

Contributions of Herodotus to African History

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the contributions of Herodotus to African historiography. Its aim is to define, justify and affirm the importance of Herodotus in African History. Being a librarybased study, its data is mainly obtained from secondary sources and from discussions with historians. A purely historical research method was adopted so as to gain deeper understanding of the pertinent issues involved in African historiography. The historical data was evaluated utilizing external and internal criticism. Herodotus was one man who did not subscribe to the biased writing about Africa. If by scientific knowledge, scholars can eliminate all forms of frustrations which victimize people, particularly Africans, the sincere rapprochement of mankind to create a true humanity will be fostered as argued by Cheikh Anta Diop, in the reconstruction of African history. The Euro-centric view about lack of history in Africa is biased and one of the classical writers, Herodotus tried to argue a case, for African's rich historical background. GJHSS-D Classification : FOR Code: 210310p

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Index terms—

1 Introduction

Herodotus was born at Halicarnassus between 490 B.C and 480 B.C, and his extensive travels took him to Egypt in C.450 B.C during a period when the country was ruled by the Persians. Eventually in retirement at Thorium in Italy, he added to his work the histories which gave an account of the conflict between Greece and Persia. The most important work of Herodotus was his Book II called 'Euterpe' where he extensively examined Egypt and its civilization. His book was mainly an account of the country's history and geography and his lively mind eagerly grasped the many peculiarities he encountered there. He wrote "there is no country that possesses so many wonders or any that has such a number of works that defy description." This is the first factual account written by a foreign observer of Egypt to survive intact (Rosalie David, 1993:11).

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Amadou Matar M'bow director general of UNESCO says "for a long time all kinds of myths and prejudices concealed the true history of Africa from the world at large. African societies were looked upon as societies that could have no history." The continent of Africa was hardly looked upon as a historical entity. A great many non-African experts could not rid themselves of certain preconceptions and argued that the lack of written sources and documents made it impossible to engage in any scientific study of such societies. He continues to argue that, in fact there was a refusal to see Africans as the creators of original cultures which flowered and survived over the centuries in patterns of their own making and which historians are unable to grasp unless they forego their prejudices and rethink their approach (Ki-Zerbo, 1987: xvii).

The first, major force from antiquity to forcefully deal with African historiography; however is a foreign classical writer Herodotus, of the fifth century (C. 484-430 B.C) who is regarded as the father of history. His account was the first attempt to separate fantasy from reality. His works were based on his firsthand observation of movements, facts and evidence obtained from his discussions with people, such as the priests whom he met in Egypt. His work certainly contains inaccuracies, but he became one of the few authorities on whom medieval and modern European travelers could rely and was often quoted in their own works. Herodotus accounts have been used extensively by African writers (Afro-centric) for example Cheikh Anta Diop and others in reconstructing African History.

Herodotus works disapprove those who dismissed African history before the coming of Europeans, the Eurocentric view, who showed their ignorance for thinking that only the western world type of writing was viable for the writing of history. Herodotus went further to report that Africa was the first continent in the world to have written records that could be very useful in reconstructing history ??Rosalie David, 1993:11).

Herodotus collected a wealth of geographical, ethnological and historical information. He was the first to write continuous historical narrative and attempted to weigh the evidence and was remarkably impartial for his day ??Couch, W.T., 1958: 27).

Herodotus is one of the ancient travellers to Egypt in order to see the great monuments and interpret this information into historical facts. It can therefore be argued that though Herodotus visited Egypt, we are able to get information about other parts of African through his work, for example Ethiopia, Sudanese areas such as Nubia, Libya and parts of East African Coast as well as Zimbabwe. Herodotus' visit to Egypt and his amazement about its civilization can be inferred that even other parts of African were highly civilized as compared to some parts of Europe and therefore Africa had its own history which some Western writers tried to dismiss. Through Egypt's civilization, other parts of African must have benefitted from this highly prosperous civilization, through diffusion method.

