

# Analysis of Ivan Van Sertima's Afrocentric claims on Mesoamerica

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In an attempt to give a different and more egalitarian perspective to American history – and world history by association – Ivan Van Sertima attempts to recreate a lost world using artifacts, linguistic examples, and various comparisons of the myths of Africa and Mesoamerica. With the stated goal of undoing the damage done by Eurocentrism to Black African contributions to humanity and the Americas in particular, he unfortunately replaces Eurocentrism with an Afrocentric perspective. Starting with the concepts of language and phenotype outlined in detail in the previous paragraphs, Van Sertima takes the reader on a wildly exciting, eye opening but ultimately fictitious ride. Van Sertima, like the rest of the Black Nationalist, White Nationalist, Afrocentrist, etc. crowd focus on ideology and completely disregard the need for methodology and any kind of tangible evidence.

The pseudo-scientific concept that will be discussed in this review is the narrative created by Ivan Van Sertima regarding the Mesoamerican cultures - in particular the Olmec peoples - and the purported link to the African continent before the advent of European incursion on the American continents. In 1976 CE/AD Van Sertima published a book called "They Came Before Columbus" detailing an Afrocentric account of extended and regular contact and influence between the African continent and the American continents through direct contact and diffusion. Among the claims made by

Van Sertima regarding this so called link in peoples and cultures is that the giant Olmec statue heads are proof of this link due to so called “negroid” features i.e. big lips and flat noses. His claims state that the Nubian empire in collaboration with the Phoenician naval empire engaged in a transatlantic voyage to the Americas and founded the Olmec civilization and planted the seeds for all so-called “advanced” civilization in the “New World” thousands of years before the advent of European settlement.

Pseudoscience is defined as disturbing trend in the area of knowledge regarding history, science, culture - and even matters of contemporary interest -, where a narrative is created based on information without any concrete evidence to support the claims being made. Instead of making the basis of the discussion on the topic about the verifiable facts, the mystical qualities of a story, appeal of the unknown, and often the struggle -real or imagined- between the authors and supporters of the mythos and the academic establishment take precedence. The aforementioned concept often crops up in discussions that are masqueraded as scholastic in the form of pseudohistory or pseudoarcheology. Examples include the book being reviewed, the Book of Mormon - a religious book that uses references to Native American nations and so-called Old World cultures, such as Neo Babylon and Samaria/Judah in a manner that is not historically true - , and the stories of alien influences in the building of pyramids and other ancient structures.

In order to completely understand how the Afrocentrists rationalize their idea of race with their narrative of world history it is important to understand the origins of the pseudoscientific racial theory first popularized by Johann Blumenbach, a German

scientist in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, also known as the 5 Race Model. The 5 race model has been debunked by virtually every credible geneticist and physical anthropologist, however for a period of time from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was accepted as a matter of fact by the academic community in the West. There are far too many variations in human phenotypes to create 5 “races”. If humanity were studied in its entirety, then it becomes clear that the concept of race is PURELY a cultural construct. Someone could be “White” in one country and even look completely European (due to predominately European genetics) and come to another country and then become “Hispanic” because the construct for race in that new country only allows for people of White European ethnicity (predominately Northern and Central but also including Southern and Eastern) to be considered “White”. All others are “ethnic”.

There are several problems with the claims made by Van Sertima that are problematic, the least of them not being the usurping of Native American history in order to prove racial superiority. However the majority, if not all, of the claims made in his manuscript can be challenged using the burden of evidence available or completely disproven entirely. This can be done through linguistic analysis (Blench, Spriggs, & World Archaeological Congress, 1998, p. 297-320), examination of the archeological record (Crawford, 1998, p. ), DNA analysis (Southerton, 2004, p.3-4, 40, 43, 45; Jennings, 1993, p.15-19,35,47; and Crawford, 1998) and written historic record from both the Olmec and subsequent successor civilizations such as the Maya, Aztec, etc. and even the African and West Asian civilizations of Nubia, Mali, and Phoenicia. Also the understanding of biology and human migratory patterns factor heavily into the argument against the validity of the argument by Van Sertima. In discussion of this

topic, Afrocentrism, traditional Eurocentrism, and the roles that racism plays in the genre of pseudo-science, particularly the Afrocentric subgenre.

