

# ANCIENT FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

To what extent can a historian go back in the reconstruction of a cultural history of the African people? When and where should the Africans begin in tracing their cultural history? The historians of the Western civilization do not seem to have problem in answering the above questions with particular reference to their cultural history. They claim, with certainty, ancient Greece and Rome for the foundations of their Western civilization. Under the title, *Ancient Foundations of Black Culutral Development*, the writer wishes to address himself to the statement and challenge offered recently to the African historians by Dr. Chancellor Williams, a distinguished emeritus professor of African history, Howard University. In his own words, Prof. Williams reiterated:

That the blacks were among the very earliest builders of a great civilization on this planet, including the development of writing, sciences, engineering, medicine, architecture, religion and fine arts.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Williams further remarked that the story of how such an advance civilization was lost is one of the greatest and most tragic in the history of mankind and should be the main focus of research in African history.<sup>2</sup>

With the above challenge in mind, the writer is obliged to go back and examine the history of antiquity; the period long before the Western scholars had named and classified the African people in minute details as known today.<sup>3</sup> There we can address ourselves to certain searching questions. First, who were the ancient blacks responsible for planting the earliest civilization mentioned by Prof. Williams? Second, where did their glorious civilization centre? In other words, where was the birthplace of the ancient black cultural development? Third, what were the main features of their cultural attainments? Fourth, is our cultural history built on their foundations?

## WHAT WERE THE NAMES OF THE ANCIENT BLACKS?

Who were the ancient blacks of the history of antiquity? By what names were we known in ancient history? Before taking account of cultural achievements of the ancient Africans, it is imperative for us to know who they were. In order to tackle this broad topic within the scope of this paper, the findings would be described in the outline form.

First, during the ancient history, all Africans, as members of the black race were named *Ethiopians*. This position is read on the passage of Homer, Pausanians of Sparta, Herodotus, Theophrastus, Septuagint, Flavious Josephus, Eusebius, Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), and P. Terentius (Terence).

Among the outstanding classical historians and geographers, the entire region ranging from India to Africa was *Ethiopia*. In the same way they regarded all the dark skinned people occupying the region to be *Ethiopians*. It seems that the eastern Ethiopians were blacks of Asia and the western Ethiopians were those of the African continent. The Ethiopians' empire of the ancient world before the unification of Egypt, once stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the north and to undefined limit in the south; most probably to the region of the great lakes of east and central Africa. Later in history, Ethiopia referred to the territory south of the first cataract. The Arabs named it *Bilad-es-Sudan*, meaning the land of the blacks. Today, Ethiopia refers to a country the Arabs named *Abyssinia* to which Addis Ababa is the capital.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient Greeks above all other people of antiquity were responsible for the names by which the Africans have been known in history. The word *Ethiopia* is a composite word made up of two Greek words, *Aidios*, meaning burnt dark, especially by the heat of the sun, and *δπος* (*opos*), meaning face. When the classical Greeks approached the Africans who inhabited the Nile Valley south of the first cataract, they named them Ethiopians. They assumed that because the Africans were closer to the sun than most of the lighter skinned inhabitants of Europe, they had developed their dark complexions; hence named them *Ethiopians*. Ethiopia, therefore, meant the black land and Ethiopians were dark-skinned people.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the Portuguese and Spaniards, the forerunners of the European age of discovery, originally followed the practice of Greeks by referring to the whole race of the black people as Ethiopians. The predominantly Muslim blacks of North Africa who conquered and ruled the Iberian peninsula from the 8th to the 15th centuries were known as *Moors*. They defeated the Gothic kingdom of Spain, under the leadership of O. Tarik. The word Moor is *Madfos* (*Mauros*) in Greek, *Maurus* in Latin, and *Maure* in French, meaning black or dark coloured. It literally meant black people, most of whom had accepted the Islamic faith during the infiltration of the Arabs into north Africa. The term Moor was not restricted to the occupants of Morocco during the Medieval history, for it was usually used to refer to the Africans as a whole.

Some European anthropologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attempted to classify the Moors among the so-called "dark whites". They were far more advanced in culture than the Europeans of the Iberian peninsula. Their power in Spain began to decline in the early part of the 13th century. The United Christian kingdoms of Castile and Aragon defeated

them in 1492. Since then they held mainly Grenada and were finally driven out of the peninsula through migration and expulsion by 1610.

