



CENTERING BLACK SCHOLARSHIP

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BLACK HISTORY

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Defending the Patriarchs of Black History

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It is often stated that Pan-Africanism is dead, or if not deceased, dying. To critics, the movement has been “usurped by a few black liberation elites” to validate their “pervasive plunder of our resources under the pretext of the emancipating the masses” (Muswe, 2014). This view, and others, alleges African leaders are the greatest impediment to African unification because they adopt policies that are either so ineffective or corrupt that Pan-Africanism remains a “fallacy”. Whilst this author firmly rejects the assertion that Pan-Africanism is dead, it is fair to say, some African leaders have not engendered solidarity in the region. Likewise, the African Union have departed from their founding fathers’ aims of unity (Greenaway-Harvey, 2017). However, in this author’s view, arguments that refer to the political failings of continental leaders as evidence for the lack of Pan-Africanism overlook the socio-cultural nature of the movement. As Boddy-Evans asserts Pan-Africanism is now perceived to be “much more a cultural and social philosophy than the politically driven movement of the past” (Boddy-Evans, 2017). Yet, you can go further to state that it has always been so. As this essay will reveal, Pan-Africanism began in the minds of community leaders and academics on a mission to reinstate pride in African culture.

Unfortunately, their journeys were far less straightforward than this noble mission. Labelled as fraudulent and discredited as pseudo-historians, many 20th Century Pan-Africanists overcame needless burdens to publicize volumes on African civilisations that are still applicable today. Thus, it is through an examination of some of these teachers, their trials and triumphs that people of African descent can ensure that Pan-Africanism stays alive.

Today, it is regularly mooted that an individual's history, behaviour and beliefs should be assessed in terms of their own cultural norms. The great work of scholars, like Edward Said in the 1970s, has outlined the link between the mischaracterisation of Asian societies as culturally deficient (cultural imperialism) to justify actual imperialism (Said, 1978). To Said, the conquest of indigenous cultures is a constant – if not necessary- process for the conquest of a society and the field of cultural relativism has developed greatly in light of these insights. Yet three decades before Said's seminal text, noted African-American theorists began to investigate the misrepresentation of ancient African civilisations in western thought.

John Henrik Clarke was a pioneer of these investigations. Born in Alabama in 1915, the bulk of Clarke's cultural education occurred when he migrated to Harlem in 1933. Under the mentorship of Arturo Schomburg and others figures in the Harlem Renaissance, Clarke taught himself black history. By 1949 he begun to educate others. Through his publications in the Harlem Quarterly- the magazine he co-founded – The Pittsburgh courier and many more, Clarke established himself as prolific Negro writer. From the 1950s onwards, Clarke lectured widely in Ghana, Nigeria and the USA. In Clarke's view history was the essential starting point for African-Americans because "it is a compass they [could] use to find themselves on the map of human geography" (Clarke, 1997). However, Clarke did not accept mainstream perceptions of African history. His field, Africana Studies aimed to demonstrate that the "African-American is not without a cultural past".

Thus Clarke's teachings were insightful and often revolutionary. He gained prominence in the 1960s Black Nationalism movement, challenging historical inaccuracies as a means of activism. In 1968, he edited a collection of essays from 10 black writers about the misrepresentation of slavery in William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Styron, 1968). The Black Anti-Defamation Association was formed out of this activism (Brown, 2016). Clarke continued to challenge the status quo throughout his career, offering novel theories on accepted practices. For example, Clarke refuted the progressiveness of religion and claimed it was the "hand-maiden of conquerors."

These themes and others were explored in his extensive body of work, which includes some 24 books he had either written or edited, plus numerous recorded lectures.

By the end of Clarke's life he was recognized as a distinguished historian. Founding a black studies department at Hunter College and developing the curriculum at Cornell University, Clarke was duly awarded for his efforts in 1995 with the Receiving the Woodson Medallion in 1995 for his study of the Afro-American life and history. However, his ascension to greatness was far from smooth. Clarke's revelations were marginalized as baseless (Thomas, 1998). These criticisms were furthered by Henrik's lack of formal education. Although Clarke received a PhD by 1992, the majority of his academic work was carried out before Clarke had received higher education. This fact is regularly highlighted in assessments of Clarke's life and legacy, with distinguished papers referring to him as "an eighth-grade dropout who eventually took courses at New York University and Columbia but never graduated" (Thomas, 1998).

