

# **Towards an African historical thought: Cheikh Anta Diop's contribution**

***Bryson Gwiyani-Nkhoma***

## **Introduction**

The development of an African historical thought has a relatively short history. It began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as scholars, overwhelmed by the distortions of the colonialist interpretation of the African past, sought ways of revising the history of Africa. Since then, historical and philosophical writers from both Africa and the African diaspora, started to develop theories and laws governing their past. Of these thinkers, Cheikh Anta Diop has been rated one of the most notable. He has gone down in history as a 'prominent Afro-centric thinker', 'the Pharaoh of African philosophy of his time', 'the writer who had exerted the greatest influence on Negro thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century'. Not only is one university in Senegal named after him, but also that his death in 1987 was, and still is, commemorated with seminars and public lectures by his disciples (Diop1974; Mauny 1996). Scholars from all over the world gave him credit for his uncommon determination to assert African history to the level that equals with that of Western countries:

It is this renowned polymath<sup>2</sup> and his idea of African history that this paper examines. The paper focuses on the contributions Diop made towards an African historical thought. After exploring the kind of ideas, which Cheikh Anta Diop contributed towards this idea, the paper will highlight the schools of thoughts that emerged from these ideas, and thereafter, in a way of a critique, an attempt will be made to review the scholarly viability of his work. The paper observes that Diop's main contribution falls within the confines of a nationalist idea of African historical thought. This idea of history, according to him, was to improve the personality of the Blacks, which the colonialist writers distorted, by highlighting the contributions black people made towards world civilizations.

Such an idea, however, the paper argues, resulted in the production of an African past that represented the heroes of nationalism at the expense of the local masses. Furthermore, Diop's dismissive attitude towards the criticisms his work provoked among European scholars, and his selectiveness of sources, make his ideas rather emotional and less objective. This is made worse by the absence of counter-proposals to Diop's ideas. The majority of those who reviewed his work were those from the afro-centric school which is biased on a nationalist perspective of African history. Since Diop belongs to this school, very few works opposing his ideas exist.

The paper has been undertaken under two major constraints. The first one has to do with inadequate interpretive literature on the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop. Despite the attention his work attracted, not many scholars have endeavored to review the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop. Related to this is the problem of language. It should be mentioned here that most of the books Diop wrote were in French. My ignorance of French meant that I had to depend only on those books that have been translated into English. Consequently, the paper is short on some of Diop's original ideas those in works not yet translated into English. The strength of the paper, however, lies in the fact that it used those books upon which Cheikh Anta Diop scholarship is established.

## **Biographical background**

Cheikh Anta Diop was born on December 29, 1923 at Diourbal in Senegal. Until his death in 1987, he groomed himself as a historian, physicist, archaeologist, philosopher, nationalist and linguist. This multifaceted academic specialization was subsequent to his wide training at Koranic schools in Senegal and the University of Paris in France where he obtained his undergraduate and graduate qualifications respectively. His interest in African history was inspired by the ubiquitous nationalist movements of his time. A study of African history was to acquaint him with Africa's social, political and economic heritage as well as to improve his understanding of the roots of colonial exploitation of Africa. Such knowledge was vital for him to fiercely participate in the liberation of Africans from colonialism. This he managed, first by joining the Democratic African Rally (RDA) student movement in which he served as secretary general between 1950 and 1953, and thereafter founding a Senegalese National Party in 1964, and a National Democratic Party in 1974. These efforts, however, failed to succeed due to the depth of colonial resistance and lack of finances, which he had to face.

His academic fame started as early as 1940, when he translated part of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity into a Senegalese language, *wolof*. Not only did this improve the accessibility of the theory to the Senegalese, but also proved to the world the capacity of African languages to convey the latest scientific theories (Ntaba 1994). What is more, Cheikh Anta Diop founded and directed a radiocarbon laboratory at the Institute Fundamental de l' Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Dakar where he worked since 1961. Together with Obenga, at the 1974 UNESCO conference, he proved to the participants that the Ancient Egyptian language is more related to African languages than to European languages. But his greatest scholarly achievement was the publication of several books through which his ideas and contributions to an African philosophy of history were collected and propagated.<sup>3</sup> In these books, he advanced the idea that "The ancient Pharaonic Egyptian civilization was undoubtedly a Negro civilization," and that this civilization was the springboard of world civilizations.

