



**RESISTING THE DE-AFRICANIZING OF ANCIENT EGYPT:
PURSUING ITS PARADIGMS OF EXCELLENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE EXPANDING DISCOURSE OF CONCERN and needful resistance that has developed in the Black scholarly and engaged community around the planned USA tour of Dr. Zahi Hawass, Egyptologist and former Minister of State of Antiquities in Egypt, is understandable and to be encouraged. For he has taken talking points from W. Flinders Petrie, author of the discredited “dynastic master race” theory, and others similarly afflicted with the interpretive disorder of racist reasoning concerning ancient Egypt, Africa and the world, arguing that “the Ancient Egyptian civilization did not occur in Africa, it occurred only here.” Here he denies not only the African geographical location of ancient Egypt, but also the historical and cultural context in which it comes into being and flourishes. Thus, billed as the world’s most celebrated archaeologist and real-life Indiana Jones, he will come with considerable ideological baggage which must be resisted as we resist the efforts of the right-wing in this country to deny, outlaw and erase Black history and Black Studies.

In his major works, *The African Origin of Civilization* (1974) and *Civilization or Barbarism* (1991), the multilingual, multidisciplinary Imhotepian Senegalese scholar, Nana Cheikh Anta Diop put forth some of the basic arguments for the African character of ancient Egypt, in spite of the presence of a mixed population, especially since the Arab conquest in 639 CE. First, he argues from the evidence of *physical anthropology* which reveals ancient Egyptian affinities with other African peoples, i.e., iconography, melanin dosage tests, osteological (bone) measurements and blood group tests. More recent biological anthropological studies on crania and skeletal remains tend to affirm

significant affinities with other African peoples, especially Nubians, Ethiopians and Somali.

Secondly, Diop argues from the *self-definition* of the Egyptians who, he contends, called themselves *Kmtyw* or *Kemetiu*, Black people, stemming from *km*, the ancient Egyptian word for Black. Eurocentric scholars, he notes, translates this term as people of the Black land, i.e., Black land (fertile) as opposed to Red Land (desert). It should be noticed that the word is open to both interpretations and that ancient Africans did not attach the meanings to color that we do now. However, even if we suspend judgement on this contention, the other arguments remain cogent and compelling.

Thirdly, Diop offered the evidence of *eyewitness reports* from Israelite Hamitic designations of Kush and Egypt and from “Greek and Latin writers contemporary with the ancient Egyptians” who describe the Egyptians as having characteristics commonly associated with being African, i.e., dark skin, defiant hair and bold lips and noses, and thin legs. Hawass, recalling Miriam Lichtheim’s curious claim that the Nubians were dark skin Whites, concedes that the ancient Egyptians “had dark skin, but were not Black” because they did not have the same noses and lips as other Africans.

Fourthly, Diop argues from the evidence of *cultural similarities* which he maintains include common elements with other African cultures such as circumcision, divine kingship, totemism, matrilineal focus, cosmogonies, architecture, musical instruments and religious practices. Related to cultural similarities, Diop offers evidence of the *linguistic affinity* of ancient Egyptian with Wolof, a Senegalese language which he

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argues “is perhaps as close to ancient Egyptian as Coptic” and displays a “genetic, that is non-accidental relationship”, with other African languages.

Fifthly, in his arguments of the Africanness of Kemites, Diop also offers *artistic evidence*, presenting sculpture and paintings to show what is considered prototypical Africanoid features of the ancient Egyptians as well as their similarities to some Nubians. It is important to note here, however, that Diop is not obliged to prove that all ancient Egyptians look like a Eurocentric conception of a prototypical West African. For Africa is the home of humanity as well as human civilization and thus would, of necessity, show varied physical features.

Finally, in addition to the arguments I have extracted and summarized from Diop’s works, there is the *evidence of geography*. Egypt is actually in Africa and not in the political and orientalist construction called the Middle East, and nor is it in Western Asia. As I have often and elsewhere argued, *Ancient Egypt is the only country in history that ever has to justify its geography, that is to say, explain why it’s in Africa when it should not be there if racist reasoning and scholarship is right*. And in order to maintain this falsification of the historical record, such scholars took Africans out of Egypt, Egypt out of Africa, and then Africa out of human history in their discourse.

It is this process of this de-Africanization, which Diop calls the falsification of history, that leads him to place emphasis on the rescue and reconstruction of ancient Egyptian history and culture in order to achieve three basic goals: (1) “to reconcile African civilization with history, (i.e., end the great falsification of African and human history,);” (2) to enable Africans “to build a body of modern human sciences;” and (3) “to renew African culture.”

This calls for us to resist European or Arab cultural appropriation of ancient Egypt not simply by arguing against it, but also by using Kemet as a resource rather a mere reference. This means using its paradigms of human excellence and achievement to develop deeper and more useful understandings of ourselves and the world and for the conception and creation of ever-new, refreshing, and relevant products of rigorous research, deep reflection, and social practice.

AS I ARGUE IN MY WORK, *MAAT, THE Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (2004, 2006), it means creating and sustaining an ever-expanding realm of African and human freedom and human flourishing, rooted in a profound respect for human dignity and potentiality, and a steadfast commitment to the health and wholeness of the world and all in it as imagined, explored and instructed in the classical and Kawaida Maatian ethical teachings of our honored ancestors.▲

DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture and Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.