African Genesis: A Personal Investigation into the Animal Origins and Nature of Man, usually referred to as African Genesis, is a 1961 nonfiction work by Robert Ardrey. It posited the hypothesis that man evolved on the African continent from carnivorous, predatory ancestors who distinguished themselves from apes by the use of weapons. The work bears on questions of human origins, human nature, and human uniqueness. It has been widely read and continues to inspire significant controversy.

African Genesis is the first in Robert Ardrey's Nature of Man Series. It is followed by The Territorial Imperative (1966), The Social Contract (1970), and The Hunting Hypothesis (1976). It was illustrated by Ardrey's wife, the South African actress and illustrator Berdine Ardrey (née Grunewald).

Background

Robert Ardrey, at the time a working playwright and screenwriter, travelled in 1955 to Africa, partly at the behest of Richard Foster Flint, to investigate claims made by Raymond Dart about a specimen of Australopithecus africanus. Ardrey was initially much taken by the theory. As a correspondent he wrote an article about it for The Reporter. After receiving significant attention the article was reprinted in Science Digest, which marked the beginning of the spread of popular notions about Australopithecus. The article in Science Digest also led to The Smithsonian Institution contacting Dart and eventually providing him funding to continue his research.

Following a visit by Dr. Kenneth P. Oakley Ardrey agreed to write a book on the subject. Oakley secured an office for Ardrey in the National History Museum in London, as well as access to its private libraries. Ardrey spent six years traveling between Northern universities and African archeological sites. During this time he worked with many notable scientists, including Louis Leakey (then affiliated with the Coryndon Museum in Kenya) and Tony Sutcliffe (then affiliated with the Royal Archeological Institute).

Ardrey eventually came to be a vocal proponent of this thesis, introducing it, in modified form, to a broad audience with African Genesis. He added to it his own ideas about the role of territory in human behavior, about hierarchy in social animals, and about
the instinctual status of the urge to dominate one's fellows.\[6\]

**Legacy**

*African Genesis* met with massive popular success and widespread recognition. It became an international bestseller and was translated into dozens of languages.\[8\] In 1962 it was a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction.\[9\] In 1969 *Time* magazine named *African Genesis* the most notable nonfiction book of the 1960s.\[10\] The book has continued to bear on the popular imagination of human nature.

The theories of Dart and Ardrey flew in the face of prevailing theories of human origins. At the time of the publication of *African Genesis* it was generally agreed that human beings evolved from Asian ancestors. Furthermore, it was taken for granted that these ancestors were herbivorous. The idea of an African Genesis of humanity was met with fervent resistance in the scientific community.\[5\]:38:50

On a grander scale, Ardrey challenged the reigning methodological assumption of the social sciences, that human behavior was fundamentally distinct from animal behavior. As he put it in his next book, *The Territorial Imperative*, "The dog barking at you from behind his master's fence acts for a motive indistinguishable from that of his master when the fence was built."\[11\]

Following the publication of *African Genesis* Ardrey's theories became mired in controversy because of his notions about innate human violence and inherited instinctual aggression. (For more details, see *The Territorial Imperative.*) Later commentators, however, have come to emphasize the broader implications of Ardrey's theories; it is now commonly accepted that the controversy obscured the core of his thinking. William Wright, for example, writing in 2013, writes "Not only was Ardrey, with his three-million-year-old unsolved murders, claiming that evolution has saddled us with a battery of behavioral traits, but he was also reckless enough to emphasize the most repugnant, the killer impulse. This inflammatory claim certainly won Ardrey attention, but the angry controversy it provoked almost obscured the main point: that human behavior is as much a product of evolution as the human body."\[12\]:179

While Ardrey's theses on aggression were controversial, he was also challenged on his conviction that the study of animal behavior is necessarily relevant to the study of human behavior. This precept has gained widespread acceptance and, due in large part to Ardrey's work, passed into the scientific commonsense. Following the 1961 publication of *African Genesis* the science of ethology, which is based on the methodological assumption of the cross-relevance of anthropology and zoology, underwent a massive flourishing. 1966 saw Lorenz's *On Aggression* published, followed by Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape* in 1967, Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* in 1969, and Tiger and Fox's *The Imperial Animal* in 1971. Along with ethology's ascendance came a renaissance of its central premise—then much derided in scientific communities by blank-state theorists—that the study of animal behavior could tell us much about human behavior.\[12\]:178

*African Genesis* led Ardrey into a long career of work in anthropology and ethology. Regarding his later-in-life return to science, Ardrey wrote "while peasant and poet may apprehend a truth, it is the obligation of science to define it, to prove it, to assimilate its substance into the body of scientific thought, and to make its conclusions both available and understandable to the society of which science is a part."\[1\]

His writings on paleoanthropology, ethnology, and anthropology, along with the massive popular success of *African Genesis*, are widely credited with initiating public interest in these fields and sparking widespread popular debate about human nature as it is connected to human evolution.\[13\][14][15] C.K. Brain, for example, writes:

*African Genesis* has, in all probability, been read by more people throughout the world than any other book on human evolution and the nature of man. Its influence has been very great indeed as it fermented an intense debate about these topics, and catalysed a new set of concepts in paleoanthropology.\[3\]

Several scientists credit Ardrey's work, and *African Genesis* in particular, with launching them into their studies.
In 1972, defending his film *A Clockwork Orange* from Fred M. Hechinger, Stanley Kubrick cited Ardrey. In particular, he quoted *African Genesis* (along with *The Social Contract*).[18] Kubrick was a notable fan of Ardrey's work, and also cited him as an inspiration for his 1968 film, [*2001: A Space Odyssey*].[19][20] Nonetheless, the behavior of the apes in the "Dawn of Man" sequence of 2001 has since been "proven false", since violent apes such as these have now been shown to be "vegetarians" instead—according to archeologist K. Kris Hirst in reviewing the 2015 PBS documentary film *Dawn of Humanity*, which describes, directly in the context of 2001, the 2015 studies of fossils of *Homo naledi*.[21][22]

A.J. Jacobs, who wrote the 2004 book *The Know-It-All*, about reading the entire *Encyclopædia Britannica*, states in an interview that a quote from African Genesis was the most profound thing he read while reading the Encyclopædia.[23]

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(From the Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke.)


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