



## LITERATURE



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### **The Kernel and Mettle of Cheikh Anta Diop**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

When scholars, write or take a stand, there is always an idea behind the writing. In the case of Cheikh Anta Diop, the great and single idea is the re-establishment of a historical truth, and thereby, as he was concerned, the rehabilitation of the black man. He focused on the mental and psychological dimensions of this wonderful task, using history as a tool and science as a way, a door and a key.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

What Cheikh Anta DIOP upholds in his socio-historico-political context and experience, is that you have to work on the mind before you can change people's attitudes and behaviours.

So, the first steps are mental and psychological rehabilitation. In a socio-historical context where "black" is the equivalent of nothingness or of anything close to it, Diop comes with the idea that the first civilisation was black. He once declared in Yaoundé that: "We have to remember that the first humanity was necessarily a Negroid humanity and a black humanity in any case". (1) This makes the black man to be "the first king in history". (2) One must acknowledge the audacity of such a statement in a context where the authority of established scholarship feels safe with a seemingly successful scheme based on an institutionalized racism that "thingifies" the black man and reduces him to one who, according to the derisive words of Aimé Césaire, "...invented neither powder nor compass those who never tamed steam or electricity those who did not explore sea or sky" (3)

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The fact is that we are at a juncture of history where the black man is pushed forward as a naked, non-human being without a past, a culprit who contributed nothing to the evolution of mankind, to the progress of knowledge and civilisation. The process is very simple, even though subtle and crooked in its ways and means: it is based on assumptions that certain truths are absolutely true and should therefore be taken for granted: the Negro is a lower creature and, subsequently, he is unable of great things. Pseudo scientific facts and arguments, like the “denegrification” of Egypt and its brilliant civilisation are put forward to deny the undeniable. Professor Djibril SAMB is aware of this when he writes:

“Egypt being a country of Negroes and the civilisation that developed there being a fact of Negroes, any thesis aiming at proving the contrary would be fruitless; the protagonists of these theses are not in the least unaware of this fact. So, it is wiser and safer to rid Egypt, purely and simply, and in the most tactful way, of all its creations and to put them to the credit of a nation of clearly white origin”. (4)

The contribution of Cheikh Anta DIOP is tremendous here; he knows that no change is possible before the cart is put right on its wheels again; the aim of “his research is clear: rehabilitating the negro nations and their culture” and “putting the Negroes in the seat usurped for a long time by Greece in the abridged general history of humanity set up by Hegel and his disciples” (5).

Being an intellectual as defined by Professor Devisse at a panel discussion with other Egyptologists, that is “one who is right, really right twenty years ahead of time” (6), Cheikh Anta understands clearly the importance and psychological dimension of self-trust in the process of restoration of what he calls “the historical consciousness”, which entails a clear understanding of the difference between the notions of nation and population (7).

Historical consciousness is defined by Theophile Obenga as: “a double act:

- a) Acquiring a consciousness more and more acute of the historical depth of the world as it has been experienced,
- b) .....acquiring a consciousness to partake in history, to make history. The “accidents” of history (slave trade, colonisation, economic, political, cultural and psychological trauma) have made the black African people amnesic: the collective historical memory of the African people has been profoundly affected. Cheikh Anta DIOP has undertaken a fundamental task for the restoration of the African historical consciousness”. (8)

The importance and weight of his task can be measured against two factors:

- a) The hostility of the indo-european world picture;
- b) The self- flagellating mind resulting from an inferiority complex among some blacks which, in fact, is the result of a temporarily successful indo-european world picture taken for granted. Slavery and colonialism play the key roles here with the techniques of brainwashing violence and dehumanization that are inherent in and coherent with both. (9)

Cheikh Anta turns to history which he uses as a tool in the process of “reestablishment” of the truth with its corollaries (Africa as the birthplace of humanity and of its first civilisation, historical continuity, cultural unity,

