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☐ *Kemet* - ancient history, critical history

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1. Differing lives 1955 1996 2018

Among African-centred historians of ancient Egypt, **Cheikh Anta Diop** continues to exert exceptional influence beyond the institutional academy. Yet his major works receive limited systematic analysis from the disciplines of history, anthropology, archaeology and Egyptology at the universities with the most comprehensive research libraries and the fullest access to funding. Against this rejection by omission, the detailed review by **François-Xavier Fauvelle** offers a notable exception, as **Elikia M'Bokolo** emphasises in its preface.¹ As a European historian of Africa, **Fauvelle** cites leading contemporaries on right and left in French historiography, **François Furet** and **Marc Ferro**, in placing the question of ideology at the centre of his 1996 study. From the observation “*Au fond, il y a toujours de l'idéologie*” (“At heart, there is always ideology”), **Fauvelle** describes the aim of his review in the following terms:

“à quoi sert ce travail? Certainement pas à *juger* Ch. A. Diop, mais à le *situer*. Certainement pas à *mettre en cause* ses thèses, mais à les *mettre en perspective*. Il ne s'agit en somme que de juger l'œuvre à l'étalon de ce dont elle se juge exempte: l'idéologie.”²

When **Fauvelle** asserts that the works consider themselves free from ideology, he is applying a definition constructed over the preceding pages, summarised in this statement:

“*Nous dirons qu'est idéologique tout énoncé qui, à quelque niveau que ce soit, est incapable de justifier sa production ou de reconnaître son caractère problématique*”.³

According to his terms, the negative aim not to judge **Cheikh Anta Diop**, or his theories, would be consistent with judging the publications through their underlying ideology.

Fauvelle raises issues of self-contradiction and ideological self-occlusion in relation to the African author; they apply equally to disciplinary European historiography. In its wider impact on readers, a judgement of underlying principles might seem to involve inescapably the judgement of author and work. More lethally, an underlying ideology of Eurocentrism remains intensively active in enabling people of European descent in and outside Europe to

¹ M'Bokolo, E., “Préface”, in F.-X. Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, Paris, Karthala, 1996, pp. 7-13.

² Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 27 (“What is the purpose of my study? Certainly not to judge Ch. A. Diop, but to *situate* him. Certainly not to *call into question* his theses, but to *put them in perspective*. In sum it is only a matter of judging his works by the measure of the factor of which they consider themselves exempt: ideology”: note that these translations are my own attempts).

³ Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 23 (“I identify as ideological any statement which, whatever its level, is incapable of justifying its production or of recognising its problematic character”).

“forget their present”,⁴ by avoiding their centuries-long history of inflicting genocide on Europe itself and on other territories.⁵

Later studies by **Fauvelle** attracted comments on these issues of ideology and context. In 2009, three of his articles up to 2002 were republished as *La mémoire aux enchères. L'idéologie afrocentriste à l'assaut de l'histoire*.⁶

In review, **Sarah Fila-Bakabadio** questioned the reduction of such a diverse phenomenon to the term “Afrocentrist ideology” in the singular, which removes from view a “*multitude d'afrocentrismes universitaires comme populaires*”. She considered that republication of the articles would have been strengthened by adding some comment on the historical context of growth and popularity of Afrocentrisms.⁷

Similarly **Marie-Aude Fouéré** concluded her descriptive review with regret at the lack of any conclusion or update, given developments in postcolonial studies, and wider enthusiasm inside and beyond the university.⁸ A broader approach may be sought in the collective scholarship assembled in 2000 by **Fauvelle** with **Jean-Pierre Chrétien** and **Claude-Hélène Perrot**, where a plurality of “Afrocentrisms” did enter the title.⁹

Reviewing that volume, **Martin Klein** endorsed objections by some contributors to African-centred writers. However, after noting the argument that “many of the Afrocentrics are not interested in testing their ideas”, he observed how “many of their critics are equally closed to the notion that there may be a germ of truth in Afrocentric writing”. **Klein** begins to respond to the need for historical context:

“We also have to recognize that the reason why Afrocentric ideologies are popular is that they are a response to centuries of slavery, racism, and colonialism”.¹⁰

⁴ From Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, Johannes Fabian finds “the suggestion that history, or the past, must be *thought* and the present should be *remembered*”: J. Fabian, *Memory against Culture. Arguments and reminders*, Durham N.C., Duke University Press, 2007, 99.

