THE AFRICAN ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION
MYTH OR REALITY

CHEIKH ANTA DIOP

Edited and translated by MERCER COOK

"... 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." C. A. Diop
THE AFRICAN ORIGIN
OF CIVILIZATION

Myth or Reality
1. The Sphinx, as the first French scientific mission found it in the nineteenth century. This profile is neither Greek nor Semitic: it is Bantu. Its model is said to have been Pharaoh Chephren (circa 2600 B.C., Fourth Dynasty), who built the second Giza pyramid.
Cheikh Anta Diop

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Myth or Reality

Translated from the French by MERCER COOK

Lawrence Hill Books
This book consists of selections from
NATIONS NÈGRES ET CULTURE, first published by
ANTÉriorité des Civilisations Nègres:
Mythe ou Vérité Historique?,
first published by Présence Africaine, Paris, 1967
Copyright © Présence Africaine, 1955 and 1967.

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First edition February, 1974
Lawrence Hill Books is an imprint of
Chicago Review Press, Incorporated
814 North Franklin Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress
Cataloging in Publication Data
Diop, Cheikh Anta.
The African origin of civilization.
Translation of sections of Antérieurité des civilisations nègres
and Nations nègres et culture.
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Negroes in Egypt. 2. Egypt—Civilization—
To 332 B.C. 3. Negro race—History. I. Title.
DT61.D5613 913.32'06'96 73-81746
Table of Contents

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE ix

PREFACE The Meaning of Our Work xii

CHAPTER I What Were the Egyptians? 1

CHAPTER II Birth of the Negro Myth 10

CHAPTER III Modern Falsification of History 43

CHAPTER IV Could Egyptian Civilization Have Originated in the Delta? 85

CHAPTER V Could Egyptian Civilization Be of Asian Origin? 100

CHAPTER VI The Egyptian Race as Seen and Treated by Anthropologists 129

CHAPTER VII Arguments Supporting a Negro Origin 134

CHAPTER VIII Arguments Opposing a Negro Origin 156

CHAPTER IX Peopling of Africa from the Nile Valley 179
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Political and Social Evolution of Ancient Egypt</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>Contribution of Ethiopia-Nubia and Egypt</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>Reply to a Critic</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>Early History of Humanity: Evolution of the Black World</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NOTES ON ARCHEOLOGICAL TERMS USED IN THE TEXT</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INDEX</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Illustrations

1. The Sphinx  
   Frontispiece
2. Handsome East African  
3. The God Osiris  
4. Lord Tera Neter  
5. Narmer (or Menes)  
6. Zoser  
7. Cheops  
8. Mycerinus and the Goddess Hathor  
9. Mentuhotep I  
10. Sesostris I  
11. Ramses II and a Modern Watusi  
12. Tuthmosis III  
13. Taharqa  
14. Egyptian Woman  
15. The Lady with Thumbs  
16. Women Making Perfume  
17. Vintage Time  
18. Sudanese Soldiers  
19. Egyptians Fishing  
20. Egyptian Heads  
21. A Cook  
22. Nok Terra Cotta  
23. Black Peasant Prisoners  
24. Princess and Senegalese Girls  
25. Djimbi and Djéré  
26. Totemic Coiffures  
27. Patesi, King of Lagash  
28. The Famous Dark Red Color  
29. Prisoners of Abu Simbel  
30. Aryan, Libyan, and Semitic Captives  
31. Narmer's Tablet  
32. A Black Queen of Sudan  
   80–81
List of Illustrations

33. Egyptian Totemic Deities 99
34. The Tower of Babel 171
35. Falcon and Crocodile 172
36. Zimbabwe Architecture 173
37. Grimacing Swiss Mask 174
38. Congolese Cubist Mask 175
39. Ife (Nigeria) Head 176
40. Benin Bronze Head 177
41. The Gao Mosque 178
42. The Peul Type 202
43. Ramses II as a Boy 203
44. The Sphinx and the Great Pyramid 227
45. Zoser's Mortuary Temple 228
46. Egyptian Influence on Cretan Art 229
47. Three Skulls 269
48. The Hottentot Venus 270
49. Aurignacian Skull 271
50. Sahara Cave Painting: Negro Woman 272
Translator's Preface

