Review Article*


The beginnings of this book were avowedly political. C. A. Diop, in his preface, informs us: "I began my research in September 1946; because of our colonial situation at that time, the political problem dominated all others." The first published outline of his views on "African anteriority" appeared in an article, "Toward a Political Ideology in Black Africa" which appeared in 1953 in the organ of the RDA students in Paris, *Voie de l'Afrique Noire* (loc. cit.).

After that appeared *Nations Nègres et Culture*, Paris, 1955, and *Anteriorité des civilisations Nègres*, Paris, 1967. The present volume is composed of selections of chapters from these, plus "Reply to a Critic," and a new preface and conclusion by the author. The translator-editor has added some notes in addition to those of the author.

The Black African Political Ideology as set forth by Diop involved not only ideas on "strategy and tactics in the struggle for national independence", "concepts on the creation of a future federal state, continental or subcontinental," "thoughts on African social structures", "the past and future of our languages [and] their utilization in the most advanced scientific fields as in education generally", but also "all our ideas on African history" (loc. cit.).

The "decolonization of history" has since become a familiar movement and has helped to alter the kind of history once written by Cultru, Claridge, Burns and others who had had experience in colonial service, missionary churches, or other enterprises in Africa. But this has applied mainly to the modern period of interaction between Africans and Europeans and the immediately previous period as represented by Europeans to have existed on the eve of their arrival. Diop goes back far beyond that — to ancient Egypt.

What does Pharonic Egypt have to do with the struggle for independence of Senegal and the rest of Black Africa? The answer was already given by Africanus Horton in 1868 in his *Vindication of the African Race*: "Why should not the same race who governed Egypt once more stand on their legs and endeavor to raise their characters in the scale of the civilized world?"

Few believed that the colonized Black Africans were the same race as that which had governed ancient Egypt, and despite Horton's exhortation progress toward independence was slow. Diop set out to convince the world that not only was Egypt a black civilization, but that it was the first civilization and that everyone else obtained the beginnings of their civilization from Egyptian Blacks. Thus white barbarians had once received the gift of enlightenment from Negroes but were now so ungrateful as to conquer and exploit them. This gave the struggle against colonialism a poignancy and tended to make any statement by a white suspect, no matter what the subject.

Independence for the French territories and for much of the rest of Black Africa came in 1960. There must be more to the argument of Black "anteriority" than mere political strategem or we would not have had the publication in 1967 of further argumentation nor the publication now of this translation.

*Journal of Asian and African Studies* IX 1–2
Cheikh Anta Diop is virtually alone in attempting to relate in an extensive and systematic way the data concerning ancient Egypt and that of the rest of Africa, a problem that demands attention. One reason why so few others have ventured on this task is that the scope is so enormous and the nature and variety of technical problems is therefore so formidable. The result of neglect of this field is that hardly anyone can claim full competence to assess Diop's formulation (nor do I); most Egyptologists know or care little about the rest of Africa (though this seems, perhaps, to be changing) and most Africanists know little of Egyptology (and there's little indication of change here). Nonetheless, everyone who is interested in the overall history must deal with this challenge.

Were the early Egyptians Negroes? Possibly. Diop is not the first to assert this argument, and some of his predecessors were white. Or was the Nile Valley north of the cataracts an area of mixture of races in predynastic times, as some Egyptologists believe, or was the population white as many have simply assumed?

That some mixture has occurred at some time prior to the present is undeniable, but were the Blacks there first and did whites come in after the pharaonic civilization began, or did the whites later bring in mercenaries and laborers from the south, or had the mixture begun before civilization arose?

Since some, but only some, of the skeletons in predynastic graves have been reported to be negroid, it could be argued that Egyptian culture from the beginning was the creation of a racially mixed population.

Another position is that the problem is a false one. Some contemporary physical anthropologists argue that as race is a combination of traits (skin pigmentation, hair, form, skeletal proportions and other anthropometric measurements), there will be centers where the combination appears in most individuals (as on the Guinea Coast, East Asia, and southern Scandinavia) but in many communities in the Old World between these relatively homogeneous areas the tendency is toward heterogeneity as far as any standard racial categorization is concerned. Thus the "gene pool" of the population of Egypt need not be made to conform to a standard of the norms of any of the more or less homogeneous areas, and in any case no "gene pool" is totally isolated from others.

Some readers might want to note the cautions that this anthropological position implies, but it is perhaps irrelevant to Diop's position because while he doesn't make explicit his definition of Negro his usage suggests that it is broad and is probably therefore not dependent on the physical anthropologist's concept of a combination of traits. In any case, the physical anthropologist is not concerned with some of the problems which interest the historian. What was the nature of the affinities of the Egyptians, biologically and culturally? The answer may have to come in percentages, or broken down to deal with designated traits separately, but an answer of some kind is required: historians are not likely to be satisfied with the physical anthropologists defining the problem out of existence.

This reviewer does not know which of the possibilities will turn out to be the truth and he would be just as happy if Diop's claim is correct but is not satisfied that the arguments are conclusive. It would be fatuous to deny that Blacks had a role in Egypt from an early time but that all Egyptians were then Black remains open to question.