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Black Ideologies, Black Utopias: Afrocentricity in Historical Perspective

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B LACK NATIONALIST IDEOLOGIES have existed throughout the history of African Americans. But the exact content and the way in which their intensity and popularity has waxed and waned can be best understood by examining the specific historical contexts in which the ideas were embedded. Such an analysis has been completely lacking in the current furor over "Afrocentricity" in its varied forms. Many of the ideas which are now considered Afrocentric — though they were not labeled a such at the time — also flourished at the turn of the nineteenth century during what appropriately has been described as the "nadir" of the Black experience in post-Civil War America. There are sufficient parallels between that time and our own to give us reason to feel that a comparison of the social circumstances and the ideas of the two periods will enhance our understanding of the current debate.

A century ago blacks faced a situation that shares many general characteristics with conditions today. Both were eras during which conditions for people of African descent everywhere in the world were getting worse, with no clear-cut solutions in sight. The 1890s marked the peak of European colonialism in Africa, the apogee of "scientific" racism and racial social Darwinism, and contempt for all peoples of color. In the United States this was the period of rampant mob violence including scores of lynchings each year; the passage of Jim Crow and disfranchisement laws in the South which were sanctioned by the Supreme Court; and a deteriorating economic situation with blacks relegated almost entirely to menial work and to the lowest positions in agriculture and industry. The federal government, which had been moving haltingly to provide assistance to the freedmen in the years immediately following emancipation, had now turned its back on the notion that it should assume any responsibility for assisting black progress. Within the black community effective strategies and tactics were sorely lacking, and the conservative, accommodating perspective of Booker T. Washington held sway. Most of the handful of white allies were philanthropists wedded to the Tuskegee idea and Washington's highly gradualist approach.

Much has happened in the history of race relations and in the history of African Americans during the course of the last hundred years, but the signs indicate that we are likely facing a long period of reaction and decline. While scientific racism is no longer respectable, anti-black statements are more widespread, and being voiced more openly, than at any time since the 1950s. The achievements of the 1960s have been undermined

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by the federal government — by the decisions of both the federal judiciary and the White House. The prospect of economic progress has been reversed partly because of the current depression and partly by the emasculation of economic opportunity programs. Within the black community, leadership is generally weak and divided with no real prospect of generating effective mass protest strategies. Advancement, such as it is, stems either from responses to crises such as the L.A. Riot or through the efforts of the slowly growing number of black elected officials who try to use their votes and those of their constituents to obtain limited concessions.

Class or status divisions within the black community, highlighted by the tremendous deterioration of inner-city and rural life, have proven to be an obstacle to unified action that even the most well-meaning members of the new black middle class cannot overcome. Not only are racial issues on the domestic front no longer a high priority in the judgment of white public opinion or of political elites, but internationally the high hopes held at the time that Africans and West Indians were gaining their independence have been dashed. Even the greatest of the African statesmen, from the independence generation to their successors, have been unable to solve the difficult political and economic problems faced by their young countries. A combination of European and American interference, the physical consequences of long-term drought, and interminable ethnic and boundary conflicts defy even the most fervent imagination when it comes to solutions. Moreover, with the closing of the Cold War such leverage as the African nations once wielded in capitalizing on East-West tensions has vanished. We hope that the recent events in South Africa signal a turn around in these circumstances.

Thus, despite the obvious differences, the 1890s and the 1990s share important similarities. In both periods, one way in which African Americans responded to the social and psychological consequences flowing from the severity of their alienation from the larger society, was to redefine the situation in a more positive light. From this perspective we can see that the focus on Africa in both cases served to create a utopia that could not be found in the United States. In short, in both cases we are faced with the phenomenon of the "invention of tradition."[1]

The 1890s witnessed a resurgence of "Ethiopianism" which had long been a feature of Afro-American Christianity. Frequently cited was the biblical text,

> Princes shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch
> out her hands unto God (Psalms 68:31),

which was interpreted by African Americans as a promise of redemption from racial oppression and of the ultimate achievement of freedom. Given the extremely small size of the black academic community (the total of black college graduates in 1900 could not have been more than 2,500, and virtually all of the private black colleges employed only white faculty),[2] it was to be expected that these ideas would be disseminated by ministers and independent intellectuals like Arthur Schomburg and John E. Bruce. The political event highlighting the salience of the belief in the significance of Ethiopia was the Battle

of Adowa in 1896, where an invading Italian army was defeated by the Ethiopians under Menelik II.[3]