⁵ Involvement in both colonialist violence and its amnesia extends beyond the major imperialist states to peoples across the European continent, as argued from Sweden by Sven Lindqvist in works such as *Utrota varenda jävel*, Stockholm, Albert Bonner, 1992 (English translation *Exterminate all the brutes*, London, Granta, 1997).

⁶ On lack of attention to continuing Eurocentrism here, see Lancelot Arzel, “*Les armes tranchantes de la mémoire*” at https://www.nonfiction.fr/article-2986-p1-les_armes_tranchantes_de_la_memoire.htm : “à trop porter la focale sur l'afrocentrisme, il en oublie l'existence d'un archipel d'historiens occidentaux, certes isolés, mais qui se font les défenseurs d'une histoire explicitement eurocentrée, voire blanche.” (“by excessive focus on Afrocentrism, he leaves out the existence of an archipelago of Western historians, doubtless isolated, but setting themselves as the defenders of an exclusively European, or white, history”).

⁷ Fila-Bakabadio, S., review in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales* 70.2, 2015, 523-525

⁸ Fouéré, M.-A., review in *Journal des africanistes* 80.1-2, 2010, 321-324: §5 “Qu'en est-il aujourd'hui de la place de l'afrocentrisme dans le monde universitaire, et de son audience populaire?” (“what is the place today of Afrocentrism in the university world, and of its popular audience?”); “*Quelle place est accordée aux voix africaines qui proposent d'autres définitions de l'africanité, ceci en considération de la reconnaissance accrue des études postcoloniales aux Etats-Unis ?*” (“what place is assigned to African voices proposing other definitions of Africanness, considering the enhanced recognition of postcolonial studies in the United States?”).

⁹ Fauvelle-Aymar, F.-X., J.-P. Chrétien, C.-H. Perrot (eds.), *Afrocentrismes: L'histoire des Africains entre Egypte et Amérique*. Paris, Karthala, 2000.

¹⁰ Klein, M., review in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35. 1, 2002, 154-157.

As these reviews indicate, the further writings by **Fauvelle** on Afrocentrism into the late 1990s and early 2000s can assist an understanding of his earlier work and its underlying ideology. Yet the acknowledgement by **Klein** falls far short of the 1996 preface by **M'Bokolo**, in defining the historical contexts for the vast resonance of African-centred writing as the point that requires attention and explanation. **M'Bokolo** did not find originality in **Cheikh Anta Diop**: “*au-delà du style, sur le fond, les arguments utilisés étaient, eux aussi, passablement connus*”;¹¹ “toute l’œuvre de **Cheikh Anta Diop**, pour les connaisseurs, un air de ‘déjà vu’”.¹²

Instead, the challenge to the connoisseur from this history is precisely this disjuncture between familiar argument and exceptional impact: “cette impression se révèle si forte qu’on ne peut laisser d’être surprise par la surprise suscitée par **Cheikh Anta Diop** et par le “choc” que son œuvre a provoqué et continue de provoquer”.¹³ In university departments outside Africa, the shock at the shock has led most often to expressions of irritation or contempt,¹⁴ belying a profound sense of irreversible disturbance. Within the space of two pages, **M'Bokolo** is able to outline three salient factors as a basis for understanding the **Diop** impact in historical context. First he highlights “cette audace inouïe qui fit de lui le premier, dans le domaine de l’égyptologie et de l’histoire africaine, à prendre le contre-pied des thèses acquises et du “sens commun” universitaire”.¹⁵ Here **M'Bokolo** turns against disciplinary researchers their own abhorrence of a “common sense” beyond their universities. Related to this, the second factor is the dual character of “la subversion diopienne”, in simultaneously rejecting a received historical ideology, and importing into scientific territory the voice from the outside.¹⁶ **M'Bokolo** emphasises that the formal reaction of the PhD jury had been to offer him a doctorate, but not on his thesis that ancient Egypt belonged to the history of Africa, and that the university world in general continues to repeat that reaction to those who cite **Cheikh Anta Diop**.

Although the story continues along the same confrontational lines today, the third factor identified by **M'Bokolo** is historical timing: the corpus of writings by the Senegalese historian “est née au milieu des batailles pour les indépendances et s’est épanouie au cœur

¹¹ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.10 (“beyond the style, essentially the arguments deployed were also rather familiar”).

