Cleopatra, Egyptology, and Afrocentrism: A Bitter Tripartite

Radwa Saad

Abstract

This essay explores the tensions surrounding Afrocentrism in Egypt, exemplified by recent controversies over depictions of Cleopatra in cinematic productions. It examines the clash between Egyptian nationalist narratives and Afrocentric interpretations of ancient Egypt's Black heritage and advocates for a more nuanced understanding of race when navigating complex historical legacies.

Keywords: Afrocentrism; Cleopatra; ancient Egypt; historical revisionism; Arab-African relations; identity politics

In Egypt's ongoing feud with the Afrocentrism movement, the government has banned Dutch archaeologists from carrying out excavations in the country over their involvement in an exhibition that traced the influence of ancient Egypt on Black musicians such as Beyonce and Rihanna (BBC News 2023). Many following the feud view this as a response to the massive public backlash provoked over the recent launch of *Queen Cleopatra* – a Netflix documentary series produced by Jada Pinkett Smith. The documentary cast Cleopatra as a Black African Queen in what the director Tina Gharvi (2023) described as a deliberate political act.

The intimate entanglements between gender, race, and nationalism are palpable to feminists following these debates. At the heart of most contemporary nationalist mythologies is a desired proximity to Whiteness. Efforts to establish ethnic homogeneity, heteronormativity, and some degree of historical revisionism and civilisational gatekeeping sustain these narratives. After all, nation-states are European constructs. To quote Jemima Pierre (2013, xiv), "How could any

postcolonial society not be structured by its legacy of race and racialization—especially when colonialism was, in the most ideological, political, and practical way, racialized rule?"

In recent decades, nationalist mythologies are being deconstructed by previously marginalised groups empowered through the forces of globalisation. *Queen Cleopatra* was not only an attempt to reframe the narrative around a powerful ruler objectified throughout history, but also an invitation for Egyptians to (re)imagine themselves as Black – one that was not well received. As remarked by Tina Gharvi (2023), "The HBO series 'Rome' portrayed one of the most intelligent, sophisticated and powerful women in the world as a sleazy, dissipated drug addict, yet Egypt didn't seem to mind. Where was the outrage then? But portraying her as Black? Well [that's a different story]".

It is difficult to overlook the blatant anti-Blackness emanating from some of these public discussions. Take, for example, the counter-documentary on Cleopatra, featuring Egypt's most prominent archaeologist Zahi Hawass released on the same day as the Netflix docu-series. The production focused on proving that the Ptolemaic dynasty's last ruler was primarily of Greco-Macedonian descent while debunking any correlation between Egypt and Blackness. In fact, Hawass argued, "the enemies [of Ancient Egypt] were always Asiatic, Africans, and Libyans", with Africans being synonymous with Blacks in his interpretation (Woodside 2023 23:49 – 27:10). He even goes as far as to dismiss the legacies of the Kushite Dynasty that ruled Egypt for nearly a century.

These Black Pharaohs, according to Hawass, "had nothing to do with its [Egypt's] great accomplishments such as the construction of temples and the pyramids." (Woodside 2023, 23:49:00). The biggest irony lies in Hawass's claim that Cleopatra was not Egyptian. Why divert energy and resources towards rectifying alleged historical fallacies over a figure he claims is not Egyptian to begin with? There are numerous examples of Egyptian queens with a less contested ethnic background whose stories have received little attention. The fact that both Hawass and Jada Pinkett Smith decided to produce yet another rendition of a figure so fetishised throughout history is an example of how Western standpoints and epistemologies continue to govern the issues worthy of our attention.

However, it would be erroneous to dismiss all Egyptian reactions as mere expressions of racism or internalised White supremacy. The virtual exclusion of any Egyptian commentators in the Netflix casting is another example of how they are systemically marginalised from debates regarding their cultural heritage. Egyptians have resisted the racialisation, misrepresentation, erasure, and/or appropriation of their history by different actors continuously for decades. In the past, these grievances were channelled towards the Eurocentrism advocated by Westerners, but now they are increasingly directed towards the Afrocentrism promoted mainly by African Americans – a staunchly disappointing contrast to the transnational Afro-Arab solidarities characterising the era of decolonisation.