To introduce Cheikh Anta Diop to English-speaking readers, we present, with the author's consent, ten chapters from his first published volume: *Nations nègres et culture* (1954), and three from his latest work: *Antériorité des civilisations nègres: mythe ou vérité historique?* (1967). For purposes of continuity and accessibility, this selection excludes most of the more technical discussions, especially the linguistic and grammatical passages, but nonetheless should give the reader a general idea of what Congolese author Théophile Obenga calls the "Historical Method and Conception of Cheikh Anta Diop."¹

Dr. Diop's method is multi-faceted and reflects his varied background as "historian, physicist, and philosopher." Obenga singles him out as "the only Black African of his generation to have received training as an Egyptologist." As a Senegalese, he has had direct contact with the oral traditions and social structure of West Africa. From André Aymard, Professor of History and later Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Paris, he has gained an understanding of the Greco-Latin world. As a student of Gaston Bachelard, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, André Leroi-Gourhan, and others, he has acquired proficiency in such diverse disciplines as rationalism, dialectics, modern scientific techniques, prehistoric archeology, and so on. More importantly, he has applied this encyclopedic knowledge to his researches on African history.

"While pursuing this research," he told the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in September 1956, "we have come to discover that the ancient Pharaonic Egyptian civilization was undoubtedly a Negro civilization. To defend this thesis, anthropological, ethnological, linguistic, historical, and cultural arguments have been provided. To judge their validity, it suffices to refer to *Nations nègres et culture . . ."²

Thus he proceeded in *Nations nègres et culture* and subsequent volumes to document conclusions that form a coherent theory, controversial because it refutes many ideas previously presented by Egyptologists, anthropologists, archeologists, linguists, and historians.

AFRICAN ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION

A good example of this is Chapter XII of the present volume in which he replies to a critical review of *Nations nègres*.

More than a decade ago Immanuel Wallerstein summarized Dr. Diop's contribution as follows:

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to reconstruct African history has been the numerous writings of Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop has a theory that there is a basic global division of peoples into two kinds: the Southerners (or Negro-Africans), and the Aryans (a category covering all Caucasians, including Semites, Mongoloids, and American Indians). Each grouping has a cultural outlook based on response to climate, the difference between them being that the Aryans have had a harsher climate.

The Aryans have developed patriarchal systems characterized by the suppression of women and a propensity for war. Also associated with such societies are materialist religion, sin and guilt, xenophobia, the tragic drama, the city-state, individualism, and pessimism. Southerners, on the other hand, are matriarchal. The women are free and the people peaceful; there is a Dionysian approach to life, religious idealism, and no concept of sin. With a matriarchal society come xenophilia, the tale as a literary form, the territorial state, social collectivism, and optimism.

According to Diop's theory, the ancient Egyptians, who were Negroes, are the ancestors of the Southerners. This bold hypothesis, which is not presented without supporting data, has the interesting effect of inverting Western cultural assumptions. For, Diop argues, if the ancient Egyptians were Negroes, then European civilization is but a derivation of African achievement. . . .

Born on December 29, 1923, at Diourbel, Senegal, Cheikh Anta Diop received his master of arts degree and his doctorate from the University of Paris. Since 1961 he has been on the staff of IFAN (Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire) in Dakar, where he directs the radiocarbon laboratory which he founded. In 1966, at the First

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Translator's Preface

World Festival of Negro Arts, he shared a special award with the late W. E. B. DuBois, as the writer who had exerted the greatest influence on Negro thought in the twentieth century.

All numbered footnotes in the present volume (except for inserted material included between square brackets and so indicated) are the author's and are placed at the end of the book. All asterisked footnotes within the text are the editor-translator's. For the reader's convenience, a list of Brief Biographical Notes on authors and authorities mentioned within the book but not identified exhaustively is given as an appendix. Most archeological terms used in the book are also listed and defined in an appendix.

