



Interview with Dr. Ivan Van Sertima
Highland Park, New Jersey, USA (1995)
(Photo by Ms. Jacqueline L. Patten-Van Sertima)

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Chapter 2



The Place of Africa in History and Scholarship: A Conversation with Ivan Van Sertima

Edward Ramsamy

Africa's history and contributions to human development have been grossly misrepresented in Western portrayals of the continent. German philosopher Hegel's view that "Africa is the land of unredeemable savagery" unfortunately still pervades the popular mindset on Africa. As Cornel West, professor of Religion and African-American Studies at Princeton, observes, "The notion that Black people are human beings is a relatively recent discovery in the Western world." Ivan Van Sertima has dedicated his life to counteracting Hegel's irrational and erroneous caricature of Africa. In 1977, he published *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, now in its 10th printing. The book advanced the controversial thesis that Africans traveled to the Americas long before Christopher Columbus' voyage in 1492. In *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*, among other works, he examines the technological and scientific legacies of ancient Africa.

Some of Van Sertima's critics argue that Van Sertima presents a romanticized view of ancient Africa and subjects knowledge to chauvinistic Afrocentric nationalism. In the following interview, Van Sertima discusses how he developed an intellectual interest in his field and responds to his critics. Ivan van Sertima teaches in the Africana Studies department at Rutgers and is the editor of *The Journal of African Civilizations*.

Ramsamy: How did you develop an interest in the contributions of ancient Africa to various human civilizations?

Van Sertima: It was an accident. I was invited by the Prime Minister of British Guiana to read poetry during the celebration of our independence. So I flew from Britain, where I was living and working on a novel at the time, to Guyana (our name after independence) for Republic Day. There, a friend asked me to stop off in the United States on my way back to Britain. I arrived on a Saturday and that Sunday morning, while he was asleep, I went through his library and noticed a strange book, *Africans and the Discovery of the Americas*, by Leo Wiener. I read the book because it was very exciting, but I dismissed its argument that Africans had "discovered" the Americas. I felt that although Wiener's case for linguistic evi-

dence was impressive, he had not really proven his case. I didn't think he had enough upon which to build such a thesis. So, I actually attacked this thesis 25 years ago. I wrote an essay arguing that even though this is an interesting thesis, it was not properly probed; it was built on fragile pillars of philology. I concluded my essay by saying, "If anyone can show me at least one convincing image of an African in the Americas before Columbus, I would believe."

A week later, Charles Harris, an editor at Random House, called me and said that something unusual has happened. He told me that John Williams, the novelist, had been to Mexico and met a strange German there who had spent many years of his life collecting pieces of pre-Columbian sculpture and art. I rushed off to Mexico that very next weekend to see this man. Alexander Von Wuthenau was really an extraordinary individual. Hitler's government had initially put him in charge of the German embassy in Argentina. The Nazis then decreed that all ambassadors have to sign a document swearing that they were pure Aryans. He wrote an essay arguing that there was no such thing as a "pure Aryan" and, as a result, had to flee Argentina. He went to Mexico and got very involved in studying pre-Columbian culture in the Americas. Von Wuthenau was the last of the royal house of Germany, the son of Count Charles Adam Von Wuthenau and Countess Marie Antoinette Chotek. He spent a lot of time excavating artifacts and eventually wrote a book called *The Art of Terra Cotta Pottery in Pre-Columbian South and Central America*. In this work, he presented the argument of an African influence in pre-Columbian American crafts. After talking with him, I realized that he knew nothing of the linguistic evidence, just as I knew nothing about the art evidence. It occurred to me that the only way that one can investigate the idea of an African presence in pre-Columbian America was through a multidisciplinary approach. So, I investigated within various disciplines. In botany, I discovered that there were some unsolved mysteries. For instance, some African plants were found in the Americas that could not have come by themselves. As I delved into the issue, I found much evidence to support this thesis.

My first attempt at a book on this topic dealt strictly with the Africans' 14th and 15th century journeys, commissioned by the Mandingo King Abu Bakari II of Mali. One captain actually returned from an expedition and Abu Bakari then abdicated the throne and commanded another expedition himself. It was during this period that there were reports by Europeans, including Columbus himself, of seeing Blacks in America. Columbus himself suggested that there were Blacks in America before him. For instance, it is recorded in his *Journal of the Second Voyage*, and quoted in many places, that when he was in Haiti (then called Hispaniola), the Native Americans told him that Black-skinned people had come from the south and southeast in boats, trading in gold-tipped spears made of a metal alloy called "guanin." It is recorded in *Raccolta Part I* that Columbus wanted to find out whether what the Indians of Hispaniola had told him was true. He had samples of the spears sent to the king and queen of Spain for assay and they were found to have 18 parts gold, 6 parts silver, and 8 parts copper, of 32 parts. The proportion of gold, silver, and copper alloys were not just identical to spears in African Guinea; the words used by the Caribbean people for these spears were similar to the words used in Africa by Africans.

