

The Black Power Pan-Africanist Perspective

By Chinweizu

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**The Black race will be exterminated
if it does not build a black superpower in Africa
by the end of this century.**

Ivan van Sertima: Rehabilitating the self-image of the Black African (1)

The pathetic self-image of the Black African in the 20th century was embraced with desperate bravado by Aime Cesaire, the famous Negritude poet, when he proclaimed:

Hurrah for those who have never invented anything,
those who never explored anything,
those who never tamed anything,
those who give themselves up to the essence of things.

This pathetic self-image, which was implanted by colonialism, has been a major contributor to our burden of self-contempt and self-defeat, and to our psychological inability to motivate and organize our societies for great achievements. It is a myth that gets us to accept white domination and control down to this day. It has left us psychologically impotent to rebuild our shattered societies; impotent to build viable new societies from the rubble made of old Africa by the hurricane of colonialism.

Fortunately for our future, this self-image is false, demonstrably false; and we can erase it and end its damaging consequences by discovering and teaching ourselves the correct history of Black Africa.

Thanks to the work of Ivan Van Sertima and Cheikh Anta Diop and their complementary schools of historiography, we know that these claims are not true but were foisted on us by Eurocentric historians, anthropologists and propagandists. And Van Sertima and Diop have left us abundant evidence to correct that false image.

Professor Ivan Van Sertima died at 74, on 25 May 2009, African Liberation Day. Who, you might ask, was Ivan Van Sertima? He certainly was not well known in Black Africa, and certainly not as well known as he deserves to be. He was an Associate Professor of Africana Studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey, USA. He was the leader of a team of researchers whose work on the *Journal of African Civilizations*, which he founded in 1979, and edited, helped to rehabilitate the image of the Black African by removing the “primitive” from the center stage it has occupied in Eurocentric histories and anthropologies of the African. His major book, *They Came Before Columbus*, was published in 1977. It presented evidence for two distinct pre-Columbian contacts from Black Africa to the Americas:

(1) Evidence of Mandingos, from the Mali Empire in West Africa, who were traveling to and trading with the peoples of Central America, and sometimes settling there, in the two centuries before Columbus found himself in America; and

(2) evidence of an Egypto-Nubian visitation ca.900 BC which left Pharaonic culture imprints in Central America.

Though the evidence presented was strong, the prevailing climate of anti-African prejudice inspired many attacks on the book. How could African primitives, it was mocked, have reached America before Columbus, from civilized Europe?

In an interview he gave in 1991, Van Sertima explained the mission which the attacks on *They Came Before Columbus* impelled him to undertake:

“What the reaction to *They Came Before Columbus* taught me is that it does not matter how well documented, how well supported may be the new facts one presents to the world, the old habit of thinking about the African does not easily change. It is important that the vision of the African be changed, our old-fashioned vision of the African ancestor. I began to realize the reason why it was so hard for people to see the African on any other plane before the European arrived except that of the primitive, the static primitive. Most primitives do not easily make transcontinental, trans-oceanic movements. It took thousands of years for the very early primitives to move across the spaces of Africa, across the spaces of Europe, across the spaces of Asia. By conceiving of the African as a relatively static primitive, it is hard to accept that he could be on a continent other than his own, unless someone brought him there. Especially when a vast and virginal ocean stands between. Where, therefore, it is claimed, that he not only made contact with distant civilizations but influenced them, it would start a momentous controversy. I realized that I would first have to revise, in the mind of millions, the popular vision of the African. That is why I got involved in the *Journal of African Civilizations*.”

[*Egypt Child Of Africa*: pp. 453-454]

Between 1979 and 1998, his journal published more than a dozen major anthologies, including *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*; *African Presence in Early Europe*; *African Presence in Early Asia* (co-edited with Runoko Rashidi); *African Presence in Early America*; *Great Black Leaders: Ancient and Modern*; *Black Women in Antiquity*; *Great African Thinkers* (co-edited with Larry Williams); *Nile Valley Civilizations*; *Egypt Revisited*; *Golden Age of the Moor*; *Egypt: Child of Africa*; and *Early America Revisited*. All are available from Transactions Books, New Brunswick, N.J., USA. The set should be in every school library in Black Africa, and should be used in teaching African history.

