Cheikh Anta Diop: The Search for a Philosophy of African Culture.
Monsieur Isidore Okpewho

Abstract

I. Okpewho — Cheikh Anta Diop : en quête d'une philosophie de la culture africaine. 
Appréciation critique de l'œuvre du penseur sénégalais par un intellectuel africain d'expression anglaise. Bien que Diop se soit distancié formellement de la négritude senghorienne, I. Okpewho considère qu'il en a subi l'influence et le critique pour un certain romantisme qui en résulterait. Il n'en reconnaît pas moins l'intérêt, ne fût-ce que par la provocation intellectuelle qu'elle implique, d'une œuvre finalement peu connue dans les ci-devant colonies britanniques.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :


Document généré le 26/06/2017
ISIDORE OKPEWHO

Cheikh Anta Diop: The Search for a Philosophy of African Culture

‘Roots, be an anchor at my keel
Shore my limbs against the wayward gale

Reach in earth for deep sustaining draughts
Potencies against my endless thirsts.’

Wole Soyinka, A Shuttle in the Crypt.

The pages of cultural history are punctuated by the quest for an earthing in the face of political uncertainty. Perhaps nothing in all of Alex Haley’s Roots (New York, 1976) is more representative of the overall message of the book than that scene towards the end of it where the author’s Grandma, who had told the story of ‘Kin-tay’ times without number, is hurt to be told by her own daughter how ‘all that old-timey slavery stuff’ is ‘embarrassing’. As Haley tells it, ‘Grandma would snap right back, “If you don’t care who or where you come from, well I do!”’ (p. 664). All through the story we feel the sustained urge of a man who was sure he had made a firm umbilical connection with the earth of his being and that this connection was worth everything. In fact, one of the most touching scenes of the book recalls that moment when the author discovered that Cousin Georgia, who lived on to tell the family saga after Grandma died, had herself ‘passed away within the very hour that I had walked into Juffure village. I think that, as the last of the old ladies who talked the story on Grandma’s front porch, it had been her job to get me to Africa, then she went to join the others up there watchin’” (p. 682).

No race of people has demonstrated this pained desire to achieve a rooting in the earth of contemporary history quite as much as the Negro race, perhaps because no race has had its humanism questioned quite as determinedly. To be sure, during all those centuries in which the African continent was subjected to the most brutal human and economic ravages, a well-reasoned voice of protest was occasionally raised to the conscience of the civilised world by an African or non-African sympathiser. But it was not until the thirties and forties, when the Black intellectuals saw how much more could be achieved through an established congress of nations, that the drive for the affirmation of the Black selfhood gathered momentum. Indeed, that congress was made up largely of nations that still held the Black race in political bondage; henceforth the entire intellectual vigour of the Black man was mobilized towards demonstrating, as Irele (in Senghor 1977: 10) has recently put it, ‘the desire of Black people to change the conditions of their historical relationship with the West, and a preoccupation with the destiny of the Black man in the modern world’. This impetus bore political fruit in the late

Cahiers d'Études africaines, 84, XXI-4, pp. 587-602.
fifties and early sixties, when a considerable number of Black nations gained independence from their colonial rulers.

But after independence, what? Has political independence regained for the Black man his cultural prestige, which was violated just as much as his political freedom was denied? Having now regained the power to rule himself and govern his destiny, can the Black man convince a world that has held him in worse than contempt that he possesses the essential foundations and makings for surviving in a technological culture that is dominated by his erstwhile political rulers?

The intellectual debate about the virtues of "Africanity" has hardly ceased, and the nature of each treatise is to a large extent a reflection of the cultural and political climate within which it has been conceived. There have been some African scholars who, leaning heavily on the ethnological scholarship of the turn of the century and thereafter, were anxious to capitalise on the well-advertised grandeur of ancient Egypt and to trace the origins of the Negro race and culture therefrom.1 There were others who, largely for reasons of religious ideology, preferred to see the Negro race as one of the lost races of Israel and to trace the African past back to Abyssinia (Ethiopia), home of the ancient Coptic faith. This paper will attempt a detailed treatment of the work of one of the most outstanding Egyptianists, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, and an assessment of his place in the evolution of contemporary thought on African culture.

Diop's books are a landmark of Black nationalist thought, and were part of that general impulse which paved the way for the political liberation of several Black nations in the fifties and sixties. He is a committed scholar, an ethnoscientist who plumbs the depths of history, anthropology, linguistics, etc., for what he considers the cultural advantages of the Black race over the White which are the ultimate hope of salvation of the human race. For like some of his contemporaries in the championship of the Black cause (Senghor, Césaire, etc.), Diop does believe that mankind will be saved. It is not easy to say for certain why that generation of thinkers chose to soften the impact of their criticisms of White culture with this message of salvation. Perhaps they were aware that they could not really afford to antagonize a Europe that still had the power to deny the Black race its political (if not cultural) dignity. Or they may have seen that an argument based on universal brotherhood and hope had better chances of influencing a Europe that was tormented by world-weariness and ennui. So, although his work is basically a challenge to White culture, Diop like the others believes there is ample room for dialogue. But his defence of Black African culture has an unmistakeably polemical tenor. In our discussion of his contribution toward an understanding of that culture, we shall be addressing ourselves to the following questions: how justly has he represented the roots of Black culture, and how valuable can his conclusions be in claiming for the Black man a firm footing in contemporary culture?

II

As a committed philosopher of African culture, Diop does not simply have an archival interest in African history. He explores the past of Africa almost as painstakingly as the professional historians both native (e.g. Adu Boahen) and foreign (e.g. Basil Davidson) have done, but for him the past is more valid as a

---

1. Among the notable influences, we must reckon the following: in mythology, the work of Emmanuel Cosquin; in history and social studies, the works of Frobenius on the origins of African civilization and of W.H.R. Rivers on social organization.

2. For a quite useful treatment (from the point of view of the sociology of literature) of some of the major figures of Diop's generation, see KESTELoot 1965 (see p. 102 for her view of Frobenius' influence on the Egyptianist thought of Diop).
guarantee of cultural selfhood and a source of strength for future survival. Because of this larger philosophical bias in his researches, he is inclined to look beyond the ravages of African history for the psychological background to these ravages.