Herodotus was not a credulous historian who recorded everything without checking, he knew how to weigh things. He distinguished carefully between what he has seen and what he has been told. Therefore he was not biased in his reporting of historical information and therefore his accounts can be used to reconstruct African history accurately ??Diop Cheikh, Anta, 1974: 3).

Herodotus works which are not biased has assisted enormously African intellectuals to reconstruct the national personality of its people, distorted by colonialism, that is considered backward or alarming, and try to start from there to build something modestly.

Through Herodotus accounts African writers can restore the historical consciousness of the African people and re-conquer a promethean consciousness. He was among the first writers to report about Africa in the following positive ways; particularly Egypt where he had visited.

Herodotus reported about a prosperous trade carried out between the peoples of West Africa such as the Moroccans and the people who settled at the City of Carthage the Phoenicians. His works shed light on the later period from the Saite dynasty of seventh century, Herodotus speaks of Egypt with relative accuracy that does not preclude ignorance. He gives us a great deal of information about Ethiopian world especially as regards the trade routes and merchandise. It is a compilation of unequal value, certainly, but splendid for various details. He continued to report information concerning the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in more soundly based, for it is plain that Mediterranean, or at least Alexandrian merchants were developing trade on these coasts (Ki-Zerbo, 1987:25).

Herodotus describes Carthaginian trading down the west coast of Africa and also refers to the silent trade or 'dumb barter' by which goods were exchanged between Africans beyond the straits of Gibraltar and the Carthaginians. Herodotus says "the Carthaginians also inform us about a part of African and its inhabitants beyond the straits of Gibraltar. When they reach this country, they unload their goods and arrange them on the beach. They then return to their ships and send up a smoke signal. When the natives see the smoke, they come down to the sea and place a quantity of gold in exchange for the goods and then retire.

The Carthaginians then come ashore again and examine the gold that has been left. If they think it represents the value of the goods they collect it and sail away. If not they return to their ships and wait until the natives have added sufficient gold to satisfy them ??Mokhtar, 1981:448). In this trade neither side tricks the other. Carthaginians never touch the gold until it equals in value what they have brought for sale, and the Africans do not touch goods till the gold has been taken away.

Such is the earliest description of the classic method of dumb or silent trade. The trade involved people of interior of Africa as well. Due to communication barrier, they used signs to determine the value of goods. This was

trade based on mutual trust. This description of trade helps us in reconstructing African history and dismissing the Euro-centric writers who claim that trade was introduced to African by foreigners. From Herodotus report we can argue that Africans had the practice of trade amongst themselves and therefore trade was an act that was part and parcel of African culture and civilization.

When Herodotus visited Egypt he was impressed by high level of civilization. When he compared Egypt and Greece, he showed that Egypt was more advanced in civilization. He reported that the people who had inhabited Egypt at the time and created Egyptian civilization were Black people. According to him the whites were minority in Egypt. With regard to the origins of the Colchians he wrote "it is in fact manifest that Colchians are Egyptians by race ?". Several Egyptians told me that in their opinion Colchians were descended from soldiers of Sesostris. I had conjured as much myself from the pointers, firstly because they have black skins and kinky hair." ??Mokhtar, 1981:36. According to Herodotus the inhabitants of Egypt were black and sun-baked which is the scientific cause of black color.

Another writer who supported Herodotus is Cheikh Anta Diop in his book titled *The African origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Another reason according to Herodotus that supports that Egyptians were black was through the art of circumcision. Diop argues that the Egyptians practiced circumstances as early as prehistoric times, they transmitted this practice to the Semitic world in general (Jews and Arabs) especially those whom Herodotus called Syrians. To show that the Colchians were Egyptians, Herodotus cited two indications. He reported that "my own conjectures were founded ?". On the reason that alone among mankind the Egyptians and Ethiopians have practiced circumcision since time immemorial.

