

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CJP-1  
What is Africa to me ?

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93 Cornwall Gardens  
London, S. W. 7.  
England

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Almost three decades ago, a Negro American poet in a moment of anguish and passionate ignorance, wrote:

One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me ?

As it probably did to most Negroes in America, this powerful question, in all its full and threatening might, possessed me during the tender years of childhood, unreason and eager repression. My answer, of course, in screaming silence, was nothing, nothing, nothing! For Africa was the place of the savage, the natural abode of evil, the banquet hall of the cannibal, and the pit of blackness itself. This sure knowledge of my socially more important contemporaneous ancestors, was first made available in the pages of the history and geography books of elementary school. There, among the handsome Nordics, the noble Indian, the dignified Oriental, and the sinewy Polynesian, stood the naked African, with a bone in his nose, an elongated head, and prognathous jaw.

The shortcomings of the African, already fully documented by book and picture, were further under-scored by any number of lectures on the glories of Rome, Greece, and Mesopotamia plus one more lecture on the failure of the black race to make any contribution to civilization. Effectively buttressing the views of book and teacher were the movies where Africans always seemed to be dancing nudely and lewdly, preparing to sacrifice a young white maiden, or comically serving "bwana" or "the Great White Hunter". The African "knowledge" of school and movie was further sustained by the comic section of the newspapers, where the Katzenjammer Kids stalked the cannibal king; Tarzan slew rampaging black savages with his bare hands; and Jungle Jim was always a match for any ten Africans.

With this certain and sole knowledge available, it is not surprising that in the days of my growing up, the most terrible thing anyone could call you in addition to "black nigger" was "black African". For me and my Negro friends, deeply and emotionally outnumbered in a world of white goodness, "black" was a fighting word, used to compound the basic racial obscenities of nigger and African. Africa was indeed, the very source of blackness, father and mother to the nigger within. To honor such parents was to dishonor oneself, and so like thousands of my fellow Negroes the answer of my early years was always nothing, Africa is nothing to me.

With Africa written all over me, in the colour of my skin, the shape of my nose, the size of my mouth and the curl of my hair, it becomes clear that my answer of nothing originated from the severest kind of racial schizophrenia. The very vehemence of the shame and the denial, so common to all the Negroes I knew, demonstrated the ugly morass of self hatred in which many of us flounder to this day. The most poignant part of the whole business was the unchecked, subversive, and ridiculous ease with which this image of our contemporaneous ancestors, and thus of ourselves, became buried at the core of our innermost being. Still the image has never stayed buried, for the magic racial obscenities were, and are, always around to invoke its presence. Not for long, because the skill of repression also includes the skill of re-internment. For me this process worked well up until my thirteenth year.

One fall day I sat in a seventh grade geography class, the "only Negro" (and how those words were to haunt my school years). The teacher, grey, grandmotherly, and benign, had given much time and attention to the places and peoples of the earth. High among the things given particular emphasis was the classification of the Indians of Asia as racially Caucasian, thus assuring the white population a safe majority in the world. In the words of the teacher, "They are really white". Her remarks were a kind of curious analogue to that ancient blues of self-hatred choked up by Fats Waller, "What did I do to be so black and blue . . . I'm white, deep down inside". This dispensation of "white insidedness", freely and generously offered to Indians, was offered by my school teachers to only three Africans, Cleopatra, the Queen of Sheba, and Simon of Cyrene.

Having confirmed and expounded the usual negative American judgements on Africa and blackness, and having sung the praises of the world's white heritage, my teacher of geography, now called upon the pupils of the class to demonstrate the richness of the American cultural "melting pot" by listing on the blackboard at the front of the class,

those countries in which their families had originated. One by one, my fellow pupils marched to the front of the class, and, often with a flourish of pride, added the name of any ancestral country not yet represented on the board. In that small time, as my turn drew closer and my confusion increased, for the first time I openly and fully confronted the question, "What is Africa to me?" In this naked situation, this "only" situation, the nothing of the young, young years would not suffice. My "aloneliness" meant that I was starkly visible to the others of my class, and these others, these generalized others, were in turn a mirror in which I clearly beheld the darkness of Africa written upon my brow and being. I arose in self-consciousness, defiance and anger and wrote Africa on the board. It was a moment of self-knowledge and truth. Africa was something to me, Africa was something to all Negroes in America.

Over the years, implicitly and explicitly, in word and behaviour, Americans, Negro and white, have attempted to give specificity to that something. The African revolution of this decade has intensified search and analysis. Published articles have increased, debate has intensified, experts have come forth, acrimony has risen in the air. I would like to review some of the more vivid conceptions of the relationship which have appeared in recent months. Some are direct and declaratory, others more indirect and elusive.

At first glance, points of view appear to be determined by racial affiliation. In the last few months two white authors have particularly infuriated Negro intellectuals with their analysis of the relationship between Negro Americans and Africans.

The more controversial and annoying of the two, "Strangers in Africa", was written by Russel Warren Howe (The Reporter, June, 1961), the other, "Back to Africa", by Harold Isaacs (the New Yorker, May 13, 1961).

The burden of the Howe article is that Negro Americans are more "the stranger" than non-Negroes in Africa. They are "Europeans in disguise", and thus the African sees "that most suspicious of persons - a black man who does not speak the local tribal language and whose language he, the African, probably does not speak, or speaks only imperfectly". This means Negro Americans in Africa will find themselves in an "ambiguous situation" filled with "psychological difficulties". "The State Department, his university, or his company thinks that because he is 'Afro-American' he will be more acceptable to African people . . . . But on the whole the policy of using a large number of American Negroes in African jobs is dangerous for all concerned - the employer, the usually discontented or disenchanting Negro, the natives and the United States."

