

Problems in African History

The Precolonial Centuries

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Markus Wiener Publishing, Inc.
New York & Princeton

A Review of Diop

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... One would have thought after reading his doctoral thesis that Diop would have "put water in his wine" and that the advice of his professors ... would have taken root. This is not the case, as I realized when listening to the lecture given by C. A. Diop on April 19, 1960 at Dakar. ...

Now, what may be permissible to a student or a young secondary school teacher is not permissible to the *Doctor es lettres* who can, by virtue of his title, begin teaching in a university. And so, despite the understanding that I feel toward the author, whom I know, I feel it's my duty, whatever pain it may cause both of us, to say openly what others do not, out of politeness or for other reasons.

According to Diop, the Pharaonic Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Elam, and the ancient Arabians were all Negroes. Negroes were at the origin of civilization:

[T]hey were the first to invent mathematics, astronomy, the calendar, science, the arts, religion, agriculture, social organization, medicine, writing, technology, architecture. ... In saying all this one simply asserts that which is, in all modesty, strictly true and which no one, at this time, can refute by arguments worthy of the name, ... Moses was Egyptian and therefore Negro.

Thus, according to Diop, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are basically Negro.

I am all the more confident about rejecting the author's interpretations because I have no intention of attributing to Indo-Europeans what I attribute to races more or less *brown* (I am aware of the author's objection on page twenty to the use of the word *brown* instead of black, an objection I do not accept) and to the yellow people between the Nile and the Pacific: Egyptians,

¹⁵This review appeared in *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire* XXII, Series B (1960), pp. 544-51. Translated by Nell Painter and Dr. Robert Collins. This review is actually directed at Diop's original work *Nations nègres et culture*, first published in 1955 by Présence Africaine, Paris. *Nations nègres et culture* was translated and published in English in 1974 as *The African Origin of Western Civilization*.

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Syrians, Mesopotamians, Hindus, and Chinese. I recognize without any prejudice that "my ancestors the Gauls"¹⁶ were, before the arrival of the Romans, barbarians, when, at the same time, brown and yellow people already had a civilization for several millennia and when great monuments had already been built in Nubia, a Negro land.

On what does C. A. Diop base his opinion? The whole of modern Egyptology, according to him, has been a vast European racist plot to destroy the evidence that the people of the Pharaohs belonged to the Negro world. This veritable "falsification of history"—it is even the title of one of his chapters—has led to the willful disappearance of thousands of mummies so as to preserve only those with long hair.

It is well known that a number of "archaeologists" working before 1900 and before the legislation concerning ruins in Egypt did neglect to preserve skeletons in order to have only those on the side of "artistic and epigraphic treasure. . . ."

According to C. A. Diop the examination of bone remains and of mummies of pre-Roman Egyptians demonstrates that they were Negroes:

I assert that the skulls found for the most ancient periods and the mummies of the dynastic period are in no way distinct in anthropological characteristics from the two Negro races existing on earth: the Dravidian with straight hair and the Negro with kinky hair."

add further on . . .

When we scientifically clean the skin of mummies, the epidermis appears pigmented in the same way as that of all other African Negroes. . . . I add that today *infallible scientific techniques* exist (ultraviolet rays, for example) to determine the melanin content of a pigmentation. Now the difference between a white person and a black, from this point of view, comes from the fact that the white person's organism does not secrete enzymes. It is the same for that of the ancient Egyptians. That is why, from prehistory to the Ptolemaic period, the Egyptian mummy stayed black. In other words, during all of the known history of Egypt, the skin of all the Egyptians of all social classes (from Pharaoh to peasant) has stayed that of the authentic Negro, as well as their osteology. See: the canon of Lepsius.

