

## SANKOFA

### (Looking back to look forward)

Only when a people are truly familiar with their history can they charter a course that will not repeat the errors of the past. Only then can they truly over-stand the ties that bind them together as a unique people with a unique story. Only then can they equip themselves with a historic sense of destiny that gives them fortitude and courage, enabling them to acquire that level of strength that stretches beyond any one individual lifetime. The following is an attempt to push our historical memory even further back than the slave raids on western coasts of Africa and the well-known "middle passage" journeys that followed. It is hoped that the knowledge that follows will guide us faithfully in our continued migrations.

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### Excerpts from Chancellor Williams' "THE DESTRUCTION OF BLACK CIVILIZATION"

#### Describing the take-over of Africa that started before the Europeans and made it easier for the Europeans

Wherever the splintered-off refugee groups found a place where the soil seemed favorable for cultivation, and the land unoccupied by preceding migrants, they settled and began to build villages again. A sense of relative security was a necessary factor in deciding where to begin new settlements. **A CRUCIAL QUESTION WAS HOW MANY MILES HAD THEY PUT BETWEEN THE SLAVE HUNTERS AND THEMSELVES.** For the kind of houses and community buildings they would erect depended directly on the probability of permanent settlement or sudden flight again. In short, they could build large, sturdy and attractive compound homes and temples of worship or instead build easily demolished huts.

It was for reasons of security that so many of these groups, later called tribes or societies, sought the most hidden and isolated areas they could find. This **PERMANENT SEPARATION FROM THEIR KINSMEN IN OTHER GROUPS** was generally quite contrary to their heart's desires. The original splintering off and parting was often done in tears. But breaking up into smaller units seemed to be the only route to survival in **A PERMANENT CRISIS SITUATION**- apparently permanent, since the movement of people over the continent had been going on so far beyond the memory of each generation that migrations and temporary settlements were among the most significant facts in the oral tradition of each society.

Fragmentation and isolation had two momentous consequences. The first was that the isolation of various groups led to the development of over two thousand different dialects and languages.

The second fateful outcome was that the rise of all these tongues widened the gulf between the Blacks that territorial distances had already achieved.

One should pause here for reflection if there is any serious attempt to really understand what happened to the African people and why. For even without the aid of western writers in emphasizing the language differences and the cultural variations and attempting to show how unrelated the Blacks were, they in time came to consider themselves unique with each society not only independent of the other but independent of its enemy, if only potentially. **Disunity and mutual suspicion became an African way of life.** Small chiefdoms sprung up everywhere, often no more than a village of one or two hundred people. Africa therefore presented itself to Asia and Europe as the ideal land for exploration, enslavement and conquest.

There were then, different outcomes for different societies. Some perished even to the last member from disease, starvation or warfare. Others, despairing of ever again being able to have a fixed abode, became nomads. Some, although isolated so long that they had developed different languages and customs, had nevertheless decided that salvation required a union with other groups. These were the tribes that merged with other tribes, lost their separate identity and languages and who evolved from this process a single common language, larger and larger chiefdoms, Kingdoms, and finally empires that began the rebirth of their long lost civilization.

The fiercest wars between the Blacks occurred in the founding and expansion of new kingdoms and empires. For while the core groups were voluntary confederations, expansion of an empire required the conquest of neighboring states, usually small, independent chiefdoms that preferred to maintain their absolute sovereignty. The repercussions from this forced unity by conquest were to shake the continent from end to end centuries later when European political rule ended.

Modern Africans and students of Africa have tended to emphasize the destructive impact of European imperialism in Africa while ignoring the most damaging developments from the Arab impact before the general European takeover in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a relatively recent period.

This point is important. For one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the Blacks is that dealing with those dauntless leaders and people who, having lost one state after another along with three-fourths of their kinsmen, nevertheless overrode all the forces of destruction and death and began to build, always once again, still another state.