It is clear to him that both the colonial officers and the scholars of the West were operating from a very warped vision of the Black race. For the colonial experience in Africa, he finds a parallel in the Roman conquest of Gaul: after the Romans overran Gaul, they could only remark the ability of the natives to imitate whatever the Romans had taught them, but they never credited these natives with any originality whatsoever. The Western colonizers had very much the same view of Africans. Consequently, if one should believe the evidence of Western scholars, there is nothing anywhere in Africa—right up to the heart of the tropical jungle—that could in the final analysis be credited to the invention of the Negro race; even the great civilizations of Egypt and Ethiopia, of Ife, Benin, etc., were "created by some mythical Whites who have subsequently vanished like a dream leaving the Negroes to carry on the forms, organizations, techniques [...] that they had invented" (Diop 1954: 7). It is this falsification of African history that Diop (1960b: 9) has set himself up to combat with a view to "the restoration of the Black historical consciousness". For instance, he summarily rejects Western views of the origins of African art—as held by scholars like Frobenius who derives African art from the Mediterranean world and North Africa, or Olbrechts and Baumann who give it a Hamitic origin, or even Paulme who finds Portuguese, medieval North African, and Hispano-Moorish sources for Ashanti bronze art—then goes on to trace what he considers the native, underived characteristics of the arts of Black Africa (Diop 1954: 335-347).

But how far back can we trace the roots of this cultural achievement? Anybody wishing to set the history of Negro culture against that of White culture must be prepared to turn up material that can compare with the classics of Indo-European antiquity (Crete and beyond). Yet most writers of African history who may be credited with a reasonable measure of negrophilia have hardly gone beyond the medieval kingdoms and empires of the Western Sudan in their derivations. This surely is not enough, and scholars like Diop have consequently looked to Egypt. There is no doubt that for those Africans who are inclined to embrace Egypt as the fountainhead of Black culture, the ethnic and political realities of the Egypt of today do constitute a bit of an impediment if not embarrassment. Diop himself is at pains to justify his enthusiasm, and so pre-empts the objections of his readers by posing the question himself: if it was indeed Black people who created Egyptian civilization, how does one account for their regression? But he quickly dismisses the question as irrelevant, 'for one could equally cite the Fellahs and Copts who happen to be descendants of the Egyptians and who today find themselves in the same state of regression—if not worse—as the other Blacks'. Having taken care of that problem, Diop (ibid.: 209-211) then goes on to trace the roots of dispersal of the Negro race from the Nile country throughout the continent of Africa.

It is amazing how far back in scholarly tradition Diop is moved to go in search of supporting evidence. We must appreciate that he was writing in an age when Black had to be beautiful to be believed and trusted with its destiny. What better surety could be furnished to earn this trust than the evidence of an Egyptian ancestry for the Black race? And what better support for this endeavour than the equally authoritative evidence of classical writers like Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Tacitus to the effect that the ancient Egyptians were Black people, just like the Ethiopians and other Africans (ibid.: 19)?

Diop has little difficulty in locating his subjects within the appropriate cultural geography, and this enterprise constitutes the basic format of The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa. Following the tradition of 19th-century ethnographic scholarship of the diffusionist branch, he divides the world into three culture areas: the 'northern cradle', embracing the entire Indo-European or Aryan world; the 'zone of confluence', made up of the regions west of the Indus (Arabia, Western Asia, Meso-
potamia, Byzantium); and finally the 'southern' or 'meridional cradle', comprising Egypt and the whole of Africa. The zone of confluence is characterized by a commingling of the cultural traits of both the north and the south; on the whole, however, Diop (1962: 112) attempts to adduce sufficient scholarly evidence 'to show everywhere the presence of a meridional substratum, which was later covered by a northern contribution'.

In what does the kinship of Egypt and Black Africa consist? The link is seen as basically two-fold: linguistic and ethnological. However, as soon as Diop begins to outline the details of the consanguinity between Egypt and Negro Africa, one is left with a growing scepticism about the validity of his claims.

Rather in the style of a Max Muller, Diop predicates much of his theory about the Egypt-Africa kinship on the resources of comparative philology. The enterprise takes up about a quarter of the entire Nations nègres et culture; an 'Appendice linguistique' accounts for one fifth of L'Afrique noire pré-coloniale; and in Les fondements culturels, the linguistic argument features very prominently in the recommendations that Diop makes towards the unification of all African States in a viable federation. This linguistic enterprise is as selective as it is ambitious, being fundamentally based on a tendentious comparison of the forms of modern Senegalese Wolof with those of old Pharaonic Egyptian: 'The grammatical relationship between the African languages of today, such as Wolof, and ancient Egyptian of the eighteenth dynasty (2400-750 B.C.) shows that the comparison of the two realities, far from being illusory, is legitimate and that it is conceivable even in different fields.' (Diop 1962: 183.)

Diop (1954: 119) seems to embrace these links with a certain passion, and even goes so far as to hope to restore, by means of his comparative ventures, the exact structure of ancient Egyptian grammar. In fairness to him he is honest enough to own that 'in linguistics it is always relatively easy to compare any two languages from any part of the globe; it is the opposite which would be rather difficult; to prove that two languages have absolutely no bond of relationship' (Diop 1962: 193). But it is difficult to see how Diop could have done without the elaborate linguistic prop on which he builds his deductions of kinship.