In addition to the metallurgical and linguistic evidence, there were at least a dozen Europeans who wrote on the African presence in the Americas. Ferdinand Columbus, one of the sons of Columbus, reported that his father told him about seeing Blacks north of a place we now call Honduras. In September 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa wrote that as he was coming down the slopes of Quarequa, near Darien (which we now call Panama), he

saw two Black men who were captured by Native Americans. These men were not only exceedingly Black; they were also of different stature than the Native Americans and had different hair texture. Peter Martyr, a prominent historian, has said that these Blacks must have been shipwrecked in the area and taken refuge in the mountains. Alphonse de Quatrefages, author of *The Human Species*, speaks of distinct Black tribes among the Native Americans, like the Jamassi of Florida, and the Charruas of Brazil. Quatrefages presents a map made by a French captain, Kerhallet, showing independent Black settlements along South American coasts. Fray Gregoria Garcia reports a Black presence off Cartagena, Colombia and says that these are the first Negroes in the Indies. One can go on citing other eye witness accounts.

There are other kinds of evidence as well, such as the important corroborative evidence by botanists. The Portuguese were in West Africa before 1450. They found cotton growing plentifully in West Africa and introduced it into the Cape Verde islands in 1462, assuming that cotton was indigenously African. In the 20th century, it was found that cotton was not African at all. *Gossypium hirsutum var punctatum*, which was grown in the pre-Columbian Caribbean and in parts of South America, is not African. Thus, there is also evidence of people returning to Africa from the Americas long before Columbus. The Arabs have also documented these travels by Africans.

There is also evidence of pre-Christian voyages that we don't have time to discuss now. Let me just mention one aspect of it. We found a stone head at a place called Tres Zapotes that not only had African features but also had seven braids. Similar heads have also been found at La Venta but made of wood. The La Venta heads are very important because wood, an organic material, can be dated easily. The platform at La Venta was dated to 814 B.C., plus or minus 134 years. I have been misrepresented often by my critics as saying that Africans founded the cultures of the Americas. I have never said this. I am talking about Africans influencing a culture in the Americas.

Ramsamy: Why is there a reluctance to accept your thesis, in spite of the evidence you present in your books?

Van Sertima: My own earlier reluctance may help to explain it. We were trained to despise ourselves and all of Africa. We felt that Africans were either primitive or semi-primitive, that they had no science and made no significant contribution to civilization. We did not realize that we were looking at a looted Africa, a shattered Africa. We did not know then what American, French, and German scientists have discovered within the last 25 years, that Africans had steel smelting machines. Peter Schmidt and Donald Avery from Brown University have shown that African machines were producing steel in the 5th century along the lakes of Tanzania and Uganda, where the Africans had built an industrial site. Africans were manufacturing steel at temperatures of 2600 degrees Fahrenheit! No machine anywhere else in the world at the time produced steel at temperatures achieved in the African blast furnaces. The Africans had a single-stage process while the Europeans had a two-stage process of making steel. So, the Africans were using less fuel.

This puzzled me more than anything else. I kept asking why Africans would be driven into fuel-saving technology when Africa was said to be "full of jungles." I turned to schol-

ars who were investigating Africa's physical geography through a United Nations study. The study found that Africa has less jungle than any other continent in relation to its area. So, Africa had always been mismeasured. The new Peterson projections show that Africa is much larger than it was represented in the older McCarter projections. Recent maps from NASA also show that Europe has more forestation than Africa. (I am talking about Europe, proper, not "Eurasia.") The Arabs have also described the vastness of Africa. The empire of Mali was apparently larger than all the states of Western Europe put together and in that empire there was no jungle. It was bordered on the north by desert, on the south by the jungle, on one side by the Atlantic, and on the other side by another African empire, the Songhai.

My point is that Europeans constructed this myth of "jungle Africa." Once this idea was popularized, it became impossible to conceive of Africans crossing oceans or inventing things. Chinese records show that Africans brought elephants in ships to China 200 years before Columbus. We did not know that Africans had made significant advances in astronomy or that they had astronomical observatories. Lynch and Robins of Michigan State University uncovered an observatory from 300 B.C. in northwest Kenya. This supposedly primitive area also had one of the most accurate pre-historic calendars. We did not know that Africans had domesticated cattle earlier than any other people. When I was attending university in London, I was told that Africans were "dull-witted agricultural Negroes." Dr. Charles Nelson from the University of Massachusetts and his research team have found evidence that Africans began domesticating cattle about 15,000 years ago. Yet "conventional wisdom" would have us believe that Africans contributed nothing to advances in agriculture, that they were just "dull-witted."

