

African Mythomania

Africa in History, by Basil Davidson,
New York: The Macmillan Company,
1968.

The Lost Cities of Africa, by Basil
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Teachers' Guide to African History,
by William Loren Katz, *Chicago: Quad-*
rangle Books, Inc.

A Glorious Age in Africa, by Daniel
Chu and Elliott Skinner, *Garden City,*
N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,
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Black History, edited by Melvin Dri-
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Company, Inc., 1968.

THERE IS A CLOSER relationship than one might suppose *prima facie* between the philosophers of history and the contemporary eulogistic historians of Negro Africa. The former are concerned with the causes and rhythms of the rise and fall of civilizations and their location in space and time. Most have concluded that Negro Africa lies outside the zone of civilization and that its inhabitants have never created any significant or original integrated cultural system.¹

The negrophile historians of Africa are not primarily concerned with stating "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*," as Leopold Ranke defined the aim of history, but with proving that African culture-civilizations were comparable in quality to those of other regions. Alternately, they seek to show that any shortfall in African Negro creativity was due to environmental handicaps or oppression by non-Negroes. The alleged "golden era of the western Sudan," according to the inaccurate propagandistic book of Chu and Skinner, was destroyed

by Moorish invaders;² others blame the African slave trade for the barbarism which European explorers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries found in West Africa.

The propagandistic goal of much of contemporary Negro and African history is at times avowed with commendable candor. Thus, Melville J. Herskovits, a pioneer in this hagiographic sociology, declared that he wished "to give the Negro an appreciation of his past . . . to endow him with the confidence in his own position in this country and in the world *which he must have . . .*"³ It need scarcely be stressed that this approach to sociology and history is incompatible with scholarly objectivity.

The former *Manchester Guardian* correspondent, Basil Davidson, has devoted the past twenty years to turning out volumes on African history which have been extravagantly praised by reviewers who are ideologically committed to the glorification of the black African past. As history, Davidson's latest effort,⁴ is pretentious, filled with sociological clichés, and an evasion of the main issue, namely, the character and quality of autonomous Negro civilizations. "The seductively agreeable belief so dear to nineteenth century Europe," Davidson writes, "that all in Africa was savage chaos before the coming of the Europeans may linger here and there, but not among historians concerned with Africa."⁵

Obviously, nineteenth century Europe did not for a moment imagine that "all in Africa was savage chaos"; it was keenly aware of the fact that great civilizations had been created on that continent, those of Egypt, Carthage, and Roman Africa, for example. What the Europeans of that day asserted was a very different proposition, namely, that Negroes had never created a civilization of their own either in Africa or elsewhere.

Davidson makes his case by mixing Arab and Berber civilizations with Negro societies indiscriminately and seldom revealing to his readers which were which. Moreover, Africa was never a continental unity. Whereas the Mediterranean served as a

corridor, the Sahara was a barrier. Hence, no meaningful treatment of Africa north of the Sahara is possible except as part of the Mediterranean world. The second result of Davidson's method is that the ill-informed reader will imagine that great Negro civilizations existed in such places as Meroë and Kilwa. In fact, Davidson quotes Ibn Batuta, the great Arab traveller, as describing Kilwa in 1331 as "one of the most beautiful and best constructed towns in the world. . . ." A Negro achievement? Scarcely. Kilwa was an Arab coastal city of the *Zenj*; its chief industry was the purchase, castration and export to Arabia, Persia, India and China of Negro slaves.⁶

Davidson and other eulogists of the Negro past rest their case on partial quotations from one or two carefully selected Arab sources, notably Ibn Batuta and Leo Africanus.⁷ Even with these favored writers, Davidson and *confrères* carefully omit passages which reflect unfavorably on their *protégés*. Thus, Davidson quotes Ibn Batuta's observation that nobody who travels in the African kingdom of Mali "has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence." He adds that scholarship flourished, that the influence of these African "schools of theology and law spread far into Muslim Asia," and that, in the successor kingdom of the Songhay, there was "a regular delegation of authority to a civil service." He concludes that "medieval Timbuktu might reasonably have claimed as much of civilization as most of the university cities of medieval Europe" and, on the same page, he refers to the kingdoms which ruled Timbuktu as "these Negro states."⁸ We learn further that these states of the western Sudan "remained much more broadly democratic, even when allowing for the steady growth of the royal power after the middle of the fifteenth century, than their contemporaries in Europe."⁹

One might infer from all of this that Timbuktu had cathedrals rivalling Salisbury, philosophers capable of discussing Thomas Aquinas, representative institutions comparable to the English Parliament,

and sophisticated concepts of sovereignty and justice. Yet even Ibn Batuta observed that the houses of Timbuktu were cottages built of chalk and covered with thatch"; that the currency was unstamped gold and cowrie shells, and that the people ate "carrion, dogs, and asses."¹⁰ As for the "broadly democratic" institutions and "civil service" of the Songhay, let us turn from Davidson's literary efforts to what his source, Ibn Batuta, actually said and what Davidson omits. At the court of Sulaiman, king of the Songhay, some cannibals appeared from Wangara, the gold-mining district.