Van Sertima attempts to accomplish several different goals, with a new twist. He attempts to use the sophistication of indigenous American civilization to validate his ideas of racial superiority. This is not new in terms of the concept of usurping culture and history of disadvantaged people in order to bolster your own claims of superiority. The so-called Aryan White Supremacists have long claimed direct responsibility for the advent of all cultures in the Near East, North Africa, Europe, and the Americas. They claim that so called “pure” Nordic Europeans created all of the higher concepts of math, engineering, science, military strategies, among other things which were either imparted to lower White sub-races or stolen by other subhuman Mongoloid and Negroid races. The difference between the Eurocentric model and the Afrocentric model used by Van Sertima is that the former is used by the dominant ethnic group as a method of furthering their concepts of cultural dominance while the latter is espoused by members of a similarly marginalized ethnic group with the express intention of competing with Eurocentric ideals of racial superiority.

Van Sertima argues that various African populations visited the American continents several times throughout history bringing culture, technology, architectural improvements, and various sophistications that did not previously exist among these American peoples. He proposes in his hypothesis that the Nubian empire of Upper Egypt and Lower Kush, respectively Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan in the present, were the founders of human civilization. They then transmitted civilization to the people of Lower Egypt, the area that corresponds with the Ancient Egyptian Empire, who then

transmitted human civilization to the Near East giving rise to civilizations such as Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, Minoan Greeks, etc. He also proposes that Egypt under the direct rule of the Nubians during the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, which corresponds with the 8<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE/BC, formed an alliance with the Semitic speaking Phoenician seafaring empire in order to gain greater access to the wealth of Western Africa and Western Europe. By accident, he alleges, this exploratory armada were blown off course and happened to land in the present-day Veracruz area of Mexico and had contact with the pre-civilization Olmec peoples. Due to their primitive state and the advanced technology of the Nubian/Egyptian/Phoenician expedition, they were worshipped like gods by the natives who after being instructed in all of the wonders of civilization by their generous benefactors, erected enormous statues in their honor; hence the Negroid features of the giant heads.

Van Sertima made several huge mistakes in his book, which when examined completely unravel his narrative of contact between the Old World and New World. However before discussing those factual errors, it is important to understand who the Olmec people were. The Olmec were the first 'major' civilization in Mexico following a progressive development in Soconusco. They lived in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico, in the present-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco. It has been speculated that Olmec derive in part from neighboring Mokaya and/or Mixe–Zoque. The name "Olmec" comes from the Nahuatl word for the Olmecs: Ōlmēcatl /o:l'me:kat͡ɬ/ (singular) or Ōlmēcah /o:l'me:kaʔ/ (plural). This word is composed of the two words ōlli /'o:l:i/, meaning "rubber", and mēcatl /'me:kat͡ɬ/, meaning "rope", so the word means "rubber line or lineage". Two things are important to note for further reference: 1. The

fact that the Olmec people lived in a subtropical/tropical climate and 2. The name “Olmec” is not the name of the people in their language. It was a name given to them by the Nahuatl speaking Aztec people, who came over 1000 years after this civilization fell, who named them the Olmecs based on who their historians knew from their own history and from what they discovered in the ruins of the long abandoned civilization.

One of the major focuses of the book by Van Sertima is the existence of Black Pre-Columbian Americans. One of the ways to prove that a certain group of people existed in a particular location or are related to a particular group is genetic evidence. It can be proven with 100% certainty that Europeans had contact with the Native Americans for several reasons. 1. It was heavily documented by both sides. 2. They often intermarried/interbred with Indigenous Americans. Even before Columbus, the Viking settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows (Kolodny, 2012) demonstrates the existence of Europeans due to artifacts, housing structures, and even the existence of trinkets and items traded to the Native people by the Vikings. This is true of conquering people everywhere so there is absolutely no legitimate reason to assume that Black Africans wouldn’t have done the same. 3. People die. If this supposed Nubian/Phoenician expedition actually discovered and established a civilization in Mesoamerica then they would have died and left behind remains. Being that the initial decades and maybe centuries the people would have still remembered their culture and burial rites and the burial rights would have mirrored that of such ceremonies in North Africa and the Levant. No such comparisons have ever been found or mentioned. Even the architecture of the Olmec people would have mirrored that of Nubia in some fashion. This relation would have carried on into the building traditions of the later empire of the

Toltec people, and then the more contemporary Maya and Aztec empires (whose people and culture exist today in the millions). There is no relation architecturally, nor DNA wise, nor linguistically.