In various forms the ideology of Ethiopianism remained alive well into the twentieth century. At the popular level Drusilla Dunjee Houston's *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire* (1926) and Rev. Sterling M. Means' *Ethiopia and the Missing Link in African History* (1945) asserted the importance of Ethiopia as the ancient civilization from which all others sprang. Means made an explicit call for the establishment of an independent African state whose existence would solve the problems of racism and colonialism. These ideas, of course, had also been articulated as part of the world view of Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association. At the scholarly level, W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and William Leo Hansberry labored to substantiate the seminal role played by ancient Ethiopia in the history of world civilizations. However, with the exception of the Rastafarians in Jamaica, the ideology of Ethiopianism in the late twentieth century faltered on reality. Ethiopia was a state that suffered from its own share of the problems that bedevil all societies.[4]

The revival of interest in Africa's distant past during the last two decades of the twentieth century has taken the form of an intense interest in, and identification with, Ancient Egypt. What is particularly striking about this recent and quite popular interest in Egypt is the amount of energy and resources dedicated to a subject so removed from, and seemingly irrelevant to, the everyday problems of African Americans as well as those of contemporary Africans. The stroke of genius in settling upon Ancient Egypt for such a utopia resides in the fact that it no longer exists, can make no demands on one's faith, cannot disappoint one with problems of internal contradictions, nor present one with the tension of having to decide whether to emigrate there or not. Buttressing the importance of Ancient Egypt as a focus of study is a large body of writing designed to make the case not only that Egyptians were black, but that the Greeks drew heavily on Egypt for their own achievements. Thus Egypt, and not 5th century BCE Athens, provided the foundation of western civilization. The intensity of the focus on the Greeks is partially due to the exaggerated claims made for their role by generations of Classical scholars.[5] Of course, these questions are of genuine intellectual and scholarly concern. *What we are interested in is why such questions have become the dominant concern of so many black intellectuals at this time.* As we have pointed out earlier, it is undoubtedly due to the convergence of several trends in the social context in which we live.

Though much of the excitement has centered on Egypt there actually are several outlooks that have been classified under the general label of Afrocentricity. Notwithstanding his interest in Egypt, Molefi Kete Asante, the leading theorist in the development of Afrocentric ideology and school curricula, draws on a wide range of African societies for his generalizations and is very much concerned with areas such as West and Central Africa from which black American's ancestors came as slaves.[6] As we have suggested, among those whose interest is centered on Egypt there exist two questions: whether the Egyptians were black in the same sense that we mean it today, and to what extent Pharonic Egypt influenced the subsequent development of world civilizations.[7] An overlapping interest involves the question of the origins of human life on the planet;

older arguments rooted in biblical commentary seem to be buttressed by the newer scientific advances. An Afrocentrist, for example, would emphasize the evidence that the earliest humanoids and even Homo Sapiens originated in Africa. If there were an "Eve" then she must have been black. The Nation of Islam, on the other hand, believes that African American are descended from "The Original Asiatic Blackman" —persons whom one might consider to be of "mixed blood" and who trace their roots not to Africa but to southwest Asia. A more provocative variant of the Nation's doctrine is that of the "Five Percenters" who believe that the Blackman is "God. " Further complicating the picture are those who maintain that the Ancient Hebrews were black and that African Americans are their descendants.[8] What can be seen as a more secular underpinning of all these ideologies are the writings of black psychologists who view an Afrocentric orientation as the key to the psychological healing and regeneration of African Americans.[9]

Much more so than the earlier Ethiopianism, the ideology of Afrocentricity has extremely widespread support among all segments of the African American community. In what can be seen as a triumph of 1960s cultural nationalism, a cadre of scholars, teachers, publishers, and journalists have developed formidable mechanisms for disseminating their views throughout the nation's black communities. From Asante's graduate program at Temple University, to the proliferation of desk-top publishers, a growing network of independent Afrocentric schools, and the curricula of public school classrooms, the advocates of Afrocentricity have made their influence felt. Outside the frameworks of educational institutions rap musicians such as Pubic Enemy, KRS-1, and Queen Latifah have been a major force in popularizing Afrocentric ideas among segments of the population that may not receive much of its information from books.[10]

A poignant example of the extent to which Afrocentric points of view have framed the discussion of these issues is the reception, or lack thereof, of the work of St. Clair Drake. Drake traversed much of the above terrain over a period of almost fifty years—from his essays, "The Responsibility of Men of Culture for Destroying the 'Hamitic Myth'" (1959) and "Negro Americans and the African Interests" (1966), to his final, two-volume synthesis, *Black Folk Here and There* (1987, 1990). Hostile to any form of special pleading or racial chauvinism, and armed with years of concrete involvement in African and African American politics and societies, Drake was inclined to let his scholarly chips fall where they might. In *Black Folk Here and There* he tackled the important question of how racism as we understand it today developed. In his analysis of attitudes and behavior towards African people, from the origins of civilization in the Nile Valley down to the contact between Africans and Europeans that marked the Atlantic slave trade, Drake reached conclusions that were at odds with most Afrocentrists. On the question of Ancient Egypt as a black civilization, for example, he sharply criticized the scholarly methods of those he felt were rushing to conclusions unwarranted by their evidence. Son of a UNIA organizer, friend and confident of Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore, co-author of a brilliant sociological study of a black community, and secure in his sense of himself as an African American, Drake had no stake in romanticizing the African historical and cultural experience. Thus in this current

debate Drake's voice has not been drawn upon as the indispensable resource that it is.[11]