From the earliest times the elimination of these states as independent African sovereignties had been an Asian objective, stepped up by Muslim onslaughts after the seventh century A. D. So the reestablished black states were still being conquered and Islamized when Europeans began to arrive in great numbers to impose their rule over both Asians and Africans. The big thing that happened here, to repeat, is generally glossed over, ignored or forgotten. The last being a pretension, since a historical development of this magnitude could hardly be forgotten by serious writers on Africa. For what happened, very simply, was that **European imperialism in Africa checked and replaced Arab imperialism.**

Insofar as those who were fortunate enough to find promising areas for settlement are concerned, the picture was generally one of state building and the revival of basic African institutions which, though not forgotten, **could neither be maintained nor developed by any people forever on the move.**

But what about the countless societies, fleeing before the conquering hordes and the enslavers, as well as famine and the deaths which were their daily companion, what about those who found no Promised land anywhere? For quite unlike the societies I mentioned that could settle down and had the opportunity to start and develop civilizations comparable to any elsewhere in the world at the time, **these people could neither settle down, nor therefore develop a civilization.** What they suffered from year to year as they wandered over the continent is almost beyond both description and belief. In fact, while the story is well-known, few writers would want to go into its awful details. Suffice to say at this point that, here then, were numerous societies of Africans that were virtually **sentenced either to death from starvation or enslavement by Arabs; (I am still in the pre-European period) or barbarism and savagery, and in many cases even cannibalism.**

Under such conditions I would defend not only the retrogression of these people to barbarism, but to cannibalism itself. The defense of the latter is easy, since it has been well established that other supposedly highly civilized men will revert to savagery and cannibalism under prolonged conditions of extreme hunger and thirst, when survival itself was the only question that dominates the human mind. This phenomenon of reverting to a state of savagery and even cannibalism under extreme conditions of starvation is known to occur universally among various peoples- white, black, brown, red, or yellow.

The facts we have then, show that after they lost Egypt and the Eastern Sudan, some Africans overriding all adverse conditions grouped themselves to form nations and developed a high order of civilization independent of any external influences. Others never settled anywhere long enough to develop anything notable, but seemed to remain in a state of lethargy or suspended animation. **THEY HAD SURRENDERED TO FATE AND BECAME TOO WEAK TO FIGHT BACK.** They descended to a state of semi-barbarism. "Descended" because most of these societies had known better times and a higher order of life. Some in more favorable circumstances nevertheless failed to advance. Still others were in the class discussed in connection with cannibalism- **HUNGER-CRAZED PEOPLE** who had sunk to the lowest levels of dog-eat-dog existence.

These last are the people about whom European and American authors delight to write. No cartoons are better known than those showing a sweating white man (usually an explorer or missionary) being cooked in a huge black pot, while black savages dance around with human bones decorating their heads or stuck through pierced noses. The idea these "experts" on Africa have been planting and still actively plant, in the minds of the peoples of the world is that "This is Africa, and these are the savages who are now clamoring for independence"

NATURE JOINS THE ATTACK

The question of physiology, vegetation, climate, water, and soil are all more crucial in the history of the Blacks than they are in the case of any other people. For here a whole continent is involved, and on that continent a people who, in one period of time, were among the foremost people on earth, and in a later period, the furthest behind. Nature itself set an environmental stage in a manner and under conditions which appear to have been designed to test to the utmost one race's moral, intellectual and physical powers to override all obstacles to survival.

The slow but relentlessly steady withdrawal of inhabitable land over the centuries eventually left Africa a land of desolation, a waste land, the greatest part of which was desert and treeless grassland with only a fractional part, about ten percent, with the much needed forests and thickets. Even the continental land configuration was against its native inhabitants. Like a vast inclined plane, the highlands beginning in Central Africa at 3,000 feet above sea level, rose southward to higher and higher levels, reaching the south-eastern provinces of the ancient Ethiopian empire. This caused Africa to slope northward and its principle river, the Nile in particular, to flow in the same direction. This single circumstance caused the Blacks to lose the very earliest centers of their civilization and the heartland of the race – Egypt and the southern area that was later called the Sudan (or land of the Blacks, just as though Egypt itself was not also formerly the “Land of the Blacks.”)

