

Review Article

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History and Historical Consciousness in the Philosophy of History in Cheikh Anta Diop's works.

The link between history and consciousness in general is historical consciousness, a notion which lends itself to determining, defining and identifying what is in Cheikh Anta Diop's work which implicitly or explicitly expresses the - or one - philosophy of history - or rather which expresses an African school of History. This involves identifying the following in Diop's work:

- 1 - what the nature of history is;
- 2 - what the end or ends of history are.

Our search for an answer to this two-pronged question must take into consideration the contexts of Diop's rearing and education and of his life and combat. I shall begin by recalling something about the man.

*When I discovered that the ancient Egyptians were Black and became convinced that Egyptian and Kushitic civilization was Negro-African, I was at first stunned. I set about learning more and became fully aware that this relationship could be proven historically¹. The first of my conclusions constituted the substance of my work entitled *Nations nègres et culture*.²*

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- 1 He will say later: "Thus for us, the considerable new feat is less having stated that the Egyptians were a black people in accordance with the classical writers, one of our principal sources, than having contributed to making the idea a fact of African and world historical consciousness and, above all, an operational scientific concept. This is what our predecessors failed to achieve" (Diop, C.A., *Civilisation et Barbarie*, 1981, p. 10)
- 2 Diop, C.A., *Nations nègres et Culture: de l'Antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1954

This is what Cheikh Anta Diop told me when, in September 1979, I interviewed him about his intellectual journey. This discussion, my first with him, seemed necessary if I were to put his work in context and understand it better, for placing it in context would make it possible to separate out the scientific dimension from ideological elements and from things in his work which make sense only as polemics. Only afterwards did I go back and closely re-read Diop's books from the beginning, starting with *Nations nègres et Culture*.

In *Nations nègres et Culture* the author develops three main themes:

a - The civilization of Pharaonic Egypt was Negro-African

- because the ancient Egyptians perceived themselves to be and represented themselves as Blacks;
- because the Greeco-Latin sources stated this unambiguously;
- because the Bible attests to it
- because the debate between anthropologists (Massouard, Fawcette, Thompson (A), Randall, McIver, Keith (D), Fulkenburger, Petrie, etc.), confused though it was, none the less shows that the skeletons and mummies of ancient Egyptians were Negro ones.
- because all aspects of pharaonic culture are to be found among Negro-African peoples, from ancient to modern times, which are so similar as to be almost identical. Examples are totemism, social and political structure, circumcision, cosmogony, etc.

b - The origins of pharaonic civilization lie in southern Egypt and southwards in the Nubian Sudan

- because the ancient Egyptians said that the Delta (Lower Egypt) was only a sea when they migrated into Upper Egypt³.
- because the technological evolution and progressive cultural refinement which was to give rise to pharaonic civilization can be traced without discontinuity in Upper Egypt, and there only, from prehistory to the advent of monarchy, sometime before 3000 B.C.
- because pre - and protodynastic Nubio-Theban archeology attests to the cultural unity between Upper Egypt and Nilotic Nubia and the Sudan⁴.

3 Herodotus, II, 15; Diodorus of Sicily, I, 10 and III, 3.

4 Cf. *Africa in antiquity: the arts of ancient Nubia and the Sudan*, Exposition of Brooklyn Museum. New York, September 30 December 31, 1978. 2 volumes.

- because the Nubio-Sudanic cultures are prior, in their elaboration, to those of Egypt.

c - Nubia and the Sudan - the crossroads between southern Africa (the Great Lakes region), central Africa (the Nile/Chad basin) west Africa (Sudan and the western sahel), the Mediterranean periphery and Arabia - constitute the cradle of civilization, which, from there radiated towards all of Africa and, through Egypt, to the northern Mediterranean, and the Asian Near East.

