

african presence in early america ivan van sertima

African Presence in Early America: Ivan Van Sertima

The exploration of African presence in early America has been a subject of extensive research and debate among historians and scholars. One of the most prominent figures in this field is Ivan Van Sertima, an Afro-American scholar and linguist whose work has shed light on the significant contributions of Africans and their descendants in the pre-Columbian and early colonial periods of American history. Van Sertima's theories challenge conventional narratives that often overlook or minimize the role of Africans in the development of the Americas. This article will delve into his findings, the historical context, and the implications of his work.

Background of Ivan Van Sertima

Ivan Van Sertima was born on January 9, 1935, in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana). He later moved to the United States, where he pursued higher education and became a prominent figure in the field of anthropology and African studies. Van Sertima earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and anthropology from the City College of New York and a master's degree in anthropology from Rutgers University. His academic career was marked by a relentless pursuit of knowledge about Africa and its diaspora, culminating in his most notable works that argue for the significant African influence on early American civilizations.

The Central Thesis

Van Sertima's central thesis posits that Africans arrived in the Americas long before Columbus and that their presence significantly influenced Native American cultures. He contends that African mariners, traders, and explorers reached the shores of the Americas through various routes, including transatlantic voyages, and contributed to the cultural and technological advancements of indigenous societies. His seminal book, "They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America," published in 1976, is foundational in this discourse.

Evidence of African Presence

Van Sertima presents a multifaceted argument supported by a variety of evidence, including:

- **Historical Records:** He cites historical accounts from early European explorers and

writers who noted the presence of Africans in the Americas before Columbus. These accounts sometimes describe interactions between Africans and indigenous peoples.

- **Archaeological Findings:** Van Sertima points to archaeological discoveries that suggest connections between African and indigenous cultures, such as similar agricultural practices and artifacts that bear resemblance to African designs.
- **Linguistic Evidence:** He analyzes the linguistic similarities between certain African languages and Native American languages, proposing that these similarities point to shared cultural practices and interactions.
- **Artistic Expressions:** Van Sertima also examines art forms that reflect African aesthetics and themes, suggesting that these influences may have originated from African presence in the Americas.

Case Studies of African Influence

Several case studies illustrate the African influence on early American civilizations:

1. **The Olmec Civilization:** Van Sertima argues that the Olmec civilization, known for its colossal stone heads and advanced societal structures, may have had African connections. He suggests that the features of the Olmec heads bear resemblance to those of African peoples, indicating potential African migration and influence.
2. **The Mound Builders:** The cultures that created the earthen mounds across North America are another focal point for Van Sertima. He proposes that their complex societal structures, agricultural practices, and spiritual beliefs may have been influenced by African traditions, given the similarities observed in various cultural artifacts.
3. **Maritime Traditions:** Van Sertima discusses the maritime capabilities of ancient African civilizations, particularly the Egyptians and the West Africans, suggesting that they possessed the navigational skills necessary for transoceanic travel long before Columbus. He posits that these skills could have facilitated contact with the Americas.

Critical Reception and Controversies

While Van Sertima's work has garnered significant attention and respect, it has also faced criticism from some scholars who argue that his conclusions lack sufficient empirical evidence. Critics assert that the historical and archaeological records do not adequately support the notion of substantial African presence in pre-Columbian America. Some major points of contention include:

- **Misinterpretation of Evidence:** Critics claim that Van Sertima sometimes misinterprets existing archaeological findings or draws conclusions that are not universally accepted within the academic community.

- Overemphasis on Cultural Similarities: Some scholars argue that Van Sertima's emphasis on cultural similarities between Africans and Native Americans does not necessarily imply direct contact or influence, as such similarities could arise independently.
- Lack of Primary Sources: Detractors often point out the scarcity of primary sources or concrete artifacts that can definitively link Africans to specific developments in early American civilizations.

