



[Dunstan, S. C.](#) (2023) Cheikh Anta Diop's recovery of Egypt: African history as anticolonial practice. In: Manela, E. and Streets-Salter, H. (eds.) *The Anticolonial Transnational: Imaginaries, Mobilities, and Networks in the Struggle against Empire*. Series: Global and International History. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, pp. 135-161. ISBN 9781009359108 (doi: [10.1017/9781009359115.009](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009359115.009))

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Deposited on 14 February 2024

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Cheikh Anta Diop's Recovery of Egypt: African History as Anticolonial Practice.

When the Congolese scholar, V.Y. Mudimbe, argued in 1994 that knowledge of Africa has, since the time of Greek empire, "been represented in Western scholarships by 'fantasies' and 'constructs'", he was making a claim that underpinned much of the anticolonial and anti-racist thinking of the 20th century.¹ Indeed, the very idea that Africa had a history at all had been long refuted in Western historical narratives. Delivering lectures in the 1820s on the philosophy of history, Frederick Hegel casually observed that "Africa... is no historical part of the World; it has no movement for development to exhibit. Historical movements in it - that is in its northern part - belong to the Asiatic or European World...".² Writing over one hundred and forty years after Hegel, in 1965, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, still felt comfortable writing "Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of Black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa."³

Throughout the period separating Hegel from Trevor-Roper, the notion of a lack of history was intimately connected to theories of human evolution that were deployed to justify racist hierarchies of imperial development and unequal access to rights. The self-ordained *mission civilisatrice* of the French Third Republic (1870–1940) rested, like British imperial justifications of humanitarian intervention and development, upon hierarchies of racial order. French anthropologists such as the influential Lucien Lévy-Bruhl wrote about white Europeans in direct contrast to their non-Western counterparts, describing them in terms of a "primitive mentality" incapable of the abstract thought used by Europeans. In this schema, concepts

¹ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (1994): xv.

² Frederick Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (1966 [1837]), 99.

³ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 9.

beyond the concrete and immediate had no place for African peoples, and thus notions of time, and of history, were beyond them.⁴ In contrast, European civilizations were part of a teleological progression of time that reflected their so-called superiority. In particular, the Third Republic notion of *la plus grande France*, or an expanded French nation, rested upon the idea that the colonies were an integral part of France, and any historical significance of these regions were contingent upon France's place in history.⁵

Efforts to equate race with stages of human development were, of course, deeply contested by anticolonial and anti-racists scholars and activists from the very beginning. Indeed, despite the confidence of his assertion, Trevor-Roper's perspective was under siege, as his own admission of student demand for the subject of African history demonstrated. By 1965, many of the African peoples who had been ruled by European empires for centuries had won their independence. The reconfiguration of understandings of African history, and specifically African political and intellectual history, had played an important role during the nationalist decolonizing movements leading to this independence.⁶ Pre-colonial political organisation in Africa took centre stage as a means of asserting the readiness of African peoples for political independence.

It is important to understand that this approach was a direct response to the research that had been conducted in colonial contexts, studies by anthropologist, international relations specialists and the like who sought to understand African peoples so as to better rule them.⁷ Lévy-Bruhl, for example, believed that ethnology was the route to "more rational and more human modes of colonisation."⁸ The Senegalese historian, physicist and Egyptologist, Cheikh

⁴ See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1910); *La mentalité primitive* (Paris : Les Presses universitaires de France. Collection Bibliothèque de philosophie contemporaine, 1922).

⁵ On the "historical reality" of Greater France, see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 24-42.

⁶ William G. Martin, "Africa and World-Systems Analysis: A Post-Nationalist Project?" in *Writing African History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 381-402 (esp. 386-390).

⁷ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

⁸ Michel Leiris, *C'est-à-dire. Entretien avec Sally Price and Jean Jamin* (Paris : Jean-Michel Place, 1992), 38.

Anta Diop, flipped the perspective on this approach when he wrote “If we are to believe the Western works, it is in vain that one would seek a single civilization...which is the work of Black peoples. The truth is what serves and, here, what serves colonialism: the goal is... to make the Black believe that he was never responsible for anything of value”.⁹ The challenge of anticolonial thinkers, then, was to dismantle this version of history that so underpinned the machinery of colonial administration.¹⁰ Diop advocated the use of scientific modes of historical inquiry that provided irrefutable evidence in the face of racism. Such evidence could then be used in the service of anticolonialism and antiracist politics.

A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to teasing out the intricacies of Cheikh Anta Diop’s thought and its legacies.¹¹ My aim in this chapter is to contextualise his intellectual trajectory by showing how Diop’s efforts to challenge the racial hierarchies embedded in his historical discipline operated in tandem with his anticolonial politics and with the work of other anticolonial and anti-racist thinkers. To show, in short, how, in the decades immediately following World War II, the re-writing of history was a central part of what Paul Gilroy has called a Black Atlantic counter-culture of modernity.¹² Doing so is also revealing of the ways that Western institutions shaped the prevailing understandings of history and historical truth.

⁹ Cheikh Anta Diop, “Preface : Edition 1954,” *Nations Nègres et Culture : De L’antiquité nègre égyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l’Afrique Noire d’aujourd’hui* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1954, 1979), 14. N.B. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the original French are my own.

¹⁰ This mode of thinking can be seen in diverse Black anti-colonial and anti-racist movements from Kwame Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism in Ghana through to W.E.B. Du Bois’ writings: Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora,” *Public Culture* 11:1 (1991): 251.

¹¹ This is particularly true of debate around Diop’s Black Egypt and Two Cradle theses. Amongst many others see Cheikh Mbaké Diop, “La Renaissance africaine: Enjeux et perspectives culturelles, scientifiques et techniques dans l’œuvre de Cheikh Anta Diop Thierno Diop,” *Présence Africaine*, 2007-1er semestre 2008, 175/177, 469-497; “Cheikh Anta Diop et le matérialisme historique,” *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, 1998, 23 :1 (1998) : 87-111; Troy D. Allen, “Cheikh Anta Diop’s Two Cradle Theory: Revisited” *Journal of Black Studies*, 38 :6 (July 2008) : 813-829 ; Théophile Obenga, “Méthode et Conception historiques de Cheikh Anta Diop,” *Présence Africaine*, 74 (1970): 3-28; James G. Spady, “Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop and The Background of Scholarship on Black Interest in Egyptology and Nile Valley Civilizations.” *Présence Africaine*, 149/150 (1989): 303-304; John Henrik Clarke, “The Historical Legacy of Cheikh Anta Diop : His Contributions To A New Concept of African History.” *Présence Africaine*, 149/150 (1989): 110–20; Regina Jennings, “Cheikh Anta Diop, Malcolm X, and Haki Madhubuti: Claiming and Containing Continuity in Black Language and Institutions,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33:2 (2002): 126-144.

¹² See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

I begin with a brief description of the context in which Diop made an intervention into Francophone ethnographic understandings of African history: the 1948 special issue of *Le Musée vivant*. From there, I chart Diop's trajectory in relation to other key anticolonial thinkers in the Francophone context in this moment – specifically those attached to the *Présence Africaine* network -, before connecting his historical work to the efforts of African American historians and activists making similar claims about the value of history and historical consciousness for defeating racism and colonialism. Finally, I turn to the Diop's triumphant doctoral defence in 1960, and gesture towards the decolonising efforts of African states to cement a new version of African history in the emerging world order. A key part of this story will be the multiple spaces in which efforts towards anticolonial and antiracist histories were developed: museums such as the Musée de l'Homme; journals such as the *Le musée vivant* (the review of the *Association populaire des amis des musées*); the *Journal of Negro History* and *Présence Africaine*, as well as in initiatives funded the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco).