What these volumes established is that, in Van Sertima's own words:

“The African we have been dealing with, the African we've been focusing upon, or rather the African that our Eurocentric vision has created, is one-sided and false. The African we were taught to envision as the true African is the peripheral creature of the forest zone or the colonized survivor of the slave trade. The more sophisticated centers of Africa were shattered, the great achievements of mainstream Africans were ignored. So we have a comparison between the mainstream European and the primitive African. Even people of African descent have come to the conclusion that what is special about the African is his simple, raw humanity, his exotic little rituals and costumes, etc. They are not aware, for example, of his scientific tradition. Most people have been made to think that it was the European, because of his so-called theoretical and abstract thinking, who alone learned to master and transcend nature. When we go back in history, we begin to realize that this is not true.” [*Egypt Child Of Africa*: p. 454]

Writing in 1983, in his foreword to *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*, Van Sertima commented:

“Within the last decade alone, evidence has been unearthed in the field of agricultural and pastoral science, architecture, aeronautics, engineering, mathematics, mining, metallurgy and medicine, navigation and physics, that has made the whole ground, upon which conventional studies of Africa have been built, rock violently with the shock of astonishing discoveries. These are astonishing only because the nerve of the world has been deadened for centuries to the vibrations of African genius. Every new revelation has made us realize that the eyes of the anthropologist and historian have been focusing on the edge or periphery of the African world, blind to all that has lain within the heartland of its civilizations.

“Anthropology has had a long love affair with the primitive and has preferred to set its tent down among the African bushmen, exploring the simplicities of tiny tribal communities rather than the complexities to be found in the primary centers of large African nations. Very partial and limited visions of the African hovering on the fringes of his vast world have come to represent the totality of his capacity and potential. . . . What they mean by traditional is the only kind of culture we have come to accept as African—that of the primitive on the periphery, the stunned survivor . . . Even notable African scholars, in their romantic embrace of this exotic savage, have come to the conclusion that the African invented nothing, explored nothing, but occupied some special sensory or

emotional realm in his experience of the natural world. Five centuries of these falsehoods have been exploded in just five years.” [*Blacks In Science*, pp.5, 8-9]

Among the findings of his school of scholars, as published in his Journal, are:

- (1) African astronomical observatories, one going back in Kenya three hundred years before Christ.
- (2) Africans in the Lake Victoria region were making carbon-steel 1,500 years ago
- (3) *tetracycline* was used 1,400 years ago in Nubia.
- (4) the use of *aspirin* among the Bantu, centuries ago.
- (5) A *smallpox vaccine* was brought to the USA by the African slave Onesimus, as reported by his master, Cotton Mather (1663-1728). African vaccination used the same principle as the later (1790s) Jenner vaccination: Among the Mano of Liberia, “During an epidemic, material from the pustule of a sick person is scratched into the skin of unaffected persons with a thorn.”
- (6) Africans were performing eye cataract surgery in Mali in the 14th century, as reported by the Arabs.
- (7) what is probably the first drug to treat hypertension and psychotic disorder—*reserpine*—was developed by Africans.
- (8) African navigation was far more sophisticated than assumed. Carthaginian-type vessels were found on the Niger. Phoenician and Egyptian-type vessels were found on the African edge of the Indian ocean.

- (9) Between 17,000 and 18,000 years ago, while ice still covered much of Europe, Africans in the floodplains of the Nile were raising crops of wheat, barley, lentils, chick-peas, capers and dates.
- (10) Africans in the Kenyan Highlands had domesticated cattle some 15,000 years ago.
- (11) In the Black Egypt of the pharaohs, pyramid-building architects were using co-ordinates to draw a curve, some 5,000 years ago. Descartes introduced the use of co-ordinates to European science only in the 17th century.

