

THE ANCIENT AFRICAN PAST AND THE FIELD OF AFRICANA STUDIES

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The ancient African past refers to deeds and events of African peoples documented or narrated through oral or written traditions or other means from the time of human beginnings until the modern period. Africana studies is a transdisciplinary field of study pertaining to intellectual traditions and practices of African and African-descended peoples. The ancient African past is valued in the field of Africana studies. The value given to ancient Africa within the field may serve as a critical conceptual challenge to the colonial history of Africa. This article calls for an Africana philosophy of history, that is, a vision and interpretive scheme to critically reflect on the historical field of concerns. It seeks an intellectual endeavor to recapture historical spaces, thereby leading not only to autonomous readings of ancient African history but also to engaging in the development of explanatory paradigms for the field.

Keywords: *ancient African past; Africana studies; African Diaspora; colonialism; historical linguistics; Rosetta stone; Africa-centered paradigm*

I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

—Langston Hughes (1920/1997)

The ancient African past, in its broadest sense, refers to deeds and events documented, through oral or written traditions, by peoples of Africa or African descent from the earliest, in African time, which now stands at about 7 million years, to the contemporary era. Seven million years is a date assigned to a hominid (commonly known as Toumai in Chad), the earliest dated humanlike species.¹ Africana studies is a transdisciplinary field of study pertaining to

intellectual traditions and practices of African and African-descended peoples. From its inception, *Africana studies*' "field-forming and tradition-defining" (if I may use Lucius Outlaw's, 1998, apt phrases) efforts include the teaching and researching of ancient African history and civilizations. The importance given to ancient Africa within the field not only highlights its linking attribute, but it also serves as a critical conceptual challenge to the colonial history of Africa and the African Diaspora. Colonialism here is broadly defined and it covers the era of enslavement and direct or indirect colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries (Eze, 1997). As Eze (1998) puts it,

By colonialism, we should understand the indescribable crisis disproportionately suffered and endured by the African peoples in their tragic encounter with the European world, from the beginning of the fifteenth century through the end of the nineteenth into the first half of the twentieth. (p. 4)

This article calls for an African philosophy of history, that is, an African vision that facilitates interpretive schemes and perspectives to critically reflect on the historical and epistemological field of concerns. According to Keto, the process of understanding the past involves knowledge of one's own time in conjunction with explanatory tools or paradigms to interpret and construct events and deeds.²

Keto contends that past historical scholarship has often failed to recognize or include an Africa-centered paradigm as a tool to interpret the lives and experiences of African peoples. As a consequence, a philosophy of African history may be visualized as an intellectual endeavor to recapture historical spaces and to control one's own time in an effort to move toward autonomous readings and understandings of the African past.³ As Tsenay Serequeberhan (1994, quoting Martin Heidegger) cogently puts it, "The possibility of African freedom presupposes an open site which is 'the historical place, the there in which, out of which, and for which history happens' from within the historicalness of the African situation" (p. 35).

The ancient African past can be both exciting and frustrating to those who study or specialize in it. The excitement comes with a finding of a fossil or a stone tool, deciphering the Rosetta stone,

or recognizing the historical importance of languages, as in the case of Niger-Congo languages. "Historical linguistics suggested a time depth of four thousand years for the settlement of Niger-Congo speakers, the so-called Bantu speakers" (Vansina, 1994, p. 193). In other words, unearthing evidence from the paleontological era, the green Sahara, or the royal burial chambers of ancient Nubian and Egyptian rulers would most likely guarantee, if not fortune, at least a great deal of fame, together with a significant contribution to the field of narrative history.

On the other hand, studying or researching the ancient African past can become quite frustrating, for evidence is rare and it will take a considerable amount of time to reasonably grasp the full implications and meanings of an ancient artifact. Besides, studying ancient languages can take a considerable amount of time. Speculations are ripe and interpretations are subject to challenges and often lead to lengthy debates.