Ethnography, Black Modernity and *Le Musée vivant*:

When Cheikh Anta Diop arrived in Paris from his home town of Diourbel, Senegal, in 1946 the 23 year old found himself in a France that was in the process of re-definition.¹³ As the constitution of the French Fourth Republic was drafted, debates raged about the extent to which the colonial peoples of the French empire would be granted political representation and belonging. Diop began his research into the African past that same year, cognisant that prevailing myths about Black inferiority rested, in part, upon historical narratives that erased the Black African presence from world history. Within France at this time, two institutions

¹³ Gary Wilder has described this moment as one of “world historical opening” not just for France and French empire but for the world more broadly: *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

were instrumental in establishing public understandings of African history. Both were part of the colonial project and both were deeply entwined with notions of France's *mission civilisatrice*: the National Museum of African and Oceanic Art and the Musée de l'Homme.¹⁴ The former was opened in 1931 as part of the Colonial Exhibition held that year, whilst the latter was built in 1937 as part of a new era of ethnographic thought. It was a reconfigured version of the older Musée d'Ethnologie du Trocadéro, funded by the Ministry of Colonies and intended as the repository for ethnographic objects collected by the research teams of the Institut d'Ethnologie.¹⁵

The three founders of the Musée de l'Homme, George Henri-Rivière, Paul Rivet, and Jacques Soustelle, were leaders in French ethnography in this period. They were also part of a new generation of ethnographers that saw their academic work as key to the struggle against racism, and which pushed back against some of the racial hierarchies embedded in pro-imperial projects such as the 1931 Colonial Exhibition. As Rivière phrased it in 1932 “we seek to illustrate the history of human endeavours and help to dispel prejudice against the supposedly inferior races.”¹⁶ For Paul Rivet, the new Musée de l'Homme was an opportunity not just to further such research within the field, but to directly engage the French population at large.¹⁷ As Rivet's fellow ethnographer Jacques Soustelle put it “The museum of tomorrow can be the museum of the people... through the union of the technicians and the museum-goers.”¹⁸

Efforts to reach “museum-goers” were not limited to the museum exhibits themselves. In 1936 Soustelle, Rivet and Rivière also co-founded the Association Populaire des Amis des Musées (APAM) to further the aims of the museum. APAM was charged with cultural

¹⁴ On the nuanced history of the Musée de l'Homme, and French traditions of ethnographic research see Alice Conklin, *In the Museum of Man: Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Rivière, “La réorganisation du Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, » *Outre-Mer*, 2 :2 (June 1930) : 138-148.

¹⁶ Georges Henri Rivière to Gaston Monnerville, 22 December 1932.

¹⁷ Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 101.

¹⁸ Jacques Soustelle, “Musée vivants, pour une culture populaire” *Vendredi*, 26 August, 1936.

programming and with a new journal, *Le Musée vivant*. Both the museum and APAM were developed under the auspices of the French Popular Front government. Led by Léon Blum, this government sought to establish the spirit of democracy amongst the French people through a series of cultural initiatives including APAM.¹⁹ The men and women who became members of APAM were drawn from the ranks of the Popular Front, and included a number of recognisable figures in the Parisian landscape, from the Popular Front Minister for National Education, Jean Zay, to the poet Tristan Tzara, through the trade unionist Henri Raynaud, and the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire. Although sharing slightly different ideas about the future of France's democracy, these individuals shared a belief that historical knowledge and culture appreciation could shape the nature of France's democracy.

In the mid-1930s, this desire to reach the wider populace was directly connected to the goal of combatting scientific racism and fascism, especially as it was then manifesting in France and Germany.²⁰ Soustelle addressed this directly in an interview in *L'Oeuvre*, where he argued that "We ethnologists, we know that there is no race that has not contributed to the common patrimony of civilization... Racism depends on a first confusion between the idea of race and culture."²¹ In the minds of the Musée de l'Homme founders and workers, the Second World War only further underlined the urgency of overcoming these misconceptions. This is not to say that that thinkers such as Rivet or Soustelle rejected the idea of racial difference. To the contrary, they embraced a humanism that espoused tolerance and begged the appreciation of individual cultures on their own merits.²²

¹⁹ On the cultural politics of the Popular Front see P. Ory, *La belle illusion. Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994).

²⁰ Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 144.

²¹ Georges Schneeberger, "Un quart d'heure avec un jeune: Jacques Soustelle, » *L'œuvre*, 20 Nov, 1938.

²² Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 18-27.

The November 1948 special issue of *Le Musée vivant* was a product of this kind of anti-racist inclination, dedicated in particular to the “cultural problems of Black Africa.”²³ It was also published to coincide with the one hundred year anniversary of the French abolition of slavery and thus titled “1848 Abolition de l’esclavage – 1948 Evidence de la culture nègre.” Madeleine Rousseau and Cheikh Anta Diop were the editors. The entire issue was an exercise in temporal dissonance, with articles oscillating between perspectives that suggest Africans are about to enter into modernity to the argument that they were in fact, already there, they just need to be recognised as such.²⁴

At the time, Diop was already working on the manuscript for his ground-breaking 1954 book *Nations, Nègres et Culture* as well as being involved in the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA). The latter organisation was a Pan-African political *bloc* of French West and Equatorial African delegates elected to the French National Assembly. Primarily socialist in orientation, the group turned into a political movement encompassing many of the African students in Paris, including Diop. In his capacity as the Secretary General of the RDA students group, Diop understood the struggle for independence in two ways: political freedom from empire, and the problem of “restoring the collective national African personality.”²⁵ Colonialism had distorted African understandings of themselves and it was necessary to return to the African past, and to African languages, to re-assert the African personality necessary for independence. He was a strong advocate of basing this return upon a “scientific” approach rather than “taking a liberties with scientific truth, by unveiling a mythical, embellished past.”²⁶ In this, Diop was scathing of “infantile leftists” whose flights of fancy only opened Black

²³ Madeleine Rousseau and Cheikh Anta Diop (eds.), ‘1848 Abolition de l’esclavage – 1948 Evidence de la culture nègre,’ special issue of *Le Musée vivant*, (November 1948) : 36-37.

²⁴ Pierre-Philippe Fraiture describes this in terms of “a redemptory model”: *Past Imperfect: Time and African Decolonization, 1945-1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 5.

²⁵ Diop, “Preface: The Meaning of Our Work,” in Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook, (New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974, [original 1955]), xiii.

²⁶ *Ibid*, xiii.

peoples up to further ridicule. Diop's own doctoral work, the product of expertise in archaeology, Egyptology, linguistics, and physics stressed the importance of rational, scientific study. In part, this was connected to Diop's desire for African peoples to be taken seriously not just by themselves but by those who had infantilised them through imperialism.