## **Cheikh Anta Diop: his idea of African history**

An African philosophy of history entails a system of theories and ideas through which Africans have come to view their past. It encompasses Africans' own traditional consciousness on how their societies have evolved in time and space, and how this should be interpreted (Ruch 1973). It forms part of African political discourse which seeks to 'identify and remove all the beliefs, ideas and thoughts that impede the manifestation of the African spirit' by underlining what is essentially African in relation to various contexts (Hensbroke 1999). Against this philosophy, Cheikh Anta Diop advocated a nationalist view of African history. Nationalist history, it should be noted, is Afro-centric, in that it sets out to glorify African initiatives in history (see Denoon and Kuper 1970). Appearing in early post-colonial period, it was aimed at decolonizing the history of Africa from the Euro-centric paradigm, which came to dominate African history since the arrival of the colonialists. Colonialist historians maintained that prior to the advent of the Europeans in Africa, Africa was without history. Whatever history might have been made was actually centred on the European presence and activities in Africa. Thus, colonialist historians concentrated on the contributions of the Europeans to the development of African societies (Phiri 1992/93).

Against this background, nationalist history sets out to challenge the colonialist image of Africa's past by reconstructing the accomplishments of the Africans in

their own right and the kind of contributions they have made to world civilization. Effort is made to interpret the past in a way that would be relevant to the social, economic and political struggles and aspirations of Black people. The central argument is that Africans were not merely observers but rather makers of their own history. They positively participated in and contributed to the evolution of world civilization. Quoting Sanders, Neale argued that: "Africa was not a *tabula rasa*, but that it had a past, a history which could be reconstructed; that it was a continent which knew empire builders at a time when large areas of Europe stagnated in the Dark Ages; that it knew art and commerce" (Neal 1985:115). Important to note also is the fact that nationalist history was meant to promote the ideological interests of the nationalist fighters. "... An African philosophy of history which should serve as a liberation from the colonial experience must be a total concern of all historians studying in Africa" (Denoon and Kuper 1970:347). Thus, nationalist historical thought tended to be defensive and less holistic, and concentrated on themes that highlighted the historical significance of the Africans. These included topics like the pre-colonial kingdoms, African slavery, African resistance to colonialism, nationalist struggles, among others (Denoon and Kuper 1970, Marks 1985, Kurtin 1974).

It is within this nationalist historical framework that Diop's work should be understood. Motivated by the nationalist spirit of his time, he set out to reconstruct a history that would largely work towards the glorification of the African past. Through writing and study of African history as well as public lectures, he called African scholars to become less dependent on western interpretations of African history. He contended that studies by western scholars were biased in favour of the Europeans at the expense of the contributions of the Africans. In other words, African history was largely Euro-centric in that it was the contributions of the Europeans that received much attention. It remained, therefore, an obligation to African scholars to reconstruct a corrective history that would enable the Africans to reassert themselves politically, culturally, economically and morally. The Africans needed to make their own discovery of the past if colonial distortions and misrepresentation were to be corrected. "...how absolutely necessary it is for us to dig out our own past, a task that no one people can do for another, because of passions, national pride, and racial prejudices resulting from an education distorted from the ground up"(Diop 1974:195).

As a way of correcting the colonialist intellectual 'defilement' of African history, Cheikh Anta Diop, in the first place, advocated the use of an independent methodology to be employed by those seeking an African perspective on the past. Since the existing sources were contemptuous and carried with them colonial racial prejudices and distortions of the African image, he found the use of original sources such as oral traditions, archaeological artifacts, and the writings of such classical writers as Herodotus, Aristotle, Livy, Apollodorus, Aeschylus, Achilles Tartius, Strabo, Diodorus, Dogenes, Laetius, and Ammianus Marcellinus, of absolute necessity. For one, classical scholars operated a long while before the colonial encounter with the Africans. As such, Diop felt that their work was sanctimonious of colonial racial prejudices, and thus, presented a relatively balanced image of the African past (Diop 1981). And these are the sources on which he solely depended in his writing of the history of Black Africa.

