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Creating african unity through history: the question of the origin of the ancient egyptians in Cheikh Anta Diop's pan-africanist historiography

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Introduction

This article examines Cheikh Anta Diop's (1923-1986) proposal to create African unity through historiographical work, spanning the history of the continent from Antiquity to the present day, suggesting that contemporary black Africans should appropriate Ancient Egypt as the starting point of their common past. The Egyptian origin of African civilization and the black population of Ancient Egypt, which are central arguments in his work, are advocated in the 1995 book "Nations nègres et culture – De l'antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique Noire d'aujourd'hui" (Black Nations and Culture - From Ancient Egypt Negroes to the Cultural Problems of Today's Black Africa)[1]. In 1974, this discussion was taken to the symposium "The Settlement of Ancient Egypt and the Decipherment of the Meroitic Script", organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), where Diop presented the text "Origins of the Ancient Egyptians" (Diop, 1983).

Defending the black identity of the ancient Egyptians required Diop to transpose the contemporary concept of "black" back into Antiquity, thus reframing it within a modern context. This transposition also signifies a process of redefinition, for while the modern concept emerged in a context of conquest, subjugation, and enslavement of black individuals, Diop sought to invert these values, aiming to emancipate the black population by associating it with science, culture, and the exercise of power. Diop's historiography embodies a strategy of reversal, an appropriation turned inside out of the practices and methodologies he observed being employed by Europeans. Thus, he employs methods ranging from physical anthropology, originally developed to marginalize Africans and other colonized peoples, to constructing essentialist narratives and rigidly defining national identities. However, he directs these techniques towards the purpose of dismantling racial domination.

After this introduction, in the second section of this article, we will explore the context in which Diop's proposal was formulated, bringing elements from the post-World

[1] Free translation. The original title of the book is: "Nations nègres et culture – De l'antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui" (Diop, 1955). From this point on, the book will be referred to as "Black Nations".

War II international scenario, the French-speaking Pan-African intellectual environment, and Diop's political activities. We will examine in detail the preface of "Black Nations", in which Diop presents his Pan-Africanist ideas for the future of the continent and relates this project to the work presented in the book. We will refer to the prevailing view in historiography prior to Diop, which portrayed Egypt as white and disconnected from African reality, a continent that European tradition had long considered devoid of history. Bridging the gap between the publication of "Black Nations" and the presentation at the UNESCO symposium, we will analyze the preface of "The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality" (Diop, 1974)[2], in which Diop reflects on his political journey and the significance of his work.

The third and final section, before the conclusion, will focus on "The Origin of the Ancient Egyptians", Diop's presentation at the 1974 UNESCO symposium (Diop, 1983). In addition to studying this text, we will engage with analysts who have commented on the impact of this intervention, in order to discuss its contribution to the direction of Egyptology and African history in a broader sense. However, it should be noted that in this article, the reader will not find an updated report on the evidence that Egyptology might be working with today regarding the origin of the ancient Egyptian population. Nor is it our intention to opine on the color (or colors) of the ancient Egyptians. The genesis that interests us here is not so much that of the ancient Egyptians, but rather the genesis of Diop's ideas, situating the argument of the blackness of these people within his Pan-Africanist historiographical proposal.

About "Black Nations and White Egyptians: Some Preceding Moments to the 1974 Presentation"

Cheikh Anta Diop was born in 1923 in Senegal, which was then a French colony. The work from this nuclear physicist, Egyptologist, historian, linguist, and anthropologist, ranged from titles in physics such as "*Le Laboratoire de Radiocarbone*" (1968) and "*Physique nucléaire et chronologie absolue*" (1974) to studies in African history, such as "*Anteriorité des civilisations nègres*" (1967), among various others (Iniesta, 1989, p. 15). He worked as a researcher at the Fundamental Institute of Black Africa (IFAN) in Dakar from 1961, where he directed the first radiocarbon research laboratory in Africa. He

[2] Free translation of the original title of the work, which is "The African Origin of Civilization – Myth or Reality" (Diop, 1974).

became a university professor in the Senegalese capital in 1981 (Sagredo, 2017, p. 71-72).

As Reis (2018, p. 498) recounts, Diop completed his secondary education in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and commenced his university studies in Paris in 1946. While in the French capital, he actively participated in the student movement, notably co-founding the Association of African Students in Paris in 1946. This association later became affiliated with the Federation of African Students in Paris (FEANF) from 1950 onwards. In 1951, following his affiliation with the African Democratic Rally (RDA), he assumed a leadership role within the Student Association of this political organization.

In 1961, a year after Senegal achieved independence, Diop founded the Bloc of Senegalese Masses (BMS), a movement in opposition to the government led by Léopold Senghor (1906-2001). Senghor dissolved the BMS through a decree in 1963, but not before Diop's temporary arrest in 1962 on charges of political agitation, which led to his detention for approximately a month (Reis, 2018, p. 498).[3]

In the book "Nations nègres", written in French, Cheikh Anta Diop posits the existence of a black civilization that commences in Ancient Egypt and continues through to contemporary Black Africa. His central ideas, namely, the Egyptian origin of African civilization and the black population of Ancient Egypt, sparked controversy. Diop sought to obtain a doctoral degree from the University of Sorbonne with this work; however, the French university rejected his thesis (Reis, 2018, p. 168).

The period during which Diop conducted his research was marked by significant cultural and political upheaval in both Africa and the world. The post-World War II era held promises of emancipation and equality among all human beings. The United Nations Charter of 1945 upheld the principle of self-determination for nations and the eradication of racism. African urban centers, ports, factories, high schools, political parties, and cultural organizations buzzed with intense political and cultural activities. In 1955, the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, convened as an anti-colonialist forum, signifying the assertion of the newly emerging Third World.

In Africa and the Americas, from the mid-19th century onward, Africans and Afro-descendants endeavored to forge a black identity and articulate an African persona (Barbosa, 2020). This movement is commonly known as pan-Africanism, which,

[3] The French names of the entities mentioned in this paragraph are: Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noir (IFAN); Association des Étudiants Africains de Paris; Fédération des Étudiants Africains en France (FEANF); Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA); and Bloc des Masses Sénégalaises (BMS).

by the mid-1940s, had entered its third generation, actively advocating for the political independence of the continent. Also, it had substantial networks in European cities like London and Paris (Devés-Valdés, 2008).

According to Sagredo (2015), pan-Africanism called upon black people around the world to unite based on racial solidarity that encompassed both biological and socio-historical factors. Sagredo (2015, p. 8) points out that while there are currently harsh criticisms of the use of the notion of race by pan-Africanists, it is necessary to "understand the historical context at hand and distinguish racism from racialism; while for Europeans, the race category was a means of oppressing and devaluing others, for pan-Africans, it was a unifying concept".

The colophon of the work states that it was printed in Paris on the last day of 1954, while on the back cover it is mentioned that the book was released in 1955 with all rights of reproduction, translation, and adaptation reserved for Éditions Africaines (a label of Présence Africaine) "for all countries, including Russia" (Diop, 1955, s.p.)[4].

In Reis's analysis, the publication of "Nações Negras" marked a new phase for Présence Africaine (Reis, 2018, p. 168), a journal founded in 1947 that also functioned as a publishing house since 1949 (Reis, 2018, p. 169). Starting from 1955, the magazine changed its editorial project, adopting an anti-colonial stance. As a publishing house, it began to give greater visibility to the production of African intellectuals, with new thematic choices and the use of African languages (Reis, 2018, p. 169).

It is in this new environment of greater editorial autonomy that Diop publishes and presents his work. The verb "present" here is neither redundant nor trivial: we want to emphasize that he himself writes the preface of his book, informing the audience of what his work is about and its intended purpose. It should be noted that in the 1930s and 1940s, books authored by Africans published in France were often prefaced by Europeans—ethnologists, colonial administrators, intellectuals (Reis, 2018, p. 144; p. 145).

