
Introduction

The dawn of the twenty-first century finds persons of varying ethnic and racial and religious backgrounds living together in societies all over the globe. The United Kingdom and France in Europe, together with the United States and Brazil in the Americas, are perhaps only the better known of many such societies, a principal dynamic of which concerns how groups maintain their identities while forming new and viable communities with those who do not share their backgrounds or beliefs. To achieve the latter requires a willingness on the part of all to learn about the histories and cultures of everyone in the society.

This book is about people of African descent who found (and find) themselves living either outside of the African continent or in parts of Africa that were territorially quite distant from their lands of birth. It is a history of their experiences, contributions, victories, and struggles, and it is primarily concerned with massive movements and extensive relocations, over long periods of time, resulting in the dispersal of Africans and their descendants throughout much of the world. This phenomenon is referred to as the African Diaspora. Redistributions of European and Asian populations have also marked history, but the African Diaspora is unique in its formation. It is a story, or a collection of stories, like no other.

As an undergraduate text, this book is written at a time of considerable perplexity, ambiguity, and seeming contradiction. People of African descent, or black people, can be found in all walks of life. In ancient and medieval times their achievements were in instances unparalleled; their economic contributions to the modern world have

been extensive and foundational, introducing agricultural forms and mining techniques while providing the necessary labor. They have contributed to the sciences and the arts in spectacular ways, but it is their cultural influence, involving literature, theater, painting, sculpture, dance, music, athletics, and religion, that has received greater recognition, with individual artists or athletes achieving extraordinary heights. Jazz, blues, reggae, and hip hop, for example, are global phenomena. Even so, the contemporary contrast between the individual of distinction and the popular perception of blacks as a whole could not be more striking. Blacks as a group are disproportionately associated with crime, poverty, disease, and educational underachievement. This perception is paralleled by the view of Africa itself, a continent brimming with potential but waylaid by war, poverty, disease, and insufficient investment in human capital.

The study of the African Diaspora can be distinguished from the study of African Americans in the United States, or from other groups of African-descended persons in a particular nation-state, in that the African Diaspora is concerned with at least one of two issues (and frequently both): (1) the ways in which preceding African cultural, social, or political forms influence African-descended persons in their new environment, and how such forms change through interaction with non-African cultures (European, Native American, Asian, etc.); and (2) comparisons and relationships between communities of African-descended people who are geographically separated or culturally distinct.

The observation that the African Diaspora is a complex pattern of communities and cultures with differing local and regional histories raises an important question: Why continue to speak of the African Diaspora as a unified experience? There is no easy answer or scholarly consensus, but there are a number of factors that together suggest a related condition. These are (1) Africa as the land of origin; (2) an experience of enslavement; (3) the struggle of adapting to a new environment while preserving as much of the African cultural background as possible; (4) the reification of color and race; (5) a continuing struggle against discrimination; and (6) the ongoing significance of Africa to African-descended population. With these factors in mind, one can state that the African Diaspora consists of the connections of people of African descent around the world, who are linked as much by their common experiences as their genetic makeup, if not more so.

This book is divided into two parts, “Old” World Dimensions and “New” World Realities, with chapters that proceed in more or less chronological fashion. Chapter One, Antiquity, begins with a consideration of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Greece and Rome. Chapter Two, Africans and the Bible, recognizes the critical role Judeo-Christian traditions have played in the formation of African Diasporic identities and seeks to examine the historical bases for this process. Chapter Three, Africans and the Islamic World, centers on the roles of Africans, sub-saharan and otherwise, in the formation and expansion of Islam as a global force. The fourth chapter, Transatlantic Moment, shifts the inquiry away from the Old World to the New and discusses the various dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade. Chapter Five, Enslavement, focuses on the similar and dissimilar experiences of slavery in the Americas. The response of Africans and their descendants to the disorientation of displacement and enslavement, their various strategies of resistance and reconstitution, and the ambiguities of economic, political, and juridical conditions in the postslavery period are the subjects of Asserting the Right to Be, Chapter Six. Chapter Seven, Reconnecting, concerns the first half of the twentieth century and the rise of global capitalism, and it considers migrations of those of African descent, especially involving the Caribbean and the American South. Such developments increased contact between diverse populations, contributing to the rise of Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, and *négritude*. Chapter Eight, Movement People, covers the period from World War II through the 1960s, highlighting the interconnections between decolonization, civil rights, black power, music, sports, and writing.