Furthermore, he advocated the use of concepts and techniques of Egyptology, the science used in studying the life and history of ancient Egypt. He was of the view that African civilizations, if not world civilization, derived their ideas from the ancient Egyptians. An understanding of Egyptian civilization was, therefore, a prerequisite to the study of Africa per se (Diop 1981). Related to this is the adoption of the diffusionist theory which anthropologists use in trying to determine the development of cultures and how these cultures influence one another. According to Diop, Egypt was the springboard of African cultures. The diffusionist theory was deemed instrumental to the understanding of the evolution of the ancient Egyptian culture, and how it spread to the other parts of Africa and the world. As regards to the spread of the Egyptian culture, Diop cited migration, trade, foreign invasion and intermarriages as critical factors (Asante 1990, Asante and Asante 1990, Diop 1978).

Finally, he called for a patriotic spirit as the main drive for historical scholarship. He called historians to demonstrate an unquenchable determination and courage in the face of scholarly opposition and as much as possible avoid 'wages' to become the propelling force for the study of the African past. Diop observes:

Intellectuals have to be able to present perspectives for Africa, solutions to their problems on national scale while allowing no other possible way out. The intellectual must gain respect at the same time through their efficiency, their task for unselfish work on behalf of the people, and their clarity. They must be sincere, and to do that they must fully feel themselves animated by an ideal that will stand come what may. They must set themselves apart from the minds which shine only with deceptive light, as artificial as it is sterile, the flasky pseudo-intelligence that so readily prove to be insignificant (Diop 1982:27-28)

After describing the kind of methodology by means of which the history of Africa should be constructed, Cheikh Anta Diop went on to demonstrate the epistemology after which African history should take. To a large extent, he advocated a history that confines itself within the parameter of the glorification of the Blacks. His major contention was that the black people were not passive observers, as the colonialist historians made us to believe; but rather active makers of their past. He was of the view that pre-colonial Africa had a civilization that did not only precede western civilization, but also surpassed, if not influenced it.

Using evidence drawn from anthropological, archaeological, linguistic, classical, ethnographic, historical, and cultural studies, Cheikh Anta Diop, to begin with, discovered that ancient Egyptian civilization was of Negro origin. According to this discovery, the ancient Egyptians originated from the land of the great lakes in Ethiopia or Nubia, which was also the home of the earliest modern man, homo sapiens. The remains of homo sapiens, according to the archaeological findings of Dr Leakey and Miss Fawcet, reflected elements of the Black race such as long legs, long forearms, kinky hair, and reddish brown skin, among others (Diop 1974). This discovery meant that the Blacks were the first to become civilized, and that the West had to copy its idea of civilization after them. This, according to him, was also asserted by Herodotus whom he quoted to have pointed out that: “ The Egyptians were black and that Greece borrowed from Egypt all the elements of her civilization, even the cult of the gods, and that Egypt was the cradle of civilizations” (Diop 1974:4). Thus, Egyptian civilization was not only of Black origin but also the earliest, and undoubtedly the springboard of other civilizations the world over. Diop noted that through trade interactions along the Mediterranean Sea, intermarriages, and foreign invasions, the West derived its civilization from the ancient Egyptians.

During this Sidonian epoch, elements of Egypto – Phoenician civilization crossed into Greece. It was conflict between the Cadonian (the Phoenicians) and the Serpent son of Mars (the Greeks) that freed the Indo-European world from the domination of the Black Egypto-Phoenician world (Diop 1974:110-111).