A historian delving into this vast time and place will certainly face an almost impossible task of assigning meanings to fragmentary evidence that has been silent not just for millennia but for millions of years. In addition, the present African world, full of natural and human disasters, political conflicts, economic misdirection, and globalization, leaves little room for the ancient African past. In today's Africa, we have more diamond liberation fronts than democratic fronts. The 1990 Civil War in Somalia resulted in the total destruction of national museums with all their national artifacts in Mogadishu and Hargeissa. We find similar destruction of museums and historical sites in Liberia and Sierra Leone as a result of civil wars at the beginning of the 21st century.

Moreover, a significant number of ancient artifacts and manuscripts remain in the hands of former colonial powers. The acquisition and reassigning of values (mostly in monetary terms) continue to be a major challenge to our sense of history. The demand for the return of our cultural arts and artifacts is therefore a fundamental desire and conviction to engage in the formulation and articulation of the African past.

The recent return of the Aksum obelisk from Rome, Italy, to Aksum, Ethiopia, is a significant development in the struggle to

repatriate African historical and cultural legacies from Europe to Africa. It is clear that a persistent and organized movement for repatriation of cultural artifacts can bear fruit, as in the case of the returned Aksum obelisk. It is my hope that the successful repatriation of the Aksum obelisk serves as a catalyst for other movements to increase their pitch for the repatriation of all African historical and cultural artifacts and manuscripts.⁴

In spite of these dialectical realities, as Roman historian Titus Livius of Padua puts it, "There is always something new out of Africa." Some of these new things are forcing fundamental changes in our understanding of past events.

Currently, Seleshi Semaw and his team are conducting paleontological field research at Gona, Ethiopia, the site of the oldest stone tools in the world. According to their partial report, they are able to find more stone tools that are dated from 2.5 to 2.6 million years. They also succeeded in finding skeletal remains of *Homo erectus* from the same site (S. Semaw, personal communication, March 25, 1997).

Molecular geneticists have also just reported the conclusion of their XY chromosome DNA test of *Homo sapiens* or modern humans: We all come from an African male gene dated 59,000 years. It is to be noted that the female mitochondria study reached a similar conclusion a few years ago, tracing all the females to an African female ancestor.

A human origin in Africa is attributed to the spectacular geological formation of the Rift Valley that stretches from the eastern Sahara to east and central Africa, culminating in southern Africa. The Rift Valley, with its river basins and fresh lakes girded by a protective chain of mountains, created an environment for the first humanlike and human habitats. In this earthly heaven, we are finding an assortment of paleontological evidence testifying to the evolutionary emergence of the first humans, who permanently splintered from four-legged animal species, such as the apes.

Dinqnesh, we insist, and not Lucy, is a 3.1-million-year-old humanlike species found in the Afar region of the Rift Valley of Ethiopia. Dinqnesh, whose scientific name is *Australopithecus afarensis*, was bipedal. Short stature and much smaller brain size place the skeletal remains as one of the earliest human ancestors

(Leakey & Lewin, 1977). Dinqesh is a forerunner to women's active presence in the African past. African women invented agriculture. In ancient Africa, women held central positions in creation legends and mythologies. Rock paintings and engravings amply documented the deeds of both women and men. Although minimal, early documents narrate the historical achievements of great women leaders.

Human evolution continued in Africa until the emergence of *Homo erectus*, whose family members migrated out of Africa about 1.5 million years ago. By 2.5 million years, we now know that the first scientific experiment was conducted to develop lithic technology. The species were no longer simply scavengers and gatherers; they used their stone tools to cut and break meat into smaller pieces. In other words, mobility and the availability of stone tools enhanced the range of food sources. With the production of more advanced tools, such as stone axes, spears, and cutting knives, hunting became a major source of food.

Paleontological research also suggests to us the original evolution that reached its peak with the emergence of *Homo sapiens* about 150,000 years ago. *Homo sapiens* were hunters and gatherers. They were also the pioneers of family, communal living, rituals, and other cultural activities. Rock paintings and engravings that are found throughout the continent of Africa help us understand the early human beings and their lives. "Rock art in South Africa carries the San people's religious concepts and ritual and the tradition was a common practice until the end of the nineteenth century of our era" (Isichei, 1997, p. 42).

