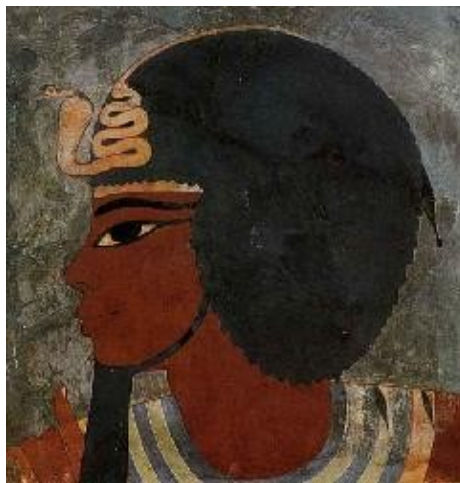


# The African Origin of Ancient Egyptian Civilization

By : BrandonSPilcher

Egypt is in Africa, but were the ancient Egyptian people and culture really of indigenous African origin? I make the case that they were using evidence from biological and cultural anthropology and archaeology. I wrote this as a paper for my South African History class at UCSD. It earned a grade of 95% from the professor.



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In his autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom* (1994), the former South African President Nelson Mandela recounts that he had fantasized about visiting the ruins of ancient Egypt, which he calls "the cradle of African civilization". To quote Mandela's statement on why this was so significant to him:

This was not amateur archaeological interest; it is important for African nationalists to be armed with evidence to dispute the fictitious claims of whites that Africans are without a civilized past that compares with that of the West. In a single morning, I discovered that Egyptians were created great works of art and architecture when whites were still living in caves.

As much as ancient Egypt may have helped fuel the fire of Mandela's passion to liberate Black South Africans from the oppression of apartheid, few non-Black people even recognize that it was an African civilization to begin with. At our own University of California in San Diego, ancient Egyptian history is taught under the Near Eastern rather than African division of the history department, as is the case in colleges across the country. In movies like *The Mummy* and *The Ten Commandments*, White rather than Black actors are cast into the Egyptian characters' roles. The implicit notion being promoted by our popular culture, and even many academics that ought to know better, is that Egypt of the Pharaohs was of Middle Eastern or Mediterranean rather than African origin.

This view is wrong and Nelson Mandela is right. Ancient Egypt, far from being a foreign import from the Caucasian lands of Europe or Asia, was an indigenous African civilization in the same tradition as Mali, Ethiopia, or Great Zimbabwe. Its population was predominantly of African racial descent and its culture was both rooted in Africa and related to other African cultures.

## Biological Anthropology

Before we begin to explore whether or not the ancient Egyptians were Africans, we must take into account that African people do not all look alike. If anything, Africans are the most physically diverse of the world's major populations. They vary far more in facial features than any other ethnicity. For one example, their nasal indices (which measure the length and width of their noses) cover 92% of the world range (Hiernaux 1975), with narrower noses prevailing in drier regions near Egypt such as Northeast Africa (Molnar. 1991). Similarly, Africans also have the world's greatest diversity in skin tones (Relethford 2000), ranging from the yellow-brown of South African Bushmen to the very dark color of South Sudanese. All this variation is unsurprising when we consider that Africans are also the most genetically diverse people in the world (Tishkoff 2009).

Despite their physical and genetic variability, we have some justification for grouping all the different kinds of African people into one distinct ethnicity. L.L. Cavalli-Sforza (1988) sampled gene frequencies in 42 world populations and found that the most basic genetic division within humankind is between non-Africans and Africans. His African cluster included peoples as physically different from one another as Mbuti Pygmies, Nilotes, Bantus, and Ethiopians. That all of these variable people are more closely related to one another than to anyone outside of Africa supports the classification of Africans into one ethnicity.

With this out of the way, how can we determine whether or not the Egyptians fell within this African cluster?

The method traditionally favored by physical anthropologists for determining human population relationships from skeletal remains is craniometry, the measurement of skulls' dimensions and facial features. The more similar certain populations' craniometric measurements are, the more closely related the populations are

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considered. Generally speaking, the highest quality craniometric studies use comprehensive lists of variables covering the entire skull instead of fixating on a small number of features.

Numerous studies report finding ancient Egyptian skulls to resemble those of other Africans. As early as 1923, the white racist anatomist Sir Grafton Elliot Smith reported that the thousands of Egyptian mummies he examined at Cairo's Egyptian Museum frequently had features such as "poorly developed" brows, bulging occiputs, small but relatively broad noses, and slight projections of the jaws, all common African characteristics. Slightly over a decade later, Barnard (1935) observed that most Egyptian crania resembled those of Sudanese. Nutter (1958), Keita (1990), and Godde (2009) have all replicated this result of Sudanese affinity for Egyptians. Crichton (1966) found Egyptians to resemble Kenyans, whereas Brauer (1976), Keita (1990, 2005), and Vermeersch (2005) report a similarity between Egyptians and a larger selection of African populations.