Third, with the introduction of slave trade and slavery into the Iberian peninsula during the fifteenth century, the Spaniards adopted the name, *Negro*, from Latin "Nigger", meaning black. The term *Negro* was coined, therefore, to designate the blacks who were being transported to Europe and the New World as slaves in contrast to the Moors, the blacks who were responsible for the introduction of cultural development in southern Europe.

Fourth, during the supremacy of Rome as a world power, the Italians chose to identify the black people by the name, *Africans*. After the third Punic War (146 B.C.), the Romans founded a province on the northern section of the continent which they named Africa. Later the title was used in reference to the continent as a whole. The indigenous black inhabitants of the continent became known as the *Africans*; the very name in use still today.

### THE BIRTHPLACE OF BLACK CIVILIZATION (CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT)

Most students of archaeology and history know about the great civilization that prevailed within the Nile Valley, during the history of antiquity. This was the civilization of the Ethiopians and Egyptians. We have identified already the people who were named Ethiopians by the Greeks. Who were then the *Egyptians*? To which ethnic group did the ancient Egyptians belong? The simple answer is that the early Egyptians were African people, members of the black race. It is also vital to point out here that a good number of the western scholars have concluded that Egyptians as the Hamitic people were Caucasians; a group of "white race". The basis of their assertions must be critically examined here before we set forth the Africans' right claim to ancient Egypt and its grand civilization.

First, as a result of the European African slave trade and slavery that developed enormously between 1400 and 1800, a new doctrine emerged about "superior", and "inferior" races of the world. The "superior" race was made up of the "white" people; whereas the "inferior" races were "brown", and "black" people of the globe. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the whole "white" race proved to be the master of the world and rulers for whose glory the rest of the human race existed. Under such powerful position, the Europeans began to arrange and rearrange this planet as they pleased. They assumed the responsibility of naming places, groups of people as they saw fit; especially of the so-called primitive inhabitants of the third world, namely the Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans.

Second, within the same spirit, everything that seemed great, fine, successful, beautiful, and super in human culture or civilization was automatically attributed to the Caucasians; "white race". Within the same influence, Egypt and Ethiopia were stripped from Africa geographically and culturally and

made extension of Euro-Asian territories and civilization. The major reason was that such territories portrayed so great human achievements that could hardly be credited to the "inferior", and "primitive" classes of people, the "Negroes". For the first time, therefore, an imaginary boundary was created to break the continent into two parts, the "Black", and "White" Africa. The western scholarship introduced its thesis of *Subsaharan Africa*, or Africa South of Sahara. The Subsaharan Africa was the "dark continent", inhabited by the "Negroid race", the people of no history; hence of no cultural development until the "white" men arrived as conquerors and agents of civilization. In order to separate the Ethiopians from the other black people in Africa and the New World, these scholars began to say that the Ethiopians were a Semitic people "without a single drop of Negro blood".

Third, every attempt was further made within the umbrella of scientific objectivity to establish a close link between the colour of the skin and cultural development. Within the influence of organic evolution through natural selection and the survival of the fittest as propounded by Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, humanity was reduced to the level of brutes; hence man was no longer the object of a special creation. In this process and belief, the black man was declared to be closer to the ape than any other races of the world. The scholars of repute remarked that there were certain physical traits in common that gave the "white" race superiority; the very ones which could not be transmitted to men of another race, meaning the "inferior" races of the world. A black skin was concluded to be a symbol of ugliness, evil and innate inferiority. The black people or the "Negroid" race was predicted by them to go the way of the dinosaurs, into eternal extinction.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, with reference to Mosaic Old Testament historical records, the western scholarship claimed that the black people were the direct descendants of Ham who were destined to serve the descendants of Japheth and Shem as slaves, the hewers of wood and drawers of water. In this position, it was alleged that the black skin was a sign of a curse said to have been pronounced upon Ham by Noah, the post diluvian father of the nations.<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, it is interesting to observe that the science of Egyptology emerged at the height of the European African slave trade and imperialism. Consequently, a good number of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Egyptologists after having been astounded by the wonders of the Nile Valley, did their best to remove Egypt and Ethiopia geographically and culturally out of Africa and to make them extensions of Europe and Asia. The Darwinian anthropologists went forward in the course of time to classify the African people in such minute details based mainly on the linguistic criterion and to be sure that there was not any link between Egypt and the "Negroid" race. Whoever attempted to classify the ancient Egyptians among the black people was bound to be considered too romantic, extreme, bias, and unscientific in scholarship. Dr. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, the latest