Diop is of course not the only African to trace negro African cultures from Egypt by way of language. Before him, the Rev. Olumide Lucas (1948) used such arguments to derive Yoruba divinities like Ogun and Sango from Egyptian sources; and after him, Modupe Oduyoye (1972) has tried an even more ambitious job of derivations. However attractive may be the idea of an Egyptian homeland for Black culture, it is nonetheless difficult to see how dependable these linguistic excursions are as a guide to cultural roots. For surely a careful reflection on the fortunes of linguistic influence soon reveals that, given the right conditions, the same language was just as likely to travel in one direction as in another. One can hardly talk about ancient Egyptian culture without suggesting its links with the civilizations of the ancient Near East (Akkadian, Assyrian, Canaanite, etc.), of Western Asia (Anatolia, the Caucasus region), and of course the immediate Grecian world. Is it any wonder, then, that Diop's chart of derivations finally leads him to conclusions that are only too obvious and less than enlightening, 'the Egyptians are Semitic Nubians' (citing Erman), and 'in lending itself to the Negro mentality, the intellectualism born of Socrates and Aristotle, Euclid and Archimedes adapted itself there' (citing Masson-Oursel) (Diop 1962: 184).

Diop's exploration of the ethnological links between Egypt and Black Africa is perhaps less impeachable and sometimes attains a poetic quality of expression, but again there are a few disturbing kinks in the logic. The essential unities are seen in the areas of ontology and social organization. Perhaps we should begin by...
acknowledging him as one of the most articulate defenders of the principle of vitalism in traditional African culture, which Western ethnologists and philosophers all the way from David Hume and Herbert Spencer to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and even Ernst Cassirer had misconstrued as a ‘prelogical’ or ‘prerational mentality’ in a people who were not yet capable of making the right analytical distinctions between (for instance) themselves and animals. Diop’s response (1962: 160-161) was for its time something of a landmark in the definition of totemism:

‘In a mentality where the essence of things, ontology par excellence, is the vital force, the exterior forms of beings and of objects become secondary and can no longer constitute a barrier either for totalling two vital forces or for identifying two of them, because they are equal quantities or because the beings they animate have been led in their existence to proceed to a social contract, a sort of blood pact. Thus, if the beauty of the plumage of a parrot or of a peacock attracts me, there is nothing to prevent me from choosing it, for this single particular trait, as my totem. I might also have been tempted to choose the lion, because of its strength, or the falcon, because of its vigilance […]. Evidently, all these choices which, in the beginning, were made at the level of the clan, express themselves by an identification of essences which is only conceivable by a vitalist mentality, governed by a philosophy of the Bantu type. And it is seen that it is not only due to chance that among the negroes of Black Africa and the ancient Egyptians, who all practised totemism or zoolatry, that vitalism was at the basis of their conception of the universe. While in the Semitic and Aryan world the association of an animal and a human being had, as André Aynard has remarked, only a symbolic character, in the African world the philosophy which is the basis of life allows us to identify these two beings without contradicting the principle of identity, without our being able to evoke a prelogical mentality. Here the exterior form is not the first reality, it is perhaps not illusory, but secondary, and no serious classification could come from it. The pharaoh and the falcon were one and the same essence, although enjoying different exterior forms: Diana’s hind or the Gallic cock are only symbols, otherwise the Indo-Europeans would have known totemism.4

There is something of a non sequitur in the last statement. Is it inconceivable that the Indo-Europeans may have had a vitalist ontology before this was overtaken by the abstraction of the symbolist outlook? I doubt that Diop would make such concessions to Indo-European culture; besides, we have no reason to expect a négritude scholar of the fifties to give quarter to Western logic right or wrong.5 The first duty is to demonstrate the beauty of Black culture against all opposition, and Diop has certainly pressed anthropology to good service in his

4. The ‘philosophy of the Bantu type’ is no doubt a reference to the vitalist concept of muntu as expounded by Tempsels 1959. On totemism, compare Lévi-Strauss, Totemism (1964) and The Savage Mind (1966), where totemism is seen simply as a cognitive tool by which the pre-industrial mind, in true bricoleur fashion, attempts to harmonize the disparate ‘signs’ of its organic universe. For totemism as a device for ensuring social control, see Davidson 1960: 116-118.

5. Nilsson (1950: 143-144) was one of those who sneered at ‘the grotesque figures of deities from Africa and Polynesia’ as against the ‘anthropomorphism’ of the Homeric gods. But it is hard to defend some of the figures we see in the Iliad as ‘symbols’; in XIII, 62-72, there is an obvious case for a hawk-shaped Poseidon, for Oilean Ajax remarks the unusual form of the feet from behind; an equally aviform Apollo appears to Hector in XV, 237 ff. If we accept Walter Leaf’s punctuation (as I think we should, considering Hector’s total befallement), line 247 should translate: ‘Which of the gods, noble sir, are you to speak to me face to face?’
defence of the spiritual order of that culture. He has also attempted to do the same for the temporal order, and here again he sees a basic uniformity in the socio-political traditions of the southern cradle: in the systems of kinship, social organization, etc., Diop tends to give greater attention to social organization, with particular emphasis on the caste system which he sees as playing the same harmonising role in the temporal order as totemism does in the spiritual. He is of course aware that the caste system exists in India, which is well outside the southern cradle; but he finds an easy explanation for this. In *L’Afrique noire pré-coloniale*, he evokes the evidence of authorities like Lenormant to demonstrate that this system is alien to the Aryan-Semitic mentality; it can only be traced to an early meridional presence upon which the later Aryan invasion has wrought some peculiar changes (Diop 1960a: 11-13).

Let us quickly survey Diop’s understanding of the concept of caste:

‘The African society is stratified into castes, these being the result of a division of labour in the precolonial period. Following the political division at this period, military duty was the one which carried the greatest share of risks as guaranteeing the security of the group; the warriors thus quickly became a class of nobles with a monopoly of power, influence and esteem. Every other form of labour was degrading for them. The caste is nothing else but a profession considered in its dialectical relationship with the sum of advantages and disadvantages which its exercise carries.’ (Diop 1954: 349-350.)

How could a social structure, which guaranteed that one class of people stay forever above and another below, have survived the temperament of those who had no means of mobility in the social ladder?

‘The originality of this system’, Diop replies, ‘arises from the fact that the manual worker instead of being cheated out of the fruits of his labour—as the artisan or serf of the Middle Ages, or to a lesser extent the modern workman—can, on the contrary, increase it, by adding to it goods given him by the nobleman. Consequently, if there were to be a social revolution, it would be accomplished from above and not from below. But there is something better: the members of all the castes, including the slaves, are closely associated with authority which leads to constitutional monarchies, governed by councils of ministers where all the authentic representatives of the people appear.’ (Diop 1962: 182.)