A flaw in Van Sertima's story was the disregarding of the importance of language, as language is the building block of civilization. In fact Mesoamerican (and all American) languages belong to a series of language families that share no linguistic relation with African/West Asian languages, past or present, that would otherwise demonstrate any fundamental or intrinsic characteristics of linguistic connection. This includes the Mixe-Zoque language family, of which Olmec is a part, which suggests independent development of these languages versus linguist diffusion. The Mixe-Zoque language family - which include still spoken languages - would share a common link or even a proto language that shows a linguistic relation between the Semitic languages of Phoenician and Ancient Egyptian, if his assertions of cultural diffusion were true (Blench, Spriggs, & World Archaeological Congress, 1998; Campbell & Kaufman, 1976, p. 80-89) .

Another crucial mistake made by Van Sertima relates to the detail pointed out earlier in this essay regarding the Olmec name (Van, 1990, p. 155-173). The Olmec people belonged to the Mixe-Zoque language family while their name comes from the completely separate Uto-Aztecan language family. As previously noted the name Olmec comes from the Nahuatl word for "rubber people" denoting the relation between the use of rubber and these ancient people. The Olmec people would not have called themselves "Olmecs" as they would have referred to themselves in their own language

and with their own name. Van Sertima uses the term “Olmec” than the name the Nubian/Phoenician explorers would have known through direct contact.

Another issue regarding language was the writing system, another detail that Van Sertima and the Afrocentrists have skimmed over. The writing system of the Phoenicians and the Nubians were completely different in organization and usage. For instance the Phoenician writing system while derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs, had an alphabet of 22 symbols and is considered the basis for modern Latin writing symbols. Nubian writing however had three different types that served different purposes. The writing system in Nubian was generally the same as that of the ancient Egyptians, as they borrowed cultural concepts from each other periodically; the common writing systems were hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic. Hieroglyphs was used for ceremonial purposes in terms of temple decorations, etc. Hieratic writing was a simplified version of hieroglyphs that were used on a daily basis by scribes and the educated elite in daily situations as hieroglyphs were an art form and much more complicated than needed in the daily situation. Demotic was a system that rose around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Nubia, its golden era, and definitely would have shown up in Olmec and the subsequent civilizations writing systems if their sophisticated culture were truly a gift of the far flung explorers.

One of the main issues and justifications for the Black Pre-Columbian Americans according to Van Sertima is the so-called Negroid features on the giant Olmec heads and the fact that the heads were made from Black material versus a material that “reflects their racial identity” (Van, 1990) . There are several issues with this argument that will be discussed in short order. The first issue with the argument is the idea that



phenotype is a purely “racial” category. The second issue with the argument is the way in which “race” is defined in Van Sertima’s argument. The issues that exist with both arguments are inherent in the methods used to assert them and even the logic used to support them. As much as Van Sertima and other Afrocentrists claim that they are combating the excessiveness of Eurocentrism and White supremacy, a surprising number of their arguments are White supremacist arguments that have simply been switched to change the dominate race from White to Black. The primary argument made by Van Sertima in support of Black Olmecs is the supposed Negroid features on the giant basalt heads. The first fallacy in his argument is that 1. Flat noses are solely indicative of Black African ancestry and 2. That the nose on the Olmec heads are somehow indicative of a connection between Nubia and Mesoamerica. Unfortunately for the hypothesis floated by Van Sertima, nothing could be further from the truth.

In regards to similarity of the so-called “Negroid” features (large lips, short, flat noses) that are found in Central American, South East Asian, and certain African populations is actually very simple to explain. It is due to environmental factors. These “Negroid features” and especially the nose is: “particularly inappropriate as racial markers, because the shape of the nose is primarily a function of climactic factors such as temperature and moisture content of the air. In areas where the air is very dry, such as deserts, a larger mucous area is required to moisten inspire air, and this necessitates a longer and narrower nose. Both the Olmecs and the West African ancestors of African-Americans have short, flat noses because they lived in wet, tropical areas; Nubians and Egyptians have longer, thinner noses because they have lived in a desert” (De Montellano, Haslip-Viera, & Barbour, 1997).