There is also evidence that Africans had first domesticated fire in Kenya about 1 million 400 years ago, not the Chinese, as always assumed. All of our fantasies about Africa, all of the anthropology that portrayed Africans as one step above the monkey, and all "conventional history" come from Europe, which gets all the credit for human civilization as if everything occurred in one little place called Europe and nothing of any significance happened elsewhere.

Ramsamy: Why were you invited to testify before Congress on the controversy surrounding the celebration of Columbus' Quincentennial? Did you influence public attitudes towards Columbus Day in any way?

Van Sertima: I was a little mystified about why I was called at first. It appears that my various lectures have had an effect on how people regarded the Quincentennial. The desire to make Columbus out to be some great hero, a "great discoverer," fell down badly. I had been called to address the issue of why we should not refer to Christopher Columbus' accidental stumble into the Caribbean as a discovery. I pointed out to the Congressional Committee that I was not the first person to suggest that there were Africans in the Americas before Columbus, that Columbus himself was the first person to suggest that. In fact, as I said earlier, most of the evidence comes from European narratives. There were no Blacks trying to prove that they had come to America. This whole idea of "discovery" is absurd. We have evidence in Roman Chronicles of Native Americans being shipwrecked in Europe and nobody claimed that Americans "discovered" Europe! Columbus' appearance

in the Caribbean was purely accidental because he intended to go to India. When he found "India" in the West, he started calling the Caribbean Sea the "Gulf of the Ganges." He called Cuba a continent and South America an island. When he set out, he did not know exactly where he was going and when he got there, he did not know exactly where he was. When he got back home, he did not know where he had been. How can we make a hero out of someone like that? Even the word "Carib," given to the region and its peoples, reflects Columbus' ignorance of linguistics. *Car-e-ib* meant "foreigners" and it was used by the Native Americans to describe the Europeans! However, since the Europeans conquered the indigenous people, the word became associated with the region.

My testimony led the chairman of the Congressional Committee to advise the Quincentennial Commission that it would not be wise to use the word *discovery* because it is insulting. It also led the Bahamas to be included in the celebration and led to the "discovery" that there were no Native Americans in the Commission and just one or two Blacks. The whole racial constitution of the Commission was called into question. As a result of my testimony, the emphasis was shifted away from "Columbus' discovery of America" to a celebration of the extraordinary meeting and mixing of the peoples of the world. What we were celebrating here in the Americas, the New World, was the creation of a New World people. This is a significant date for Latinos because it is the birth date of "Latino" identity, a distinctively New World identity. We have to transcend the absurd idea that one person discovers another and lifts them to greater heights because various peoples of the world have made advances at various times and in various places.

Ramsamy: You are frequently called a "nationalist" and an "Afrocentric." How do you respond to these characterizations?

Van Sertima: You can have a plural society in which various races take pride in their achievements without losing sense of their shared humanity with others. I am not a "nationalist" in the sense of one who goes around saying that my people or race is the "superior" race. Europeans have a history of that; they have invented all sorts of myths to justify their supposed superiority. First of all, race, as it is currently used to describe phenotypes, is a social construction, not a biological fact. Secondly, we cannot expect a people who have been treated as inferiors for centuries, because of the Eurocentric constructions, to destroy those myths by meekly pleading, "I am just as good as you." That makes no sense. There is a certain militancy that comes with a revolution in thinking and certain excesses, unfortunate as they may be, are to be expected. But those excesses don't come from me. My thought and perspectives are informed by having lived on four continents. I was born in South America, and I have spent much time in North America, Eastern and Western Europe, and in Africa. I am not stuck within a narrow perspective based on a particular locality. My scholarship is about recovering and reconstructing the best in African history so that we can resist that Eurocentric vision which dominates everything. While it is true that in any revolution there is an extremist element, it is also true that if you try to wipe out new ideas because they challenge your earlier, false conceptions of the world, there will be trouble.