Another team of archaeologists surprised the world in 1999 by mapping out an earthen wall that was built, in their estimate, in the 10th century of our era by a civilization based in West Africa. According to a journalist recording the event,

At Eredo, south of Lagos, archaeologists were able to map out a 100-mile-long earthen wall that was built in the 10th century A.D. by the Yoruba people. The Eredo's earthen bank rises 70 feet in the air from the bottom of a wide ditch, its reddish, vertical wall glistening with patches of moss. The local legends attribute this, perhaps the largest monument in Africa, to Sungbo, who died childless. He built the monument to spiritually be remembered with it. (Onishi, p. A4)

A team of scholars who are undertaking archaeological research in Egypt recently made an astonishing discovery with regard to writing systems. They found clay tablets with distinct and legible pictorial writings and, upon dating, they are found to be perhaps the oldest writings on record. It was dated 3200 to 3400 B.C. This finding serves as a reconfirmation of an established fact of world history that posits Africa as the birthplace of writing. This reconfirmation is significant, for our conception and understanding of history have been governed for too long by establishing core links between civilization and writings. It was a sort of criteria that was established by Eurocentric scholars in an attempt to deny the presence of civilizations in Africa ("Were Egyptians the First Scribes?" 1998).

Before we even fully absorbed the significance of Dreyer's findings from Abydos, another team of researchers from Yale announced the finding of inscriptions in the desert west of the Nile, between Thebes and Abydos, described as the earliest known example of alphabetic writing, dating to between 1900 and 1800 B.C., two or three centuries earlier than previously recognized examples of uses of an alphabet ("Oldest Alphabet Found," 1999).

The findings by the scholars from Gunter Dreyer of the German Archaeological Institute at Abydos, Egypt, however, force us to make a proper reassessment and understanding of the intellectual traditions of Africans. The tradition ought to be explored in all its manifestations and we ought to be able to examine its continuity as well as its future directions.

The discovery made at Abydos also vindicates the work of Martin Delaney during the last quarter of the 19th century. In 1879, in his book, *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color, With an Archeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization, From Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry*, Delaney (1879/1991) wrote, "With our limited knowledge of archaeology, we have always believed that the philosophy and root of alphabetical literature had its origin in Africa" (pp. 52-56). The Ethiopian alphabet is identified as the oldest on record.

The ancient African past, or at least some aspects of it, has been championed and promoted by the African Diaspora, particularly starting from the 19th century. Henry Highland Garnet was a

TABLE 1
Proposed Periodization of African History
Based on Richard B. Moore's Model

Very early period	7 × 10 ⁶ million years ago–10,000 BCE
Early period	10,000 BCE–3400 BCE
Classical period	3400 BCE–300 CE
Median period	300 CE–1495 CE
Colonial period	1495 CE–1957 CE
Renascent period	1957 CE–present

member of the African Civilization Society. DuBois was one of the earliest proponents of the Africanness of ancient Egypt. Edward Blyden wrote about ancient African civilizations. Richard B. Moore proposed “a new look at African history.” He divided African history into the very early period, early period, classical period, median period, colonial period, and renascent period (Turner & Turner, 1992, pp. 242-243). Table 1 shows a proposed periodization of African history, developed from Moore's model. Marcus Garvey called for a “Return to Africa” at a time when Africans in America were facing virulent racial violence. According to Stuckey (1994), Garvey's lasting achievement was his ability to direct the attention of the masses toward the sources of their sorrow and rage. He assured them of the greatness of the Black race (p. 254). Paul Robeson urged African Americans to draw upon the creative springs of their heritage and proceeded to engage in brilliant investigations of African folklore and languages to reveal new possibilities for cultural growth (p. 254). It is, in fact, this early tradition that was further consolidated with the establishment of programs, centers, and departments of Africana studies in the late '60s in the United States.