M.C.
The Meaning of Our Work

I began my research in September 1946; because of our colonial situation at that time, the political problem dominated all others. In 1949 the RDA* was undergoing a crisis. I felt that Africa should mobilize all its energy to help the movement turn the tide of repression: thus I was elected Secretary General of the RDA students in Paris and served from 1950 to 1953. On July 4–8, 1951 we held in Paris the first postwar Pan African political congress of students, with the West African Student Union (from London) well represented by more than 30 delegates, including the daughter of the Oni of Ife, the late Miss Aderemi Tedju. In February 1953 the first issue of the Voie de l'Afrique Noire appeared; this was the organ of the RDA students. In it I published an article entitled "Toward a Political Ideology in Black Africa."

That article contained a résumé of Nations nègres, the manuscript of which was already completed. All our ideas on African history, the past and future of our languages, their utilization in the most advanced scientific fields as in education generally, our concepts on the creation of a future federal state, continental or subcontinental, our thoughts on African social structures, on strategy and tactics in the struggle for national independence, and so forth, all those ideas were clearly expressed in that article. As would subsequently be seen, with respect to the problem of the continent's political independence, the French-speaking African politicians took their own good time before admitting that this was the right political road to follow. Nevertheless, the RDA students organized themselves into a federation within France and politicized African student circles by popularizing the slogan of national independence for Africa from the Sahara to the Cape.

*Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (Democratic African Rally), the RDA, founded in 1946, "was the first interterritorial movement in French West Africa, created before parties in territories other than Senegal or Ivory Coast had taken root." Ruth S. Morgenthau, Political Parties in French-speaking West Africa. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964, p. 302.
Meaning of Our Work

and from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic, as our periodical attests. The archives of the FEANF (Federation of African Students in France) indicate that it did not begin to adopt anticolonialist positions until it was directed by RDA students.* We stressed the cultural and political content that we included in the concept of independence in order to get the latter adopted in French-speaking Africa: already forgotten is the bitter struggle that had to be waged to impose it on student circles in Paris, throughout France, and even within the ranks of RDA students.

The cultural concept especially will claim our attention here; the problem was posed in terms of restoring the collective national African personality. It was particularly necessary to avoid the pitfall of facility. It could seem too tempting to delude the masses engaged in a struggle for national independence by taking liberties with scientific truth, by unveiling a mythical, embellished past. Those who have followed us in our efforts for more than 20 years know now that this was not the case and that this fear remained groundless.

Admittedly three factors compete to form the collective personality of a people: a psychic factor, susceptible of a literary approach; this is the factor that would elsewhere be called national temperament, and that the Negritude poets have overstressed. In addition, there are the historical factor and the linguistic factor, both susceptible of being approached scientifically. These last two factors have been the subject of our studies; we have endeavored to remain strictly on scientific grounds. Have foreign intellectuals, who challenge our intentions and accuse us of all kinds of hidden motives or ridiculous ideas, proceeded any differently? When they explain their own historical past or study their languages, that seems normal. Yet, when an African does likewise to help reconstruct the national personality of his people, distorted by colonialism, that is considered backward or alarming. We contend that such a study is the point of departure for the

*Starting especially with the administration of Franklin, secretary general of the RDA students at Montpellier. Cf. the article by Penda Marcelle Ouegnin: "Un compte-rendu du Congrès de la FEANF organisé par les ERDA aux Sociétés savantes le 8 avril 1953," in the same bulletin cited above, May–June 1953.

Similarly, with a few exceptions, the PAI (African Independence Party) was organized by former RDA students who had returned to Africa. Various branches in France rallied to the new party which thus carried forward the RDA line and popularized the slogan of national independence that we had launched.
cultural revolution properly understood. All the headlong flights of
certain infantile leftists who try to bypass this effort can be explained
by intellectual inertia, inhibition, or incompetence. The most brilliant
pseudo-revolutionary eloquence ignores that need which must be met
if our peoples are to be reborn culturally and politically. In truth,
many Africans find this vision too beautiful to be true; not so long
ago some of them could not break with the idea that Blacks are non-
existent culturally and historically. It was necessary to put up with
the cliche that Africans had no history and try to start from there to
build something modestly!

