

# African Civilizations between the Winds of East and West

*Babacar Diop*

Among the intellectuals who have significantly contributed to the discussion of Africa's place in the concert and/or shock of civilizations, Kwane Nkrumah, Cheikh Anta Diop, Samir Amin, Ali Mazrui, Amilcar Cabral could be found in a pertinent sampling. These different personalities indicate the linguistic and geographic diversity of a multidisciplinary and critical production.

Kwane Nkrumah of Ghana is a point of reference for the political and philosophical dimension systematized in the anglophone region. From the francophone region, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal is a key figure in the humanities and exact sciences. Amical Cabral of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde lends a Portuguese tone to the formulation of politico-cultural dilemmas. Focusing on economic questions and the importance of Afro-Arabic relations, the Franco-Egyptian Samir Amin clearly situates these issues in international context and shows how they are marked by relations between a dominant center and a dominated periphery. Finally, Ali Mazrui proves to be even more sensitive to the interbreeding of West and East African civilizations in the east and south of the continent.

It would be easy to further complicate this scene if one were to include the abundant literary, political, and scientific production formulated in Nigeria and South Africa, or insist on the role played by South Africa in the theorization of a new pan-Africanism and an African renaissance.

However, I am eager to center the discussion around the "humanities" in order to provide a better diachronic, pluridisciplinary, and critical delimitation of the topic. In so doing, I feel that limiting the analysis to Senegal makes it possible to define the converging and/or diverging tendencies in African intellectual production.

Three intellectuals, whose destinies merge with their political itinerary, seem to me representative of the Senegalese panorama: Léopold Sédar Senghor, Mamadou Dia, and Cheikh Anta Diop. Their meetings have been tinged at times by reciprocal respect and at times by open adversity.

I have previously shown the similarities and differences between the thought processes of Cheikh Anta Diop and those of Léopold Sédar Senghor.<sup>1</sup> Both were interested in (ancient and modern) Oriental, European, and African humanities. On the one hand, Senghor, the bard of Negritude, proved to be a fervent defender of Greco-Latin humanities, encouraging the teaching of the Arabic language and the study of Dravidian civilizations. On the other, Cheikh Anta Diop, who also paid particular attention to the study of Greco-Latin and Semitic civilizations, won great renown by showing how the African humanities are the basis for Pharaonic studies; he reproached adherents of Negritude for using a unilateral approach to the facts of civilization and for having given the psychological factor an exaggerated importance to the detriment of the historical and linguistic facts.

Although Mamadou Dia allotted economic questions (praise of the cooperative movement) a major role, he could not help recalling the philosophical basis of his work and pointing to his sources of inspiration – he drew from Muslim and Christian humanism, in addition to communitarian African traditions – thus positioning himself nearer to Nkrumah's "Consciencism" and the "triple heritage" dear to Mazrui.

Granted, all schematization is reductive, and it is possible to detect even more complex formulations at different stages in the thought of our "enlighteners." However, this Senegalese production not only reflects West-African francophone preoccupations, but it also reveals African, indeed Africanist, situations and awarenesses: the advent of the publishing industry, the development of new communication technologies, and the efforts to translate the works of these different authors enable us to analyze the interplay of influences and impacts on Africa and outside the continent.

Of the three authors I have cited, Cheikh Anta Diop seems to be the one who voices, in an instructive way, the link between regional and international, the interweaving of sociopolitical, eco-

conomic, and cultural factors; above all, he is the one who conveys the transition from past to present and from present to future.

## **Humanities of the Center or the Periphery?**

It is incontestable that the shadow of Cheikh Anta Diop hovers over African humanities. His work spans prehistory, antiquity, the Middle Ages, modern times, and the contemporary period. It deals with paleontology, the exact sciences, and political institutions.

Cheikh Anta Diop contributed to methodological questions in diachronic linguistics and to theories of human migrations; his reflections on art, literature, philosophy, cultural identity, and on Africa's political, cultural, economic, and scientific renaissance are a source of inspiration.

His theses and views on human races, the dating of the "hand-over" (that is, when African civilizations lost speed), the role and impact of determinisms, religious syncretisms, etc., have provoked and continue to provoke many controversies. If Ali Mazrui was quick to compare Nkrumah to a Leninist tsar, Lansana Keita did not hesitate to oppose Cheikh Anta Diop to Hegel. Also, it is not uncommon to find attacks against him that some call "Afrocentrist."

It is true that the Senegalese intellectual assigned a central role to Egypt and to African civilizations in the history of humanity. His ideas are clearly explained in his work *Civilization or Barbarism*:

Insofar as Egypt is the distant mother of Western cultures and sciences, as it will emerge from the reading of this book, most of the ideas that we call foreign are oftentimes nothing but mixed up, reversed, modified, elaborated images of the creations of our African ancestors, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, dialectics, the theory of being, the exact sciences, arithmetic, geometry, mechanical engineering, astronomy, medicine, literature (novel, poetry, drama), architecture, the arts, etc.