However moving the plea, it is hard to see how one can so stoutly defend—not simply document—a way of life in which ‘the dynamic elements of society, whose discontent would have given rise to transformations, are satisfied with their social condition and do not seek to change it’. There is simply no room for aspirations in such a society, and a society without hopes is a society without a future. So how could such a society survive not simply its own internal dynamics but indeed stresses from without (whether salutary or destructive), considering it left no room for a squirt of new blood? Diop’s reply (ibid.: 181-221) to this is a classic challenge to sociology and political science: ‘African societies have remained relatively unaltered, to the point where we are able today to lay down many points of comparison with ancient Egypt’, and ‘there has never been, in Africa, a revolution against the regime, but only against those who administered it badly, that is to say, unworthy princes.’ Whatever the logical or other merits of this claim, one cannot help wondering: is a system bad because of the men who run it, or the men bad because of the gross privileges that the system confers on them?

6. For a contrary view of traditional society, i.e. from the point of view of social change, see especially Goody, ed., 1975; Goody 1977.
One can hardly overemphasize these privileges: Diop himself suggests their uniqueness in his enumeration not only of the advantages that the casted society bestows on its citizens, but indeed of the moral values which the system engenders. One of these is 'dare-devility'—which I must admit is something of an understatement for Diop's word témérité. 'The function of warrior encourages the growth of the sentiment of martial honour to its highest degree: dare-devility was one of the most coveted, if not the highest, of moral values in the African society. For instance, at Cayor, a darobe who survived a defeat lost his title to the nobility.' (Diop 1954: 357.) The implications are clear. If we accept that there was never a revolution in the casted society, it will only be for this reason: that the underprivileged elements never had a fighting chance against a class of men who would stake every drop of their blood to keep that title to the nobility on which the society put so much premium. It seemed safer to be content with, than to be crushed by, such a system.

Another one of the moral values engendered by the caste system was generosity or fellow-feeling. Since the system survived on the insurance—according to Diop—of an equilibrium between the different cadres of society, the people were thus obliged by the mutual need for security to look out for one another. So perfect, it seems, was this atmosphere of harmony and hospitality that a man could travel anywhere he pleased without having to worry about bed or board, and this in an age when there were no hotels or banks (ibid.). We have, to be sure, quite a few African folktales that speak of such a shangri-la; but there are also a good many that tell a different story. True, in some heroic and other stories, we frequently encounter a benevolent ruler and a hospitable folk who receive the stranger with an exchange of gifts, especially if he is in any way connected with a ruling house. But we also have a good number of morality tales—Herskovits (1958) provides a good sampling—that warn against improvident journeys and narrate the sheer unkindness to neighbour and stranger and point to the harm that these are known to have brought to communities and individuals alike. The trouble with golden ages of the Diop kind is that they may never have been; the beauty of them is that they need never have been.

A third virtue which Diop attributes to the system of castes is respect for old age. In a system built on a pattern of privileges, it is not hard to find one for longevity: wisdom, Diop tells us, was valued as a sum of experiences lived and knowledge acquired thereby. In the modern West, Diop continues, education could give a child more knowledge than his elders had; hence there is no respect for or sanctity in old age (ibid.).

The modern West. It is hard to miss certain eclecticism in Diop's logic, though this is not out of place in a man who felt he had to do battle with White culture. But we are inevitably drawn to ask: if irreverence is a mark of modern Western society, is this the result of an undue emphasis placed on a mechanical, impersonal system as against the warmth of a lived experience, or do we ultimately trace it to the sheer knavery of the Aryan character which historically was unschooled in the tender graces of humanity? Diop would not be the only one to suggest this. Not so long ago, a well-known Ghanaian poet was asked in an interview whether he was in the habit of thinking in his native dialect (Ewe) or in English. 'Both', he replied. 'It depends on the subject. For instance, if I think of my family or my mother I can't think in English. When I begin to think of abstract subjects—about politics, for example, I generally think in English.' (Awoonor 1978: 751.) This idea that a gentleness of the heart does not sort well with White culture, and that Black culture is distinguished from the White by its regard for motherhood and motherright, is the central thesis of Diop's perhaps most controversial work, The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa.

To understand Diop's mother-fixation, we must allow a little diversion on his kinship with writers of his generation that were similarly persuaded. Négritude writers, especially poets, felt such a strong attachment to the feminine mystique as
was never quite matched by writers of a later generation. Even the figure of the river-goddess Idolo in the poetry of the late Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo (1971), is tame by comparison; though she informs the overall mystical feel of the sequence ‘Heavensgate’ and superintends the poet’s rites of passage, she does not attain the larger racial metaphor of the female figures in Senghor’s poems. There is a possible explanation for this appeal to the Black womanhood. The négritude of Senghor and his friends was formulated between the two world wars. These Black men, who saw themselves ultimately as strangers to the conflict, must have recoiled instinctively from the mad manly waste of the flower of European youth and sought refuge in the nostalgic image of the protective, beautiful bosom of the mother who, in the polygamous African household, often loomed larger in the child’s experience than the father. ‘Woman’, to quote Ibrele again, ‘is thus imagined in terms of procreation and perpetuation of the race, fertility and regeneration—in short, as a cardinal principle of life. The association of the image with the poet’s continent gives it a further dimension—through this image, Senghor develops in his poetry a scheme of vital values that inform the [. . .] concrete portrayal of Africa as a landscape in the luxuriance of natural growth.’ (Senghor 1977: 25.) We can thus appreciate the romantic appeal of the following lines from Senghor’s war-time collection, Hosties noires:

‘Bless you, Mother.
I remember the days of my fathers, the evenings of Dyilor.
The deep-blue light of the night sky on the land sweet at evening.
I am on the steps of the homestead. Deep inside it is dark.
My brothers and sisters like chicks huddle their numerous warmth against my heart.’ (Senghor 1964: 24.)