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intelligibility of African and universal history, historical consciousness and necessity of a renaissance rooted in a known and acknowledged past". (10)

The background is clearly set here with historical research that reconnects Egypt to the rest of Africa. The first man was a black and the "negro substratum" as Professor Djibril SAMB puts it is undeniable. (11)

In the same way we pitch Indo-European civilisation against Greece and Rome, we pitch, on the basis of scientific evidence, African civilisation against Egypt. The problem is crystal clear: for the modern European or westerner in general, this is "politically incorrect" insofar as the influence of Egypt on Greece has been acknowledged by the Greeks themselves; we understand why Cheikh Anta is the target of so many attacks, even though to no avail in the long term. The issue is of primeval importance because it leads to a frightening conclusion: what is known as the cradle of western philosophy and science, namely Greece and Rome in chronological order, borrowed everything from older Egypt.

Cheikh Anta has established that:

- The Greeks learned all the elements of western civilisation from the Egyptians;

They never had a philosophical thought before they met with Egypt;

- The Romans contributed nothing to exact sciences because they had no contacts with Egypt (12).

One of the prides of Greek mathematics, Thales's theorem, was in reality discovered in Egypt 1350 years before Thales was born (13).

- The modern day calendar was invented 4236 years before Christ, in Egypt (14), proving the scientific level and capacities of the Egyptians.

These, among many others feats of Egyptian sciences will turn a few assumptions upside down. I remember the famous poet from Daghestan, Rassoul Gamzatov, writing that "if you fire pistol shots at the past, the future will fire cannonballs at you" (15). That is exactly what has been happening to Cheikh Anta's challengers. James G. Spady got to the point where he stated that:

"Diop has led a massive war against (the) adversaries of scientific reason" (16)

This leads us to Cheikh Anta's methodology as the third element of his African history rehabilitation endeavour. His training in different fields allows him to build on a multi-faceted approach based on scientific evidences which corroborate each other. He starts studying philosophy at the Sorbonne, in Paris, along with Mathematics in 1946. He is obviously conscious of the interrelatedness of the various aspects of science and comes to the conclusion that they are all useful when he writes about the necessity of

"...a new rationality at the moment when human sciences are becoming amenable to the charms of exact sciences. Yet, one must be able to integrate the methods and the notions of the latter with discernment" (17)

His use of Egyptology, physics, chemistry, mathematics, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics in addition to history, philosophy and other

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specialized scientific domains make of him an earnest and honest researcher preoccupied only with the triumph of an undaunted truth. (18)

Cheikh Anta's creed is that: "a scientific issue remains always an open issue" (19)

This makes him unafraid of controversy. He believes that the researcher, whatever his field may be, must remain true to faithful scientific evidence as the only credible touchstone for credibility. It is before anything else a matter of intellectual and moral honesty, an expression of a sheer sense of responsibility. This defense of the monogenetic theory which discards polycentrism as far as the origin of man is concerned is an eloquent example of an uncompromising principle based on scientific methods. His whole life is a vivid, didactic example in this regard. He disregards narcissism and looks directly at reality with an open mind and objective eye.

Cheikh Mbacke Diop quotes Luca Cavalli-Sforza, an anti-racist activist whose assessment stems from the influence of Cheikh Anta Diop on the race issue: "a group of individuals who have a common origin and retain as a result a certain genetic resemblance, that is to say a resemblance in the features they have biologically inherited.

They may or may not have retained a certain cultural identity: shared traditions, common language, political unity, or have lost one or several of these features. Cultural identities are generally more unstable whereas genetic identities are more lasting in time: that is why we are concerned only with the latter to define a race". (20)

The western conception of race which leads to a hierarchised set of relations is therefore discarded here. (21)

The next important element, which we perceive as a corollary to the process of rehabilitation, to the use of history as a tool and the methodology based on science as extolled above is education. Cheikh Anta underlines its importance before relating it to culture and freedom.

Polonius advises his son Laertes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to go with the following words: "... to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man".

