



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

Cheikh Anta Diop and the New Light on African History

By Dr. John Henrik Clarke (1974)

Cheikh Anta Diop, one of the most able of present day scholars writing about Africa, is also one of the greatest living Black historians. His first major work, *Nations Negres et Culture* (1955) is still disturbing the white historians who have made quick reputations as authorities on African history and culture. In this book Dr. Diop shows the interrelationships between African nations, north and south, and proves, because in this case proof is needed again and again, that ancient Egypt was a distinct African nation and was not historically or culturally a part of Asia or Europe. More myths about Africa are put to rest in another one of his books, *The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa*, (1959). The publication of his first book in the United States, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth of Reality*, is a cause for celebration. This book and others of recent years, all by Black writers, have called for a total reconsideration of the role that African people have played in history and their impact on the development of early societies and institutions.

Cheikh Anta Diop¹ was born in the town of Diourbel, in Senegal, on the West coast of Africa in 1923. His birthplace has a long tradition of producing Muslim scholars and oral historians. This is where his inspiration and interest in history, the humanities and social sciences from an African point of view began. After the publication of his first book *Nations Negres et Culture*, that had been rejected as a Ph.D. thesis at the Sorbonne in Paris, he became one of the most controversial of present day African historians. *Nations Negres et Culture* is both a reassessment of the African past and a challenge to Western scholarship on Africa. He refutes the myth of Egypt as a white nation and shows its southern African origins. It is his intention to prove that, through Egyptian civilization, Africa had made the oldest and one of the most significant contributions to world culture. This is not a new argument that started with Cheikh Anta Diop's generation of Africans. The Ghanaian historian, Joseph B. Danquah, in his introduction to the book, *United West Africa at the Bar of the Family of Nations*, by Ladipo Solanke, published in 1927, four years after Cheikh Anta Diop was born, said exactly the same thing. His statement reads:

"By the time Alexander the Great was sweeping the civilized world with conquest after conquest from Chaeronia to Gaza, from Babylon to Cabul; by the time the first Aryan conquerors were learning the rudiments of war and government at the feet of the philosopher Aristotle; and by the time Athens was laying down the foundations of European civilization, the earliest and greatest Ethiopian culture had already flourished and dominated the civilized world for over four centuries and a half. Imperial Ethiopia had conquered Egypt and founded the XXVth Dynasty, and for a century and a half the central seat of civilization in the known world was held by the ancestors of the modern Negro, maintaining and defending it against the Assyrian and Persian Empires of the East. Thus, at the time when Ethiopia was leading the civilized world in culture and conquest, East was East, but West was not, and the first European (Grecian) Olympiad was yet to be held. Rome was nowhere to be seen on the map, and sixteen centuries were to pass before Charlemagne would rule in Europe and Egbert

became first King of England. Even then, history was to drag on for another seven hundred weary years, before Roman Catholic Europe could see fit to end the Great Schism, soon to be followed by the disturbing news of the discovery of America and the fateful rebirth of the youngest of world civilizations."²

Here Dr. Danquah is showing that African history is the foundation of world history. In the present book by Cheikh Anta Diop, and in most of his other works, his objective is the same. In his first major work on history, Dr. Diop has said:

"The general problem confronting African history is this: how to recognize effectively, through meaningful research, all of the fragments of the past into a single ancient epoch, a common origin which will reestablish African continuity. ... If the ancients were not victims of a mirage, it should be easy enough to draw upon another series of arguments and proofs for the union of the history of Ethiopian and Egyptian societies with the rest of Africa. Thus combined, these histories would lead to a properly patterned past in which it would be seen that (ancient) Ghana rose in the interior (West Africa) of the continent at the moment of Egyptian decline, just as the Western European empires were born with the decline of Rome."

While using Africa as the vantage point and the basis for his thesis, Dr. Diop does not neglect the broader dimensions of history. He shows that history cannot be restricted by the limits of ethnic group, nation, or culture. Roman history is Greek as well as Roman, and both the Greek and the Roman histories are Egyptian because the entire Mediterranean was civilized Egypt; and Egypt in turn borrowed from other parts of Africa, especially Ethiopia.

Africa came into the Mediterranean world mainly through Greece, which had been under African influence. The first Greek invasion of Africa was peaceful and scholarly. This invasion brought in Herodotus. Egypt had lost its independence over a century before his visit. This was the beginning of the period of foreign domination over Egypt that would last, in different forms, for two thousand years.