Diop shares with Senghor this image of mother and womanhood as a symbol of life, tenderness and warmth, qualities which he finds alien to the Aryan culture. The full title of his book is The Cultural Unity of Negro Africa: The Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity. In this book, Diop tries to establish a fundamental distinction between the northern and southern cradles of humanity in terms of cultural character and temperament. The northern cradle is marked by patriarchy while the southern cradle is characterized by matriarchy; in this latter cradle, Africa is seen as the realm of ‘matriarchy par excellence’.

How has this dichotomy come about? The Aryans of the North—argues Diop with a plethora of ethnological evidence—were traditionally a nomadic race, wandering from one place to another with their flocks and having to fight for and usurp pastures wherever they went. Since herding was basically a male occupation, the men of this race held the leadership of affairs and the women were simply accessory to the scheme. The nomadic life was inevitable for the North because the land there was infertile, due to the inclemency of the climate. But the South, especially Africa, has always been blessed with fertile land and thus disposed towards a more sedentary and more peaceable life than there was up North. In such a situation the female was not simply accessory to the dominance of the male; she had her pride of place as an equal partner with the man in the affairs of the family, and indeed on her devolved the organization of the domestic life of the family while the man was busy in the fields. It is this primal position of the woman in Black culture that accounts for such a phenomenon as matrilineal descent that according to Diop—characterizes just about every traditional African society, from the Egypt of Queen Hatchepsout to the Ashanti and Fulani societies of contemporary West Africa.

But first Diop has to account for the disturbing evidence from regions outside the southern cradle in which women are known to have held leadership; it must be said to his credit that, however eclectic his scholarship may be, he certainly takes as much of the extenuating evidence as is usable into account. In the first
chapter of Cultural Unity (1962: 27) he tackles those scholars who have made the point that matriarchy is a universal phenomenon. J.-J. Bachofen (1861) had traced the history of the human family from (a) promiscuity, through (b) matriarchy, since in a free-love culture only the mother of a child could be established, and finally to (c) patriarchy, which came with the establishment of rational social processes. Bachofen based his arguments largely on Aeschylus’ Oresteian trilogy, which he saw as basically exploring the struggle between mother-right and father-right; for him the doom of mother-right was sealed with the vindication of the matricide Orestes and the disgrace of the protective goddesses of mother-right, the Eumenides, or Furies. The American scholar Lewis Morgan (1871) confirmed the views of Bachofen: he used the system of consanguinity found among the Iroquois Indians of New York State as a basis for reconstructing the primitive forms of the human family and was led to the conclusion that ‘the matriarchy which rules there is of a universal type similar to that which, at a given moment in their evolution, has governed all peoples’. Finally, the Marxist philosopher Friedrich Engels (1884) made use of the arguments of Bachofen and Morgan, but he was at pains to show ‘that the traditional bourgeois monogamous family, far from being a permanent form, will be striken by the same decay as previous institutions’.

Before condemning the deductions of these scholars, Diop makes an excursion through what he considers some of the distinguishing traits of the two systems, patriarchy and matriarchy. In the former, there is a long tradition of the worship of fire which was continually fed to keep alive the memory of an ancestor in an individualistic culture; in the latter there is a tradition of burial in a tomb in the communal earth to which the progeny can make periodic visits in search of continued spiritual sustenance. In the final analysis, the argument for the universality of matriarchy is condemned as thin. Bachofen, according to Diop (1962: 27), failed to prove his evolutionary theory exhaustively for any community. Even if Morgan is right about the Iroquois, the explanation for the presence of matriarchy among them must be sought from elsewhere, and Diop (ibid.: 40) does just that: ‘It is known that the population of America came from elsewhere since no traces of early human skeletons have been found there.’ And he renders the argument of Engels irrelevant by declaring (ibid.: 19) that this ‘Marxist has made use, in a theoretical work, of material the soundness of which has not been proved’.

The suggestion about the early populations is, of course, that the American Indians came from the southern cradle (how Diop must have welcomed Thor Heyerdahl’s transatlantic venture in a raft!). This argument about derivation is one which Diop presses even further later on in the book. Wherever else outside of the southern cradle matriarchy is claimed to have existed, he systematically dismisses it either as (a) a corruption of the system or a dubious replication of it, or else (b) a result of an early infiltration of the society by negroid blood from the southern cradle; this is particularly the case with the southern Mediterranean region. Under the first category, Diop is especially hard on the phenomenon of amazonism. He thinks that this culture, ‘far from being a variation of matriarchy, appears as the logical consequence of the excesses of an extreme patriarchy’ (ibid.: 120). It was a peculiarly Euro-Asian culture which thrived on a hatred of, and thus revolt against, the rule of men. What was often thought to be amazonism among the Dahomeans of West Africa under King Ghezo (1818-1858) was simply a case of an ‘auxiliary women’s corps’ formed by a king fighting tooth and nail against the Yoruba and the overlordship of Benin. Africa never had need of amazonism because her culture, from ancient Egypt to pre-Islamic West Africa where matriarchy reigned supreme, was marked not by a confrontation but by a partnership between the sexes. The beauty of matriarchy is outlined in a passage that in sheer mellifluence compares favourably with Portia’s declaration on the quality of mercy:

‘Matriarchy is not an absolute and cynical triumph of woman over man; it is a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes, the better
to build a sedentary society where each and everyone could fully develop by following the activity best suited to his physiological nature. A matriarchal regime, far from being imposed on man by circumstances independent of his will, is accepted and defended by him. (Ibid.: 120; for a similar romantic flourish, see p. 129.)

The deduction that evidence of matriarchy outside the southern cradle must be traced to an early infiltration from the South, does not come as a huge surprise. If there is one idea that haunts Diop's learned survey of the cultural geography of the world, it is clearly that of the mobility of populations with their baggage of cultural traits; so how could the great humanism of the South have failed to reach the North? Thus in Cultural Unity we are told—with considerable scholarly support (pp. 128-131)—of traces of agricultural (i.e. sedentary) life in the Indo-European world of the 'sixth millennium, after the Ice Age and the warming of the climate'. The evidence is further supported by 'the discovery of the steatopygous statuettes (the Venus of Willendorf and others) whose area of dispersion extends from Western Europe as far as Lake Baikal in Asia and to Japan'. All this is traced to infiltration by negroid blood from the South at a period which has been called the Aurignacian Age. The result of this infiltration was particularly felt in Southern Europe, culminating in ideas like cults of fertility, of the Mother goddess, the origin of rock art, and the presence of the 'Grimaldi man'.

