

The Story of Africa: Nile Valley

BBC World Service

The Peoples of the Nile Valley

For many years now there has been a debate about whether the ancient peoples of the Nile Valley were 'black' or 'white'. Much Western scholarship, particularly in the early twentieth century, refused to accept that black peoples could have built such a great civilisation.*

In 1930 for example, Charles Seligman (1873-1940), an English ethnologist who wrote a book titled 'The Races of Africa' said that the ancient civilisation of Egypt was created by a race he called 'Hamites', who he regarded as coming from Asia.

Some African historians, including the Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nairobi, Simiyu Wandibba, believe that European writers developed such theories to discredit Africa and make it easier for the continent to be colonised.

"In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were theories that Africa was inhabited much later than Asia and that the people occupying Africa today were the result of waves of migration from western Asia, the Middle East and the Far East.

I want to say that this is not true. But if you want to rule a people, you don't want to give them credit." Professor Simiyu Wandibba, University of Nairobi.

Senegalese Historian Cheikh Anta Diop

One of the main academic proponents of the view that the ancient Egyptian civilisation was founded by black Africans was the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop.

"Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilisation. The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in the air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt. The African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective nor unruffled. He is ignorant, cowardly and neurotic. The ancient Egyptians were Negroes. The moral fruit of their civilisation is to be counted among the assets of the Black world."

Cheikh Anta Diop, taken from *The African Origin of Civilisation*.



Cheikh Anta Diop

In his two major works *Nations Negres et Culture* and *Anteriorite des Civilizations Negres* he profoundly influenced thinking about Africa around the world.

Cheikh Anta Diop argues that:

- (a) As humankind began in East Africa it was likely that people were black skinned.
- (b) People populated other continents by moving either through the Sahara or the Nile Valley.
- (c) In the period before the start of the great Egyptian dynasties the whole of the Nile river basin was taken over by these negroid peoples.

To support his theory, Diop cited the writings of several Greek and Latin writers who had described the ancient Egyptians.

The Greek historian Herodotus, for example, described the Colchians of the Black Sea shores as "Egyptians by race" and pointed out they had "black skins and kinky hair."

Apollodorus, the Greek philosopher, described Egypt as "the country of the black-footed ones" and the Latin historian Ammianus Marcellinus said "the men of Egypt are mostly brown or black with a skinny desiccated look."

Diop also argued that the Egyptians themselves described their race as black and that there were close affinities between the ancient Egyptian tongue and the languages of Africa.

UNESCO Conference, 1974

The issue of the peopling of Egypt came to a head in 1974 when UNESCO hosted a conference in Cairo aimed at discussing the latest research.

The symposium provoked ferocious debate and many of Diop's theories were strongly challenged, however, the meeting concluded with the following statement, "the overall results...will be very differently assessed by the various participants."

The closing statement also pointed out that not all participants had prepared for the conference as painstakingly as Professor Diop or his academic ally Theophile Obenga of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The argument still remains largely unresolved to the extent that UNESCO's *General History of Africa* is somewhat cautious in its final analysis of the issue.

"It is more than probable that the African strain, black or light, is preponderant in the Ancient Egyptian, but in the present state of our knowledge it is impossible to say more."

The issue was given more impetus with the publication in 1987 of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* in which he argued that Classical civilisation had its roots deep in Afroasiatic cultures which had been systematically suppressed for mainly racist reasons.

Martin Bernal, 'Black Athena' Scholar, Dies at 76

By Paul Vitello
New York Times
June 22, 2013

Martin Bernal, whose three-volume work "Black Athena" ignited an academic debate by arguing that the African and Semitic lineage of Western civilization had been scrubbed from the record of ancient Greece by 18th- and 19th-century historians steeped in the racism of their times, died on June 9 in Cambridge, England. He was 76.

The cause was complications of myelofibrosis, a bone marrow disorder, said his wife, Leslie Miller-Bernal.

"Black Athena" opened a new front in the warfare over cultural diversity already raging on American campuses in the 1980s and '90s. The first volume, published in 1987 — the same year as "The Closing of the American Mind," Allan Bloom's attack on efforts to diversify the academic canon — made Mr. Bernal a hero among Afrocentrists, a pariah among conservative scholars and the star witness at dozens of sometimes raucous academic panel discussions about how to teach the foundational ideas of Western culture.

Mr. Bernal, a British-born and Cambridge-educated polymath who taught Chinese political history at Cornell from 1972 until 2001, spent a fair amount of time on those panels explaining what his work did not mean to imply. He did not claim that Greek culture had its prime origins in Africa, as some news media reports described his thesis. He said only that the debt Greek culture owed to Africa and the Middle East had been lost to history.