The future of Africa and the continent's independence are the central concerns of the preface of "Black Nations and Culture" This paragraph is quite representative of the ideals of its time:

> It becomes evident, then, that only the existence of Independent African States federated within a democratic central government, from the Libyan shores of the Mediterranean to the Cape, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, will allow Africans to fully develop and showcase their capacity in various creative fields, gain respect – even love –, put an end to all forms of

[4] In the original: "pour tous pays, y compris la Russie"

> paternalism, turn a page of philosophy, advance humanity, making it possible for peoples to fraternize, which will be much easier to establish between independent States on an equal footing, and no longer between dominators and dominated (Diop, 1955, p. 10, our translation).[5]

Representative ideas, but not unanimous: As Reis (2018, p. 180) illustrates, among Francophone African politicians of that era, there were varying positions in play beyond total independence. For instance, Senghor proposed autonomy for the then-colonized territories within a federation with France. Moreover, as pointed out by Barbosa (2020, p. 81 *et seq.*), the notion of a federative integration of Africa gradually lost traction within African circles starting in the 1960s, coinciding with the increasing independence of countries on the continent. This concept was deferred to an uncertain future, with questions surrounding how and when it might materialize.

For Diop, the independence of small colonies like Senegal or Ivory Coast would be an illusion without unity. In an era of economic interdependence and the end of small national economies, these countries would face all kinds of external pressures and eventually fall into the orbit of a major power. In his view, a federative form would solve this problem (Diop, 1955, p. 12).

Diop begins his preface by stating that according to Western works, there would be no civilization that had been created by black people. Egypt, Congo, Ghana, and other ancient civilizations would have been the work of mythical whites (Diop, 1955, p. 7). These and other theories about Africa's past would serve colonialism, leading to the belief that blacks were not responsible for creating anything valuable. This would make it easier to abandon any national aspirations among the hesitant and reinforce the subordination of those who were already alienated. In order to prevent cultural alienation from being used as a tool of domination, Africans needed to delve into their history and civilization. However, as Diop notes, this idea was far from evident for all Africans (Diop, 1955, p. 8).

Controversial yet methodical, Diop divides the opponents of his ideas into three groups. The first group consists of cosmopolitans, scientists, and modernizers, who view delving into the past as an outdated approach and a waste of time in the face of

[5] Original passage: "Il devient donc clair que c'est seulement l'existence d'Etats Africains Indépendants fédérés au sein d'un Gouvernement central démocratique, des côtes libyques de la Méditerranée au Cap, de l'Océan Atlantique à l'Océan Indien, qui permettra aux Africains de s'épanouir pleinement et de donner toute leur mesure dans les différents domaines de la création, de se faire respecter – voire aimer – de tuer toutes les formes de paternalisme, de faire tourner une page de la philosophie, de faire progresser l'humanité en rendant possible une fraternisation entre les peuples qui deviendra alors d'autant plus facile qu'elle s'établira entre Etats indépendants au même degré et non plus entre dominants et dominés".

contemporary problems on a planet undergoing unification. This group believed that science would solve all major issues, rendering local and ancillary concerns obsolete (Diop, 1955, p. 8). They also considered non-European languages unnecessary, as the European ones were already universal and sufficient for expressing scientific thought (Diop, 1955, p. 8-9). According to Diop, this group would be most affected by cultural alienation and tend to devalue "everything that comes from us", as a result of cultural poison injected since early childhood (Diop, 1955, p. 9).

Diop (1955, p. 9) argues that modernization does not entail breaking with the past, but integrating new elements into the vital and robust parts of history. This implies the existence of an integrating medium, a society with a sufficiently known past that an entire people can recognize themselves within. Conversely, the absence of this integration would lead to societal disintegration, often with the cooperation of the elite, resulting in the erosion of fundamental values that constitute the societal bedrock. For this reason, Diop maintains that even the most experienced Marxists, amidst the harshest struggles for daily sustenance and political power, prioritize the constant preservation and reinforcement of cultural elements. They understand that without safeguarding the national culture that ensures the survival of the society they fight for, their efforts would prove futile (Diop, 1955, p. 9).

According to the Senegalese writer, modernity and progress remain attainable under a colonial regime; they would be mere illusions, mirages capable of deceiving entire populations with the complicity of a few. At most, under colonialism, a few bright individuals may emerge, but the progress of the entire populace remains a distant goal. Only with complete political independence for Africa can a future characterized by progress and modernity be constructed for the continent (Diop, 1955, p. 10). Lenin and the Bolshevik Party's struggle are cited in his argument to underscore the urgency of seizing power as a prerequisite for a modernizing project (Diop, 1955, p. 11).

Diop makes several references to Marxism and the communist movement in this preface, and he believes that "anyone who wants to use Marxism as a guide to action in African lands will come to substantially the same conclusions" as his work (Diop, 1955, p. 14)[6]. In this way, the author considers his appropriation of Marxism to be the only one possible, at least for action on the African continent.

Moreover, Diop's message is directed towards the second group, composed of

[6] Original passage: "quiconque voudra se servir du marxisme comme guide d'action sur le terrain africain arrivera sensiblement aux mêmes conclusions".

intellectuals who either neglected their Marxist education or hastily studied Marxism without applying it to the specific social realities of their own countries (Diop, 1955, p. 11). We can observe that the adaptation and alignment of political propositions with local realities were a common theme throughout the 20th century, a theme that also resonated with Diop's perspective.

Diop recounts that this second group labels his ideas as reactionary, bourgeois, racist, and Nazi. In response to these accusations, he argues that it is essential for a people to understand their history and preserve their national culture. If these aspects have not yet been studied, it is a duty to do so. This is not about creating a history more glorious than others to morally pacify the people during the struggle for national independence. Instead, it stems from the clear notion that every people possesses their own history (Diop, 1955, p. 11). To counter claims that his approach is bourgeois, Diop cites a speech by Lenin in which he advocates for the appreciation of the knowledge amassed by humanity in shaping proletarian culture. Diop asserts that this idea is relevant to the specific circumstances of each country (Diop, 1955, p. 11). Therefore, just as one cannot expect to construct a proletarian culture from scratch and disregard the accumulations of knowledge in human history, merely assimilating communist slogans, one cannot build a Black-African culture without considering the origins of these peoples (Diop, 1955, p. 11).[7]

Diop (1955, p. 12) questions what these intellectuals who criticize him think of Communist China, which retained hieroglyphic writing instead of replacing it with universal Phoenician characters. Concerning accusations of racism, the author of "Nations nègres" clarifies that he does not intend to promote racism when using terms like "negro" (Nègre) and "African negro origin" (origine nègre africaine) to describe the ancient Egyptians. He finds the expression "African people" (peuple africain) imprecise and insufficient because the Egyptians have been categorized as white, Asian, and European in the past. It is the conscious and unconscious racists who compel him to refute his writings with equivalent terms (Diop, 1955, p. 12).