Our investigations have convinced us that the West has not been
calm enough and objective enough to teach us our history correctly,
without crude falsifications. Today, what interests me most is to see
the formation of teams, not of passive readers, but of honest, bold re-
search workers, allergic to complacency and busy substantiating and
exploring ideas expressed in our work, such as:

1. 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.
In particular, the study of languages, institutions, and so forth, can-
not be treated properly; in a word, it will be impossible to build Afri-
can humanities, a body of African human sciences, so long as that re-
lationship does not appear legitimate. The African historian who
evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective, nor un-
ruffled; he is ignorant, cowardly, and neurotic. Imagine, if you can,
the uncomfortable position of a western historian who was to write
the history of Europe without referring to Greco-Latin Antiquity and
try to pass that off as a scientific approach.

The ancient Egyptians were Negroes. The moral fruit of their civi-
lization is to be counted among the assets of the Black world. Instead
of presenting itself to history as an insolvent debtor, that Black world
is the very initiator of the “western” civilization flaunted before our
eyes today. Pythagorean mathematics, the theory of the four elements
of Thales of Miletus, Epicurean materialism, Platonic idealism, Juda-
ism, Islam, and modern science are rooted in Egyptian cosmogony
and science. One needs only to meditate on Osiris, the redeemer-
god, who sacrifices himself, dies, and is resurrected to save mankind,
a figure essentially identifiable with Christ.

A visitor to Thebes in the Valley of the Kings can view the Mos-
lem inferno in detail (in the tomb of Seti I, of the Nineteenth Dy-
Meaning of Our Work

nasty), 1700 years before the Koran. Osiris at the tribunal of the dead is indeed the "lord" of revealed religions, sitting enthroned on Judgment Day, and we know that certain Biblical passages are practically copies of Egyptian moral texts. Far be it from me to confuse this brief reminder with a demonstration. It is simply a matter of providing a few landmarks to persuade the incredulous Black African reader to bring himself to verify this. To his great surprise and satisfaction, he will discover that most of the ideas used today to domesticate, atrophy, dissolve, or steal his "soul," were conceived by his own ancestors. To become conscious of that fact is perhaps the first step toward a genuine retrieval of himself; without it, intellectual sterility is the general rule, or else the creations bear I know not what imprint of the subhuman.

In a word, we must restore the historical consciousness of the African peoples and reconquer a Promethean consciousness.

2. Anthropologically and culturally speaking, the Semitic world was born during protohistoric times from the mixture of white-skinned and black-skinned people in western Asia. This is why an understanding of the Mesopotamian Semitic world, Judaic or Arabic, requires constant reference to the underlying Black reality. If certain Biblical passages, especially in the Old Testament, seem absurd, this is because specialists, puffed up with prejudices, are unable to accept documentary evidence.

3. The triumph of the monogenetic thesis of humanity (Leakey), even at the stage of "Homo sapiens-sapiens," compels one to admit that all races descended from the Black race, according to a filiation process that science will one day explain.*

4. In L'Afrique Noire précoloniale (1960), I had two objectives: (1) to demonstrate the possibility of writing a history of Black Africa free of mere chronology of events, as the preface to that volume clearly indicates; (2) to define the laws governing the evolution of African sociopolitical structures, in order to explain the direction that historical evolution has taken in Black Africa; therefore, to try henceforth to dominate and master that historical process by knowledge, rather than simply to submit to it.

These last questions, like those about origins (Egypt), are among

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XV
the key problems; once they are solved, a scholar can proceed to write the history of Africa. Consequently, it is evident why we are paying particular attention to the solution of such problems and of so many others which transcend the field of history.

The research pattern inaugurated by *L'Afrique Noire précoloniale* on the sociohistorical, not on the ethnographic, plane has since been utilized by many researchers. That, I suppose, is what has led them to describing the daily life of the Congolese or enlarging upon the various forms of political, economic, social, military, and judicial organization in Africa.

5. To define the image of a modern Africa reconciled with its past and preparing for its future.*

6. Once the perspectives accepted until now by official science have been reversed, the history of humanity will become clear and the history of Africa can be written. But any undertaking in this field that adopts compromise as its point of departure as if it were possible to split the difference, or the truth, in half, would run the risk of producing nothing but alienation. Only a loyal, determined struggle to destroy cultural aggression and bring out the truth, whatever it may be, is revolutionary and consonant with real progress; it is the only approach which opens on to the universal. Humanitarian declarations are not called for and add nothing to real progress.