While the Eurasians were still deep in barbarism, the ancient Egyptians created an extraordinary level of development in terms of religion, system of writing, agriculture, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, architecture, trade, calendar, medicine, social organization which the West had to copy for their own civilizations (Diop 1974:230-235).

On social organization, Diop pointed out that pre-colonial Black Africa was well organized politically, socially and economically. Pre-colonial states of Africa had well-defined territories and systems of governments punctuated with the widespread ideas of monarchical and matriarchal leadership, divine kingship, judicial system, etc. Furthermore, modern systems of commerce, taxes, customary land ownership, use of currency, market, metallurgical production and distribution, education system, etc, were already in place in Africa during the pre-colonial period (see Curtin 1974). But he argued that the Europeans through the slave trade, colonialism and capitalism destroyed these elements (Diop 1987).

Most importantly, he propagated the idea that Black Africans derived their cultural, historical and political heritage from the ancient Egyptians. The peopling of Africa, according to Diop, was from Egypt to other parts of the continent.

Starting from the Nile basin, in successive waves, the populations radiated in all directions. Some people, such as the Serer and the Teular, seem to have gone directly to the Atlantic Ocean, while others stopped in the Congo basin and the region of the Chad, with the Zulus going as far as the Cape (Diop 1978:232-3)

To support this, he contends that there exist, among the Black Africans, cultural and political elements, which to a large extent irrevocably resemble those of the Egyptians (Diop 1974). These elements include: totemism, circumcision, kinship, divine kingship, the matriarchy system, and that certain languages share roots that are of Egyptian origin. On the basis of this cultural, political, psychological, linguistic and historical unity, Diop calls Black upon black Africans to unite, put their resources together, and operate as a federated state in the face of the western domination.

If we are to protect Black Africa from such a fate, the idea of federation must actually constitute – for all of us, especially those in high political positions- a method of survival (by way of an efficacious political and economic organization to set up in optimum time) not just a dilatory demagogic formulation receiving merely lip service (Diop 1978:15-16).

In order to achieve this, Diop, among other things, emphasized the necessity of promoting a prominent African language as the *lingua franca* of Africa. This language should be used in government and schools as a replacement of foreign languages from the West. He contends that the use of foreign languages is culturally abortive, while the use of an African language would ease international relations.

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.... The selection of a single language from the continent – one which any foreigner, whether French or British, would have to learn to communicate with any African on the Black continent – would, thus, obviously lead to a simplification of intercourse with the outside world (Diop 1978:12-13)

Another contention of Diop was the prominence Islam has come to occupy in African history. He looked at Islam as “a living religion, in contrast to the Christianity of the west, which tends to become among Europeans a mere religious custom” (Diop 1978:12-13). Islam penetrated Africa long before the advent of Europeans, and that together with a metaphysical relationship it had with African beliefs and customs such as dual world, life after death, circumcision, etc, it has enjoyed a peaceful co-existence with African traditional beliefs. Since its introduction, unlike the Christians, the protagonists of Islamic faith never denounced African traditional beliefs nor made a deliberate effort to discourage Africans from pursuing their beliefs and customs. Intellectually, Islamic education constituted the education of Africa during the pre-colonial period.

Finally, Diop took note of the grip of western neo-colonialism that was to characterize the post-colonial Africa. He observed that despite the withdrawal of the whites in Africa, the states are still economically, socially, morally and politically under the control of European countries. Independent African states continue to use western languages in government and education, western cultural values continue to replace traditional African values, their leadership is still dependent on the west for financial support, etc. Faced with lack of finances and personnel, nationalist leaders have degenerated into ‘traditionally



conformist groups' that seek, from time to time, the assistance of the ex-colonial masters. The West seems to take advantage of this to subject the African states to their interests. Consequently, there has been a death of revolutionary movements in Africa, as nationalist leaders deplorably reduced themselves to the level of 'executive committee' of the western countries. Diop noted:

We are not free, however, even after this loosening of bonds. We will never be allowed to select a political and social regime different from those of the western world without running the risk of having to fight or seeing ourselves overthrown by intrigues, making use of local parties of western allegiance. This is the last camouflaged line of retreat from the batteries of imperialist west, alleging that its economic fate and 'civilization as we know it' depend on retaining control of Africa (Diop 1987:31).