The sultan received them without honour, and gave them as his hospitality-gift a servant, a negress. They killed and ate her, and having smeared their faces and hands with her blood came to the sultan to thank him. I was informed that this is their regular custom whenever they visit his court.¹¹

So much for Songhay democracy, civil service and culture. When we turn from the comparatively restrained exaggerations of Davidson to Chu and Skinner, we read that the Songhay city of Jenne had "a university of very high reputation" with "thousands of teachers who lectured and conducted research on many subjects, including medicine."¹² This is not history, but hallucination.

What are the basic facts about these supposed civilizations of the Sudan? It would be as unreasonable to dismiss them as totally barbarian as it would be to believe the claims of Davidson.

1. They existed in the border zone, or shatter belt, between the domains of the Caucasian and the Negro races. In Ghana, "the ruling dynasty was white, but the people were black Mandingo."¹³ As for the "intelligentsia" of these caravan towns, that of Jenne seems to have been Negro, but the literati of Timbuktu were preponderantly Jedralas. The Jedralas were Berbers, and therefore whites, from Mauretania. They were famous as the scholars of the desert lands and made their intellectual imprint

on more civilized portions of the *Maghreb*, notably Morocco. Some, in fact, emigrated to Portugal, intermarried with Jews, and produced such distinguished minds as Master Guedalha, the Astronomer Royal and astrologer to Prince Henry the Navigator.

2. Ghana, Mali and Songhay were immensely rich. They obtained gold from the primitive Negro tribes of Guinea by the silent trading method described by Herodotus, offering in return salt which slave laborers worked for them at Taghaza, where they were blinded by desert winds and often "perish(ed) for lack of food."¹⁴ Until the exploitation of the gold mines of Mexico and Peru in the sixteenth century, the rulers of these Sudan states excited the cupidity and admiration of the West by their ostentatious display of bullion during their occasional trips to Egypt and Mecca. Chu and Skinner appear awed by the fact that a king of Ghana had a gold hitching post for his horse.¹⁵

3. These African states were able to survive for several centuries for two basic reasons: as extensions of Islam, linked with the *Maghreb*, and led in part or in whole by people of Berber blood, they found it easy to dominate and exploit the primitive Negro mining tribes of the interior. Their protection against invasion by the militarily and technologically superior white states of northern Africa was the Sahara. When a Moorish army, consisting mainly of Iberian Christians, made this terrible crossing at the close of the sixteenth century, it massacred the defending Songhay forces with ease and overthrew their kingdom.

4. Comparisons between civilization levels in the Saharan states and in medieval Europe in terms of such categories as democracy, justice and respect for human life are silly. No European monarch would have thrown a slave to cannibals to be butchered and eaten in his presence. The fact that one horse was worth from 15 to 20 slaves in the Songhay is eloquent testimony to the value placed upon human life in the Saharan kingdoms.

5. A serious discussion of the compara-

tive levels of central African and medieval European civilizations might do well to avoid the pretentious sociological jargon of writers such as Davidson and deal instead with a few simple stages in human control of natural forces. One of these is the domestication of animals. Although by no means the most inventive people of their time, the Carthaginians learned the difficult art of training African elephants for war. By contrast, the Negroes of sub-Saharan Africa never learned how to domesticate any of their wild animals, not even the zebra, who presents no greater difficulties than the horse. African Negro animal husbandry developed on the basis of importation of Eurasian livestock which had been domesticated by other races. Another yardstick is the failure of African Negroes to discover and settle Madagascar, which parallels the East African coast for a thousand miles some 250 miles seaward of the littoral. Madagascar was discovered and colonized by Indonesians, who voyaged several thousand miles across the Indian Ocean to make that landfall. They brought in Negro slaves; hence the population is racially mixed, but the language is akin to that of Indonesia, and the social stratification is such that the more negroid tribes are lowest in status. Failure to develop shipbuilding, seamanship, navigation and a cognate knowledge of astronomy has been characteristic of Negro Africa.

Ethnocentric mythologizing about history is not the monopoly of the glorifiers of the Black African past. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the intellectual author of Nazi race theories, made the extravagant and untenable claim that "all those who from the sixth century onwards appear as genuine shapers of the destinies of mankind, whether as builders of States or as discoverers of new thoughts and original art, belong to the Teutonic race."¹⁶ In pursuit of his racist fantasies, Chamberlain alleged that Jesus was an Aryan, that the Jews did not write the Bible, and that the historic mission of Jewry was to "produce a herd of pseudo-hebraic mestizos, a people

beyond all doubt degenerate physically, mentally and morally.”