and, most distinguished black scholar of the country, with reference to the above racist train of thought, concluded that without further hesitation, we should ignore such verdict of history, popular as it might be, and treat Egyptian history as an integral part of African history and civilization.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the position of the racist Egyptologists and anthropologists, of the last century, nearly every fact of history and archaeology confirm the idea that ancient Egyptians were Africans, members of the black ethnic group, varying no more from the other African people, than the Chinese from the other Asians; and the Scandinavians from the other Europeans. The eye-witness accounts of the people of near east and near west state affirmatively that Egypt belonged to Africa geographically and culturally. These people included the Babylonians, Assyrians, Hebrews, Persians, Phoenicians and during the western classical period, the Greeks and Romans.

First, just as they are marly physical varieties of the African people today, so they were in ancient history. Today, there are dark and brown Africans in complexion; so were they in the antiquity. No informed scholar doubts as to where came most of the light skinned people occupying north and South Africa. These foreigners were late comers, invaders and usurpers of the African soil and cultural achievements. Among the ancient Egyptians were black and brown in complexions so they painted themselves in contrast to yellow and white foreigners from Asia and Europe.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the readers may be interested to know that the ancient Egyptians did not name themselves "Egyptians"; for the name was created by the ancient Greeks. The Greeks of the classical age visited the Nile Valley and were highly impressed by the temple of *Ptah*, erected at Memphis, the northern capital of Egypt. They considered this building to be the most glorious structure within the valley. Consequently, the Greeks afterwards referred to the territory as *Hekuptah*, another name of Memphis, the city of Menes, meaning the land of the temple of Ptah; Ptah being the god who protected the city. The Greek language *Hekuptah* developed to be *Aiyulltos* (Aiguptos). During the Roman empire, the name acquired its Latin form *Aegyptus*, from where Egypt sprang, meaning the black land or the land of the black people. Some western scholars in order to deny the Africans of the culture of Egypt, close to state that the blackness referred to the soil rather than the people.

Third, the ancient black inhabitants of this region on the other hand, called their land *Chem*, *Khem* or *Kam* or *Ham*, which meant the black land. In this case, they named themselves *Chemites* or *Khemites*, *Kamites* or in the familiar name, *Hamites*; the very name which was cited by the near eastern neighbours, especially the Hebrews in their historical accounts.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, of all the near eastern and near western people who had dealing with the blacks of the Nile Valley, probably the Hebrews have had their records distorted by modern scholars. The tables of the nations and messages accompanying those tables have been taken out of context and made to say

what Moses, the author did not utter, as recorded in Genesis chapters nine and ten. The Hebrews as known in ancient history sojourned and lived in Egypt for a period of about four hundred years, dating from the middle of the 19th century to about 1445 B.C., the date in which the Israelites marched out of Egypt and headed towards Canaan, according to the 15th century or 18th dynasty's view of Exodus.<sup>13</sup> During the period, the Hebrews learned a great deal about the blackland and people, for whom they wrote afterwards.

Since the Hebrews historical records attempts to clarify the relationship that existed between the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians, it is vital if such accounts were examined at this stage. The Mosaic Old Testament historical accounts simply stated that Noah as the father of the post-diluvian world had three sons. The first one was Japheth who became the progenitor of the Japhethite race, known among the anthropologists as the Indo-European people. The second one was *Shem* in Hebrew and *Sem* in Greek, who became the father of the Semitic race of people to which the Babylonians, Assyrians, Arameans, Hebrews and Arabs belonged. The third son was Ham or Châm in Hebrew who was the progenitor of the Africans, and the Ganaanites.<sup>14</sup>