## **Points of debate in Diop's ideas**

Diop's work provoked a heated debate among scholars of African history. Two schools of thought have emerged over his ideas. The first one condemns the ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop as 'a veritable falsification of history' only attempted to twist the history of Africa to suit and promote the interests of the Africans (Mauny 1996:42). Protagonists of this school include scholars like Mauny, Macgaffey, Henry Slater and Caroline Neale. These scholars are of the view that the Egyptians were not black, and that their civilization was borrowed from the Semites in Asia through the Berbers or Libyans who came to North Africa via the west. Related to this was the argument that Egyptians did not originate from the upper Nile as was maintained by Diop; rather they came from the Delta. In other words, it was the Egyptians who influenced the Ethiopians or Nubians and not the reverse. Furthermore, the existence of black skin and woolly hair, they argue, is not unique to the blacks; rather it is a general characteristic of all human races especially those subjected to a hot climate. On the contrary, they noted that the discovery of straight hair and regular features by Diop signifies that the Egyptians were a white race or bastards. The inscription on the Stella of Philae, the border of the Meroitic Sudan and Egypt which barred the blacks from entering Egypt provided sufficient evidence to the non-existence of relationship between Egypt and Sudan, the country Diop asserted as the original home of Egyptian ancestors. Furthermore, his ideas were found by these scholars to have been rejected by the same Egyptians whom he wanted to glorify. At the 1974 conference, the Egyptians who attended objected to Diop's point that their ancestors were Black (see Macgaffey 1991). Although the scholars accepted that the Blacks were the original

inhabitants of ancient Egypt, they argued that a mixture of races existed in Egypt of which the Blacks were only a part. In relation to this, they further asserted that Egypt was located at the crossroads of three continents with varying races, and that all these had influence on Egypt. A number of questions were raised against Diop's theories, for example, Mauny asks;

How can C.A. Diop explain that the Egyptians, who he claimed were Negroes, and the Nubians, spiritual sons of Egypt were the only ones before the first millennium BC to be civilized in Africa? For one cannot understand why the inhabitants of the Nile valley would have been *the avant – garde* of humanity when the other Negroes stayed at a 'primitive' state just like the Europeans who were their contemporaries. And if the West African Negroes descended from the Egyptians, why did they become 'de-civilized' *en route* between 500 BC, the date of their departure from Egypt according to C.A. Diop, and 900AD, the period from which we have texts describing them as rather 'backward'? Which way did they go? How is it that no ancient author speaks of this migration, although according to the author, it was made during the historical period? And how can it be that they have left no trace of their passage along the way? (Mauny 1996:46)

The other school constituted those scholars who admired Diop from both Africa and the African Diaspora. A whole host of scholars from the Africanist, nationalist, and Afrocentric schools belonged to this school. These attributed the 'de-civilization' of African states to the process of migration and assimilation, which the Africans underwent after their invasion in 500 BC, not to mention the effects of the slave trade, colonial conquest and capitalism. These scholars agree that the Europeans found the Africans 'primitive' during the 19<sup>th</sup> century contact, but they contend that this was during their second encounter with the Africans. At this point, the African heritage had already been destroyed through the slave trade and colonization. During their first encounter in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Europeans found the Africans culturally and politically united and progressive. Diop, for one, maintained that it would only be inaccurate to judge the Africans as 'primitive' after the destruction of colonization. Accordingly, the emperors of Black Africa were not passive victims of European invasion; far from being merely knights, they negotiated on equal footing with their most powerful western counterparts. Diop (1974:162-4) on colour and features of the hair, Diop argued that there are two black races in Africa: those with black skin and wooly hairs, and those with black skin and straight hair. The latter is the category to which the Egyptians belonged. The reddish brown color of the Egyptians, which his critics used in their contention that the Egyptians were a white race, he argued, was an effect of the slave trade, intermarriages, and raping of white women by African leaders (Diop 1974:184-7).