The third and final group of opponents that Diop addresses is that of the formalist anti-nationalists. This aspect provides interesting elements for reflecting on the nationalisms emerging at that time. It's worth noting that, in the post-World War II era, the concept of nationalism carried a stigma, closely associated with the semantic fields of

[7] The Leninist text quoted by Diop in this passage is Lenin (1920).

xenophobia and chauvinism, and linked to fascism and Nazism. However, in the mid-1950s, the idea that nationalism could be a progressive and revolutionary force, especially when applied to countries under colonialism and imperialism, was gaining traction concurrently with the formation of the political Third World. These ideas resonate with the formulations of Lenin and, notably, Stalin from the 1910s and 1920s.[8]

According to Diop, the formalist anti-nationalist group's members would be distracted by the book's title, simply because it contains the word "nation". Diop argues, "Just because Stalin wrote 'Marxism and the National and Colonial Question'[9], a book with 'national' in the title, it doesn't mean he was a nationalist" (Diop, 1955, p. 12, our translation)[10]. Evidently, in 1955, it was still possible to mention Stalin in a somewhat lighthearted and positive manner, as it was presumed that the former Soviet leader couldn't be labeled a nationalist. In that context, the term "nationalist" carried a negative connotation and was associated with the far right.

As per Diop's perspective, his interest in nationalism was confined to the two aspects that Marxists focus on in this context: national culture and national independence (Diop, 1955, p. 12). Consequently, we observe that the concept of nationalism, in Diop's view, is associated with a somewhat negative value judgment, and it becomes relevant to highlight certain distinctions.

Nonetheless, the context in which Diop writes represents a pivotal moment, during which the concept of nationalism was undergoing a rehabilitation, particularly when viewed through an anti-colonial lens. By distinguishing between bourgeois metropolitan nationalism and the nationalism of colonized nations, Diop contends that the former serves to uphold the privileges of colonial domination, while the latter would dismantle this form of control:

> Colonialist forces are spearheading a coordinated campaign against nationalism in the colonized nations, seeking to suppress it at all costs. This is because our nationalism, even in its most chauvinistic form, poses dire consequences for them: it eradicates their privileges and washes away their domination with the force of a torrent (Diop, 1955, p. 13, our translation).[11]

[8] See Stalin (1913; 1924).
[9] Book originally published in 1913 with the title "The National Question and Social Democracy" (Stalin, 1913, note 1). In this article, we reference the version available in the "Arquivo Marxista" Internet Archive, titled "Marxism and the National and Colonial Question", based on a Brazilian Portuguese translation from 1946.
[10] In French: "n'est pas parce que Staline a écrit 'Le marxisme et la question nationale et coloniale', un livre dont le titre contient le terme de 'nationale' qu'il fut nationaliste".
[11] "Les milieux colonialistes mènent une campagne orchestrée contre le nationalisme dans les pays dominés, essaient de prendre les devants pour le faire avorter partout; car notre Nationalisme, même le plus chauvin, a des conséquences redoutables pour eux: il pulvérise leurs privilèges et balaient leur domination

Diop contemplates the concept of African nations. The preface writer suggests that applying Stalin's[12] definitions to Ethiopians, Jolofs, Yorubas, Zulus, and others would be straightforward, while in places like Senegal, Kenya, South Africa, and so on, there existed the nuclei of nations that would solidify during the struggle for independence (Diop, 1955, p. 13). Diop considers that even though these regions shared factors of unity—historical, cultural, psychological, and geographical—it would be impractical to define the exact borders of these nations in the present day. He argues that the current borders, which were established for colonial exploitation, are not sacrosanct, and it's crucial to instill an openness to future adjustments in the collective consciousness (Diop, 1955, p. 13).

The book from 1955 also delves into other controversies, including critiques of certain approaches by the poets of Negritude.[13] This movement, aside from promoting the arts and culture, advocated the primacy of emotion over reason in black culture. In verse, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) referred to blacks as "Those who invented neither gunpowder nor the compass, those who never learned to conquer steam or electricity, those who never explored the sea or the sky..." (Césaire, 1939, p. 68, cited in Santos, 1968, p. 121).[14] Senghor, in the late 1930s, versified that emotion would be black and reason Hellenic.[15] Diop, conversely, emphasized the rationality of black individuals and the African origins of scientific development. In "Black Nations", he critiques these stances held by the Negritude poets, arguing that they echoed the racist ideas of thinkers like the Frenchman Arthur de Gobineau (Diop, 1955, p. 33). Nevertheless, in the case of Césaire, Diop is keen to underscore that these criticisms do not diminish the profound admiration he holds for the Martinican poet, whom he regards as the greatest poet of his era (Diop, 1955, p. 34).

The Senegalese scientist was a proponent of using African languages in the fields of science and education. To substantiate his perspective, he explains Einstein's theory of

avec la violence d'un torrent".

[12] Most likely, Diop is referring to the definition provided by Stalin (1913, s.p.): 'A nation is a historically established, stable community of people, founded on a common language, territory, economic life, and shared psychology, expressed through a common culture. Moreover, it is understood that, like all historical phenomena, a nation is subject to the law of transformation, possessing its own history, a beginning, and an end".

[13] Regarding Negritude, please see, among others, Barbosa (2020, p. 47 *et seq.*).

[14] In French: "Ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre, ni la boussole, / Ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter ni la vapeur, ni l'électricité / Ceux qui n'ont exploré ni la mer, ni le ciel..." (Césaire, 1939 *apud* Diop, 1955, p. 34.)

[15] "L'émotion est nègre et la raison hellène" (Senghor *apud* Diop, 1955, p. 33).

relativity in the Jola language[16] (Diop, 1955, p. 285-288), based on a translation of a French summary (Lanvgevin *apud* Diop, 1955, p. 279-283). Furthermore, he translates "La Marseillaise" (the national anthem of France) and excerpts from Horace's poems into Jola. Additionally, he includes modern Jola poems (Diop, 1955, p. 289-291). The first, second, and third chapters of the second part of his book are devoted to his studies in African linguistics.

The creation and valorization of narratives about a glorious past, especially during moments of crisis, nation-building, and identity reconstruction, are recurring phenomena in the histories of various human societies, including African ones. The 1950s, during which Diop began publishing his works, represent one of these moments when the assertion of a Pan-African identity gave rise to various proposals for appropriating and mobilizing the historical past. These approaches faced criticism and contemplation from participants in the public discourse of the era, such as Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a native of Martinique. In 1959, while actively involved in the leadership of the Algerian liberation war against French colonialism, Fanon delivered a presentation at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Rome. In his speech, Fanon analyzed the political and psychological necessity for colonized intellectuals to celebrate pre-colonial civilizations in response to the colonial discourse that portrayed the colonized people's past as a period of darkness. However, Fanon also contemplated that:

> The fact that there once existed an Aztec civilization doesn't significantly alter in the dietary habits of today's Mexican peasants. (...) all the evidence that could be presented for the existence of a prodigious Songhai[17] civilization doesn't change the fact that today's Songhai people are undernourished, illiterate, lying between heaven and water, with vacant minds, with empty eyes. (Fanon, 1959, p. 204, our translation).

Fanon criticizes the imprudent mobilization of historical past, which he argues is in contradiction with the actual practices of certain political figures, like Senghor:

> Black African culture revolves around the struggle of the people, rather than focusing solely on songs, poems, or folklore. Senghor, who is also a member of the African Society of Culture and collaborated with us on the matter of African culture, did not hesitate to instruct his delegation to support the French theses on Algeria. Commitment to Black African culture and the cultural unity of Africa first and foremost demands unwavering support for the liberation struggles of the people. One cannot seek the splendor of African culture without actively contributing to the conditions necessary for that culture,

[16] A language spoken in West Africa, primarily in Senegal; Jola language, Jola people, Wolof.
[17] Former empire in the region that is now Mali.

> namely, the liberation of the continent (Fanon, 1959, p. 230-231, our translation).