Although that particular paper goes on to detail Clarke's accomplishments, its crudity tarnishes them. Furthermore, this comment recreates a common criticism of Pan-African scholars: that they do not possess the requisite qualifications and by extension knowledge, to generate valid theories. One historian that is endemically accused of falsifying his credentials is Yosef Alfredo Antonio "Dr Ben" Ben-Jochannan. Like Clarke, Ben-Jochannan's enlightenment occurred in Harlem. His early interactions with African-Americans in the 1940s Ben-Jochannan was a Caribbean native who uncovered with a proclivity for Egyptology. He outlined the African origins of religion, culture and various elements of civilization in a frank, inimitable manner, for instance, he is infamous for stating that not "Jews were all 'hook-nosed and sallow faced" some were black like himself. Through his teachings Dr Ben challenged the whiteness of religion and he even offered an alternative chronology to the bible in his 1991 book '*Chronology of the Bible*' Dr Ben's work was both "controversial and polarizing." However he acknowledged that controversy was an inevitable part of decolonising world history, suggesting work that receives "the endorsement of everyone has said nothing meaningful."

The many inconsistencies over Ben-Jochannan's credentials, place of birth and even national origins reduced his overall credibility. Reports from Cambridge University that they have no record of Ben-Jochannan's attendance are difficult to reconcile with his claims that he attained his PhD there (Kestenbaum, 2015). Nor are his assertions that he taught at institutions before they were in existence. As such, Kestenbaum rightly highlights the 'contested' nature of his legacy. Yet, the crux of the matter is the validity and utility of Ben-Jochannan's theories. As Henrik-Clarke has highlighted a lack of formal education is not tantamount to a lack of knowledge, this may hold true for Ben-Jochannan. He, too, penned 49 books, lectured at; Cornell and Rutgers Universities, the Malcolm King College and was granted an honorary faculty position at Israelite Rabbinical Academy. His works, particularly in religious doctrine, have been heralded as "vehicles" for spiritual empowerment and his praise of the black woman also brought great pride in the community (African Globe, 2012).

However, Lefkowitz has argued that is all he has done (Lefkowitz, 1997). She criticizes Ben-Jochannan for distorting history to convey black excellence and argues this is typical of Afrocentric theorists. This allegation of pseudo history is a serious charge that challenges the integrity the historiography of Pan-African scholars. Ben-Jochannan has been accused of this from both European and Afrocentric scholars (Walker, 2001). However though the many inconsistencies in accounts of his personal life harm his overall credibility, one must objectively assess the strengths of his research. Ben-Jochannan's many books are a "researcher's dream" due to the detailed critical analysis and visual data he utilises to support his arguments (Zulu, 2016). Furthermore, many of his claims have now become accepted tenets of history.

From a broader perspective, Lefkowitz's allegation that Afrocentric thought adapts history as a means of propaganda, can appear ironic, because the same arguments have been levelled against mainstream history (Foucault, 2004). Thus, as Asante argues Afrocentric theories developed to redress this bias (Asante, 2003). For example, the theories of the distinguished Senegalese scientist and historian Chiek Anta Diop have also faced sustained academic attack from Lefkowitz and a series of mainstream historians. From the beginning of his career Diop's ideas were not well

received, he expended “titanic and herculean effort” for more than a decade to have his PhD thesis accepted, in which time he submitted four titles (Rashidi) Even when it was accepted in 1960, it was on far broader terms than his earlier attempts. The earlier additions examined Ancient African culture on their own; the final thesis was a comparative study of African and European civilizations. So, whilst he obtained his doctorate at the time, mainstream Parisian scholars were still unwilling to accept a range of his ideas. To bypass this, Diop independently published his earlier attempts thesis in *Nations nègres et culture (Negro Nations and Culture)*. He also refused to submit his ideas to peer-reviewed journals and seek the opinions of other scholars, although this was common academic practice. These decisions have helped to discredit Diop and further the idea that he perpetuated myth over genuine historical reasoning (Froment, 1991).