One can see then how fundamentally improper is the notion, so often repeated, of the importation of foreign ideologies in Africa. It stems from a perfect ignorance of the African past. Just as modern technologies and sciences came from Europe, so did, in antiquity, universal knowledge stream from the Nile Valley to the rest of the world, particularly to Greece, which would serve as a link.

Consequently, no thought, no ideology is, in essence, foreign to Africa, which was their birthplace.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore with total liberty that Africans can draw from the common intellectual heritage of humanity, letting themselves be guided only by the notions of utility and efficiency.<sup>3</sup>

Some of Cheikh Anta Diop's theses have resurfaced and gained ground. For example, the Greece theme, referring to its origins in Negro-Egyptian thought, inspired the title of Martin Bernal's famous series entitled *Black Athena*;<sup>4</sup> it continues to feed the debate on the relations between the civilizations of the Near East, Africa, and Mediterranean Europe.

The most systematic critiques opposing Bernal have been collected by Mary Lefkowitz in two works of unequal value published in 1996. The first, entitled *Black Athena Revisited*,<sup>5</sup> is the collective work of many specialists; the second, *Not out of Africa*,<sup>6</sup> is Lefkowitz's more personal and, in my opinion, weaker contribution. In attacking Bernal, Mary Lefkowitz expressly cites Cheikh Anta Diop and other inspirations of the "Afrocentrist" movement.

Other critics, more attentive to the nuances, have reflected on the similarities and differences between Cheikh Anta Diop's theses and those of Martin Bernal. For example, in *The Idea of Africa*, V.Y. Mudimbe examines Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga's contribution to the systematization of the African humanists.<sup>7</sup> Mudimbe goes back over the Greek paradigm, the ambivalence of the Greek sources, and the critiques opposing Bernal. He is quick to analyze the convergences and divergences between Diop and Bernal.

Two points of convergence are the affirmations that 1) Egypt is principally a Negro-African civilization, and 2) Egypt exerts a considerable influence on Ancient Greece. The questions raised by Cheikh Anta Diop and Bernal concern Africa's fate both in antiquity and in contemporary history.

Cheikh Anta Diop wished to use ancient history to illustrate historic relativism, to show Africans that their continent has not always been behind in science and technology, and to point out that it can once again become a driving force in the concert of civilizations.

Martin Bernal asserted that his objective was to weaken the arrogance of Eurocentrism; he invited Afro-American communities and Jews living in the United States to settle their differences and unite on the essential: the fight against racial ideology.

We could reproach both Cheikh Anta Diop and Martin Bernal for, on the one hand, not having paid much attention to internal factors in the development of Greek civilization and, on the other, not having examined the inverse effect of Greco-Roman civiliza-

tion's contribution to Africa, particularly in Egypt, Meroe, Aksum, and Maghreb. However, like the European opponents of slavery in the eighteenth century who developed the concept of Africa as mother of all civilizations (Bernal calls this the "ancient" model as opposed to the "new" model that is marked by racism), Cheikh Anta Diop and Martin Bernal devoted themselves more to showing what Africa passed on to Greco-Latin classical antiquity.

Of these two authors, Cheikh Anta Diop seems to have better articulated the fate of ancient and present civilizations, even future ones. To better appreciate his contribution, it is instructive to compare it to that of Samuel Huntington, author of *The Clash of Civilizations*.<sup>8</sup>

In his book, Huntington establishes a link between history and civilization, but he points out that the area of scholarship concerned with civilization interests sociologists, anthropologists, and economists. Consequently, there are differences in perspective and method according to each of these specialties. The questions often debated are the criteria of identification, and the origins, development, and disappearance of these civilizations.

For Huntington, civilization is opposed to barbarism. Civilization is based on institutions, develops in cities (as its etymology indicates), and points to a certain level of education.

The idea of one universal civilization is advocated by some, but Huntington voices some reservations about the return to singularity by considering the civilization/culture relation. For him, a civilization is first and foremost a cultural entity. He is conscious of the term's complexity and illustrates this using the case in Germany as an example. In effect, German intellectuals in the nineteenth century distinguished civilization (which, according to them, include mechanics, technology, as well as other material factors) from culture (which implies values, ideals, and the intellectual and moral characteristics of a given society) (41). From this German perspective, the term "culture" is on par with primitivism, whereas "civilization" seems to be reserved for complex societies, particularly technically oriented ones.