For Fanon (1959, p. 213), the colonized man's quest for his roots is "a painful and distressing leap (...), yet a necessary one. Failing to undertake it will result in extremely serious psycho-affective mutilations". However, the colonized intellectual cannot be content with just this movement:

> Therefore, one must not be content with delving into the people's past to find elements of coherence for countering the falsifying and derogatory initiatives of colonialism. It is imperative to work and fight at the same pace as the people to secure the future, to prepare the ground where powerful shoots are already growing. National culture isn't merely folklore, where abstract populism attempted to unveil the people's truth. In underdeveloped countries, national culture must be positioned at the very heart of the ongoing struggle for liberation. African intellectuals who have fought in the name of black African culture, organizing numerous congresses in pursuit of the unity of this culture, must now grasp that their efforts have been reduced to the examination of certain artifacts or the comparison of certain sarcophagi (Fanon, 1959, p. 229, our translation).

These comments should not necessarily be understood as a critique of the work of historians like Diop, but rather as a critique of some of the possibilities for the instrumentalization of such work by political actors. It's worth noting that some of these instrumentalizations were proposed by the historians themselves, as in the case of Diop. Specifically regarding Fanon's appreciation of the work of the Senegalese scientist, it should be noted that in "Black Skin, White Masks", Fanon mentioned that he followed "with great interest the linguistic studies of Cheikh Anta Diop" (Fanon, 1970, p. 58). In this same book, originally published in 1952, there are different passages with criticisms of using the past as a guide to the future:

> In no way should I draw my original vocation from the past of people of color. (...) I refuse to sing the past at the expense of my present and future. The Indochinese did not rebel simply because they discovered their own culture. It was "quite simply" because, for multiple reasons, they found it impossible to breathe (Fanon, 1970, p. 260, our translation).

Alternatively: "There is no need to try to fix man, because his destiny is to be free. The density of History does not determine any of my actions. I am my own foundation. And it is by surpassing the historical, utilitarian data that I introduce the cycle of my freedom" (Fanon, 1970, p. 265).

Continuing our historical journey, it's worth highlighting that pre-Diop

historiography depicted Egypt as "white", considering it a part of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern history, rather than African (Araújo, 2001; Sales, 2001). However, in antiquity, there were Greek descriptions of Egyptians as "blacks". It's important to note that during this period, the concept of race as it emerged in the Modern era didn't exist. M'Bokolo (2012, p. 59) cautions against interpreting the ancient Greek references to skin color anachronistically using the concepts of racism characteristic of the Modern and Contemporary eras.

According to Bernal (1991), the European perceptions of Egyptians as either black or white have evolved throughout history, influenced by changing notions of race and shifts in European admiration for Egypt. For instance, in the late 17th century, there was a simultaneous increase in both racism and respect for Egypt. Consequently, during this period, the portrayal of Egyptians tended to become more whitened, in contrast to earlier eras when Egyptians could be represented as darker or black (along with white or yellow) without diminishing European admiration for them. Once a negative judgment about the black "race" was firmly established, associating Egyptians with this group would tarnish the image of that civilization. As Bernal notes, in the 18th century, German romantics showed little admiration for Egyptians and pejoratively linked this civilization to Black Africa (Bernal, 1991, p. 240-246). To sum it up, Bernal outlines "the Egyptian problem" as follows:

> If it had been scientifically 'proven' that Blacks were biologically incapable of civilization, how could one explain Ancient Egypt, which inconveniently resided on the African continent? There were two, or rather three, solutions. The first was to deny that the Ancient Egyptians were black; the second was to deny that the Ancient Egyptians had created a 'true' civilization; the third was to doubly ensure by denying both. The last solution has been preferred by most historians of the 19th and 20th centuries (Bernal, 1991, p. 241, our translation).[18]

In addition to these mental conditioning factors, other practical issues - though also socially and historically determined - hindered an understanding of Egypt as an African civilization. A perspective like the one proposed by Diop presupposes knowledge of African history that was not systematized by academia before the mid-20th century, with Diop himself being one of the pioneers. Positioning Egypt's history within the

[18] In the original: If it had been scientifically 'proven' that blacks were biologically incapable of civilization, how could anyone explain Ancient Egypt - which was conveniently located on the African continent? There were two, or rather three solutions: the first was to deny that the ancient Egyptians were black; the second was to deny that the ancient Egyptians had created a "true" civilization; the third was to be doubly sure by denying both. The last option was preferred by most historians of the 19th and 20th centuries.

framework of the Near East and the Mediterranean was more accessible to scholars' education.

At the end of the 19th century, driven by the demands of colonialism, major European powers began investing in the study of Africa. The research conducted during this period primarily aimed at facilitating conquest and territorial exploitation. However, these studies were predominantly undertaken in fields such as anthropology, geography, medicine, botany, and others, rather than history. It wasn't until the 1960s that the academic study of African history began to gain substantial traction. An important milestone in the academic recognition of African history was the elaboration of the General History of Africa by UNESCO in the 1960s and 1970s, a context that coincided with the colloquium on the peopling of Ancient Egypt.

This delay in the comprehensive study of African history, in comparison to other regions of the world, raises historical and political questions. It's crucial to remember that one of the central pillars of European colonial discourse was the denial of Africa having a history. According to this colonialist perspective, Africa's history supposedly commenced only with the arrival of Europeans on the continent. Slavery and later colonialism not only subjugated and dehumanized African peoples in their daily lives but also influenced the discourse surrounding them.

This way, we can understand the destabilizing impact of associating Ancient Egypt, a civilization of immense prestige in Ancient History, with the concepts of blackness and the African continent. Propositions of this nature were met with strong reactions. As we will see later, a European thinker like Constantin-François Volney, who challenged the idea of a white Egypt in the 18th century, reflected on the political and moral implications of considering the possibility that the ancient Egyptians were black. In his discourse, these statements were intertwined with his condemnation of the enslavement of black people.

At other points in history, the contest over Egypt's memory also intersected with debates about the modern enslavement of Black individuals. In the mid-19th century United States, during discussions about the abolition of slavery in that country, emphasizing the whiteness of ancient Egyptians was sometimes used to legitimize and normalize the status of Black individuals in American society. Sagredo (2015, p. 5-7) references the work of Samuel George Morton, an American physician and professor, in his 1844 publication “Crania Aegyptiaca”. This work served as a foundation for subsequent Egyptological studies that argued for the idea of a white Egypt. Morton's

conclusions were drawn from the analysis of skulls from Egyptian mummies, where he contended that ancient Egyptians displayed characteristic features of white individuals. In his work, he provided a list of fifteen statements supporting this assertion. Notably, in the eighth statement, Morton appeared to be concerned with employing Egypt's history to justify the established social order in the United States. He argued that even though Black people were numerous in Egypt, their social status in ancient times was comparable to that observed in the contemporary United States, where they were enslaved (Morton, 1844, p. 65-66 *apud* Sagredo, 2015, p. 6-7).[19]

Conversely, the concept of a Black Egypt has roots dating back to the beginnings of Pan-Africanism and is evident in the writings of figures such as Edward Blyden, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Anténor Firmin (Sagredo, 2017, p. 65 et seq.).

To conclude our exploration of moments predating the 1974 presentation, let's examine the preface and conclusion of the book "The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality" (Diop, 1974). Directed at an American audience, this work translates selected and condensed content from "Nations Negres" and "Antériorité des Civilisations Nègres: Mythe ou Vérité Historique?" – the latter from 1967. In the preface, dated July 1973, Diop explains that his research began in 1946, a time when the colonial situation overshadowed all other concerns. He reminisces about his involvement with RDA, a transnational organization in West Africa, where he served as the Secretary-General of the student section from 1950 to 1953. He recounts a pivotal moment when the first post-World War II Pan-African student congress was held in Paris in 1951 in collaboration with the West African Student Union in London.

