

## Ivan Van Sertima



Ivan van Sertima was a world renowned public intellectual. Author of fifteen books, he was a major force in scholarship of the African Diaspora and of South American history. *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, published by Random House (1977) now in its twenty-first printing (published in French in 1981 and in the same year was awarded the Clarence L. Hotle Prize, a prize awarded every two years "for a work excellence in literature and the humanities relating to the cultural heritage of Africa and the African Diaspora") was his most well-known book.

He was born in Guyana, South America (1935), educated at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London University) and the Rutgers Graduate School, held degrees in African Studies and Anthropology, and received an honorary D.H.L. from The City University of New York via Medgar Evers College in 2003. From 1957-1959 he served as a press and broadcasting officer in the Guyana Information Services; and during the decade of the 1960's he hosted broadcast weekly from Britain to Africa and the Caribbean. As a literary critic, he was the author of *Caribbean Writers*, a collection of critical essays on the Caribbean novel, and also the author of several major literary reviews published in Denmark, India, Britain and the United States. He was honored for his work in this field by being asked by the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy to nominate candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature from 1976-1980; he had also been honored as an historian of world repute by being asked to join UNESCO's International Commission for Rewriting the Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind.

And as a linguist, he compiled the *Swahili Dictionary of Legal Terms*, based on his field work in Tanzania, East Africa, in 1967.

Dr. Van Sertima was also a professor of African Studies at Rutgers University, and a visiting professor at Princeton University. He had lectured at more than 100 universities in the U.S., and also lectured in Canada, the Caribbean, South America and Europe. He defended his highly controversial thesis on the African presence in pre-Colombian America before the Smithsonian, which published his address in 1995, and he also appeared before a Congressional Committee on July 7, 1987 to challenge the Columbus myth.

And notwithstanding, Van Sertima was also the founder (1979) and editor of *The Journal of African Civilizations*, which published several major anthologies that help change the way African history and culture is taught and studied. Thus, he informed us (via [www.journalofafricancivilizations.com](http://www.journalofafricancivilizations.com)) that the journal “is the only historical journal in the English-speaking world which focuses on the heartland rather than on the periphery of African civilizations” and “... therefore, removes the “primitive” from the center stage it has occupied in Eurocentric histories and anthropologies of the African”. These anthologies include *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*; *Black Women in Antiquity*; *Egypt Revisited*; *Egypt: Child of Africa*; *Nile Valley Civilizations*; *African Presence in the Art of the Americas*; *African Presence in Early Asia*; *African Presence in Early Europe*; *African Presence in Early America*; *Great African Thinkers*; *Great Black Leaders: Ancient and Modern*, and the *Golden Age of the Moor*.

Thus, *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern* (1983) showed that Africa had an impressive scientific tradition in certain centers and historical periods with a particular focus on African American inventions, especially in the fields of telecommunications, space, and nuclear science; *African Presence in Early Europe* (1985) places into perspective the role of the African in world civilization, in particular the little-known contributions to the advancement of Europe with a major essay on the evolution of the Caucasoid discusses scientific discoveries of the African origins of humankind and the shift towards albinism (dropping of pigmentation) by the Grimaldi African during an ice age in Europe. Second, the debt owed to African and Arab Moors for certain inventions, usually credited to the Renaissance, is discussed, as well as the much earlier Egyptian influence on Greek science and philosophy; *African Presence in Early Asia* (1985, 1988) co-edited with Runoko Rashidi, is divided into five sections. The first discusses the peopling of Asia from Africa and identifies African people with Asia's first hominid, as well as modern populations. The second section demonstrates the African elements underlying major early civilizations in Asia, an overview that includes India, Iraq and Iran, Phoenicia, Palestine, the Arabian peninsula, China, Japan and Cambodia. The third section discusses the African origin of the great religions of Asia--Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The fourth section focuses on the historical and anthropological relationship between African people and Asia's Indo-European, Mongoloid and Semitic populations.

