

The Cleopatra controversy

Dear Editor,

- 1 Queen Cleopatra, a new docudrama to be released by Netflix on May 10, is creating a maelstrom of controversy as Arabs and people of Greek heritage accuse Jada Pinkett Smith and Netflix of stealing their cultural thunder by portraying Cleopatra as a biracial (black) woman. After all, everyone knows that Cleopatra was the last of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt. Equally well-known is the fact that the current Arab ruling class in Egypt is not black either, so how dare Pinkett Smith and Netflix so shamelessly appropriate Greek and Arab culture.
- 2 As a person of African ancestry who is aware of the cultural appropriation practised by other races against black people, I do have some sympathy for the Greeks and the Arabs. If Cleopatra was a full-blooded Greek or a mixture of Greek and non-black Arab, then black people should release our racial claim on her and let the Greeks and the Arabs be proud of their famous ancestor.
- 3 Pinkett Smith and Netflix may, however, have inadvertently provided black intellectuals with a teaching moment that allows for the exploration of a topic that is of far greater importance to people of African ancestry. Much of the Greek and Arab animus against the casting of a black woman in the role of Cleopatra stems from a much broader controversy about the role occupied by black people in Egyptian history. Caucasian and Arab scholarship seem to be in agreement that the glorious civilisation developed on the African continent in Egypt was not an indigenous black African civilisation. Omniscient Caucasian intellectuals have even gone so far as to state with great certainty that black people had no civilisation until it was bequeathed to them by Asians, Arabs, Caucasians, and - wait for it - extraterrestrials.
- 4 Without doubt, one of the most distinguished black scholars to push back against the Eurocentric contention that black Africans were civilisationally challenged was the great Senegalese intellectual Dr Cheikh Anta Diop. In 1974, Diop and Dr Theophile Obenga of Congo engaged a number of European and Egyptian scholars at a symposium organised by UNESCO.
- 5 The first chapter of Volume II of the UNESCO-sponsored 'General History of Africa' makes for some very interesting reading and should be perused by anyone interested in the subject of ancient Egyptian history and the role played by black Africans in the origin of that civilisation.

Diop marshalls a number of arguments in support of the black origin of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

- 6 Diop contends, as did the great -African American- scholar John Henrik Clarke, that Europeans and others could quibble all they cared to about the academic credentials of Herodotus, Aristotle, Diodorus, and Tatius, but they should at least concede that these contemporaries of the ancient Egyptians had good eyesight. Diop called to the witness stand 11 contemporaries of the ancient Egyptians who all concluded that the Egyptians, the Ethiopians, and the Colchians were all highly melanated¹⁾ people.
- 7 Diop attempted to show just how African ancient Egypt was in geography, language, religion, physiology, iconography, culture, self-description, and phenotype. He argued that a melanin study of the mummies in the museum of Cairo would go a long way in helping to determine their racial affinity. Regrettably, the Arab authorities in Egypt declined to give Diop the permission he sought to carry out such tests.
- 8 Another very interesting argument forwarded by Diop was rooted in the Old Testament scriptures. In Genesis 10, Misraim is listed as one of the sons of Ham. Ham, as every good Bible student knows, is supposed to be the father of the black race. Misraim is the name given to Egypt in the Hebrew scriptures. The five books of Moses or the Pentateuch are embraced by Jews, European Christians, and Muslims. The Pentateuch places Egypt squarely in the Hamitic or black camp.
- 9 Since European Christians, including the Greeks, Jews, and Muslims, happily reject any Hamitic association, they should get the point that Pinkett Smith and Netflix are alluding to, which is that only a Hamitic or black person can legitimately make the claim of being an original Egyptian.
- 10 If Cleopatra were 100 per cent Greek, then she was not an original Egyptian. This point must be conceded by black people. If she was a mixture of Greek and Arab, then, once again, she could not have been an original Egyptian. If, however, Cleopatra also carried the original dominant Hamitic gene, that opens the door for a mixed-race Cleopatra with the original black Egyptian phenotype.

Lenrod Nzulu Baraka
Founder of Afro-Caribbean Spiritual Teaching Center

jamaicaobserver.com, 2023

noot 1 melanated = met een donkere huidskleur