

# How Valid Are the Portland Baseline Essays?

*If they are to create valid multicultural curriculums, educators must be careful to check the scholarship and legitimacy of their sources.*

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Teachers and curriculum writers who wish to develop up-to-date multicultural curriculums frequently find themselves on unfamiliar terrain when called upon to assess conflicting claims about premodern African history. Although they may question the accuracy of materials submitted by supporters of Afrocentrism, the fear of being labeled "Eurocentric" and the legitimate argument that African history has long been neglected make them put their doubts aside. However, in evaluating new curriculums, they need to know the difference between accurate and inaccurate information and how many differing interpretations of the documented data to include in a curriculum.

The Portland, Oregon, *African-American Baseline Essays* (1987, revised 1990), already widely used in creating multicultural curriculums, is largely inaccurate. Written under the guidance of educational psychologist Asa Hilliard III, the AABE has already been adopted, in part or entirely, by Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, and Indianapolis; it is under consideration in other large districts. The AABE is a teacher resource consisting of historical surveys of African and African-American contributions in the fields of Art [AR], Language Arts [LA], Mathematics [MA], Music [MU], and

Science and Technology [ST]. The Social Studies [SS] essay is a survey of African and African-American history.

When we began the process of revising an African-American History course for the Washington, D.C., Public Schools, we were confronted with Afrocentric materials, including the AABE. Seeing the need for advice from specialists, we consulted, among others, Frank Snowden, Jr., of Howard University, an authority on Greek and Roman views of black Africans, and Frank Yurco of Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, who had advised the Chicago Public Schools on the accuracy of curricular material on ancient Egypt, including the AABE. Snowden helped us understand how the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the Egyptians and other Africans. Yurco provided detailed critiques of Afrocentric materials on ancient Egypt, including the lengthy ancient Egypt portions of the AABE. The following summary of the flaws of the AABE is, except where noted, based upon Yurco's critiques (available upon request).

## The Portland Essays

The AABE might be termed "Egyptocentric" as approximately 30 percent of the content is devoted to ancient Egypt.

Openly disdainful of professional Egyptologists, none of whom were consulted for accuracy, most of the essays' authors, with the exception of the Math author, attempt major revisions of ancient Egyptian history. Although they claim to be advancing long overlooked facts and correcting Eurocentric distortions of ancient history, some of their theories and factual claims often turn out to be "Africanized" versions of long discredited and discarded European ones.

Briefly stated, the Afrocentric historical view advanced in the AABE, accompanying lesson plans, and supporting bibliography holds that: "Ancient Egypt was a Black nation" (AR-7) or "The Land of the Blacks" (MU-22); the famous Ptolemaic queen "Cleopatra VII . . . was of mixed African and Greek parentage....She was not fully a Greek" (SS-44); "the original home of the [ancient Egyptian's] prehistoric ancestors was south in . . . the neighborhood of Uganda and Punt" [modern Ethiopia and Somalia] (SS-22); "invasions and conquests by Asians, Europeans, and Arabs pushed Blacks further south" (AR-7) making today's Egyptians different from the ancient Egyptians; Egypt was "the first great civilization" (SS-21) since it was only "during the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties" of ancient Egypt (after 2563 B.C.) that "the nations and people in the other river valley, the Tigris and Euphrates, were laying the foundation of Sumerian civilization" (SS-30); "the African origins of Greek development [were] an unquestioned reality of the Greeks" (AR-3); Olmec

civilization in Meso-America and most other Old World civilizations were largely the products of an ancient African diaspora (Van Sertima 1976).

All of the above assertions are problematic. "Black" and "white" are hard to define. Ancient Egyptian and Greek views of skin color, unlike 20th century U.S. views, were not the products of a legacy of discrimination. According to Yurco (1989), these terms are a "chimera—cultural baggage from our own society that can only be imposed artificially on ancient Egyptian society." Yurco claims that studies in both physical anthropology and ancient Egyptian art suggest that:

The ancient Egyptians, like their modern descendants, were of varying complexions of color, from the light Mediterranean type (like Queen Nefertiti), to the light brown of Middle Egypt, to the darker brown of Upper Egypt, to the darkest shade around Aswan and the First Cataract region, where even today, the population shifts to Nubian.

These studies show the early pre-dynastic (pre-3150 Before Common Era) population of Southern Egypt having affinities with tropical Africans (Keita 1990). Regarding Cleopatra VII, Frank Snowden states that she "is well attested on coins that depict the Ptolemaic queen as white" (Snowden 1990). Yurco points out that the Ptolemaic dynasty was "so concerned to retain its Greek purity that they engaged regularly in brother-sister marriages. . . . Though you cannot prove that Cleopatra VII had no indigenous Egyptian admixture, the probability is that she did not" (Yurco 1991).

Further, the phrase "Land of the Blacks," is a mistranslation by some Afrocentrist writers of the ancient Egyptian word "KMT" (Kemet). It means "the black land" (by contrast to

"Deshret," "the red land,"—the desert). KMT refers to the black, alluvial soil deposited by the yearly inundation of the Nile. It was never a reference to the skin color of the ancient Egyptians.

Linguistic, pictographic, and archaeological evidence point to a Saharan origin of the ancient Egyptians from the west, not from the south. This migration occurred following the gradual desiccation of the Sahara after 5500 B.C.E. (Yurco 1990).

There is no evidence that Egypt was a forerunner or a major factor in the formation of Mesopotamian civilization, since the beginnings of the two are approximately contemporaneous. While Egypt and Mesopotamia (the Phoenicians) did make important contributions to the development of Greek civilization, indigenous Greek achievements appear to have been central to that process.