Despite the controversies, Van Sertima's work has opened up important discussions about the African diaspora and its historical significance, encouraging further research and a re-examination of established historical narratives.

Legacy and Impact

Ivan Van Sertima's contributions to the understanding of African presence in early America have had a lasting impact on the fields of history, anthropology, and African studies. His work has inspired a new generation of scholars to explore the complexities of African diasporic histories and has encouraged a more inclusive approach to the study of American history.

Influence on Education and Public Discourse

Van Sertima's theories have been incorporated into educational curricula in various institutions, promoting awareness of African contributions to the Americas. His work has also influenced public discourse, helping pave the way for discussions around race, identity, and the historical narratives that shape contemporary society.

Conclusion

The exploration of the African presence in early America, as articulated by Ivan Van Sertima, challenges traditional narratives and highlights the importance of recognizing the diverse influences that have shaped the continent's history. While the debate surrounding his theories continues, the significance of his work lies in its ability to encourage critical thought and dialogue about the interconnectedness of cultures throughout history. As scholars continue to examine the complexities of early American civilizations, Van Sertima's legacy will undoubtedly remain a pivotal point of reference in understanding the rich tapestry of human history.

In summary, the contributions of Africans in early America, as examined through Van Sertima's lens, not only reshape historical understanding but also invite ongoing exploration into the profound connections that span continents and cultures.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Ivan Van Sertima and what is his significance in the study of African presence in early America?

Ivan Van Sertima was a Guyanese-born historian, anthropologist, and linguist known for his work on the African presence in pre-Columbian America. His significance lies in his arguments that Africans had established contact with the Americas long before Columbus, challenging traditional narratives of American history.

What is the main thesis of Ivan Van Sertima's book 'They Came Before Columbus'?

The main thesis of 'They Came Before Columbus' is that Africans, particularly the ancient Egyptians and other West Africans, had traveled to the Americas long before Columbus, and that these voyages had significant cultural and social impacts on the indigenous populations.

What types of evidence does Van Sertima present to support his claims about African presence in early America?

Van Sertima presents a variety of evidence including historical records, cultural similarities between African and Native American practices, artifacts found in the Americas that resemble African art, and accounts from early explorers who noted the presence of African-descended individuals in the New World.

How did Van Sertima address the skepticism surrounding his claims about pre-Columbian trans-oceanic contact?

Van Sertima addressed skepticism by meticulously documenting his sources, providing comparative studies of cultural artifacts, and engaging with critics through public lectures and writings to bolster the credibility of his arguments.

What impact did Ivan Van Sertima's work have on the field of history and archaeology?

Van Sertima's work opened up new discussions about the African diaspora and challenged Eurocentric views of history, encouraging further research into the contributions of Africans in the Americas and the complexities of trans-oceanic contacts.

What criticisms have been leveled against Van

Sertima's theories regarding African presence in early America?

Critics have argued that Van Sertima's evidence is often anecdotal or speculative, questioning the credibility of his interpretations of artifacts and narratives, and suggesting that they lack rigorous scientific validation.

How does Van Sertima's work relate to contemporary discussions about race and history?

Van Sertima's work contributes to contemporary discussions about race and history by emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions of African peoples to global history, challenging dominant narratives that often marginalize these contributions.

What is the significance of the cultural similarities between African and Native American societies as discussed by Van Sertima?

The cultural similarities suggest potential historical interactions and exchanges between African and Native American societies, which may indicate that knowledge, practices, and technologies were shared and adapted across these cultures.

What role did the African presence play in shaping early American cultures, according to Van Sertima?

According to Van Sertima, the African presence contributed significantly to shaping early American cultures through the introduction of agricultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and artistic expressions that blended with indigenous traditions.

How has the perception of Van Sertima's theories evolved over time in academic circles?

The perception of Van Sertima's theories has evolved, with some scholars increasingly recognizing the need for inclusive historical narratives while others remain critical, leading to ongoing debates and further research into the African influence in early America.

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