During antiquity, emphasis was placed first on anthropological elements. In Huntington's opinion, of all the objective elements that define a civilization, the most important is religion (42). He

thinks we must take objective elements and subjective elements of self-identification into account. In short, he asks us to pay attention to multiple identities.

He also discusses the state/civilization relation: "A civilization may thus contain one or many political units. Those units may be city states, empires, federations, confederations, nation-states, multinational states, all of which may have varying forms of government" (44). To study civilizations is to study spaces and to insert them in a chronology, which is difficult. According to Huntington, civilizations do not have clear-cut boundaries, nor precise beginnings and endings: "civilizations are mortal but also very long-lived; they evolve, adapt, and are the most enduring of human associations" (43). Quoting Fernand Braudel, he continues: "Empires rise and fall, governments come and go, civilizations remain and 'survive political, social, economic, even ideological upheavals'" (43). The longevity of civilizations depends on their attitude when confronted with environmental and political, economic and social challenges.

But what is most important to Huntington is to place civilizations in relation to one another. There are variable differences between civilizations, and he identifies three phases in the history of humanity:

- 1) For more than three thousand years, contacts between civilizations were intermittent, almost nonexistent, and restricted. During this period, exchanges were very limited because of the great distances and modest means of transport. Two major events during this phase include the invention of the printing press in the eighth century A.D. and the invention of gunpowder in China;
- 2) Beginning in 1500 A.D., there was a unidirectional, strong, and sustained influence from the West;
- 3) Corresponding to our era, it is the period of accelerated globalization and new communication technologies. (21)

Huntington's contributions are very interesting because they allow us to consider the civilization/culture/state relations, examine the factors that make the identification of civilizations possible,

and distinguish the phases of periodization. However, it is unfortunate that he quickly skims over key questions, such as the passage from singular to plural. In response to this question, he could have stressed ideological reasons, such as the fighting due to philosophical, ethical, and religious issues. Thus, the debates between Marxists and liberals, Christians and Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc., have greatly contributed to relativism, not to mention the role played by the major sociopolitical cataclysms: the two world wars revealed that barbarism was possible in the West.

On another level, Huntington treats religion's role in the history of civilizations unilaterally. However, religions have not played the same role in all ages and in all places. It is a contextual approach that allows us to understand how Christianity and Judaism separated or why Zionism emerged in the modern era following the anti-Jewish persecutions in Europe.

Finally, it is unfortunate that Huntington has proved to be very conformist concerning the analysis of the African case. He seems to doubt the existence of an African civilization or of a civilization in Latin America. He enumerated twelve civilizations, seven of which have disappeared: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Crete, "classical civilization," Byzantium, Central America, and the Indies. The survivors are therefore China, Japan, India, Islam, and the West. So, in his opinion, Orthodox Russia, Africa, and Latin America are atypical cases.

Huntington, using the criterion of technological innovations, did not make the effort to follow the different stages of the history of humanity. If he had first started with evidence from rock and plant fossils, then taken other works – Cheikh Anta Diop's, for example – that consider Africa's contribution to universal civilization into account, his approach would have benefitted.

Granted, Huntington is only interested in contemporary Africa, which he often quotes, whether by mentioning the two major sub-Saharan powers (South Africa and Nigeria) or by referring to its zones of military, religious, and sociopolitical tension.

Huntington's pessimism regarding the confrontation of civilizations is at the opposite extreme of the positive parry Cheikh Anta Diop formulates in his work *Civilization or Barbarism*. The Senegalese intellectual foresees the future of human behavior as follows:

Ethics stem from philosophy as the practical behavior comes out of the idea that one has about things.

Only scientific knowledge differentiates modern man's ethics from those of primitive man.

It is possible to demonstrate the originally "rational" foundation of all moral behavior, for any given mental level. That which is feeling and moral and was first conceived as saving knowledge in the natural order.

A new ethics that largely takes into account objective knowledge (in Jacques Monod's sense) and, in short, the interests of the human species is in the process of being built; it is only difficult to internationalize it because of conflicts of national interests.

Ecology, defending the environment, tends to become the foundation [...]: the time is not far off when the pollution of nature will become a sacrilege, a criminal act, even and mainly for the atheist, because of the one fact that the future of humanity is at stake; what knowledge or the "science of the epoch," decrees as harmful to the whole group becomes progressively a moral prohibition.

### **Progress of the Ethical Conscience of Humanity**

Humanity's moral conscience progresses, slowly but surely, after all the crimes committed in the past and that is an opening toward others and a powerful element of hope foreseeing tomorrow the blooming of an era of genuine humanity, a new perception of humanity without ethnic coordinates.