The Phoenicians and Syrians in the river Thermodon and Pathenius region and their neighbors the Macrons say that they learnt it recently from the Colchidians. These are the only races which practice circumcision and it is observable that they do it in the same way as the Egyptians. As between the Egyptians and Ethiopians I could not say which taught the other the practices for among them it is quite clearly a custom of great antiquity. As to the custom having been learnt through their Egyptian connections, a further strong proof to my mind is that all those Phoenicians trading to Greece cease to treat the Puderida after the Egyptians manner and do not subject their off springs to circumcisions" (Diop, Cheikh Anta, 1974:135-136).

Accordingly, it is only among the blacks the Egyptians and Ethiopians does circumcision find an interpretation in a general explanation of the universe. This too points clearly illustrate that the people who should be credited for the Egyptian civilization are the Black people. Therefore, then, it can be soundly argued accurately that those who created Egyptian civilization were Black. Through this contribution, African writers, intellectuals and historians can positively reconstruct African history and dismiss the 19th century Euro-centric writers who ignorantly and falsely argued that the Egyptian civilization was created by whites who believed that Africans were not capable of doing anything worthwhile. Herodotus has assisted greatly in correcting this falsehood since he was an eye-witness of what was happening in Egypt during his time. It can therefore be safely concluded that Egypt circumcision rites, totemism, cosmogonies, architecture, musical instruments etc were of Black Africa, thus Egyptian antiquity is to Africa culture, what Graeco-Roman antiquity is to western culture ??Mokhtar, 1981:49).

Herodotus insists on the Negro character of the Egyptian and made the following observation, "It is certain that the natives of the country are Black with heat ?" (Diop Anta Cheikh, 1974:1). This statement prove beyond doubt that Black people were innovative and therefore made their own history, and that African in general had a very rich historical background and wealth of great magnitude that were destroyed by the invading Europeans who distorted history to suit their illegal design against Africa.

Herodotus sources enable us to test and evaluate from about 5000 B.C., the role of geographical factors in the history of Africa as a whole. It also allows us to gain not only a fairly accurate knowledge of history of events in Egypt proper, but more especially a precise idea of the material, intellectual and religious culture of the lower and middle Nile valley as far as the marches of Bahr-el-Ghazal. When in Egypt Herodotus reported about Egyptian Religion and gave a comparative analysis of Egyptian religion and the Greek Religion. Though he was a Greek, he came up with a conclusion that the Greek religion must have heavily borrowed from Egyptian religion. Herodotus reported that: "thus to prove that the Greek oracle Dodona in Epirus was of Egyptian origin, one of his arguments is the following: "? and when they add the dove was black they give us to understand that the woman was Egyptian" (Mokhtar, 1981:37). The dove in question actually is that there were two Egyptian women who are said to have been carried off from the Egyptian Thebes to found the oracles in Greece at Dodona and in Libya respectively.

Herodotus concluded that since the oracles were founded by the two Egyptian girls through inference it can show the influence of the Egyptians over the Greeks.

To demonstrate that the Greek oracle was of Egyptian origin Herodotus advances this argument "lastly by calling the dove black, they (Dodonaeanes) indicated that the woman was Egyptian" (Diop. C. A, 1974:1).

According to Cheikh Anta Diop, he says that on numerous occasions reference has been made to the fact that the Greeks borrowed their gods from Egypt, there is the proof, he says "almost all the names of the gods came into Greece from Egypt, my opinion is that Egypt furnished the greater number of civilization and extensive borrowing of the Greeks from the Egyptians are historically evident as supported by Herodotus". (Diop, C. A., 1974:181).

There is an agreement between Negro legends now current and these facts reported by Herodotus 2500 years ago. It is true that Egypt had profound influence on Greece especially in religion. Therefore, then, it can be

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argued that Greece borrowed from Egypt all the elements of her civilization, even the cult of the gods and that Egypt was the cradle of civilization as it has been proved by modern archaeological discoveries and writers like Cheikh Anta Diop and Christiane Desroches noble court have proved that Herodotus did not lie. Therefore this account has helped in correcting falsehood by Eurocentric writers that Africa was a dark continent devoid of any history. Africa has the ability to influence western world as argued by a foreigner from western world. Herodotus used the myths, beliefs and oral traditions of Egyptians to show the migration from Ethiopia through the upper Nile before moving northwards to settle in the Nile Delta.