We need answers to these statements which only anthropologists and

¹⁶"Nos ancêtres les Gaulois" ("Our ancestors the Gauls") is an allusion to the opening sentence in an elementary school textbook widely used in French West Africa. The phrase has since become synonymous with the assimilationist colonial policy of France. (*Editor*)

Egyptologists can give us. *That there were Negroes among the Egyptians and that a prolonged mixing has left profound Negroid imprints among the people of the country has not been denied by anyone for a long time. But this is far from making the whole or even the majority of the Egyptians of the Pharaonic period Negroes.*

I am not an anthropologist no more than an author for that matter, but I suggest to the reader one of the best works concerning the question of the ancient Egyptians: C. S. Coon, *The Races of Europe*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1939, pp. 91-98 and 458-62). The racial composition of ancient Egypt is analyzed (pre-Neolithic Mediterraneans, whites; Tasians, whites; Fayum-Merimilians, whites; Badarians, seemingly from the Abyssinian plateau, brown with Negroid features; Nagada, related but less Negroid; Mediterraneans of lower Egypt, whites; and from 3,000 BC up to the Ptolemaic period, the history of Egypt shows "the gradual replacement of the Upper Egyptian type by that of lower Egypt." The later invaders (Hyksos, people of the sea, Semites, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks) all belonged to white races, with the exception of the Ethiopians of the twenty-fifth dynasty who were of Nubian origin.

According to Coon, the conventional impressions show a svelte body, with narrow hips and small hands and feet. The head and face "are those of smoothly contoured fine Mediterranean form"; numerous types of the upper classes represented by the portraits "looked strikingly like modern Europeans." The type of certain Pharaohs, like Ramses III, seems on the contrary to be related to the Abyssinian type.

The pigmentation of the Egyptians "was usually a *brunet white*; in the conventional figures the men are represented as red, the women often as lighter, and even white" and the daughter of Cheops, the builder of the great pyramid, as "a definite blonde." Southward, as one approaches Aswan, the population was evidently darker (brown-red, brown).

In their paintings and sculptures the Egyptians represented foreigners with their racial characteristics: "Besides the Libyans, who have Nordic features as well as coloring, Asiatics, with prominent noses and curly hair, sea peoples from Mediterranean, with lighter skins and more pronounced facial relief than the Egyptians, are also shown, as well as Negroes" and farther "The Mediterranean pigmentation of the Egyptians has probably not greatly changed during the last 5000 years."

Such is the opinion of an anthropologist. I leave each individual to draw his own conclusions. But this does not prevent me from thinking that it would be difficult to support the position that a people composed principally of Mediterranean groups could be Negro, especially after all the precise arguments given by Coon, who, it may be noticed in passing, recognized a Negroid contribution.

According to C. A. Diop the ancient authors definitely affirmed that the

Egyptians were Negroes. Herodotus, the "father of history," who wrote about 450 BC, is very correctly included, for he visited Egypt. But are C. A. Diop's examples the proof that he thought they were?

Herodotus does not mean to speak of Egypt when he says "the heat makes the people black," but rather of the inhabitants of the countries of the South, that of the Ethiopians, from where the Nile comes.

"And when he adds that the pigeon was black, he means us to understand that the woman was Egyptian." Did not the Greeks (the Hebrews had the same reaction) have a tendency, as is well known, to regard the Egyptians as "blacks" only because they were darker than the Greeks? Do we not use the same expression in France (from which the family names Morel, Moreau, Lenoir, Negre, etc.) to designate people with a darker than average complexion? A Nordic is clearly conscious of having a lighter complexion than the ordinary Spaniard or southern Italian. He will speak of dark skin, brown skin, even of black skin, just as one, for that matter, speaks of bathers tanning on the beach in summer. Yet neither the one nor the other is any more Negroid for it.

Is the example of the Colchidians any better? The author cites a passage from Herodotus: "The Egyptians think these people are the descendants of part of the troops of Sesostris. I would suppose the same for two reasons: the first is, that they are *black* and that they have kinky hair." But why does Mr. Diop not add the rest of Herodotus' passage . . . "To tell the truth this proves nothing" because other peoples are in the same situation." And the adjective *melanochroes* which Herodotus uses does not necessarily mean "black." Legrand, in 1948, translated it as "having a brown skin." Also on this subject I refer the reader to F. M. Snowden's, *The Negro in Ancient Greece*.

In the following example concerning the southern Indians, I see nowhere any mention of the fact that the Egyptians were black. It is a question only of the Ethiopians.