Discussion of the creative contributions of American Negroes is complicated by the fact that this population is ethnically mixed. Various estimates of the degree of admixture have been made over the past twenty years, based on solid serological evidence. In an article in the summer 1970 issue of *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, I estimate that the Caucasian genetic component in the present American Negro population is about sixteen percent.¹⁷

Whereas Latin Americans generally classify persons as Negro who appear to be predominantly of Negro genetic origin, the Anglo-Saxon propensity is to so classify anyone who has discernibly Negro features. There are enormous variations between the abilities, characteristics and mental capacities of different members of the same race and the American habit of classing preponderantly Caucasoid people as Negroes further increases that range. With the possible exception of a few vestigial Stone Age folk, whose brains may be too small for rational thought, there are individuals in every race at the so-called genius level.

In the specific case of the American Negro, the most authentic recorded case of genius is that of Philippa Duke Schuyler, whose mother was white and whose father is of mixed Negro, white and Indonesian (Madagascar) racial origin. At two and a half, Philippa could spell 500 words, including *rhinoceros*; at four, she won her first gold medal in the National Piano Guild competitions; by eleven, she had written a hundred piano compositions, one of which was played by the New York Philharmonic. She went through eight years of grammar school in three years and grew up to become a professional concert pianist, foreign correspondent and author. She died tragically at the age of 34 while evacuating Vietnamese orphans from a battle area by helicopter.

The volume under review which deals with putatively great American Negroes does not mention Philippa Schuyler, pos-

sibly because she was a patriot who loved her country or possibly because mediocrity is repelled by excellence. William Loren Katz's *Teachers' Guide to American Negro History*, sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League and touted by the *New York Times*, is an appalling *melange* of half-truths and errors of fact which is deficient in both objectivity and scholarship. Strongly biased in favor of communist sources and interpretations, it serves as a powerful instrument for the development of race hatred in the American Negro population. Katz's work is the same sort of prostitution of history to racism that is occurring in the field of African history. The purpose is to show that American Negroes accomplished great deeds which were ignored or concealed by our white racist society. Yet the only member of the mob which assaulted British soldiers in the Boston Massacre who is remembered and after whom schools, streets and monuments are named is the Negro, Crispus Attucks. The white men who lost their lives in the same affray are neglected or forgotten.

Katz characterizes Benjamin Banneker as "the most noted Negro" of his day and points out that Jefferson "sent his work to French scientists, and recommended his appointment to the commission that laid out the city of Washington, D.C.," but suppresses Jefferson's private judgment that Banneker's achievements were the result of "aid from Ellicot," his white Quaker friend, who "never missed an opportunity of puffing him," and that Banneker's letter to Jefferson revealed "a mind of very common stature indeed."¹⁸ Again, there are references to Phillis Wheatley, "the slave poet who achieved international fame," but without Jefferson's observation that her compositions were "below the dignity of criticism."

These instances of puffing up the mediocre, of calculated *afflatus* and judicious suppression of evidence could be multiplied *ad nauseam*. In the field of technology, we are told that Jan Matzeliger, a Negro workman, "developed a complicated machine

that manufactured an entire shoe." If the author had taken the trouble to visit a shoe factory, he would have had visible proof of the absurdity of this assertion. Madame C. J. Walker, who became a millionaire by discovering a way of straightening hair for her colored clientele, is placed in this hall of fame. Norbert Rillieux is credited with having "revolutionized the sugar industry of the world." The vacuum pan, attributed to his ingenuity, was certainly a major technological forward step, but there is evidence that he appropriated the discovery of another person.

The *Teachers' Guide* is a work of unabashed propaganda which is more appropriate to a totalitarian than to a free society. One of its avowed purposes is "to demonstrate that Negroes never willingly accepted slavery or second-class citizenship but battled in valiant and practical ways to achieve the promise of America." Thus, Katz swallows whole the thesis of Herbert Aptheker that American Negroes were in a state of almost incessant rebellion against their white masters, an assertion that is contrary to the weight of evidence, but obviously useful to the communist purpose of stirring up race war. It is significant that he recommends Aptheker's books in terms of unqualified enthusiasm in nine separate places without once revealing that Aptheker is a Communist Party spokesman. He hails the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, characterized by the Negro former head of the U.S. Information Service, Carl Rowan, as an "ex-convict, ex-dope peddler who became a racial fanatic," as "the exciting story of the Negro leader who became the symbol of Black Nationalism."

