

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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IS EBONY REALLY AN INSTRUMENT OF
CULTURAL IMPERIALISM ?

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University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Earlier this month when I arrived at Ghana's International Airport one of the first things to attract my attention was a big black newspaper headline that proclaimed: "EBONY: AN INSTRUMENT OF IMPERIALISM". Startled, my culture-bound reaction was that they couldn't mean Ebony, not that financially successful chronicler of Negro-American achievements, aspirations and anxieties. But they did.

In its issue of November 22, 1963, The Spark, "A Weekly of the African Revolution", had examined Ebony in light of an announcement that its publisher planned to launch Ebony Africa in twenty-four African countries; the Ghanaian paper, the voice of Ghana's radical left, found the American magazine severely wanting. Its publisher, the Johnson Publishing Company of Chicago, also the proprietor of Jet, Tan and Negro Digest, had announced the setting up of sales and advertising offices for Ebony Africa in Paris, London, and New York and "operating offices" in ten English-speaking and fourteen French-speaking African countries. The first issue of the new periodical is due February 1964.

Era Bell Thompson, co-managing editor of Ebony has been appointed editor of Ebony Africa; within a year a circulation of 250,000 is anticipated. John H. Johnson, president of the publishing house, states that Ebony Africa is being launched because "it offers us an opportunity for expansion and also because it will aid in creating better understanding between Americans and Africans."

Ignoring the high purpose proclaimed by Johnson, The Spark asked in its lead story: "Whose interest is Ebony Africa likely to serve in Africa?" For an answer the "Weekly of the African Revolution" turned to "the great Afro-American sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier"; who had "revealed" that Ebony is an instrument of the "black bourgeoisie" that serves two purposes: first the propagation of "the myth" of Negro business, and second, the creation of "a world of make believe" as a compensation for an inferior status keenly felt by the "black bourgeoisie".

Thus, charges The Spark, Ebony's efficacious evocation of "myth" and "make believe" serves only to subvert and hinder the freedom struggle of Afro-American people.

As glaring proof of Ebony's racial perfidy, the Ghanaian paper cited a story in a recent edition that dealt with the civil rights records of four American presidents of the immediate past (Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower). Truman was singled out as the most sympathetic to the Negro-American's fight for civil rights. This was the same Truman, The Spark angrily pointed out, who, when asked his opinion on the civil rights march in Washington last August, had underscored his opposition to the march by asking the inquiring white reporter "the significant question: Would you like your daughter to marry a Negro?"

"This answer and suggestion, The Spark contended, "could have been made by the die-hard racists, Dr. Verwoerd, Roy Welensky or Winston Field, and yet Harry Truman is the man Johnson's Ebony put up as a champion of the Afro-American cause."

Now while The Spark objects to Ebony because of what it perceives as the magazine's subtle betrayal of the "Afro-American struggle", that is not the main source of its hard opposition to an African entree by the Johnson Publishing Company. The heart of their objection is that "Johnson publications have never accepted the African revolution. In fact they are opposed to African Unity.

"It is obvious that not only will Ebony Africa poison the atmosphere in Africa with neo-colonialist theories, but it will also propagate the cause of disunity."

Johnson will devote its "substandard reading materials" to propagating the customary illusory image of America, for Ebony in particular "believes that America is a country where the impossible is slightly less attainable than the difficult." There will be pictures galore of the American kitchen - "a dazzling porcelain and chrome spectacle, complete with refrigerator, disposal unit, deep freeze, automatic washer and drier, and electric stove" - which serves as Ebony's "monument to the glory of capitalistic society."

The Spark added to its withering indictment the charge that John H. Johnson would not only "subvert Africa with slick and cheap American propaganda but that he would also "be able to convince the manufacturers and advertisers of Europe'

and America of the important role he will play in shaping African opinion. Through this Johnson will monopolize a great deal of advertising revenue".

To demonstrate that they were not alone in their suspicions and their rejection of Ebony, the "revolutionary" weekly cited a resolution passed in November 1963 at the Accra Conference of Pan African Journalists:

"To protect the independence of Africa and to preserve its unity, the African Press should fight against any literary invasion of the Continent. Slick magazines and other publications of a subversive nature hiding behind the glamour and attraction of their designs should be exposed and utterly condemned. We should be careful of publications which preach harmony where there is disharmony and publications which publish only success stories and ignore the sufferings of the masses."

The Spark's lead story, while vigorous in its denunciation of Ebony, centered its attack on the content of the magazine and on the individual ultimately responsible for it. The lead editorial, going much further, perceived a more murky, Machiavellian machination behind Ebony's African project, the addition of "a brand new weapon.... to the armoury of U.S. imperialism in Africa". What follows is a harsh analysis of how that "weapon" is to operate and the suggested methods whereby Africa can defend itself against it:

"Obviously enjoying the blessing of policy-makers in the State Department and the financial support of U.S. big business, Ebony is setting out boldly to enslave the mind of Africa with cheap, dazzling propaganda of the American way of life. They wish to impress on our minds the brighter side of the affluent society, forgetting that we know of the deplorable life led by 20 million Negroes in the USA and forgetting we know that the poverty of Africa for decades has been a contributory factor to the affluence enjoyed by imperialist countries today.

"The technique of U.S. imperialism is to promote its interests in Africa by using American Negroes. They staff their information centres with Afro-Americans. They accommodate a few Afro-Americans on their embassy staff. They send these Negroes out in AMSAC, in Operation Crossroads', in the Peace Corps, etc. Now they are out to use a Negro magazine - Ebony - to continue their onslaught on Africa. The whole idea is to get us to embrace U.S. imperialism by using as vehicles for this way of life people of the same colour of skin as ourselves.