The ancient African past is a critical component of African and African Diasporas. This critical importance, I like to argue, has been duly recognized by the field of Africana studies. I also like to argue that the ancient African past is one of the pillars of the field of Africana studies. This means that the ancient African past is central to the overall intellectual strategy of the field. Most programs or departments that I know include the ancient African past as their core curriculum. Joseph ben Jochannan, who introduced me to ancient Africa, taught Nile Valley Civilization for 18

years at the Africana Studies and Research Center of Cornell University (J. ben Jochannan, personal communication, October 22, 2005). The late Professor Ohadike's African Civilizations and Cultures course at Cornell University attracts more than 100 students every year. I have been teaching the course since spring 2006. I also teach the Ethiopic writing system as part of a course on Nile Valley civilizations.

At Temple University, a graduate seminar on Cheikh Anta Diop, the author of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, is offered. A number of courses on ancient African history and civilizations are offered both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Theophile Obenga, one of the leading Afrocentric Egyptologists, is chairing the Department of Black Studies at San Francisco State University. He also edits an important journal on ancient African civilizations called *Ankh*. Maulana Karenga, who wrote a widely used *Introduction to Black Studies*, has written his second doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of ancient Egypt. He also chairs the Black Studies Department at California State University, Long Beach.

It is fair to argue that outside of what John Henrik Clarke calls lay historians, of the past two centuries in particular, Africana scholars ought to be credited for their effort in placing ancient histories of Africa not only as a link to Africa and African Diaspora histories but also as a part of a field forming intellectual strategy of Black or Africana studies.

Another tenet of the proposition for African philosophy of history is the need to link the history of Africa with the history of the African Diaspora. According to the eminent and Pan-Africanist historian Joseph E. Harris (1998), "The history of Africa is relevant to the history of black people throughout the world . . . because persons of African ancestry are dispersed throughout the world" (p. 1).

The major epistemological breakthrough in the reading of the African past was achieved, first, during what Jan Vansina (1994) calls the roaring sixties, when African historians, immediately after independence, insisted on the need for Africanization of African history. In this regard, Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Jacob F. A. Ajayi at Ibadan, Nigeria, succeeded in establishing a common West

African curriculum for schools and universities. "The West Africans rejected any balance sheet approach toward the colonial period in which one weighed 'benefits,' such as the creation of large and bureaucratic states or the introduction of Christianity, against 'liabilities,' such as forced labor" (pp. 113-114). Bethwell A. Ogot in Kenya, who also made an immense contribution to the development of East African history, also rejected the sanitization of colonial history. He published textbooks and a pamphlet series for secondary and university education. Historians such as Isaria N. Kimambo and Arnold Temu as well as Terence O. Ranger in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, proposed the need to look at colonialism from the perspective of "African initiative in order to construct a usable past" (pp. 114-116). Historical materialism is also an approach used by the "Dar es Salaam School" (p. 116).

Second, in the 1970s, African historians defined and used an Africa-centered approach—an inside-out approach or a center stage of analysis approach. It is an approach that insists on examining the African past from the perspective of African peoples.

African American historians have made significant progress in the whole production of African American history. We see the emergence of able and accomplished historians with several books attached to their names. African American women historians have also made important contributions.

One of the historians who advocated an Africa-centered approach to the study and production of historical narratives, as mentioned earlier, was C. Tsehloane Keto (2001), the author of an influential book, *Vision and Time: Historical Perspective of an Africa-Centered Paradigm*. To Keto, it is valid to posit Africa as a geographical and cultural starting point or center in any study that involves people of Africa or African descent. This is because, Keto (2001) argued, "history is implicitly or explicitly influenced by the historians' perspectives, and secondly, an Africa-centered perspective of history cannot be sustained without its connection to the African culture of Ancient Egypt" (pp. 53-55). Keto, like Diop, sees ancient Egypt as Africa's classical center. As Diop (1974) puts it, "the history of Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt" (p. xiv). This is important in grounding the history of

African people to a tangible center of time and space. It should be noted, however, that the centrality of ancient Egypt as suggested by Keto and Diop has to be broad and flexible enough to accommodate other tangible centers of time and space from Nubia, Aksum, Zimbabwe, Benin, or Songhay.

