

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Harold Issacs Revisited

June 1, 1964
60 Netherhall Way
Cambridge, England

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Three years ago Harold Issacs wrote an article in The New Yorker called "Back to Africa". Much to his surprise, and disillusionment, it brought forth a gale of abusive rebuttal from the Negro press and Negro Africanists.

Having explored some of the social and psychological aspects of the prolonged residency of Negro-Americans in Africa, he had come to these conclusions: "... 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 in which 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 blush 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."

Of the 129 Negro-Americans I met in Africa at least fourteen of them exhibited attitudes and behavior that supported Issacs' conclusions. They had come looking for freedom from racism and prejudice, for a situation that counted them in, that provided solace and a sense of identity; and, they insisted, all these things they had found in Africa. The very vehemence with which they asserted their new found freedom denied that there was solace in their "all black" world. They confirmed too much and their conversation turned again and again to the hurts of their past and the continuing deviltry of white people in America. In Lagos for example, one young Negro-American businessman for a few moments would speak exuberantly of his life in Nigeria, and then, with a great deal of poignance, he would speak to me as a fellow Negro-American about the good old days in "The States". He reminded me of combat days in Italy when my fellow infantrymen and I wistfully wondered if we would ever see "The States" again.

For these few, the discovery of being an alien in Africa and an American in exile was so painful that they naturally refused to acknowledge that it was so. Yet so much energy and anger went into their efforts to affirm their new freedom, that I could not help but feel theirs was the kind of hurt that could only be soothed at its source: America.

These fourteen had all come to Africa by personal means. They had come as small scale entrepreneurs, as wives of Africans, or in hopes of finding employment with an African government. Their situation was quite different from that of most of the Negro-Americans I met in Africa. This majority had come as representatives, or under the sponsorship of four kinds of American institutions: the federal government, universities, foundations, and large corporations. They were institutionalized Americans who had arrived in Africa via American vehicles. In the case of the government employees, most of them not only spent their working days on premises owned by the United States but also lived in suburban neighborhoods with other Americans. In Ibadan white Americans wryly referred to one such community as "The American Ghetto", a label never used by Negro-Americans who lived there. As one Negro A.I.D. official put it, "Hell, if they had had to live in some place like Harlem, they wouldn't toss that word around so freely."

This bitter remark did not typify the feelings of the Negro government employees. They, and their wives, were oriented more to the unique experience of living a racially integrated life with white Americans. Ironically, in Africa, "the Black Continent", they were experiencing a degree of freedom and intimacy with white Americans they had never known at home. Only twelve out of these fifty-five government people had grown up and gone to colleges and universities in the north. The others were all products of the segregated south and had received their education in all-Negro schools and colleges. Some had been teachers and professors. Now they worked for the Agency for International Development or the United States Information Service.

(Out of the twelve northerners, nine were with the Peace Corps. These nine, plus two volunteers from the south were of another generation and another breed. Their identification was with the Peace Corps, not the "United States Government".)

The apparent preponderance of southern Negroes in the A.I.D. might be accounted for by the agricultural nature of the A.I.D. program in Africa. Many of the better Negro universities and colleges concentrate on agriculture, and consequently graduates from these institutions made ideal agents for some of the A.I.D. programs.

These Negro-American government people have found "a racial situation that counts them in instead of out", but they have not found it among Africans, but among their fellow Americans working in Africa. Their pride of achievement stems from being an integral part of America abroad. One of

the best examples of this integration was a 4th of July picnic sponsored by the American "Ghetto" in Ibadan. The running, shouting American kids, the American movies, the American flag flapping in the breeze, the long line of American cars parked in front of the picnic area, the 4th of July oratory, the baseball games, the barbecue, the home-baked cakes, plus the easy and obvious participation of Negro and white Americans added up to a sense of American identity that had nothing to do with Africa. Here, for some Negro-Americans was a new kind of insidersness -- an American among Americans.

The strength of this "American" experience is indicated by an incident that took place in one African city. The wife of a Negro official had gone to a dental clinic sponsored by an American Protestant mission. While waiting her turn she saw the white American missionary-dentist slap a little African boy who had become hysterical at the prospect of dental treatment. Her "gorge rose", she said, "at the idea of that white man hitting that little colored boy." This was the kind of thing, she decided, that should be called to the attention of the American consul. Because "it certainly is not the way to make friends for our country". Her husband being away, she confided in another Negro official. His response was, "Damn it, you people want to drag that civil rights business with you wherever you go. Don't you know that kind of thing has got nothing to do with your husband's career out here?" She discussed it with other Negro-American government people. Finding they agreed with her first adviser, she decided to drop the matter. "After all", she concluded, we are here representing the American Government, not the race."