Let us examine further the descendants of the last person mentioned, Ham was recorded to have four sons. The youngest one was Canaan who became the father of the Sidonians, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Hivites, Arkites (Phoenicians), and Hamathites. The first son was named *Cush* (Kush) in Hebrew, and *Ethiopia* in Greek. The Egyptian inscriptions named Ethiopia the land of *Kasha*, and in the Assyrian cuneiform texts, it was rendered *Kushu*. Most of the nations of the near east named the Ethiopians, Cushites (Kushites). The second son was *Mizraim* in Hebrew and *Egypt* in Greek. The other near eastern nations had similar title as of the Hebrews. The Arabs who are the present occupants of the land named it United Arab Republic of *Misr*. The third son was *Phut* (Put) and was traditionally identified to be the progenitor of the Phuttites (Libyans in Greek). The other scholars identified the land of Phut to be in the region of East Africa and Southern Arabia.<sup>15</sup>

With reference to the above near eastern accounts, the Kushites (Ethiopians), Mizramites (Egyptians), Phuttites (Libyans), and Ganaanites were all brothers, members of the same race, the *Hamites*. In no case, therefore, could the Japhethites, the Indo-European people, be classified within the Hamitic race. Similarly, the Kushites (Ethiopians) could not be grouped within the Semitic race, the descendants of *Sem*. This does not rule out the possibility of one group of race adopting another's language. Based mainly on the linguistic criterion the western anthropologists and linguists have distorted the black race and made it so divided to the extent that we do not know where we came from originally. We are currently running away from the name *Hamites*, the collective title of the original black people who first settled on the continent, which later was named by the Romans, *Africa*, simply because of the abuse of the so-called "Hamitic myths". Both the

*Kushites* (Ethiopians) and *Mizraimites* (Egyptians), were therefore Africans, members of the black race who were known collectively as the *Hamites*.

This does not mean that Egypt has always been a black land. The story of how Egypt was transformed from being black land to brown and at last white land is a long one which defies the boundary of this paper. In brief, the transformation took place due to migrations necessitated by two main factors. First, the growth of the Sahara desert brought an overpopulation along the Nile Valley and the Mediterranean coastal regions of Africa, hence some had to find other places for settlement. Second, there were centuries of the struggle between the blacks and the Asiatics and later Europeans who reached the valley for trade purposes but finally abused the hospitality of the African people by seeking to make permanent settlement. During the chaotic periods of black rule, these foreigners took the advantage of grabbing the black land. The defeated Africans were forced to push southwards and to the other directions of the continent. Such similar struggle is currently being enacted within the present Sudan where the Arab whites are the majority in the northern section of the country and the blacks are fighting constantly for independence and maintenance of the land, in the southern portion. The Africans and the people of their descent long time ago migrated not only to the other parts of Africa but also to Anatolia (Asia Minor), Arabia, India, China, Japan, and East Indies. All these areas to this day, show an African or dark stock of people. The blacks or the people of the African descent also moved to Palestine, Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, England, Wales, Ireland and to the countries of North and South America.<sup>16</sup>

The civilization of the Nile Valley as a whole was the creation of the black people who were named *Kushites* and *Mizraimites* by the near easterners, and Ethiopians and Egyptians by the classical Greeks. This grand cultural development sprang from the cradle of world civilization *Kush* (Ethiopia).

The Mosaic Old Testament historical records pointed out that from *Kush* (Ethiopia) emerged descendants who were responsible for the foundations of the civilization of both the Mesopotamian and Nile Valleys. This position was further upheld by the classical Greek historians and some outstanding modern archaeologists of the near eastern world. Homer testified that the Ethiopians were the most just of men and the most favourites of the gods. Herodotus spoke of the Ethiopians as the tallest, most beautiful and long lived of the human race. Both Homer and Herodotus held that the original inhabitants of Sudan, Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, western Asia and India were Ethiopians.<sup>17</sup>

According to Professor Charles Seignobos, a prominent French historian, the first civilized inhabitants of the Nile and Mesopotamian Valleys were a dark skinned people with short hair and prominent lips and were named *Kushides* (Ethiopians) by some scholars and *Hamites* by others.<sup>18</sup>

Diodorus Siculus, one of the prominent classical Greek historians,

observed that the Kushites were of the opinion that their territory was not only the birthplace of the human race and the cradle land of the world's earliest civilization, but that it was indeed the prime Eden where living things for the first time emerged on the earth.<sup>19</sup> In the above statements, the Greek historian rubber stamped the Mosaic Genesis position. The Old Testament record simply asserted that *Gihon*, as the second river which flowed from the Garden of Eden encircled the whole land of *Cush* (Ethiopia).<sup>20</sup> Up to the present time Nile springs are named *Giyon*, the Ethiopic title for *Gihon*. In Septuagint, the river of Egypt was *Lewv* (Geon) whereas in Ben Sira, *Gihon* appeared in parallelism to the Nile. Josephus in *Antiquities* had the same rendering. The great river of Africa was the *Gihon* that flowed from Eden, the very river which the Greeks named Nile.<sup>21</sup>

