THEMATIC CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

EGYPTIAN GEOGRAPHY

Ancient Egyptians were surrounded by deserts on three sides and protected from potential Mediterranean invaders by muddy marshes to the north. In this dry desert land, the 4,000-mile-long Nile River became the source of ancient Egypt’s livelihood and prosperity. Each summer its banks overflowed to flood a strip of land just a few miles wide. This annual flood left behind a dark layer of extremely fertile soil that enabled crops like barley, flax, and emmer wheat to grow each fall.

Examine the Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Amenemhet and His Wife Hemet (image 3). Which objects suggest that the Egyptians were successful farmers? Which articles of clothing and objects suggest that the Egyptians lived in a hot climate? Which objects suggest that the Egyptians lived in a fertile region?

The country of Egypt is located on the African continent (See “Egypt in the Construction of African American Identity,” page 27). Research the climate of other African countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria. What impact do the Niger and Congo Rivers have on these two nations? Like ancient Egypt, do these two nations rely on these rivers for survival? Present your findings in the form of a request to the United Nations to preserve the ecology of the river(s).

Objective:
Explore the geography of Egypt and the impact it had on Egyptian lifestyle and civilization.
EGYPT IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

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For African Americans, a people whose identity has been forged in the Americas over the last 500 years, the desire for deeper roots in the story of the human enterprise of civilization has been compelling. In a land where, except for Native Americans, everyone was initially defined by their relationship to a previous national experience, a homeland was essential. For psychological health and cultural wholeness, reflection on a previous home offered a sense of social and historical location as well as a narrative connecting the present to the past.

In the case of African Americans, this narrative was problematic. Sudden, forced dislocation due to transatlantic slavery abruptly ruptured the various narratives which constituted the immediate heritages of continental Africans. The equally involuntary dispersal in the Americas made the reconstruction of these narratives virtually impossible. The fabric of intact African identities was irreparably torn, especially since black people in their new settings lacked significant control over their lives. Euro-American economic and political structures, reinforced by a vitriolic racism that sought to dehumanize and devalue the transplanted Africans, dominated their situation. Even family and religious structures were atomized, leaving African Americans the task of inventing themselves from fragments of memory and culture.

As firsthand memories gave way to racist distortions, Africa became both the literal and the symbolic heritage of new-world blacks, so they began to look for her place in the larger human saga—because that place would suggest their roots as well. The new topography that came to dominate their historical consciousness was the landscape of the Biblical world where they encountered Egypt and Nubia, and therein found themselves an honored place before slavery, indeed, before racism and its evils. All of

\(^1\)Africa is the place from which blacks were brought to the Americas, thus it was their literal heritage. As Africans became African Americans, most lost direct knowledge of their specific African origins. Africa became both generalized and romanticized, and thus was transformed into a symbolic heritage.
Africa was conflated into Egypt, and Egypt became the site of honorable, ancient black beginnings. This has remained essentially true even though the 20th century brought a more nuanced and historically complex understanding of the African American relationship to all of Africa.¹

Ancient Egypt and Nubia—often seen from the black perspective as one—continue to stand at the center of African American cultural consciousness. Both names are also frequently associated with Ethiopia. (The present-day nation of Ethiopia, to the south of ancient Egypt, is bordered by Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, and the Red Sea. [see map of Egypt, page 9]) Indeed, the ancient world often spoke of present-day Nubia as Ethiopia and its people as Ethiopians. For new-world blacks, the three names were sometimes used interchangeably. The oddity of this usage nevertheless captured the central idea that all these terms referred to ancient African civilizations and therefore belonged to the symbolic lineage of African-derived peoples. Through this relationship, African Americans staked their claim to vital participation in the formation of humanity’s earliest endeavors in what we know as civilization.

Why was it important for black Americans to define a relationship to ancient black peoples? The importance lay in the response of blacks to the aggressive assault on black humanity advanced from virtually all arenas—personal and institutional—of American society. Blacks were often characterized as lacking humanity and civilization. At best they might be a sub-species of the human family, a lesser, lower variety. Remnants of such ideas are still voiced today by Aryan Nations and the Christian Identity Movement here in the United States.