The evidence about the mobility of populations is a plausible enough one; it is also interesting that Diop has drawn attention to the cultural effects that such contacts generally have. But though we can establish with adequate certainty the fact of culture contact between two peoples, we cannot be nearly enough certain what and how much of the character of the one people was accepted or rejected by the other. Those who attempt to draw such fine lines have frequently been led to reach nationalistic conclusions and holier-than-thou attitudes. We may concede that it was in the interests of the generation of Diop, as champions of the cause of African independence, to argue that we were traditionally a peaceable race until we came into contact with the war-loving White race (Diop 1962: 163-165); our colonial rulers should therefore leave us to continue in our old peaceable ways. But if we accept the theory of the infiltration of Europe by negroid blood at such an early stage in the cultural history of mankind, can we honestly cling to the notion that violence is 'fundamentally contrary to our genius' and disclaim any share of the responsibility for the ravages that were later visited upon us? If we had such an early genetic contact with the White man, the plea of saintliness would seem a bit of a fallacy; needless to say, a later generation of African scholars has hardly seen the need for such a claim.

Diop has been arguing how much better Black culture is than White culture all the way back from Nations nègres; but he has reserved his most far-reaching comparative conclusions on the characters of the two cultures for his discussion of their traditional myths and literatures in Cultural Unity (pp. 165-180). Here as always ancient Egypt bears the banner of the Black race against the Indo-European White, represented by classical Greece. Relying almost entirely on Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy essay, Diop straightaway pronounces tragedy the genre best-suited to the Indo-European sensibility and instincts; though on page 163 he has it that 'the idea of justice seemed unknown to the (nomadic) Aryans', two pages later he defines their native sensibility as 'a feeling of guilt original with and at the same time typical of the northern cradle'. Whatever wisdom and progress humanity has gained, Nietzsche has argued, it has done so by guilt which must be atoned.

7. Senghor (1965: 100) also pronounces violence 'fundamentally contrary to our genius'. Compare also the image of the Zulu leader Chaka, in a play of the same title, in a land transformed from peace and friendliness to violence in the advent of the 'Pink Ears' with their baggage of guns (Senghor 1964: 71-72).
by generations to come with a pained sense of awareness: the guilt referred to is of course Prometheus’s theft of fire from the gods, with the attendant punishment.

Diop goes on to discuss Nietzsche’s analysis of the Dionysian basis of Greek tragedy; but he also borrows somewhat from Herodotus’s derivation (Histories II.42) of the Greek god Dionysus Bacchus from the Egyptian Osiris, and argues that what the Greeks have done is to corrupt the salutary role of the Egyptian god into a wild naturalistic rite which only reflects the warped sensibility of a nomadic culture. Here we are back to the dichotomy between the patriarchal North and the matriarchal South. The Osiris-Isis-Horus myth reflects the virtues of familial harmony and of fertility in which the woman enjoys due respect and pride of place. But Indo-European culture, as a culture which had systematically subjugated womanhood, had trouble coming to terms with that positive image of the myth. On the one hand, Dionysus ‘is the enemy of physical restraint, of all that which is anti-natural’, and thus is the patron of unlimited lust; on the other hand, ‘the conjugal union is sacred to him, as well as the fidelity of those who are married,’ and ‘he is on the side of the development of human beings and, in particular, of that of woman’.

We can see clearly here the seeds of an Angst-ridden ontology which shows itself in the myth as well as the art that grew from it. ‘The dismemberment of Dionysus-Zagreus is only a carbon concept of the passion of Prometheus and supports a sense of guilt which invites unending purgation and redress (e.g., in the liberation of the enslaved Aryan woman). For the negroid Egyptian, however, the dismemberment of Osiris was only the act of the evil one (Seth) and does not at all leave the race with a guilt to be accounted for; on the contrary it was beneficial in ensuring, through the rebirth of Osiris in Horus, continued fertility. Diop further cites evidence of a Dogon myth which supports the thesis that the roles and experiences of ancestral figures in Africa have always been salutary for the race, ‘instead of forming till the end of time the sentiment of some unknown, irrational, undeserved fault which must be expiated throughout one’s whole life’.

What conclusion does Diop draw from all this evidence? ‘The Egyptian mental universe—and the Meridional, in general—is quite optimistic, in a conscious and reasoned manner’, whereas that of the Aryan North is guilt-ridden, pessimistic and schizophrenic. ‘Tragedy’, he declares, ‘is therefore a specific creation of the Aryan consciousness’, whereas ‘the meridional cradle, confined to the African continent in particular’, is characterized by ‘an optimism which eliminates all notion of guilt or original sin in religious and metaphysical institutions. The types of literature most favoured are the novel, tales, fables, and comedy.’ (Diop 1962: 195.)

What then does Diop recommend; what future does he see for the Black man and the society in which he lives? It is hard not to be impressed by the scope of Diop’s vision and the vigour with which he expresses it. We may find some of his ideas a little romantic from this point in time; but there is surely much to be said for a man who was concerned not merely with the liberation of his race but indeed with the viability of this independence. Those who are tired of the maudlin, satin-draped ease of poetry and prose can don their overalls and go to work in Diop’s programmatic factory. In Nations nègres and Les fondements culturels he moves beyond a simple romantic recall of the past and recommends ways in which Africa can achieve self-sufficiency in concrete terms. It was useful to have traced the roots of the African cultural personality as a way of establishing, as Chinua Achebe once said, ‘where the rain began to beat us’. But now ‘the time has come’, says Diop (1960b: 9), ‘to draw together practical conclusions from so many years of the study of African problems, and to put them together into the clearest possible formulas that can be easily utilised’.