• **To be continued**

(1534 words)

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Ivan van Sertima: Rehabilitating the self-image of the Black African (2)

The list continues of some of the achievements of ancient African science:

- (12) The Dogon, now of Mali Republic, centuries ago, had detailed knowledge of the Sirius star system, including Sirius B, the dwarf star, invisible to the naked eye, that orbits around the big bright Sirius A once every 50 years.
- (13) A Caesarean section performed by a Banyoro surgeon in Uganda in 1879, used both anaesthesia and antiseptics, as described by a European missionary doctor who witnessed it.

More can be found in *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*, a book that should be required reading in all schools in Black Africa—primary, secondary and tertiary.

Van Sertima writes:

“Our whole vision of the African, his capacity, his potential, his ability to move and to affect and to influence other peoples, all that had to be changed. All that had to be revised before people could look again at the hypothesis of an African presence in early America. . . . Everybody has to become aware of this revision of history. The

disrespect for us, the kind of prejudices that have built up upon that disrespect and contempt, is what is at the root of racism. It is no sense talking about man being equal when we have history books that show us repeatedly that that is not true. The concept, the idea, the vision of equality, cannot be based simply upon liberal cliché or Biblical fantasy. We have to realize that it is rooted in hard historical realities. There is a body of hard evidence about great achievements of Africans and African-Americans upon which we can build [a] new curriculum.” [Egypt Child Of Africa: pp. 455, 456]

Why, you may ask, do we need to learn these facts? Van Sertima enlightens us:

“We have to make our people aware of these things and to be inspired by them. Not to be inspired by mere hollow chauvinistic boasts, but inspired by a genuine awareness of achievement, so they can emulate that achievement. So their children do not have to feel they only half-belong to the world. . . . People of African descent should become very much aware of what is going on. Very much aware of these developments, of this record of achievement. It is affecting us profoundly. It's not only the ignorance of this that is making people despise us, push us aside and treat us as second-class citizens, but our ignorance of it makes us also treat ourselves in a certain way. It has affected the way we approach everything.” [Egypt Child Of Africa, : p. 457]

And as Amos Wilson reminded us:

“History can be used to intimidate. European achievements are inflated and the next thing we know, we are asking ourselves ‘How can we fight this great people?’ We’ve been frightened! They talk about the great discoveries they’ve made and we say to ourselves, ‘Hey, we’d better hang in with these people because if we lose them we’re going back into the Dark Ages.’ We think this way because they’ve destroyed our confidence, our capacity to think for ourselves and to believe that we are capable of creating a world as great or greater than the Eurocentric one that presently exists. . . . Even if we forget every fact and detail of inflated Eurocentric history, its intimidatory impression stays with us even when the content is lost. That’s the point of it, to leave the impression, because that impression will become a dynamic source of behavioral orientation toward the world.”

--Amos Wilson, *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness*, New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1993, p.27

Thus, if we stopped believing that we are a people who “invented nothing, explored nothing, tamed nothing”; and if we learned our true heritage of achievements, we would no longer be intimidated by the achievements recorded in Eurocentric history.

The explosive significance of Van Sertima’s work can best be measured by comparing the inspiring image that emerges from this documentation of pre-colonial Black African societies as centers of great scientific achievements with the contemptible, and dispiriting image invented by our enemies, Arab and European. Here are a few of the most notorious specimens:

1] “Therefore, the Negro nation are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because [Negroes] have little [that is essentially] human and have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals.” -Ibn Khaldun, 14th century Arab historian, philosopher, and sociologist.