¹² M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.9 (“together the works of Cheikh Anta Diop prompts, for specialists, a feeling of déjà vu”).

¹³ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.9 (“this impression is so strong that you have to be surprised at the surprise which Cheikh Anta Diop caused, and by the shock which his works provoked and continue to provoke”).

¹⁴ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.10 on the “*mépris dont certains l'accablent*” (“contempt with which some people treat him”).

¹⁵ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.10 (“this audacity, unheard of, which made him the first in Egyptology and African history to take a stand against theoretical assumptions and the “common sense” of university thinking”).

¹⁶ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p.11 “*subversion d’une idéologie de l’histoire d’une part; mais aussi, ce qui était un comble, importation, sur le terrain scientifique, de ce que ses adversaires ont sans cesse considéré comme le “sens commun” profane et vulgaire, comme une idée fixe et dénuée de fondement, chère à une poignée d’intellectuels noirs en manque d’histoire*” (“subversion of an ideology of history on one side; but also, the height of presumption, importing, onto scientific terrain, what his opponents have unceasingly considered to be profane and vulgar “common sense”, a fixed and baseless idea, dear to a handful of black intellectuals lacking a history”).

des interrogations africaines sur le devenir de l'Afrique"¹⁷ If the past is never finished, then the questions of history remain acute when they address the future, beyond the university. The success of **Cheikh Anta Diop** resides, then, in the urgency of his aims; opposition to his success may be most intense where that urgency is unwelcome, and denied.

At the same time, **M'Bokolo** identifies a particular potential of the 1996 **Fauvelle** study in its attentiveness, detail and clarity. Indeed, **Fauvelle** ends on the prospect of harnessing the growth in memory studies to resolving differences in approach: "Au fond, lire **Diop**, c'est assister à une tentative, celle de fonder une mémoire collective. La jugera-t-on au même étalon que l'histoire qu'il écrit? Car quand bien même l'œuvre ne répond pas tout à fait aux *questions* que nous nous posons, force est de reconnaître qu'elle mobilise de profondes *aspirations*".¹⁸

The assessment by **M'Bokolo** encourages me to pursue the theme of contradiction as it arises in the 1996 publication. I wish to contrast the prohibitions by **Fauvelle** against Afrocentrist methods of enquiry, with the prohibitions by European critical theorists against historicism. From my constricted disciplinary corner within Egyptology, both Afrocentrism and critical theory overcome the stagnation and isolation which have been seen as characterising Egyptology.¹⁹ In this context, the judgements by **Fauvelle** on **Diop** are of direct relevance to the study of ancient Egypt, and illustrate ways in which the **Diop** approach deserves attention from disciplinary Egyptologists.

2. Structures of movement across space and time

The argument in **Fauvelle**, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, moves with cumulative confidence through its targets: ideology ("Introduction - Questions de position"), African cultural unity and "l'univers diopien" ("1. Une philosophie pour l'Afrique - Histoire et culture"), rival ideologies in the universe of **Fauvelle** ("2. Une idéologie de la connaissance - Marxisme et vérité"), the litmus test of falsification in scientific knowledge ("3. Epistémologie et méthodologie" ending with the sub-section "L'histoire déduite, ou l'histoire sans faits"), race, origin myths, movement and language ("4. Schémas, paradigmes, mythes - les césures du réel"), to a summary of definitive tone ("Conclusion - vérités, identité). Chapter 4 contains the responses of the historian to the procedures adopted by **Cheikh Anta Diop** in relation to time and space:

¹⁷ M'Bokolo, "Préface", in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, p. 12 (it "was born in the midst of the multiple battles for independence and flowered at the heart of the African debates on the future of Africa").

¹⁸ Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 179 ("Fundamentally, to read Diop is to experience an endeavour, the endeavour at founding a collective memory. Are we to judge that according to the same standards by which we judge the history which he writes? For even if his works do not fully answer the *questions* which we set ourselves, it must be recognised that they put into play profound *aspirations*").

¹⁹ Giddy, L. "The present state of Egyptian archaeology: 1997 update", in A. Leahy, John Tait (eds.), *Studies on ancient Egypt in honour of H. S. Smith*, London, Egypt Exploration Society, 1999, pp. 109-113; Moreno Garcia, J. C. "The cursed discipline? The peculiarities of Egyptology at the turn of the Twenty-First Century", in W. Carruthers (ed.), *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 50-63.