Diodorus Siculus was therefore, the first western scholar to draw attention on the Ethiopians claim about the tropical Africa being the cradle land of the world's earliest civilization, the original Eden of the human race. Diodorus Siculus and Stephanus of Byzantium further held that the blacks of antiquity were the earliest of all the civilized people on earth and that the first civilized inhabitants of ancient Egypt (Mizraim) were members of the black race which entered the country as emigrants from Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup>

The opinions of the ancient writers on the relationship that existed between Egypt and Ethiopia was summarized by Gaston Camille Maspero (1846-1916), an outstanding Italian born French Egyptologist and the second director of the Institute of Egyptian Antiquities. Maspero observed that by almost unanimous testimony of the ancient historians, the Egyptians belonged to the Negroid or black race which first settled in Ethiopia, on the Middle Nile. By following the course of the river, they gradually reached the sea.<sup>23</sup>

## ANCIENT BLACKS AS PIONEERS IN WORLD CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

In what realms of knowledge and cultural development were ancient blacks pioneers? With the ancient Ethiopia and Egypt having been restored to Africa and its original inhabitants, it is not difficult to outline the main features of their civilization. In this section we shall examine again Prof. Williams statement which portrayed the Black's pioneering role in building the very earliest great civilization on this planet, including the development of writing, sciences, engineering, medicine, architecture, religion, and fine arts.

First, the blacks of the ancient world were pioneers in the development of *writing and literature*. The blacks of Ethiopia originally invented hieroglyphic scripts and during the Meroitic civilization developed their own alphabetic scripts. While archaeologists have managed to read the Meroitic hieroglyphic scripts, the understanding of them still remains as a challenge to the contemporary and future scholars.<sup>24</sup> Within the Upper Egypt where the black cultural development reached the summit of glory during the



dynastic period, writing passed through four chief stages. In the first stage the blacks formulated *hieroglyphs*. In this attempt they carefully developed pictures from the early pictograms. Second, *Hieratic* scripts were developed. They resembled the hieroglyphs with the exception of the fact that they were drawn in a more cursive form. The *demotic* stage on the other hand proved to be more cursive and much more simplified kind of writing than hieratic. This kind of scripts were commonly used during the first millennium B.C., shortly after the end of the New Kingdom. The last stage, *Coptic* scripts were in use. As soon as Egypt became a Christian nation during the fourth century A.D., the old scripts ceased to be used and the Greek alphabetic letters were adopted in the reproduction of a Coptic language. In this case, about eight additional characters were borrowed from the demotic scripts so as to express sounds for which the Greek scripts had no letters.<sup>25</sup>

There were varieties of the ancient blacks' literature. There are magical and religious texts such as the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead. Manetho, a black priest, and most probably the father of African history, wrote a *History of Egypt* in Greek, dating from the earliest times up to his period, 3rd century B.C. Unfortunately, a great portion of his texts were lost in the destruction of the Alexandrian Library. The surviving fragments listed the kings of Egypt in thirty dynasties. In this case, the blacks of Ethiopia and Egypt had historical narratives; publications of love, banquet songs; there were also military campaigns and building records. There were publications on prophecies, and proverbs. There were also treatises on medicine, mathematics, and related subjects.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the ancient blacks of the Nile Valley were pioneers in *architecture* and *engineering science*. From the earliest time of African history, the blacks had reached a high degree in mechanical arts. Great perfection was reached in spinning and weaving. The glass was manufactured. The colouring of such products have baffled modern ingenuity. The iron and steel along with the common agricultural and mechanical implements made from them were in use. The magnificent ruins along the Nile Valley still make a profound impression upon the observers. The temple of Karnak from its outstanding forms and brilliant decorations has been pronounced the most magnificent of man's architectural works. Their great proficiency in the engineering science was demonstrated in the construction of the great pyramids, obelisks, and temples, which have withstood the test of time for millenniums of years.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the blacks were pioneers in the development of *fine arts*. We have mentioned about building monuments that have withstood the destructive forces of nature and man of thousands of years. They reached a high level in handling such enormous amounts of stone without the knowledge of the wheel which was discovered several centuries later. They excelled also in sculpture, painting, and the use of both hard and soft stones, bronze and gold. Every piece of art was done for a specific practical purpose of life,