This pejorative thinking about black humanity was heavily influenced by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who, in his *History of Philosophy*, divided Africa into three parts: the Nile Valley, European Africa, and Africa Proper (a notion similar to the recently abandoned category of sub-Saharan Africa). Of the latter he asserted:

> Africa Prior... as far as history goes back, has remained, ... shut up... the land of childhood, which

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¹ Egypt refers to the civilization along the Nile River, stretching from south of Aswan to the Mediterranean Sea. Nubia, sometimes also called Kush, generally refers to civilizations stretching from just south of Aswan to Khartoum and extending further south along the Blue and White Nile Rivers toward the African highlands. In ancient times, this area was also known as Ethiopia. During their long coexistence along the Nile, Egypt and Nubia were at times controlled each by the other. Cultural, geographical, and political boundaries between the two were both permeable and shifting.

² Kwame Anthony Appiah, in *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 1992, suggests that African Americans invented their relationship to Africa as part of their larger response to racial essentialism.
lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is
enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.¹

Hegel, professor of philosophy at the University of Berlin, powerfully repre-
sented the academic and philosophical perspective of the time, a perspective
which was to remain influential for generations.²

If this view prevailed, Africans—without history—could not be significant
people, and their descendants in the United States would be without a wort-
thy heritage. By separating Egypt from Africa, Hegel sought to de-
Africanize Egyptians. If this posture were to stand, Africa’s most ancient
dawning would be canceled and assigned elsewhere in human history.
African Americans would not, could not, tolerate this travesty, and thus
they became part of a protracted struggle to restore Egypt to Africa, and
thereby to restore an honorable Africa to themselves. This struggle led to
nearly two centuries of debate over Egypt. Present Afrocentric arguments
are only the most recent manifestation of this struggle.³

For African Americans, Egypt was inseparable from issues of race, and thus
the perennial question was, and remains: were the Egyptians black? Of
course, this question presented myriad difficulties: what does “black” mean
in this context? Is “black” a relevant term for application in the world of
the ancients? Is “black” fundamentally a political, social, cultural, or
anthropological term? What does it matter? These questions have proven
difficult to answer, or more exactly, difficult to answer if wide agreement is
expected. Yet these questions remain inescapable, at least in these United
States, where the issues are so intimately associated with black responses to
the white denial of black personhood. It is not surprising, therefore, that
such questions should inspire vigorous disputations within black settings.

By the 19th century, black spokespersons and scholars were already
arguing forcefully and consistently for a different perspective on Africa and
on Egypt. They argued for a viewpoint that conceded Egypt to Africa and
honored black participation in civilization from the outset. It was worth
fighting to claim Egypt for Africa.

¹Miriam Ma’at-Ka-Re Monges offers a challenging presentation of the history of black thinking about Egypt and
I have quoted several passages from this source. They are indicated by (Kush).
²An excellent discussion of the impact of Hegel and other European philosophers on the formulation of ideas of race
may be found in Robert J. C. Young’s Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race, 1995. Especially
relevant is his chapter, “Egypt in America.”
³Afrocentricity is an approach to the study of Africa from an African perspective.
Interest in Egypt/Nubia/Ethiopia was not consigned only to scholars and public figures. It was manifested widely at the popular level, where the love of language from the scriptures, classical texts, and Shakespeare mesmerized. When ordinary black folk sought to reject an interpretation of the Biblical story of Ham which justified the enslavement of blacks, they turned to other pages in the same Bible where the saga of Moses in Egypt, of Nubian King Tarharka coming to the rescue of Hezekiah, or of the exploits of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the New Testament testified to black greatness and piety. Biblical episodes—many set in Egypt—were a credible route to historical recognition. The occasional scholar—often a minister—added to this credibility by recalling how ancient Greeks and Romans regarded the ancient Africans of the Nile Valley as “blameless Ethiops,” etc.

On public platforms, leading black Americans entered the fray declaring the kinship between African Americans and Egyptians and reconfirming that Egypt was still in Africa. David Walker, in his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World but in Particular and Very Expressly to Those of the United States of America*, published in 1829, held that:

... Egyptians were Africans... such as we are—some of them yellow and others dark—a mixture of Ethiopians and natives of Egypt—about the same as you see the coloured peoples of the United States at the present day. (Kush, 55)

Less than 10 years later, Hosea Easton published “A Treatise on the Intellectual Character of the Coloured People of the United States,” in which he states, “Egyptians transmitted their knowledge to the Greeks.”

