Black Inventors: Crafting Over 200 Years of Success. Keith C Holmes.

Two of the prolonged myths about Africa is that her history is limited to the continent’s colonial past and secondly African’s have contributed little to the development of the world’s science, technology and agricultural innovations. And even the few publications which do mention Black inventors rarely cite inventors outside the US.

Keith Holmes sets out to counter these omissions and in doing so, he provides us with a comprehensive catalogue of Black inventions and inventors as well as a glimpse into the socioeconomic and political history of Black people.

This book will prove that without the inventors, innovators, designers and labourers of African descent, in Africa as well as throughout the African Diaspora, western technology, as we know it today, would not exist.

Holmes’s book is some 20 years in the making and builds on a book by Henry E. Baker written in 1913, “The Colored Inventor”. Acknowledging Africa as the ancestral homeland of all Black people, Holmes wanted to expand Baker’s research which was limited to the US, to include the “Motherland” and the whole of the African Diaspora. It is not surprising that the book has taken such a long time to write as it includes inventors from Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, Russia, Australia, Native America as well as the United States over a two hundred year period.

The Introduction states the book is organised into three parts. Part One covers the role African civilisations have played in developing innovations. Part Two, identifies inventors who originated in Africa and Part Three provides a geographical breakdown of inventors. I can't understand why the author chose this format as Part One is only 4 pages of, mainly tables covering inventions in Ancient Egypt and pre-colonial Africa. It would have been far better if Part One had been written in a discussion format using the tables to supplement the text rather than the other way around.

In Part Two, the author chooses another format which is essentially a series of sentences and although the information is interesting, it seems to me that it would be far more engaging and reader friendly if it was written in a more traditional style of paragraphs built around themes. Sometimes the mixture of writing styles makes the book appear disjointed and scattered which is a shame as it does contain very valuable and previously unpublished material on the history of Africa and her descendents.

Part Three is the meat of the book, where we really come to see the value of the content. This is where the author sets out the detailed material – invention, country, gender, of hundreds of inventions. He has gone to great lengths to present the data in easy to read table format supported by text, under a range of categories. We are able to see at glance the date of an invention plus the number of inventions by Africans in the various European countries or by women across the various states of the US. We are able to see how our environment shapes the inventions we create. For example a Black Australian is given a patent for the improvement of sheep sheers. An Ethiopian for adapting the typewriter to the Ethiopian script. A Jamaican for applying steam to a sugar mill and a Nigerian for improving extracting machines for palm oil. There are so many pleasing surprises to be found in the pages of Black Inventors from everyday utility items to specialised machinery. In 1862, a Black man from New Haven, Connecticut invented the ironing board. In 1923 the pneumatic tube was invented in Cuba.

The contribution of Black women is also documented and though the author states that more research needs to take place, he does record patents from Black women in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe and the US. Many of the patents held by Black people are for medical and scientific products and processes and again these are spread across the continents.

The one question that keeps propping up as you read the book is how especially in the Diaspora has the author managed to identify patents held by people of colour? The answer to this question reveals
the racist ideology behind the classification system devised to document information about Black people.

One in which the author rightly points out, was developed to prevent Black people from identifying each other. Thus we have Black people classified as African, Afro, Black, Coloured, Caribbean, Kaffir, Negro, Mulatto and so on. On the problem of specifically identifying a patent as belonging to a Black person, the author would have to rely on census information and cross check that with each patent which gives you an idea of the amount of work involved in producing a book such as this one.

Black Inventors is a huge resource and is particularly useful to teachers, students, researchers and librarians who wish to discover inventions from a particular time period, geographic location right down to cities, by gender, type of technology. It is not just a list of inventions along with names, nationality, gender and country. The book is also a geosocial and colonial history of Africans and their descendants. Black people are largely unaware of the contribution of Black innovators to the economic growth of the industrial West. Some of the inventions have generated billions of dollars such as the two patents held by Norbert Rillieux two hundred years ago which are used in the food and beverage industry. As the author writes, “it is important to correct the myth that savages and uncultivated people were transferred from their homelands to save them and put an end to their misery”. On the contrary, Africans brought with them ideas, craftsmanship and the desire to design and create new things.


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