

Cheikh Anta Diop: Great African Scholar Revisited

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Cheikh Anta Diop was born in 1923. He obtained his advanced doctoral degree in 1960, and went directly to work as Research Fellow at IFAN, Dakar's Institute of African Studies. Concurrently, he directed the Carbon Dating Laboratory, a facility he himself built from scratch. In 1981 he was belatedly appointed Professor of Egyptology and Prehistory in the Faculty of Humanities. He died in Dakar, Senegal on February 7, 1986.

Historian, anthropologist, linguist, mathematician, physicist, philosopher, and Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop was all of these. Throughout this scholarly work, he highlighted two outstanding features of Africa's history: first, its anteriority - in other words, its status as the source of human history and civilization; and secondly, its remarkable continuity. The

following is a brief outline of key ideas in Diop's work:

Africa is the cradle of all humanity. It was from Africa that, at the evolutionary stage of *homo habilis*, the *hominidae* set out to populate the Eurasian continent. It was in Africa that humanity accomplished its rise to the status of *homo sapiens*. And it was in Africa that the first Neolithic revolution took place.

The fruit of that crucial leap in human intelligence was the world's first major cultural achievement, the pharaonic civilization of Ancient Egypt. That African civilization got its formative beginnings in the Sudan and Nilotic Nubia. Egypt provided the context in which it attained its full flowering.

Pharaonic Egypt was a black African civilization before the foreign infiltration and invasions that finally helped destroy it. Of this truth there is abundant evidence: to start with the ancient Egyptians perceived themselves as black people and portrayed themselves in their own words, images and records as such. Secondly, the Greek and Latin classics confirm this truth. Thirdly, the *Bible* also bears witness to it. Fourthly, and very significantly, modern, scientific methods of clinical analyses prove it. Finally, those bent on denying the Africanness of Ancient Egypt have only one way open to them: to turn history, which ought to be the logical study of facts and ideas, into an arbitrary, absurd mess.

Egypt was not an Indo-European achievement. It was neither Semitic nor Hornito-Semitic. The plain truth is that Egypt was African, black African. Spreading its influence outside the parent continent, it made a fecundating contribution to later civilizations rising in the northern Mediterranean. The cradle of scientific knowledge, art and literature, whose first manifestations appeared here as early as 3,000 years before Jesus Christ, Egyptian civilization offers a key to the understanding of numerous aspects of Greek, Judaic, Christian and Islamic thought.

So in the long history of the world, it was Africa and Africans that provided humanity its civilizing leaven from ancient times until the dawn of the modern age. Africa's contribution to humanity, understood without prejudice, is simply beyond measure.

What of the relationship of Ancient Egypt to present-day Africa? The imprint left by pharaonic Egypt on the cultural visage of sub-Saharan Africa has been so deep that the continent's post-pharaonic civilizations stand revealed, on careful study, as basically neo-pharaonic.

As for the history of Africa, the parent continent itself, in the long view, shows a remarkable continuity. For even when, at the beginning of the first millennium before Christ, the civilizing center that was Egypt began its decline, Kush became a fresh center. In time Kush also yielded place, but the flame was picked up by Axum in the east, and by Ghana in the west.

To eyes prepared to see, so clear is the record of this continuity that in any informed approach to the Humanities in Africa, it is the ancient pharaonic civilization which provides an appropriate humanist substratum for the study of black Africa's Egypt- Kushite civilizations and cultures. The cultural affinities (linguistic, religious, institutional, artistic) that link Ancient Egypt and Kush to various cultural centers in sub-Saharan Africa were just so many indices of this continuity in the history of the black African peoples, and of the underlying unity of our civilization and cultures.

This basic unit is an objective reality. It is up to African thinkers and researchers to free their minds to discover it, and then, through their productive work in the continent's institutions of learning, to make it a living part of the daily, active consciousness of Africa's peoples. Once this begins to happen, Africa's' researchers, scholars and intellectuals will find themselves playing their full participatory role, laying the ideational groundwork for the necessary achievement of a federated, united Africa.

By highlighting the historical continuity beneath the cultural achievements of black African societies, and by emphasizing among other realities, the cultural unity of the black peoples and our civilizations, Africa's schools of history will restore to Africans at home and abroad our lost historical consciousness. Such a historical consciousness is an indispensable defense against cultural assimilation, against social alienation, against the now pervasive threat of fatalistic resignation, against the drift into anomie. In sum, a people's historical consciousness, once liberated and energized, is a sure driving force in the human struggle for life.

Such, in very broad outline, is the meaning of Cheikh Anta Diop's lifework. Through that labor of love he helped start a necessary process of epistemological liberation. It is the challenge of Africa's intellectuals, scientists, researchers to complete that process by sharpening in ourselves the capacity to uncover buried scientific truths, by becoming intellectually tough enough to break with old slavish habits of dependence on alien approval, by accepting fully our responsibility to achieve scientific autonomy, and by identifying relevant classificatory criteria springing from our own daily living realities, from the necessities of our own world, and from aspirations born of our own highest dreams.

That was the basis on which Cheikh Anta Diop worked, an intellectual liberator fighting against the falsification of 'history, against academic charlatanism. All his life he did this work in a terrible solitude. Old-guard Africanists were hostile to his ideas. From Dakar University, which ought to have given him his strongest support, all he got for 20 long years was deliberate, calculated frustration, and his political opponents subjected him to the full power of their enmity. In a sense, then, Cheikh Anta Diop died a martyr, worn out by constant harassment from well-placed mediocrities.

Despite all that, he survived long enough to leave an intellectual legacy which makes him undisputed dean of the African school of scientific learning, now already past the budding stage. Henceforth, Cheikh Anta Diop's influence and fame can only grow. That is something sweeter than mere revenge. It is the natural reward of the true intellect, the justified spirit.