In the *Methodist Quarterly Review* (1869), Caribbean scholar and activist Edward Wilmot Blyden published “The Negro in Ancient History,” in which he discussed at length his understanding of the African foundation of ancient Egyptian civilization. Blyden had traveled in Egypt and entered the pyramidal Khufu. Ten years later, Martin Delaney published *Principles of Ethnology: Origins of Races and Colors with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization*. In the same year, Rufus L. Perry published *The Cushites: or the Children of Ham as Seen by the Ancient Historians and Poets*. Even Frederick Douglass, exslave, orator, abolitionist, and author of two autobiographies, declared kinship with the Egyptians in a lecture in Rochester, New York, in 1854. He

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1 Frank Snowden Jr’s, *Blacks in Antiquity*, remains an excellent discussion of the African presence in the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.
reaffirmed this position after visiting Egypt in 1886. Of that experience, he wrote to his son:

It has been the fashion of American writers to deny that the Egyptians were Negroes and claim that they are the same race as themselves. This has, I have no doubt, been largely due to a wish to deprive the Negro of the moral support of Ancient Greatness and to appropriate the same to the white race. (Kush, 5)

Nor was the fascination with Egypt/Nubia/ Ethiopia limited to the world of oratory. In the visual arts, African Amerindian sculptor Edmonia Lewis sculpted a heroic image of the dying Cleopatra, which was exhibited at the United States Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. This is one of the earliest works by an African American artist celebrating an Egyptian theme. Lewis also created a figure of Abraham’s Nubian wife Hagar.4 Through her Cleopatra, the sculptor publicly identified herself with Egypt and simultaneously attached herself to the larger imaginary place of Egypt as a marker of ancestral identity. This identification is again embraced by another African American sculptor, Meta Warrick Fuller, who in 1914, produced Ethiopia Awakening in which an Egyptian/Nubian mummy represents sleeping Africa which, with the coming of the 20th century, is about to reawaken. The linen-wrapped female is depicted lightly touching her hand to her breast in a gesture that suggests aspiration. And as her hand lifts, she comes to life as if awakening from a deep slumber. The features of her face are softened and rounded, suggestive of black women.

As the 20th century settled in, the appropriation of Egypt as central to African American identity grew. The ways in which it was expressed widened. Alain LeRoy Locke, the godfather of the New Negro Era of the 1920s, added his endorsement to the cause. Indeed, Locke was present at the reopening of the tomb of King Tutankhamen in Luxor, representing Howard University and the Negro Society for Historical Research. In Indianapolis, Indiana, a city in the American heartland which momentarily rivaled Chicago as the center of black economic and cultural development, Madame C. J. Walker was building a theater using Egyptian motifs as part of her new block-long factory building. Aaron Douglas, a Midwestern painter who arrived in New York in the mid-1920s and became strongly associated with the Harlem Renaissance, produced murals and graphic illustrations deeply influenced by Egyptian ideas. In works such as The

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4Hagar was Sarah’s handmaid, whom she gave as a wife to her husband, Abraham, in order that he might have children. The mother of Ishmael, Hagar was later rejected by Abraham. Hagar was thought to be Nubian.
Creation, Douglas employed Egyptianized silhouette forms.

Of course, writers and historians such as Drusilla Dunjee Houston were also busy at work. In 1926, Houston published Wonderul Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire, Book 1, in which she focused on Nubian contributions to early civilization along the Nile. Though her book had many weaknesses, it pointed out once more the continuing preoccupation of blacks with the restoration of relationship between themselves and the occupants of the Nile Valley four millennia ago.

Without question, the most important African American Nile Valley specialists were Professors W. E. B. DuBois and Leo Hansberry. Harvard-educated DuBois authored the following books in which he dealt with Africa and African Americans: The Negro World (1916); Black Folk Then and Now (1939); The World and Africa: An Inquiry Into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History (1946). These volumes had the intention of writing Africa into history by emphasizing its engagement in international, political, economic, and cultural history over thousands of years. DuBois sought to construct a historical narrative from a black point of view, appreciating that this would necessarily result in an elevation of regard for Africa. In 1946, DuBois wrote:

Almost unanimously in the 19th century, Egypt was not regarded as part of Africa... It is especially significant that the science of Egyptology arose and flourished at the very same time that the cotton kingdom reached its greatest power on the foundation of American Negro slavery... We may then without further ado ignore this verdict of history... and treat Egyptian history as an integral part of African history. (Kush, 56)

Never tiring of this endeavor, DuBois died years later in Ghana where he had undertaken the huge task of completing an encyclopedia to be known as Encyclopedia Africana.