2] “We know that the Zanj (blacks) are the least intelligent and the least discerning of mankind, and the least capable of understanding the consequences of actions.” -Ibn Khaldun

3] Africa “is no historical part of the world”, i.e. that it is not in history (Hegel, 1830); and is the "heart of darkness" (Joseph Conrad, 1902)

4] Pre-colonial African life was a "blank, uninteresting, brutal barbarism" (Prof. Egerton of Oxford, 1922)

5] The thinking of Blacks is pre-logical (Levy-Bruhl, 1910)

6]. “The Negro is a child, and with children nothing can be done without the use of authority . . .With regard to Negroes, then, I have coined the formula: I am your brother, it is true, but your elder brother”

--Albert Schweitzer, 1921, [quoted in David Lamb, *The Africans*, New York: Vintage Books, 1985, p. 142](#)

7]. Africans, though men, are “fallen men” ([William Wilberforce](#))

8] “All scientific investigations of the subject proves the Negro to be an ape”—Chas Carroll, *The Negro a beast* (1900)

9] “Slavery has elevated the Negro from savagery”—William Gilmore Simms (1853)

10] “I am apt to suspect the Negroes . . . to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or speculation. . . Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptom of ingenuity . . . In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ‘tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.”-- David Hume (1711-1776)

It was this endless litany of contempt that led Aime Cesaire, the famous Negritude poet, to revolt by defiantly proclaiming: “Hurrah for those who have never invented anything,” etc. Van Sertima’s work disproves the assertion that Black Africans never invented anything, never explored anything, never tamed anything.

And the scientific accomplishments of Black Africans did not end with the colonial conquest of black Africa. A fact that is not widely known is how much African-Americans have contributed to modern science and technology, especially since their emancipation from slavery in 1863. By 1913 it is estimated that as many as one thousand inventions had been patented by African-Americans. These patents represented

inventions in nearly every branch of industrial arts such as household goods, mechanical appliances, electrical devices and chemical compounds. Some of the outstanding black inventors of the nineteenth century were :-

- **Elijah McCoy (1844 – 1929):** automatic lubrication for steam engines. McCoy received 25 patents for different types of lubricators between 1872 and 1899.

- **Jan Matzeliger:** first machine for mass-producing shoes

- **Granville Woods (1856-1910),** “the Black Edison”, invented improvements to electric railways, air brakes, the telephone and the telegraph. He invented a chicken egg incubator and an apparatus for an amusement park ride. Of the more than 45 patents that he registered, the majority were concerned with railroad telegraphs, electrical brakes, and electrical railway systems. Some of his better known contributions were in developing the "third rail" concept in mass-transit subway systems and developing the "trolley" system for trolley cars. Woods's inventions were part of the everyday lives of millions of people. They rode street cars and subways powered by Woods's motors, supplied with electricity by Woods's electric transfer devices, and brought to safe stops by Woods's improved air brakes.

- **Lewis Latimer (1848-1928):** inexpensive cotton-thread filament which made electric light practical for homes.

- **Norbert Rillieux (1806-1894):** vacuum evaporator for turning cane juice into white sugar crystals

- **Lewis Temple (1800-1854):** movable harpoon head which revolutionized the whaling industry.

As Robert Hayden pointed out, “Before the end of the Civil War, noteworthy inventions by blacks were not numerous. For most slaves the foremost question was how to gain their freedom. Those with intelligence and vision used their minds to devise plans and to interest others in gaining freedom from slavery. Many free black people worked to save those blacks in bondage. They did so by developing their literary and speaking ability rather than by becoming machinists, engineers, or inventors.” [*Blacks in Science*: 216]

Some of the patents obtained by African-Americans in the 19th century include:

Inventor	Invention	Date	Patent Number
Beard, A.J.	Car Coupler	11/23/1897	594,059
Brooks, C.B.	Street Sweepers	03/17/1896	556,711
Burr, J.A.	Lawn Mower	05/09/1899	624,749
Butler, R.A.	Train Alarm	06/15/1897	584,540
Campbell, W.S.	Self-Setting Animal Trap	08/30/1881	246,369
Ferrell, F.J.	Valves for Steam Engine	05/27/1890	428,671

Grant, G.F.	Golf Tee	12/12/1899	638,920
Headen, M.	Foot Power Hammer	10/05/1886	350,363
Lee, J.	Bread Crumbing Machine	06/04/1895	540,553
Matzelliger, J.E.	Shoe Lasting Machine	09/22/1891	459,899
McCoy, E.	Lubricator for Steam Engines	07/02/1872	129,843
Murray, G.W.	Fertilizer Distributor	06/05/1894	520,889
Purvis, W.B.	Paper Bag Machine	01/28/1890	420,099
Sampson, G.T.	Clothes Drier	06/07/1892	476,416
Winters, J.R.	Fire Escape Ladder	05/07/1878	203,517