The passage of Diodorus of Sicily concerning Ethiopia's civilization being older than that of Egypt, according to the Ethiopians, is interesting from more than one point of view, because it reports for the first time in history, to my knowledge, the interpretation that the Egyptians were descended from the Ethiopians, and thus raises the question of the part that the Negro had in the formation of ancient Egypt. In addition I consider this text more important than those of Herodotus, of Genesis, and of Strabo, for the problem before us. But I insist on immediately saying that archeology has convincingly shown that it was Egypt that was the civilizing element in Ethiopia, and not the reverse. I do not think that anyone can prove that the architectural triumphs of Nubia, to cite only one example, are earlier than those of Upper and Lower Egypt of the period of the pyramids. This does not mean that the Ethiopians did not have a part in the constitution of Egyptian civil-

ization. I am even convinced of the contrary. It is up to the ethnologists, sociologists, and others to determine the precise magnitude of that contribution.

In the following example from Strabo: "Egyptians established themselves in Ethiopia and Colchida." I do not see anything which would prove that the Egyptians were black; they colonized these two countries and that is all.

The same comment may be applied to the passage from Genesis (9:18 to 10:20) where the Egyptians (Mistaim) are, in effect, regarded as descendants of Cham. Cham was only a legendary person, however, just as Noah, Sem, and Japhet, and the Bible's division only indicates the diverse races known at the time by the editors of Genesis: Indo-Europeans (Japhet), Semites (i.e. Hebrews, Arabs, some Mesopotamians, etc.), and Chamites (i.e., the ensemble of people who to their knowledge were darker than Semites: Kush, Ethiopians, Punt, Canaan).

Genesis, which is not a treatise of anthropology, by any means, but a collection of Hebrew, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian legends concerned, among other things, with the origins of the human races as the Hebrews of the second millennium BC might see it, and nowhere does Genesis speak of the color of the descendants of Cham or Canaan: the Israelites were only conscious of being lighter than they, that is all.

Thus not a great deal is left after an examination of the ancient texts cited by the author which might lead us to believe that the ancient Egyptians were Negroes. Archaeology leads us to just the opposite conclusion, supported, of course, by the text of Herodotus. It was only from the time when "Egyptian fugitives" were settled in Ethiopia that "the Ethiopians, adopting manners of the Egyptians, became more civilized."

To be sure, there is no lack of hypotheses regarding the origins of the Egyptians; and C. A. Diop is not an innovator in this matter. Here is a passage where G. Hanotaux (*Histoire de la nation égyptienne*) speaks of it:

What were the earliest people (of the Nile Valley)? Celtes, replies Poinssinet de Sivry—Negroes, said Voley—Chinese, was the opinion of Winckelmann—Indo-Polynesians, pretended Moreau de Jonnes—Africans from Ethiopia or Libya, declared Petrie, supported by the naturalists, Hott, Morton, Perrier, Hamy—Asiatics coming from Babylonia with an advanced civilization, affirm the archaeologists and orientalists, Brugsch, Ebers, Hommel, de Rouge, de Morgan. There is without doubt reason for this variety of opinions: It is that there was such a mixture of diverse races in Egypt.

Egypt is thus a melting pot of races and civilizations, at the crossroads of three continents. This is the real contribution of this country. To want to monopolize the whole to the profit of only one of the composite elements is

to contradict the truth. And it is up to us, historians of Black Africa, to unravel what was the part of the *Negro* and of the *Brown* people (the "Africans of Ethiopia and Libya" of Petrie), a fact already widely admitted, as we have seen, in the makeup of ancient Egypt.

As for the rest of Black Africa, the results of archaeology, as we know, are very meager at present. How can C. A. Diop explain that the Egyptians, who he pretends were Negroes, and the Nubians, spiritual sons of Egypt, were the only ones before the first millennium BC to be civilized in all of Africa? For one cannot understand why the inhabitants of the Nile valley would have been the *avant-garde* of humanity when the other Negroes stayed at a "primitive" state just like the Europeans who were their contemporaries. And if West African Negroes descended from the Egyptians, why did they become "decivilized" *en route* between about 500 BC, the date of their departure from Egypt according to C. A. Diop, and 900 AD, the period from which we have texts describing them as rather "backwards"? Which way did they go? How is it that no ancient author speaks of this migration, although, according to the author, it was made during the historical period? And how is it that they have left no trace of their passage along the way?