What many Pan-Africanist Egyptians like me are opposing is not the association of ancient Egypt with Blackness, but the Afrocentrist movement's insistence that ancient Egypt was *originally* and *exclusively* a Black civilisation. This position is a form of resistance to the Western understandings of race and identity and the related notions of Whiteness and Blackness that are consistently imposed on an ancient world and on a contemporary society that views these issues differently. Most Egyptians identify as neither White nor Black but as the product of a melting pot of influences. Pharaonic history is just as central to the Egyptian nationalist imaginary as Coptic, Arab, Muslim, African and Mediterranean influences. However, Egyptians consistently find themselves enmeshed between racial boundaries imposed by Eurocentrists and Afrocentrists alike. Egyptology has been permeated with hegemonic Western understandings of race that minimise Egyptians' agency in narratives over their cultural heritage and self-understanding.

To portray ancient Egypt as "White" or "Black" is to project contemporary racial sensibilities onto a past where such differences were yet to acquire their saliency. After all, race is a modern construct that only dates back to the Enlightenment era of the 17th century. The ancients certainly had their means of categorising human differences, but they did not make distinctions on the basis of race; nor were differences in complexion imbued with the same social meaning attributed to them now (Appiah 1992). Even in the modern world, race cannot be understood as a monolith. While anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon, understandings of race vary drastically across contexts. Although darker-skinned Afro-Arab minorities across North Africa are continuously subject to racism,

they do not necessarily embody a political Black consciousness (Ltifi 2021), partially because racism was not institutionalised in African states in the same way it has been in the US. Yet Western understandings of race are continuously exported to and imposed on the continent, a tragedy whose manifestations are easily observable in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In their effort to brand ancient Egypt as a Black civilisation, the Afrocentrism movement of the 1970s took a clear anti-Arab and anti-Islamic turn. The prominent Afrocentrist scholar Molefi Asante (1985), for instance, argued that "The Arabs, with their jihads, or holy wars, were thorough in their destruction of much of the ancient [Egyptian] culture" and that Egyptian knowledge was preserved through priests forcefully displaced further south down the continent (p.5). According to this plot line, contemporary Egyptians have diverse shades of complexion because they are the descendants of White and Arab conquerors who are keen on destroying Pharaonic history and displacing its inhabitants.

Such arguments continue to be perpetuated despite ample scholarly work that refutes the existence of a racially homogeneous North Africa. Even Cheikh Anta Diop (1987, 102), whose work is considered foundational to Afrocentricity, described allegations of Arab armies invading Black Africa as divisive "figments of the imagination". It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Egyptians are triggered by narratives that not only rob them of claims to their Pharaonic lineage but also serve to cast them as enemies of a civilisation so intimately tied to their national identity and self-understanding. As one Cairo-based Egyptologist wrote to express her discomfort with Afrocentrist influence:

> I have heard outright Egyptologists and museum curators in the West, in personal correspondences, panel discussions, conferences and on social media shut down discussion of the repatriation of artefacts using these bogus claims about the "racial differences" between ancient and modern Egyptians or because Egyptians are Arab invaders … Some of this is good old Eurocentrism but a very significant portion of it is Afrocentrism (as cited by Hisham Aidi 2022).

Aside from issues of (mis)representation, there is another reason why Egyptians are threatened by the Afrocentrist movement's growing influence: its activity in Nubian territories is perceived as a potential source of sectarianism. African Americans have taken an immense interest in Nubian culture over the years, in

part driven by the belief that the darker complexion of Nubians makes them the "true descendants" of Pharaonic Egypt. As inspiration is drawn from Egyptology to uplift African Americans through historical revisionism, Nubian populations and territories have become iconic centrepieces in the representation of these new ideas. For example, Kemetic yoga – a brand of yoga purported to have originated in Pharaonic texts and practices - was developed by African Americans in the 1970s. As the practice has gained popularity, Nubian territories have become a hub for Kemetic yoga retreats. The increased presence of African Americans coming to introduce Nubians - many of whom have never heard of yoga - to the "lost" elements of their history and culture bears semblance to an all too familiar civilising mission exercised by members of the Black diaspora in the past.