As an interpretive history, this book is far from an exhaustive treatment of such a vast topic (or set of related topics). As part of a strategy to sufficiently treat the various components of the African Diaspora at some point in time, geographic emphases shift from chapter to chapter. Originally envisioned as part a series of short books introducing African history, the book’s scope is necessarily influenced by spatial constraints, and, in keeping with the format for the series, there are no endnotes. But in addition to African history, *Reversing Sail* can also be used for courses examining the African Diaspora as well as African American history. While not intended to serve as a comprehensive reference section, suggested readings following each chapter identify materials of most immediate assistance in the undergraduate search for greater depth.

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Michael A. Gomez
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I

“Old” World Dimensions

CHAPTER 1

Antiquity

Scholars of American history have long understood that discussions of the African American experience must begin with a consideration of people and cultures and developments in Africa itself, before the rise of American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, to debilitate the notion that black folk, prior to their experiences in the Americas, had no history worthy of the name.

Long before the rise of professional historians, black men and women had reached a similar conclusion. Facing the withering effects of slavery, black thinkers as early as David Walker and Frederick Douglass were careful to mention the glories of the African past. When circumstances all around suggested otherwise, they found evidence of the potential and ability of black people in the achievements of antiquity. Rather than conforming to divine decree or reflecting the natural order of things, the enslavement of black people, when placed in the context of thousands of years of history in Africa itself, was but an aberration. In this view, there was nothing inevitable about black suffering and subjugation.

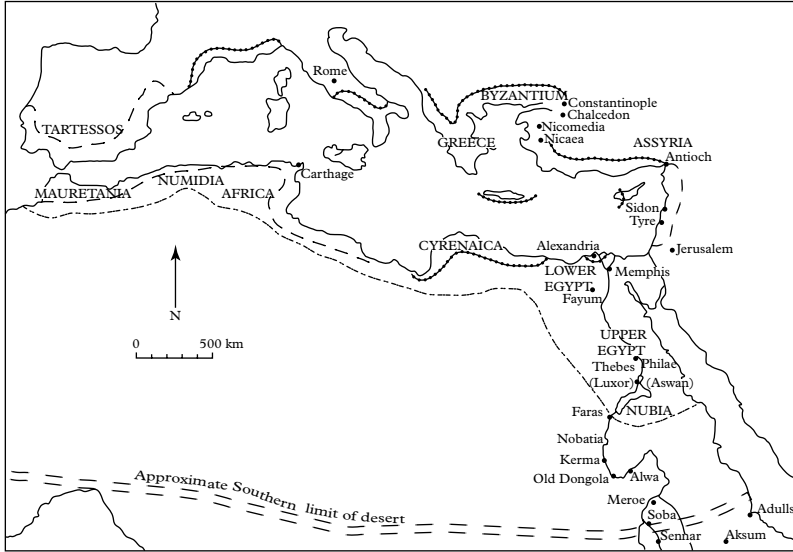
These early thinkers, uninformed about the greatness of West and West Central African civilizations, invariably cited those of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia as exemplars of black accomplishment and creativity. In so doing, they anticipated the subsequent writings of scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and St. Clair Drake, who likewise embraced the idea that ancient Egyptian and Nubian societies were related to those toiling in American sugar cane and cotton fields. This view was not limited to black thinkers in the

Americas; the Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop argued for links between Egypt, Ethiopia, and West Africa. The latest to make such claims have been the “Afrocentrists,” but whatever the particular school of thought, certain of their ideas resonate with communities in both West Africa and the African Diaspora, where the notion of a connectedness to either Egypt and Nubia or Ethiopia resides in the cultural expressions of the folk. Whether one accepts their views or finds them extravagant, there is no avoiding the realization that Africans and their descendants have pursued a long and uninterrupted conversation about their relationship to the ancients. Such intergenerational discussion has not been idle chitchat but rather has significantly influenced the unfolding of African American art, music, religion, politics, and societies.