Indeed, Diop's decision to pursue a doctorate in Paris was inextricable from this political project. It was also the result of a rather eclectic pathway to the study of history. When he had first arrived in Paris in 1946, he was enrolled in a mathematics degree although unofficially studying African history in his free time. By 1947 he had switched to studying Philosophy under Gaston Bachelard at the Sorbonne whilst simultaneously pursuing a study of the history of the Senegalese languages of Serer and Wolof.²⁷ From there he continued to pursue multiple disciplines, enrolling in a course of doctoral study titled "*L'avenir culturel de la pensée africaine*" under the direction of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard, as well as in two chemistry certifications. It was at this juncture, within the context of this interdisciplinary training and political community, that he was invited to co-edit the special issue with Madeleine Rousseau.

Born in 1895 in Troyes, France, Rousseau was a curator and museologist who had also amassed an extensive personal collections of artefacts from various regions in Africa.²⁸ She had begun her career as a painter but, as a result of the financial hardships of the Great Depression, had pivoted in the mid-1930s to the study of art history and curation at the Ecole du Louvre.²⁹ From APAM's launch, she had been the editor of its journal and, by 1938 had also become the general secretary of the organisation. When the French Popular Front government fell from power that same year, she was instrumental in keeping the organisation

²⁷ Diop, "Origines de la langue et de la race Valaf," *Présence Africaine*, 4 (1948): 672-679.

²⁸ Elizabeth Harney, "Constellations and Coordinates: Repositioning Postwar Paris in Stories of African Modernism," in Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips (eds.), *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018): 304-334. (esp. 311).

²⁹ Danielle Maurice, "L'art et l'éducation populaire : Madeleine Rousseau, une figure singulière des années 1940-1960," *Histoire de l'art*, 63 (2008): 111-112.

going and in shoring up support from Parisian intellectuals. This was partly possible due to her appointment, in 1943, as Professor of visual arts at the *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*. By the end of the Second World War, she had secured for APAM the support of such prominent names as the poet Paul Éluard, the artist Pablo Picasso, the architect Le Corbusier and sculptor Henri Laurens.

When Rousseau had first begun collecting African and Oceanic art, her interest had been primarily aesthetic. Indeed, many of the artists and patrons attached to APAM were collectors of such art, with little regard for the often violent provenance of works looted from their original creators. In the post-war period, however, Rousseau increasingly subscribed to the Musée de l'Homme aim of revalorising indigenous cultures that had been stultified by colonialism.³⁰ In her Latin Quarter apartment, she held gatherings amongst her collections that brought together a sort of who's who of the Parisian artistic landscape. This included Black intellectuals and activists such as Cheikh Anta Diop; the so-called fathers of the political-cultural movement of *négritude* and elected members of the French Constituent Assembly, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas; and the Guinean political activist Sékou Touré.

Discussions at these gatherings opened Rousseau's eyes to the political significance of African art and culture. Rousseau began to publish Black writing in *Le Musée vivant* -including a poem of Césaire's - as well as to question the inclusion of contemporary African art in the ethnology collections at the Musée de l'Homme. Ethnographic collections, Rousseau argued, were supposed to be dedicated to "the most ordinary objects of everyday material life". Juxtaposing these "ordinary materials" with the "works of art created by pre-Columbian America, Africa, Oceania" was to devalue their very real artistic contribution and, in

³⁰ Maurice, "L'art et l'éducation populaire," 117.

consequence, the peoples who created them.³¹ It was increasingly evident to Rousseau that regardless of the anti-racist intentions of the Musée de l'Homme, the reality remained that the new museum's contents were drawn from collections initially used as evidence for the racial inferiority of colonised peoples.³² Racial difference had become part of modern ways of seeing the world, and the osteological exhibitions in particular perpetuated such classifications of humanity.

Eventually, these realisations provided the impetus for the 1948 special issue dedicated to the centenary since the French abolition of slavery. The idea was to showcase the potential for modernity in African culture, and to therefore disprove racist stereotypes of inherent Black inferiority. The issue included a number of articles by Rousseau, as well as another APAM member, Olivier le Corneur. Contributors also included Michel Leiris, Denise Paulme and Jean Laude, from the Musée de l'Homme; and two anticolonial historians Emile Tersen and Jean Dresch. Whilst a few of the articles, like Tersen's, were dedicated to economic and political questions in Africa, the majority of the issue explored the question of African culture and its role in world history; a role that had predated European occupation but which now included integration into Western civilisation.³³ The preface was written by the African American novelist, Richard Wright, who had become a French citizen in 1947 and whose own work was considered to be at the vanguard of contemporary African diasporic culture.

It is evident from one of her contributions to the special issue – “La Philosophie des Nègres” - that Rousseau subscribed in part to an essentialist vision of Blackness that emphasised the artistic imagination and purity of original African cultures.³⁴ Drawing on Placide Tempel's (in)famous 1945 essay on Bantu Philosophy, Rousseau contended that that

³¹ M. Rousseau, "Sur quelques musées et expositions," *Le Musée vivant*, 4 (sept. 1946): 9.

³² Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 147.

³³ Madeleine Rousseau, "En marge de l'histoire ancienne africaine," *Le Musée vivant*, (novembre, 1948): 19-20.

³⁴ As Pierre-Phillipe Fraiture has noted, this is not necessarily true of some of her other contributions to the special issue, some of which are less explicitly determinist. It is nonetheless a position that seems to have formed part of her thinking on African art at this time: *Past Imperfect*, 11.

this creative energy and artistic imagination “determines Black behaviour in its entirety.”³⁵ Indeed, Rousseau believed that this descriptor worked for all pre-industrial Black civilizations, from ancient Egypt through to contemporary Black cultures. Such a view effectively flattened Black African history into a static production of culture that did not change (or develop) over time. The value, or authenticity, of African art came from the way that it lay outside of time. In a similar vein, a piece from the Belgian colonial functionary stationed in the Belgian Congo, Auguste Verbeken, framed his appreciation for Congolese oral story telling traditions in terms of the need to protect “the indigenous style...against destructive influences.”³⁶

Richard Wright’s preface similarly demonstrated an atemporal understanding of African culture. He commended the issue for showcasing the “astounding art of Africa” , exemplar of a culture which “cannot be allowed to perish under the yoke of imperialism” and “neglect.” He read this turn to Africa very much in terms of the collapse or crisis of European civilization, arguing that “we must realize that Europe needs Africa perhaps more desperately than African needs Europe, for it is among these pre-industrial millions of people that the impulse to live and be is to be found in all its original purity.”³⁷ Wright’s emphasis on the “purity” of Africa is nonetheless indicative of the way that even he was thinking about the continent in terms of a colonial teleology.³⁸ That is to say, he thought of it as pre-modern.³⁹

A similar approach to the temporal positioning of African peoples can be found in Michel Leiris’ contribution to the special issue, “Message de l’Afrique.” Contemporaneously involved, alongside Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Alfred Mètraux, in Unesco initiatives to combat

³⁵ Rousseau, "La Philosophie des nègres," 9.

³⁶ Auguste Verbeken, ‘La Poésie nègre du Congo,’ in Madeleine Rousseau and Cheikh Anta Diop (eds.), :1848 Abolition de l’esclavage – 1948 Evidence de la culture nègre,’ *Le Musée vivant*, (November 1948): 13-18 (17).