To be sure, Egyptian skull morphology has not been static over the country's long history. Barnard (1935) found one northern Egyptian series from the period of Macedonian rule, very late in Egyptian history, to differ substantially from earlier Egyptian and Sudanese skulls. Zakrzewski (2002) also found relatively recent Egyptian crania to look distinct from earlier ones. This is unsurprising when we consider that Egypt received increased immigration from foreigners, especially Europeans and Middle Easterners, during its decline.

Craniometry is not the only physical anthropological method that shows the Egyptians' African origin. Measurements of the skeleton beyond the skull (what anthropologists call the postcranial skeleton), particularly the length of the limbs relative to the body, have also shed a lot of light on this question. On average, African people have proportionately longer arms and legs than Europeans or Asians, as long and narrow appendages dissipate heat better in tropical conditions (this is known as Allen's Rule). Just as ancient Egyptians had similar skull shapes to other Africans, so too do their limb proportions fall within the African range. Actually, that is an understatement; two studies (Robins and Shute 1986, Zakrzewski 2003) have discovered that Egyptian limb proportions are "super-Negroid"—that is, they are even more elongated than those of other African people! By contrast, Middle Eastern populations such as Palestinians have limb proportions that are closer to cold-adapted peoples such as Caucasians (Holliday 2000, Smith 2002). This is noteworthy since Egypt actually has a similar climate to the Middle East, implying that the Egyptians' prehistoric ancestors settled the Nile Valley from the tropics further south relatively recently.

Moving on to softer tissues than bone, one histological study on Egyptian mummies (Mekota and Vermehren 2005) noted in passing that the skin cells were packed with melanin (the pigment that determines human skin color) as expected for people "of Negroid [African] origin", although they neither specified the exact density nor went into depth. An earlier study by Chapel et al (1981) also reported heavy pigmentation in Egyptian skin cells.

Even more persuasive data for determining Egyptian population relationships than skeletal or skin cell analysis is DNA. Back in 1993, Paabo and Di Rienzo extracted DNA from Egyptian mummies and found that some of the genetic lineages they carried could be traced to more southerly Africa; the other lineages were not identified but may be African as well. More recently, the personal genomics company DNA Tribes (2012), using genetic data that Hawass (2010) extracted from Pharaoh Tutankhamun and his family's mummies, ran it through their genomic analysis software and found that the mummies were overwhelmingly more closely related to African populations, particularly those from South and Central Africa.

We have seen that the ancient Egyptian people both possessed physical characteristics within the native African range and had close genetic ties to other Africans. While this may suffice to answer the question of whether the Egyptians could be classified as "Black" or "Negroid" using modern American racial terminology, there is still the issue of their cultural affinity with the rest of the African continent. Being "Black" is not sufficient to make one *culturally* African; most Black Americans, although they may

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retain vestiges of their ancestorsâ West African culture, are for the larger part Western rather than African in mindset. Whatever skin color the Egyptians had, can we truly attribute their civilization to native African genius, or did they import most of their culture from elsewhere? To address this new question, we must turn to the archaeological data on the origins of ancient Egyptian civilization.

### Archaeology

Possibly the oldest evidence for a sedentary civilization along the Nile River has been excavated not in Egypt proper but in central Sudan near the modern capital of Khartoum. This culture, dubbed the Khartoum Mesolithic, is considered to have constructed permanent or at least semi-permanent settlements because it left behind the oldest pottery ever found in Africa, dating as far back as 8200 BC (archaeologists interpret pottery as evidence of a sedentary lifestyle because it has little utility for constantly wandering foragers). Other artifacts left behind by the Khartoum Mesolithic people include bone harpoons, grindstones for processing grains, and burials of the dead (Byrnes 2009), but for our purposes the most significant discovery is a piece of rock art depicting a boat. Usai and Salvatori (2007) show that this boatâs architecture is ancestral to that of later Egyptian ships, which means that the Khartoum Mesolithic either evolved into the Egyptian civilization or at least culturally influenced the proto-Egyptians.

