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EGYPT

Ancient Egypt. Land of implacable sun and inscrutable ruin. The pyramids, the Sphinx, the Valley of the Kings. Sand stretching to infinity in a world out of time. A source of fascination for the West even before Napoleon's 1798 expedition (or invasion) and the ensuing twenty-three volumes of *Description de l'Égypte*. Ancient Egypt inspired a branch of Western knowledge (Egyptology) and genre of bourgeois architecture (Egyptian revival). Its somber gaze into death's vortex, its mummies, tombs, and hieroglyphics, its user's guide to immortality (the *Book of the Dead*): these conjure an antiquity of terrible, aloof wisdom. Even today, a stroll through any cemetery of substance yields sepulchers and tombstones etched in the hard lines of Egyptian motifs: sempiternal suns, animal-headed gods, kings seated in pharaonic profile. The land equally of death and immortality, ancient Egypt has haunted later ages like an animate dream. "In Chicago," Szwed relates, "intimations of Egypt were everywhere: in exhibits in the Field Museum, in the Oriental Institute, the libraries, the books sold

by the street-corner Egyptologists on the South Side.”¹ For a group of self-taught urban intellectuals, Egypt offered a ready-made alternative to an ostensibly enlightened culture of the West responsible for chattel slavery, racism, Jim Crow, and segregation.

Thmei Research made good use of it, but not simply because things Egyptian were ubiquitous in Chicago and elsewhere. The antiquity of Egyptian civilization proved a strategic advantage to a black radicalism that took culture for its means of social transformation. Egypt was much older than Greece and its rational philosophy, older than Israel and its jealous God. By the dawn of those belated civilizations, Egypt had witnessed millennia of social stability. Greece and Israel look like unsuccessful social experiments in comparison. In an interview conducted at Berkeley, Sun Ra describes the appeal of ancient Egypt as a model for politics, particularly given political unrest in America:

America’s just four hundred years old, and it’s shakin’ and quiverin’—they had a civilization—the oldest known civilization: ancient Egypt: five thousand years of precise, orderly government. So the world got to go back and see: what were they doing? What were they doing to have five thousand years of precise government, education; and the whole world, it revolves around Egypt, really.²

Along with the other members of Thmei, Sun Ra found in ancient Egypt a precedent for social stability and spiritual prowess. What was Greek democracy in comparison? What was Hebrew monotheism? Nothing but latter-day dabbling in political logistics. To account for their origins, Greece had mythology, and Israel had scriptures. Behind both, however, spiritually as well as historically, loomed an Egyptian antiquity whose longevity alone might undermine their sweet assurances of human rationality or divine entitlement. Furthermore, if the Western tradition of Abrahamic religion and Greek philosophy condones segregation and black debasement, then the times require a reevaluation of that tradition’s self-congratulating assumptions. Ancient Egypt provided Thmei and its public persona, Sun Ra, with a

historically viable and culturally powerful alternative to Western culture and its presumptuous politics.

Thmei's Egypt was black. Located in the northeast corner of the African continent, its ancient civilization rose to consolidate the wisdom, science, and statecraft of, as Thmei saw it, a native black population. White cultures came later, although not of course according to their own accounts. For Thmei, the West had traced its heritage back to Greeks and Hebrews in part to ensure the priority of whites as progenitors of civilization. A black civilization in ancient Egypt would force a reexamination of such claims to cultural anteriority and superiority, and it provided radicals such as those associated with Thmei an imposing tradition counter to the West's, with its built-in whiteness. To them, Egypt seemed not only an alternative to Western culture but, when considered more deeply, its unacknowledged origin. Long before Martin Bernal explored Greek retentions of Egyptian culture in his book *Black Athena* (1987), a variety of writers had taken Egypt for the true origin of both humanity and civilization. On their reading of history, whites derived—physically and culturally—from blacks. As early as 1791, in *The Ruins; or, Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires* (a book Sun Ra knew well), Count Constantin-François Volney argued that Africans gave birth to civilization and all its achievements: religion, law, literature, science, and art.³