This accounts for pharaonic Negro contributions to the Greco-Latin, Canaanite, and Arabic civilizations and the similarities between Egypto-Kushitic pharaonic civilizations and the civilizations which spread in Black Africa from antiquity to the birth of modern states in the sixteenth century A.D.

From these theses he draws a certain number of conclusions:

1 - Pharaonic Egypt, humanity's first great cultural achievement in historic times, was a Negro-African civilization. It left a deep impression on later civilizations in Africa, southern Europe, and the Asian Near East. It determined the cultural shape of all of the rest of Africa to such a degree that post-pharaonic Negro-African cultures, until the sixteenth century A.D. were neo-pharaonic.

2 - The Upper and Middle Nile valleys, center of diffusion for technology and men, explains Egypt, Africa south of the Sahara, and the relationship between the two. Africa's modern Black populations came from the Nile valley both in prehistorical and in historical times.

3 - This Black world has civilized humanity in ancient times. Africa's contribution to humanity is inestimable, from prehistory to the beginnings of modern times. Africa played a role, still not analyzed, in the emergence of the Iberian peninsula at the beginning of modern times, Diop said. It played no less important a role than the expansion of Christianity, Islam and Judaism⁵. Examples from all periods could be multiplied, up to the period of primitive accumulation of capital. More, from the neolithic to the 16th century A.D., Africa led the world in terms of socio-political organization and technology.

5 Accordingly as Diop declared, no thought, no ideology is essentially foreign to an African, the important thing for him is to mind one's ideological training (cf.: Introduction to *Nations nègres et culture*).

Not satisfied with an argument based only on written testimonies, Diop trained himself in other disciplines in order to study his theses from other perspectives. In *Antériorité des Civilisations nègres: Mythes ou Vérité historique?*⁶, Diop had recourse to paleontology, physical and cultural anthropology, chemistry and archeology and defended positions drawn from paleoclimatology and paleobotany. The study deepened and refined the arguments for the points made in *Nations Nègres et Culture* by drawing different disciplines into the service of approaching knowledge from a historical perspective. The paleontological and anthropological dimensions of the argument added to the subtlety of the perspective and completed the epistemological break⁷. The author argued for monogenetism and monocentrism against polygenitism and polycentrism, using as support the discoveries of Professor Leakey⁸. He traced humanity from its appearance in the Great Lakes region through its early development into homo erectus who, as a migrator, went on to conquer western and central Europe through Gibraltar, Italy via Sicily as well as Asia via the Suez region⁹. Here Diop demonstrates the anteriority of sapienization among African hominids and the development of an African neolithic to point out the role of Negro-African communities in the emergence of civilization, the first light of which was planted in Egypt¹⁰.

In *L'Afrique noire précoloniale and L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique Noire* (1960), which are the published versions of the principal argument (a comparative study of European and African political systems from antiquity to the formation of modern States) and complementary argument (domains of patriarchy and matriarchy in classical antiquity) of C.A. Diop's Doctorat d'Etat thesis, the author demonstrates the differences between Europe and Africa in their

6 Diop, C.A., *Présence Africaine*, Paris, 1967.

7 The first part entitled "Approche paléontologique" of *Civilisation ou Barbarie*, is some sort of summary of this approach as elicited in *Nations nègres et culture* and *Antériorité des civilisations nègres*. Under the title "*The african origin of civilization*", Mercer Cook translated some parts of these two works which are both run through and united by the same approach.

8 Diop, C.A., *Civilisation ou Barbarie*, 1981, first part "*Approche paléontologique*".

9 Coppens, Y., *Le singe, l'Afrique et l'homme*, Fayard, 1983, p. 99-144.

10 Diop, C.A., *Histoire primitive de l'humanité. Evolution du monde noir*. BIFAN, Série B, tome XXIV, N 3-4, 1962, p. 449-541.

cultural features. He shows the very strong influence of Black Africa and of Blacks (who were in Greece before Greeks set foot in Africa)¹¹. on the Greco-Hittite and Semitic areas, on the civilizations of the northern Mediterranean. He analyzes the historical continuity of African societies and the cultures they created from the civilizations of the Egypto-Kushitic Black Africans up to the end of the great empires, explaining recurring and permanent features. In these two works, Diop breaks with Marxism. Clearly he was not a Marxist. But he was not anti-marxist either. He drew fully upon the conceptual apparatus and even the spirit of historical materialism. It was Engels whom he criticized for the vision reflected in *The Origin of Family, Property and the State*. His "informant", Morgan, having led Engels astray¹².