*“Les analogies relevées par **Diop** dessinent sans trembler des diagonales dans le temps ou dans l’espace ou dans les deux à la même fois”.*²⁰

In his review of the co-edited volume cited above, **Martin Klein** would echo the charge from critics of Afrocentrism that “many of the Afrocentric thinkers have a very static conception of the societies they write about and of the processes of historical change. The Afrocentrics ignore gaps of thousands of years.”²¹

In the concluding section, **Fauvelle** summarises his principal objections by describing two flaws: “*le défaut d’origine*” and “*le défaut de fonctionnement*”. According to the first of these, the flaw in the origin of the ideas, **Fauvelle** finds that the structure of thought in **Cheikh Anta Diop** inverts but does not alter the structure of colonialist European ideology:

*“Du coup, sous la peinture noire encore fraîche, on reconnaît la peinture blanche de l’appareil recyclé du blanco-biblisme, de l’ethnologie, de l’anthropologie physique”.*²²

Yet this observation does not close the matter effectively; a structural relation might be present, and might have been inverted first by colonial ideology, as the discussions by **Cheikh Anta Diop** indicate. Acts of inversion are not in themselves implausible in the history of ideas. On this issue, the monocausal thrust of the **Fauvelle** analysis risks turning into a caricature of the original aims of the author in historical context, as **Maghan Keita** found in the dismissal by **Frank** of African-centred historiography.²³

The study of inversions is an important task for research, and might be advanced by opponents of African-centred writing, and of **Cheikh Anta Diop** in particular, if they accepted the inclusion of both postcolonial and neo-colonial Eurocentric ideological structures within the scope of this critique. **Fauvelle** perhaps considered the prospect of a sequence of inversions too close to a dialectical history, and so to Marxism. At a distance of a generation, his specific bias against dialectical aspects of the **Diop** corpus might be read as part of an ideological production in which an extreme example was the 1992 *End of history and the last man* from **Francis Fukuyama**. Even allowing for that context, opponents of African-centred writing can seem lacking in self-critique. While **Fauvelle** sees the **Diop** corpus as exempting itself from considerations of ideology, **Klein** cites one complaint that Afrocentrists only talk to one another. Yet the two charges describe concisely their own university environments, where liberal economy may impose its prohibitions of thought, and where a closed academic circuit attracts wider social critique of the “ivory tower”.²⁴ Underlying neoliberal ideologies in the decade from the collapse of the

²⁰ Fauvelle, *L’Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 157 (“The analogies delivered by Diop draw, without a tremble, diagonal lines in time or in space or in both at the same time.”).

²¹ Klein, M., in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35. 1, 2002, 155.

²² Fauvelle, *L’Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 173 (“At once we recognise under the still fresh black paint the white paint of the materials recycled from white authority, ethnology, physical anthropology”).

²³ Keita, M., Africa and the construction of a grand narrative in history, in *Across cultural borders*, 285-308, at p. 293: “Frank has conventionally identified Afrocentrism as “ideological”, and as such useless. Afrocentrism has no nuance for Frank. He has reduced more than a century of intellectual activity to caricature” (a list of nineteenth and twentieth century authors follows at p.297).

²⁴ See the review of W. Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York, Zone Books, 2015) by J. Ertel, “Democracy, Higher Education, and the Ivory Tower Critique of Neoliberalism”, at

Soviet Union to the al-Qaeda attacks on New York can become objects of study here, for identifying the points which provoked strongest opposition from historians in that decade.²⁵ The “pliure” ascribed to **Cheikh Anta Diop** may turn out to be a wider neo-colonial stratagem in late twentieth and early twenty-first century historiography, folding back onto colonial models of world rule.

