

Black History Month, part one: We must study Ancient Africa

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that ancient Egyptians performed surgical procedures, practiced dentistry, and successfully embalmed the dead so that corpses were preserved for centuries. The same is true of engineering and the development of geometry. It is well documented the Egypt was one of the first and most advanced early civilizations. While this is acknowledged, there is and continues to be a widespread attempt to pretend that the ancient Egyptians were not Africans. But not only were they Africans, they were also heavily infused with the blood of other Africans who surrounded them. It was at a much later time period than the age of the great pharaohs that the northern region of Africa was invaded by Arabs and southern Europeans.

The use of proverbs for teaching the young was quite common all over Africa as was the use of fables. The book of Proverbs in the Christian Bible is just one example. It also should be noted that the most widely known writer of fables, Aesop, was an African who happen to be known by a Greek name. At the higher education level, the ancient Africans were known for the university at Timbuktu. But university education was being dispensed at other places and has been attested to by the Ancient Greeks. We are often told, however, that these were Arabic institutions.

If we lose this knowledge or fail to recognize these contributions of ancient Africa, we fall into the deception of the white supremacists. Early on white Europeans and Americans tried to pretend that Africans were not "civilized" and were less than fully developed humans. That justified their being taken as slaves. Ignoring the advanced nature of ancient African society helped spread the idea that these Africans were blessed or helped because they were introduced to an advanced civilization.

FULL TEXT

Typically, Black History Month programs begin with the horrors of chattel slavery. Often they focus on how African Americans have overcome, that is, how they achieved despite the racial handicaps of slavery and Jim Crow and/or how they fought to bring about an improved human condition. Fairly typical also is the fact that black history courses glance over or omit altogether the life, culture and achievements of African people prior to the arrival of European conquerors and enslavers.

We should pledge this year to never again allow ourselves to remain uninformed of the historical importance of Ancient Africa to us and to the world. We must turn to the works of scholars such as John H. Clarke, C.K. Diop, Chancellor Williams, J.A. Rogers, and William Leo Hansberry, to name a few.

No longer should there be an absence of the fact that African people were the first humans, and that as such, they created the first cultures, the first cities, the civilizations. In more specific terms, it needs to be understood that agriculture began in Africa as did the practice of irrigation to grow the crops and provide for the people living in

cities and villages. Similarly, it was in Africa where people first used salt to preserve meat from spoilage.

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This induced confusion about the African identity of Ancient Egypt is also characteristic of how other African people such as the Phoenicians, Hittites, and Hebrews are treated in many history classes and "scholarly circles." As a result, Africans are not rightly credited with the development of the alphabet, the Arabic numerals, algebra, and the smelting of iron for use as tools and weapons.

The use of proverbs for teaching the young was quite common all over Africa as was the use of fables. The book of Proverbs in the Christian Bible is just one example. It also should be noted that the most widely known writer of fables, Aesop, was an African who happen to be known by a Greek name. At the higher education level, the ancient Africans were known for the university at Timbuktu. But university education was being dispensed at other places and has been attested to by the Ancient Greeks. We are often told, however, that these were Arabic institutions.

In the area of religion or theology, Africans were the first to advance the idea that there was only one god (monotheism), that there was life after death, and that god expected people to live by a well defined and accepted code of conduct. It was in Africa that monks and an ascetic life style was developed and held up as a model "holy life."

The practice of pharmacy was known all over Africa. We just generally referred to such as home remedies. Similarly, midwifery was practiced all over Africa.

Astrology and the origins of astronomy are ancient African products. The story of the birth of Jesus attests to the idea of astronomy and the prediction behind the announcement of that birth points to the practice of astrology.

In the area of music, not just the drums and other percussion instruments, but stringed instruments such as the banjo came from Africa. Call-response singing and polyphonic rhythms are African in origin as is creative, communal dancing.

Even the practices of trial by jury and democratic decision making were well know in Africa before being adopted by the Greeks and Romans. The more common practices in Europe at the time were trial by combat and trial by ordeal. In terms of decision making, monarchy was the common European style. In many African villages, the elders and sometimes all adults were involved in decision making.

If we lose this knowledge or fail to recognize these contributions of ancient Africa, we fall into the deception of the white supremacists. Early on white Europeans and Americans tried to pretend that Africans were not "civilized" and were less than fully developed humans. That justified their being taken as slaves. Ignoring the advanced nature of ancient African society helped spread the idea that these Africans were blessed or helped because they were introduced to an advanced civilization.

The truth of the matter is that some Africans were taken to Europe and the Americas as slaves, reducing their ability to continue their cultural advancement. At the same time, the African continent as a whole was colonized and its precious resources taken, arresting its development. At least two writers, Walter Rodney and Chancellor Williams, have written books about how Europe undeveloped Africa.

On the other side of the coin, by beginning Black History with the discussion of slavery, many students get the impression that all of the advancement of Black people has been made since they were brought to America. It leaves a great deal of doubt and negative self concepts in the minds of Black people about Africa and themselves. That too, is a consequence of the spread of the idea of white supremacy.

In order to diminish the influence of white supremacy on black and white minds, we must study Ancient Africa.

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