

ON THE THEORY OF 'AFRICAN OLMECS'
and in general about the movements between
Africa and Central / South America in antiquity

By Alessandro Demontis

The theory according which, in ancient times, negroid african populations had come into the center and south of the Americas is generally ignored or denied by calling it '*pseudoscience*' and accusing its supporters of *Afrocentrism*, although this theory has gained respect over the decades among many an authors, both academic and otherwise, who have nothing to share with Africa.

With this article I want to make a little light on the subject, highlighting the focal point of the matter and how this is often addressed superficially.

It should be said that this theory lends unfortunately to imaginative reworkings, and they were made especially in the last decade relatively to the wave of New Age that involved a bit all fields of alternative research (I use this term to indicate that often this search was conducted by people outside the academic world or, when carried out by academics, stood in stark contrast to the commonly accepted knowledge); but the theory itself, although occurring with many variations regarding times, places, and characters involved, whether isolated from New Age drifts, can be analyzed in detail and in many respects, finding that to name it as 'pseudo-science' is definitely a wrong and not justifiable attitude.

The most 'orthodox' version of this theory tells us that at a time unspecified, at the turn of the third-to-second millennium BC, one or more waves of people coming from Africa (generally speaking of Western Africa, other times of Nubia, at other times of Congo and Togo) arrived to the shores of the Central and / or Southern Americas, and there, mingling with local people (also on this detail we have those who speak of conquest, those of coexistence, those of exchanges), would have given rise over the generations to the 'mother culture' of Central America: the Olmecs.

A branch of this theory adds that further and subsequent moves from the areas of northeastern Africa (Egypt and Nubia) and the Middle East (today's Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and perhaps Iran) brought these populations in South America, specifically in Peru and in Bolivia.

Although this theory dates back at least to the 70's, it began to spread among the masses only from the late 90's and had its top diffusion after the year 2000, certainly due to the best-selling books of the Azerbaijani author Zecharia Sitchin. Being he a non-academic author, criticized for his theories about the alien origin of civilization on our planet, automatically his version of the theory concerning the Olmecs was considered pseudoscience, too often by those who actually showed they had not even read his books and the incredible amount of documentation they reported, all documentation coming from classical authors of the matter and often academic ones.

The theory was born probably in the 70's with the publication of the book *"Unexpected Faces in Ancient America 1500 BC-AD 1500, The Historical Testimony of Pre-Columbian Artists"* by Alexander von Wuthenau in 1975, followed closely by *"They Came Before Columbus"* in 1976 by an English author of Guyana, Ivan van Sertima, this book being soon branded as a product of Afrocentrism and ignored by the specialists of Mesoamerican studies.

Over the years it was accepted that, on the origin of the first peoples of Mexico, history had drawn a veil almost impenetrable, because the very little written material left by those people (or rather, their descendants) was almost utterly destroyed during colonization, and a good 90% of what at that time was known of the Olmecs and their kindred peoples (Mixtecs, Zapotecs etc) was written by post-conquest author, mainly Spanish or Italian ones (usually religious), who cared to write down the stories that until then were passed orally, occasionally inserting in their volumes some maps and reproductions of art given to them by local tribes. These documents constitute the famous 'Codes'. Besides, important travel reportage remain, as those by Cieza de Leon, Tordesillas, and others.

The few notions that could be drawn from these writings, however, must have seemed so absurd to academics of the twentieth century that they were generally dismissed as 'myth' or 'metaphors', especially when they told of giants, bearded, sometimes black skinned and sometimes white skinned, coming from the sea.

However, the academics of the twentieth century decided and determined that the Olmecs were a 'native population' and still this decision is supported by the establishment, both academical and not, although over the decades numerous inconsistencies with this theory have been brought to the eyes of the most, and at the same time a number of clues that give support to the theory of an african and / or middle eastern origin were pointed out. It is funny that in 2014 a popular website devoted to refuting the theory of ancient astronauts (in a chapter dedicated to the Olmecs) wrote: *"The Olmecs of Central America are easily one of the most recognizable indigenous tribes on the planet"*. Nothing less: one of the most recognizable indigenous tribes!

