

Diop, Cheikh Anta

sex: m; b. Dec. 29, 1923, Thiaytou, Sénégal; d. Feb. 7, 1986, Dakar, Sénégal; country/nation/culture: Senegalese; fields of study: history of civilizations, history of mentalities, history of philosophy; ref: EHHW, HLex; contrib.: R. Boa Thiemele.

Main works: *Nations nègres et culture* (1954; partly translated in *The African Origin of Civilization. Myth or Reality*, 1974); *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire* (1960; *The cultural Unity of Negro Africa*, 1962); *L'Afrique noire précoloniale* (1960; *Precolonial Black Africa*, 1986); *Les fondements économiques et culturels d'un Etat fédéral d'Afrique noire* (1960; *Black Africa. The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State*, 1978); *Antériorité des civilisations nègres. Mythe ou vérité historique?* (1967; partly translated in: *The African Origin of Civilization. Myth or Reality*, 1974); *Parenté génétique de l'égyptien pharaonique et des langues négro-africaines* (1977); *Civilisation ou barbarie. Anthropologie sans complaisance* (1981; *Civilization or Barbarism. An authentic Anthropology*, 1990)

Biography: Diop was born in the town of Diourbel, in Senegal, on the West coast of Africa. He completed his baccalaureate in Mathematics and Philosophy in 1945 in Dakar. He travelled to Paris, where he devoted himself to literary and scholarly pursuits. During his student days he was an avid political activist. In 1950 Diop became for three years Secretary-General of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) and helped organize the first Pan-African Student Congress in Paris in 1951. His first book, *Nations nègres et culture*, was rejected as a doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne university. He participated in the First (1956/Paris) and Second (1959/Rome) Congress of Writers and Artists of Black Africa. After completing his *doctorat d'état* in *lettres* in 1960, Diop returned to Senegal. His first project there was a Carbon-14 laboratory. Thereafter he taught at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of the University of Dakar. Diop became a member of a UNESCO committee charged with the creation of a general history of Africa (published in 1974). Cheikh Anta Diop held many lectures in African and American universities.

Characterization: Cheikh Anta Diop sought to carry out a true Copernican revolution in intellectual history in placing the culture of Ancient Egypt at the root of the African civilization, and to restore to Black Africans the credit of parentage of this brilliant civilization. This thesis of Diop is combined with two principal ideas: that Egyptian Pharaonic civilization was Black African in its origin and that racial mixing was late in date. The ancient Egyptians were Negro, saw themselves as Negro, and called themselves Negro or Black. Pharaonic civilization has its origins south of Egypt and in southern Egypt, that is to say in Nubia-Sudan. It is from this region that the light of civilization reached Egypt, the Mediterranean, and the Near East.

Diop draws some major conclusions from these ideas: The substratum of Pharaonic Egyptian civilization is Black African. Hence, the very civilization which has never ceased to influence humanity is in essence African. The Black or Negro-African world civilized ancient humanity. Modern Africans should be aware of this, and draw moral and psychological benefit of this truth. There exists a linguistic and cultural relation between Ancient Egypt and the rest of Black Africa. It is possible to specify the great migrations and the origins of African ethnicities beginning with the decline of Ancient Egypt. This idea was not new; certain historians had set it out before Diop. He himself depended upon Greek, Roman and Jewish authors contemporary with the Ancient Egyptians such as Herodotus, Diodorus of Sicily, Aristotle, Strabo, Aeschylus and Apollodorus. Diop deepened the thesis so as to make it the centre of his theoretical framework: there is a historical, cultural and racial continuity between Black Africa and Pharaonic Egypt.

Nations nègres et culture (1954), his first book, set out to provide a scientific foundation for a Negro Egypt that civilized the earth. Ancient Egypt and the Nile Valley appear as the point of departure, the beginning and origin of Black African history. This work caused a scandal; it broke with the intellectual and psychological climate of the time, which was powerfully dominated by the notion that no civilization, even in the heart of the tropical forest, is the creation of Black people.

In his last work, *Civilisation ou barbarie* (1981), Diop presented a historical panorama covering five thousand years by the diachronic study of African societies. Diop insisted less on the Negro origin of

Ancient Egypt than on the Egyptian contribution to Greece and humanity as much in science as in philosophy.

Diop has suffered criticism over his propensity for the glorification of the past, for making a correspondence between 'race' and 'culture', and for putting scholarship at the service of political struggle; on the other hand, the international "Afrocentric" movement has its roots in his work. The problematic of culture as a factor in development is one that he perceived. His work favours Panafricanism, the political independence of the Black continent, and the cultural renaissance of the Black world: Africans must recover their ancient scholarly heritage, reconcile themselves with their memory by what they have of grandeur, while taking on new systems of education in all freedom, in a new unitary society, which favours reciprocity, truth and honesty.

Method: Diop first used an interdisciplinary method, borrowed from the school of French historians of the journal *Annales*, the *longue durée* [i.e. an extended synchronic study]. He analyzed archeological, linguistic, and historical material; he studied the politico-social evolutionary phases of African societies, the names of ethnicities and of places. Diop returned systematically to techniques of the exact sciences like radiometric dating of absolute chronology, physical and chemical analysis, aerial photography, and the techniques of forensic science. By doing so, he invited egyptology to leave behind a centuries-old hermeticism of the texts and to open the gate that had isolated it from the vivifying wellspring that the Negro world provides.

In his later works Diop used a comparative method for establishing the kinship between African and Ancient Egyptian cultures. This kinship is neither accidental, nor a result of loans, but genetic. As a multidimensional scholar with some expertise also in nuclear physics and quantum mechanics, he created and directed the Radiocarbon Laboratory of the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) of the University of Dakar, now Cheikh Anta Diop University. Apart from Carbon-14 dating, one of the central missions of the laboratory is to use radio-isotopes as tracers in biology, medicine, hydrology, geochemistry, etc., and to take radioactive and chemical pollution measures. For this purpose, in 1974, he wrote a treatise on nuclear physics and absolute chronology (*Physique nucléaire et chronologie absolue*).

Impact: Diop wanted to break up the fortifications of alienation that colonization and Eurocentrism have constructed around African history. These fortifications have helped to atrophy and disintegrate the personality of the African. What advantage can Africans draw from this thesis? According to Diop, they will be able to create an assurance. This notion is linked to the fact that in becoming aware of the true nature of one's ancestors, who civilized and colonized the world, the African gains a legitimate pride in building the study of humanities from an Ancient Egyptian base just as legitimately as the West has built its own studies from a Graeco-Roman base, and to write one's own history and build one's own culture instead of being satisfied with passively becoming conscious of it in the works of foreigners who falsify it. Of these three eminently creative activities, there will come an intellectual and interior fullness.

African intellectual elites and those of the Black Diaspora are profoundly influenced by this multidimensional thinker. Today, Anta Diop studies flourish in African, American and Caribbean universities, and also among those who study Egyptology and African culture. All these studies confirm it, as does the prize that he shared in 1966 with the American W.E. B. DuBois at the first world festival of Negro arts, a prize for "the writer who has most influenced Black thought in the twentieth century". In Atlanta (USA) April 4th is "Dr Cheikh Anta Diop Day."