A brief consideration of ancient Africa, especially Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia, remains important for at least two reasons: First, it contextualizes the discussion of subsequent developments largely inaugurated with massive trades in African captives. Antiquity reminds us that modernity could not have been predicted, that Africans were not always under the heel but were in fact at the forefront of human civilization. Second, antiquity reminds us that the African Diaspora did not begin with the slave trades. Rather, the dissemination of African ideas and persons actually began long ago. In this first diasporic phase, ideas were arguably more significant than the number of people dispersed. The Mediterranean in particular benefited from Egyptian and Nubian culture and learning. This initial phase was further distinguished by the political standing of the Africans in question; Egypt was a world power that imposed its will on others, rather than the reverse. This was therefore a different kind of African Diaspora than what followed many centuries later.

Egypt

The study of ancient Egypt is a discipline unto itself, involving majestic monuments, mesmerizing religions, magnificent arts, epic wars, and the like, all of which lie beyond our purpose here. Rather, our deliberations are confined to Egypt’s relations with its neighbors, especially to the south, as it is in such relations that the concept of an ancient African Diaspora can be demonstrated.



MAP 1. North Africa in antiquity.

Ancient Egypt, located along the Nile and divided into Upper and Lower regions, exchanged goods and ideas with Sumer (in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) as early as 3500 BCE, and by 1700 BCE it was connected with urban-based civilizations in the Indus valley, the Iranian plateau, and China. Situated in Africa, Egypt was also a global crossroad for various populations and cultures, its participation in this intercontinental zone a major feature of the African Diaspora's opening chapter.

Just who were these ancient Egyptians? While none can reasonably quibble with identifying them as northeastern Africans, the discussion becomes more complex when the subject turns to "race." Race, as it is used currently, lacks scientific value or meaning; it is as a sociopolitical concept that race takes on decided import and gravity. Our understanding of ancient Egypt is complicated by our own conversations about race, and by attempts to relate modern ideas to ancient times. A contemporary preoccupation, race was of scant significance in ancient Egypt, if the concept even existed. For example, while some paintings depict the Egyptians as dark skinned, it is more common to see males painted a dark reddish-brown and females a lighter brown or yellow. Such varying representations were not meant to simply convey

physical traits, but social standing as well; a woman portrayed as light brown suggests privilege and exemption from the need to work outdoors, her actual skin tone a matter of conjecture.

Ancient Egyptians were highly ethnocentric, regarding themselves as “the people” and everyone else as uncivilized, a distinction having more to do with land of birth and culture than outward appearance. Foreigners included Bedouins from Arabia, “Asiatics” from Asia Minor, Libyans from the west, and the Nehesi from the area south of Egypt, called *Nehesyu* or *Khent* (“borderland”) by the Egyptians, otherwise known as Nubia or Kush. But given Egypt’s long history, its gene pool periodically received infusions from Asia Minor, southern Europe, the Arabian peninsula, and, of course, subsaharan Africa. What Egyptians may have looked like in the third millennium BCE is not necessarily how they appeared 1,000 years later, let alone after 4,000 years. Swift and dramatic changes in the North American gene pool between 1500 CE and 2002 caution that sustained and substantial immigration can produce startling transformations.

Egypt and the South

During the Old and Middle Kingdoms (3400–2180 and 2080–1640 BCE), Egypt sought to militarily control Nubia and parts of Syria and Palestine. Under the New Kingdom (1570–1090 BCE), Egypt repeatedly invaded Palestine and Syria in its competition with Assyria and (subsequently) Babylon for control of the region. Africa was therefore a major foreign power in what would become the Middle East for thousands of years, years that were formative, in lands destined to become sacred for millions of people.

While especially interested in Nubia’s gold, Egypt also recruited the Nubians themselves for the Egyptian army, as their military prowess, especially in archery, was highly regarded (Egyptians referred to Nubia as *Ta-Seti*, or the “land of the bow”). Nubians were also sought as laborers, and some were even enslaved. However, with the possible exception of the Hebrews, Egypt’s enslaved population was never very large, with slaves from Europe and Asia Minor often more numerous than Nubians or other Africans.