³⁷ Richard Wright, “Preface,” in Madeleine Rousseau and Cheikh Anta Diop (eds.), :1848 Abolition de l’esclavage – 1948 Evidence de la culture nègre,’ special issue of *Le Musée vivant*, (November 1948): 3.

³⁸ Fraiture has also read this as indicative of Wright’s ignorance on the subject of sub-Saharan Africa: *Past Imperfect*, 3.

³⁹ Kevin Gaines makes this point in terms of Wright’s failure “to question his teleology of modernization”: “Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora,” *Social Text* 19:2, (2001):75-101 (75).

racism, Leiris was part of a new generation of French ethnographers who espoused theories of cultural relativism that argued against race as a determinant of civilization.⁴⁰ In his piece for *Le Musée vivant*, Leiris argued that Africa is “marching towards its own discovery”, towards an entry in modernity.⁴¹ He intended this in the spirit of anticolonialism, contending that this entrance into modernity cannot occur in an imperial relationship. Contrary to the French imperialist discourse of a *mission civilisatrice*, Leiris declared that it is not for “those whites who, until recently, regarded themselves as the absolute masters [of Africans]” to “play the role of spiritual guides” for this rediscovery. Like Wright, Leiris was ambivalent about the progress made by Europeans relative to Africa, writing that recent Western progress seems to have been more in the lines of destruction, oppression and torture, rather than any great civilization. In this context, he declared: “once they have achieved equality with those who have ceased to believe that they are the designated custodians of the only true culture, Black peoples will have a lesson to impart.”⁴²

Cheikh Anta Diop also feared the damage done to Black African cultures by “European contamination.”⁴³ He called instead for an African renaissance that would entail the full intellectual decolonization of African peoples. This involved, for Diop, a rejection of European cultures and a revival of African authenticity. Language was central to these concerns, as Diop was uncertain that African writers using the languages of empire could be considered truly African. He asked “Without underestimating the value of these African foreign language writers, do we have the right to consider their writings as the basis of an African culture?”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Michel Leiris, *Race and Culture* (Paris, UNESCO, 1951) ; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris, UNESCO, 1952). See also Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 341; Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 9-27.

⁴¹ "Message de l'Afrique," Madeleine Rousseau and Cheikh Anta Diop (eds.), :1848 Abolition de l'esclavage – 1948 Evidence de la culture nègre,' special issue of *Le Musée vivant*, (November 1948), 5-6, quote on page 6.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cheikh Anta Diop, "Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une renaissance africaine ?" 57-65 (57).

⁴⁴ Diop, "Quand pourra-t-on parler d'une renaissance africaine ?", 58.

For him the main sticking point here was whether Black peoples could truly express themselves without deploying “the genius of their own language.”⁴⁵

Language was a key pre-occupation of Diop’s, a question inextricable from that of history.⁴⁶ A few years after the special issue came out, in 1952, Diop was ready to take his thesis of renaissance further, having developed a methodology of linguistic analysis to argue for a direct lineage between Egyptian civilization and present day sub-Saharan Black communities. In the same way that Europeans linked their cultural and political power to greatness of Roman and Greek civilizations, so too could Black peoples look to a Black Egyptian civilization to bolster their confidence in the present day. Diop contended that “the moral fruit” of Egyptian civilization needed “to be counted among the assets of the Black”, and as a blueprint for a postcolonial world order.⁴⁷

Making the case for a *Présence Africaine* :

Diop also spoke on this topic at the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists held at the Sorbonne under the auspices of the journal and publishing house *Présence Africaine*. *Présence Africaine* was the project of a group of students and intellectuals led by the Senegalese senator to the French parliament, Alioune Diop.⁴⁸ The journal had been launched in 1947 and, by 1948, had expanded to include a publishing house. In his statement of the journal’s aims, Alioune Diop explicitly indicated that the journal was “open to . . . all men (white, yellow or black) who can help define African originality and hasten its insertion into the modern world.”⁴⁹ In much the same way as Cheikh Anta Diop and Madeleine Rousseau’s

⁴⁵ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁶ See Sarah C. Dunstan, “La Langue de nos maîtres”: Linguistic Hierarchies, Dialect, and Canon Decolonization During and After the *Présence Africaine* Congress of 1956,” 93 :4 (December 2021): 877-878.

⁴⁷ Diop, “Vers une idéologie politique africaine,” *La Voix de l’Afrique noire*, (février 1952): 5-24.

⁴⁸ On *Présence Africaine* see Sarah C. Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021):207-213; 226-231; 237-278.

⁴⁹ Alioune Diop, “Niam N’goura ou les raisons d’être de *Présence Africaine*,” *Présence Africaine*, 1 (November–December 1947): 7.

special issue of *Le Musée vivant* had sought to open dialogue about the problems facing Africa, Alioune Diop created a forum for the grappling with these issues. The question of connecting Africans and African descended peoples with modernity was at the forefront of these debates. As the Madagascan poet and politician and a regular contributor to the *Présence Africaine* journal, Jacques Rabemananjara would later put it, the Second World War had entailed “the defeat of all the Western values that we had learnt under colonization”, thereby puncturing historical narratives of European civilizational prowess and linear progress.⁵⁰ *Présence Africaine* was an anti-racist exercise in creating new ways of understanding the present in relation to the past.

Cheikh Anta Diop certainly offered a new way of thinking about the Black past in his speech to the Congress. Drawing from research published in his 1954 book, *Nations nègres et culture*, he declared “we have come to discover that the ancient Pharaonic Egyptian civilization was undoubtedly a Negro civilization.”⁵¹ *Nations nègres et culture* was based on a manuscript Diop had originally prepared as a doctoral thesis in 1954. That thesis was the product of both his work under Bachelard, and the work he had done on a secondary thesis question, “Qu’étaient les Egyptiennes predynastiques?”, which he pursued from 1951 under the supervision of the Sorbonne’s first Chair of Anthology, the Dogon expert Marcus Griaule. Despite, or perhaps because of, the influential character of both Diop’s supervisors, Bachelard and Griaule, Diop was unable to persuade a jury of examiners to pass the manuscript which was judged “too aggressive”.⁵² Indeed, the argument Diop was making about Egypt as Black civilization was a direct attack upon the thinking of such French luminaries as the aforementioned anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl. “Nowhere,” Diop declared, “was there a primitive

⁵⁰ Jacques Rabemananjara, “Alioune Diop, le cenobite de la culture noire” in *Hommage à Alioune Diop, Fondateur de Présence Africaine* (Rome: Éditions des amis italiens de présence africaine, 1977), 17.

⁵¹ *Présence Africaine*, 8-10, June-November, (1956) : 339.

⁵² Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, “L’Historiographie africaine en afrique,” *Revue Tiers Monde* , (octobre-décembre 2013): 114.

mentality in the sense intended by Lévy-Bruhl”.⁵³ To the contrary, Black Africans had created the very first civilization on Earth, a civilization that had led to all those that came after, including the Roman and Greek civilizations that Europeans claimed as their antecedents.⁵⁴ Such an understanding of Egypt was certainly not accepted within the French Egyptological circles, or, indeed, more broadly. To take this argument seriously was, as Diop observed, to undermine the European characterisations of colonialism as “a human duty... to raise the African to the level of the rest of humanity.” It argued, to the contrary, that Europeans had been responsible for obliterating African societies and preventing their natural development.⁵⁵ This approach appealed, however, to the broader ideological project of *Présence Africaine*, and Alioune Diop organised to have it published it as a book.