Okon Edet Uya (1974), who studied under Jan Vansina at Wisconsin University, proposed three criteria for an Africa-centered perspective of history:

1. It should reflect a firm knowledge of the language and culture of the society;
2. Empathy, not sympathy with the culture; and
3. It must view the society from the inside out rather than from the outside in (pp. 1-6).

Our conception of African history ought to be informed by a thorough understanding of the cultures. Uya (1974) provides us with an excellent example. He writes,

The past ties the living community into the world of ancestors. The dead, or those who have left this present reality to the other, for they are not really dead, affects what goes on in the present community. In other words, laying a claim to authority becomes a correlation between pastness and sacredness. This is one of the reasons why the past in most African societies is conceived in mythological terms. It becomes mythical only because pastness, long enough, assures, the dimension of sacredness. (p. 7)

Uya (1974) further argues,

A sound knowledge of the past means access to land, right to office and a secured membership of the community. The well being of the community is dependent to a great extent on the posture of the ancestors. This means that, more often than not, if any harm occurs in a society, the way that it is explained is that society itself, has not been faithful to its pastness. It has not placated the ancestors very well. It becomes important, therefore that in pouring libations one summons the past, in which a whole train of ancestors are called upon to bless the living community; a prerequisite for positive progress in the living community. Hence, knowledge of the past is a good investment. (p. 7)

What Uya articulated with regard to Africa-centered perspective was later developed and defined as Afrocentricity by scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante.⁵

The narratives of the ancient African past rely almost entirely on information obtained from archaeological, anthropological, paleontological, geological, zoological, botanical, linguistic, and molecular biological sources. Information is also gathered from spoken traditions. As a result, the construction of the ancient past tends to be an interdisciplinary endeavor that is conducive to a team approach.

One of the most crucial aspects of the development of philosophy of African history has been a realization of the importance of the spoken or oral traditions in the framing and interpretation of African history. According to an African proverb, "to say is to do," speech-centered knowledge is relevant in the construction of the ancient African past. Because an oral tradition presents a total picture of a given community, including an indigenous language, it becomes useful in gathering information to construct the ancient African past. Several historians have acknowledged the importance of oral sources. According to Vansina (1994), "Oral traditions often do reflect the past and remain useful as historical sources, especially for the last century and sometimes for a few centuries preceding the date of their recording" (p. 218). In a seminal essay written for the UNESCO *General History of Africa*, Ki-Zerbo (1981) notes the importance of oral history in the reconstruction of African history. According to him, "Oral tradition takes its place as a real living museum, conservator and transmitter of the social and cultural creations stored up by peoples said to have no written records" (p. 7). To Africans, oral history is not only an article of the past but also a living "breathing" body of the present and future.

Oral traditions cover virtually every aspect of life in society except that they may not provide quantifiable data or adequately mirror unconscious change. They are, however, invaluable to reconstruct the socioeconomic-religious life of African communities.

Hampate Ba (1981) wrote the *History of the Fulani Empire of Macina in the Eighteenth Century* by entirely relying on oral sources. Bethwell Ogot had also written the history of the Luo

people of Kenya by relying on oral sources (Atieno-Odhiambo, 2002; Zeleza, 2003).

The Wanyarwanda have a strong spoken tradition, a tradition that even the former monarchy abided by. For instance, the *abiiru* tradition that preserved the secret ritual code of the dynasty was responsible for naming and installing the king's successor. According to Vansina (1985), "*abiiru* were special people whose main duty was not the remembering of, but the carrying out of, the rituals of kingship" (p. 38). Oral traditions combined with written and other sources are perhaps an important hardware for the reconstruction of African history.

According to Vansina (1994), "The activity of writing of African history is still dominated by outsiders" (p. 239). As a matter of fact, no other history is as controlled by outsiders as African history. It is even worse for ancient African history, which is almost entirely dominated by non-Africans. It is very important to make one point clear here. Non-Africans have and continue to make important contributions in the field. But it is important for Africans themselves to chart its meanings, the guiding principles and perspectives. Historical consciousness cannot be imported; it has to come from the very souls who are responsible for the production of history in the first place.