While extending its control over Nubian territory and tapping Nubian labor, Egypt also relocated select Nubians to its capital at Thebes, where an institution called the *Kap* provided a formal, rare Egyptian

education. Nubians learned the ways of Egypt, but their presence as elites, workers, and soldiers also led to the spread of Nubian culture in Egypt. This phenomenon was similar to later developments in the Americas, where the convergence of African, European, Asian, and Native American elements led to a flourishing of African-inspired cultures, among others.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the New Kingdom's eighteenth dynasty's involvement with Nubia was the determinant role Nubian women played in the royal court. Indeed, Nubian women became Egyptian royals, wielding tremendous power as queen mothers and royal wives. As wives, they ruled at times with their husbands, at times as regents, and in some instances alone. Ahmose I inaugurated the eighteenth dynasty and ruled with Nefertari, a Nubian who enjoyed tremendous prestige and popularity with native Egyptians. Their granddaughter Hatshepsut ruled as both queen and regent from 1503 to 1482 BCE. Ties to Nubia were later strengthened when Amenhotep III married thirteen-year-old Tiye, another Nubian. Their seven children included sons Amenhotep IV and Tutankhamen. Renowned and emulated for her beauty, Tiye was also well educated and quite the political force; funerary sculptures depict her as an equal to Amenhotep III. She may have been responsible for affairs of state under Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akhenaton (from *aton*, solar symbol of supreme deity) as part of his promotion of monotheism. As Akhenaton's wife, Nefertiti, was yet another Nubian, we can see that it is not possible to discuss the New Kingdom without acknowledging the Nubian presence and contribution.

Nubian Ascendancy

Nubia, also located along the Nile, was called *Qevis* by its inhabitants. None of its various names – Nubia, Qevis, Cush, Kush, Ta-Seti, Nehesyu, Khent – refer to skin color; one can surmise that whatever differences existed between Egyptians and Nubians, skin color was not one that elicited elaboration.

Nubia was likewise divided into Lower and Upper regions: The former was associated with bows, shields, and other manufactures as well as raw materials; the latter with gold, semiprecious stones, leopard skins, and cattle. A Nubian state may have existed prior to Egypt's Old Kingdom, and at least one was its contemporary. The three major

Nubian kingdoms came later and are named after their capitals: Kerma (1750–1550 BCE), Napata (750–300 BCE), and Meroë (300 BCE–350 CE).

Scholars point to the distinctiveness of Nubian history and culture, that Nubia was not simply an outpost of Egyptian civilization or an imitation of Egypt on a smaller scale. The history of Napata, however, features Egyptian and Nubian convergence. Under Napata's leadership, the Nubians not only freed themselves of Egyptian domination but also turned and conquered Egypt. Establishing the twenty-fifth dynasty, the Nubians ruled as Egyptian pharaohs, their acceptance by the Egyptians a reflection of the long familiarity of the Egyptian with the Nubian.

The twenty-fifth dynasty was a time of contestation between Egypt and Assyria for control of Palestine. Assyria invaded Egypt in 674 BCE but was defeated. Three years later they were successful, driving the Nubians south where they eventually reestablished their capital at Meroë. Removed from the interminable conflicts in the Near East, neither the Ptolemies nor Rome mounted any serious effort to conquer Meroë, opting instead to maintain trade relations. Commerce and defensible terrain allowed Meroë to flourish and export such commodities as gold, cotton, precious stones, ostrich feathers, ivory, and elephants (the latter for war and amusement), while producing large quantities of iron.

Meroë was a unique civilization, with large stone monuments of stelae and its own system of writing, Meroitic. Nubian women played major roles in government (Egypt's eighteenth dynasty may reflect this custom); queen mothers were especially powerful, and, together with royal wives, were called *Candaces* (from *Kentakes*). The renown of the Candaces in the ancient Near East was such that they reappear in accounts connected with the Bible; they were a source of dramatic and powerful images reverberating to the present day.

Africans in the Graeco-Roman World

The ancient Mediterranean world, successively dominated by the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Romans, came to know Africans from a number of places and in varying capacities. Most Africans, especially during the Roman period, entered the Mediterranean from both Egypt and Nubia. They also came from areas south of the Nile, North Africa