## **Critical analysis and judgment**

The work of Cheikh Anta Diop, it should be mentioned in the final analysis, is quite significant to the understanding of the development of African historical thought. His work, to begin with, opened the way for African scholars to embark on the noble task of de-colonizing African history from the dominant colonialist paradigm (Mauny 1996:43). The colonialist assertion that Africa had no history prior to the advent of Europeans was contemptuous and needed scholars of Diop's caliber to challenge and bring Africa on the world map. At present, African involvement in the reconstruction of African history is an approach that can benefit the African and Africanist historians. African scholars are culturally close to their history and that unlike outsiders, they have the advantage of collecting data using the local languages in the areas of their studies. The possibility of writing African history from an African point of view would result in a holistic history that serves the political, economic and psychological needs of Africa as a continent (Macgaffey 1991:515). In other words, Diop has immeasurably contributed to black nationalist history and ideology, which has served to promote the national personality of Africa and correct the colonial view that the 'blacks are non-existent culturally and historically', and that 'Africa had no history.'

In addition, the importance of using original sources in the study of African history cannot be overemphasized. It is a methodology that is seriously considered in historical scholarship. Primary sources in the form of oral traditions, archival documents and archaeological artifacts, are regarded as the lifeblood of African historians. Among other things, these sources ensure the originality and empiricism of the historical studies in question. For one, oral traditions are the means by which the history of Africa before the advent of 'literacy,' after western standards, can best be reconstructed (Vansina 1986, Phiri 1984/5).

What is also noteworthy here is his inclusion of the idea of neo-colonialism, which at present is overwhelmingly threatening the future of Africa. This concept has become topical among scholars from the Marxist and underdevelopment schools (Samoff 1980, Rodney 1972, Leys 1975 Hyden 1980).

While I commend Diop as one of the greatest contributor to African historical thought after nationalist tradition, a number of issues from the methodology and

content of his thesis cannot go without challenge. As regards to methodology, it should be pointed out: Cheikh Anta Diop solely depended on archaeological sources, pictures, and classical writings. Despite the fact that these sources provide information for the period before written records and that the data obtained through them is free from colonial distortions and exaggerations, these sources have been criticized as unreliable due to their dependence on speculation to reach conclusions about the past they are meant to depict. What is more, Cheikh Anta Diop, instead of subjecting these sources to external and internal criticisms in order to ensure their validity and authenticity, and separate myths from facts, adopted them wholesale in his studies. Besides, no effort was made to compare them with the existing literature especially the recent works on the history of Africa. Worse still, his choice of sources was selective: sources that were at variance with his thesis were ignored. Related to this was his dismissive attitude to criticism. According to him, criticism of his work was a European attempt to destroy African historical importance and cultural heritage (Macgaffey 1991:518-519). His problem was that instead of using sources in their own right, he wanted to pattern them according to his argument and ideology. His was a preconceived approach to historical scholarship.

Diop's failure to subject sources to scientific criticism impacted negatively on the quality of his conclusions. Details were piled upon details without critical analysis and clarity. Some of them were biased in favour of his religion and location. The creation of a federated state, for example, is not practical as far as African politics is concerned. It underplays the vastness of the continent to be organized under a single centralized leadership as well as the problems of ethnicity, tribalism and regionalism (Ntaba 1999). Furthermore, his view that Islam has spread through peaceful penetration in Africa blindly ignores its spread through *jihads*, Moslem holy wars. More importantly, his findings were based on West African experiences. It would be academically abortive to use conclusions based on findings from a particular region to develop a theory governing the history of Africa as a whole. What is clear is that his scholarly endeavours were biased in favour of Islam, *wolof*, and West Africa, which constituted his personal religion, language and region, respectively.