Writing in 1955, in reaction to Diop’s *Nations nègres et culture*, the Martinican politician and poet Aimé Césaire described it as “the most audacious book yet written by a Negro” because it unravelled the white efforts to hide the truth of Black Egypt from Africans.⁵⁶ The American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein perhaps put it more succinctly when he noted that Diop’s “bold hypothesis” essentially inverted Western assumptions of superiority: “if the Ancient Egyptians were Negroes, then European civilization is but a derivation of African achievement.”⁵⁷ Diop’s portrait of Egyptian civilization was not, in fact, new. As Wallerstein himself noted, other Black scholars had been similarly refuting Western narratives around Egypt for some time. The eminent African American scholar activist, W.E.B. Du Bois, is one such example. The difference seemed to be, as Wallerstein reluctantly admitted, that Diop’s argument was “not presented without supporting data.”⁵⁸ In other words, by all the

⁵³ Diop, *Nations nègres*, 52.

⁵⁴ Diop, *Nations nègres*, 54.

⁵⁵ Diop, *Nations nègres*, 54.

⁵⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York : Monthly Review Press, 1972 [1955]), 56.

⁵⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: The Politics of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 129-30.

⁵⁸ Wallerstein, *Africa*, 130.

contemporary standards of rational scientific enquiry, Diop's argument was supported by evidence.

The question of what constituted "evidence" for the purposes of rational scientific enquiry was highly racialised in this moment. When Wallerstein raised this issue in his review of Diop's work, he was referring to Diop's use of linguistic analysis; his careful reference to ancient sources, and to his analysis of surviving Egyptian art to bolster his argument. Wallerstein's comment gives us an insight into the manner in which challenges to Western historical narratives were received. They had to be couched in a rationalist frame, relying on notions of Western science rather than being attacked on the basis of their underlying racism. Diop, reflecting on this issue in 1971, put it this way: "One must, in the first phase, establish scientifically the facts, and in this domain not even the least complacency is permitted. The way in which unbiased scientific truth must be presented depends on the circumstances, because in the order of the human sciences, it is one thing to demonstrate the veracity and it is another to make this accepted right away." Only once the science was irreproachable was it possible to "drive out the bad faith of men" who did not want to accept that history did not bear out their ideas of racial hierarchy.⁵⁹

It is perhaps because of this that Wallerstein could dubiously accept Diop's thesis but American academia had hitherto refused the claims of Black historians such as W.E.B. Du Bois, and William Leo Hansberry. Both men had made a similar arguments about Egyptian civilization in their work. In Du Bois' case, he had written on the subject in his 1947 *The World and Africa*, as well as earlier in his 1939 *Black Folk: Then and Now*, and his 1915 *The Negro*.⁶⁰ Certainly, Du Bois was not a trained Egyptologist: his PhD from Harvard had focused on more

⁵⁹ Cheikh Anta Diop to James Spady, April 26, 1971 as cited in James Spady, "Negritude, PanBanegritude and the Diopian Philosophy of African History," *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 5:1 (1972): 26.

⁶⁰ In his biography of Du Bois David Levering Lewis describes *The Negro* as "a large building block in an Afrocentric historiography": *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a race 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993): 461-462.

modern history, titled “The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the United States of America, 1638-1871.” Nevertheless, as his qualifications make clear, he was a highly trained scholar of piercing intellect. Rather than turning to so-called scientific evidence, however, Du Bois’ book was premised on reading the existing scholarship against the grain and taking into account research by Black scholars who had struggled to publish. That is to say, he was taking to task the very practice of Western historical method for its racial biases. Indeed, Du Bois explicitly declared “I am challenging Authority—even Maspero, Sayce, Reisner, Breasted, and hundreds of other men of highest respectability, who did not attack but studiously ignored the Negro on the Nile and in the world and talked as though black folk were nonexistent or unimportant.”⁶¹

To make this challenge, Du Bois adopted a Marxist framework and leant on writers more sympathetic to the idea of African civilization and culture such as Leo Frobenius. He also relied on the work of Howard historian and African specialist, William Leo Hansberry; journalist J.A. Rogers; activist intellectual George Padmore, and the journalist and peace activist, Anna Melissa Graves, as evidence for his claims. None of these last writers had the credentials and institutional affiliations of Western academia, with the exception of Hansberry who had a Masters degree and had worked at a number of US universities. Like Diop, Hansberry had found himself unable to earn his doctorate due to the nature of his historical interests. Despite decades of study more than equivalent to a doctorate, no contemporary American faculty members or degree conferring institutions were willing, or indeed had the expertise, to supervise a PhD in the sub-Saharan African history Hansberry sought to pursue.⁶² Du Bois had good reason to draw on his work, as well as that of others, and the challenge he

⁶¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Foreword,” *The World and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007 [reprint, 1947]), xxxii.

⁶² Spady, “Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop,” *Présence Africaine*, 149/150 (1989): 303-304. On Hansberry’s education see also Kwame Wes Alford, “The Early Intellectual Growth and Development of William Leo Hansberry and the Birth of African Studies,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 30:3 (January 2000): 269-293.

mounted to the existing scholarship was rigorous. A contemporary reader's sympathy to it was, however, contingent upon the extent to which they themselves accepted that racism had shaped the work of the reigning authorities on the subject.

The experience of William Leo Hansberry, particularly in comparison to Cheikh Anta Diop, serves as particular illustration of this argument. As an undergraduate at Harvard, Hansberry had mounted the same challenge to Egyptological circles as Diop would in 1954. In a class taught by the celebrated Egyptologist George Andrew Reisner, Hansberry drew on ancient sources such as Herodotus to make the case for Egypt as a Black African civilization. Reisner refused to entertain the idea, on the basis that Black peoples had never developed civilizational greatness themselves. Reisner used Hansberry, the lone African American student in the class as a case in point, commenting: "You are a brilliant student Hansberry, but you are a product of our civilization."⁶³ The very evidence that suggested Egyptian civilizational sophistication to Reisner and his like-minded contemporaries, seemed to them to simultaneously be proof that it could not have been a Black civilization. The *a priori* assumption of Black inferiority shaped their conclusions. In a similar vein, Black African societies outside of Egypt, in more southern regions of Africa were considered to be ahistorical. As such, throughout his career, Hansberry not only repeatedly encountered the refrain that Egypt could not have been Black but also "the popular misconception that the early history of Africa south of the Sahara was a matter unworthy of serious academic concern."⁶⁴

Black history as anti-racism in the Untied States:

Compounding the sense of Black people's a-historicity within the American historical discipline was the extent to which not only historians of colour were excluded, but the subject

⁶³ James Spady, "Legacy of an African hunter," *Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 3:10 (November-December, 1970): 28-29.