And the final section deals with African bondage in Asia and provides a fascinating glimpse of the Dalits, the Black Untouchables of India and more; *Great African Thinkers: Cheikh Anta Diop* (1986), co-edited with Larry Obadele Williams, the first in a scheduled series is devoted to the Senegalese physicist, historian and linguist Cheikh Anta Diop (1923-1986), who was born in Diourbel, Senegal. The content includes: “Conversations with Diop and Tsegaye” by Jan Carey; critiques of his major works “The Cultural Unity of Africa: the Domains of Patriarchy and of Matriarchy in Classical Antiquity” by Asa Hillard III, “The Changing Perception of Cheikh Anta Diop and his work” by James G. Spady, “Cheikh Anta Diop and the New concept of African History” by John Henrik Clarke; “The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality”—Review by A.J. Williams-Meyers; “Civilization or Barbarianism: the Legacy of Cheikh Anta Diop” by Leonard Jeffried, Jr. and “Diop on Asia: Highlights and Insights” by Runoko Rashidi; interviews “Africa’s Political Unity,” “Emancipation and Unity,” “Negritude and the African personality” and “Ethnicity and National Consciousness” by Carlos Moore; “Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop” by Shawna Moore, “Meeting the Pharaoh” and “Further Conversation with the Pharaoh” by Charles S. Finch; the first authorized English translation of the introduction and two opening chapters from his last major work “Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology” by Edward G. Taylor; a selection of essays by Diop—“Origin of the Ancient Egyptians;” “Iron Metallurgy in the Ancient Egyptian Empire” a translation by Darryl Prevost; “Africa’s contribution to the Exact Sciences” and a selection of lectures made by Cheikh Anta Diop during his first and only visit to the United States; *African Presence in Early America* (1987) is focused on contact between Africa and America towards the close of the Bronze Age (circa 948-680 B.C.) and the Mandingo-Songhay trading voyages (from early fourteenth to late fifteenth century); *Black Women in Antiquity* (1988) is an overview of African queens, Madonnas, and goddesses who dominated the history and imagination of ancient times focused on Ethiopia and Egypt which documents the Nile Valley’s voluminous record in human history. The book is divided into three parts: Ethiopia and Egyptian Queens and Goddesses; Black Women in Ancient Art; and Conquerors and Courtesans. This second edition contains two new chapters, one on Hypatia and women's rights in ancient Egypt, and the other on the diffusion into Europe of Isis, the African goddess of Nile Valley civilizations; *Great Black Leaders: Ancient and Modern* (1988) emphasizes the outstanding individuals from America, Africa, and the Caribbean selected from a number of historical epochs which includes material on outstanding women leaders (Queens Tiye, Hatshepsut, Nzingha), and others who has profoundly affected the modern period (Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela) to ensure that time warrants a consensus about their significance; *Egypt Revisited* (1989) represents a new departure in the examination of Egypt’s place in the African context to unite the latest research of the 1980s on Nile Valley civilizations, hence authors take an “Afrocentric” in contrast to a “Eurocentric” perspective in their studies of the birthplace of civilization (this volume also includes sections on the race and origin of the ancient Egyptians, African dynasties and rulers, Egyptian science and philosophy, and great Egyptologists); *Golden Age of the Moor* (1992) examines the debt owed by Europe to the Moors for the Renaissance and the significant role played by the African in the Muslim invasions of the Iberian peninsula which focuses mainly on Spain and Portugal, but also examines the races and roots of the original North African before the later ethnic mix of the Blackamoors and the tawny Moors in the medieval period.

The study ranges from the Moor in the literature of Cervantes and Shakespeare to profound influence upon Europe's university system and the diffusion via this system of the ancient and medieval sciences. The Moors are shown to affect not only European mathematics and map-making, agriculture and architecture, but their markets, their music and their machines, and last, the ethnicity of the Moor is re-examined, as is unique contributions, both as creator and conduit to the first seminal phase of the industrial revolution; *Egypt: Child of Africa* (1994) seeks to answer two questions. First, whether ancient Egyptians were predominantly African in a physical sense during the major native dynasties before the invasions of the Persian, Greek, Roman and Arab foreigners, and second, whether their language, writing, vision of God and the universe, their concept of the divine kingship, ritual ceremonies and practices, administrative and architectural symbols, structures, and techno-complex were quintessentially African, and not, in any major particular way, projected from those in Europe or Asia in that or an previous time (the research contained within Dr. Van Sertima's book, *Nile Valley Civilizations* is included as part of this work.); and *Early America Revisited* (1998), a vigorous defense and amplification of *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* which makes a case for an African presence in America before Columbus' voyages. Hence, Van Sertima's critical cutting edge is that there is an anthropological and ethnographic dimension to the process of discovery, one in which African people of non-European origins played a central role. He marshals literary and pictorial evidence and shows its authenticity to be beyond question. The impact of these early discoveries is of far more than historical interest, they serve as a basis to examine anew the study of culture contacts between civilizations, and in so doing, offer a serious base for a multifaceted re-examination of earlier hypotheses of influences.

In short, the *Journal of African Civilizations*, set a new African centered standard of excellence and innovation in the publishing of academic journals devoted to African historical research as it was published via Transaction Publishers in book size editions. And next to his *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*, the *Journal of African Civilizations* had become closely associated with his legacy as a scholar focused on extracting truth from history to announce the strength and vitality of the African presence throughout the world. *JPAS* editor Itibari M. Zulu (and others) had an opportunity to meet and talk to Dr. Van Sertima in 1999 at the African Marketplace & Cultural Faire in Los Angeles, California.