Before, migration that the ancestors learned the art of state building and how to honour their kings as gods all learned in Ethiopia which is an African religion. From this it can be argued that Africans in general had a better religious system than the westerners and that African were more pious than most westerners. This dismisses the European missionaries who termed Africans as pagans and heathen, and in reconstructing African history it is important to note that since time immemorial African were religious people.

According to Herodotus Egypt served as a centre of knowledge, where scholars from all parts of the Mediterranean region were studying. Using this accounts, Herodotus argued that African had history emanating from the classical times, where the Greeks and Romans envied the Egyptian wealth of literature, it is the westerners who destroyed this wealth and tried to distort history that Africa borrowed all its civilization from Europe, which is of course not true.

African historians have also been able to invent chronology of events in history for example list of kings. Herodotus reports how he was impressed by records kept by Egyptians. Herodotus stated that "of the 300 Egyptian pharaohs, from menes to the seventeenth Dynasty, 18 rather than merely the three who correspond to the Ethiopian 'dynasty' were of Sudanese origin" (Diop, C. A., 1974:150). It can be argued that the corresponding evidence shows the close affinity between Ethiopians and Egyptians who maintained commercial ties and raised an extraordinary stage of development in all elements of civilization.

The Greek writers Herodotus and Strabo concur in their view that geometry was invented by Egyptians. The need to calculate the area of land eroded or added each year by the flooding of the Nile apparently led them to its discovery. As a matter of fact, Egyptian geometry like mathematics was empirical. We learn that the Egyptians knew perfectly well how to calculate the area of a triangle, a circle, and the volume of a cylinder, of a pyramid or a truncated pyramid. They too had considerable practical use in land surveying (Mokhtar, 1981:168). Therefore, then, it can be argued that African in general had advanced and therefore Euro-centric writers should give credit where it deserves instead of trading falsehoods.

It would be misleading to contend that all parts of African suffered from the fact that it was pre-literate and therefore lacked records of their past, through Herodotus we learn that Egypt has evolved its hieroglyphics some three thousand years before the beginning of the Christian era. In Ethiopia there was the Ge'ez, the language of ancient Axum, which had been committed to writing before A.D 400. Contacts with the classical civilization of Greece and Rome helped to introduce their language and literature to Mediterranean Africa. All these are valuable sources of African historiography (Olaniran Richard, 1992:56-57). The language, writing, story of decipherment and development of the Egyptian hieroglyphic as published by Herodotus has contributed enormously to African historiography, for this proves that African like the western world had written records as well, which can be used to reconstruct the past accurately.

In the field of funerary customs and beliefs, the Egyptian documents of the later period and the works of Greek writers particularly Herodotus provide most of the written evidence about mummification. He gives accounts of preparation of the body, interment, embalming and the wrapping of the mummies was carried out with great skill, every effort was made to produce a bandaged mummy convincing in appearance (Quirke Stephen, 1994:63). Therefore it can be argued that Africans particularly Egyptians had knowledge in human anatomy and they could manage to preserve bodies for centuries. This proves that Africans were advanced technologically and that they had learned sophisticated skills. In general it can be argued that the African particularly Egyptians contributed significantly to scientific knowledge for example physics, chemistry, zoology, geology, medicine, pharmacology and applied mathematics. In fact, they gave humanity a large store of experience of these fields, some of which were combined in order to give a specific project. African has therefore contributed enormously to world development, but it is only unfortunate that the western world does not want to admit. This important contribution however can be used in the reconstruction of African history.

