

## Tribute To Van Sertima

**"The African presence in America before Columbus is of importance not only to African and American history, but to the history of world civilizations. The African presence is proven by stone heads, terra cottas, skeletons, artifacts, techniques and inscriptions, by oral traditions and documented history, by botanical, linguistic and cultural data."**

[Tribute To Ivan Van Sertima] This tribute was composed and first published in 2003. With absolute certainty it can be stated that, due to his consistent and unrelenting scholarship over the past twenty-five years in the rewriting of African history and the reconstruction of the African's place in world history, particularly in the field of the African presence in ancient America, Ivan Van Sertima has cemented his position as one of our greatest living scholars. Indeed, during this turbulent and exciting period, he has been in the vanguard of those scholars fighting to place African history in a new light. Simply put, Van Sertima's clarion call has been: "We shall follow the trail of the African in Europe, in Asia, and in every corner of the New World, seeking to set the record straight. This is no romantic exploration of antiquities. It is a search for roots." Ivan Van Sertima was born in Kitty Village, Guyana, South America on January 26, 1935. He was educated at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University where he graduated with honors. From 1957 to 1959, he served as a Press and Broadcasting Officer in the Guyana Information Services. During the decade of the 1960s, he broadcasted weekly from Britain to both Africa and the Caribbean. He came to the United States in 1970, where he completed his post graduate studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Dr. Van Sertima began his teaching career as an instructor at Rutgers in 1972, and he is now Professor of African studies in the Department of Africana Studies. Van Sertima is a literary critic, a linguist, and an anthropologist, and has made a name for himself in all three fields. As a linguist, he is the compiler of the Swahili Dictionary of Legal Terms, based on his field work in Tanzania, East Africa in 1967. As a literary critic, he is the author of *Caribbean Writers*, a collection of critical essays on the Caribbean novel. He is also the author of several major literary reviews published in Denmark, India, Britain, and the United States. He was recognized for his work in this field by being requested by the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy to nominate candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature from 1976 to 1980. The cornerstone of Dr. Van Sertima's legacy will probably be his authorship of *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America*. According to Van Sertima: "The African presence in America before Columbus is of importance not only to African and American history, but to the history of world civilizations. The African presence is proven by stone heads, terra cottas, skeletons, artifacts, techniques and inscriptions, by oral traditions and documented history, by botanical, linguistic and cultural data." *They Came Before Columbus* is a groundbreaking historical work and a literary hallmark. The ideas and themes presented in *They Came Before Columbus* were not novel. Indeed, many people had written on the African presence in pre-Columbian America before Van Sertima, notably Leo Wiener, Kofi Wangara, R.A. Jairazbhoy, Legerand H. Clegg II, and Floyd W. Hayes III, but Van Sertima's book was the first such work of its type written by an African to comprehensively address the subject. In his own words, Van Sertima notes that: "What I have sought to do in this book, therefore, is to present the whole picture emerging from these disciplines, all the facts that are now known about the links between Africa and America in pre-Columbian times." *They Came Before Columbus* has now gone through more than twenty printings. It was published in French in 1981, and in the same year was awarded the Clarence L. Holt Prize, a prize awarded every two years "for a work of excellence in literature and the humanities relating to the cultural heritage of Africa and the African diaspora." In 1979 Dr. Chancellor Williams received the Clarence L. Holt prize for the *Destruction of Black Civilization*. Following upon the publication of *They Came Before Columbus*, and equally momentous, in 1979 Dr. Van Sertima founded the *Journal of African Civilizations* which quickly gained "a reputation for excellence and uniqueness among historical and anthropological journals. It is recognized as a valuable information source for both the layman and student." The late St. Clair Drake described the *Journal of African Civilizations* as "one of the most important events in the development of research and publication from the perspective of Pan-African

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scholarship." Van Sertima set the tone early on when he stated that:"The destruction of African high-cultures after the massive and continuous invasions of Europe left many Africans surviving on the periphery or outer ring of what constituted the best in African civilizations. New facts that challenge this image create such consternation and incredulity that an extraordinarily emotional campaign is mounted by some of the most respected voices in the scientific establishment to explain away the new data. That drift of dynastic Egypt from Africa has now dramatically slowed. Recent archeological finds have caught up with the mythmakers. More and more the history of Africa is being reconstructed upon the basis of hard, objective data rather than upon the self-serving speculations and racist theories about the black barbarians." Since 1979 the Journal of African Civilizations has published works by and about many of the world's finest Africanist scholars in a series of magnificent anthologies. These works include Blacks in Science, Nile Valley Civilizations, African Presence in Early America, Black Women in Antiquity, Egypt Revisited, Egypt: Child of Africa, African Presence in Early Europe, Golden Age of the Moor, African Presence in the Art of the Americas, Great Black Leaders, Great African Thinkers (coedited with Larry Obadele Williams), and African Presence in Early Asia (coedited with Runoko Rashidi). In 1998 Transaction Press produced Van Sertima's newest text--Early America Revisited--the definitive statement on the subject. On July 7, 1987 Dr. Van Sertima appeared before a Congressional Committee to challenge the Columbus myth. In November 1991 he defended his thesis in an address to the Smithsonian Institute. In this arena Ivan Van Sertima has emerged as an undefeated champion. Please post your comments directly online or submit them to Milton@blackstarnews.com for posting.

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