--[*Blacks in Science*, pp. 218, 220]

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The best known 20th century African-American scientists are probably **George Washington Carver** (1864-1943) who invented three hundred uses for peanuts and hundreds more uses for soybeans, pecans, and sweet potatoes; and **Charles Drew** (1904-1950), the first person to develop the blood bank.

Other outstanding 20th century African-American inventors include— **Frederick McKinley Jones** (1893-1961); **Otis Boykin** (1920-1982), and **Meredith Gourdine** (1929-1998).

Robert Hayden tells us in his article in *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*:

“Jones was born in 1893, was an orphan for most of his boyhood and never had anything more than an eighth grade education. He worked as an automobile mechanic as a teenager, built racing cars, and served in World War I where he studied electricity and electronics. During his lifetime, Frederick Jones was awarded more than 60 patents: 40 were for refrigeration equipment alone. Others were for portable X-ray machines and sound equipment techniques for motion pictures.” [*Blacks in Science*, p. 225]

Otis Boykin was born in Dallas, Texas in 1920. He attended Fisk University and Illinois Institute of Technology but dropped out after 2 years because his parents couldn't pay his tuition. Boykin invented more than 25 electronic devices including a variable resistor used in guided missiles and a control unit for the pacemaker, the device that maintains a regular heartbeat. Boykin died of heart failure in 1982.

Meredith Gourdine, a physicist and energy system engineer, was the inventor of electrogasdynamics systems -- a way to disperse fog and smoke. Gourdine was born in Livingston, N.J. in 1929 and received his Doctorate Degree in Engineering Science from California Institute of Technology. In 1952, while still a physics student at Cornell University, Gourdine went to the Olympic Games in Helsinki and won a silver medal in the broad jump. After earning the Doctorate at Caltech in 1960 he worked as Chief Scientist of the Curtiss-Wright Corporation from 1962 to 1964. In 1964, Gourdine left his job and borrowed \$200,000.00 from family and friends and opened Gourdine Laboratories, a research laboratory located in Livingston, New Jersey, and built it into a multi-million dollar corporation that is based on his ideas in the field of electrogasdynamics (EGD). Applications of EGD include refrigeration, desalination of sea water, and reducing the pollutants in smoke. At its height he employed 150 people. Over his career Gourdine held more than 30 patents and many of his creations serve as the basis for allergen-filtration devices common to households across the world. He was inducted into the Engineering and Science Hall of Fame in 1994. He died in Houston, Texas on November 20, 1998.

Other notable 20th century patent holders are:

- **David Crosthwait** (1898-1976) who holds 39 patents for heating systems and

temperature regulating devices. He is most well known for creating the heating system for New York City's famous Radio City Music Hall.

- **Lloyd Hall** (1894-1971) contributed to the science of food preservation. By the end of his career, Hall had amassed 59 United States patents, and a number of his inventions were also patented in foreign countries.

- **Jack Johnson** (1878-1946), the world's first African American heavyweight champion, patented a wrench (U.S. patent #1,413,121) on April the 18th, 1922.

- **James Edward West** (1931-). Ninety percent of microphones used today are based on the ingenuity of African American inventor James Edward West. West and a colleague, Gerhard Sessler, developed the mic (officially known as the Electroacoustic Transducer Electret Microphone) while working for Bell Laboratories. They received a patent for the mic in 1962. Throughout his 40-year career with Bell Labs, West obtained 47 U.S. patents and more than 200 foreign patents, making him one of the most prolific black inventors in history.

These remarkable achievements prompt two questions:

(A) What happened to those science traditions in Black African societies? Are they now lost or do they still exist? If they are no longer here, why are they not?

(B) Why have Black African societies since the end of the 19th century been unable to create vibrant science traditions? Can they be reorganized to do so again?