Let us be very clear that it is *mounds* in the interior region of the Niger Delta and not *pyramids*, as the author thinks, not that one wants to "disparage African achievements," but because a pyramid is a volume with a well-defined form and mounds have a round or oval plan and are roughly hemispheric in form. The first are found particularly in Egypt, Nubia, and in Central America, the second in Black Africa and Europe.

As for thinking that the signs carved on the Baobabs of Diourbel are hieroglyphics, the author is now at home and knows the question well enough, I suppose, to judge for himself whether it is really writing (the old people of the area would give him the information in this case) or simply graffiti carved in the soft bark, which seems more likely.

Another problem rightly preoccupies Mr. Diop: the skin color of the Egyptians as it is represented in tomb paintings and on other documents. According to him . . . "the color called dark red of the Egyptians is none other than the natural color of the Negro," and he gives a text of Champollion-le-Jeune as evidence. Now Champollion-le-Jeune clearly distinguishes between Egyptians (dark red), Negroes "Nahasi," Semites "Namou" skin color tending toward yellow, Medes and Assyrians with a swarthy complexion, Indo-Europeans "Tambou," with white skin.

Two works with numerous illustrations in color, which I have before me . . . to my mind support the opinions of Champollion-le-Jeune, and many others, concerning the great variety of races represented [in Egypt]. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: when the artist wanted to depict Negroes, he distinctly gave them a black or gray color. And the dark red people are not, with few exceptions, Negroes, but tawny people, brown people. It is, of

course, true that the color black is found throughout the paintings, *but to represent the hair and not the skin*. The Egyptians were absolutely conscious of the difference in skin color between themselves, the Negroes, and Asiatics.

We have seen above that an anthropologist, C. S. Coon, called the usual color of the Pharaonic Egyptians "brunet white." This color resembles that of the average modern Egyptian of the Delta, those of the south being darker (reddish brown to a medium brown hue).

I am happy to find myself in accord with C. A. Diop when he speaks of the Ife civilization in Nigeria. It was a brilliant civilization, incontestably Negro, which, with its brass heads in naturalistic style, attained the summits of, not only African, but world art.

I am not competent, on the contrary, to judge the linguistic portion of this work, in particular the relationships between ancient Egyptian and modern Wolof; and I leave this problem to linguists. But I must admit my skepticism when I see a toponym in Songhai country, Tondidarou [Tundi-Daro], a site which I know well, with its megaliths (of which the obvious etymology is Songhai: *tondi daru* = big stone) explained by the Serer *tundi daro* = the hills of the union.

Nor do I think that the Lebu of Cape Verde have any relation whatsoever with the people, of the same name inhabiting the western approaches of the Nile Delta before our era. And to say that several Pharaohs of the first dynasties were of the Serer race "because their name included *Sen*" seems, to my mind, at the least very questionable. Such play on words is possible among all the languages of the world. Would Sun-Yat-Sen, Ibsen, Eisenhower, and Amundsen all be Serer as well?

Logic does not seem to lead to a closer possible relationship between ancient Egyptian and other African languages than to Indo-European languages. *But it is evident that comparisons should be made by competent and specialized linguists.*¹⁷ It will be impossible to speak knowingly about all this until dictionaries and grammars of African languages are published. In order to form an opinion on a similar work of D. P. de Pedrals, *Archeologie de l'Afrique noire*, (Paris: Payot, 1950), a work which unfortunately seems to have had a good deal of influence on the author, I suggest the reader consult the reports in *Man*, September 1951, pp. 122-23, and the *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, 1951, pp. 1331-33.¹⁸

¹⁷The student would do well to consult the work of Joseph H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1963), particularly pp. 42-65. (Editor)

¹⁸Unfortunately, the work of D. P. de Pedrals, *L'Archeologie de l'Afrique Noire*, (Paris: Payot, 1950), from which C. A. Diop derives so much of his information, has been described by one authority as "would-be scientific discussions of names and words that add not one jot to our knowledge of African archaeology." (G. W. B. Huntingford in his review of *L'Archeologie de l'Afrique Noire*, appearing in *Man* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain