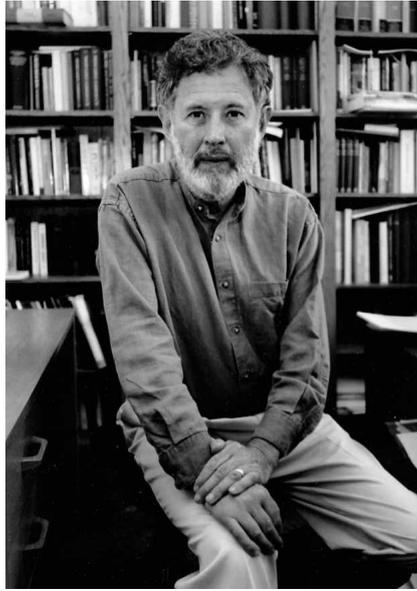
His thesis was this: For centuries, European historians of classical Greece had hewed closely to the origin story suggested by Plato, Herodotus and Aeschylus, whose writings acknowledged the Greek debt to Egyptian and Semitic (or Phoenician) forebears.

But in the 19th century, he asserted, with the rise of new strains of racism and anti-Semitism along with nationalism and colonialism in Europe, historians expunged Egyptians and Phoenicians from the story. The precursors of Greek, and thus European, culture were seen instead as white Indo-European invaders from the north.

In the first volume of "Black Athena," which carried the forbidding double subtitle "The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece — 1785-1985," Mr. Bernal described his trek through the fields of classical Greek literature, mythology, archaeology, linguistics, sociology, the history of ideas and ancient Hebrew texts to formulate his theory of history gone awry (though he did not claim expertise in all these subjects).

The scholarly purpose of his work, he wrote in the introduction, was "to open up new areas of research to women and men with far better qualifications than I have," adding, "The political purpose of 'Black Athena,' is, of course, to lessen European cultural arrogance."

He published "Black Athena 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence" in 1991, and followed it in 2006 with "Black Athena 3: The Linguistic Evidence."



Another book, “Black Athena Writes Back,” published in 2001, was a response to his critics, who were alarmed enough by Mr. Bernal’s work to publish a collection of rebuttals in 1996, “Black Athena Revisited.”

One critic derided Mr. Bernal’s thesis as evidence of “a whirling confusion of half-digested reading.” Some were more conciliatory. J. Ray, a British Egyptologist, wrote, “It may not be possible to agree with Mr. Bernal, but one is the poorer for not having spent time in his company.”

Stanley Burstein, a professor emeritus of ancient Greek history at California State University, Los Angeles, said Mr. Bernal’s historiography — his history of history-writing on ancient Greece — was flawed but valuable. “Nobody had to be told that Greece was deeply influenced by Egypt and the Phoenicians, or that 19th-century history included a lot of racial prejudice,” he said in a phone interview Tuesday. “But then, nobody had put it all together that way before.”

The specific evidence cited in his books was often doubtful, Professor Burstein added, but “he succeeded in putting the question of the origins of Greek civilization back on the table.”

Martin Gardiner Bernal was born on March 10, 1937, in London to John Desmond Bernal, a prominent British scientist and radical political activist, and Margaret Gardiner, a writer. His parents never married, a fact their son asserted with some pride in interviews.

“My father was a communist and I was illegitimate,” he said in 1996. “I was always expected to be radical because my father was.”

His grandfather Alan Gardiner was a distinguished Egyptologist.

Mr. Bernal graduated from King’s College, Cambridge, in 1957, earned a diploma of Chinese language from Peking University in 1960 and did graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1963 and Harvard in 1964. He received his Ph.D. in Oriental studies from Cambridge in 1966 and remained there as a fellow until he was recruited by Cornell.

His other books, which also focused on the theme of intercultural borrowing, were “Chinese Socialism Before 1907” (1976) and “Cadmean Letters: The Westward Diffusion of the Semitic Alphabet Before 1400 B.C.” (1990).

Besides his wife, he is survived by his sons, William, Paul and Patrick; a daughter, Sophie; a stepson, Adam; a half-sister, Jane Bernal; and nine grandchildren.

Mr. Bernal was asked in 1993 if his thesis in “Black Athena” was “anti-European.” He replied: “My enemy is not Europe, it’s purity — the idea that purity ever exists, or that if it does exist, that it is somehow more culturally creative than mixture. I believe that the civilization of Greece is so attractive precisely because of those mixtures.”

**With each passing decade as quality research supported by scientific evidence becomes available, the so-called ‘Africanists’ who hold sway to Eurocentric ideas of the inferiority of African peoples, their heritage and contributions to civilization, will increasingly lose ground but not without bitter fighting because ‘whiteness’, i.e., skin color, though by far the weakest of all arguments, and seemingly not the last, remains as a powerful tool put forth to justify the false discourse of racial superiority, for which humanity will face continuous dire circumstances of an ever-heightening and unfathomable magnitude.*