Later writers followed suit, establishing a clear if unacknowledged intellectual legacy tracking humanity back to black Africa. That's the basic argument of a short book entitled *The Children of the Sun* (1918), by George Wells Parker.⁴ Theodore P. Ford's *God Wills the Negro* (1939) similarly locates the birthplace of humanity in ancient Ethiopia and the flowering of black civilization in Egypt, describing its fall as having spawned a diaspora that scattered black Egyptians across Africa and eventually, thanks to the slave trade, America.⁵ The British anatomist Grafton Elliot Smith, a resident of Cairo for thirty years, argues stridently in favor of an Egyptian genesis for civilization in *The Ancient Egyptians and the Origin of Civilization* (1923): "There can no longer be any doubt that the essential elements of civilization did really originate in Egypt."⁶ While denying that ancient Egyptians were black,

Smith nevertheless attributes to Egypt an enormous effect on European cultures, doing so in terms deeply appealing to Thmei: “Egypt brought her influence to bear on the springs of European civilization, not by the violent imposition of an alien culture [. . .] but by raising the members of her own family group of peoples to a higher plane of knowledge and by inoculating them with the germs of her own culture.”⁷ Egypt diffused higher knowledge as if it were a benign pathogen, culturally invigorating an otherwise enervated Europe.

Most inspiring to Sun Ra and his fellow activists, however, was a book by George G. M. James entitled *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians* (1954). Born in Guyana, James studied in London before coming to the United States and enrolling in a PhD program, probably in classics, at New York’s Columbia University. He taught math, Latin, and Greek at several US colleges, most tantalizingly, for a time, Alabama A&M, where Sun Ra attended college for a year. Whether or not their time there overlapped, their ideas about the relationship between Egypt and Greece certainly do. In a relentless reevaluation of primary Greek texts, James hammers home his thesis: “Greek philosophers were not the authors of Greek philosophy, but the Egyptian Priests and hierophants.”⁸ The Greeks stole their celebrated philosophy from Egypt, and Western culture has since colluded in the crime, devaluing an ancient wisdom and its black proponents.

James’s aim is not simply to exonerate that wisdom. More purposefully, it is to better the social condition of its black heirs: “We sometimes wonder why the people of African descent find themselves in such a social plight as they do, but the answer is plain enough. Had it not been for this drama of Greek philosophy and its actors, the African Continent would have had a different reputation and would have enjoyed a status of respect among the nations of the world.”⁹ James examines Greek philosophy not as truth but as drama, a power play that denigrated people of African descent, its true creators. As he systematically lays out the intellectual theft that he claims underwrites the works of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, he makes a compelling case for the Egyptian Mysteries as the foundation of Greek

philosophical thought. And he does so for reasons that chime with Thmei's social agenda: "The aim of this book is to establish better race relations in the world by revealing the fundamental truth concerning the contribution of the African Continent to civilization." By emphasizing Egypt's contribution to a philosophical tradition mistakenly believed to be the sole property of the white West, James intended "to cultivate race pride in the Black people themselves and to offer them a New Philosophy of African Redemption."¹⁰

With pride comes parity. James sought to restore intellectual and cultural dignity to a people wrongly dismissed as uncivilized, cultivating "the realization and consciousness of their equality with all the other great peoples of the world, who have built great civilizations." James writes not simply as a critic but more inspiringly as a teacher advocating bold educational reform with a clear social agenda, "a world-wide dissemination of the truth, through a system of re-education, in order to stimulate and encourage a change in the attitude of races toward each other."¹¹ This aim neatly describes that of Thmei's activism and of Sun Ra's music, too: ancient Egypt as a countertradition through which to reeducate the world, composing fractious races into a new harmony. In James, then, Thmei's members found a strong advocate of both Egypt's ancient wisdom and its contemporary social promise. They would make creative use of his example, reviving, for instance, the potency of the implacable Egyptian sun: Sun Ra.