To Katz, the black politicians of Reconstruction were all "earnest, hard working legislators" and nowhere is it hinted that many of them had sticky fingers. By contrast, white "Southern character is carefully documented with the words of Southern fanatics." Like Herskovits, Katz alleges that one of his aims is "to instill in Negro students a pride in their African and American heritage . . ." Be that as it may, the

effect of this propaganda is very different. It creates a racial consciousness based on falsehoods and fabrications; it instills illusions about Negro history which cause deep feelings of racial resentment; it makes the American Negro imagine that his failings are due exclusively to white mistreatment and oppression; in this way, it spawns attitudes of rancor, alienation and disloyalty to country. Books such as those of Katz, Davidson, Chu and Skinner lure Negro intellectuals into the blind alley of cultural return to an imaginary African golden age and to self-imposed isolation from the challenges and opportunities of American society. The predictable result is that the Negro thus affected will learn things that are neither true nor useful to him in facing his problems and which serve to deepen the frightening alienation between his race and white America that has already occurred.

Reviewed by NATHANIEL WEYL

¹⁴"The Negro exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Great Books, Vol. 46, 196-197.) Except for Egyptian civilization, which was "grossly exaggerated," none of the African peoples were able to "emerge, in any degree, from the ignorance to which the penury of nature has doomed them." Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (New York, 1863), I, 36. "It will be seen that, when we classify Mankind by colour, the only primary race that has not made a creative contribution to any civilization is the Black Race. . ." Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London, 1951), I, 233. Toynbee continues with an expatiation on the improbability that the "Black Race" should be the only division of mankind devoid of creativity and urges that judgment on the matter be suspended, presumably for the next few millenia. Unfortunately, Toynbee's knowledge of physical anthropology and ethnology is even more defective than his grasp of other exact sciences cognate to the philosophy of history. He makes two major errors in the quoted passage: First, races cannot be classified by skin color, which is an adaptation to intense solar radiation, the melanin providing protection against ultra-violet rays and skin cancer. Therefore, all tropical populations tend to become dark skinned through differential survival. Second, other major races have failed to produce civilizations, notably, the Australoids and Capoids, the latter being represented by Bushmen and Hottentots.

³Chu and Skinner, *Age*, 112. The army was commanded by Judar, a blue-eyed Spaniard, who had been captured and enuchized as an infant. Since traversing the Sahara was a military operation of enormous hardships and difficulty, the majority of the invading force consisted of picked Andalucians and European renegades. Moorish armies were, at the time, hardly better than armed rabble. E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (London: Oxford, 1968), 168. This is one of the few recent books on Negro Africa which is factual, judicious and honest.

⁴Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941) p. 37. Emphasis supplied.

⁵Davidson, *Africa in History*.

⁶Ibid., p. 63.

⁷In Islam, the chief purpose of castration was to protect the harem; in China it was a mark of degradation. Concerning castration, Montesquieu observed that the Asiatics "always deprive the blacks of their resemblance to us by a more opprobrious distinction." (*Spirit of the Laws*, Book XV, Section 5, 238.)

⁸Yet there were Arab travelers to sub-Saharan Africa who returned unimpressed. For instance, Ibn Haukal, who visited Ghana and the western Sudan around 1000 A.D. and who was a better observer than Leo Africanus (since he at least knew which way the Niger flowed), wrote: "I have not described the country of the African

blacks and the other peoples of the torrid zone: because, naturally loving wisdom, ingenuity, religion, justice and regular government, how could I notice such people as these, or magnify them by inserting an account of their countries?" E. W. Bovill, *Golden Trade*, p. 62.

⁹Davidson, *Africa in History*.

¹⁰Ibn Batuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa* (London, 1929) pp. 329-332.

¹¹E. W. Bovill, *Golden Trade*, p. 95.

¹²Leo Africanus: quoted by Bovill, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

¹³Chu and Skinner, p. 28.

¹⁴Bovill, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹⁵Leo Africanus: quoted by Bovill, p. 161.

¹⁶Chu and Skinner, p. 28.

¹⁷Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundation of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1912). lxvi.

¹⁸"Some Genetic Aspects of Plantation Slavery."

Also see Bentley Glass and C. C. Li, *The American Journal of Human Genetics* (1953), Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 1-20; P. L. Workman, B. S. Blumberg and A. J. Cooper, *The American Journal of Human Genetics* (1963), Vol. 15, pp. 429-37; W. S. Pollitzer, R. M. Menegaz-Bock, Ruggero Ceppellini and L. C. Dunn, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, Vol. 22, pp. 393-8, and W. S. Pollitzer, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (1958), Vol. 16, pp. 241-63.

¹⁹Jefferson to Joel Barlow, October 8, 1809.



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