The end of the genocide coincides with the emergence of an international opinion.<sup>9</sup> This fact has brought about a modification of the behavior of the capitalist universe toward the weak; and the phenomenon is irreversible; the result is a forced progress of the world's ethical conscience. The Americans did not spontaneously become better than in 1932, the period of the Ku Klux Klan and quasi-official lynching. It was the appearance of an adversary of their own caliber that imposed on them the revision of their behavior, and so much the better if social and moral progress come out on top. The young white American, Slain, who drove his car into a meeting of the wizards of the Ku Klux Klan, performed an important civilizing act. In essence, it is a peacemaking, nonviolent act.

It is the worldwide dissemination of information that forces the ethical conscience of humanity to stick to "acceptable" limits, in the absence of radical change. (375-76)

Which vision should we share? Huntington's pessimism, founded essentially on political observation, or Cheikh Anta Diop's optimism, founded on scientific progress and on the balance of forces?

Today, if we can salute the vigilance of Cheikh Anta Diop, who insisted on the dangers of exclusion in both antiquity (the Spartan case) as well as in modern times (the Hutu/Tutsi conflicts), we must admit that he was far from envisaging the rapid disappearance of the United States/Soviet Union bipolarization, which, in spirit, should have contributed to assuring "the forced progress of



the world's ethical conscience." Certainly, the wager on new communication technologies can contribute to the realization of this ideal, but African civilizations are not yet in a situation to meet the challenges of globalization. Could the third millennium be that of the renaissance of the African humanities, revitalizing new humanities with more solidarity? Under this plan, the African elites – intellectuals, scientists, technicians, artists, political and social leaders, etc. – have a major role to play.

*Translated from the French by Sherri Meek*

## ARTICLE SYNOPSIS IN WOLOF

Jokkoo mbaaxi Afrik ak yu Tugal ak Penku

Waxtaan wi mi ngi jublu ci jokkoo gu am ci diggante xeet yi ci Adduna. Lan la doomi Afrik teg ci loxog doomi Aadama ak ban toogaay la Afrik tooge ci àdduna ?

Jéem nanu wane li ay gëstukat wane moo xam ci Afrik la nu cosaanoo (Nkrumah, Seex Anta Jóob, Samiir Amin, Ali Masruwi, Amilkaar Kabraal) mbaa deet (Martin Bernal mi cosaanoo Amerik.).

Ñoom bind nanu ci mbirum xalaatin xilaas, koom koom, bind nanu ci làkk yu bare (farañse, angale, portugees ak noom seem).

Ci bindi doomi Senegaal la nu gëna sukkëndiku. Na ka noonu, nu dendale bindi Seex Anta Jóob, Lewopool Sedaar Sengoor ak Mamadu Ja : ñoom wane nanu ni doomi Afrik am nanu seeni mbaax, jokkoo nanu ak waa Penku ak waa Tugal. Ngir gëna xóotal waxtaan wi, nu gëna, dugg, ci bindi Seex Anta Jóob. Nu wane ni moom dafa jàpp ne, Afrik demb moo xewoon ba sédd waa Penku ak Tugal, kon tay suy yoot, di jéem dab ñi ko raw tay, dara ñaawu ci, ndax da nu ko delloo njukkël.

Moom Seex ñaawul njort, ne amerikeñ bi tudd Huntington, te yaakaar ne xeet da nuy gën di xeccoo di, xeex ci seen bir.

Seex moom dafa yaakaar ne xam xam yi di nanu gëna yaatu, jokko yi gëna yomb ci àdduna, nit ñi di gëna nite. Ci yoon woowu nag Afrik warul des ginnaaw.

## Notes

1. Babacar Diop, "L'identité culturelle dans l'oeuvre de Ch. Anta Diop," in *Éthiopiennes*, vol. IV, no. 1-2, 1987.
2. In general, it seems that Africans who have examined the fate of civilizations have been obsessed with the West and the East, Cheikh Anta Diop as well as Mazrui, and have neglected, that is, not to say forgotten, for example, pre-Columbian America, China, and Burma. (*Author's note*)
3. Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. from the French by Yao-Lengi Meema Ngemi, ed. by Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager (Brooklyn, NY, 1991), pp. 3-4. Original text: *Civilisation ou barbarie, Anthropologie sans complaisance* (Paris, 1982), p. 12.
4. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ, 1987); *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. The Archeological and Documentary Evidence*, vol. 2 (New Brunswick, NJ, 1991).
5. Mary L. Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers (eds.), *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill, 1996).
6. Mary L. Lefkowitz, *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history* (New York, 1996).
7. Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Indianapolis, 1994), see chapter 3.
8. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, 1997).
9. However, Cheikh Anta Diop's optimism may possibly need to be reconsidered. The situations in Rwanda and Serbia, for example, remind us of the tragic reality. (*Author's note*)