Despite these questionable hypotheses given as accepted and irrefutable truths, and the failure to include information from recent works concerning West Africa, the book of Mr. Diop is a landmark. It is the first general historical work written by a French-speaking black African, and, besides being an important source of documentation, it includes some excellent parts and it has the great merit of not following the traditional interpretations and of forcing the Egyptologists and others to take a stand and define their positions more precisely. Nevertheless, written before 1955 in Paris, it is inescapably a belligerent book, completely impregnated with the spirit of those years of struggle during which Africans, in particular students exiled in Paris amid the colonizing people and, in addition, frustrated by their national history, prepared the way for independence by exalting Negritude, sometimes even, and this is normal, at the price of taking liberty, perhaps unconsciously, with impartial and scientific truths: only that which could agree with his thesis was included. All this is "quite fair," and to me the attitudes formed during the general struggle of all the different African peoples are to be found therein.

Today, in 1960, times have changed. This is the year of independence for a number of countries in Black Africa, Mali among others. The African historian, without abandoning in the least his political opinions formed during the years of struggle against colonialism, owes it to himself, to science, and to his country to place himself, if he has not already done so, on the level of *strict objectivity*, which does not exclude interpretation or the use of hypotheses to be proven, but without which it is impossible to speak of history, of research, of scientific knowledge of history. *Otherwise the whole of the new school of African history risks being discredited and the sum of errors and exaggerations would be disastrous for the Africans themselves.* For now, and with reason, the African history taught to black children is being reformed so that children no longer learn just the history of the colonizers, but of their own people. It is no longer a question of convincing Parisian audiences or African students in Paris; the former were almost in general incompetent to judge and the latter were obviously already decided by anticolonial reaction, before the rapid acquisition of independence, to applaud this veritable Negro Gobinism. *It is now a question of the author's submitting his ideas to the examination of specialists, who are the only ones qualified to say what is worth retaining.* Or else the author himself must go back to the hard task of historical research to verify a number of his hypotheses.

When modern Egyptologists accept C. A. Diop's thesis that ancient

and Ireland, LI 1951), p. 123. Other leading archaeologists agree, seeming to make this work a very questionable source for evidence on Egyptian origins and migrations of the African. (Editor)

Egypt was "Negro," then and only then must school manuals be reformed. Would the cultural unity of Africa, from the Egyptians to the Bushman, include the Moroccans, the Tauregs, the Teda, the Pygmies, the Zulu, the Somalis, and the Abyssinians? Why not? On the condition that the ethnologists and sociologists tell us it is so.

A linguistic connection between ancient Egyptian and Wolof? Specialists of African languages could, one day, tell us if this hypothesis is valid. But again, they must be experts and their works confirmed by other specialists.

As for West African prehistory and history to the end of the middle ages, I hope that the author will permit me to think that I may give a relatively authoritative opinion in this matter.

There is, in effect, one urgent problem: *the part of the Negro in the development of the universal civilization during the course of past centuries.* In the meantime, however, what must come immediately is the development of the Negroes' active and original contribution to the elaboration of modern humanity. That the Negro had a part is incontestable, undeniable, but, up to now, the question has only just been touched by specialists. Just like all the other races, the Negro has contributed his stone in the construction [of the edifice of human history], but it is now a question of making this addition more precise, and no longer dismissing the problem by saying that Egypt was Negro and thus solving the problem before it can be properly stated and studied.

This study will no doubt necessitate long years of work before it can lead to any real conclusions: careful scrutiny and commentaries on texts, examination of Egyptian and other collections, innumerable detailed studies will all advance us, step by step, towards the truth. This task should be begun as early as possible, and principally in the three West African universities, Ibadan, Accra, and Dakar, and in Negro universities in America. I am ready to collaborate in this task.

The great merit of C. A. Diop will be to have contributed, after Dr. K. O. Dike, Fr. M. Snowden, J. C. de Graft-Johnson, and others, to the opening of this record to which no African, no Africanist and I would even say that no one should be indifferent at the hour when Africa vigorously affirms her personality.