⁶⁴ W. L. Hansberry, "W.E.B. Du Bois' influence on African history," *Freedomways*, 5 (Winter, 1965): 82.

of racism considered a “political problem” rather than a historical fact. When the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) was founded in Chicago in 1915, and its journal, the *Journal of Negro History*, launched by Carter G. Woodson the following year, careful language characterised its mission statement. The stated purpose of the *Journal of Negro History* was not “to drift into discussion of the Negro problem” but rather to “popularize the movement of unearthing the Negro and his contributions to civilization.”⁶⁵ Woodson’s white colleagues at the American Historical Association underlined the segregated character of the discipline’s professional associations when they explicitly welcomed what they described as the de-politicised nature of the *Journal of Negro History*. They applauded the decision to not discuss “the [N]egro Problem, but to exhibit the facts of [N]egro history”, an incontrovertibly modern phenomenon.⁶⁶ Of course, the hypocrisy of this reaction is clear in the fact that the *Journal of Negro History* was important not just for the topics it pursued, but for the opportunity it provided Black historians to publish their work. It was one of the few venues available to them in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. W.E.B. Du Bois is unusual in that an article of his was actually published in 1910 in the American Historical Association’s *American Historical Review*. It was the first by a Black historian to appear in that journal. This was by no means a sign of greater inclusivity: it was seventy years before John Hope Franklin’s 1980 article would make him the second Black historian to publish there.⁶⁷

Woodson, as the *Journal of Negro History*’s early editor as well as founder, may not have explicitly tackled the question of race relations in the United States in the pages of the

⁶⁵ The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, “A Neglected History”, *Journal of Negro History*, 1:1 (January 1916): n.p.

⁶⁶ “Historical News,” *American Historical Review* 21 (April 1916): 643.

⁶⁷ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” *American Historical Review*, 15:4 (July 1910):781-799. Earl Lewis makes this observation in his “Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas,” *American Historical Review*, 100:3 (1995):765-787. For more on the history of AHA exclusion of Black historians see Jaqueline Goggin, “Countering White Racist Scholarship: Carter G. Woodson and The Journal of Negro History,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 68:4 (Autumn, 1983): 355-375.

journal but he did have a political goal in creating the journal. Much like Cheikh Anta Diop some three or so decades later, Woodson wanted to use history, “the facts” of Black history, to assert Black humanity and to combat racist stereotypes. Indeed, in his own contributions to the *Journal of Negro History*, Woodson emphasised the “striking evidence that the colored people generally thrive when encouraged by their white neighbors.”⁶⁸ Integration was possible, if white America would just allow it. As such, Woodson also published work by white scholars whose views on Black history ran counter to mainstream white journals.

The topics covered in the *Journal of Negro History* tended to skew towards the Black experience in the United States, although most geographical regions were covered at one time or another. This history of the United States was, however, often framed in international terms that reinforced notions of African diaspora and transnational connections between Black peoples. This was also true of history focused pieces in W.E.B. Du Bois’ the *Crisis*, the organ journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.⁶⁹ Indeed, early efforts towards Pan-African anti-colonial and anti-racist organising were premised on a sense of shared historical origins in Africa, from the Trinidadian barrister, Henry Sylvester William’s, London Pan African Conference of 1900 through to W.E.B. Du Bois’ congresses of 1919, 1921, 1923, and 1927. These earlier movements tended to be more assimilationist in ideology, challenging the violence of colonialism rather than criticising it wholesale.⁷⁰

Carter Woodson was concerned not just with academic arenas but with public outreach. Undergirding both the aim of the *Journal of Negro History* and the ASNLH more broadly, was the assertion that Black people did in fact *have* a history and overcoming racism involved

⁶⁸ Carter G. Woodson, "The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War," *Journal of Negro History* 1:1 (1916): 1. See also: "Freedom and Slavery in Appalachian America," 1(1916): 132-50; "The Beginnings of the Miscegenation of the Whites and Blacks," 3(1918): 335-54; "Ten Years of Collecting and Publishing the Records of the Negro," 10(1925): 598-606; "Negro History Week," 11(1926): 237-42; "Attitudes of the Iberian Peninsula," 20(1935): 190-243; and "Notes on the Bakongo," 30(1945): 421-31.

⁶⁹ James W. Ivy, "Traditional NAACP Interest in Africa as Reflected in the Pages of The Crisis," in *Africa Seen by American Negro Scholars* (New York: American Society of African Culture, 1963), 229-46.

⁷⁰ See Sarah C. Dunstan, "Conflicts of Interest: The 1919 Pan-African Congress and the Wilsonian Moment," *Callaloo*, 39:1 (Winter 2016): 133-150.

learning that history. Woodson commented in a 1925 article that the ASNLH had become “a free reference bureau for information respecting the Negro. . . . on the early history of the Negro in this country and the past of the race in Africa.”⁷¹ Building on that momentum he launched Negro History Week in 1926. ANSLH branch leaders, often African American women working as teachers, librarians and community activists, brought the initiative to Black schools and libraries throughout the United States.⁷² Eleven years later Woodson also founded the Negro History Bulletin, with the aim of offering black communities a sense of their history. He described the rationale for doing so in the following way: “Not to know what one’s race has done in former times is to continue always a child. If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.”⁷³

In part this was about offering a sense of racial pride, a means through which to assert Black humanity against the de-humanising racism and oppression of the Jim Crow South and second class citizenship status African Americans suffered. Of course, even these changes within the parallel academy of African American history did not translate immediately to the classroom in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, in his autobiography the African American activist Malcolm X mused “I remember, we came to the textbook section on Negro History. It was exactly one paragraph long” and when the teacher came to it, they “laughed through it practically in a single breath”.⁷⁴ Much like the refusal to accept that Black Africa had a history, Black Americans were understood only to have a history relative to their place in the development of a white United States.

⁷¹ Carter G. Woodson, “Ten Years of Collecting and Publishing the Records of the Negro,” *The Journal of Negro History* 10 (October 1925): 605.

⁷² Deborah Gray White, “Introduction,” *Telling Histories, Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower* (Durham, NC, 2008), 10.

⁷³ Carter G. Woodson, “‘Forgotten Negroes’: Who Played Major Roles in the Race’s March of Progress,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1934, 4.

⁷⁴ Malcolm X, Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York : Ballantine Books, 1992 [1965]), 35.

Once again, this came back to prevailing notions that Africa had no history. Both Du Bois and Woodson had been cognisant of the importance of establishing African history on its own terms through the publication of textbooks and encyclopaedias. Unfortunately, the lack of funding available for such an endeavour left them without the wherewithal to see these plans to fruition. As early as 1908, Du Bois had in mind “an Encyclopedia Africana covering the chief points on the history and conditions of the Negro race.”⁷⁵ This was work he wanted undertaken by “leading scholars of the race” rather than white historians, whom he nonetheless imagined might have an advisory role. He went so far as to invite over sixty such scholars from the United States, Africa and the West Indies to take part in such an initiative but was ultimately unsuccessful in procuring funding.⁷⁶ Other efforts followed, including a Phelps Stokes funded venture in the 1930s for an *Encyclopaedia of the Negro* (although this initially did not involve W.E.B. Du Bois, or Carter Woodson.)⁷⁷ Woodson, who refused to be involved in the primarily white-led Phelps Stokes initiative, was excoriating of this project.⁷⁸ He hoped for a separate *Encyclopedia of the Negro* to be published under the auspices of the ANSLH, and kept in the hands of Black historians, for fear that white written histories would always reflect the racial biases built into white academia. Woodson was ultimately proven correct in his suspicions about the Phelps Stokes project, and funding dried up in 1941. Du Bois persevered with the project even as he lamented “that no money sufficient for the publication of such an

⁷⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois to Edward W. Blyden, 5 April 1909, reprinted in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois: Volume 1, Selections, 1877–1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, MA, 1973), 145–146. On the history of this see Jonathan Fenderson, “Evolving Conceptions of Pan-African Scholarship: W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and the ‘Encyclopedia Africana,’ 1909–1963,” *The Journal of African American History*, 95:1 (Winter 2010), pp. 71–91.