On the second flaw which he identifies in the **Diop** corpus, **Fauvelle** writes:

*“Le défaut de fonctionnement, ce sont les césures que la pensée de **Diop** impose au réel. Le temps, l’espace, la causalité (ramené à l’antériorité), le divers humain, culturel ou aussi bien idéologique, se retrouvent segmentés et donnent de la réalité une vision kaléidoscopique”.*²⁶

Here the critique makes no allowance for a different form of viewing, or a different method of knowledge production, or, in historical context again, an expression of the formative phase in a new setting of knowledge production, starting from generalised blocks. From study of ancient Egypt, I would investigate further the first of these, the possibility of a difference in “vision”. For **Fauvelle** comments: “*Ce qui caractérise également la pensée de **Diop**, on l’a dit, c’est cette impossibilité de prendre en compte les fluidités du réel*”.²⁷ His visual metaphor indicates a source for this impasse between a European and an African-centred approach to history. The European writer seems to privilege the fluid or dynamic as a true rendering of the real, and to denigrate the inert block as a false image of real life. At this point, the historian of world art may recall a continuing if concealed hierarchy, which sets at the high point of progress the development of perspective, first in ancient Greek and Roman depictions of the body, and then in Renaissance and later European depictions of space.²⁸ In general, proponents of that hierarchy seem unable to perceive the movement or hear the sound in any of the widely varying other principles of depicting. The ancient Egyptian strategy in script and image involved projecting the essential perfect into eternity by juxtaposing blocks of colour, achieving dynamic effect by clear lines, concise forms and a strong polychromy, generally without shading.²⁹

In their objections to juxtaposed aggregates, and their desires for “free” flowing forms, modern historians may be failing to see difference, for reasons not of logic, but of their own ideology. Yet, however dominant, the negative judgements on non-perspectival art did not go unchallenged. Against the standard European art histories entrenched from the 1764 **Winckelmann** *History of Art* onwards, other observers of ancient Egyptian works offered a different appreciation, whether of the power in painting and architecture, as Frederik

<http://www.hamptoninstitution.org/ivory-tower-critique-of-neoliberalism.html#.WoBd3Ex2t9A>
consulted 9.2.2018

²⁵ For this analytical time-frame, compare A. Mazrui, *English in Africa after the Cold War: power, politics and the African condition*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters, 2004.

²⁶ Fauvelle, *L’Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 173 (“The flaw in operationality is the set of breaks which the thought of Diop imposes on existence. Time, space, causality (levelled to anteriority), human diversity, whether cultural or ideological, are presented as segmented, giving a kaleidoscopic vision of reality”).

²⁷ Fauvelle, *L’Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, 173 (“Another characteristic feature of the thought of Diop, as stated, is this impossibility of taking into account the fluidities of reality”).

²⁸ Wood, C. “Introduction”, in E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York, Zone Books, 1991, 7-24, at p. 14 “This is not simply a plurality of possible meanings but a hierarchy”.

²⁹ Nyord, R. “Vision and conceptualization in ancient Egyptian art”, in R. Caballero, J. E. Díaz Vera (eds.), *Sensuous Cognition: Explorations into Human Sentience: Imagination, (E)motion and Perception*, Berlin, De Gruyter, pp. 135-168.

Norden in 1737,³⁰ or the transformative effect of anatomical precision in stone sculpture, as **Abdallatif al-Baghdadi** in 1100.³¹

The aggregate of blocks is a regular pattern of comparison in other areas. A systematic framework for studying time as adjacent segments underpins studies by **Igor Diakonov** on the African language family, which spilled over into west Asia, and is therefore known in linguistics as Afrasian or Afroasiatic. **Diakonov** proposed “*the notion of Afrasian languages of the Ancient, Middle, and Modern or Late Stages. It is quite obvious that such a subdivision is only a rule-of-thumb approximation.*”³²

In addition to its efficiency in comparative analysis, in linguistics and beyond, a graphic juxtaposition of time-space segments can also express a different conception of life, echoing the visual arts where ancient Egyptian blocks operate different expressive principles to those of pre-twentieth century European perspective shading. In drawing out connections between two regions, a graphic block chronology can support a different telling of history, as a space for articulating lines between and across time-blocks (*Figure 1*).

When a feature from **period 3** in **Region A** recurs at **period 1** in **Region B**, the formula **A3<—>B1** becomes part of a datum for which a method of analysis can be tested. With a larger dataset, new methodologies can be developed for this interregional history, at a more precise level of resolution, as they have been in comparative historical linguistics. In graphic form, these lines of comparison can thus support the further development of lines of enquiry, from the ideas presented by **Cheikh Anta Diop**. The first prerequisite for the enquiry is openness, that is, the ability to avoid any prior assumption that a particular connecting line is unthinkable. If **A3** is **ancient Egypt** and **B1** is **modern Nigeria**, then the current structures of university Egyptology and Africanist anthropology, archaeology and history may be unable to accommodate the enquiry. In that case, the graphic block may be useful as a means to illustrate an intellectual closure.