In February 1953, within the inaugural issue of "Voie de l'Afrique Noire", the official publication of RDA students, Diop published an article providing a summary of "Nations Negres", for which the manuscript was already completed. According to Diop, this article vividly conveyed his ideas on various subjects, encompassing African history, the past and future of the continent's languages, and their roles in science and education, the vision of a future federation of African states, either continental or subcontinental, African social structures, and the strategies and tactics involved in the fight for national independence (Diop, 1974, p. xii). It's important to note that in this preface, Diop doesn't specify whether he continued his involvement in political organizations, nor does he make

[19] "Negroes were numerous in Egypt, but their social position in ancient times was the same that it now is [in the United States], that of servants and slaves".

any references to the communist sphere, unlike his preface nearly twenty years earlier.

According to Diop, a people's collective personality is shaped by three factors: the psychic factor, the historical factor, and the linguistic factor. The first can be approached in a literary manner and corresponds to the national temperament highlighted by Negritude poets. The other two factors are amenable to a scientific approach, and it's these factors that his work primarily addresses. Diop argues that foreign intellectuals who level baseless accusations against him employ a similar methodology when studying their own historical backgrounds and languages. Therefore, he questions why they find it concerning and regressive when an African undertakes the same pursuit (Diop, 1974, p. xiii).

Diop emphasized that what interested him most at the time was to witness the formation of teams consisting of honest and courageous researchers who would further develop the ideas found in his works (Diop, 1974, p. xiv). He proceeded to enumerate ten of these ideas, providing commentary and citing their locations in his works. Within the context of Egyptian topics, Diop underscored the thesis regarding the blackness of the ancient Egyptians, the pivotal role of Egyptian civilization in the study of African history, and the precedence and influence of black-Egyptian civilization on the entirety of human civilization (Diop, 1974, p. xiv-xv).

He states that his book “L’Afrique Noire précoloniale” (1960) marked the beginning of a new line of research, characterized by socio-historical analysis rather than ethnography. This approach has subsequently been embraced by other researchers (Diop, 1974, p. xvi). He contends that the documentation of a few outstanding black individuals holds minimal significance; the crucial objective is the recovery of the entire nation's history.

The contrary of this would be to believe that existence or non-existence hinges on recognition in Europe (Diop, 1974, p. xvi). He highlights that “L’Unité culturelle de l’Afrique Noire”, published in 1959, identifies common characteristics of Afro-black civilization (Diop, 1974, p. xvi), while “L’Afrique Noire précoloniale” proposed connections between Africa and pre-Columbian America, a research direction that American scholars were pursuing at that time (Diop, 1974, p. xvii). He underscores that in “Nations Negres”, he demonstrates the ability of African languages to express scientific and philosophical thought and stresses that the use of African languages in education needs to become a reality—an idea that, according to Diop, was being adopted by UNESCO in recent years through colloquiums and initiatives to promote these languages

(Diop, 1974, p. xvii).

He calls on American scholars, both white and black, to form research groups to develop the ideas he has proposed. He proclaims that his conception of African history had virtually triumphed, and those who were then producing works on the subject were basing their research on this conception, whether willingly or not (Diop, 1974, p. xvii).

The same emphasis on collective and ongoing work is echoed in the book's conclusion (Diop, 1974, p. 276-277). Diop believes that scientific knowledge can eliminate all forms of frustration and hopes that his book will contribute to the noble goal of bringing humanity closer together, creating a genuine sense of humanity (Diop, 1974, p. 277). He states that the new generation of African social scientists was determined not to regress from a scientific approach to an emotional one. He further explains that he proposed three preconditions for the preparation of the second volume (pertaining to Ancient Africa) of the General History of Africa by UNESCO. All of these preconditions were accepted at the 1971 plenary session of the International Scientific Committee for the project. One of these proposals involved convening an international colloquium in Egypt, where Egyptologists and Africanists would come together to compare their perspectives for the first time regarding the anthropological identity of the ancient Egyptians (Diop, 1974, p. 276).

Presentation of origin of the ancient egyptians (1974)

In 1964, the UNESCO General Conference decided to initiate the creation of a General History of Africa. To prepare for this monumental task, colloquia on crucial themes in the continent's history were organized. Notably, Iniesta (1989, p. 111) emphasizes that, akin to Diop, other African historians, including the Congolese Théophile Obenga, stipulated as a prerequisite for their involvement that the project would address the ethnocultural issue of Ancient Egypt. Back in 1962, UNESCO and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) had assigned Joseph Ki-Zerbo[20], a historian from Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), the task of producing a History of Black Africa. This work, published in 1971, intentionally refrained from definitively stating whether Egypt

[20] Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1922-2006) was a prominent African intellectual, political activist, and historian. Further details can be found in Botelho, Barbosa, and Sapede (2016).

had been populated by blacks or whites, as noted by Iniesta (1989, p. 111).

The decision to create a General History of Africa by UNESCO occurred at a time when a significant number of African countries had already achieved independence. During the early 1960s, numerous African nations became members of the United Nations (UN). As of January 1974, during the UNESCO colloquium, the Portuguese colonial empire was the last remaining major colonial power in Africa. In South Africa, the apartheid regime was still in force, and Nelson Mandela was incarcerated.

In 1974, at the outset of his address during the UNESCO symposium, Diop asserted that the human race emerged in the region of the Great Lakes, near the source of the Nile River, at the foot of the Mountains of the Moon. According to him, from this place, humanity spread to populate the rest of the world. Thus, the earliest men and women were considered "ethnically homogeneous and Negroid". Initially, the entire human population had dark skin due to their tropical origin, but as they settled in areas with different climates, humanity "eventually differentiated into various races". To populate other continents, people could travel through the Sahara Desert and the Nile Valley. Diop (1983, p. 39) contended that, from the Upper Paleolithic period to the Dynastic Period, the entire Nile Basin was "gradually settled by these Negroid peoples".

When examining the contributions of physical anthropology to determine the race of the ancient Egyptians, Diop noted that the criteria employed in craniometry were flexible and subjective. By using these same criteria, one could potentially arrive at the conclusion that Ethiopians and Dravidians, groups classified by Diop as black, shared more physical similarities with Germanic peoples. It could even suggest that 30% of contemporary English individuals exhibited Negroid characteristics, or that out of the 140 million black Africans today, 100 million could be considered white (Diop, 1983, p. 40-41).

Nevertheless, Diop did not entirely dismiss the use of craniometry, a technique historically employed to support racist ideologies, in substantiating his thesis. He concluded that despite the disparities in the criteria used, the evidence he compiled enabled him to affirm that "the foundation of the pre-dynastic Egyptian population was black" and reject the notion that "the black element infiltrated Egypt in a later period" (Diop, 1983, p. 41, our translation). According to Diop, the Mediterranean race was closer to the brown race than the white race, and he even considered "brown" as a euphemism for black. Diop contended that the entirety of the Egyptian population was black, except for a few white nomads who infiltrated during the proto-dynastic period. He criticized the

dissemination of the idea that Egyptians were white in school textbooks without solid research to substantiate this claim. In contrast, Diop believed that the accumulated evidence from scientific research pointed to an Egypt of predominantly black ethnicity.

As per M'Bokolo's observation, while Diop's work "completely resides within the scientific realm", it does not avoid subscribing to the theory of 'races, which is essentially defined "using the very criteria employed by proponents of the inequality of human races". Furthermore, Diop establishes a connection between 'races' and 'civilization', whereas civilizations are typically understood as products of societies (M'bokolo, 2012, p. 65, our translation).