Briefly, he sees the major problems facing Africa as (a) linguistic, (b) political, and (c) technological, and proceeds to offer suggestions towards combating them and achieving a viable federation of African States. His concern with language goes as far back as in Nations nègres, where he expresses the belief that for Africa
to be able to cope with the future, her citizens must be able to develop their own language and thus cultivate 'a modern frame of mind (the sole guarantee of adjustment to a technological world) without having to pass through a foreign idiom'. The foreign tongue is an impediment to a grasp of the reality which the words embody, and Diop shows (using Wolof as an example) how the national languages could be developed to cope with the realities of contemporary culture. He provides a vast selection of passages in French—concepts in mathematics and the natural sciences, an extract on the principle of relativity, a passage from Corneille's *Horace*, etc.—and turns each of these into Wolof as a way of demonstrating that, as far as language goes, Africa is equal to the challenge of modern culture (Diop 1954: 237-334).

The frontiers of this programme are pushed even further in *Les fondements culturels*, which is carefully divided into three sections. Part One deals with linguistic and political issues, and here the use made of Wolof in *Nations nègres* is put in a much wider context. The idea is to move systematically from a local national to a continental level in linguistic autonomy. First a local language is raised to the level of a national language; such a language would be encouraged by the introduction of such 'artificial but effective' measures as the creation of literary prizes, translation of scientific works, publication of academic dictionaries in the various sciences, and so on (Diop 1960b: 14). From a list of such national languages Africa should be able to choose, 'by the appropriate method and at the appropriate time', a continental language of government and culture which will overshadow all the other languages by the same process that Russian has been superimposed on the various languages of the USSR.

The rest of Part One is a political manifesto which had been earlier broached by a survey of African history up to the disruption caused by colonialism. Here West Africa is given the same kind of spotlight that Wolof enjoyed in the linguistic programme. West Africa, the seat of the proud empires of the past, is seen as having a messianic role which 'consists, in large measure, in profiting from the facilities which history has given it for becoming without delay a powerful federal State capable of freeing the rest of the continent by force if need be, instead of being perpetually weakened by division and the mercenary rhetoric of time-serving demagogues' (ibid.: 40). Parts Two and Three and the Conclusion tackle the more technical and material sides of sovereignty. Diop makes a survey of Africa's energy resources (solar, thermonuclear, oil, etc.); presents an 'industrialization plan' in which he maps the continent out into appropriate regions (Congo Basin, Bight of Benin, Southern Africa, etc.) for the exploitation of these resources; then tackles problems of investment funds and scientific research.

This is sound revolutionary talk. But what kind of sovereignty does Diop want for a Black African nation? Can the fortunes of such a nation be seen in isolation from that of the rest of mankind, including the erstwhile political rulers of Africa? Critics of the French colonial policy of assimilation have charged that it endeavoured to make the Francophone African see himself under the benevolent umbrella of the larger metropolitan culture. We may consider the likes of Diop sufficiently liberated in mind and spirit to be able to conceive of an independent African destiny. But that destiny is hardly seen in isolation from general human one. It may well be that Cheikh Anta Diop, a devout Muslim, could not bear to set his race in an apocalyptic conflict with the rest of mankind. At any rate, it seemed inescapable that this scholar, who has plumbed classical lore so deeply for

8. It is interesting to note that Diop (1962: 165) scoffs at 'the stimulation of the creative will by artificial means, such as the awarding of prizes at the Olympiades'.

9. 'Time-serving demagogues' is as close as I can get to the contempt embodied in the French *patriotes de circonstance*. Obviously, Diop has in mind those politicians ostensibly treating with the colonial rulers for a viable sovereignty but actually using the opportunity for their own selfish ends.
his arguments, should end by expressing the sentiments of the classic Terentian humanist.

We see this clearly enough in the denouement of Cultural Unity. For Diop, the native sense of guilt of the Indo-European man leads him to be pessimistic about the future of the human race: the scientists conjecture that the universe will run out its course and either be frozen stiff or else end in conflagration. The African man, on the contrary, is born optimistic, and ‘the future African scientists’ are prone to a different conception of the universe from that which has tormented the Indo-European mind. It is difficult to resist citing in full that flourish of trumpets with which Diop (1962: 197) closes his well-modulated composition:

‘Perhaps they [i.e. African scientists] will consider that once earthly humanity accomplishes itself, instead of dying in boredom in the most complete idleness, man will realise that his task has only begun. He will discover then that it is absolutely within his possibilities, well before fifteen billion years of reflection, to tame the solar system and to reign there as far as the peripheral planet Pluto, in a practically eternal manner. Will man perhaps arrive at this by nourishing the sun with unstable satellites formed of sidereal matter, which finish by falling into its mass, or perhaps by restoring to the sun the energy radiated by it, by the acceleration of hydrogen nuclei from huge artificial electromagnetic fields? To refuse a thermodynamic “heath death”, to stabilize the solar system, to protect it from dangerous meteors, to solidify the gaseous planets, to reheat those on the periphery to make them habitable, to prevent the appearance and proliferation of biological monsters, to control the climates and the evolution of the planets, to discover and maintain all the practicable routes in the system, to communicate with the nearest stars in the galaxy, perhaps to create a superman with a longer life, such perhaps will be the enthusiastic preoccupation of the scientist of tomorrow. Life would thus in its own way have triumphed over death, man would have made an earthly paradise which would be almost eternal, and at the same time would have triumphed over all the pessimistic philosophical and metaphysical systems, all the apocalyptic visions of the destiny of the universe. A grandiose stage in the evolution of the human consciousness would have been passed over. Man would appear as a god of “Becoming” in the Hegelian sense of the word. The universe of tomorrow will in all probability be imbued with African optimism.'