typical of a black philosophy of life and thought. In this case, nothing was done for a mere sake as featured in the western thought. Some of the paintings on many tombs during the New Kingdom rank with the contemporary modern pieces of art.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, the blacks were among the pioneers in *mathematical science*. They developed a knowledge of mathematics. Texts show that they could compute correctly the volume of a truncated pyramid or of a cylinder. The Greek system of mathematical notation and arithmetic calculations were derived from the blacks of the Nile Valley, just as their trigonometry and algebra were borrowed from the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates.<sup>29</sup>

Fifth, the blacks were pioneers in the realms of *astronomy, physical and geographical sciences*. They did not need to think abstractively as the Greeks and Romans. Astronomy grew out of a need for control of the Nile River. According to Richard A. Proctor, an English astronomer, the Great Egyptian Pyramid was used also as an observatory position in the study of the heavenly bodies. The blacks were among the first to invent a calendar. The solar calendar of twelve months which govern the lives and movements of the human race was a discovery of the ancient blacks of Egypt. By the beginning of the dynastic kingdoms, they were using already a yearly cycle of twelve months, which started in the middle of the summer season when the Nile annually overflowed its banks. By observing the stars the Africans knew that the approximate length of the year was 365 days. Each of the twelve months consisted of thirty days. They knew well that a year was made up of 365 days and the extra five days which were corrected at the end of each year as the birthdays of the great gods and were observed as festivals during which none was allowed to work. The Romans borrowed the knowledge of a calendar from the blacks of Egypt. The so-called Julian and Gregorian calendar were simply slight improvements on the inventions of the ancient blacks of the Nile Valley.<sup>30</sup>

Sixth, the blacks were pioneers in *medicine*. In the science of medicine, the blacks of the Old Kingdom (2700-2185 B.C.) displayed a remarkable achievement. They knew a great deal about the knowledge of physiology, surgery, the circulatory system of the blood, and asepsis. Imhotep, the Wise, Grand Vizier and Court Physician of King Sozer of the third dynasty, the architect of the world's earliest stone building, demonstrated himself as a unique character in the field of medicine. He became a deity and later a universal god of medicine. The first Temple of Imhotep was mankind's first hospital. To it came sufferers from all the world for prayer, peace and healing. After his death, Imhotep was worshipped as a medical demi-god up to 525 B.C., and from that time to A.D. 550, he was worshiped as a full deity. Kings and queens bowed at his shrine. When black Egyptians' civilization went across the Mediterranean to become the foundation of what is called Greek classical culture, the teachings of Imhotep were swallowed along with the principles of the other great black educators. When the Greek

civilization became predominant within the Mediterranean world, the Greeks wanted the inhabitants of the globe to know that they were the originators of everything. Consequently they stopped acknowledging the indebtedness to Imhotep and the other great black educators were forgotten: hence *Hipocrates*, a legendary figure of two thousand years later, was made the father of medicine. The truth is, the blacks were the ones who produced the father of medicine, Imhotep the Great.<sup>31</sup>

Seventh, the blacks were among the pioneers in the development of *agricultural science*. The blacks of Egypt developed agricultural skills that made the Nile Valley to be the granary of the ancient world. Nations, during the time of famine rushed to Africa for food; example was of the Israelites who migrated to Egypt during the Hyksos period of domination. They devised ways of irrigation and preservation of the waters of the Nile. Herodotus, the European father of history remarked right when he said that Egypt was the gift of the Nile. It was from the Nile Valley that the Greeks obtained their knowledge of agriculture, while Babylonia became outstanding for its merchants, the Nile Valley was prominent for its farmers.

Eighth, the blacks were among the earliest in the formation of an orderly system of government; hence in the formulation of *political science*. By the fourth millennium, about 3100 B.C., the blacks of the Nile Valley had a unified federal government, under one monarch Pharaoh Menes. The unification took place between 3500 and 3100 B.C., when various communities of Northern Ethiopia (Upper and Lower Egypt) formed a federation. From this beginning the Egyptian Government passed through the centuries, thirty dynasties as outlined by Manetho, the father of African history.