Lines across rough time-blocks disrupt rules of synchrony and demonstrable sequence in historical analysis. Greater leeway may emerge in archaeology, where the chronically fragmented record foregrounds the incomplete state of knowledge. However, the established disciplines may share an underlying ideology to such an extent that they respond in similar ways to the prospect of connections across Africa.

In the **Fauvelle** critique, a rupture of reality seems cause enough to reject the comparative approach in the works by **Cheikh Anta Diop**. Yet the same motif of rupture, in the same radical operation on history, had been hailed in earlier twentieth century European critical theory as the only acceptable relation between present and past. These different views are considered in the following section.

³⁰ Norden, F. “Man sage mir nichts mehr um Rom, und Griechenland mag auch nur schweigen” (“Speak to me no more of Rome, and Greece can also only be silent”), specifically charging them with a lack of originality, a focal point in these debates: 19 April 1739 letter to P. von Stosch, cited in preface by J. F. Steffen to F. Norden, *Beschreibung seiner Reise durch Egypten und Nubien*, Leipzig, Meyer, 1779, p.xxix-xxx.

³¹ Colla, E., *Conflicted Antiquities. Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 86-87.

³² Diakonov, I., *Afrasian Languages*, Moscow, Nauka, 1988, p. 17.

3. Critical theory in Europe and in Africa

When **Fauvelle** finds fault with **Cheikh Anta Diop** in standards of historical method, a reader may receive the impression that a consensus has been breached. However, debates in historiography across the continents include continual expressions of doubt. Foremost among European critics, **Walter Benjamin** attacked linear and causal historicism in an “*Essay on Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian*” (1937), and in his more famous final work, the *Theses on history*.³³ Annex A to the *Theses* asserts:

*“Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments of history. But no fact that is a cause, is for that reason historical. It became historical, posthumously, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.”*³⁴

In the seventeenth of the *Theses*, **Benjamin** sought the miracle of a liberating moment in the encounter with history. This passage is worth quoting at length, as addressing the core issue pinpointed by **Elikia M'Bokolo** on the works by **Cheikh Anta Diop**, their immediate and continuing impact:

*“Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognises the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history.”*³⁵

The **Diop** corpus was met incomprehension by **Fauvelle**, but it fully answers the 1940 call from a desperate **Benjamin** to replace historicist causality with disruptive cuts across time. Universities may be soundproof on this score. **M'Bokolo** notes the marginal position of **Cheikh Anta Diop** in terms of his academic career in both France and Senegal.³⁶

From his own standpoint outside the gates of the university, **Benjamin** could see how we “must abandon the calm, contemplative attitude toward [our] object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present”.³⁷ If such intense immediacy is necessary, the distance

³³ Schwartz, F., “Walter Benjamin’s essay on Eduard Fuchs: an art-historical perspective”, in A. Hemingway, *Marxism and the history of art: from William Morris to the New Left*, London, Pluto Press, 2006, pp. 106-122.

³⁴ Benjamin, W. “Theses on the philosophy of history”, as translated by H. Arendt from one version, in her edition W. Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and reflections*, London, Random House, 1968, pp. 225-265, at p. 255.

³⁵ Benjamin, W. “Theses on the philosophy of history”, H. Arendt translation, pp. 254.

³⁶ M'Bokolo, “Préface”, in Fauvelle, *L'Afrique de Cheikh Anta Diop*, pp. 7-8.

³⁷ Cited in Schwartz, F., “Walter Benjamin’s essay on Eduard Fuchs: an art-historical perspective”, pp. 117-118.

between life-spaces may become too great to bridge, and a north Atlantic writer – Egyptologist or critic – may not be in a position to see an ancient Nile in Africa.³⁸ **Benjamin** himself only very rarely gives space to the African presence that permeates the colonial metropolitan hubs of Europe, where he was writing.³⁹ Within the university, the barriers to thinking increase, because partiality in scope of references combines with the temporalities of research, where disciplinary agendas are largely predetermined and separated by discipline.⁴⁰ The overall effect is to defer indefinitely any engagement with wider horizons of experience and thought.