An emphasis on historical permanence and continuity constitutes the thread of C.A. Diop's last ... works, *Parenté génétique de l'Égyptien pharaonique et les langues négro-africaines* (1977) and *Civilisation ou Barbarie* (1981). The basic idea is that post-pharaonic Negro-African civilizations (or institutions) are explained by Egypt, in that they are neo-pharaonic. A profound cultural unity exists between Black Africa and Egypt. This unity exists in itself, rarely for itself. Hence Diop could warn that "African history will remain something suspended in the air and cannot be written correctly for so long as African historians fail to relate it to pharaonic Egypt"¹³. This relation is a relevant classificatory criterion which reconciles African civilizations with history. It is also a necessity, because it makes it possible to re-establish the continuity of the cultures created by Negro-african societies and the unity of Negro peoples and civilizations. It is a necessity because it provides a purpose for history as a discipline, a science, a way of thinking, a product, a discourse and an ideological argument; a necessity for achieving the intellectual breakthrough we vitally need. Thus we see that Diop's purpose for history in Africa is the restoration and strengthening of historical

11 Bourgeois, A., *La Grèce antique devant la négritude*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1970. One can also note that Ulysses's companion, named Eurybates is a black man. Cf Homer's *Odysseus*

12 Morgan, L.H., *Ancient society*, 1877.

13 Diop, C.A., *The african origin of civilization*, Westport, 1974, p. XIV. *Civilisation ou Barbarie* p. 12, "Hegel and Mark did not pick a "German Quarrel" with St Thomas or with Heraclitus the Obscure, because without the rambling of the latter they would never have built their philosophical systems" (id. *ibid.* p. 13).

consciousness. For Diop, history serves to restore, structure, and dynamize the historical consciousness of peoples. Historical consciousness is the bulwark against alienation, fatalism, and submission. But what is history for Diop?

Throughout his work, history is the study of the rules and general laws of social evolution, of social movement. The past is a field into which history meets myth and collective memory side by side. In Diop's work, the long term is emphasized by studying social movement through the past, i.e., the solidified part of time. Diop was an historian of civilizations. Periods of accelerated change did not interest him much, though he did attempt to theorize about revolution in *Civilisation ou Barbarie*¹⁴. What interested him was the comparative history of socio-political institutions, their successive forms, the generative factors rather than the evolutive ones. This is doubtlessly explained by that part of the historical field in which he specialized, "Antiquity", the period of the genesis of institutions. Thus he was able to describe, by region and by period, the institutions which arose through invasion, those resulting from diffusion, and those which were the fruit of internal evolution. The dimension of diffusion appears to have had great explanatory power for Diop as regards the history of institutions in Africa from antiquity to the beginning of modern times.

For C.A. Diop, history does not aim solely at the structuring of time. It does aim at this, but not only at this. History does not aim solely at relativizing judgment. It is one of the humanities, but that is not all. For Diop, history attempts to fix, to restore knowledge of a special relationship with social movement, and this in the interests of immediate acts, of dynamizing and reorienting social evolution. History is consciousness -- consciousness of what one was, is, and will be, in movement and in evolution, as individual, class, socio-juridical category, nation, or race. History, throughout C.A. Diop's work, is a level of knowledge, knowledge of the present situation of what to support among the options available for development of the one which will be most beneficial. Which are the options Africa should choose? Diop sees the necessity for federation, discussed in *Les fondements économiques et culturels d'un Etat fédéral de l'Afrique noire* (1960). He also sees the necessity for promoting Negro-african lan-

14 Cf. Chapter 12 of *Civilisation ou Barbarie*.

guages, the theory for which position is in "Comment enracciner la science en Afrique"¹⁵.

