

HISTORY MATTERS

# Egypt in Africa: William A. Brown and a Liberating African History

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In the spring of 1998, I had the privilege of sitting in on William A. Brown's undergraduate research seminar on the history of Ancient Egypt (Kemet). Although technically a seminar, all fifteen weekly class meetings began with a substantial lecture by Brown. This provided an unusual opportunity to see some of the results of a lesser-known phase of Brown's career: the decades he spent training himself in Egyptology (including learning the Egyptian language) and staying current with that field.<sup>1</sup> Brown's lectures that year offered a timely hybrid of the interests and commitments of Afrocentric Egyptologists, the data and reconstructions of more traditional Egyptology, and the general approaches of *longue durée* Africanist history. The result was an example of how an engaged historicism can produce accounts that respond to a wide range of political projects.

While it does not always come through clearly in his published work, those who knew him personally know that Brown was firmly and explicitly committed to what he called a 'liberated or liberating African history'.<sup>2</sup> In a 1972 talk at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, he told his audience, 'the thing which concerns me very deeply indeed is what I call the mis-writing and mis-casting of American and generally European scholarship about Africa... and the implications of this kind of work for the Black liberation struggle in Africa and overseas, indeed for the world generally'. An analysis of this misleading scholarship had, he insisted, 'real relevance to the struggle of Black and white peoples or other peoples of the world for various kinds liberation and self-determination'. The causal connection between scholarship and liberation passed through the representations of Africa produced in Europe and the US and their effect on global consciousness. 'We've been conditioned', he noted, 'to expect bizarre or presumably barbaric behavior out of Africa and this is directly attributable to the scholarship on Africa which is available in the western world'. Africanist history was particularly to blame insofar as 'the image that the world has of Africa is based upon the world's understanding or misunderstanding of Africa's past.... [P]olitical science, sociology, economics, all of the other disciplines adopt the assumptions which are provided by African history'.<sup>3</sup>

At the core of Brown's idea of a liberating African history were two deceptively obvious convictions: that the motives and logics animating all historical agents could be approached via their

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<sup>1</sup>Although my sense at the time was that Brown offered this course somewhat regularly, neither the archives of the UW-Madison History Department nor the memories of my contemporaries substantiate this. My sources for this essay have thus been confined to the syllabus and mountain of handouts that Brown distributed that spring, my moderately-legible notes on his lectures, and my declining memory. My thanks to Scott Burkhardt for digging through the department's files.

<sup>2</sup>W. A. Brown, 'Toward a liberated African history', lecture at the Institute of the Black World, Atlanta, 18 Aug. 1972, streaming audio, Northwestern University, Herskovits Library, audiovisual collection.

<sup>3</sup>W. A. Brown, 'The racist assumptions of European and American scholarship', lecture at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Atlanta, 11 Aug. 1972, streaming audio, Northwestern University, Herskovits Library, audiovisual collection.

shared humanity, repudiating those who started with the assumption that Africa was ontologically different from Europe; and that the material, social, and ideological circumstances of individuals differed enough across space and time that narratives centered on European experiences could only depict historical processes in Africa as defective, delayed, or incomplete. Those convictions were shared, at least in principle, by many of Brown's contemporaries. But few were as critical of the dominant scholarship of the day. His ITC talk, for example, devoted several minutes to the racist assumptions he saw as baked into even the most sympathetic readings of oral traditions.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Brown adopted and promoted European high social theory — particularly Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, and Louis Althusser — while dismissing much work on African history produced in the US and Europe.<sup>5</sup> Despite the apparent contradiction, this reflected his view that what had distorted global representations of Africa were the racist biases inherited from anthropology and colonial discourses, rather than the structure of the historical discipline itself or the emancipatory politics of the left (with which he strongly identified).