As to how these sciences were lost, that is the story of the destruction of Black civilizations. The books to read are *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, by Chancellor Williams, Chicago: Third World Press, 1987; and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, by Walter Rodney, London: Bogle L'Ouverture, 1988.

First, the Egypto-Nubian civilization on the Nile Valley was overrun some 2500 years ago, first by the Persians, then by the Greeks and then by the Romans, and finally by the Arabs. The social structures that preserved their sciences were destroyed or taken over by the white invaders, and their sciences were appropriated by their conquerors and used as the foundation for Greek and then Arab science.

Of Africa South of the Sahara, Charles Finch reminds us “that Africa has been subjected to centuries of almost continuous political, social, and cultural disruption and that – among cultures that rely heavily on oral transmission of knowledge—*a tremendous amount of knowledge has been lost*. Thus, the state of traditional medicine today does not reflect the best of what traditional doctors knew and surviving fragments of eyewitness reports . . . indicate that they knew quite a lot.” [*Blacks in Science*, p.148]

As Van Sertima himself put it: “Africa is not as influential as it was before the slave trade. Remember, Africa is no longer what it used to be. Africa is an exploded world, an exploded star, a shattered continent. It is only in this century, within our own lifetime, that it has started to stumble back into any kind of coherent, independent form. Even independence has not yet truly come to Africa. . . . So bear in mind, you can't compare modern shattered Africa with the Africa that was.” [*Egypt Child Of Africa*, p.463]

In Africa south of the Sahara, the destruction of these science traditions began with the social disintegration initiated by the wars of the so-called slave trade. The destruction was completed by colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. But where, for whatever reasons, colonialism failed to uproot the social structures, as for example among the Dogon in Mali, much of the knowledge transmission system and the knowledge itself survived. Everywhere else, these sciences have been lost.

Why was Black Africa unable to build vibrant science cultures in the 20th century? The 20th century was the century of colonialism in Africa. And colonialism, whether of the old or the new variety, was not in business to build viable, autonomous societies in Africa. It was in business to subordinate African societies to the interests and demands of the colonizing powers. And an autonomous African scientific culture was the last thing it would tolerate, let alone help to build. The same intention has remained true under neo-colonialism.

Why is there the much-lamented brain drain out of Africa? Why do droves of our scientific personnel—engineers, physicians, chemists, physicists, biologists, nurses, etc.—find it better to work outside Africa than within Africa? Why doesn't Black Africa have the structures to foster and employ their talents? Why, for instance, did Philip Emeagwali have to leave Nigeria and emigrate to the USA for his genius to blossom? In 1989, **Philip Emeagwali** won the Gordon Bell Prize, considered the equivalent of the Nobel Prize, for developing the fastest supercomputer software in the world.

We must realize that despite all the talk about development in the last 50 years, the comprador leadership of these neo-colonial Bantustans that litter the land of Black Africa are psychologically uninterested in genuine development. They are only interested in being the local assistants of the imperialist plunderers of Black Africa and in presiding over dependent economies with little growth and no development.

We will build a new and thriving scientific culture in our societies **only when our leadership accept, and act upon, three facts:**

(1) that a Black African's self-respect, and the respect of the world for him, does not depend on how much money he has looted, or on how many academic degrees he has acquired, or on how many prizes or sports medals he has won, or on how many lavish parties he has given, or on how many flashy cars he owns, or on how many mansions he owns in Africa and abroad, or on his level of conspicuous consumania, or on any personal achievement of his, but only on the power status of Black Africa as a whole;

(2) that that group status can only be earned through building a Black African superpower of G8 rank; and

(3) that building such a superpower depends on our building our own thriving scientific structures within a decolonized and industrialized megastate, starting from ECOWAS or SADC.

It is the power of a group that gives respect to its individual members. That is the key axiom of Black Power Pan-Africanism. Therefore any black person who

desires to be personally respected in the world, must devote himself to building up the power of the Black race.

• **ENDS**

(1500 words)

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