But, before Black peoples can meet their societies needs for fundamental change, they must have confidence in themselves, they must be convinced of their own ability to create and innovate and assimilate. Their consciousness must be liberated through historical consciousness; for consciousness in general, this conviction of their own abilities, depends on their relationship with their history, with the history of others, and with the history of humanity in all periods of social movement. In Africa, historical thought and scholarship must fulfil these missions. The African school of history must make these demands upon its own philosophy. After all, history plays these roles among the liberated peoples of Europe and America. It shows these peoples that they created values and instruments for liberation and for living in the past, that history is not linear, that the most backward peoples of one period have been able to become great creators in others, that their backwardness is historically explicable and that they can once again become first-rate creators and innovators. It is when the history of a dominated people is written by the dominators that all this is hidden and falsified in order to prolong the domination¹⁶.

By showing Africans that Blacks created the first great human cultural achievement of historical time, that this black civilization inspired those (later in terms of their elaboration and expansion) of the peoples of Europe and the Near East, one provides them with this special relationship with social movement, i.e., one restores to them their historical consciousness. This liberates their general consciousness, galvanizes them, makes them creators once again. And, says Cheikh Anta Diop, all liberated peoples are equipped and ready to promote their national cultures by adapting -- re-adapting -- historical reflection and scholarship to the relevant classificatory criteria which emanate from their daily lives, their ambitions, their dreams, their utopias, even their fantasies. But Diop also notes that, for African peoples in particular, it is the West which has heretofore written the greater part of their history -- "Africanism". This historical thought and product is oriented towards serving the historical consciousness of the West, which sees Africa as a museum, the

15 Diop, C.A., BIFAN, Série B, tome XXXVII, N 1, 1975, p. 154-233.

16 Diop, C.A., *Nations nègres et culture*, Paris, 1979. Tome I, chapters II and III, p. 49-203.

image of what humanity was in primitive times, enabling the West to measure and take pride in the distance it has covered and, what is more, to convince the West that the creation of values, instruments, and tools for living is its own prerogative, inducing it to consider itself naturally entitled to dominate the world.

In other words, "Africanism" does not favor Africans: the old adage goes, "What's done for you but without you is done against you". The proof is that when an African speaks of African history aiming to restore Africans' historical consciousness, all westerners, from the ultra-royalists to the hard-line marxists ally in attempting to banalize and marginalize his ideas -- generally deliberately but sometimes unconsciously. It is said that conditions do not yet exist for a real dialogue between the West and Africa. Well, says Diop, let us act conservatively. No field of knowledge must be ignored, all means of acquiring knowledges must be explored. One must be capable of revealing scientifically what the truth is if the debate is to be raised to a higher level. Autonomy of scholarship must be gained by doing without the approval of the other¹⁷.

This attitude of Diop's must be linked to the fact that, in his view, "Africanism" is part and parcel of that logic which tends to dilute Africans' historical consciousness and elevate that of Westerners. For does not "Africanism" teach Africans.

- 1) that they have always stood outside the movement of history
- 2) that they are condemned and cursed,
- 3) that they are destined forever to need tutors,
- 4) that they know only how to dance and sing,
- 5) that they never, in all history, invented anything,
- 6) that they have contributed nothing to humanity and owe all they have to the West, which took upon itself a civilizing mission¹⁸?