Moving northward and forward in time, the oldest trace of civilization in Egypt itself has been uncovered by Wendorf and Schild (1998) at Nabta Playa in the countryâs far southeast. The ruins of stone huts built in straight rows, wells, a circle of megaliths similar to Stonehenge, and stone tumuli containing the bones of sacrificed cattle have all been found here. The Nabta Playa people, who lived circa 6000 BC, apparently had an economy centered on herding cattle that were descended from a North African subspecies of the aurochs (Wendorf 1994, Hanotte et al 2002). Jordeczka et al (2011) notice similarities in pottery style between the Nabta Playan and earlier Sudanese cultures, again attesting to immigration or influence from the south.

From Nabta Playa, civilization spread down the Nile Valley all the way to the Fayum Oasis region northwest of the river, and it is here that we find the Fayum Neolithic culture of 5200 BC. This is the oldest Egyptian site to show signs of plant cultivation, and to be sure many of the crops and domesticated animals uncovered (e.g. emmer wheat, sheep, and goats) do appear to have been imported from the Middle East. However, this does not necessarily mean significant Middle Eastern immigration into Egypt. Ehret (1996) notes that since agriculture seems to have developed very gradually in the Fayum, it was more likely slowly incorporated by native Africans into their existing subsistence strategy rather than brought into the area fully developed by immigrants. Additionally, Keita (2005) observes that none of the ancient Egyptian words for these Middle Eastern domesticates appear to have been loaned from ancient Middle Eastern languages such as Semitic or Sumerian, and Arkell (1975) has detected similarities between Fayum Neolithic and contemporary Sudanese material cultures.

Between 5200 and 4000 BC, knowledge of plant cultivation spread from the Fayum into southern (or Upper) Egypt, but this did not immediately lead to Egyptians abandoning their cattle-herding ways. On the contrary, herding cattle, along with hunting wild game, continued to play much more important roles in prehistoric Upper Egyptian economies (Wilkinson 2003). Furthermore, Egyptian material culture, especially tools and pottery, continued to share characteristics with more southerly African material culture (de Heinzelin 1962, Arkell and Ucko 1965, Arkell 1975) and rock art from the heart of the Sahara shows similarities to prehistoric Egyptian art (Donadoni 1964).

The thousand years between 4000 and 3000 BC saw the drying up of the Sahara from a grassy savanna to a hyper-arid desert, forcing the Egyptian people to crowd along the Nile and develop more urban, socially stratified societies. Most of this urbanization and growth of social complexity occurred in Upper Egypt, whereas northern (or Lower) Egypt remained somewhat of a cultural backwater (Wilkinson 2003). Eventually the Upper Egyptian culture would expand to dominate the whole country and completely replace the simpler

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Lower Egyptian society (Bard 1994). As this was happening, a prosperous monarchic culture very similar to Upper Egypt was developing in northern Sudan, again showing the close cultural ties between these two African regions (Williams 1986). Indeed, Ehret (1996) argues that the very institution of sacral kingship that was so fundamental to classical Egyptian civilization was adopted from Sudanese peoples.

None of this is to say that there were no Middle Eastern or other Mediterranean influences on the nascent Egyptian civilization, but the fact that the majority of Egyptian culture's foundations were laid in those areas of the Nile Valley that were further away from the Middle East and Mediterranean basin refutes the popular notion that Egyptian civilization was derivative of these more northerly areas. Ancient Egyptian civilization was a predominantly indigenous African development.

### Cultural Anthropology

Before we begin this section of our argument, we must put down another disclaimer: Africa is a vast continent with many different kinds of environment, so not only do African people vary substantially in physical appearance, but they subscribe to a rich diversity of very different cultures. Nomadic foragers and herders, sedentary farmers living in small villages, and complex civilizations have all coexisted on African soil. Just as Classic Mayan culture was remarkably distinct from the Lakota or Wampanoag cultures despite sharing a common Native American heritage, so too did the ancient Egyptians differ in many ways from Yoruba or Zulu despite sharing an African heritage. To say that the ancient Egyptians's main cultural roots lay in Africa is not to deny the uniqueness of their civilization or to paint Africa as a cultural monolith.

Nonetheless, for all the many ways African peoples differ from one another, many do share certain generalities that imply a common cultural heritage, and these also apply to the ancient Egyptians. A complete list of cultural correspondences between ancient Egyptian and other African cultures could fill an entire book, but let us name a small number for this paper's purposes.

