



Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

EFLA STUDY GUIDE

UNIT 1: Ancient Africa (150,000 B.C.E. – 332 B.C.E.)

CLASS 1: The Racialization of Ancient Egypt

OVERVIEW

Around 3800 – 3500 B.C.E., Africans founded one of the first and most advanced civilizations in world history in the Nile Valley region of Africa, which included modern day Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt. In fact, the oldest human remains ever found were discovered in Africa, specifically in Ethiopia. According to Ethiopians and other historians of [antiquity](#), Ethiopia is the oldest civilization on earth. It fostered the civilization of Nubia to the west, which in turn influenced the civilization of Egypt in the north. Although Egypt represents some of the highest cultural achievements of Nile Valley civilizations, it is the product of the collective African genius. For example, pyramids were built in Nubia before they were built in Egypt, and the foundations of Egyptian religion can be found in Ethiopia. The Nile River, the longest in the world, connected Africans in the south to those in the north and the interior. Together, these Africans shared and expanded their knowledge and resources and practiced similar cultural and religious rituals.

Egypt, by its location, had the highest contact with the non-African world, and was subsequently invaded and conquered in ancient times by the Hyksos, the Libyans, the Nubians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks, the French and the British. Thus, Egyptian society was always a melting pot of African and foreign cultures, resulting in a population with highly varied skin colors. Yet the people who established Egypt – its first Dynastic Pharaohs and those who built the Great Pyramids, were from southern and eastern Africa – Nubia and Ethiopia respectively.

Because of the splendor and [unequivocal](#) brilliance of Ancient Egypt, those who cultivated the modern racist theories of the 17th – 19th centuries began to claim that Egypt was actually established by Caucasians – not Africans. Therefore, the first class of this unit will explore the [racialization](#) of Ancient Egypt. The Greeks referred to this extraordinary civilization as *Aegyptos*, the origin of the name *Egypt*. But Africans called their land “*KMT*” or *Kemet*. The people of Ancient Kemet/Egypt invented one of the oldest writing systems, including paper made out of [papyrus](#), and established the world’s first libraries and universities. They [pioneered](#) the arts and sciences and provided the foundations for many different fields including religion, philosophy, astronomy, agriculture, mathematics, architecture, medicine, government and

engineering. To preserve their legacy and reflect their accomplishments, they built remarkable statues, monuments and temples that continue to astound the modern world. When the rest of the world remained in what has been called “the Dark Ages,” the people of the Nile Valley region in north and east Africa were living in a period of [enlightenment](#), prompting [archeologists](#) to refer to Africa as “the cradle of civilization.”

The racial characterization of the Ancient Egyptians has been one of the most controversial aspects of [Egyptology](#) — a branch of archeology founded in the 1800s, which focuses exclusively on the study of Ancient Egyptian history and culture. Despite overwhelming evidence that confirms the African origins of Ancient Egypt, Egyptologists and [cultural producers](#) have portrayed Ancient Egyptian civilization as Mediterranean, Asian, or Caucasian. More recently, in order to [disassociate](#) Egypt from the African continent altogether, many scholars have begun to claim (and teach) that Egypt is a part of the “Middle East”— a fairly recent geographical invention — rather than part of the African continent. Most of the artifacts and images of Ancient Egypt that are commonly shown in history books, documentaries and Hollywood films emphasize an era of Greek and Roman rule following the reigns of Alexander the Great through Cleopatra VII, 336 – 30 B.C.E. By this time the Egyptian population had intermixed with foreign people for over 1,000 years, creating a multi-racial population.

Ancient Kemet – or Ancient Egypt under African rule, lasted for well over 2,000 years before Greek and Rome were established as nations. All of the major monuments, statues and temples in Ancient Egypt were constructed under African rule. Yet rarely are the contributions and images of Ancient Egypt before foreign invasion highlighted in historical studies and popular culture. Images of the original architects of the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx, as well as statues and tomb paintings, for instance, reflect men and women of African descent in varying shades of black and brown, affirming their identity as African people.

It is important to note that the ancient world did not subscribe to the same racial concepts we use today. Racism as we know it did not exist. Many of the most prominent ancient Greeks and Romans openly acknowledged the genius of the Egyptians and spent many years studying in Egypt. However, throughout the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, Egyptologists, scientists and intellectuals challenged this established knowledge by claiming that Egypt should be classified as a “Caucasian” civilization. We call this process [racialization](#) — the act of imposing a racial meaning to a relationship, social practice or group where one did not previously exist. This preoccupation with racializing the Egyptians as non-African and non-Black has had a lasting impact on both the shaping and erasure of African history, and by extension world history.

Some of the most explicit testimony regarding the race of Ancient Egyptians came from Ancient Greeks. Many Greek scholars including Pythagoras, Aesop and Plato traveled to Egypt for study, and they credited Egypt as the model for classical Greek civilization. At that time, the race or color of the Egyptians was not a mystery. For instance, Herodotus, often celebrated as the “father of history,” described the Egyptians as

“black-skinned and wooly-haired.” Similarly, the famed Greek philosopher, Aristotle referred to both the Egyptians and Ethiopians as “very black.” In fact, the name “Ethiopia,” a term that was used to describe Africans more broadly, derives from the Greek words *ethios* and *ops* meaning “burnt faces.” In ancient times, black skin did not carry the negative **stigma** it does today. Racism and white supremacy are modern inventions with origins in late 18th century Europe and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

The Legacy of Racial Theories

The images of Ancient Egypt as a Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Asian or Caucasian civilization are so common in historical and popular imagination that it is difficult for many to believe that Black Africans are responsible for its founding and development. Rarely are Ancient Egyptians depicted as Black unless they are portrayed as slaves. Why do dominant historical and cultural narratives deny African origins of Ancient Egyptian civilization? And why do many scholars continue to omit and **distort** evidence of African rule over Ancient Egypt?