Similarly, it is not a matter of looking for the Negro under a magnifying glass as one scans the past; a great people has nothing to do with petty history, nor with ethnographic reflections sorely in need of renovation. It matters little that some brilliant Black individuals may have existed elsewhere. The essential factor is to retrace the history of the entire nation. The contrary is tantamount to thinking that to be or not to be depends on whether or not one is known in Europe. The effort is corrupted at the base by the presence of the very complex one hopes to eradicate. Why not study the acculturation of the white man in a Black milieu, in ancient Egypt, for example?

7. How does it happen that all modern Black literature has remained minor, in the sense that no Negro African author or artist, to my knowledge, has yet posed the problem of man's fate, the major theme of human letters?

8. In *L'Unité culturelle de l'Afrique Noire*, we tried to pinpoint the features common to Negro African civilization.

Meaning of Our Work

9. In the second part of Nations nègres, we demonstrated that African languages could express philosophic and scientific thought (mathematics, physics, and so forth)* and that African culture will not be taken seriously until their utilization in education becomes a reality. The events of the past few years prove that UNESCO has accepted those ideas.†

10. I am delighted to learn that one idea proposed in L'Afrique Noire précoloniale—the possibilities of pre-Columbian relations between Africa and America—has been taken up by an American scholar. Professor Harold G. Lawrence, of Oakland University, is in fact demonstrating with an abundance of proof the reality of those relationships which were merely hypothetical in my work. If the sum total of his impressive arguments stands up to the test of chronology, if it can be proved in the final analysis that all the facts noted existed prior to the period of slavery, his research will have surely contributed solid material to the edifice of historical knowledge.

I should like to conclude by urging young American scholars of good will, both Blacks and Whites, to form university teams and to become involved, like Professor Lawrence, in the effort to confirm various ideas that I have advanced, instead of limiting themselves to a negative, sterile skepticism. They would soon be dazzled, it not blinded, by the bright light of their future discoveries. In fact, our conception of African history, as exposed here, has practically triumphed, and those who write on African history now, whether willingly or not, base themselves upon it. But the American contribution to this final phase could be decisive.

Cheikh Anta Diop
July 1973

*In Nations nègres, Dr. Diop translates a page of Einstein's Theory of Relativity into Wolof, the principal language of Senegal.
†Bamako 1964 colloquium on the transcription of African languages, various measures taken to promote African languages, and so forth.
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CHAPTER I

What Were the Egyptians?

In contemporary descriptions of the ancient Egyptians, this question is never raised. Eyewitnesses of that period formally affirm that the Egyptians were Blacks. On several occasions Herodotus insists on the Negro character of the Egyptians and even uses this for indirect demonstrations. For example, to prove that the flooding of the Nile cannot be caused by melting snow, he cites, among other reasons he deems valid, the following observation: “It is certain that the natives of the country are black with the heat. . . .”

To demonstrate that the Greek oracle is of Egyptian origin, Herodotus advances another argument: “Lastly, by calling the dove black, they [the Dodonaeans] indicated that the woman was Egyptian. . . .” The doves in question symbolize two Egyptian women allegedly kidnapped from Thebes to found the oracles of Dodona and Libya.

To show that the inhabitants of Colchis were of Egyptian origin and had to be considered a part of Sesostris' army who had settled in that region, Herodotus says: “The Egyptians said that they believed the Colchians to be descended from the army of Sesostris. My own conjectures were founded, first, on the fact that they are black-skinned and have woolly hair. . . .”

Finally, concerning the population of India, Herodotus distinguishes between the Padaeans and other Indians, describing them as follows: “They all also have the same tint of skin, which approaches that of the Ethiopians.”

Diodorus of Sicily writes:

The Ethiopians say that the Egyptians are one of their colonies which was brought into Egypt by Osiris. They even allege that this country was originally under water, but that the Nile, dragging much mud as it flowed from Ethiopia, had finally filled it in and made it a part of the continent. . . . They add that from them, as from their authors and ancestors, the Egyptians get most of their laws. It is from them that the Egyptians have learned to honor