into Egypt first, the Arabian armies under General El As assisted the African people in throwing off the yoke of the Romans. But the Arab allies to the African people of Egypt remained as overlords, engaging in numerous wars with the indigenous people, until the final

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overthrow of the regimes of Egypt and Nubia. Thus, the Egyptian people lost their sovereignty first to the Arabs, to the Turks, and afterwards to French and British authorities (Asante, 2003, p.10).

Africans suffered from the oppression of Arabs first in ancient Egypt or Kemet, until the revolution of Nasser and the colonels in 1952. Egyptians had experienced more than one thousand years of foreign control and had been under constant pressure of absorption. Although colonial administration and colonial social anthropology reduced pre-colonial political entities in Africa to simple "chiefdoms," Davidson granted them their rightful term of "kingdoms". We noticed an upgrading of the moral worth of Africans in Davidson's *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade*. Unlike most established Western scholars of the slave trade who regarded it as a natural economic transaction and were pleased to treat the victims of the evil trade as economic goods, Davidson saw the African slave trade as an unjust and irresponsible turn of events in the normal and decent relations between European nations and African peoples.

Also, the unfair and tricky relations of African partner nations over the course of several centuries, following Portuguese explorations in Atlantic Africa were a nightmare for Africans. The British author evaluated the slave trade in human terms and weighed its consequences on the scales of human history. Davidson (1961, p. xiv) regretted "the steady year-by-year export of African labor to the West Indies and the Americas that marked the greatest and most fateful migration, forced migration in the history of man." He was disgusted by chattel slavery which was based on two basic forms of chattel, domestic one and productive one. It was a shameless dehumanization of its victims as hapless slaves abusively regarded by a lot of writers as papers of economic exchange. Instead, with all the respect, Davidson did not doubt to call them "captives" of the slave trade. The slave trade was largely treated as an aspect of European and American international trade quite before the publication of *Black Mother* in 1961. Basil Davidson showed the harmful slave trade consequences for African regions.

Basil Davidson helped to redirect the course of African studies in a more dramatic way other than through the means of such nuanced moral reevaluation of Africans and their cultures. The orality of Africa through the Griots and old historians having a narrative outside of the contact with Europeans was really discouraged. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown of Oxford University, taught his followers that, unlike the situation in Europe, "We cannot have a history of African institutions" (Radcliffe-Brown 1950, p. 2). We can notice the domination of the methodology of African studies well up to the 1950s, colonial social anthropology contended that Africans and their cultures were best studied by adopting and adapting the tools of the natural sciences. They propagated the view that the human sciences of history and philosophy, which they thought were specially invented for the mastery of European civilizations, were inappropriate for the study of African societies. In 1960, most of the African countries became independent and most of the Europeans still believed that Africans have no history.

Basil Davidson's greatest achievement in African studies is that he pioneered credible publications that confronted such outlandish prejudices as Trevor-Roper's. Davidson's towering feat was that he assembled and provided scholarly illumination on an assortment of archeological, artistic, anthropological, and indeed historical data and evidence that others had ignored. Freed from institutional prejudices that European imperialism had implanted into its intellectual agencies, Davidson shed new light on ancient African societies and offered a fresh interpretation of African history. The inclusion of the civilizations of the Sahara, Egypt, and Kush in his work enabled him to lend respect to the chronological time-depth of African history, reckoned in millennia rather than in centuries (Davidson, 1966). The dramatic degeneration of the Sahara from its green age of pioneering agriculture and animal husbandry to its subsequent fateful desiccation has laid waste a huge portion of Africa. Davidson's prominent schools of history in his homeland fought against the separation of ancient Egypt from African history. Although he might have used different words and phrases and would probably not go as far as the Senegalese scholar did, Davidson would seem to share in the sentiments of Cheikh Anta Diop's declaration: "Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization".

"The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt.... The African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective, nor unruffled; he is ignorant, cowardly and neurotic" (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). The expressed purpose of Basil Davidson's ambitious adventures in African historiography was not limited to unearthing the depth of ancient African history. Davidson was insistent that knowledge of the African past would help us in the appreciation of the African present. Writing in 1961 about the purpose of his first two major works in African history, Davidson (1961, p. xi) proclaimed as follows: "As with its predecessor, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, the aim of this book [*Black Mother*] is to reassess the past of Africa, and thus contribute to a fuller understanding of the Independent Africa of today." His faith was that Africa's rich history of the past would be leveraged into prosperous and worthy postcolonial states and societies in the modern world. Davidson framed the terms of this form of dissonance between the miserable African present and the substantial achievements of the African past in somber and realist language in a page of *The Black Man's Burden* that is worth quoting from:

The history of Africa's self-development, before foreign rule began, has shown that these peoples achieved much in the past, and will in all likelihood achieve much again.... But the actual and present condition of Africa is one of deep trouble, sometimes a deeper trouble than the worst imposed during the colonial years.... And so the historian, emerging from the study of past centuries when Africa generally knew no such misery and crisis ... meets questions not to be avoided. What explains this

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degradation from the hopes and freedoms of newly regained independence? Where did the liberators go astray? (Davidson, 1992, p. 9).

The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State is Davidson's (1992) effort to account for such a historical dissonance in Africans' experiences with statecraft. The Black Man's Burden is a complex book. In it, Davidson was intensely based on self-reflection. He did offer an explanation for the failure of postcolonial states in Africa to measure up to the high standards of their predecessors in ancient times. To begin with, Davidson ruled out inherent internal weaknesses of "human blunders and corruption" as too "easy answers" (1992, p. 10) to the fundamental question of near-catastrophic failures in modern African statecraft. Instead, Davidson blames the abnormalities of modern state formation in Africa on the advent of European imperialism and its powers to alienate colonial societies from the traditional virtues of ancient Africa. He also blamed these modern failures on the structure of African nationalism that unwisely appropriated the vices of the colonial state.

CONCLUSION

Basil Davidson passed away fourteen years ago. His impact on the African Civilization, in a nutshell, continues to grow as he described the growth of West African history. He was a man of numerous talents and multiple lives. After dropping out at sixteen years old, he was not technically supposed to shine all around the world based on his academic research but his destiny has decided differently. He was able to be a soldier and in addition to that, he became a secret agent. After spending some hard period in this job, he decided to become a journalist. Exactly like Ernest Miller Hemingway who also was an American novelist, journalist, and short-story writer. An example for the future generation to understand is that 'where there is a will there is a way'. His book contributes to enhancing the level of students who have a history in West Africa as their major in preparing for the General Certificate of Education and likewise for public investigations. Through it, a lot of people learned about the historical growth and also the value of the civilization of West Africa. As a White man, he silenced those who thought that Africa had no history before colonization. If you do not investigate his person before you read his book, you will believe that he is a black person. He has revolutionarily changed the knowledge of people about African history. Definitely, the book has reached its goal because it traced the growth of West Africans' indigenous contributions up to the coming of the first colons in this rich part of African history. The rich civilization heritage of Africa grew steadily but surely up to the arrival of the Atlantic slave trade organizers. The spreading of the great contribution of Africa does make the business of the enemies of Africa and Davidson showed the way to the future generation.

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