Diop proposed additional methods to establish the Egyptians as black, which included examinations for melanin levels, blood type verification, and osteometry. According to Diop, "it's possible to directly determine the skin color and, consequently, the ethnic affiliation of ancient Egyptians through laboratory microscopic analysis" (Diop, 1983, p. 46, our translation). This method would also enable one to confidently affirm that the Egyptians were "undoubtedly" black. He mentioned that he himself conducted laboratory analyses on mummies from the Museum of Man in Paris and found a level of melanin that does not exist in white-skinned races.[21]

Diop expressed his frustration at not being able to obtain "a few square millimeters of skin" from Egyptian mummies at the Cairo Museum for testing. He considered osteometry[22], a to be a "less misleading" method than craniometry, as another technique that could confirm the Egyptians as black (Diop, 1983, p. 47, our translation). Regarding blood types, Diop asserted that blood group A was characteristic of the "white race before any miscegenation", while blood group B was typical of West African populations. He noted that even today there is a prevalence of blood group B among Egyptians and suggested conducting blood tests on Egyptian mummies to examine blood type distributions (Diop, 1983, p. 47-48, our translation).

In a dialogue attributed to the Greek writer Lucian, two characters, Licinus and Timolaus, discussed a young Egyptian. Licinus described him as having black skin, thick lips, and very thin legs. His braided hair led Licinus to assume he was a slave, but Timolaus pointed out that in Egypt, having braided hair was a sign of "well-born people" (Lucian *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 51). The list continues to the tenth classical author. Diop's conclusion (1983, p. 55) is that "the degree of agreement among them is impressive,

[21] Melanin is a substance that darkens the skin, hair, and eyes.
[22] Osteometry is the measurement of bones for anthropological purposes.

constituting an objective fact that is difficult to underestimate or conceal. Modern Egyptology constantly vacillates between these two poles".

Diop compiled a list of ten authors from Greco-Roman antiquity who described the Egyptians as black. Among these, Herodotus contended that the Colchian people[23] had their origins in the Egyptians because both groups shared characteristics such as black skin, curly hair, and, significantly, the practice of circumcision (Diop, 1983, p. 48). Aristotle argued that individuals who were "very black", like "the Egyptians and Ethiopians", were prone to cowardice, as were very white people, such as women; he proposed that courage lays between black and white (Aristotle *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 51, our translation). In a dialogue ascribed to the Greek writer Lucian, two characters, Licinus and Timolaus, discussed a young Egyptian. Licinus described him as having black skin, thick lips, and very thin legs. His braided hair led Licinus to assume he was a slave, but Timolaus pointed out that in Egypt, having braided hair was a sign of being "well-born" (Lucian *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 51, our translation). This list extends to the tenth classical author. Diop's conclusion (1983, p. 55) highlights "the remarkable consensus among these sources, constituting an objective fact that is challenging to downplay or conceal. Modern Egyptology consistently fluctuates between these two perspectives".

Diop mentions the book "Voyages en Syrie et en Egypte" (1787) by the French historian Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820). During his travels in Egypt between 1783 and 1785, Volney observed physical traits in the Copts that he described as "mulattoes", noting features such as "swollen faces, puffy eyes, and thick lips" (Volney, 1787 *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 55, our translation). According to Diop (1983, p. 55, our translation), he considered the Copts as the "representatives of the true Egyptian race, the one that produced the pharaohs". Volney evaluated the features of the Sphinx as black and recalled Herodotus's passage comparing the Egyptians to the Colchians (Volney, 1787 *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 55). Volney concluded that:

> The ancient Egyptians were indeed of black descent, originating from the same racial lineage as the indigenous African peoples. This fact explains how, after several centuries of intermingling with Roman and Greek influences, the Egyptian race lost its originally dark skin color yet retained its distinctive features. In essence, this observation can be widely applied, indicating that physiognomy serves as a form of historical evidence, which can be used in many cases to discuss or illuminate the indications of a people's origin (Volney, 1787 *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 55, our translation).

[23] The Colchian people were a black-skinned people who lived in "Colchis, on the Armenian coast of the Black Sea, surrounded by white-skinned nations" (Diop, 1983, p. 48, our translation).

As per M'Bokolo (2012, p. 62, our translation), Volney was not only a scientist but also a revolutionary, a "man of the Enlightenment era who cherished liberty and vehemently opposed all forms of oppression, especially the slave trade". Diop (1983, p. 55) values Volney's observations as a rare and truthful testimony concerning Egypt. Inspired by his experiences in Egypt, Volney penned the following reflections:

> But returning to Egypt, his contribution to history provides many themes for philosophical reflection. There are several significant themes worthy of contemplation: the present-day barbarism and ignorance of the Copts, who are considered to have sprung from the genius of the Egyptians and the Greeks; the fact that this race of blacks, who are currently slaves and subjects of our disdain, are the very people to whom we owe our art, our sciences, and even the use of the written word. Moreover, it raises questions about how among those who claim to be the greatest champions of liberty and humanity, the most barbaric form of slavery was sanctioned, and whether blacks were doubted to have brains of the same quality as those of whites! (Volney, 1787, p. 74-77 *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 56, our translation).

Volney's comments are essentially personal observations and opinions, and they do not serve as conclusive evidence regarding the skin color or origin of the ancient Egyptians. However, his insights are intriguing to contemplate in the context of the memory-related issues, which emerged long after the existence of Ancient Egypt. What particularly stands out is Volney's capacity to reshape and revolutionize the value system within which he was socialized. He engaged in a profound critique, challenging prevailing notions of slavery and the belief in the intellectual inferiority of black individuals.

It is indeed remarkable that, as Diop underscores (1983, p. 55, our translation), "even during the era of black slavery", Volney believed that Europeans owed their art, science, and writing to black people. It's also noteworthy that throughout history, and even today, there hasn't always been a perceived contradiction between oppressing other peoples and self-identifying as champions of freedom and humanity.

Diop also includes, categorizing it as 'captious', a comment from Champollion-Figeac in 1839, who was the brother of Champollion the Younger. He stated, "The two physical traits presented – black skin and kinky hair – are not sufficient to label a race as black, and Volney's conclusion regarding the black origin of the ancient population of Egypt is clearly forced and unacceptable" (Champollion-Figeac, 1839, p. 26-27 *apud* Diop, 1983, p. 56, our translation).

Regarding the Egyptians' self-perception, the Senegalese Egyptologist studied human representations from the proto-historic period. He concluded that the natives and

leaders of the country were depicted as black, while individuals from other racial backgrounds were portrayed as foreigners holding servile positions. Diop argues that there is no inherent contrast between representations of Egyptians and black individuals; any contrast that exists is social rather than ethnic in nature. Diop further posits the existence of two variants of the black race: one with straight hair, such as the Dravidians or the Nubians, and the other with kinky hair from equatorial regions. He notes that "both of these types contributed to the composition of the Egyptian population" (Diop, 1983, p. 46, our translation).

According to Diop, the Egyptians referred to themselves as "kmt", meaning "the blacks". He suggests that this word also gave rise to the biblical term "Ham" (Diop, 1983, p. 56). Diop's studies indicate that the ancient Egyptians did not employ color-related adjectives to distinguish themselves from the Nubians or other African populations. Instead, any distinction was primarily social or related to civilization. To illustrate this, Diop draws a comparison with the Romans, who used terms associated with civility and culture to set themselves apart from "barbaric" Germanic groups, rather than using color-related adjectives (Diop, 1983, p. 59).

Diop identifies cultural and linguistic affinities between Ancient Egypt and contemporary African nations. When comparing the Egyptian and Wolof languages, he notes that the similarity between these two languages encompasses "regular correspondences, in key areas (...) It was through the application of laws like these that the existence of the Indo-European language family could be demonstrated" (Diop, 1983, p. 67, our translation). In his conclusions, Diop revisits the theme of the similarities between Egyptian culture and contemporary African cultures:

> The structure of African royalty, in which the king is either ritually or symbolically killed after a variable reign, typically around eight years, evokes the pharaoh's regeneration ceremony during the Sed festival. The previously mentioned circumcision rituals, totemism, cosmogonies, architecture, musical instruments, and more, all reflect echoes of Egypt in the culture of Black Africa (Diop, 1983, p. 68, our translation).