Another issue with the claims made by Van Sertima is that the statues were made with dark material as an effigy to celebrate and worship their African visitors due to their appearance as gods because of their “inherent” technological and cultural superiority. In reality the material of the statues is due to the symbolic meaning of the raw materials used in construction (Van, 1990, p. 144-180). In Mesoamerican culture, primarily the Olmec, volcanic rocks such as jade, basalt, etc. were symbolic of major themes in their culture such as rain and fertility thus the use of such materials in the construction of their idols, sculptures, buildings and the suchlike are not out of the realm of likelihood or reality.

When examining the statements made by Van Sertima it is clear that the arguments posed by his book follow the pattern of all pseudoscientific stories, in that the claims cannot be supported by any evidence found in the historical, archeological, or linguistic record. As previously mentioned, the attempt by Van Sertima is a pseudohistorical/pseudoscientific publication that uses appeals to the readers sense of mystery and curiosity along with the appeal to the emotional center of said reader rather than actually providing solid evidence of his claims. This is a common tactic used by pseudoscientists. Another flaw - in the long list of flaws - in Van Sertima's arguments is the fact that there are no proofs or any evidence of the merging of and/or introduction of an alien culture, language or society into the Mesoamerican record over 2300 years ago. Instead of looking for a solid link in linguistic record or even proposing architecturally studies or DNA assessments, he simply focuses on the racial stereotypes created by White Supremacists and floats hypothetical scenarios in lieu of the existence of tangible evidence of his claims.

Van Sertima seems more concerned with creating a narrative where the African Americans - and other Black African groups - are essentially everything to everyone than creating a solid and well researched scholarly work. His book does little to convince someone who is familiar with the scholarship in the area of Mesoamerica and Africa that there is a true and verifiable link. In other words, as previously noted, he substitutes knowledge of linguistic links and genetic relation with previously debunked phenotypic inferences – using pictures that conjure references to popular stereotypes – to make his points. The fact that he introduces little to no new research – in that he presents findings that he has discovered that has been reviewed by an academic publication – is crucial in recognizing his work for what it is, fiction – or at the very least, poorly researched and written. It is also heavily reliant on outdated sources and is bound by his contemporary notions of race and ethnicity. This is exemplified by the examples given with the misuse of the Olmec name and misunderstanding of the biological science of the human nose.

The argument by Van Sertima, while it does nothing to answer the gaping holes in the Afrocentrist hypothesis, it also does not contribute anything new to the discussion. For instance, he states that the Malian kingdom set explorers to the New World and interacted with the native peoples extensively. During this point in time 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE/AD, the West African Malian Empire was one heavily, if not entirely, influenced by Islam (Brown, Stride, & Ifeka, 1972). Islam, like Christianity, is a religion that holds conversion as one of its main tenets and historically when a culture of these two religions come in contact with a civilization different from theirs –especially one deemed

“inferior” – there is usually some sort of conversion process that takes place. The evidence of this are the Islamic conquests of the late 7<sup>th</sup> to early 8<sup>th</sup> century and the Christian conquest of Africa and the Americas in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He offers no explanation why there are no traces of Islam in the New World nor does he explain the lack of influence on the writing systems developed, as discussed earlier.

His viewpoint throughout his book relies heavily on the revisionist mentality of Afrocentrism. A mentality where what can be explained through circumstantial “evidence” is simply recolored to fit their perspective and what cannot be is ignored or relegated to a status of nonimportance. In a sense, they can continue to subscribe to the beliefs that they gained through slavery and colonialism - such as Christianity or Islam - without having to worry about rationalizing continuing to follow the ideology of their captors and enslavers. Especially when faced with the reality of how they gained those beliefs historically versus their Nationalistic ideology. This is done because rather than completely admit that one’s beliefs are a complete lie, it is easier to simply change the players within the mythos so that it better represents one’s ideology.

In adherence to this ideology, Van Sertima while claiming several times that he is not attempting to belittle or steal the heritage of Americans does just that in his treatment of Native American history. His book, while attempting to create a narrative favorable to his targeted audience, only serves to further the stigmatization of indigenous Americans under a White supremacist model by stealing their identity and history - thus robbing them of their accomplishments and contributions to human civilization. In other words, his Afrocentric viewpoint impresses on Native Americans the

same systematic cultural theft and marginalization, that has been forced onto not only Africans/African Americans but people of color in the Americas and worldwide in the name of colonialism.

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