"Afrocentricity" is a strange word. It can be understood only in the context of "Eurocentric," which refers to the belief that Europe is the be-all and end-all of the world, that Europeans created the world, and that only Europeans can re-create the world. Afrocentricity, taken to extremes, would lead to the same sort of conceit and fantasy. What I may have is an Afrocentric perspective that points to African achievement in an effort to correct the distortions of Eurocentricity. I hope that as a result, there will no longer be an "Afrocentricity" or "Eurocentricity," but a new, balanced consciousness. There would be no need for Afrocentricity once Eurocentricity has been corrected. In revolutions, it is difficult to avoid extremes, although that is our hope. A person may be reacting to being treated in the most abominable manner and, as a result, may be forced to make certain emphases in order to gain a new, positive self-image. I emphasize things African in order to bring about a balanced world view and to deflate Europeans' exaggerated pride in their achievements without realizing how much credit they owe the rest of the world. For example, most people think that the Industrial Revolution is purely a European development. Were it not for the Moors, for instance, both African and Arab Moors, Europe would not have become the head of the Industrial Revolution. Were it not for the Moors, Europe would not have had cotton, which entered Europe around the 9th or 10th century. Europe would not have rice and various other agricultural products. Important commodities in Europe were brought by the Moors. The Moors had a profound effect on European classical music and the first major books used in European universities were the books of the Moors. Of course, the numbers that we use today—0,1,2,3—are not European. I don't think pointing these things out necessarily makes me an "Afrocentric" or a "nationalist."

Ramsamy: Critics such as Gross and Levitt argue that your work *Blacks in Science* is a flagrant falsification of science in the service of Afrocentric chauvinism. How do you respond to this?

Van Sertima: It is amazing that educated people can read a book without checking out its authors. Almost half of the authors in my book are European. Are these European scientists Afrocentric? Are Lynch and Robbins, who I referred to earlier, Afrocentric? Schmidt and Avery actually tested the iron smelting machines in Tanzania and verified that they were achieving temperatures higher than any European machine. Are they Afrocentric? This is nonsense! These people haven't even read my work! John Pappademos, a Greek who has seriously studied Greek and Egyptian history, has shown the interaction between the two civilizations. How does Pappademos become Afrocentric? I am surprised at the audacity of people to lie about works they haven't read properly and call themselves scholars. These prejudices, masquerading as scholarship, freeze the intellect and the capacity for vision. These people want to put everything in a box. What I and the Afrocentrists say can easily be dismissed by putting it in a Black box. My objective is to show that the African is no fool. I am not here to show that he is some kind of superman, as the European believes himself to be. However, if I say, "But look here, we did certain things too," they react by saying, "Oh my God, these guys are becoming presumptuous; let me remind them that they are fundamentally inferior." That is why books like *The Bell Curve* are received so well by White society and why any attempt to emphasize African achievement is so viciously criticized or inhibited.

Ramsamy: Some critics claim that there is a paradox in your school of thought, in that Black Africa played a role in European development and yet blames Europe for the ills of Africa. How would you respond to that?

Van Sertima: It's a very stupid argument. If you gave me shoes to walk on and I caught a germ in my toe, are you to be blamed because you gave me the shoes? It is as absurd as saying that if the Japanese were to take the computer and the radio from European scientists, then the ills of Japan somehow must be visited on European scientists. That is so silly!

Ramsamy: In *Black Athena* (Volumes I and II), published by Rutgers University Press, Martin Bernal addresses some issues similar to the ones that have occupied you over the years. What do you think of his work?

Van Sertima: Bernal's main contribution is in showing that the Greeks recognized Africans' important contributions to the development of human civilization. Later on, Europeans created an "Aryan" model that assumed the Greeks did it all when, in fact, the Greeks paid homage to the early Egyptians, who were African. Egypt is no longer African because there have been massive movements of people. Syrians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Arabs have all interacted with Egypt and integrated with the African population.

Apart from those who criticize Bernal because they wish to maintain the Aryan model, he is also criticized for assuming that the Egyptian civilization was a mulatto, or mixed-race civilization. Of course, there are no totally homogeneous civilizations, but the mixing of races did not occur until later. Many Blacks live in Britain today and there are Blacks in China now but nobody says these are mixed English or Chinese civilizations! The problem with Bernal, although it is not really his fault, is that he did not know that Africans have at least six phenotypes. There is the elongated variant, the Nilotic variant, and the so-called "true Negro," which accounts for less than 50% of pure-blooded Africans. When archaeologists went into the graves of ancient Egypt and found someone with a narrow nose, they assumed Egyptians were "Caucasoid" even though the hair was "Negroid." As far as they were concerned, a narrow nose meant "Euro-Asiatic." They didn't realize, however, that a dry, hot climate gives rise to a narrow nose, not just cold, icy climates. They went on to argue that if people with dark skins or kinky hair had great achievements, it is because of their fusion with "superior" races. That way, credit would be given to the "superior" race. In order to justify the European myth of the fundamentally "inferior" African, they had to show that any African achievement is because of the blending with "superior" blood and brains. Others have tried to argue that African achievements weren't really achievements at all.

Ramsamy: In 1991, you were invited to deliver an address at the Smithsonian. How important was that lecture to the wider recognition of your work?