According to Iniesta (1989, p. 124-125), the comprehension of the Egyptian language and culture within the African framework was not as contentious during the 1974 symposium. The more sensitive issues revolved around matters related to color or "race".

It's noteworthy that, during the colloquium, UNESCO representatives expressed concern about the use of the race category by participants. This prompted a

debate on the validity or invalidity of the concept of race, the suitable terms for scientific use, and whether the terminology related to “race” should be reconsidered not only for African history but for global contexts as well (Summary [...], 1983, p. 765-767).

In this debate, Professor Obenga argued that “scientific research recognizes the validity of the notion of race and that racism is not necessarily implied in the study of races” (Síntese [...], 1983, p. 766).

During this debate, Professor Obenga contended that “scientific research acknowledges the validity of the concept of race and that racism is not inherently implied in the study of races” (Summary [...], 1983, p. 766, our translation).

When discussing the concept of race, Diop demonstrates that he considers it operational, especially in social relations, due to the persistence of racism. Even though he admits that a Zulu has “the ‘same’ genotype as Vorster”, Diop emphasizes that the two individuals are perceived differently due to their physical characteristics, leading to divergent roles in their "national and social activities” (Diop, 1983, p. 69, our translation). This passage refers to the situation in South Africa at the time when the system of racial segregation, known as apartheid, was in force. Balthazar Vorster served as the Prime Minister of the country, while the Zulus, a significantly populous ethnic group, inhabited the region.

Thus, according to Diop, the concept of race continued to be socially operative as an expression of the phenomenon of racism. Furthermore, the Senegalese historian appeared skeptical about the complete abandonment of the concept by the scientific community:

> We are told that molecular biology and genetics only recognize the existence of populations, and that the concept of race no longer holds any significance. However, whenever questions arise about the inheritance of hereditary diseases, the concept of race, in its most traditional sense, re-emerges, as genetics teaches us that sickle cell anemia occurs exclusively among individuals of African descent (Diop, 1983, p. 69, our translation).

Simultaneously, Diop adhered to the paradigm of the monogenetic theory of humanity (Diop, 1983, p. 39 and p. 69; Diop, 1974, p. xv), which posits that all of humanity shares a common origin, originating from Africa. This idea was fundamental to his thinking, and it may have given rise to the diffusionist nature of his historical-anthropological conception. In our perspective, Diop extended the concept of a single origin of the human species to the realm of societal development, positioning Africa as not only the biological but also the cradle of civilization for all of humanity. It's notable

that Diop chose to commence his presentation by affirming the "monogenetic and African origin of humanity" (Diop, 1983, p. 39, our translation).

However, while, on the one hand, human beings shared a common origin and also a common destiny – the reconciliation of humanity and the creation of a true humanity (Diop, 1974, p. 277) – on the other hand, they were historically divided into groups. Based on what we have seen so far, Diop was not willing to relinquish the delineation and appreciation of the black-African group. He believed that the same procedures he criticized in his historiographic work were applied without significant scrutiny in the historical narratives produced by and about Europeans (Diop, 1974, p. xiii).

Diop's proposal aimed to solidify African unity through the conceptual construction of a shared past, dating back to Ancient Egypt, and a set of cultural elements that would be common to African civilizations from antiquity to the contemporary era. Diop suggested that Africans and black people worldwide should embrace the Egyptian past as their civilizational cradle, just as "Westerners" did with the Greco-Roman past. He stated at the colloquium, "Ancient Egypt holds the same significance for African culture as Greco-Roman antiquity does for Western culture" (Diop, 1983, p. 68, our translation).

This wasn't merely about selecting an origin distinct from Ancient Greece but one that was also prior and superior to it. As aptly characterized by Lopes (1994, p. 8), Diop belonged to the generation of African historians who advocated for "African superiority" and aligned with the "inverted pyramid" current. Farias (2003, p. 339-340) emphasized that Diop ascribed ethical superiority and epistemological privileges to Africans. Diop argued that the Nilotic-African environment had given rise to gentle, idealistic, and peaceful societies, contrasting with Indo-European and yellow peoples originating from the Euro-Asian steppes, who were seen as materialistic, warlike, cruel, and driven by a spirit of conquest, as summarized by Farias (2003, p. 339-340).[24] According to Diop (1974, p. 249-250), black Africans can and should assert their exclusive heritage of Egyptian culture, claiming to possess the same intellectual and emotional characteristics as the Ancient Egyptians, and contending that contemporary blacks are better equipped than Western Egyptologists to comprehend the essence and spirit of that ancient civilization.

Creating an idealized national essence that dates back to the past, a shared essence

[24] See Diop (1974, p. 111-113).

transcending all societal distinctions and extending in a straight line to a romanticized contemporary individual, is a common approach in various nationalist narratives. Diop executed this maneuver cognizant of the recurrence of his methods and firmly convinced that such steps were imperative for African emancipation and for shaping a humanity that encompassed black people and Africans. While we earlier discussed the diffusionist nature of Diop's thinking, here we identify a certain evolutionary linearity in his formulations.[25] Nationalism emerges as a phase that, according to Diop (1955, p. 13, item a), all nations seeking to fulfill their national aspirations have traversed, even those nations that took issue with similar actions undertaken by Africans. However, this linear organization doesn't position Africa as primitive but rather as a place of primacy—Diop's intent is to restore Africa to the place he believes it rightfully occupies: the center, origin, source, and epitome of splendor.

Diop's African framework places Ancient Egypt in a privileged position compared to other African cultures, as it's considered their point of origin. This establishes a hierarchical relationship in which one civilization spreads its culture to others. It's important to note that this hierarchy doesn't seem to trouble Diop because it operates within a specific communal context, one he idealizes as “black”.

We arrive at this interpretation by observing Diop's stance during the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956 when he advocated for the adoption of a common African language for a future federation of African states. He argued that it wasn't the same to impose a native or foreign language on a people (Diop, 1956, p. 343, as cited in Reis, 2018, p. 168). In this reading, adopting a unified historical memory, as well as a shared language, wouldn't pose a problem if they had native origins.

Diop's (1983, p. 70, our translation) closing remarks at the symposium read as follows:

> The rediscovery of the authentic history of African peoples should not be a source of division but should instead foster unity among all, strengthening their connections from North to South of the continent. This will enable them to collectively embark on a new historical mission for the betterment of humanity, all in harmony with UNESCO's principles.

The presentation by Diop at the 1974 UNESCO symposium forms the first chapter

[25] For more information oN evolutionism, diffusionism, and other schools of anthropological thought, refer to Castro (2016).

of the book "General History of Africa: Ancient Africa". At the end of this chapter, there is a footnote from the publication's organizer, the Egyptian Gamal Mokhtar, indicating that Diop's arguments did not receive unanimous acceptance among experts in the field. This same volume also contains an appendix that provides a summary of the symposium (Summary[...], 1983).

Opinions regarding the outcomes of the symposium can vary significantly depending on the analyst. Iniesta (1989, p. 127) contends that, of the four central themes discussed in the 1974 symposium (language, civilization, southern origin, and race), Diop and Obenga garnered explicit or tacit consensus on the first three and achieved a notable partial victory on the last theme. According to Iniesta, the Cairo symposium witnessed the public abandonment of the traditional Champollionian Egyptology theses. Ancient Egypt was recognized as African due to its language (Serge Sauneron), its social system (Jean Vercoutter), and its art and thought (Jean Leclant). As for the physical characteristics and pigmentation of the ancient Egyptians, opinions were divided: Diop and Obenga advocated the melanodermia thesis, Jean Devisse (the symposium's rapporteur) remained undecided about this thesis, and the rest placed the issue in the realm of uncertainty (Iniesta, 1989, p. 16).

