

Chapter 15 Excerpt

It now seems clear that in spite of the great antiquity of the ancient Egyptian civilization and its now copiously documented native African origins and character, the earliest pages of African history were not written there. Any attempt to understand the truth about African history, the origins of the West African peoples, and indeed the history of civilization itself must begin with an understanding of the history of the Sahara. It is now clear, from both archaeological and linguistic evidence, that the Sahara, which for thousands of years was the site of innovative and dynamic black societies, was also the birthplace of modern civilization.

The Indian historian K. Madhu Pannikar wrote in his book *The Serpent and the Crescent* that “It is only on the basis that thousands of years ago the Sahara was an extremely fertile area where a civilization of considerable antiquity existed that ancient West African history, which archaeologists have started unearthing, can be understood.” Rock paintings document the evolution of this society, from the early Stone Age to about 1500 B.C. Although most of the Sahara is now too dry to support even the most rudimentary forms of plant and animal life, it was once a fertile area dotted by lakes and filled with game. Remnants of tropical and Mediterranean fauna and rock paintings support this contention. When it rains, frogs still appear in the Ahaggar, ostriches and antelopes can still be found in many areas, crocodiles in a degenerated form are still found at Ennedi, cypress still flourishes in the Tassali des Ajjer, and rock paintings of elephants, hippopotamuses, and giraffes all vividly demonstrate that the unknown artists were personally familiar with these animals.

The Saharan rock paintings, which are among the most important archaeological discoveries of our time, have, in tandem with recent developments in linguistic geography, completely revolutionized the traditional view of Saharan, and consequently, African history. The quality of the paintings, which document the long history of a civilization that evolved through at least sixteen stages, from hunting to cattle raising, have been compared favorably with the finest artistic efforts of any period. The rendition of the movement of camels in silhouette, and horses pulling chariots and galloping in full extension with both front and back legs raised symmetrically, for example, have been widely praised.

Almost all of the paintings were found near the two great trade routes in what must have been the heavily populated regions of Tassali-Fezzan and Atlantic-South Morocco. Horses, chariots, and the wild rush of desert warfare are vividly and convincingly illustrated. The people depicted, some armed with javelins, are clearly Negroid in type, and a painting of a mask similar to ones still being made in the Ivory Coast was found near Aurohet in the Tassali range. Although dating the paintings in chronological sequence has proven to be extremely complex and difficult, two broad historical periods have been recognized. During the first period, when the Sahara was still fertile, the animals shown (such as the hippopotamus and the giraffe) are primarily tropical. In the later period, when the Sahara began to dry up, it became cattle country, and the engravings of oxen become more frequent and prominent.

The desiccation of the Sahara and the isolation this imposed on sub-Saharan Africa made the area, as Panikkar so aptly phrased it, “one of the very few areas in the world which was almost wholly thrown on its own resources.” Unlike the forest dwellers of Central and North Europe, those of the African rain forests were unable to borrow the ideas and inventions of other civilizations. Unlike the Europeans, who were able to avail themselves of the accumulated wisdom of the Mediterranean world, including the black civilizations of North Africa, the people of tropical Africa were left to fend for themselves, and the societies they created were almost totally the result of their own native genius.

If the rock paintings initiated the rethinking of Saharan history, developments in linguistics have

greatly expanded our understanding of its peoples and societies. Starting about 10,000 years ago in areas that included what is now southwestern Egypt, some of the Saharan peoples began a three-stage development of food production, the cornerstone of what we call civilization. Although the Sahara was at the time densely occupied by speakers of all three major African language families—Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Afroasiatic—the three most important African cereals were all domesticated in areas occupied by Nilo-Saharan speakers.

Because of the remarkable convergence of the archaeological record and the linguistic history of Nilo-Saharan food production, there is widespread agreement that pastoralism in the Sahara began long before the earliest known date for the arrival of food production in ancient Egypt. Cattle tending, in the first stage, was followed by what the linguists Christopher Ehret describes as “prima facie evidence for a second development, of cultivation, by the second half of the eighth millennium, and at a still later point in time, possibly about 6000 B.C., by the first evidence of sheep and goat.”

These first food producers probably spoke proto-Northern Sudanic, one of two daughter languages of proto-Nilo-Saharan, the original mother language of Nilo-Saharan, and the oldest of Africa’s three major language families. These widely used genetic metaphors imply, as Ehret pointed out, “a linguistic relationship not unlike that found in many single-cell organisms.” Languages are regarded as related when they descend from a common mother language called a proto-language. Typically, proto-languages evolve into two or more daughter languages, in much the same way the mother cell divides into daughter cells. The daughter languages can become proto-languages themselves, diverging into daughter languages of their own, repeating this process over and over during the long run of language history.

By itself, linguistic history is usually not the most reliable method of precise dating. However, it provides powerful tools for probing and examining the history of communities and societies as a whole. Languages contain many thousands of individual artifacts of the past, words that are hard evidence of a society’s gamut of knowledge, range of experience, and cultural practices. As ideas, behaviors, and practices evolved and changed, so too did, inevitably, the vocabulary that described those aspects of the society’s life. New meanings were applied to existing words, new words were invented or adopted from other societies, and older words were discarded or forgotten. The history of that society, the changes and developments across the whole gamut of its culture and economy, is therefore reflected in the individual histories of the thousands of words used by the members of that society to express every element of their lives.

Languages exist solely as vehicles for social and cultural communication, so when the speakers of a common language no longer share common experiences and practices, the mother or proto-language they shared will begin to diverge into daughter languages. The breakup of a mother language is always gradual: a slow, progressive accumulation of small changes in vocabulary, grammatical usages and pronunciation. At first, different dialects of the language will emerge in different parts of its speech territory, and then, over centuries, the dialects will become distinct languages, no longer intelligible to each other’s speakers. It should be noted that the mother language does not give birth to its daughters and remain separate and distinct from them. Instead, “it evolves directly into each of its daughters as part of a continuing historical process.”