While Howe's discussion is primarily concerned with African reactions to Negro Americans, it contains within it an implied answer to the question of what Africa is to American Negroes. For them it is a place of ambiguity, psychological difficulties, alienation, discontent, disenchantment, and danger.

Isaacs "Back to Africa" makes a direct attempt to explore the nature of the American Negro's relationship to Africa. He found that "practically all the American Negroes I met in West Africa had come to the ancestral continent with some form of the same idea in their minds. They had come looking for freedom from racism and prejudice, or at least for a racial situation that counted them in instead of out - that provided solace and a sense of identity in a world where everyone was black. They had also looked for a chance to share in the new pride of achievement stemming from the black man's reassertion of himself and his 'African Personality'. In West Africa, in a small way and for a short time, the Negro pilgrim can find some of this. But it does not last long - hardly past the first flush of the sensation of being in a place where the white man is not master. Almost invariably, the Negro pilgrim in Africa soon finds himself not free at all, more than ever without solace and a sense of identity, fighting new patterns of prejudice, and suffering the pangs of a new kind of outsidersness. He had thought that he was alien in America, but discovers that he is more alien in Africa. Whether he likes it or not he is American, and in Africa he becomes an American in exile."

All this suggests that for American Negroes, Africa is a kind of Gethsemane, from which they emerge to find themselves confronted and burdened with the cross of their own American identity.

Negro reaction to the melodramatic work of Howe and the more thoughtful probing work of Isaacs was bitter, angry, and highly emotional. It was probably best exemplified in a series of three articles, written by Negroes, released by the Associated Negro Press. The first of these, by Dr. Horace Mann Bond, Dean of the School of Education of Atlanta University and consultant to a number of African governments and organizations, disputed the factual content of the Howe article; assailed the methods of study of both Isaacs and Howe; offered his personal experiences as a testimonial rebuttal; and concluded there was deliberate malicious mischief underlying the commissioning and timing of the two articles. "The editors knew that an avid public would welcome such articles; and so, they commissioned them to be written to supply the waiting market. Themes: Negroes don't like Africans. Africans don't like Negroes; there is mutual prejudice between them, it is dangerous to send American Negroes to Africa."

Dr. Bond's vigorous and passionate reaction is much like that of the Negro father of eighteen children, who when informed that he should practice birth control, indignantly replied "You white folks don't want us to have nothing, do you."

The other two ANP releases were written by Dr. A. Lee Tinnin, who has travelled extensively in Africa as a representative of Olin-Mathieson International Corporation, and Edward W. Brice, who was stationed for five years in Liberia as a U. S. government official. Both follow the same pattern of criticism laid down by Bond, and both reflect the same basic fear; the fear, in the words of Tinnin, that negroes would be "left out at this crucial juncture in history."

The deeper significance of these Negro rejoinders lies in the fervor of the response, and, in what the response does not say. For the Howe and Isaacs articles challenge the assumption of special privilege for Negroes in America's growing involvement with Africa, and special privilege within American society is indeed a new and promising vision for Negro Americans. Some Negro intellectuals, having escaped the African education of my geography teacher, years ago saw in the prospective power of Pan-Africanism -- basically a creation of American Negro intellectuals -- the answer to the problems of Negro dignity, status, prestige and acceptance in American society. To them Negro special privilege in Africa, fully accepted by the American government, by universities, and corporations, represents a giant step forward for Negroes within American society, regardless of the validity or lack of validity of Negro special privilege and assumed usefulness. Africa emergent then, particularly to Negro intellectuals, is hope at home.

James Baldwin (The New York Times Magazine, March 1, 1961) puts it pungently. "It signals, at last, the end of the Negro situation in this country as we have known it thus far. Any effort, from here on out, to keep the Negro in his 'place' can only have the most extreme and unlucky repercussions." African \*uhuru means "The American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again be controlled by white America's image of him."

While these points of view by no means exhaust an analysis of the "something" between American Negroes and Africans, they do represent major areas of disagreement and misunderstanding. Howe is certainly right when he argues that psychological difficulties lie in wait for American Negroes in Africa. It is doubtful, however, that these difficulties represent danger "for all concerned". Such a broad assessment leaves out the tremendous range of individual differences between American Negroes now scattered all over West Africa. The most important point made by Howe and Isaacs is that a common color and a

\* "Freedom"

shared history of racial oppression is not necessarily the basis for a continuity of common understanding and common goals. They, however, are writing about Negro Americans in Africa, and the limitations and disappointments of their specific situation can not be transferred without critical reservations to the massive, more amorphous African-Negro relationship developing within the United States. Isaacs does not attempt this transfer. Rather his analysis implies that amorphous Afro-American uhuru has not carved out a special niche for Afro-Americans in African societies, and that those looking for such a resting-place are doomed to disappointment.

This piece of truth is hurtful to many Negroes because it threatens the newly gained special privilege, and, consequently, blunts the use of a new weapon in the real war at home in America. In fact it has been secretly argued by some that those Negroes literally "going back" to Africa to stay, not for visit or special assignment, are potentially traitors to the cause at home, for they are neurotics and misfits, bound to be disappointed and disenchanted wherever they go. Their disenchantment exposes intimate social stratagems and tactics. Truly they would seem to be a more appropriate target of Negro ire than Isaacs, if not Howe. Their "failure" in Africa weakens the chance that "that the American Negro can no longer . . . . be controlled by white America's image of him".

"What is Africa to me?" For thousands of Negroes it is a way into the heart of American society. What are American Negroes to Africans? That's a matter for future letters.

Most sincerely,



Charles J. Patterson

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