Most of the invasions, as correctly noted in the Math essay (MA-29), involved only small numbers of people, often only soldiers, who did not displace the vast majority of local peoples (Kanimba 1986).

Scholars of pre-Columbian America see the origin of the Olmec civilization in indigenous, not African, influences (Feder 1990). Furthermore, an analysis of ancient navigation techniques demonstrates that only East Indians and Pacific Islanders practiced transoceanic sailing. Africans, Egyptians, and other Mediterranean peoples' voyages were coast-hugging excursions, with sailors putting into shore every night.

Inaccuracies in the AABE include both facts and interpretations. Worldwide phenomena such as pentatonic scale in music, use of prophecy, body language, creation stories, rock art, as well as the earliest pottery, sculpture, and musical instruments are often discussed as if they originated in

Africa, while other features that might be considered specific to Africa, such as trickster stories, are not highlighted. Dates and dynasties are confused. In addition, dates and periods overlap, contradict each other, and are not consistent among the six essays.

In the Social Studies essay, almost all the dates associated with human evolutionary stages are incorrect

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according to current evidence (Brooks 1991). According to John Hopkins African history scholar Philip Curtin, "The fundamental problem is that [the author] puts forward racial theories that have been long ago abandoned by mainline scholars of Africa or any other continent." These theories "sometimes take the form of claims to superiority for people from sub-Saharan Africa, against claims by others for the superiority of the 'Caucasians'" (Curtin 1991).

The Science and Technology essay endorses pseudoscientific notions such as "the extra-terrestrial origin of the Nile" and "water-laden micro-comets" as the source of the ocean's waters (ST-15). The author attributes mystical powers to the pyramids and misinterprets artifacts, such as bird effigies, to

prove that the ancient Egyptians experimented with aeronautics, antennas, and electricity (ST-52-54). He states that "for the ancient Egyptians as well as contemporary Africans worldwide, there is no distinction and thus no separation between science and religion" (ST-14), an assertion that would surely be offensive to most African and African-American scientists.

Science and Technology essay author Hunter Havelin Adams III is listed in the AABE as a "research scientist of Argonne National Laboratories, Chicago." According to the director of public information at Argonne National Laboratory, Adams is an industrial-hygiene technician who "does no research at Argonne on any

(Baurac 1991, Marriott 1991).

### Historical Revisionism

If they are to gain acceptance, revisionist interpretations of history must be based upon impeccable and thorough research. The historiography of American history is replete with examples of inaccuracies and outright myths that were shattered by scholarly revisionist research. Such outstanding scholars as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and John Hope Franklin played crucial roles in opening up textbooks and curriculums to the African-American experience. Because of solid grounding, their research withstood criticism and could not be ignored. By contrast, the Afrocentrist historical revisions such as those contained in the AABE, are outside this rigorous tradition of scholarship. Most of the consultants and authors of the Portland essays are not professional scholars of ancient Egyptian or African history, nor, for that matter, are they familiar with other important world cultures, whether they be Native American or those of China, South India, or the Pacific Islanders.

Although the AABE does contain much accurate information, most of the writers demonstrate a compromising willingness to include outdated and inaccurate information and to place greater reliance on lay persons rather than on specialists (such as Egyptologists and archaeologists) for major sections. This presents an insoluble problem to a teacher attempting to use this resource to teach about ancient Egypt and Africa: how to sift the reliable from the specious.

With the exception of the Math essay, the ancient Egyptian portions are wholly unreliable and, unless completely revised in accordance with current scholarship, unusable. The

Science and Technology essay is severely compromised throughout by its presentation of pseudoscientific concepts as legitimate science. It needs to be revised and brought into line with accepted scientific methodology. The Social Studies essay, whose "whole framework is either false or represents a distortion of what is accurate" (Curtin 1991), is "unreliable as history" and is thus "inadequate as a school curriculum resource" (Yurco 1991).

With minor exceptions, the Math essay contains very usable information. While the Language Arts and Music essays' coverage of ancient Egypt is compromised by inaccuracies, their surveys of African-American literature and music appear sound. However, educators may want to consult specialists in African and African-American music and literature on the accuracy of particular claims before using them.

### Teachers and Questionable Curriculums

What lessons can we teachers and curriculum writers learn from the Portland experience about assessing the accuracy of curricular materials? First, we should stay informed of developments in our fields through professional journals and conferences; second, we should develop links with recognized scholars and university and museum departments in our regions; third, history is always being revised and yielding new interpretations, but we should treat with caution sweeping charges of conspiracies by historians to hide the "real truth."

Teachers, parents, and students are justified in wanting multicultural curriculums that reflect the achievements of the world's diverse cultures, including those of Africa. Older curriculums do reflect a bias that often

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topic" and whose "highest academic degree is a high school diploma." One is left wondering how Asa Hilliard could have chosen someone who is both unqualified and an advocate of pseudoscience to write a science essay

denied or neglected the genuine contributions of Africa. We must be careful, however, that new curriculums are based on reliable scholarship. As Frances Powell, director of social studies for the Washington, D.C., Public Schools, stated in a *New York Times* interview, "I don't want children to go out and substitute one myth for a lot of other myths" (Baringer 1990).

Indeed, when viewed from the perspectives of current archaeological, anthropological, and linguistic research, the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, the Levant, and ancient Africa, including Egypt, exhibit a long and rich experience of multicultural development. Efforts should be made to bring together scholars in these fields along with educators to develop sound and exciting multicultural curriculums. □

*Author's note:* This article is based on a previous article by the author in *AnthroNotes*, written with the assistance of Alison Brooks, Professor of Anthropology (African archaeology) at George Washington University and with advice from Frank Yurco. Copies of Frank Yurco's and other critiques of the AABE may be obtained by writing Erich Martel.

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