

“THE CRADLE of Man”

by
Earnest E. Lacey

In the beginning. Everything we encounter in life has a beginning. Curious minds always want to know the why, when, where and who?

Dr. John Henrik Clarke, an African-American historian and professor was asked the question many of us ask at this time of year....why is there a need for an African-American History Month? Just think about it for a moment. There's no similar month for any other minority group in America.

Back in the day, “African-Americans were the least integrated and most neglected of these groups in the historical interpretation of the American experience. This neglect made African-American History Month a necessity” Clarke said.

He also noted that “Early white American historians did not accord African people anywhere, a respectful place in their commentaries on the history of man. In the closing years of the nineteenth century, African-American historians began to look at their people's history from their vantage point....and point of view.”

Dr. Benjamin Quarks made that observation as early as 1883, followed by Dr. W. E. B. DuBois's doctoral dissertation, published in 1895.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson, an African-American historian, author, journalist and father of “Black History Week which evolved into Black History Month” conceived the idea and was convinced that unless something was done to rescue the Black man from history's oversight, he would become a “negligible factor in the thought process of the world.”

In 1915, he founded the “Association for the study of Negro Life and History”. Dr. Woodson believed that there was no such thing as “Negro History.” It was simply a missing segment of world history. He devoted the greater portion of his life to restoring this segment.

Dr. Clarke goes on to say that the acceptance of the facts of African-American history and the African historian as a legitimate part of the academic community did not come easy. Slavery ended and left its false images of Black people intact. I want to make it clear....he said “the Black race did not come to the United States culturally.....empty-handed.”

Adding....that slavery and colonialism stained, but did not completely break the umbilical cord between the Africans in Africa and those who, by forced migration (1619), now live in what is called the Western World.

A small group of African-American and Caribbean writers, such as W. E. B. DuBois, George Washington Williams, Drusilla Dungee Houston, Carter G. Woodson, Willis N. Huggins and Caribbean scholars Charles C. Seifert and J. A. Rogers, a Jamaica, who devoted over 50 years of his life, documenting the role of African personalities in world history, began to travel the globe for information.

Teachers and Clergy, collectively developed the basis of what would become an “African Consciousness Movement” more than a 100 years ago. Their concern was with Africa in general, Egypt and Ethiopia and what is called, the Nile Valley.

Egypt and the nations of the Nile Valley, the seat of ancient civilization, were figuratively, the beating heart of Africa and incubator for its greatness for more than four thousand years. It gave birth to what would later become known as “Western Civilization” long before the greatness of Greece and Rome.

Dr. Dubois tells us that “Nearly every human empire that has arisen in the world, material and spiritual, has found some of its greatest crises on the continent of Africa. It was through Africa that Christianity became the religion of the world....It was through Africa that Islam came to play its great role of conqueror and civilizer.”

The Greek traveler, Herodotus, an ancient writer, geographer and historian, was in Africa about 450 B. C. His eyewitness account is still a revelation. He witnessed African civilization in decline and partly in ruins, after many

invasions. The Nile Valley of civilization of Africa had already brought forth two “Golden Ages” of achievement and left its mark for all the world to see.

So much of the history of Africa has been written by conquerors, foreigners, missionaries and adventurers. The Egyptians left the best record of their history written by local writers. It wasn't until the end of the 18th century when European scholars learn to decipher their writing, that this was understood.

Europeans not only colonized most of the world, they colonized information about the world and its people. In order to do that, they had to forget, or pretend to forget, that the first Africans they met were not slaves. European scholars attempted for years to deny that Egypt is a part of Africa. According to most records, old and new, Africans are the oldest people on the face of the earth. The people now called Africans not only influenced the Greeks and the Romans, they influenced the early world before there was a place called Europe.

For years, historians and other scholars have gone back and forth, discussing the location of the “cradle of man”. Many thought it was in Asia. But Charles Darwin, the British naturalist, believed in 1871 it was Africa. Darwin was proven right....100 years later.

A fossil skull of a man, thought to be 2.6 million years old....was discovered in a desert east of Lake Rudolf....in Nairobi, Kenya.

The discovery was made by Richard Leakey, a scientist and son of missionary parents Dr. Mary and Dr. Louis B. Leakey, Anthropologist.

Richard, who became the administrative director of the National Museum of Kenya said his findings convinced him that “man walked from Africa out to all the other continents. If there was a garden of Eden, I would call it the African continent”. Since then, discoveries have continued elsewhere on the African Continent, so much so, that many now refer to Africa as “the cradle of mankind”.

Much of our diet today came from Africa. These crops included several basic starches central to the African diet, such as rice, okra, tania, black-eyed peas, cassava, yams, kidney and lima beans. Other crops included peanuts, (originally from South America) guinea melon, liquorice, watermelon and sesame. The guinea fowl, referred to by my great, great uncle and aunt, John and Jellon Wright as the “ginnie hen”, came along too.

Only the people of some of the Mediterranean Islands and a few states of what would become Greek and Roman areas knew of parts of North Africa and that it was a land of mystery. There was a time when all dark-skinned people were called Ethiopians. The Greeks referred to Africa as, “The Land of The Burnt-Face people”.

In Summary, Dr. Clarke, who passed away on July 16, 1998 said, “African or Black History should be taught every day, not only in the schools, but in the home. African-American History Month should be every month. We need to learn about all the African people of the world, including those who live in Asia and the islands of the pacific.

In the twenty-first century there will be over one billion African people in the world. We are tomorrow’s people. But, of course, we were yesterday’s people too. With an understanding of our new importance, we can change the world, if first we change ourselves” he said. Amen!

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Dr. Carter G. Woodson “AWARD OF MERIT” was presented to
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