Ciro Flamarion Cardoso (1942-2013) provided a different evaluation of the 1974 symposium in his book "*O Antigo Egito*" (Ancient Egypt). Cardoso (1987, p. 16) argued that the meeting did not yield conclusive results – and, in his opinion, it could not have, given the available data. He characterized it as marked by unproductive and dogmatic discussions. According to the Brazilian historian, the most sensible voices in the symposium were those that highlighted the absurdity of establishing automatic correlations between ethnicities, languages, and cultures. They pointed out that Egypt was never isolated and that its population was likely quite mixed, at least since the Neolithic period. These voices also emphasized that the discussion about skin color is largely irrelevant. While Cardoso did not explicitly mention the individuals behind these sensible viewpoints, an analysis of the symposium's summary document suggests that Professors Abdelgadir Abdalla, Sudanese, and Abu Bakr, Egyptian, were among them (Summary [...], 1983, p. 755; p. 760).

In Iniesta's assessment (1989, p. 126), the "Egyptian Arabs" were, on the whole, the ones who advocated the most "racist and Champollionian" positions during the symposium. Iniesta (1989, p. 126) found the stance of the Egyptian Ghallab, who asserted that all of humanity was of Caucasoid origin in the Paleolithic, challenging to accept.

Although Cardoso (1987, p. 14 et seq.) is critical of the motivations of Diop and Obenga and skeptical about the debates that occurred at the 1974 symposium, he does acknowledge that the questioning of the notion of an "white" Egypt primarily populated by Saharan "Caucasoids" began with pan-Africanist historians. According to Cardoso (1987, p. 15), the 19th and early 20th-century historians' desire to depict Egyptians as white was rooted in racism. Research by Sagredo (2017, p. 86-87) reveals that Cardoso's position is an exception in Brazilian Egyptology, which, on the whole, did not engage in the debate regarding the racialization of ancient Egypt.

Iniesta assesses that Diop significantly influenced the course of Egyptology and African history. Jean Devisse, who had criticized the idea of a black Egypt in 1960, came to accept the black African character of Pharaonic society in 1974. By 1985, he openly recognized that the Egyptian world was African in both its physical and socio-organizational aspects. Authors such as Leclant, Vercoutter, Mveng, and Säve-Söderbergh were undergoing similar shifts in their perspectives. Meanwhile, Obenga, who had already advocated for the black African character of Ancient Egypt in 1974, continued to advance in his studies (Iniesta, 1989, p. 13).

Diop was not the first historian to assert that the ancient Egyptians were of black African descent. However, M'Bokolo (2012, p. 65, our translation) notes that "there was indeed a sort of 'Cheikhanian revolution' in the 1950s when Cheikh Anta Diop aimed to reinforce this longstanding belief by employing scientific techniques and arguments". Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, M'Bokolo (2012, p. 65) criticizes the persistence of the racialist postulate in Diop's work.

Sales (2001), the author of the entry "Race" in the Dictionary of Ancient Egypt, explains that the debate about race, origin, and the peopling of the Nile Valley, which began in the late 19th century, was significantly shaped by the anthropology of the time. These classifications were influenced by political and ideological factors. Until the mid-20th century, Egyptology maintained that the Egyptian "race" was exclusively white and originated from the Near East. Sales (2001, p. 729) suggests that the question remains open but has been approached in different terms since then.

Araújo (2001, p. 32), the organizer of the Dictionary of Ancient Egypt and the author of the entry on "Africa", posits that Egypt is an African civilization profoundly influenced by the cultures of the ancient Near East. For many years, a significant portion of Egyptologists tended to exclusively view Egyptian civilization as an empire of the ancient Near East, closely tied to the Biblical World and the Mediterranean. Araújo (2001,

p. 32) underscores that African scholars, such as Diop and Obenga, have criticized European historians for downplaying the fundamentally African aspects of Egyptian civilization. However, in their effort to counteract an overly Eurocentric and Mediterranean perspective on Egypt, African historians may have made some overstatements, such as claiming that certain pharaohs were related to the Serer people of West Africa solely because their names contained the particle "sen". Today, the majority of prominent Egyptologists (including Gustavo Lefebvre, Sauneron, Vercoutter, Henri Frankfort, Leclant, and others) acknowledge that Egypt was an African civilization due to its language, socio-political organization, art, and thought. Numerous studies now scrutinize Egyptian civilization within its African context (ARAÚJO, p. 33). The connections between Pharaonic Egypt and Black Africa are widely acknowledged. Araújo (2001, p. 33-34) also reminds us of Leclant's recommendation that Egyptologists should possess a profound understanding of Africa, and that Africanists cannot afford to overlook Egyptological documentation.

More than four decades after the 1974 symposium, the connection between Egypt and Africa remains a challenge that has yet to be fully realized. While Diop's work stands as a milestone in understanding Egypt (also) as an African civilization, reshaping the course of Egyptology and African history, there is still much work to be done. Our ability to make comparisons is constrained by what we are familiar with. For a student of Ancient History, it remains more accessible to draw parallels between Egypt and civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Near East – areas they are introduced to in basic education – rather than with African civilizations that they may not have even encountered at the university level. This data will vary depending on the country and the time when each researcher had studied. However, all in all, we can say that there is an imbalance between the study of African History and that of European or Near Eastern History. Despite the presence of Afro-Egyptian research lines worldwide, in the day-to-day life of universities, Egypt is included in programs of Ancient History where other African civilizations are not studied. And in the field of African History – when there is one – the Pharaonic civilization is also not typically addressed.

Conclusion

Cheikh Anta Diop was a revolutionary figure, boldly asserting during the colonial era that Africa possesses its own history, historians, Egypt, and Egyptologists. His work

can serve as an inspiration for us to examine the history of Africa, not solely from its internal dynamics and connections, but also by delving into the similarities and distinctions among various African societies. We should explore the parallels and exchanges within them, recognizing their originality within a universal context and universality within their uniqueness. To do so, we should move away from the hierarchical framework established by Diop, as we've seen, which places Ancient Egypt in a privileged position relative to other African cultures.

Examining Diop's work can prompt discussions in the educational environment regarding the necessity to historicize and deconstruct the concept of race, not only in the context of studying Africa and other former colonial areas but on a global scale. By critically evaluating Diop's constructs, we can engage in conversations about essentializations and romanticizations that are prevalent in Africa, Latin America, the "Western" world (comprising the United States and Western Europe), Asia, and all regions across the globe.

When contextualizing Diop's work, we inevitably delve into the topics of colonialism, racism, and the negation of African historicity. Regrettably, these issues remain pertinent in a world where racism, xenophobia, and chauvinism continue to thrive and adapt.

In this article, we have observed that Diop embarked on his research during a period of intense debates about the future of the African continent. Diop advocated for Africa's political independence from Europe and the comprehensive integration – economically, politically, and culturally – of the entire continent. He viewed the construction of a shared historical memory and the strengthening of a Black African identity as fundamental to this vision. This project remains relevant and was underscored by Diop's contentious yet pivotal presentation at UNESCO in 1974, which left an indelible mark on Egyptology and African historiography.

However, Diop also faced criticism for the racial undertones of his arguments and certain assumptions of African superiority. Yet, the more profound reflections were those offered by Frantz Fanon – the future cannot be solely determined by the past. The future is what we make of it through our concrete actions.

Viewing science as a collective and cumulative endeavor, we trust that the analyses conducted in this article, along with the empirical elements provided, will enhance the study of the intellectual and political biography of a key figure in the history of Africa and the world, Cheikh Anta Diop.

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