For the greatest of their rivers, the Nile, played still another tragic joke on its people. This river, the longest in the world flows 4,127 miles across Africa from Lake Nyanza to the Mediterranean. Yet not until it reaches Assuan (Aswan) and begins its last stretch of 750 miles to the sea does it overflow to further enrich 13, 500 square miles of already fertile soil in Egypt.

For its 3,377 miles through the heart of Black Africa the Nile sunk as it cut deep canyons in its soft limestone floor, leaving cliffs at places from a few hundred to a thousand feet high. What this means is that for over 3,000 miles through the eastern side of the continent the Nile was collecting the rich soil carried to it by the heavy rains and a thousand tributary streams. These flow into the “Mother of rivers” and add to the enrichment of its waters flowing northward, “guarded” all the way by her deep channels until it reaches the hard sandstone bottom above Assuan and then begins its periodic overflow the rest of the way to the sea.

Here a natural phenomenon cheated the Africans in a big way that that was to have dire consequences. There could be no black “Daughter of the Nile” observed Parsons in his “Streams of history”. For the Nile, in making Upper Ethiopia (Egypt) so rich in food production that it became world famous not only as the “Bread Basket of the World,” but also for its highly advanced civilization, stirred the envy of Asia and Europe – from which continents migrants began to settle.

Even in this, the physical geography of Africa was favorable to the “peaceful” settlers who later were to become its conquerors and rulers, for the seacoast is lowland everywhere, not more than 500 feet above sea level, and remains lowland 500 miles inland.

Asian and European occupation of the sea coast of North Africa and East Africa was therefore relatively easy, and probably even welcomed at first by the Blacks as co-partners in world trade.

But the poor and hungry nomads from the vast desert areas of the Middle East poured into the most fertile and easily accessible areas of this other land of deserts that is North Africa.

There were several consequences of the greatest historical importance which are generally not sufficiently stressed. The first was that both the Saharan transformation and the steady incursion of Asians pressured more and more Blacks back into the interior to concentrate in the already limited survival areas where just to subsist was a daily struggle.

The second important result was the wide-spread amalgamation of the races. For the weaker, more submissive Blacks remained in Asian occupied territory to become slave laborers and slave soldiers and to witness a ruthless sexual traffic in Black women that gave rise to a new breed of Afro-Asians.

These were classed as Caucasians or Asians. They themselves bitterly objected to being identified with the race of their mothers – African. When those later became known as Egyptians in Egypt, Moors in Morocco and Mauretians or Carthaginians in Carthage (Tunis) great care was taken to distinguish them from Africans in daily intercourse, in paintings and in documentary literature. This “New Breed,” half-African, was to join with their Asian fathers and forefathers in the wars and enslaving raids against the Blacks that went on **CENTURY AFTER CENTURY** until all North-Africa was eventually taken.

Still another fateful geographical factor that favored the invaders has been implied or partly stated in the foregoing observations. Aside from the easy occupation of the lowlands of the seacoast and the gradual taking-over of the rich lands of the Nile valley and its ancient civilization, both Asians and Europeans found the highlands of southern and eastern Africa “more pleasant and healthy for Caucasian settlement.”

This meant that even after nature had damned three-fourths of the continent’s land mass as impossible to support human life, the Asians and Europeans came in to seize and hold the best of the one-fourth that was left. The Blacks found themselves cut off from all seacoasts that mattered, hemmed in from all directions and confined within narrower and narrower limits.

Thus they became a wandering people forever migrating in their own vast homeland, fragmenting from great united nations into countless little splinter societies, becoming so isolated from each other that each formed a new language as its own, considering themselves quite different from their original brothers who were then regarded as strangers and enemies in the endless tribal wars that ensued over the inhabitable land.

(All Excerpts taken from “**THE DESTRUCTION OF BLACK CIVILIZATION**” by Chancellor Williams