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The Cultural Unity of Black Africa, The Domains of Matriarchy and of Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity, by Cheik Anta Diop; Conceptions of History: Cheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga, by Chris Gray

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Cultural Unity of Black Africa, The Domains of Matriarchy and of Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity by Cheikh Anta Diop, 1989, Karnack House, London; *Conceptions of History: Cheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga* by Chris Gray, 1989, Karnack House, London.

Ironically his [Diop's] strength was his weakness in that he touched upon so many fields and opened so many possibilities for further research, orthodox scholars were able to point to some of his more controversial hypotheses in order to discredit him and all his ideas. (Gray, p. 67)

At the root of this frustration is the basic dilemma . . . faced not only by African historians but by African intellectuals in general; that is, they must fight for an African interpretation of their own history and culture in an area constructed by Europeans and according to rules and standards drawn up by these same Europeans. (Gray, p. 61)

The above two quotes found in Chris Gray's book sum up Diop's contributions and problems in *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Diop raises incredibly provocative questions about the whole interpretation of history by Europeans, and offers an Afro-centric alternative. Interestingly, Diop's hypotheses dovetail into some of the most exciting recent research done on the origins of gender differences. Scanning Diop's bibliography it is clear that he has reviewed none of the latest works by these feminist scholars. Instead he uses an Afro-centric as opposed to female-centric approach to reach similar conclusions.

And what are these conclusions? First, he views the development of world history as very different in the Northern regions of the world than in the Southern hemisphere. The fundamental differences according to Diop are the social and economic structures, the North is patriarchal and nomadic; the South is matriarchal and agricultural—the regions in the middle such as the Mediterranean being mixed areas. Central to these differences are gender roles. The importance of women in society in the Southern region is compared with the burden of women in the tradition of the Indo-European nomadic "hordes."

In the agricultural South, children are an asset. The more hands that work the fields, the more productive the fields are. Female reproduction is always encouraged. Diop writes that an agricultural

society tends to be organized along kinship lines, allowing both men and women to play important roles. He contrasts this to the harsh life of the Indo-European nomadic herders. In these societies women usually do not herd the livestock, therefore are not necessary for production. Pregnant women and small children are a burden to a fast moving nomadic society, especially societies where warfare is common. Thus, according to Diop, the tradition of female infanticide and the low status for women is a central aspect of the Northern culture. The family, with the father at the head, was the basic and most important unit. Diop further believes that the social and cultural structures developed during the Indo-European trek into Europe from the Asian Steppes was carried into the European agricultural society. He equates the Northern regions with the ideology of nomadism, the gender relations of nomadism including female infanticide, the worship of fire and cremation. As part of the ideology of nomadism the individualism of the modern European state is born, while in the south the ideology of agriculture, collectivism, and ancestor worship predominate.

These kinds of broad sweeping generalizations are always easy to criticize, because there are always exceptions. To further compound the problem, he often uses terminology in an inexact manner. For example, his use of the term "matriarchy" much more reflects "matrilineality" and "matrilocality" than societies controlled solely by women.

But Diop's view of two fundamentally unique developments forces us to look at world history in terms of two distinct, but equal historical traditions—one, male-centered, the other female-centered. The male-centered development is correlated with the Indo-European invasions. Mediterranean areas such as Crete started out as female-centered agricultural societies but were subsumed by the invasion of the Indo-European nomads, according to Diop's thesis. Interestingly his historical approach has been confirmed by the work of the controversial feminist archaeologist, Gimbutus, who has shown that early Southern European history was dramatically ended by the nomadic hordes of the Indo-Europeans.

Diop does an excellent job of dismissing the evolutionist theories of civilization (from Bachofen to Engels) which envisions history as having started with primitive matriarchy, reaching its zenith under European patriarchy. More importantly, he raises the question of what is truly civilization and how each region's history must be judged separately.

Diop's different approach to the history of Africa is a significant contribution of this book, but as the second quote above suggests, Diop seems compelled to make the argument in the language of the Europeans. His obsession with linking Egypt and Sub-Saharan Africa and his use of examples primarily from the big states like Ancient Ghana

and Mali seem to couch his argument in strictly European Africanist terms. He challenges us to take a totally different view of the development of civilization and then retreats to the definition of civilization as given by European and American scholars.

A further example of his accommodation with the ideology of Northern patriarchy is that he assumes African women historically played a secondary role in their societies, underestimates the significance of African women in production, and diminishes women's political role. Yet in tallying the pluses and minuses of this book, the tantalizing challenge launched at traditional historians far outweighs its shortcomings.

The one shortcoming that needs to be analyzed in a little more depth is Diop's linguistic evidence, together with the linguistic research of his student, Obenga. Diop's attempts to link Wolof and Ancient Egyptian suffers from an obvious problem—a fundamental aspect of historical linguistics is to compare sound shifts, but since Ancient Egyptian is no longer spoken, it is extremely difficult to compare the two languages. But Gray discusses a much more interesting linguistic problem raised both by Diop and Obenga. Both African scholars feel that Greenberg's classifications are incorrect and have been summarily accepted as a "sacred cow" of Western linguistics. But unfortunately, Obenga's and Diop's main reasons for criticizing Greenberg's classifications is that Ancient Egyptian is classified as part of the Afro-Asiatic language family rather than linked to Wolof or Mbuchi (both part of the Niger-Congo language family). The Afro-Asiatic language family is composed mostly of African languages, the only two major Asiatic languages in this classification being Hebrew and Arabic. Therefore, African languages such as Somali, Amharic, and Hausa are connected to Ancient Egyptian. If, in fact, Obenga and Diop represent an Afro-centric analysis, why is it necessary for Ancient Egyptian to be connected to specific Niger-Congo languages rather than to African languages in the Horn?

In conclusion, Diop's book is thought-provoking, groundbreaking, and guaranteed to have something to anger everyone. Gray's book sums up the works of Obenga and Diop and their importance to African historiography. Significant parts of Gray's book are devoted to the reasons Obenga and Diop's works are ignored by much of traditional Western academia. The real strength of his book is the challenge Diop and Obenga present to the American and European Africanist establishments. Gray clearly defines the African school of African History. This school of history does not only have a different ideology but sees the role of the historian as more than getting a tenured-track position; he/she must be a participant in that history.

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