III

A voice like Diop’s is seldom heard in Africa these days. Of course, he continues to devote his energies to a vindication of his convictions and visions with all the scientific resources at his disposal. At Dakar, he superintends a research laboratory at the Institut fondamental d’Afrique noire which, among other preoccupations, seems bent on confirming Diop’s geneticist haunches (Diop 1968; 1973; 1975—this later paper continues earlier efforts: 1954; 1960b). But the sun seems to have set on such endeavours. In Africa, the obsession with the anteced-

---

10. It would be illuminating to compare this passage with Senghor’s Hosties noires in which ‘the picture of Europe exhausted by war and drained of its spiritual energy is complemented by the vitality of Africa, agent of renewal and harbinger of a new universal order’. The European war is seen as a holocaust consuming the earth, an Apocalypse in which Africa takes on the aspect of a redeeming force, and the Black poet that of a prophet of a new hope for mankind’ (SENGHOR 1977: 18-19).
ence of the race or the quest for its exclusive character does not attain anything like
the sustained enormity that it has had under Diop; the closest to it is perhaps the
periodic cultural jamboree such as the Second World Black Festival of Arts and
Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in February 1977, which many Nigerians have
since condemned as a magnificent waste of scarce money. Otherwise, the focus
of concerns has changed in Africa.

There are basically two reasons for this shift, and these are epistemological and
socio-political. To begin with, a random glance at the pages of Diop’s survey of
African cultural history soon reveals that he is fundamentally an heir to the Euro-
pean ethnological rationalism of the turn of the century; what is happening to him
today is little more than what happened to the likes of J.G. Frazer. The catholic
strain in such cultural scholarship has simply given way to specialization in a
variety of little areas. To take one of these, African historical research into the
precolonial past confines itself humbly to the study of the oral traditions of inde-
dependent localities; and besides Theophile Obenga’s book (1973), there are not many
works that care to take us as far back as Egypt. We would therefore not be far
wrong to say of Diop what Ackerman (1975: 134) said not long ago of Frazer, that
his work ‘looms like a beached whale’.

The imperatives of politics and society have been even more influential in
urging upon later generations of African scholars and thinkers a different approach
from that adopted by the likes of Diop. Having won the independence for which
the generation of Diop fought so hard, the African States have not quite realized
the high expectations held for them. Some of the rulers of the newly-independent
nations have turned out to be just as intolerant and despotic as the White imperial-
ists; a few years after independence the machine of civilian government broke down
in some of the States, giving way to military dictatorships that (as in the case of
Nigeria) led the country to brutal civil war. The much vaunted humanism of the
Black race was therefore an illusion after all, and there is still no sign of that great
future scientist who would save Africa and the world by the force of his humanism,
let alone genius. No wonder then that a later generation of African thinkers,
disenchanted with the post-independence record of the race, were persuaded that
the African is no different from the Indo-European after all. The notable Nigerian
poet-dramatist-essayist Wole Soyinka is perhaps the best representative of that
disillusioned generation. In two essays written under the pressure of his severe
harassment by successive governments in Nigeria (both civilian and military) he
was to make this telling equation: one, the idea of African humanism was simply an
untested claim, for experience has shown that given the same chance, the Black
ruler would be just as inhuman to his subject as the racist despots of Southern Africa
(Soyinka 1968); and two, a review of his native Yoruba mythology against the same
essay by Nietzsche used by Diop (The Birth of Tragedy) leads him to a different
conclusion, that the psychology of the Black race is born of the same kind of
Angst and turmoil that underlies Indo-European culture, and that tragedy is just
a fitting literary genre (Soyinka 1969).

That was in the sixties, and the battle continues. The preoccupation of the
seventies was the trouble in Southern Africa, and this too has had its effect on the
subsequent apprehension by Africans of their culture and society. Again Soyinka
has been prominent in the articulation of this apprehension. In a book made up
mostly of lectures he gave as a Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University, he was to
make a sustained effort to demonstrate that Black African culture is fundamentally
distinct from the White Indo-European; the one is characterized by a certain
syncretic fusion of the natural and the supernatural, of the past, present and future
orders of reality, the other by a certain disengagement between one order of reality
and another—a distinction which is easily revealed by a comparison of their respect-
ive literatures (Soyinka 1976).

The search for a sustaining principle continues with almost as much vigour as
the battle against the White man in the South. Soyinka has probed the myth against Diop's history, but many in the younger generation of present-day African elite are not so sure that either of these provides the right answer. They are concerned with the dynamics of contemporary African society and see the troubles of the continent as being basically rooted in the perennial conflict between the classes—the oppressors and the oppressed. The names most frequently heard in African intellectual circles today are Karl Marx and Franz Fanon, though quite often this is due not so much to the plausibility of the logic as to the stridency of the rhetoric. Soyinka and Diop are often dismissed as misty-eyed romantics, and the programme of defining the character of African man—insofar as this is a philosophical enterprise beyond the pragmatic ambit of class conflict—has gone on a bit of a holiday.

Perhaps this is as it should be. What, in the final analysis, is the use of grandiloquent theories when some of the race is still in bondage and millions languish in hunger and oppression? Even the socialist zeal of the moment may turn out to be a passing fad under the impetus of the sheer struggle for survival. The failure of the appeal should be held against nobody. And it should be said at least to the credit of the generation of Diop that they have woken their successors to an awareness of the need for some sustaining principles. Whatever the shortcomings of their approach they have, like Haley's Grandma, made worthy nuisances of themselves and forced us to ponder who we are and where we come from so as to know how to get where we are going.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACKERMAN, R.

AWOONOR, K.

DAVIDSON, B.

DIOP, C. A.
1968 *Le laboratoire de radiocarbone de l'IFAN* (Dakar: Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire), 110 p. (γ Catalogues et documents γ 21).
Goody, J.
Goody, J., ed.

Herodotus

Herskovits, M. J. & F. S.

Kesteloot, L.
1963 Les écrivains noirs de langue française (Bruxelles: Université libre de Bruxelles, Institut de sociologie), 340 p.

Lévi-Strauss, C.

Lucas, O.
1948 The Religion of the Yorubas (Lagos: CMS Bookshop), 420 p.

Nilsson, M. P.

Obenga, T.

Oduvoye, M.

Okigbo, C.

Senghor, L. S.

Soyinka, W.

Tempels, P.