William Leo Hansberry, though he focused his attention narrowly on the study of the Nile Valley, was initially inspired to undertake his life's work as an Africanist by having read DuBois' 1916 The Negro World. For Hansberry, DuBois opened an irresistible door into the African past. Through this door, Hansberry found Nubia and Ethiopia, and later made available what he had learned in Pillars of Ethiopian History (1947) and Sources for the Study of Ethiopian History (1977).
Beginning in the 1960s, a second period of intensive cultural nationalism took hold in America’s black communities. One form of this flourish was the appearance of new images based on the appropriation of Egyptian and Nubian imagery. The Egyptian symbol of the *ankh* (figure 11), a symbol for rebirth and regeneration became immensely popular, and headgear mimicking the crown of the sculpture of Nefertiti in Berlin began to appear. Other forms associated with Egypt, such as the sphinx, were also impressed into visual service. Many muralists filled their works with pyramids and other architectural forms associated with ancient Egypt and Nubia. Almost every major city with large black communities integrated images with Egyptian sources into its public iconography. Artists associated with groups such as AfriCobra further popularized Egypto-Nubian motifs by integrating them into paintings, prints, and textiles. The artists were encouraged by the writings of scholars such as the Senegalese Cheikh Anta Diop, whose books included *Precolonial Black Africa; Civilization or Barbarism*; and the *African Origins of Civilization*. Diop asserted that:

The African historian who evades the problem of Egypt is neither modest nor objective, nor unruffled, he is ignorant. Imagine, if you can, the unfortunate position of a Western historian who was to write the history of Europe without referring to Greco-Latin antiquity, and try to pass that off as scientific approach. (Kush, 58)

Inspired by the work of Diop, DuBois, and Hansberry, a new generation of black scholars have undertaken to create an African-centered discourse in which Kemet—Egypt’s original name—is not only claimed for Africa, but also identified as the source of much of the knowledge of science, mathematics, geometry, and philosophy generally associated with Greek and Roman thinkers. A leading figure in Afrocentric analysis is Molefi Asante, author of *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1990), *Afrocentricity* (1998), and editor of *The Journal of Black Studies*. He is joined by others including John Henrik Clark, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, and Asa Houston. These writers, along with such radical scholars as Martin Bernal, author of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization; The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785–1985* (1987), have substantially changed contemporary understanding of Egypt, Nubia, and the ancient world.

Black identification with Egypt remains pervasive, often taking dramatic turns. Among recent provocative Egyptian-inspired presentations is “Remember the Time” by the globally popular Michael Jackson, in which the nimble entertainer/singer anchors a strikingly choreographed dance
constructed of stylized movements from Egyptian art. His Egyptian gestures have been widely copied in vernacular dance, especially among young African Americans.

In summary, 19th- and early 20th-century black orators and lay teachers led a reclamation of Egypt as a central pillar in the symbolic legacy of black people in America. Frequently, they merged—or used interchangeably—the terms Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia. Egypt was especially powerful in this combination, since Egyptology was well established as a respectable discipline within leading universities and museums of the world. Great importance was attached to restoring Egypt to Africa. The same urgency attached to establishing Egypt as a pillar of African American identity addressed a number of burning, passionately felt needs. These included first, a deep desire to define a noble lineage for black people, a lineage predating slavery in the Americas and recognized by the wider world; and second, an equally pressing desire arising from the belief that positive cultural identification could encourage and fortify social and intellectual development by combating the damages of racism, discrimination, and misrepresentation. In short, wholesome self-knowledge can empower fruitful growth and development, just as ignorance retards progressive advancement. The importance of Egypt/Nubia/Ethiopia in the African American experience is therefore great. Its ultimate value lies in the spiritual and psychological healing that radiates from a sense of restored wholeness deriving from the restoration of a sense of place in the human story at large.