Ninth, the blacks were among the pioneers in *religious and philosophical studies*. Herodotus testified that the Africans (Ethiopians) were the most strictly religious of all men. This statement has outlived centuries of history, for it is still true within the contemporary history. Africa south of the first cataract was known as the land of the gods by the blacks of Egypt and Greeks who visited it. Religion played a vital part in everyone's life. There rose more than 2000 gods who governed all aspects of people's lives. While polytheism reigned for years, the ancient blacks arrived at the knowledge of a Supreme Being (God), especially during the reign of Ikhnaton (Amenhotep IV) who ruled between 1375 and 1366 B.C. Imhotep apart from being the father of medicine was also the father of theology and philosophy in the history of black civilization. It was from the blacks of Egypt that the Greek philosophers gained their knowledge and inspiration that enabled them to set up a firm foundation for the western civilization. Some of the most outstanding Greek scholars and educators who were taught by the blacks of the Nile Valley included Homer, Thales of Miletus, Anaximander, Pythagorus, Lycurgus, Solon, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, and Archimedes.<sup>32</sup>

## ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK CULTURAL HISTORY

As we draw towards conclusion in this paper, it is probably essential that certain matters be clarified or re-emphasized. The Scholars and readers whose philosophical position on African cultural history are not honoured in this paper need not stumble. The defensive approach featured in it was found necessary, for the African cultural history is still ignored and misunderstood by many in Africa and abroad. The paper at the same time did not seek to foster any spirit of antagonism against the western scholars and people, simply because their verdicts on African cultural history have been either ignored or critically disapproved. The writer personally believes in a universal brotherhood of mankind and is inclined to give due adoration to the remarkable contributions the western world has made during the rebirth of African civilization. On the foundations of black cultural history, there are certain concluding remarks which could be taken into serious consideration.

First, while commendations must be extended to scholars who have contributed to the reconstruction of the African history dating from the pre-colonial times to the present, such efforts appear to be inadequate and based on weak foundations. Such scholars have not addressed themselves to the question of the Nile Valley's civilization for they seem to be bound by the western thesis of the *Subsaharan Africa*. This artificial boundary must be uprooted immediately especially with reference to ancient Africa. As long as it is still there, the Africans are bound to have a hard time in discrediting the early western notion which denied the black people of a cultural development before the Europeans reached the continent as conquerors and agents of civilization. What significant cultural attainment of the black people south of Sahara during the pre-colonial societies worthy of discrediting the above notion? After observing the simple lives which our ancestors were leading, we were classified among the most "primitive" races of the world by virtue of the fact that we were said to be divided into numerous hostile tribes with most of the members either walking naked or clothed in skins. Above all, we were said to be living in gross darkness because the people were practically illiterate, and at the same time all our languages had not been reduced to writing. Can our cultural history be said to be of great significance when it is established on the foundations of the pre-colonial societies which were subdued by the mighty sophisticated technology of the west?

Second, in the reconstruction of our cultural history worthy of granting as a more realistic sense of pride, the pre-colonial societies must be looked upon as a period of a great decline in the African civilization, and that the western Europeans took the advantage of this period by leading the race further to degradation through slave trade and colonial domination.

Third, our cultural history worthy of its name and study must spring from the birthplace of the world civilization, the region which the near eastern people

named *Kush* and *Mizraim*, and *Ethiopia* and *Egypt* by the classical Greeks. This position is not unique with this paper, for it was the understanding of the original black people who inhabited the region. It was the stand of some of the prominent archaeologists and historians of modern history. It has been the position of some of the most outstanding contemporary twentieth century black scholars most certainly including Edward Wilmot Blyden, William Leo Hansberry, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, Chancellor Williams, John G. Jackson, DeGraft-Johnson, G. K. Osei of Ghana, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, and many others. John Henrik Clarke in his introductory note to the *Introduction of African Civilizations* by John G. Jackson, asserted that Egypt was the key to ancient African history, and that African history was out of kilter until ancient Egypt was looked upon as a distinct African nation.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop, probably the only qualified contemporary black Egyptologist in his commentary over the relationship between Egypt and the rest of Africa, remarked that the history of Black Africa would remain suspended in the air and could not be written until the African historians were courageous enough to link it with the history of Egypt. He further pointed out that the African historians who attempted to evade the problem of Egypt could neither be modest nor objective. He considered such to be ignorant, cowardly and even neurotic.<sup>34</sup> Just as it is inconceivable for a European historian to account for the western civilization objectively without building on the foundations of the classical Greeks and Romans, similarly, it is almost impossible to reconstruct a sound African cultural history outside the foundations of the Nile Valley, the birthplace of black civilization.