The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality is a one-volume translation of the major sections of the first and last of the books by Cheikh Anta Diop, i.e., *Nations Negres et Culture and Anteriorite des Civilisations Negres*. These two works have challenged and changed the direction of attitudes about the place of African people in history in scholarly circles around the world. It was largely due to these works that Cheikh Anta Diop, with W.E.B. Du Bois, was honored as "the writer who had exerted the greatest influence on African people in the 20th century" at the World Festival of Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966.

The main thesis of the present work is a redefinition of the place of Egypt in African history in particular and in world history in general. Dr. Diop calls attention to the historical, archeological and anthropological evidence that supports his thesis. The civilization of Egypt, he maintains, is African in origin and in early development. In his book Dr. Diop says:

"The history of Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until

African historians connect it with the history of Egypt."

He further states:

"The African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest or objective, nor unruffled, he is ignorant, cowardly, and neurotic."

Dr. Diop approaches the history of Africa frontally, head-on with explanations, but no apologies. In locating Egypt on the map of human geography he asks and answers the question: who were the Egyptians of the ancient world?

The Ethiopians say that the Egyptians were one of their colonies, which was brought into Egypt by the deity Osiris. The Greek writer Herodotus repeatedly referred to the Egyptians as being dark-skinned people with woolly hair. "They," he says, "have the same tint of skin which approaches that of the Ethiopians." The opinion of the ancient writers on the Egyptians is more or less summed up by Gaston Maspero (1846–1916) when he says, "By the almost unanimous testimony of ancient historians, they [the Egyptians] belong to an African race which first settled in Ethiopia on the Middle Nile: following the course of the river they gradually reached the sea."

"The Greek writer, Herodotus, may be mistaken," Cheikh Anta Diop tells us, "when he reports the customs of a people. But one must grant that he was at least capable of recognizing the skin color of the inhabitants of countries he visited." His descriptions of the Egyptians were the descriptions of a Black people. At this point the reader needs to be reminded of the fact that at the time of Herodotus's visit to Egypt and other parts of Africa (between 480 and 425 B.C.) Egypt's Golden Age was over. Egypt had suffered from several invasions, mainly the Kushite invasions, coming from within Africa, and starting in 751 B.C., and the Assyrians' invasions from Western Asia (called the Middle East), starting in 671 B.C. If Egypt, after years of invasions by other people and nations was a distinct Black African nation at the time of Herodotus, shouldn't we at least assume that it was more so before these invasions occurred?

If Egypt is a dilemma in Western historiography, it is a created dilemma. The Western historians, in most cases, have rested the foundation of what is called "Western Civilization" on the false assumptions, or claim, that the ancient Egyptians were white people. To do this they had to ignore great masterpieces on Egyptian history written by other white historians who did not support this point of view, such as Gerald Massey's great classic, *Ancient Egypt, The Light of the World*, (1907) and his other works, *A Book of the Beginnings* and *The Natural Genesis*. Other neglected works by white writers are *Politics, Intercourse, and Trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians, Egyptians*, by A.H.L. Heeren (1833), and *Ruins of Empires*, by Count Volney (1787).

In the first chapter of his book, Dr. Diop refers to the Southern African origins of the people later known as Egyptians. Here he is on sound ground with a lot of support coming from another group of neglected white writers. In his book *Egypt*, Sir E.A. Wallis Budge says: "The prehistoric native of Egypt, both in the old and in the new Stone Ages, was African and there is every reason for saying that the earliest settlers came from the South." He further states: "There are many things in the manners and

customs and religions of the historic Egyptians that suggests that the original home of their prehistoric ancestors was in a country in the neighborhood of Uganda and Punt." (Some historians believe that the biblical land of Punt was in the area known on modern maps as Somalia.)

European interest in "Ethiopia and the Origin of Civilization" dates from the early part of the nineteenth century and is best reflected in a little known, though important, paper in Karl Richard Lepsius' *Incomparable Survey of the Monumental Ruins in the Ethiopian Nile Valley in 1842–1844*. The records found by Lepsius tend to show how Ethiopia was once able to sustain an ancient population that was numerous and powerful enough not only to challenge but, on a number of occasions, to conquer completely the populous land of Egypt. Further, these records show that the antiquity of Ethiopian civilization had a direct link with civilization of ancient Egypt.