"Africa must awaken to this subtlety and cunning. The truth must be told that we are not engaged in a colour fight, though the emancipation of our kith and kin is a plank in our platform.

"The African Revolution is out to destroy imperialism in whatever form it chooses to operate and to build in its place a society free from exploitation of man by man. We must know that imperialism, frightened by its weakened position in Africa, will use every stratagem including that of parading under the black skin.

"We have no alternative but to ferret out, expose and decimate all agents and agencies of imperialism. Ebony is one such agency. The colour of the skin of the persons involved should not deceive us. We have to shoot straight at imperialism even if it means shooting at a black skin. This is the duty we owe ourselves."

Intrigued by this heretofore unexpressed African willingness "to shoot straight..... at a black skin", I sought an opportunity to meet Kofi Batsa, the editor of The Spark. A mutual friend, Professor William Abraham, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ghana, quickly arranged for my wife and me to spend an evening at Batsa's home in Accra. The young editor, who welcomed us to his home with a winning smile, has a soft voice, a courteous manner, and a quick and inquiring intellect.

His other visitors included Professor Abraham, an Indonesian journalist, an official of the Ghanaian Trade Union Congress and a famous political refugee from Nigeria, Samuel Ikoku. The conversation was wide ranging and animated, occasionally bristling with such concepts as "guided democracy", "Nigeria for Nigerians", "neo-colonialism", and "cultural colonialism". It was during the discussion of the latter that Batsa expanded his views on Ebony and the political uses of Negro-Americans.

He made it quite clear that the reason he and other Africans distrusted Negroes in the service of the United States government was because of their protective coloration. Negroes could be that most dangerous of enemies, he that looks like me, but is not of me and mine.

Perhaps even more dangerous, and Batsa smiled gently at my wife and me as he said it, were Afro-Americans who come as scholars with no ostensible connections with the government. Behind them one always had to look for the long shadow of the CIA. Therefore the policy of his paper was to advise Africans to be wary of all Americans until somehow they have proved themselves true friends of the African revolution*. For Africa too, eternal vigilance is

* One of the other guests pointed out that our credentials, at least for the evening, lay in our old friendship with Professor Abraham.

the price of liberty and after all, said Kofi Batsa, with a perception not yet achieved by some white Americans, Negroes are Americans, and therefore like other Americans quite willing to spy, die and lie for their country. Such patriotic dedication, in tandem with their protective racial coloration, does indeed make them excellent "vehicles" for "cultural imperialism".

Still uncertain as to the character of "cultural imperialism", I pressed Batsa for more details. This is the substance of his lengthy analysis:

In colonial and former colonial territories the cultural situation is distressing, for wherever colonization has triumphed, the indigenous culture has deteriorated. From the deteriorated culture there then arises something that might be described as a sub-culture. It is not really a culture because it is "condemned" to remain on the fringes of Western culture and to be the domain of only a small elite group. This group, dwelling in a contrived situation and cut off from the sustaining power of the masses and their genuine culture, cannot produce a life-giving culture that is true to the society's traditions and true to the people's current revolutionary identity.

Instead, what is created are immense expanses of cultural wasteland, or, something that is essentially the same thing, great piles of perverted cultural by-products from the West - such as Ebony with its slick advertisements for skin lighteners and hair straighteners.

A people, contends Batsa, are not just an aggregate of individuals. They are an organic whole, and in that organism all values must mesh. Those Africans who by virtue of education and experience are extremely sensitized to this social fact must bear the spear, as it were, for the bulk of the people.

The rest of Batsa's views are best summed up in a statement made by Alioune Diop, editor of Presence Africaine, at the First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists:

"The men of culture of the Negro world..... have certain responsibilities in purifying the morals and languages of that culture which the West tends to impose upon the whole planet. This culture, which would have truly universal appeal, could only take substance from the intervention of particular cultures. In the face of that culture our role in the immediate future must be to redress all the errors and false values introduced and turned into institutions in Europe by a unilaterally creative subjectivity,

whose passionate urge was given tenfold strength by the whole weight of European imperialism. If, as we have said, culture is a dialogue, which begins with our disagreements, and reaches the level of our innermost reasons for living, then, however heroic and gigantic has been the cultural experience of Europe, she is inevitably tainted with aesthetic, philosophic and spiritual errors and shortcomings."

Ebony then, has been found guilty by Batsa and his colleagues as an "instrument of imperialism" because it is "tainted with aesthetic, philosophic and spiritual errors and shortcomings".

I was amused when I first saw Ebony described as an "instrument of imperialism". Our encounter* with this friendly Marxist editor with the steel mind and no nonsense air dissipated my amusement. The Spark was not kidding and their conclusions are not as capricious or far fetched as they seem at first glance. Batsa and Diop's analyses are firmly based on the historical experience of Africa. Wariness of Americans, Negro and otherwise; irritation at the sight of gleaming kitchens that are so far from the African reality, at least the reality of the African masses; resentment of the revenue to be taken out of Africa; and a perception of Ebony's schizoid position on civil rights and the value of a light complexion are sound reasons for lack of enthusiasm for the magazine's establishment in "revolutionary Africa".

That Ebony is "tainted" cannot be gainsaid, for it is the creation of a group of people who for centuries have themselves dwelt in cultural wastelands on the fringe of Western culture.

But Ebony as a deliberately employed instrument of "U. S. imperialism"?

Bosh.

Sincerely yours,


CHARLES J. PATTERSON

* My thoughts turn at this point to the famous model kitchen encounter between Richard Nixon and Nikita Krushchev.