Fourth, the reconstruction of a cultural history of the African people is conceived in this paper to mean a struggle for cultural liberation of the race which has been subject to degradation for centuries. It is the kind of liberation that the founder of Christianity remarked was affected by the understanding of the truth. It is the liberation that comes to the African mind by knowing and understanding the significant role the blacks have played in the world since the dawn of human history. The black people emerge at the dawn of human history in the forefront nearly in every phase of learning and cultural development. It is the liberation that gives members of the race courage to question the entire history of the African people as portrayed by the former colonial masters and scholars, and to do everything possible to see its full reconstruction. It is the liberation that comes with the understanding of black people as members of one family regardless of varying physical structures and multiple languages brought about through centuries of migrations and cross breeding from the original cradle land, where we were collectively known as the *Hamitic* people. This liberation will give the contemporary African historians courage to re-examine the classification and names attributed to the black people by the western anthropologists and linguists of the last century. The liberation would probably

lead the scholars to find out whether there are valid reasons for some of us being labelled "Bantu", "Nilotes", "Negrillos", "Khoisans", or "Negroes". The same cultural study will consider the possibility of abolishing such labels as "Bushmen", "Pygmies", and "Berbers".

It is the liberation that results in a better understanding of the race. With the rich examples of what our ancestors accomplished in ages past, the future could be directed towards greater prosperity and happiness. Nothing would be made an object of study for study's sake as featured in the Graeco—Roman mentality. Just as Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere has several times reiterated that liberation would be the supreme object of education; hence it should be of the reconstruction of a cultural history of the African people. The cultural liberation will enable the scholars to be themselves. In this case, they would not feel obligated to be merely duplicates of the western scholars in their stereotyped-styles of writing.

Fifth, the reconstruction of black cultural history dating from the dawn of human civilization would necessitate visiting the ancient historical sites, the Nile Valley, so that the students may observe for themselves the historic monuments and documents which portray the glory of their ancestral achievements. Such organizations like the Institute of African Studies could extend their objectives by assuming the responsibility in guiding the African students and scholars in the reconstruction of the ancient black civilization. Unfortunately, the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.), like some other international political bodies does not seem to lead the continent towards actual unity needed by the race. Through an active O.A.U., however, the largest international university could be set up having within its campus the largest library, museum, and laboratory in the world. For its library and museum the leaders could appeal to the western and eastern nations concerned to restore the documents and monuments removed from the sights of the ancient black civilization, the Nile Valley. The Arabs who are currently the custodians of the ancient historical sights could be urged to take every caution in seeing that the monuments are preserved and made available to the African students and scholars, during their study tours.

At last in the reconstruction of a cultural history of the black people, the Africans should be able to see beauty in themselves and to sense the honour of being descendants of people who have made such a brilliant record in human history. The African cultural history would be viewed and portrayed within the understanding that was experienced by Dr. G. K. Osei, a distinguished Ghanaian historian and a prolific author of African cultural history, who once remarked:

In the early history of mankind, the African stood high in the ladder of civilization; but through dark ages, fell into ignorance and superstition; but now, in the dawning of a new day arising, never again to be submerged beneath the darkness that covers the earth, the gross darkness that covers the people.<sup>35</sup>

On that note of understanding, the African historians should be courageous enough to reconstruct the entire cultural history of the black people as a source of inspiration and liberation.

#### FOOTNOTES

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17. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia*, Vol. I, pp. 1-2.
18. Charles Seignobon, *History of Ancient Civilization*; Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilizations*, pp. 68-69.
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21. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile* (London, 1936), pp. 71, 75; Josephus, *Antiquities* (in W. Whiston's trans., London, 1841), p. 33; Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 2.
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