The situation of Negro-Americans who have gone to Africa under the sponsorship of American foundations or universities is quite different from that of the private entrepreneurs and the United States Government employees, but, like the government people, they have also found a racial situation that counts them in as Americans. Their "solace" lies in receiving some of the better regards of membership in American society. Their sense of identity is in the world of American intellectual life and they are now sharing in the growth of a fashionable and important area of intellectual exploration -- Africa. They may well be sharing in it because white Americans assume that their commonality of race with Africans gives them a special insight and affinity. Still, to them, the important thing is being included by these high status American institutions. For them, the very source of alienation in America, membership in the Negro race, has become the means whereby they can reduce or even end any sense of estrangement.

While living in Africa, they tend to have many more contacts with Africans than government employees. Because they do not come as pilgrims, there is no doomed expectation of belonging, although there is anticipation that in Africa they will be free from all immediate blows of prejudice and discrimination.

Practically all the university and foundation people I talked with did have a common emotional experience upon first seeing Africa, an experience that might be likened to a long postponed visit to a graveyard wherein lie the remains of parents or other ancestors one has never known. The communication at a time like this is one-sided. For the citizens of the "graveyard"; i.e., the citizens of Africa, cannot speak to you, indeed they don't even know you are there. Yet, you know them well, for what they were is now a vital if unknown part of yourself.

As one sensitive Negro observer put it after wandering around the streets of a large African city, "I see the faces of people I know, but they don't know me."

Dr. Howard Thurman, Dean of Marsh Chapel, Boston University, and once visiting professor at the University of Ibadan, upon seeing Africa for the first time expressed the depth of his one-way communication:

"From my cabin window I look out on the full moon and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters, how many years ago they came. What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep heavy darkness of the foul smelling hold of the ship, where they could not see the sky, nor hear the night noises, nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony. How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools of the spirit were in their hearts with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair? ... There were no gods to hear, no magic spell of witch doctor to summon; even one's companion in chains muttered his quivering misery in an unknown tongue. O, my fathers, what was it like to be stripped of all supports of life except the beating of the heart and the ebb and flow of fetid air in the lungs? In a strange moment did some intimation from the future give to your spirit a wink of promise? In the darkness did you hear the silent feet of your children beating a melody of freedom to words which you would never know, in a land in which your bones would be warmed again, in the depths of the earth in which you would sleep, unknown, unrealized and alone?"

It is true, as Harold Issacs says, that the Negro-American in Africa may share "in the new pride of achievement stemming from the black man's reassertion of himself and his African personality" for "a short time". It is not true, however, that it is in a "small way". For the sharing takes place on the deep emotional level of common racial experience. Even among the most sophisticated and racially rational Negro-Americans in Africa the quality of their African experience survives disappointments at African political shenanigans and the deflation of any overly-optimistic racial expectations.

If all this does not seem a sufficient basis for claiming a continuing and real Negro-American emotional investment in Africa, there is the occasional African "response" that turns one-way communication into a

dialogue. The poet-president of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, made such a "response" when he saw Negro-American soldiers marching in Senegal during World War II:

"I did not recognize you in your prison of sad-coloured
uniforms
I did not recognize you under that calabash helmet with
no plume
I did not recognize the quavering whinny of your iron
horses that drink but do not eat,
No longer the nobility of elephants but the barbaric
clumsiness of monsters from the foretime of the
world.
Under your closed faces I did not recognize you.
I only touched the warmth of your brown hand. I said
my name, 'Afrika!'
And found again lost laughter, I greeted the ancient voice
and the roar of cascades of the Congo."

For most Negro-Americans, being in Africa does confirm their American identity. It is a surprising and pleasing experience for Americans who have heretofore been first, foremost and only, Negroes. Only those most severely wounded by a land they love more than they know, cannot, as yet, grasp this.

Sincerely yours,



Charles J. Patterson

CJP:rg

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NEGRO-AMERICANS ENCOUNTERED IN AFRICA

United States Government

Agency for International Development	16
Peace Corps	12
United States Information Service	7
Military Attaches	1

Academics

Foundation Fellows	5
Researchers Sponsored by American Universities	6
Holders of Appointments in African Universities	10
Foundation Employees	2
Students at African Universities	10

Personal Situation

Wives of Individuals (U.S. Govt. Personnel, university people, foundations, etc.)	29
Wives of Africans	12

Business

Company representatives	5
Small Scale Entrepreneurs	4

African Government Employees

Secondary Education	4
Medicine	2
Civil Service	4

TOTAL	<u>129</u>
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