When it came to Egyptology, Brown's critique of 'American and European' historiography overlapped with many of the claims made by Afrocentrist scholars of Kemet, a current of scholarship that was, in the mid-1990s, enjoying unprecedented visibility.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Brown's course adopted the methods of an Africanist scholarship that was itself Afrocentric, albeit different from the approaches of Molefi Kete Asante or Maulana Karenga — who were themselves quite different from the Afrocentrists that most of the students in the class seemed to have encountered, including Leonard Jeffries and the sloganeers of conscious hip hop.<sup>7</sup> Brown described his approach to the study of Kemet as inspired by the works of Cheick Anta Diop and Martin Bernal, although he rejected the linguistic reconstructions and racial thinking of Diop and Théophile Obenga and the diffusionist models of Diop, Obenga, and Bernal alike. In specifying this, he gave students a way both to map the course onto something familiar and to rethink their own understandings of Afrocentrism.<sup>8</sup>

What Brown did share with Diop, Obenga, and Bernal was a firm commitment to the 'Africanness' of Kemet — an adjective that obviously requires some unpacking. The syllabus as a whole placed Kemet firmly within the context of an older, wider Northeast African sociocultural matrix. Explicitly denouncing racial categories as unscientific and noting that debates over the phenotypes of Ancient Egyptians could largely be resolved by reference to normal clinal variation, he

<sup>4</sup>Brown, 'Racist assumptions'.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. a seminar on 'Africa: Colony to Freedom' focused on the 'extraordinary scholarship of researchers who have raised the most interesting questions about the nature of "modern" society, notably Michel Foucault'. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of History. [https://history.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/202/2017/05/history600\\_fall2006\\_brown.pdf](https://history.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/202/2017/05/history600_fall2006_brown.pdf). Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

<sup>6</sup>Molefi Kete Asante's term for an Africa-centered perspective in analysis and assessment, 'Afrocentrism' has since come to be applied to a wide variety of academic and popular intellectual positions, including, retroactively, to Africa-minded forebears in the Americas and race-minded African cultural nationalists. I cannot do justice to its range of meanings. Bernal himself pointed to the varieties of Afrocentric positions, only some of which he endorsed: 'Review: *Not Out of Africa* by Mary R. Lefkowitz', *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 5 Apr. 1996. <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1996/1996.04.05/>. Accessed 12 Dec. 2021. The literature is vast, including critiques and endorsements from all sides. The best overview is Mia Bay's 'The historical origins of Afrocentrism', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 45:4 (2000), 501–12. For a sense of how great the gap between the approaches appeared at the time, A. Macy Roth, 'Building bridges to Afrocentrism: a letter to my Egyptological colleagues', *Newsletter of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 167–8 (1995). [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/afrocent\\_roth.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/afrocent_roth.html). Accessed 1 Mar 2022. Many Africanists then and now have shared Roth's sense that this 'gap' is in fact quite generative. E.g.: W. MacGaffey, 'Who owns Ancient Egypt?', *The Journal of African History*, 32:3 (1991), 515–19; A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC, 2019), ch. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Terminology doesn't provide easy guideposts here, but I might venture that Brown endorsed what St. Clair Drake called 'vindicationist' Afrocentrism but without Diop's or Asante's endorsement of counter-mythmaking. *Black Folks Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (Berkeley, 1987), 1–4.

<sup>8</sup>For a summary of the debates at the time on the 'new' (post-1970) Afrocentric Egyptology: A. Macy Roth, 'Ancient Egypt in America: claiming the riches', in L. Meskell (ed.), *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage* (London, 1998), 217–29. For an overview of the earlier Black radical discourse, S. Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham, NC, 2004) and Drake, *Black Folks*, ch. 3.