Cheikh Anta is just saying the same: be what you are. The inference of his insistence on education is, however, less scholastic than Polonius's.

He is dealing with the real world in real situations where some people have their present and future at stake in front of the stark facts of history: slavery, segregation, racism. He is aware of the damaging effects of a loss of memory which must perforce entail regression, with regression entailing in its turn a loss of sovereignty and control. In Yaoundé (Cameroon), Cheikh Anta declares on January 8th 1986:

" All our studies of the past are merely a return of the African soul and spirit to help them find again their creativity so as to face more easily the problems of today and organize a better future. That is the message carried by my teaching and research..... I see in every young African liable to

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receive an education, a nation builder, and it is the builder who is dormant in each of these young people that our education must waken". (23)

The main idea here is to revive self-consciousness and subsequently create a strong sense of self worth. If there is nothing wrong with knowing the other, it still remains true that the first worthwhile knowledge is that of the self which a sine qua non is for those who are trying to right the wrongs of the past. That is why Cheikh Anta insists on the importance of African humanities. It is obvious to him that we must wear our own hats on our own heads, even if the possibility of wearing somebody else's hat is there. What is impossible is wearing or carrying somebody else's head; there is in Gamzatov's "My Daghestan" the story of a man who bought the same hat as Leo Tolstoy and who was scoffed at because he didn't have Tolstoy's head under the hat!!!

Cheikh Anta experienced colonial and post-colonial Africa. We can infer from this, but also more safely from his works and deeds that his standards on cultural issues as related to freedom are a logical attitude coherent with his educational programs. He reconciles the political and the cultural. The fact of rejecting and fighting against the predominance of foreign culture is a pervasive element in his works. As a native Senegalese he is directly and personally concerned with colonization as a physical and economic domination, but also as a cultural problem. When Senghor declares that:

"It is a question of living an original life, negro-African and French at the same time. It is in reality, a question of creating, on the land of African, with humanism, a new man" (24)

He is certainly at odds with Cheikh Anta on the issue of culture. The latter believes that: "If Senghor were a genuine builder for Africa, I would have said nothing ... Negritude is only a word for him, a prestigious cloak he put on to proceed to the destruction of the genuine African culture of which he is afraid for all the reasons we know.

That is why we will not rest until his alienated ideas are rooted out of the African cultural body." (25)

Cheikh Anta denounces also all attempts at diluting African culture into its European counterpart under the guise of "assimilation" or "the civilization of the universal" which he perceives as a form of alienation (26)

The African has to fight and defend his own values if he wants to survive and enjoy his freedom. One key element here is perceived among many by Cheikh Anta: African languages, as the first means of communication have to be rehabilitated and put on the pedestal where they belong. This should be done without any form of segregation. Cheikh rejects the idea of one; single African language used all over the continent and finds it as unconceivable as one unique language spoken all over Europe (27). Once again, the requirements of a historical consciousness will find, deeply grafted into them, the issue of language. Cheikh Anta is adamant here:

"An African educated in any African language other than his own is less alienated, culturally speaking, than he is when educated in a European language which takes the place of his mother tongue"(28).

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We notice here that the concern for language is not just cultural for Cheikh Anta. It is also highly political and central in his social and structural project for change and progress. The scientist partakes fully to what Ezekiel Mphahlele presents already on 1962 as the affirmation of responsible black leaders, even though Cheikh is not mentioned by name (29).