In concluding this brief analysis, we see that one of the major driving forces undergirding the persistence and strength of Afrocentric ideologies and utopias is the tenuous social circumstance in which much of the new black middle class finds itself. For this class, caught as it is between a socially beleaguered, politically-weak urban underclass and an uncertain economic future for itself, the vision of an Ancient Egypt free of such problems, and where African peoples are treated with appropriate respect, will remain an attractive utopia.

NOTES

[1] For an analysis of similar processes in their historical contexts see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[2] The best data on nineteenth century black college graduates in W. E. B. Du Bois, ed.,*The College-Bred Negro*. Atlanta University Publications No. 5 (Atlanta: 1900), especially pages 37-41.

[3] For discussions of Ethiopianism see, especially, George Shepperson's "Ethiopianism and African Nationalism," *Phylon* 14 (Spring 1953); "Pan-Africanism and 'Pan-Africanism': Some Historical Notes," *Phylon* 23 (Winter 1962); "Ethiopianism: Past and Present" in C. G. Baeta, ed., *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); and "The Afro-American Contribution to African Studies," *Journal of American Studies,* 8 (December 1974); Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe and Africa* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1974); St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: Third World Press 1970) Sylvia M. Jacobs, *The African Nexus: Black America Perspectives on the European Partitioning of Africa, 1880-1920* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1981) and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African American Life and Letters* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990).

[4] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1915) and *Black Folk Then and Now* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1939); Carter G. Woodson, *The African Background Outlined or Handbook for the Study of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1936) and Joseph Harris's *Pillars in Ethiopian History, The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook* Volume One (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981) and *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writer: The William Leo Hansberry African History Notebook*, Volume 2. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981). On the Rastafarians see Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians, Sound of Cultural Dissonance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977).

[5] For a recent, important example see M. I. Finley, ed., *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[6] Among Molefi Kete Asante's many publications the ones most relevant for our discussion are *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo: Mulefi Publishing Co., 1980), *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990) and (with Kriamu Welsh Asante) *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990).

[7] The literature on this topic is enormous, but a good place to start would be with Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1974); Ivan Van Sertima's edited collections, *Nile Valley Civilizations* (New Brunswick: Journal of African Civilizations, 1985) and *Egypt Revisited* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989); and *New Dimensions in African History: The London Lectures of Dr. Yosef ben-*

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Jochannan and Dr. John Henrik Clarke (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991). A brief but useful introduction to many aspects of the recent history is Manu Ampin's *The Current Movement in the U.S.: The Centrality of Ancient Nile Valley Civilization* (Baltimore: 1990).

8 On the question of origins see the two collections edited by Van Sertima cited above and also Yosef ben-Jochannan's *Africa: Mother of Western Civilization* (New York: Alkebu-lan Books Associates, 1971). On the Nation of Islam see Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Black Man in America* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, 1965) and *Our Saviour Has Arrived* (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple of Islam. No. 2, 1974). Black Hebrew writers with differing concerns are Yosef ben-Jochannan cited above; Randolph R. Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu: A History of the Ancient Black Races Including the Black Hebrews* (New York: Exposition Press, 1969); and Ben Ammi, *God the Black Man and the Truth*, 2nd rev. ed. (Washington: Communicators Press, 1990).

9 Representative of this approach are Na'im Akbar's *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery* (Jersey City: New Mind Productions, 1984) and Wade Nobles, *African Psychology: Toward its Reclamation, Reascention & Revitalization* (Oakland: A Black Family Institute Publication, 1986). The best known of these thinkers is Frances Cress Welsing, whose "The Cress Theory of Color - Confrontation and Racism" is reprinted along with many of her other essays in *The Isis Papers* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991).

10 On rap music and Afrocentricity see Joseph Eure and James Spady, eds., *Nation Conscious Rap* (New York: PC International Press, 1991); Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzales, eds., *Bring the Noise: A Guide to Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991); and Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *The Emergency of Black and The Emergence of Rap: A Special Issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

11 Drake's two essays appear, respectively, in *Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists* (*Présence Africaine* No. 24-25, February-May, 1959): 228-43, and in John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966). *Black Folk Here and There*, two volumes (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1987, 1990).