dismissed the question of the ‘blackness’ of Egyptian peoples as a red herring, even as he also endorsed Bruce Williams’ observation that, by contemporary US standards, they would hardly have been considered white.<sup>9</sup> One reading, tucked away rather inconspicuously on page seven of the course’s (handwritten) syllabus, put Brown’s answer to the Africa question in a nutshell.<sup>10</sup> Theodore Celenko’s edited catalog for the Indianapolis Museum of Art’s exhibition, *Egypt in Africa*, offered summaries of the positions of the leading participants in then-current debates about Egypt’s Africanness.<sup>11</sup> Within that volume, Christopher Ehret’s ‘Ancient Egyptian as an African Language, Egypt as an African Culture’, introduced us to the relevance of historical linguistics and placed the Afroasiatic *Urheimat* in the region bound by ‘Nubia in the west to far northern Somalia in the east’, between 15,000–13,000 BCE.<sup>12</sup> Fekri Hassan’s work provided a capsule reconstruction of the region’s environmental history that accounted for Kemet’s shared ancestry with other societies whose forebears had fled a drying Sahara. A. J. Boyce and S. O. Y. Keita provided insights from population genetics. And Bruce Williams offered a summary of his famous analysis of the Qustul incense burner as evidence for a ‘Nubian origin’ of ‘the core of pharaonic culture’ — an interpretation the following chapter, by Joseph Wegner, firmly rebutted. Other readings brought additional methodological tools to bear. Evidence from archaeoastronomy, running from Nabta Playa to the *Papyrus Carlsburg 9*, established deep continuities with regional forms of knowledge production; paleobiological work by Susan Cachel, John W. K. Harris, and others buttressed the DNA evidence.

Kemet’s origins were, however, only one aspect of its Africanness. Brown was not one to reify origins and, in any case, his course went all the way up to the 1500s CE. More telling, then, was the way he discussed Kemet’s relations with its many, changing neighbors to the south and east. Brown helped students identify the flaws in both diffusionism and evolutionism as models for understanding social interactions over the long term. We came to appreciate instead the creativity involved in the act of borrowing and adapting. In doing so, Brown chipped at the foundation of nearly all modern popular discourse on Kemet: the belief that it constituted, in a coherent and continuous way, something called an ‘ancient civilization’; that this civilization was exceptionally sophisticated; and that it was distinctive to the point of idiosyncrasy; all of which contributed to an overarching (and itself ancient) sense that its history was deeply mysterious. The only thing stable across these millennia, he insisted, was the desire of Kemet’s rulers to be understood as the custodians of a unique, ancient tradition.<sup>13</sup> Each week, Brown handed out photocopies of technical readings — some merely weeks old — that walked us through a half dozen of Kemet’s regional entanglements, forcing us in each case to account for concrete developments — the adoption of a new technology of rule, say, or of food production — in the context of specific historical events.

Brown’s other major theme ran directly counter to the conservative romanticism of much popular writing about Egypt, Afrocentric or otherwise. Kemet was, he emphasized, quite clearly a polity built in part on exploitation. His way into this was through an extended analysis of the social meanings of the goddess Maat. By the 1980s, several Afrocentric scholars had brought together a body of scholarship on Maat that provided the core of a generalizable ethical system. Maulana Karenga’s

<sup>9</sup>Characteristically, however, Brown could not pass up the opportunity to bait both sides of the debate. The opening sentence of the lecture in which he discussed the matter was, ‘There is, my friends, only one human race: the *black* race’, followed by a half-facetious chuckle as he pretended to be shocked by his own audacity, and then an explanation of what he meant by reference to the geographic origins of *homo sapiens* and the genetic unity of the species.

<sup>10</sup>Brown’s commitment to handwriting was principled: in 1996, he insisted that papers in a graduate seminar be submitted in longhand — an exercise, he explained, in teaching us to think in complete sentences.

<sup>11</sup>T. Celenko (ed.), *Egypt in Africa* (Indianapolis, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>Ehret also offered a sketch of his attempt to assign a distinctive religious ethos to each African language family, about which Brown expressed more skepticism.

<sup>13</sup>A key reading which helped frame these discussions about influence and frontiers was Bruce Trigger’s ‘The rise of Egyptian civilization’, in B. Trigger et al. (eds.), *Ancient Egypt: A Social History* (Cambridge, 1983), 1–70.