The western preconceived and biased ideas circulated by means of well structured educational and cultural systems become here a target for Cheikh Anta who does not hesitate to denounce the passivity of black leaders themselves. He believes that change will not occur as long as the black leaders do not react to the negative effects of colonial domination. It is all about a political struggle, about courage, and, the most difficult of it all : courage not to betray :“It is only the political leaders who are not up to it, who, in trust have never thought earnestly about these problems, who are afraid of accomplishing the act they consider as an economic privation. So, they try, by serving as stooges, the same economic and political tutelage in a more insidious manner which is less perceptible to the masses, but remains as real as before”. (30)

Some of these leaders are denounced by Cheikh as people who stick to their own promotion and privileges instead of working for the people. He proposes in this regard, if the African nations are to make progress and to develop, to transform “political positions into working positions”. (31)

That is one of the conditions for the new African countries to stop being tools in the colonial project. It is also a prerequisite for democracy and the setting up of a federal state within the framework of Cheikh Anta Diop's panafrican vision. Ely Madiodio Fall, one of his lifetime companions, presents Cheikh's vision as follows: “He proposes a strong state, a federal state capable of exploiting the tremendous riches of the Black continent and building an educational system capable of creating a man freed from the weight of the constraints of history where the negro race found itself on the decline, a man who reconciles with the progress that has marked our very old tradition” (32). These statements reflect Cheikh's project for a federal state with his 15 (fifteen) “practical conclusions” that close his book on the question.

1. “Restoring the consciousness of our historical unity”
2. Promoting linguistic unity at continental level
3. Giving official status to our languages at government level
4. Efficient representation of women
5. Federal African unity now, regardless of colonial linguistic stigma
6. No white state on the continent
7. Setting up a Constitution with dispositions to stop capitalism
8. Promoting industrial development and mechanized agriculture
9. Setting up a strong, educated army
10. Setting up technical scientific institutions (nuclear physics, chemistry, electronics, etc...)
11. Controlling salaries and transforming political positions into working positions
12. Modernizing agriculture in a wide scale

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13. Collectivization of agriculture
14. Re-populating Africa
15. New democratic job policies. (33)
- 16.

### **CONCLUSION**

At is the man who was hailed as believing in “.... the capacity of the Africans to tame modern sciences .... Who firmly believed that the Negroes who initiated civilization should be capable of building a modern federal state? That is the profound logic of his political struggle. At a time when Africa is at last achieving its political unity, it is only fair to revisit Cheikh Anta Diop’s contribution to the historical and cultural foundations of this unity”. (34)

He has been dubbed “the last Pharaoh” by many.

Cheikh is the “sweet prince” like Hamlet and Malcolm who did his job well and is now sleeping with a good conscience. After he departed in February 1986, the Angels looked and said: the man has done his job, and he has done it well”.

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### **NOTES**

- 1- translated from the text of his conference in yaoundé, 8 january 1986 in *hommage du cameroun au professeur cheik anta diop* presses universitaires d’afrique. silex/ nouvelle du sud. dakar, 2006 - page 24  
hereafter referred to as dika akwa.
- 2- translated from cheikh anta diop in op.cit. p.35
- 3- aimé césaire : *cahier d un retour au pays natal*. bordas.1947 / présence africaine – bi lingual edition - paris 1971. p110  
also cf. cheikh mbacké diop s comments on the issue in « *cheikh anta diop, l’homme et l’oeuvre*”. 2ème edition. présence africaine, dakar-2003, p 16, hereafter « *diop, l’homme et l’oeuvre* ».
- 4- djibril samb : *cheikh anta diop* les nouvelles editions africaines du sénégal, 1992 - page 119  
our translation from the french text.
- 5- cf. jean marc ela in dika akwa, op.cit, pp 130 and 133  
(our translation)
- 6- cf.in dika akwa, op.cit. p 77
- 7- cf. dika akwa, op.cit. pp 64-65, c. mb. diop “ *l’homme et l’oeuvre*”. p.20
- 8- t. obenga in c. mb. diop: “ *l’homme et l’oeuvre*”. p.20
- 9- cf. franz fanon in the interesting chapter « le nègre et la psychopathologie” in his *peau noire, masques blancs*”, editions du seuil, 1952, pp 115-169.
- 10- a.b.m. lam: *cheikh anta diop*,

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a tribute to diop in sociétés en devenir, melanges offerts à boubacar ly.  
presses universitaires de dakar – 2006 - p. 414

11- d. samb, op.cit, pp 11-12

12- cf. c. a. diop in dika akwa op.cit, pp. 58-59

“greece never had a philosophical thought before it met with egypt; this is fundamental. try and find a greek philosophical thought, a greek mathematical thought before greece met egypt, you’ll find none. if greece had had an autonomous scientific thought, that thought should have expressed itself before the conjunction with egypt, but it doesn’t exist. it will begin with thales and those who came to learn in egypt before going back to adapt those sciences in greece... there is not one single mathematical theorem produced by the roman” (our translation).