My present paper illustrates the structural gaps across the academy all too well, in my delayed reading of **Cheikh Anta Diop**, through a reaction to **Fauvelle** a full two decades after the latter published his attentive critique.

African critical debates over the geopolitics of knowledge production theorists offer a vital corrective to any disciplinary closure. **Omedi Ochieng** has summarised opposing trends in Francophone and Anglophone African writing, since the philosopher **Paulin Houtondji** rejected the ethnophilosophical approach advocated by **Alexei Kagame**.⁴¹ **Ochieng** agrees with **Houtondji** that it is useful in this debate to apply the distinction in Plato between *doxa* (opinion, received ideas and *episteme* (knowledge as the result of critical thought), but considers **Houtondji** too limited in confining the domain of critical thinking to literacy and book production,⁴² and in accepting without comment the boundaries between university disciplines.

Surveying contemporary African writers on philosophical questions, **Ochieng** identifies **Kwasi Wiredu**, **Odera Oruka** and **Kwame Anthony Appiah** among those who accept “African *doxa*” as material for producing a new critical *episteme* or philosophy, and **V. Y. Mudimbe** and **Achille Mbembe** among those who consider any “African *doxa*”, the field of myth and custom, to be beyond recovery.

Elsewhere **Ochieng** has charted another current line of debate, between **Souleymane Bachir Diagne** and **Ajume Wingo**.⁴³ **Diagne** used the thirteenth century AD *Oath of the Manden* to refute the notion that a pre-colonial African ethic could only be communal, never individual; **Wingo** saw in this the ahistorical category of individual, and urged investigation into the contexts and ways in which the category was constructed and applied,

³⁸ Kamugisha, A. “Finally in Africa? Egypt, from Diop to Celenko”, in *Race and Class* 45, 2003, pp. 31-60.

³⁹ Bartolovich, C. “Figuring the (In)Visible in an Imperial Weltstadt: The Case of Benjamin's Moor”, in *Cultural Critique* 52, 2002, pp. 167-208.

⁴⁰ Benjamin begins his essay on Fuchs with this problem of disciplinary divisions, see Schwartz, “Walter Benjamin's essay on Eduard Fuchs: an art-historical perspective”, pp. 106-108.

⁴¹ Ochieng, O. “The African intellectual: Houtondji and after”, in *Radical Philosophy* 164, 2010 at <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-african-intellectual>, consulted 9.2.2018.

⁴² For a similar response to Houtondji, see the comments by the Euroamerican anthropologist A. Apter. “Que faire? Reconsidering inventions of Africa”, in *Critical Inquiry* 19, 1992, pp. 87-104, defining a critical knowledge in operation in Yoruba ritual. On the relation between speech and literacy, particularly important for a researcher on ancient Egyptian sources, the embroilment of writing in oral transmission in Mali is demonstrated by Seydou Camara, “La tradition orale en question”, in *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36, 1996, pp. 763-790, concluding at p. 787 how “est-il malaisé aujourd'hui d'aborder l'étude de la société mandingue sous l'angle réducteur de société “sans écriture”” (p. 787 “it is difficult now to embark on studying Manden society under the reductive viewpoint of a society ‘without writing’”).

⁴³ Ochieng, O. *Groundwork for the practice of the good life. Politics and ethics at the intersection of north Atlantic and African philosophy*, New York, Routledge, 2016.

in specific times and places. From this exchange, **Ochieng** proposes to add the entangled embodiment of individuals to the focus on temporal and spatial context. For his approach, **Ochieng** adopts two constructive critiques in relation to contemporary debates. On one side, he rejects ethnophilosophy as “a reiteration of the Eurocentric notion of Africa as primordial and unchanging”; on another front, he charges the professional philosophers in university departments throughout Africa and the North Atlantic with evading subjectivity and social context.