Many of the leading antiquarians of the time, based largely on the strength of what the classical authors, particularly Diodorus Siculus and Stephanus of Byzantium, had to say on the matter, were exponents of the view that the ancient Ethiopians, or at any rate, the Black people of remote antiquity were the earliest of all civilized peoples and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Egypt were members of what is referred to as the Black race who entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia. A number of Europe's leading writers on the civilizations of remote antiquity have written brilliant defenses of this point of view. Some of these writers are Brice, Count Volney, Fabre, d'Oliver, and Heeren. In spite of the fact that these writers defended this thesis with all the learning at their command and documented their defense, most of the present-day writers of African history continue to ignore their findings.

In 1825, German backwardness in this respect came definitely to an end. In that year, Arnold Hermann Heeren (1760–1842), Professor of History and Politics in the University of Gottengen and one of the ablest of the early exponents of the economic interpretation of history, published, in the fourth and revised edition of his great work *Ideen Uber Die Politik, Den Verkehr Und Den Handel Der Vornehmsten Volker Der Alten Welt*, a lengthy essay on the history, culture, and commerce of the ancient Ethiopians, which had profound influence on contemporary writers in the conclusion that it was among these ancient Black people of Africa and Asia that international trade was first developed. He thinks that as a by-product of these international contacts there was an exchange of ideas and cultural practices that laid the foundations of the earliest civilizations of the ancient world.

The French writer Count C. F. Volney, in his important work, *The Ruins of Empires*, extends this point of view by saying that the Egyptians were the first people to "attain the physical and moral sciences necessary to civilized life." In referring to the basis of this achievement he states further that, "It was, then, on the borders of the Upper Nile, among a Black race of men, that was organized the complicated system of worship of the stars, considered in relation to the productions of the earth and the labors of agriculture; and this first worship, characterized by their adoration under their own forms and national attributes, was a simple proceeding of the human mind."³

Over a generation ago African American historians such as Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Willis N. Huggins, J. A. Rogers, and Charles C. Seifort read the works of these radical writer-historians and began to expand on their findings. This tradition continued and is reflected in the works of present day Black historians such as John G. Jackson's *Introduction to African Civilizations* (1970), Yosef ben-Jochannan's *Black Man of the Nile* (1972), and Chancellor Williams's *The Destruction of Black*

Civilization: Great Issues of a Race From 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D. (1971).

Until the publication of James G. Spady's article, "Negritude, Pan-Benegritude and the Diopian Philosophy of African History," in *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, volume 5, number 1, January, 1972, and the recent interview by Harun Kofi Wangara, published in *Black World* magazine, February, 1974, Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop was known to only a small group of Black writers and teachers in the United States. For over seven years his books were offered to American publishers with no show of interest. Now two of his books will be published in the United States within one year. The Third World Press in Chicago is preparing to publish his book, *The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa*. All of his books were originally published by *Presence Africaine*, the Paris-based publication arm of the International Society of African Culture.

Egyptology developed in concurrence with the development of the slave trade and the colonial system. It was during this period that Egypt was literally taken out of Africa, academically, and made an extension of Europe. In many ways Egypt is the key to ancient African history. African history is out of kilter until ancient Egypt is looked upon as a distinct African nation. The Nile River played a major role in the relationship to Egypt to the nations in Southeast Africa. During the early history of Africa, the Nile was a great cultural highway on which elements of civilization came into and out of inner Africa. Egypt's relationship with the people in the South was both good and bad, depending on the period and the dynasty in power.

In his chapter called, "What were the Egyptians?," Dr. Diop explains the rise and fall of Egypt's Golden Age and the beginnings of the invasions, first from Western Asia, that turned this nation's first age of greatness into a nightmare. This was the period of the Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings. During this time seventy Jews, grouped in twelve patriarchal families, nomads without industry or culture, entered Egypt. These Jews left Egypt four hundred years later 600,000 strong, after acquiring from African people all of the elements of their future religion, tradition, and culture, including monotheism. Whosoever the Jews were when they entered Africa, when they left, four hundreds later, they were ethnically, culturally, and religiously an African people. In this part of his book, Cheikh Anta Diop leaves no room for argument.

In the chapter called, "Birth of the Negro Myth," Dr. Diop shows how African people, whose civilizations were old before Europe was born, were systematically read out of the respectful commentary of human history. This examination is continued in the chapter called, "Modern Falsification of History." Here, Cheikh Anta Diop deals with how Western historians, for the last five hundred years wrote or rewrote history glorifying the people of European extraction and distorted the history of the rest of the world.

Those who read this book seriously are in for a shock and rewarding experience in learning. This is a major work by a major Black historian. At last, the renaissance of African historiography from an African point of view has begun, and none too soon. I will say again, the publication of Cheikh Anta Diop's book *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* is a cause for celebration.

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