Perhaps one of the most important international organizations that was instrumental in the construction of African history was the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). UNESCO, under the leadership of the great Senegalese Amadou M'Bow, set out to construct a comprehensive history of Africa where African historians and scholars played a leading role not only in the production of the narratives but also in determining its methodologies and perspectives. As a result of this magnificent effort, UNESCO published in the '70s and '80s eight volumes of African history. Important historical sites were designated by UNESCO as legacies of humanity that deserve recognition and preservation.

According to Vansina (1994), the UNESCO project represented a unique departure in historiography, because it was the first attempt anywhere to write a history under the direction of a large committee. Its goal includes the adoption of the books for use in

secondary schools and elementary schools, all across the continent of Africa. All the schools of all the countries in Africa could indeed adopt the same textbooks, for the themes emphasize commonalities without partisan chauvinism. The effort is to forestall the rise of divisive nationalism between African countries (p. 135).

UNESCO, sanctioned by concerned African and European historians as well as the Organization of African Unity (now called African Union), coordinated in 1961 the dedication of a series of guides to archives, which is followed by the publication of a full-length general history of Africa and the establishment of an institute to gather oral traditions. By 1967, the agency decided to set up a center for the collection of oral tradition in West Africa and a center of Arabic documentation at Timbuktu. The *General History of Africa* includes chapters reflecting the most diverse approaches and ideologies. If two different interpretations clash with each other, the difference is acknowledged by a footnote or parallel chapters are published (Vansina, 1994, p. 136).

According to Vansina (1994),

UNESCO's ambition to write a general encyclopedic work, encompassing the history of the whole African continent, to be used as a foundation for scholars and schoolbooks alike, taught all those involved with it more about African history and the currents and eddies of its historiography than we could ever have learned otherwise. (p. 195)

It is also through the chapters of the second volume of *General History of Africa* that we learned about Afrocentric Egyptology. Diop and Obenga made a strong case for what they termed *Black Egypt*. They, together with Ajayi of the University of Ibadan, Bethwell Ogot of the University of Kenya, and Ki-Zerbo of Burkina Faso, played crucial roles in the formulation of methodologies and perspectives as well as the production of historical narratives for ancient Africa.

Historians often write about the need to return to the source, the need to look back in order to have a good grasp of the present and to have a vision for the future. In fact, it is through history that we are able to understand not only who we are but also our ability to demonstrate a sense of cultural confidence and historical memory.

As Toni Martin puts it, history is the soul of a people. People are guided by the history that they know from within or by the history that they are forced to mimic and follow from without. John Henrik Clarke (1991), who wrote beautifully, articulates the consequence of the latter part: "When a people are not too sure about who they are loyal to and what their commitments are, they represent a danger within the cultural mainstream of their society" (p. 25).

At the center of our attempt to take control of our cultural heritages and societal traditions has been the debate over the meaning of African history. African history has been subjected to hostile and ambiguous discourse, in non-African languages, as a result of Africa's confrontation with colonialism. With the decline of direct European political hegemony in Africa, the last vestiges of European colonialism have been found in the continued existence in Africa of dependent and imitative intellectual traditions, values, and mind-sets. For without a proper and objective understanding of the ancient African past, the true liberation of African peoples would be a dream deferred.

NOTES

1. Toumai (*Sahelanthropus tchadensis*), a mostly complete cranium, was discovered by Ahounta Djimdoumalbaye in 2001 in Chad, in the southern Sahara desert. For information on the finding as well as references and links, please see <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/homs/toumai.html>. The site was posted by Jim Foley on July 31, 2002.

2. For an original analysis of an African-centered perspective and analysis of history, see Keto (2001).

3. For an excellent essay on African philosophy of history, see Atieno-Odhiambo (2002). The article includes a comprehensive bibliography on the topic.

4. For a recent essay on and comprehensive treatment of the return of the Aksum obelisk, see Bekerie (2005).

5. For a complete reflection on the issue, see Asante (1990).

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