Herodotus reported that "not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar to that country, and the Nile different in its behavior from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reserved the ordinary practices of mankind" (Mokhtar, 1981:11). From this, it is none the less true that of all the countries of Africa, Egypt is the one with the most distinctive environment. It owes this to the regime of the Nile. Without the river Egypt would not exist. Herodotus explanations of the inundations of the Nile, reveals a rational mind, seeking scientific reasons for natural phenomena. He was not a passive reporter of incredible tales and rubbish, a liar, on the contrary, he was quite scrupulous, objective and scientific for his time. It is true today that River Nile is the lifeline of Egypt existence.

From Herodotus account we are able to find out Egypt's relations with the rest of Africa. Since Egypt was more advanced her needs became a powerful spur to exploration and efforts to establish stable relations with the rest of Africa. Since Egypt was more advanced, her needs became a powerful spur to exploration and efforts to establish stable relations. Egypt needed African products such as ivory, incense, ebony and timber. Herodotus

account should inspire African writers to reconstitute the ancient exchange of goods between Africans countries by undertaking serious research. There were warm relations between Egypt and her neighbors, this strength of relation is reflected in the appearance of Egyptian and Egyptian sing objects at places associated with Greek and Phoenicians expansion including into the western Mediterranean. According to the Greek historian Herodotus the good relation encouraged the adoption of Egyptian proportion and pastures in archaic Greek stationery (Quirke ??tephen, 1994:196).

All this leads to the contusion that Egyptian civilization had influence on African and western civilizations. The links between Egypt and the African continent as well as the western world should be a very important matter facing African historiographers today. Herodotus reports call in question a great many scientific or philosophical postulates, for instance, the acceptance or refusal of the supposition that most ancient peoples of Egypt were black-skinned without exception and the acceptance or refusal of the theory of diffusionism. It can be argued that from every point of view, this problem is a major test of the scientific conscientiousness, accuracy and openness of mind of the Africans who will Endeavour to unravel it. With the help of the more enlightened than in the past, of foreign research works.

Herodotus travels in Egypt probably took him as far south as the first cataract (Elephantine) which he described as frontier between Egypt and Ethiopia. He was the first geographer to mention Meroe by name, having actually met meroites at Aswan. Herodotus describes the island of Meroe as inhabited mostly by cattle breeders and agriculture as rather undeveloped. This information is important since it assist in rewriting African history and showing accurately the activities undertaken by the people of some parts of African during that time.

Herodotus reports are accurate for Archeology seems to substantiate this view since in the B-level in Gebel moya, dating from Napata period and later, sixth to fifth centuries before our era, no traces of agricultural activity were found ??Mokhtar, 1981:310) Herodotus also reported about the Libyans races and about its women. According to him he compared the Egyptian civilization with that of Libya and he said that of Libya was lower. Therefore, in re-writing history it is important that through Herodotus we first learn about Libya, its people, culture and the form of worship as well as their weapons (Diop, C. ??., 1974:68) Herodotus also provides a fascinating account of the monuments he visited for example the pyramids of Cleops, Clephren and Mycerimes, and identified them correctly as royals burials places, labyrinth and lake Moeris in the Foyoum, the city of Memphis and temples of Sais and Bubastis. Herodotus supplies very vivid account of these monuments. The pyramids for example have been the centre of tourist interest since earthiest times. The existence of the pyramids are still an attraction to tourist today and this monuments have defied all odd to survive to date and this is a clear manifestation of superior architectural design of Egyptians in particular and Africans in general. the pyramids have been used to construct African history.