In this lesson students will **contemplate** the merits of the “great race debate” by examining a range of physical evidence including statues, papyri, tomb paintings and monuments; eyewitness testimony of the ancient Greeks; archeological and historical research; and the personal testimony of the Ancient Egyptians themselves. Students will reflect on their own perceptions of Ancient Egypt and identify how education and culture have influenced their perspectives.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Read the following materials (approximately 1 hour). Answer the study questions as you read along.

EFLA Document: Egyptology and Scientific Racism (15 minutes)

Study Questions

1. What is the significance of C.F. Volney’s book ***The Ruins***? After visiting Egypt what was Volney’s central argument?
2. What is scientific racism? Give examples.
3. What is craniology and how did Egyptology contribute to the expansion of craniological studies?
4. Why did George R. Gliddon dismiss the ancient texts written by Herodotus and others who described the Ancient Egyptians as Black?
5. What did Samuel Morton say about the social position of the “numerous” Black people in Ancient Egypt?

6. What is eugenics? How did W.M. Flinders Petrie contribute to the eugenics movement?

EFLA Document: Ancient Testimony on the Origins of Egypt (8 minutes)

Study Questions

1. How did ancient Greek writers describe the Egyptians?
2. What was the general tone used to describe the Ethiopians?
3. According to Herodotus, what elements of civilization did Greece inherit from Egypt?
4. How did Greek writers compare the Egyptians and Ethiopians? According to their observations, what is the relationship between the two groups?
5. What do these observations tell us about race and racial ideas during the era of ancient Greek engagement with Africa?

“Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop: Anthropologist, Historian, Physicist and Scholar” (5 minutes)

Link: <http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2013/may/23/dr-cheikh-anta-diop-anthropologist-historian/?page=1>

Study Questions

1. What are the three areas of Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop’s expertise? What are his credentials?
2. Where was Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop born?

“10 Arguments That Prove Ancient Egyptians Were Black” (15 minutes)

Link: <http://atlantablackstar.com/2013/10/25/10-arguments-that-proves-ancient-egyptians-were-black/>

Study Questions

1. Identify 5 of the 10 arguments made by Cheikh Anta Diop that prove the Ancient Egyptians were Black?
2. What is the Melanin Dosage Test? What does it show?

View the following materials (approximately 10 – 15 minutes):

SLIDESHOW: Ancient Depictions of Egyptian Rulers (6-10 minutes)

Access the slideshow *Ancient Depictions of Egyptian Rulers* on the EFLA website. As you view the slideshow, take notes on how ancient Egyptians depicted themselves in monuments, carvings and other artifacts.

SLIDESHOW: Hollywood Depictions of Ancient Egyptians (2-5 minutes)

Access the slideshow *Hollywood Depictions of Ancient Egyptians*. As you view the slideshow, take notes on how ancient Egyptians are portrayed in film and popular culture as opposed to how they portrayed themselves.

Study Questions

1. How do the Hollywood depictions compare to how the Ancient Egyptians portrayed themselves?
2. Do these images confirm or dispel your previous conceptions of Ancient Egyptians?
3. What role does race and racialization play in popular representations of Ancient Egyptians?
4. What political purpose does the racialization of Ancient Egypt serve? Be prepared to share your responses in class.

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop



Biographical Information

“Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop: Anthropologist, Historian, Physicist and Scholar” by Jasmin K. Williams

Link: <http://amsterdamnews.com/news/2013/may/23/dr-cheikh-anta-diop-anthropologist-historian/?page=1>

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Articles and Book Chapters:

Basil Davidson, "The Ancient World and Africa: Whose Roots?" in *Egypt Revisited* edited by Ivan Van Sertima. New Brunswick, NJ: *Journal of African Civilizations*, 1999.

James Brunson, "Ancient Egyptians: The Dark Red Race Myth" and "Ethnic or Symbolic: Blackness and Human Images in Ancient Egyptian Art" in *Egypt Revisited* edited by Ivan Van Sertima. New Brunswick, NJ: *Journal of African Civilizations*, 1999.

Cheikh Anta Diop, "Origin of the Ancient Egyptians" in *Egypt Revisited* edited by Ivan Van Sertima. New Brunswick, NJ: *Journal of African Civilizations*, 1999.

Aaron Kamugisha, "Finally in Africa? Egypt, from Diop to Celenko," *Race & Class* 45, 1: 31-60.

S.O.Y. Keita, "Studies and Comments on Ancient Egyptian Biological Relationships," *History of Africa* Vol. 20 (1993): 129-154.

Books related to the African Origins of Egypt

Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Civilization*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Anthony Browder, *Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Karmic Guidance, 1992.

Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, edited and translated by Mercer Cook. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974.

Carter G. Woodson, *The African Background Outlined: Or, Handbook for the Study of the Negro*. Washington D.C.: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1936.

Carter G. Woodson and Charles H. Wesley, *The Negro in Our History* (1922)

Studies on Race and Ancient Egypt

Meghan Keita, *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

On-Line Resources

John Henrik Clarke, *Why Africana History?* (1997)

Link: <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/afprl/clarke/why-africana-history-by-dr.-john-henrik-clarke>

W.E.B. DuBois, "Ethiopia and Egypt" in *The Negro* 1915

Link: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/dbn/dbn05.htm>

Druscilla Dunjee Houston, *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire* (1926)

Link: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/we/>

C.F. Volney, *The Ruins or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires: and the Law of Nature* (1791)

Link: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1397/1397-h/1397-h.htm>

Molefi Asante, "Race in Antiquity: Truly Out of Africa" (2009)

Link: <http://www.asante.net/articles/19/race-in-antiquity-truly-out-of-africa/>