1984 translation of the *Husia* texts had codified this thinking and given it a foundation in Kemet's own scholarly tradition.<sup>14</sup> In Brown's telling, Maat was a hegemonic concept that played a role in the wider, shifting ideological apparatuses of a series of dynasties. The imperial culture that Kemet occasionally evinced was tightly intertwined with the claims of its political elite to ensure the survival of justice and harmony in the face of an ever-encircling chaos. Insofar as Maat was, at times, the standard by which souls were judged before entering the afterlife, the ideology of the state reached down into the most intimate anxieties of ordinary people. Mindful, however, of the way the popular fascination with Kemet's necropolitics, from Hermeticism on, helped mystify the state, Brown assigned an essay by Ann Macy Roth on the bureaucracy of death and one by Kathryn A. Bard on the role of mortuary practices in ideological formations, particularly those around community membership and the right to work land.<sup>15</sup>

This was Brown's tactic throughout. He introduced Imhotep, staple of popular Afrocentric Kemetology, and the Per Ankh through the lens of therapeutic pluralism. He used the stories of the pharaohs Hat-shepsut and Sobek-neferu to illustrate the ways gender depended on and reproduced other social hierarchies and to interrogate the gender binaries and sexism of much Egyptology. Antonio Loprieno's work on slavery and a popular account of the mining garrison at Buhen made imperialism and its tensions concrete. Indeed, Brown's final lecture — 'The First Imperialists: Inner Frontiers of Northeast Africa Re-visited' — made it clear that an analysis of Kemet's 'debts' to its neighbors on the continent needed to look at more than deep cultural structures or philosophies. The romanticization of Kemet's relationship with Nubia in popular Afrocentrism was more than just a counter-mythopoetic to the centering of Near Eastern rivalries in mainstream scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Both tendencies betrayed the idea of Kemet's Africanness and reduced action to origin and influence.

Whatever side of the Qustul incense burner debate you came down on, it was clear that the unification of Kemet at the beginning of the dynastic period was deeply entangled with the Kemet-Nubia relationship. And so it was this relationship, all the way up through the decline of the last Christian monarchs in Dongola, to which Brown paid the closest attention.<sup>17</sup> He lingered, of course, on the Twenty-fifth Dynasty and the career of Pharaoh Taharqa, but as an extreme case of Nubia's perennial importance in the region, rather than as a touchstone of African achievement. Here again, Brown relied heavily on hand-picked technical publications. Archaeological evidence illuminated trade routes stretching deep into the continent and into Southwest Asia; stelae commemorating conquests revealed not just military accomplishments, but the anxieties of rulers whose control over Kemet's marches was always fragile; sociological data helped show the links

<sup>14</sup>M. Karenga, *Selections from the Husia: Sacred Wisdom of Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles, 1989 [1984]). Karenga's effort to develop a distinctively African/Black ethical system based in ideas of communitarianism and balance was, of course, a venerable one on both sides of the Atlantic, stretching from at least Edward Wilmot Blyden through Jordan Kush Ngubane and Julius Nyerere.

<sup>15</sup>A. Macy Roth, 'The organization and functioning of the royal mortuary cults of the Old Kingdom in Egypt', in M. Gibson and R. D. Biggs (eds.), *The Organization of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago, 1987), 115–21; K. A. Bard, 'Toward an interpretation of the role of ideology in the evolution of complex society in Egypt', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 11:1 (1992), 1–24.

<sup>16</sup>Brown used 'Nubia' to designate the area between the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile.

<sup>17</sup>Brown didn't explain his choice to stop in the 1500s with the Ottoman conquest of Makuria. Whatever his intentions, in doing so he reinforced a common misconception that conversion to Islam brought an end to a distinctively Nubian culture. In fact, Nubian Muslims were long important advisors to Ottoman rulers, continuing Nubia and Egypt's entangled relationship. Nubian languages are still spoken in southern Egypt and northern Sudan and the spate of dam building in the region has given Nubianness a powerful political valence. Inter alia, C. Fluehr-Lobban and R. A. Lobban, 'New social movements in Nubian identity among Nubians in Egypt, Sudan, and the United States', in L. Mullings (ed.), *New Social Movements in the African Diaspora: Challenging Global Apartheid* (New York, 2009), 313–23; M. C. Jedrej, *Ingessana: The Religious Institutions of a People of the Sudan-Ethiopia Borderland* (Leiden, 1995). David Schoenbrun has pointed out how the focus on past Nubian accomplishments combined with the erasure of current Nubian peoples in regional discourses parallels dominant ways of talking about Indigenous peoples in the US. Personal communication.