Nubians occupy a sensitive yet crucial position in the Egyptian national imagination. On the one hand, the "authenticity" of the Nubian culture is widely celebrated and cast as an example of the modern state's claim to its ancient heritage, even if these depictions are imbued with racialised and essentialist undertones (Smith 2006). On the other hand, the massive displacement of Nubian populations in the 1960s to make way for Nasser's construction of the High Dam evokes grievances that can easily be rekindled through external meddling. Activists and authorities fear that the dissemination of "counterfeit" history will polarise Nubian youth and tear the country's national fabric. In 2022 for example, the hashtag #stopafrocentricconference began trending over the "One Africa: Returning to the Source" conference that was scheduled to take place at Aswan University. Egyptian activists argued that Aswan was deliberately chosen by the Afrocentrism movement to exploit the country's ethno-cultural differences and alienate Nubian youth from Egyptian society (Aidi 2022).

The solution, however, is not to cancel conferences and excavations but to create space for respectful dialogue while understanding the origins of the Afrocentrist movement. At its core, Afrocentrism is an epistemological project – one that challenged the separation of the Black diaspora from Africa that was used to sustain the notion of a slave as a "genealogical isolate." (Patterson 1982, 5). In locating the origins of modernity in ancient Egypt, Afrocentrists disrupted the conventional thread of history itself (Balakrishnan 2020). In this sense, Pan-Africanist Egyptians and Afrocentrists have more in common than conventionally portrayed. Both reject the notion of an "Africa without a past"

by offering a critique of modernity that emphasises the contributions of the Global South to world history and to the birth of Western civilisation. However, Afrocentrists do so by (re)associating Blackness with Africa but at the expense of disassociating Arabness - as well as Amazigh-ness and other North African identities - from Africa and indigeneity.

In theorising intersectionality, Patricia Collins (1990) locates lived experiences of oppression within the social contexts that produce them. Black Feminist thought is bounded by the particular trajectory of American political history. However, it also provides conceptual tools for examining the particularistic nature of different women's struggles, without losing sight of the universal mechanisms that bind them. The dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric masculinist thought stipulated that "one must be either Black or White" so that privilege becomes defined in relation to its other. Persons of ambiguous racial and ethnic identity are systemically "othered" while "constantly [battling] with questions such as 'What are you, anyway?'" (Collins 1990, 221-238). This hierarchy of domination is at the heart of both African American and Arab-Muslim women's humiliation and debasement in the West. Both groups continue to occupy a marginal position in a global economy that continues to shape their material realities, and both are concerned with a radical reimagining and restructuring of power relations. These commonalities ought to be emphasised in discussions.

Cairo was once a hub for liberation movements across the African continent and members of the Black diaspora. It hosted a number of African American intellectuals, including Malcolm X, Shirly Graham, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Maya Angelou, who saw their fates as intimately tied to the Nasserist revolution and the Third-World movement. Mutual respect, dialogue, and recognition of the economic systems of oppression at the heart of their interwoven plights made these transnational alliances possible. Now more than ever, it is important to (re)centre a material analysis of power and lean into the feminist tradition of alliance-building.

One can sympathise with African Americans regarding their plight while challenging their reading of race relations in other sociopolitical contexts. One can appreciate Pharaonic history while condemning the government's populist efforts to exploit the past in the face of a severe legitimacy crisis. One can resist the racialisation of Egypt's ancient history without being blind to how race

operates and dictates our self-understanding in the present. Africa has been and always will remain an eclectic mosaic of colours, cultures, and civilisations that ought to be celebrated equally and understood on their own terms. If Cleopatra was Egyptian merely because she assimilated into Egyptian culture despite her contested heritage, then African*ness* is more encompassing than many are willing to concede.

Note

1 Only one commentator in the Netflix Documentary Queen Cleopatra was a British national with Egyptian roots. He accused the directing crew of concealing information from commentators and politicising the casting. "What right does she [the director] have to tell Egyptians how to view themselves?", he wrote in a rebuttal. See Issa, Islam (2023) 'Cleopatra was Egyptian – Whether Black of Brown Matters Less', Aljazeera retrieved from: https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/5/1/cleopatra-was-egyptian-whether-black-or-brown-matters#:~:text=Even%20Cleopatra's%20foremost%20European%20biographer,olive%20or%20light%20brown%20-complexion%E2%80%9D.

2 This is evident in debates regarding the repatriation of stolen artefacts, in the erasure of ancient Egyptian influences on ancient Greece and Rome, and by extension Western civilisation, in reactions to Hollywood's decision to cast an Israeli actor Gal Gadot as Cleopatra, and in refutations to claims that Jewish populations built the pyramid, to name a few examples.

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