We shall begin with linguistics. Linguists classify the ancient Egyptian language as part of the Afroasiatic or Afrasan linguistic phylum (Ehret 1996); although some languages currently spoken in the Middle East also belong to the Afrasan phylum, the vast majority of Afrasan languages are spoken in Africa and the whole phylum probably originated on the Sudanese to Somalian coast. Examples of Afrasan languages include Tuareg (Mali), Hausa (Nigeria), Oromo (Ethiopia), Somali, and Borana (Kenya). However, Diop (1974) has also found similarities between ancient Egyptian and languages from another African linguistic phylum called Niger-Congo, especially Wolof (Senegambia); this may imply a common origin for the Afrasan and Niger-Congo phyla.

As has been noted earlier, the earliest Egyptians had an economy based on herding cattle. Even after plant cultivation became more important to Egyptian subsistence, cattle continued to play a prominent role in Egyptian culture. Many favorite Egyptian deities, for example the god Apis and the goddesses Hathor and Isis, sometimes took the form of cattle. Pharaohs were frequently likened to bulls and would brag about the size of their cattle herds (Poe 1998). Even the government's regular survey of its economic resources was known as "the cattle count" (Wilkinson 2003), further showing that cattle in ancient Egypt were equated with wealth along with food.

This same association between cattle and wealth is widespread across Africa. According to Thompson (2001), South African Bantu peoples (e.g. Xhosa, Zulu, Basotho, and Tswana) considered cattle their most prized possessions, and some even had vast vocabularies with at least fifty-seven words describing cow markings alone. One Basotho proverb says that "cattle are the bank of a Mosotho". Comparable cattle-herding economies are found among Nilotic peoples such as the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan and the Maasai and Samburu of Kenya. Ehret (1996) traces this popularity of cattle among Africans to prehistoric Sudanese herders who first domesticated the animals between 10,000 and 6000 BC.

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Not only did the ancient Egyptians share with other Africans a fondness for cattle husbandry, but they shared many religious beliefs as well. We shall begin with their conception of divinity. As the Egyptologist James P. Allen (1997) explains, although Egyptian religion appears extremely polytheistic at first glance, all the various personalities in their mythology commonly dubbed gods were actually conceived as collectively comprising one Supreme Being known as Amun. This idea of a single Supreme Being having multiple extensions with their own personalities is also found in the Nigerian Yoruba belief system (Taiwo 2005).

Other spiritual forces that the Egyptians believed they had to reckon with were the spirits of their ancestors. Many Egyptian deities, for example Osiris, were considered ancestors to the Pharaohs who had once lived on Earth, and Pharaohs would often build mortuary temples in which they venerated their predecessors (Poe 1998). Away from the royal sphere, Egyptians would write letters pleading to the spirits of dead relatives and maintained shrines with offering tables and sculptures depicting ancestors (Bell 1996). This sort of ancestor veneration is fundamental to many other African religions (Kusimba 1996). Frazer (1922) recounts that the Shilluk of South Sudan build mortuary temples to their dead kings in the exact same fashion as the Egyptians, whereas South African peoples would offer sacrifices to ancestors and even name their respective ethnic groups (e.g. Xhosa or Zulu) after ancestral figures (Thompson 2001).

The last of the many links between ancient Egyptian and more southerly African cultures that we shall describe is the practice of circumcision. Unlike in modern Judeo-Christian culture, which forces circumcision on innocent babies, this practice was instead performed on youths on the cusp of adolescence in both Egyptian and other traditional African societies as part of initiation rites into adulthood (Poe 1996). Nelson Mandela vividly describes how and other Xhosa boys of his generation underwent such a rite in his autobiography (1994).

### Conclusion

The ancient Egyptians were in every sense of the word Africans. They were of racial African descent, spoke an African language, and practiced widespread African customs. Their civilization should therefore be classified as one of the great African kingdoms alongside Nubia, Mali, Ethiopia, and Great Zimbabwe.

Why does this matter to us? Obviously the ancient Egyptian civilization's merits should not be judged by its population's skin color or cultural background alone. People of all skin colors are capable of great achievements; Europeans have Greece and Rome; Middle Easterners have Babylon and the Islamic Golden Age; Asians have China and Cambodia; Native Americans the Maya and Inca, and so forth.

However, ancient Egypt's African affinity is important to recognize in part because it (along with the other native African civilizations of course) helps refute the white supremacist contention that Africans cannot construct civilization without European help, as Mandela has explained in his autobiography. It facilitates the combating of anti-Black racism. Furthermore, if we want to reconstruct ancient Egyptian civilization accurately in our popular culture, we must not misrepresent it as non-African. White Egyptians are every bit as historically inaccurate as Vikings with horned helmets or Velociraptors without feathers, so Black rather than White actors should be cast to play our movies' Egyptian characters.

The African's role in shaping world history must be acknowledged at last.

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