Most importantly, the whole paradigm of nationalist historiography has been criticized for its cynical tendency to abandon or transform materials that reflected badly on African society (Mauny 1996:42). It is further contended that nationalist history largely serves the interests of the new regimes, and it concentrates narrowly on political themes at the expense of social and

economic issues (see Neale 1985). Paul Lovejoy argued that nationalist historians allowed the dreams of the present to shape the understanding of the past rather than understanding a reconstruction of the past on the basis of sound historical methodology (Lovejoy 1985). Thus, it fails to account for the political decay of the post – independence period. “It concentrated on politics conceived in a social vacuum, and for its romantic emphasis upon the role of African initiatives, both of which singularly failed to provide a historical explanation of the present condition of African economic and political powerlessness” (Slater 1985:254). Nationalist history is racist in its approach, and only succeeded in widening the gap between Africa and the West. It depicts greater subjective than objective scholarship. Mauny maintains that:

The African historian, without abandoning in the least his political opinion formed during the years of struggles against colonialism, owes it to himself, to science, and to his country to place himself, if he has not already done so, on the level of strict objectivity which does not exclude interpretation or the use of hypotheses to be proven, but without which it is impossible to speak of history, of research, of scientific knowledge of history. Otherwise the whole of the new school of African history risks being discredited and the sum of errors and exaggerations would be disastrous for the Africans themselves (Mauny 1996:49).

Whatever reservations scholars might have with the sources he used and some conclusions that he reached, Cheikh Anta Diop’s work remains pioneering and significant to the understanding of African historical thought. He has provided us with a methodology and historical framework, which in the face of apparent colonial distortions, is indisputably appropriate for the study of the African past. At the time of his influence, his bold stand against criticism was essential as the colonialist scholars were not ready to accept anything that seemed to contradict the kind of past they, for a long period, created about Africa. The problems scholars found with his sources are not completely hopeless as not to warrant any effort for further improvement. Once subjected to internal and external criticism, and then compared to the recent works of African history, there is hope that Cheikh Anta Diop’s work would effectively meet scholarly standards.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing paper has examined the contribution of Cheikh Anta Diop to an African philosophy of history. In general, it has observed that Diop has made a notable contribution to the methodology and epistemology of African history. As regards to the epistemology of African history, Cheikh Anta Diop has contributed an African perspective after the nationalist traditions. His ideas were provocatively defensive of the contributions the Africans have made to world history, which in a way became instrumental to the nationalist ideology of his time. He contended that Africans were not merely observers but rather active participants in their history. In fact, he pointed out that Blacks were the first to achieve what came to be regarded as civilization, and that the West had to copy its own version of civilization from them. In other words, he advocated the view that Africans have their ancestral origins from the Egyptians and that they were politically, socially and economically well organized in pre-colonial times, and that all this was destroyed by the Europeans through the introduction of slave trade, capitalist economy and colonialism.

On sources, Diop advocated the use of original sources such as oral traditions, archival sources and classical works. Diop observed that the existing sources of African history, written from the background of colonial racial prejudices, contain a great deal of distortions and exaggerations. Rather than depending on them, he called African scholars to discover their own past with the help of original sources if these distortions of the African past are to be corrected.

The paper has, however, also drawn attention to what might be problematical about Diop's work and ideas. This includes his dismissive attitude towards criticism and his inability to subject sources to scientific criticism. As a nationalist historian, his views were more relevant to the nationalist movements of his time, and they largely represented the interests of the nationalist leaders who came to power at independence at the expense of the masses like the peasants, women, children, workers, etc. Consequently, some of his details contained myths, religious and geographical biases, while some of his ideas were piled up without proven scientific basis.

Despite these weaknesses, the paper contends that Diop's work remains significant to the study of Africa. Not only does it provide a wider documentation of African history and culture, but also that it goes a long way to decolonize this history from the dominant colonial paradigm. The problem with

sources is not immune to improvement; once subjected to scientific criticism, Diop's work should regain its scholarly validity and authenticity.

