

Reviews

Wilson Jeremiah Moses has taken on Afrocentrism, a fraught topic in our racialized world ever since Molefi Asante popularized the term in the 1980s and white hysteria landed it on the cover of weekly news magazines. Currently the religion of thousands of young African Americans and the scourge of academics (black as well as white), Afrocentrism is an old theme—perhaps *the* theme—in black American intellectual history. In Wilson J. Moses' book, a host of black thinkers, some surprising, belongs in its ranks—e.g., Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, the young John Hope Franklin, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Sterling Stuckey.

Moses points out, and rightly so, that the history of Afrocentrism cannot be separated from the history of demeaning stereotypes of African Americans. Throughout its history, Afrocentrism has talked back to Eurocentrism's denigration of people of African descent; it vindicates us. Moses takes Afrocentrism and its history seriously as religious fervor and myth, but he never sees in it the evil racism some of its opponents (e.g., Mary Lefkowitz) decry. For Moses, Afrocentrism and Egyptocentrism are "usually harmless and inoffensive, if sometimes extravagant, folk traditions." He qualifies only the rare Afrocentrist, a Leonard Jeffries or Ron Karenga, as paranoid or dangerous.

From Olaudah Equiano in the late eighteenth century to Cheikh Anta Diop in the mid-twentieth, Moses finds two main tendencies within Afrocentrism: first, the classic strain that takes off from the Bible and seeks vindication in ancient civilizations and, second, the modernist-primitivist *négritude* that views European civilization critically. He discusses two main narratives—one of decline, the other of progress—and divides Afrocentrists into "civilizationists," who are cultural monists, and cultural relativists, who are multicultural. From beginning to end, he stresses the difference between various Afrocentrisms, which celebrate Africanity and blackness, and Egyptocentrics, who obsessively link black Americans to the glories of ancient Egypt.

Moses organizes *Afrotopia* chronologically, which allows him to trace changes in Afrocentrism against the backdrop of Western thought. During the nineteenth century, when mainstream American thought revolved around the Bible and the glory of ancient Greece and Rome, black thinkers sought to redeem their race through interpretations of the Bible and appeals to the grandeur of ancient Egypt.

In the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, ambivalence characterized black vindication. Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, and their contemporaries combined a skepticism toward white-supremacist Eurocentrism with a frank admiration of European efficiency and colonial mastery. In Biblical terms, they also found themselves implicated in two ancient Egyptian identities: As African-descended heirs of Egypt, they identified with pharaoh. But as an enslaved people, they also identified with the enslaved Israelites. The duality of ancient Egypt, as a land of the bad (slave drivers and moral turpitude) as well as of the

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admirable (monuments and empire), would continue to bother Afrocentrists throughout the nineteenth century. Sorting out identities became even knottier with many nineteenth-century African Americans' conflation of the Bible's Ethiopia with ancient Egypt.

While much nineteenth-century Afrocentrism looked back to ancient splendor and traced—implicitly or explicitly—a narrative of decline into the Atlantic slave trade and American enslavement, a parallel narrative of progress looked forward to racial greatness. Advocates of racial progress such as Douglass placed their faith in science and the power of a progressive American environment to uplift African peoples. But even as Douglass embraced progress, he had to contend with delusions such as polygenesis in American science. Moses acknowledges the weirdness of arguments intended to counter the perversity of what passed as scientific knowledge. How, he asks, can we expect black thought always to transcend nonsense, when the negrophobic science against which black Americans had to struggle could itself be insane?

Nineteenth-century Afrocentrists found it difficult to espouse cultural relativism when (with significant exceptions) those praising African and slave cultures did so in order to uphold slavery. By and large, nineteenth-century Afrocentrists accepted a single, Northern European model of "civilization," which they usually saw as interchangeable with "culture." Cultural relativism gained credence in the twentieth century, thanks to the new field of anthropology and the belief in European decline that spread after the bloody debacle of the First World War. In the 1920s and 1930s, white as well as black Americans and Europeans saw Europe as the civilization in crisis and African Americans and Africans as the repositories of cultural vigor. Twentieth-century Afrocentricists like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and their colleagues in the Harlem Renaissance embraced primitivism in a way their nineteenth-century predecessors simply could not.

Moses' Afrocentrists are white as well as black, both as intellectual touchstones who praised the greatness of Egypt (Constantin François Volney, Melville Herskovits, Martin Bernal) and as patrons and supporters of black intellectuals and artists (Charlotte Mason Osgood and Albert C. Barnes). Afrocentrism, Moses reminds us, has never been the exclusive property of blacks. White scholars such as Herskovits, he notes, have enabled far more Afrocentric thought than Marcus Garvey. Not surprisingly, thoughtful black people's relation to white people and white thought has been ambivalent. Much distrust stems from the reasonable suspicion that white people have concealed the truth about black history.

Such suspicions have tended to turn African Americans away from the great tradition of Western learning, shot through as it is with negrophobia. Recognizing this phenomenon of distrust as well as his students' fascination with Afrocentrism, Moses applauds Afrocentrism's success in disposing such students (especially black men from the working class) to grapple with Western thought. The sight of young people with well-thumbed books by Drusilla Dunjee Houston and Cheikh Anta Diop warms Moses' heart, because he knows this means a turn toward reading and away from "priapic displays and foul-mouthed monkeys." Better the temples of ancient Egypt than the smut of gangsta rap.

Despite glances at late-twentieth-century Afrocentrism, *Afrotopia* ends at mid-century, with W. E. B. Du Bois's coinage of the term *Afrocentric* in 1961-62, regarding his projected *Encyclopedia Africana*, and Diop's work, since which, says Moses, nothing new of value has been added to the field. Reflecting its author's area of concentration, this study spends a good deal of time on figures from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Douglass, Martin Delany,

Du Bois, Alexander Crummell (on whom Moses published an excellent intellectual biography in 1989), and early twentieth-century figures such as the intriguing William Ferris, author of *The African Abroad* (1913).

This masterful, nuanced, and occasionally cranky intellectual history bears the hallmark of a senior scholar: an agile self-confidence, the fruit of a career's worth of exploration in the field. Moses also provides a few trenchant observations on the subject of academic careers and the continuing obstacles black faculty face.