⁷⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Encyclopedia Africana” in *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1920–1963*, ed. Philip Foner (New York, NY, 1970), 322–325.

⁷⁷ For more on this history see Jonathan Fenderson, “Evolving Conceptions of Pan-African Scholarship: W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and the ‘Encyclopedia Africana,’ 1909–1963,” *The Journal of African American History* 95 (Winter 2010): 77–82.

⁷⁸ Carter G. Woodson, “Notes,” *The Journal of Negro History* 17 (January 1932): 116–118;

encyclopedia under the leadership of colored scholars and the collaboration of white men can soon be found.”⁷⁹

African Freedom and transnational solidarity through history:

It was in this context that Du Bois’ 1947 *The World and Africa* came out, once again railing against the authorities whose reading of the past was inextricable from their insistence upon Black inferiority. As such Du Bois’ intervention was both academic and aimed at a broader audience. In fact, he blamed a lack of historical knowledge for what he saw as the lack of solidarity between African Americans and African peoples. Writing in 1955, in an article also published in *Présence Africaine*, he lamented African American ignorance “of the history and present situation in Africa” and their indifference “to the fate of African[s].”⁸⁰ The Black community in the United States had lost interest in Africa because of the lamentable state of African American leadership. From the end of World War II, “American Negro Leadership was in the hands of a new Negro bourgeoisie and had left the hands of teachers, writers and social workers. Professional men joined this black bourgeoisie and the Negro began to follow white American display and conspicuous expenditure.”⁸¹ They sought to emulate white models, rather than build an African solidarity that Du Bois believed would better benefit them in the long term.⁸²

At the 1959 second Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Alioune Diop underlined the importance of this message when he declared that the task at hand “was “to restore history to its true dimensions” by accepting that the African and those of the African diaspora had just

⁷⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; repr. New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), 323. For more on the politics of the Phelps Stokes funding see: Fenderson, “Evolving Conceptions of Pan-African Scholarship,” 77-82.

⁸⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Africa and the American Negro Intelligentsia,” *Présence Africaine*, Nouvelle Série, 5 (December 1955–January 1956): 34.

⁸¹ Du Bois, “Africa and the American Negro Intelligentsia,” 50.

⁸² *Ibid*, 50.

as much to contribute and had, in fact, already contributed a great deal to the modern world.⁸³ The Burkinabé historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, another intellectual luminary associated with *Présence Africaine*, shared Diop's sensibilities about the significance of history in shaping African freedom. Ki-Zerbo, like Cheikh Anta Diop, had been trained in Paris at the Sorbonne. He was the first African to become *agrégé d'histoire* in France and had been a student of the renowned *Annales* historian Fernand Braudel.⁸⁴ During his time in Paris, he had also been an important figure in Black Catholic activist circles, working for change in France's colonial administration of Africa.⁸⁵ History, and specifically the cultivation of collective history that would lead to political independence, lay at the heart of his urging for a specifically African renaissance. As far as he was concerned, "communities and peoples are the fruit of their history. History is the memory of nations".⁸⁶ From at least the fifteenth century onwards, African peoples had had their histories "brutally confiscated" by European imperialists and slave traders. The task of the historian in the era of decolonization was nothing less than the "recovery of consciousness of the Black-African peoples."⁸⁷ Ki-Zerbo meant this in an academic and a political sense, as he strongly believed that part of reclaiming African history was asserting the national character of the Haut Volta region and winning independence. A committed nationalist, Ki-Zerbo co-founded that Mouvement de libération nationale (MLN) or National Liberation Movement in order to campaign against remaining in Charles De Gaulle's French Community in 1958. The Haut Volta territory ultimately voted against leaving the French Fifth Republic and Ki-Zerbo would relocate to Sékou Touré's independent Guinea until it became independent in 1960.

⁸³ Alioune Diop, "Discours d'ouverture du 2ème congrès international des écrivains et des artistes noirs à Rome en 1959," *Présence Africaine*, 24–25 (February–May 1959): 49.

⁸⁴ See F. Pajot, *Joseph Ki-Zerbo: itinéraire d'un intellectuel africain au XXe siècle* (Paris, 2007).

⁸⁵ See E. Foster, "Entirely Christian and Entirely African': Catholic African Students in France in the Era of Independence," *Journal of African History*, 56:2 (2015): 253.

⁸⁶ Joseph Ki Zerbo, "Histoire et conscience nègre" *Présence Africaine*, Nouvelle série, No. 16 (octobre-novembre 1957), pp. 53-69. (53).

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 53.

By 1960, Cheikh Anta Diop had honed his argument about the value of the African past into a narrative that placed a Black Egypt alongside Rome and Greece as the origin points of modern human civilization. Under a new thesis question, "Comparative study of political and social systems of Europe and Africa, from Antiquity to the formation of modern states", he was finally awarded his doctorate. This time, he had a more sympathetic supervisor, the specialist of pre-history, André Leroi-Gourhan. Moreover, his examination committee was chaired by the classicist and *Le Musée vivant* patron, André Aymard, then dean of the Faculty of Letters. His thesis had a different resonance in the context of 1960, a moment wherein most of France's African territories had gained or were about to gain their independence from empire. They were joining the world order as modern nation states, literally entering into history in a way that hitherto been denied them. Such political independence not automatically equate to a less hostile academic environment but the two phenomena certainly had a reciprocal relationship in terms of what was possible for Black scholars such as Diop.

Diop's thesis became two books, both published with *Présence Africaine: L'Afrique noire précoloniale* and *L'Unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire*. In these works Diop contended that contemporary Black Africa could look back to a contribution at least equivalent to that of Western Europe. The ramifications of this line of thinking are particularly evident in Diop's 1960 comparative study of European and African political organization: *L'Afrique noire pré-coloniale*. Influenced in particular by Gaston Bachelard's notion of 'units of time', Diop formulated an understanding of historical continuity that linked pre-colonial African civilizations to the black diasporic present by framing the colonial period as one of "historical dormancy" or "memory loss."⁸⁸ In so doing, he sought to disrupt hegemonic readings of linear time and thus overcome their implicit teleological characterisation of European cultures as both

⁸⁸ See Gaston Bachelard, *La dialectique de la durée* (Paris : Les Presses universitaires de France, Deuxième tirage de la nouvelle édition, 1963 [1950]) ; *L'Intuition de l'instant*, (Paris : Editions Gonthier, 1932).

the pinnacle of civilizational achievement and the only entrance into modernity.⁸⁹ Understanding history like this was important because it allowed Africans to realise the continuity of their past and personhood as the natural state of being, a state only corrupted because of European intervention.