At this point, to make things clear, I will point out to the reader that in the course of the past 45 years, the theory has given birth to an incredible amount of articles, books, documentaries, websites, only occasionally the work of 'amateurs' in the field. Almost anytime the authors of this material came from 'academic' environment. Is it therefore still correct to define as 'pseudoscience' a theory on which many academics have written dozens of essays and books?

While considering the best job on the topic being *The Lost Realm* (1990) of the aforementioned Sitchin, I'll leave it out of the count as the author is not academic.

But I would point out the following:

- 1) Ivan van Sertima, accused of being afrocentric and pseudo scientist, was a professor of African studies at an American college, not an African one. Although born in Guyana, he held throughout his life British citizenship even when Guyana became independent. He

attended the School of Oriental and African Studies, but at the 'University of London, formed by British authors and faculty members of the establishment, until he graduated with honors.

2) We have no details on Alexander von Wuthenau's biography or what studies he performed, but it should be noted that, before publishing his controversial book in 1975, he was the author of much appreciated books that had become cornerstones of research on Meso and South American cultures, such as "Tepotzotlan, His Art and color in Mexico "(1941) and "The Art of Terracotta Pottery in Pre-Columbian Central and South America "(1969)

3) Runoko Rashidi, who was also accused of Afrocentrism and branded a pseudo scientist for his publications regarding dissemination of Africans in Europe, Mexico and Asia in antiquity, was for years an historical publisher of success at the turn of the 70 and 80 before turning to his theory as a lecturer.

4) Bernard Victor Biados Yacovazzo, author of a huge site that supports the theory of contact between Africa / Middle East and Mexico / Peru / Bolivia (perhaps the most comprehensive site on the subject) was curator of the Archaeological Museum of La Paz and director of the 'Institute of studies on pre-Columbian writing' in LaPaz. His site was the first 'place' on the internet to publish photos and analyses regarding the controversial Fuente Magna Bowl, found in Bolivia and containing cuneiform signs, and the Monolith of Pokotia found in Tiwanaku, containing signs similar to Elamite.

5) The academic artist Diane E. Wirth, who for years accompanied one of the most renowned scholars of Orthodox Mesoamerican cultures on his expeditions (Linda Schele - curiously considered a top expert in the Mayan language although she herself only having a degree in Visual Arts) and participated to her book with dozens of illustrations, produced in 2003 his original work "*Parallels: Mesoamerican and Ancient Middle Eastern Traditions*" containing dozens of examples of similarities between the Mesoamerican and Mesopotamian arts.

Furthermore, I would add that contributions to the theory were given in time by characters who, despite not having specific related qualifications, devoted much of their time to the study of Mesoamerican culture. These include Edo Nyland, a professional botanist who, after retirement in the 80s, began a course of study in the field Linguistics and Historical Linguistics; also, I would remember Andrzej Wiercinski, a specialist in ethnology and anthropology, which in 1972 (*in his book: "An anthropological study on the origin of the Olmecs"*) provided finds of Olmec skeletons in more than 10 Mexican sites, most of these skeletons showing typically African features.

The peculiarity of studies and reportages by Wiercinski is that until the advent of comparative DNA analysis, craniometric measurements and reconstructions of the skeleton were the most appropriate and widespread forensic method for the recognition of corpses in the excavation sites, this method being still considered valuable in anthropology and archeology. It is worth to remember also the work of Clyde Winters, who was accused of Afrocentrism and considered a 'pseudo scientist' despite being an ethnologist of academic training and since long a Professor of Ethnology and Anthropology in the United States. We must recall that Winters was the first to translate the Sumerian characters on the vessel found at Fuente Magna, after the Italian Assyriologist Alberto Marini had expressed his

opinion in favor of the identification of such characters as "*Middle Eastern cuneiform*" in his article "*A sumerian inscription of the Fuente Magna*" (1985 - published in Vol. 13 of the Epigraphic Society Occasional Papers).

I think it is not necessary, in this article, to list or show images about the incredible amount of data that these various authors have treated in their publications, nor to list what I think are the evidence of a relationship between the two cultures which we talked about; instead, I think it is mandatory to say that a theory which has been supported by scholars of the caliber of those appointed cannot be called 'pseudo-science', and that the less you can liquidate the authors arguing they are 'afrocentrists'.

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