The range of these arguments and the development of ideas within the life work of each author reinforce the comment by **Fila-Bakabadio** above against reducing any research environment to singulars. Each single writer too still has her or his context within a field of conflicting debates, and continually respond to others in those debates, as **Ochieng** describes **Houtondji** opening to his critics.⁴⁴ Researchers inside and outside the university are able to assemble more effective critical resources when they acknowledge and explore this internal plurality in African philosophy, and in African-centred Egyptology, as much as they recognise different political shades of European writers in history and archaeology. The resources harnessed by contemporary writers include the output from previous generations of African-centred writers, as **Reiland Rabaka** expressed it “from **W.E.B. Dubois** and **C.L.R. James** to **Frantz Fanon** and **Amilcar Cabral**.”⁴⁵

Twenty-first century African writers continue to draw inspiration from the diverse opinions in the political divisions at independence. One reason for the enduring relevance of the liberation leaders may be their degree of historical realism, recognising that an idealised past could be an obstacle in the present. Thus, **Cabral** called for a return to the source without idealisation and fully focussed on tasks of the present.⁴⁶ The impact of these writers into the new century requires the same critical assessment that **M'Bokolo** urged for the continuing success of the **Cheikh Anta Diop** corpus.

In recent years, the journal *Cahiers Caribéens d'Égyptologie* has delivered a platform for juxtaposing without comment the different strands of African-centred, Egyptian, and European Egyptologies. This combination, rather than any attempt at fusion, creates a productive environment for assessing the practical outcomes and theoretical relevance of each approach. The journal *Ankh* offers an equally essential opportunity to broaden horizons, by starting from African rather than European parallels in our efforts to understand ancient Egypt. A third model of research is shared in the publication of the processes and results of collective study, fulfilling in a different way the call from **Fila-Bakabadio** to recognise the plurality of African research. An outstanding example is the edition of the *eloquent trader Khuninpu from the oasis, Smi n skhty pn. Multilingual translation of a 4,000-year-old African story* published in 2016 by the *Shemsw Bak workgroup* **Ayi Kwei Armah**, **Ayesha Attah**, **Jacques Depelchin** and **Yoporeka Somet**. Each of twelve readers delivered their translation of the tale in one language from across the continent, from Akan, to Hausa, to Wolof, to Zulu. The languages include English, French and Portuguese. In the introduction, the workgroup tell us: “Our ability to read his

⁴⁴ Ochieng, O. “The African intellectual: Houtondji and after”.

⁴⁵ Rabaka, R. *Africana Critical Theory: reconstructing the Black radical tradition, from W E.B. Dubois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral*, Lanham, Lexington, 2009, with an introduction on his reasons for using this range of works and the term “critical theory”, and on his scope of reference, building on the publications by Molefi Kete Asante.

⁴⁶ For an application of the call to “return to the source” to discussion of new information technologies, see S. Ishemo, “Culture and historical knowledge in Africa: a Cabralian approach”, in *Review of African Political Economy* 31, 2004, pp. 65-82.

words, and to understand his thinking, gives us information from the African past that we had no opportunity to learn at school". This sentence gives the response finally to the question by **M'Bokolo** about the impact of a writer-poet.

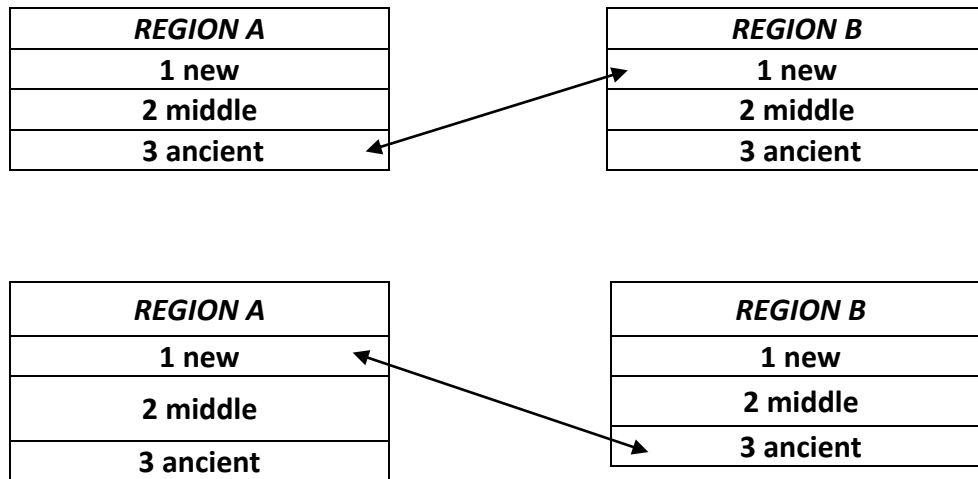


Figure 1. Diakonov time-blocks for comparison of regions

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