A New World Order through Historiographical Revision:

As we have seen, Diop was far from alone in adopting this position. It transcended the realm of academic argument and took shape in internationalist African political endeavours. Not long after Diop published *L' Afrique noire pré-coloniale*, the Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah invited Du Bois to Africa to work on an “Encyclopedia Africana” at the Ghana Academy of Learning. Nkrumah was not just the president of the newly independent Ghana, he was also, as such, the symbol of the successes of Pan-African anti-colonialism. Writing for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1961, Du Bois declared that this new project would not just be about race, “but on the peoples inhabiting the content of Africa.”⁹⁰ Such a project had only become possible in a political context with “independent Africans to carry it out.”⁹¹ Du Bois, and Nkrumah’s ambitions for the work were lofty: they hoped it would go some way towards eliminating “the artificial boundaries created on this continent by colonial masters. Designations such as ‘British Africa,’ ‘French Africa,’ ‘Black Africa,’ Islamic Africa,’ too often serve to keep alive differences which in large part have been imposed on Africans by outsiders. . . . The encyclopedia is concerned with Africa as a whole.”⁹²

It was a mammoth undertaking, and by the time of Du Bois’ death in August 1963, the Encyclopedia remained unfinished. The impetus to re-write African history in a way that

⁸⁹ For an in depth exploration of the challenge to linear understandings of time in the post-War context see Fraiture, *Past Imperfect*.

⁹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, “Encyclopedia Africana,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 October 1961.

⁹¹ “Encyclopedia Africana,” in Foner, *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks*, 323.

⁹² “Encyclopedia Africana,” 323.

centred African humanity did not, however, die with him. The staff hired to compile the Encyclopedia Africana under Du Bois' leadership continued to work on it, eventually publishing three volumes of *The Encyclopedia Africana: A Dictionary of African Biography* in 1977, 1979 and 1995 respectively.⁹³ Similarly, Carter Woodson's vision for an encyclopedia ultimately took shape in the United States through the ASNLH production of ten volumes on *The International Library of Negro Life and History*. This series was much narrower than Woodson's original project, focusing solely on "the cultural and historical backgrounds" of Black Americans rather than on Africa.⁹⁴

In this post-independence period, the *Encyclopedia Africana* and the ASNLH projects were not the only such efforts towards asserting Black and African histories. At the 1964 General Conference of Unesco, newly independent African nations pushed for a strong position on the recovery of African ownership of their past and for control over the production of knowledge around the past. Political independence from European empire was only the first step in the decolonizing process. The future, they argued, needed to include control of the past. The result of their lobbying was the decision to sponsor an eight volume *General History of Africa*. This General History was intended as an opportunity to centre African voices and demonstrate African contributions throughout time to universal civilization. The resulting eight volume, multi-authored work took thirty-five years to complete.⁹⁵ (A length of time not dissimilar to the efforts behind the *Encyclopedia Africana* and *The International Library of Negro History and Life*.)

⁹³ L. H. Ofofu-Appiah and Keith Irvine, *Encyclopedia Africana: Dictionary of African Biography: Ethiopia and Ghana, Volume I* (Algonic, MI, 1977); L. H. Ofofu-Appiah and Keith Irvine, *Encyclopedia Africana: Dictionary of African Biography: Sierra Leone and Zaire, Volume II* (Algonic, MI, 1979); L.H. Ofofu-Appiah, *Encyclopedia Africana: Dictionary of African Biography: South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Volume III* (Algonic, MI, 1995).

⁹⁴ Charles H. Wesley, "Preface," in *The Negro in Music and Art*, ed. Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1967), vii.

⁹⁵ In 2009, a further three volumes were announced to be in preparation.

In the preface to the first Unesco volume, on *Methodology and African Pre-History* (1981), the first Black Unesco General-Director, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, wrote "In exercising their right to take the historical initiative, Africans themselves have felt a deep-seated need to re-establish the historical authenticity of their societies on solid foundations." One of the great sins of colonialism had been the "refusal to see Africans as the creators of original cultures which flowered and survived over the centuries in patterns of their own making."⁹⁶ Not only did this distort "even the basic concepts of historiography" but it cemented harmful racial stereotypes that were in turn used to justify the violence of colonialism.⁹⁷

Born in Senegal in 1921, M'Bow himself had grown up under the auspices of Third Republic France, fighting on behalf of the Free French forces during the war before taking a degree in Geography at the Sorbonne. Alongside the Unesco General History project, M'Bow was a staunch advocate of the return of African artefacts from European museums to their respective points of origin.⁹⁸ It seemed abhorrent to him that it was not until his studies in Paris that he, like many Africans of his generation, had "begun to become fully aware of the most significant facts" of his own history.⁹⁹ African peoples needed to have access to their history in their home countries. For M'Bow, the function of the Unesco history project was thus twofold. It was an emancipatory project for African and African-descended people, and an assertion of African humanity in the face of centuries of European imperialist insistence upon white supremacy.

Such positioning was directly related to the way that the international institutions of the League of Nations and the United Nations had based their systems of mandate and trusteeship

⁹⁶ Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Preface", *Methodology and African Pre-History* (Unesco. International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa), xvii-xviii.

⁹⁷ M'Bow, "Preface", xvii-xviii.

⁹⁸ See Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, "Pour le retour, a ceux qui l'ont crée, d'un patrimoine culturel irremplaçable", *Museum*, 31 :1 (1979): 58.

⁹⁹ M'Bow, "Hommage à Alioune Diop, fondateur de la Société Africaine de Culture et de la revue "Présence Africaine," *Présence Africaine*, Nouvelle série, 174, (September 2006): Volume I: Cérémonies d'ouverture et hommage / Opening Adresses and Tribute, 84-5.

upon notions of the a-historicity of Black peoples. If the United Nations of the 1960s was to be different, then it needed, as M'Bow indicated, to acknowledge the falsity of these positions. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who was the editor of the series' first volume, underlined this need, when he began his contribution to the volume with the simple, yet powerful sentence: "Africa has a history."¹⁰⁰ As scholars began to accept this, and to make strides towards the rediscovery of this history, so too would understandings of the current political order be transformed. Cheikh Anta Diop would have agreed with Ki-Zerbo's declaration that "discoveries about Africa, sometimes spectacular ones, call in question the meaning of certain phases in the history of mankind as a whole."¹⁰¹

In the almost five decades between the publication of Diop's 1955 *Nations nègres* and the final Unesco volume in 1999, African history established itself firmly as a university discipline.¹⁰² Likewise, African American and African diasporic histories, so long marginalised within the Western academy, began in the same period to figure much more prominently in so-called mainstream conceptions of the field of history.¹⁰³ It is, as this essay shows, no coincidence that these efforts gained momentum in the post-World War II period when the European projects of colonialism in Africa became increasingly politically fragile and ultimately broke down. In the United States, these decades also marked watershed moments in the struggles of Black Americans to secure civil rights. In this period of undoing and remaking, the imagining of decolonial, antiracist futures required the revalorization of the African past. As the V.Y. Mudimbe quote that opened this chapter reminds us, the terrain of history was,

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction," 1.

¹⁰¹ Ki-Zerbo, "General Introduction," 2.

¹⁰² B. Jewsiewicki and V.Y. Mudimbe, "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa," *History and Theory*, 32:4 (1993):2.

¹⁰³ On the movement of African American history into the "mainstream" see Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *What Is African American History?* (Malden, 2015), 6–26. See also Claire Parfait, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, and Claire Bourhis-Mariotti eds., *Writing History from the Margins: African Americans and the Quest for Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2017)

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24.08.2022

and remains, an important part of efforts to combat racism and to decolonise the ideological infrastructures of the West.