## Notes

1. Cheikh Anta Diop had a wide academic specialization. He studied anthropology, physics, history, and philosophy.
2. Some of outstanding papers and books by Diop are *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*; *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State*; *Pre-Colonial Black Africa*; "The Origin of the Ancient Egyptians" in G. Mokhtar (ed) *General History of Africa*; "The African Origins of Western Civilizations", in Robert O. Collins (eds) *Problems in Africa History*.

## References

- Asante, M. K. 1990. *Kemet, Afro-Centricity and Knowledge*. Trenton: African World Press.
- Asante, M. K and K.W. Asante (ed) 1990. *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*. Trenton: African World Press.
- Curtin, P.D. 1974. *Pre-Colonial African History*. Washington DC: African Studies Association.
- Denoon, D and Kuper, H. 1970. "Nationalist Historian in Search of a Nation: The New Historiography in Dar-es-Salaam", *African Affairs*, 69.
- Diop, C.A. 1974. *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Westport: Lawrence Hill.
- Diop, C.A. 1978. *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated State*. Westport: Lawrence Hill.
- Diop, C.A. 1987. *Pre-Colonial Black Africa*. Westport: Lawrence Hill.
- Diop, C.A. 1982. "The Origin of the Ancient Egyptians", In G. Mokhtar (ed) *General History of Africa 2*. London: Heinemann.
- Diop, C.A. 1996. "The African Origins of Western Civilizations." In Robert O. Collins (eds) *Problems in Africa History*. New York: Markus Wiener.
- Hyden, G.1980. *Beyond the Ujamaa: Underdevelopment and Uncaptured Peasantry*. London: Heinemann.

- Jewsiewicki, B. and Newbury, D. (eds) 1989. *African Historiographies*. London: Sage.
- Jewsiewicki, B. 1989. "African Historical Studies," *African Studies Review* 32, 3.
- Leys, C. 1975. *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism*. London: Heinemann.
- Lovejoy, P. 1985. "Nigeria: The Ibadan School and Its Critics." In B. Jewsiewick and D. Newbury, *African Historiographies*. London: Sage.
- Macgaffey. 1991. "Who Owns Ancient Egypt." *Journal of Africa History* 32.
- Mauny, R. 1996. "A Review of Diop." Collin, R., (ed), *Problems in African History*. New York: Markus Wiener.
- Marks, S.1985. "The Historiography of South Africa: Recent Developments." In Jewsiewick and Newbury (ed), *African Historiographies*. London: Sage.
- Neale, C.1985. *Writing Independent African History*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Neale, C.1985. "The Idea of Progress in the Revision of African History, 1960 – 1970." In Jewsiewick, B. and D. Newbury (eds) *African Historiographies*. London: Sage.
- Ntaba, C.E. 1999. "Study of an Author: Cheikh Anta Diop." B.A. Dissertation, Philosophy Department, Chancellor College, University of Malawi.
- Phiri K. 1984/85. "Oral History Research in Malawi Since 1964." History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi.
- Phiri, K. 1992/93. "The Relevance of Teaching History in Malawi's Schools." History Seminar Paper, Chancellor College, University of Malawi.
- Rodney, W.1972. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London.
- Ruch, E.1973. "Philosophy of African History." *African Studies* 32, 2.
- Samoff, S. 1980. "Underdevelopment and its Grass Roots in Africa." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 14, 1, 3-36.
- Slater, H.1985. "Dar-es-Salaam and the Post-Nationalist Historiography of Africa." In B. Jewsiewick and D. Newbury (eds) *African Historiographies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Temu, A.J and Swai, B. 1981. *Historians and Africa History*. London: Zed Press.
- Van Henbroek, P. B. 1999. *Political Discourse in African Thought: 1860 to the Present*. London: Praeger.



Vansina, J. 1985. "After-thoughts on the Historiography of Oral Traditions." In B. Jewsiewick and D. Newbury (eds), *African Historiographies*. London: Sage Publications.

*Mzuzu University,  
P/Bag 201  
Luwinga  
Mzuzu 2  
brysongnk@yahoo.co.uk*