Herodotus also records that the project to link the Nile and Red Sea by means of a canal started in Necho 11's reign. The scheme improved communication and facilitated transport between Egypt and Persia (Rosalie David, 1993:173). Therefore present historians can research more about the construction of the canal and its importance. Herodotus also gave information about the annual Nile floods and formation of the delta. This is true even today and assists historians in rewriting the past events. From Herodotus account through inference historians can learn a lot of facts for example Herodotus mentioned Zimbabwe in a way, as the extension of the land of the Micobian Ethiopians and where he reported that ruins of monuments and cities built of stone with falcon represented. This information would inspire historians to research more into this and help in reconstructing the past (Diop, C.A., 1974:157) Herodotus historical details are correct, such as identifying the first king who founded Egyptians earliest capital, he says "the priest told me it was Menes the first king of Egypt who raised the dam which protects Memphis from floods." Also Herodotus is the main source of King Amasis (Dynasty 26), (Rosalie D, 1993:12) therefore Herodotus has assisted in constructing African histonography by providing factual details as he had seen or told by people. Herodotus has reported about Egypt technology especially textiles (linen and silk) weaving was one of the earliest crafts to be developed, fragments of woven cloth date back to the earliest Neolithic cultures and already shown advanced skill. The woven cloth of Egypt was almost invariably of line (Quirke ??tephen, 1994:188) this suggests that Egyptians had advanced technologies and therefore Africa was not backward as claimed by western scholars.

However Herodotus reports contain some in accuracies in some cases, for example, he could not explain the source of river Nile and what caused the annual flooding of river Nile. Also according to Herodotus believed the Africa could be circumnavigated. However, Mauny (1960) has suggested that it is very improbable that slow-moving oared ships then plying from Egypt could have managed the currents either of the cape or of the north western coast of Africa, where they could also have found utmost difficulty in obtaining sufficient water or food along the largely desert stretch of the coast, a stretch that would have taken months rather than weeks to navigate in the northern direction ??Mokhtar, 1981:548).

Another care is Herodotus tale of the Nasomonians journey to what appears to be the Niger may be a literary reference to an actual journey of particular interest in this tale is the mention of a Negro city which Ferguson (1969) identifies as being the region of Timbuktu.

Herodotus also thought that the earth was flat; he divided the world into 3 continents, Europe, Asia and Libya (i.e. Africa) stating that, Libya was surrounded on all sides by the sea except at the point where it was joined to Asia. This is some areas of further research and indeed some have been disapproved altogether. In conclusion modern scientific investigations have shown that Herodotus details are for the most part accurate. His account

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provides a stimulating insight by a man who was both a traveler and the world's first historians and is still well worth reaching his goners for experimenting with his new approach, attempting to sift facts from fantasy and his good fortune in seeing the monuments when they were so much more complete, combine to give the modern readers a unique view of Egypt and Africa at large. Therefore, then become very important to readers, writers intellectuals and historians, both Africans and whites who need to re-write and reconstruct the true and accurate as well as authentic history of Africa and challenge the 19 th century Eurocentric writers Africans owe a lot to Herodotus for his objective reporting about Africa.

Since the Egyptian origin of civilization and extensive borrowing of the Greeks from Egyptians are historically evident, we may wonder, despite this facts, most people stress the role played by Greece while overlooking that of Egypt. The reason for this attitude can be detected merely by recalling the root of the question. As Egypt is a Negro country, with a civilization created by blacks, so it is wiser to strip Egypt simply and most discreetly, of all its creations in favours of a really white nation (Greece).

This false attribution of the value of so called white Egypt reveals a profound contradiction that is not the least important proof of Egypt's Negro origin. From Herodotus reports the black is clearly capable of creating techniques. He is very one who first created it at a time when all the white races, steeped in barbarism, were barely fit for civilization.

When we say that the ancestors of the blacks, who live today mainly in black Africa, were the first to invent mathematics, astronomy, the calendar, sciences in general, art religion, agriculture, social organization, medicine, writing, technique, architecture, that they were the first to erect buildings out of 6 million tons of stone (Great pyramids) as architects and engineers not simply as unskilled labourers when we say all that we are merely expressing the plain unvarnished truth that no one today can refute by arguments worthy of the same. Consequently, the black man must become able to restore the continuity of his national historic past, to draw from it the moral advantage needed to re conquer his place in the modern world. This categorically shows the importance of Herodotus in the contribution of Africans historiography, as argued Cheikh Anta Diop.¹

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