Diop stresses that the tragedy lies in the fact that Blacks in Africa and in the Diaspora, have adopted these "Africanist" postulates, i.e., these ideas produced by non-African schools of history, ethnology and philosophy even when they concern the evolution, structure, and life of Black societies. One Black writes of Blacks "who have invented neither compass nor rudder nor cannon powder" (A. Césaire). Another goes farther, claiming that "emotion is Negro, reason Hel-

17 Diop, C.A., preface to *"l'Afrique noire dans l'Antiquité"* written by Théophile Obenga, Présence Africaine, 1973.

18 Hegel, G.W.F., *La raison dans l'Histoire*, translated by Kostas Papaioannou, 1979. - Gobineau; G.A., *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*.

lenic" (L.C. Senghor). All this was inculcated by the work of "Africanists", and we see where it has led.

Diop emphasizes that such attitude and ways of thinking have been possible only because the West destroyed Black historical consciousness by falsifying history -- (all achievements realized in the course of time). Let it be known that history is not neutral. It is a tool, a weapon, a way to live, to dominate, to subjugate, to create, to innovate, and to assimilate.

It has to be recognized that the nature and purposes attributed to historical reflection and scholarship depend upon the life experiences and utopias of the societies which produce them, of the men who formulate them, produce them, and diffuse them by various means. It must be recognized that "consciousness is not an objective image of the milieu" (K. Marx), but rather the expression of relationships between the milieu and men, a perception of these real and virtual relationships which is determined by human needs. Speaking of the crisis of reason, Diop remarks that consciousness depends upon the conditions of the agent, the expression of the importance any given object holds for him. History establishes as well a relationship with social movement, determines the significance of this movement for those who produce, or for whom, a historical work is produced. Hence those individuals called "objective africanists" are, with some exceptions, those for whom description is the final end of historical reflection.

These "Africanists" have educated a mass of Africans who pass most of their time splitting hairs. They have "fabricated" conscious or unconscious structuralists. So this tradition must be broken with (do without the approval of the other)¹⁹ and Black historical consciousness restored in order to liberate Africa by taking over historical scholarship, once Africans achieve the ability to establish truth scientifically.

The man with historical consciousness is a free man. He will endeavor to live and will struggle to live according to different bases for decision, among which *class consciousness*. This free man is the creator of civilizations. And, Diop adds referring to young africans, each of them contains the makings of an empire builder of the stamp of Tutmosis III, Samori Touré, Shaka, or Abdel Kader. It is merely a matter of awakening this creative force by restoring historical consciousness. In taking over the production of history, the Africans

¹⁹ Diop, C.A., *Civilisation ou Barbarie*, p. 13.

(historians, philosophers, etc.) must accentuate historical and cultural continuity in Africa, so that this might pass from existence "*in itself*" to existence "*for itself*"

.Conclusion

This is how, today, I read the assumptions and theoretical implications of the scholarly work of Professor Cheikh Anta Diop, from whom I began to learn the usefulness of thinking, writing, and teaching history. This seems to be Diop's philosophy of history and the spirit he wished to infuse into an African school of history. He hoped that this school, which he did not have the time to found but whose foundations he elaborated and laid, would be armed with this philosophy for the greater good of the Black people of Africa and the Diaspora.

To do this, historians of Africa must stop believing (without writing or saying it) that the centuries before the sixteenth century A.D. were "Africa's Dark Ages"²⁰. For so long as they believe this, they will fail to contribute to linking post-pharaonic Negro-African civilizations to their Egypto-Kushitic ancestors; they will neither re-establish the historical continuity of African civilizations nor give Black Africa's cultural unity an existence "*for itself*". Cultural renaissance in Africa presupposes, among other things, that Egypto-Kushitic pharaonic civilizations be elevated, in Negro-African humanistic studies, to the status held by Greco-Roman humanities in the West. It is this latter need which explains the fact that demonstrating that Egyptian pharaonic civilization was Negro-African is a topic in nearly every one of Diop's studies, while the neo-pharaonic perspective is muted in almost every page of Diop's works.

20 This is the title of Raymond Mauny's book, published in 1975. Original title: *Les siècles obscurs de l'Afrique noire.*