between imperial fortunes and the wealth and inequality of metropolitan hubs. But the core of his argument turned around the material culture, particularly the art, of Kemet and Nubia. To this end, several of our readings on Nubia were by David O'Connor, especially his catalog to the then-recent exhibition at the University of Pennsylvania's museum, 'Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa'. Students engaged these primary sources directly, building their own theories about the exchange of iconography between Kemet and Nubia, as well as the distinctive features of each in various eras. Combined with the readings on the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, these exercises gave students a concrete understanding of the adaptive creativity involved in influence, the consolidation and dissolution of hegemonic ecumenes, and the role of objects and images in ideological work.

To be sure, almost all of this was lost on me at the time. Even today, bridging the problematics, methods, and theories of Egyptology with those of other branches of early African history is not an altogether simple task.<sup>18</sup> At least three generations of scholars have worked to topple the wall the Sahara constitutes in many imaginaries of Africa. The work of weaving stories about North African societies that do as much justice to the richness of their connections to the south as to the north or east has made great progress, but remains incomplete.<sup>19</sup> William A. Brown was an early leader in one of the principal branches of that work, the study of the history of Islam in West Africa. It is perhaps unsurprising then that, even as his interests moved away from Masina, he remained engaged in that broader project. But while the literature on Islam largely provided evidence of contact and influence, the study of Kemet provided an opportunity to extend Africanist historiographical approaches to a story scholars thought they already understood. What deeper argument in favor of Kemet's Africanness could be offered?

Above all, both topics, Kemet and Masina, also provided ample opportunity to reveal the 'mis-writings and mis-castings' of much Eurocentric scholarship. In another 1972 lecture, at the Institute of the Black World, Brown detailed the ways in which the then-current scholarship on the nineteenth-century Islamic revolutions in West Africa implicitly dismissed the moral and intellectual motivations of the movements' leaders and rank-and-file alike.<sup>20</sup> Brown's undergraduate seminar on Kemet sought to correct parallel misconceptions in the minds of Madison students and, perhaps as importantly, to introduce them to the methods and approaches of Africanist scholarship in a context where they least expected it. Whatever the topic, the pervasive distortions that arise from fundamentally racist assumptions about Africa needed and need to be revealed and corrected. In his teaching, Brown offered one clear way of doing so: applying lessons learned from a more 'liberated and liberating' African history.

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<sup>18</sup>Some of the early pieces on the topic in *The Journal of African History* (as late as 1963) endorsed the idea that Kemet owed its origins to more civilized, racially-distinct migrants from the Middle East. E.g. A. J. Arkell, 'Review of *Ancient Egypt* by W.B. Emery', 4:1 (1963), 130–2. (Arkell himself imagined a small number of more civilized settlers from the Near East gradually producing early Kemet, as opposed to Emery's story of the mass invasion of a 'dynastic race'.)

<sup>19</sup>Since the 1990s, the *Journal* and many other fora have published key works bridging the Sahara, including scholarship on the pre-1800 period by Jacke Phillips, David N. Edwards, David P. V. Gutelius, Chouki El Hamel, Bruce Hall, Eve Troutt Powell, Jay Spaulding, and many others. Efforts to rework the history of early North Africa in ways that enable dialogue with the key themes and problematics of sub-Saharan historiography remain, however, a minority and largely confined to those trained as 'Africanists'. As late as 2001, Phillips himself deemed it necessary to justify publishing book reviews on Ancient Egypt and Nubia in *The Journal of African History*. Phillips, 'Egypt and Nubia', *The Journal of African History*, 42:2 (2001), 307–9. For key discussions of the problem, see the contributions by Ghislaine Lydon and Baz Lecocq to the *Journal's* forum on 'Trans-Saharan histories', 56:1 (2015), 3–36. The *Journal of Black Studies* and the *Journal of African Civilizations* remain the preeminent venues for Afrocentric Egyptology.

<sup>20</sup>Brown, 'Toward a liberated African history'.