13-c.a. diop in dika akwa, op. cit, p. 31

14- cf. c.a. diop in dikwa, p. cit, p. 28

15- rassoul gamzatov: *mon daghestan*.

editions du progres-moscou - p. 9

(our translation of the french version)

16- james g. spady: cheikh anta diop: a philosophical perspective of “black history” in “sciences et civilisations africaines: hommage a cheikh anta diop revue martiniquaise de sciences humaines et de littérature. n°8 - fort de france 1989 –

p. 12

17- c.a diop quoted by mama yatassaye ndiade in his *cheikh anta diop: le dernier des pharaons*.

editions tokossel, dakar, 2003. p.79

(our translation from the french text).

18- on pluridisciplinarity, confer a.b.m lam, op. cit, pp. 413-414, 427,  
d. samb, op. cit, pp 6-7,

jean marc ela in dika akwa, op. cit. pp. 129 – 140,

c.mb. diop, op. cit, pp. 153-155

19- in dika akwa, op. cit, p. 47

20- luca cavalli- sforza in c.mb. diop, op. cit. p. 153

21- interesting reading on the issue:

“free your mind: return to the source of african origins”

by asa g. hilliard iii

georgia state university, atlanta, georgia, 1974, revised 1986 ,p. 11

22- william shakespeare: *hamlet* act i, sc 3, ll. 78-80

23- c. a. diop, in dika akwa, op. cit. pp. 43 – 44. our translation

24- l. s. senghor : *liberté 2. nation et voie africaine du socialisme*

editions du seuil- paris 1971- p. 109 (our translation)

25- c.a. diop in taxaw n°3, avril 1977. (our translation)

26- cf. ethiopiennes n°17, janvier 1979, pp 72-73 where professor alassane ndaw denounces “cultural dualism” and “ cultural assimilation” as a “moral

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annexation” .see babacar diop’s brilliant paper on cultural identity in ethiopiennes, nouvelle serie, 1987, volume iv n°1.2, pp 37-42

27- cf. diop on the development of national languages in dika akwa, op. it. pp. 91 – 92

28- c.a. diop : *les fondements économiques et culturels d’un état fédéral d’afrique noire*  
p. 25

29- in his « the african image », frederick a. praeger, publishers new york-washington, 1962, p.52, ezekiél mphahlele writes:

“until president nkrumah, dr nramdi azikiwe, tom mboya, julius nyerere, dr hastings

banda went to the united states, the negro thought of the african as a primitive man whose jungle existence had largely outlived the process of education. the americans saw these messages on tv and heard especially nyerere and mboya brilliantly weather the storm of pressmen’s questions and often make them look silly.”

it is true that mphahlele is picturing a specific context, but the interconnectedness of the different forms of education, colonial, post-colonial , american or european, can explain the reactions of “some” people.

i believe that the negative attitudes of certain black people to the continental african are due to a distorted picture of history and a manipulation of facts by powerful education systems.

30- c.a. diop “*les fondements économiques et culturels*” op. cit .p. 32. (our translation)

31- *ibid.*, p. 116.

32- fall ely madiodio : *l’oeuvre politique de cheikh anta diop.*

edit. crefg - dakar. février 1996, p. 9. (quote : our translation)

33- cf. diop : « *les fondements ...* »

op. cit, pp 120-122

34- president abdoulaye wade in *ndiade*, op. cit, pp. 11-12

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