Nonetheless, Diop sought to substantiate his claims with research from a broad range of academic disciplines. His primary claim, that the earliest humans “were ethnically homogeneous and Negroid,” stemmed from an application of Gloger’s law; that warm blooded animals in hot climates are pigmented – to Louis Leakey’s hypothesis that humans originated from the East Africa’s Great Lakes Region (Gale, 2005). Diop theorised that these Negroids migrated through the Sahara and Nile Valley to Egypt and that “whites were absent from Egypt” until 1300 BC. In Diop’s view, Egyptians and other African countries had traits of an “indigenous united culture” that centred on matriarchy, collectivism and agriculture among other things (Diop, 1989). To make this case, Diop demonstrated the similarities between Ancient Egyptian languages and modern African Wolof, arguing that the Egyptian root for these words illustrated the migration of culture out of Egypt. Today, these ideas do not appear revolutionary, however, as Mokhtar notes in Diop’s time “few anthropological problems have given rise to so much impassioned discussion” (Gamal, 1990).

Diop’s insistence on a homogenous African culture has faced sustained criticism. It is proffered that his attempt to racialise cultures led him to dismiss the ethnic and cultural variety in the continent. For example Tourneax argued that in the same manner as European theorists Diop’s desire for an Egyptian root for African languages led him to

misinterpret and transliterate words to suit this purpose (Torneaux, 2010). However, other theorists such as Theophile Obenga also noted these linguistic similarities (Obenga, 1992). Transliteration necessarily involves a degree of interpretation that can be impacted by bias, therefore it is difficult to accept any theory wholesale. Still, it is fair to state, in other aspects of his theories claims that Diop sought to racialise history are unfair. Diop himself acknowledged the dangers of maintaining an “obsessional importance” to race and he refuted concepts of an authentic negro (Wané, 1998). Much of his work sought to overcome the convention that by “mingling with a Mediterranean component Egyptians could be assimilated into a purely Caucasoid race” and to bring out the African element too (Diop, 1997). Unlike other Pan-African theorists Diop sought to outline the relevance of Africa as one of the cradles of civilisation, he did not seek to assert its superiority.

To this end, Lefkowitz isn't wrong; Pan-African theories can bring pride back into the community. Yet the pride and grandeur they evoke is more than mere narcissism, it is, as Amos Wilson has shown an essential step for liberation (Wilson, 1998). This “Afrocentric Psychological Warrior” (Kambon, 2013) took a more personalised approach to Black liberation than the theorists mentioned above. Beginning his career in social work, Wilson observed similar patterns of trauma in his black case studies. These trends led Wilson to suspect that antisocial problems in the community such as ‘The Black Criminal’ were created as a “political necessity to maintain and perpetuate white supremacy” (Shine, 2013). Therefore, in Wilson's view, the remedy for these social ills was to reduce the power and influence of white supremacy by proposing Afrocentric alternatives. He taught at the City University of New York from 1981 to 1986 and at the College of New Rochelle from 1987 to 1995 and wrote several books on black empowerment. In his *Blueprint for black power* Wilson “operationalises what Black power should encompass” on social, economic, psychological and political fronts (Lowman & Jamison, 2013). He argued that the African and Caribbean nations should combine their efforts to counter white and Asian power networks and analyses the stronghold of power within the US. This blueprint has been utilised as “road map” for black liberation by many theorists and had diverse practical applications.

Wilson was also cognizant of the manner in which wider power struggles affect the psyche of black people. Actually, he posited that the best manner to understand the world is through a detailed knowledge of oneself, because “it is through getting to know the self intimately that we get to know the forces that shaped us as a self” (Wilson, 1993) Wilson therefore sought to assist African-Americans to understand and to heal themselves. His work also led him to Canada and the Caribbean. Through his “synthesis” of previous works on African liberation psychology he detailed insights into awakening the genius potential of black children; black child development; black on black crime and many other social phenomenon that continue to be applied today (Lowman & Jamison, 2013). Wilson’s theories have stood the test of time because he pragmatically connected his theories to the social realities of black people and offering counselling to those in need (Kambon, 2013). The institute named after him, continues to carry out this work.

Wilson’s work is an interesting case study because it highlights in a very direct way the manner in which the theories of our Pan-African fathers can be used to bring about psychological healing. He treated individuals in the community suffering from a body of illnesses that have since been classified as Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome, but he also codified this therapy through his scholarship. Dennard advocates the study of Wilson’s texts because they detail the vocation of a scholar and activist, and this view could be extended to all of the theorists within this essay. Through their dissemination of an authentic African history Clarke, Ben-Jochannan and Diop granted individuals an awareness of self in which they could take to analyse the wider world. These theories must be taught and reinforced in order to bring about healing and progression.