

## AFRICA'S CONTRIBUTION TO WESTERN IDEAS

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**D**URING the last fifty years the majority of Western ideas have been conditioned, or rather dominated, by science. By the end of the last century scientists in Europe and America had become more or less intoxicated by the success with which mathematical reasoning had been applied to experimental observation, and this had bred a feeling of certainty that the ultimate knowledge of nature was at hand. The French mathematician Laplace, for example, believed that if the position and motion of every atom in the universe were known at a given instant, the whole future of the cosmos could be predicted. The work of Darwin was regarded as having established that every living thing was the logical consequence of a single chemical synthesis which had produced the first living cell. It thus seemed that the history of matter was predetermined and that the technological mastery of the clever and diligent Western nations over less inspired countries was ensured. This conception of an amoral, all-pervading science was gradually passed on through schools, colleges, lectures and newspapers to the public at large. Its impact upon intellectuals resulted in materialism and dialectical argument, while it produced among less-educated people a mixture of bewilderment and expectancy.

The attitude of the professional scientist of today is a much humbler one. As our knowledge of the very small and very large increased, almost all the cherished laws of classical physics have had to be modified as they cannot be applied to the atom or the cosmos. For example, to observe an atom implies interference with either its position or its motion or both, and a detailed knowledge of one of these factors implies a corresponding lack of information about the other. Scientists resolve the difficulty by using in their calculations an ingenious, if somewhat defeatist, device known as Planck's Constant, which is the smallest possible product of the two uncertainties. One can easily see how this axiom overturns the concepts of Newton and Laplace which require that the position and velocity of a mass be precisely known at a given instant of time.

The modern Western scientist, of course, has fully recovered from the day-dreams which pervaded the minds of his predecessors. Indeed, there are some who doubt whether it is humanly possible

to establish the eternal validity of any theory, but unfortunately, the popular outlook engendered by older presumptions continues to die hard. Among even scientific intellectuals are those, even today, who scarcely admit the existence of anything which is not susceptible to scientific inquiry, while more ordinary people, who perhaps can be forgiven for not understanding the revolution in scientific thought, are still inclined to believe that the scientist competes, as it were, with God in determining the future of mankind. Yet eventually the proper place of science as a servant and not a master of man will become recognized. When the idea of scientific certainty becomes more correctly supplanted in men's minds as a conception of balanced indeterminism, and when it is realized by everyone, as it is now by scientists themselves, that science should not be expected to give final answers, but simply to explain the physical world with the fewest possible concepts, then Western thinkers will again examine non-scientific problems by methods in which humanitarianism, rather than science, predominates. It will then seem strange that science could ever have dominated our discussions of those things which determine what we, as individuals, really are, namely religion, politics and sex, subjects in which the best lessons are learned not by looking with a telescope into the future, but by taking a microscope to the past. As Chaucer wrote in 1382,

'For out of oldē feldēs, as men scith  
Cometh all this newē corn from year to year.  
And out of oldē bokēs in good faith,  
Cometh all this newē science that men lere.'

And what 'older feldē' from which to reap this 'newē corn' is there than Africa?

While our scientific revolutions were proceeding in the West, Africa made little or no contribution to the welter of new knowledge. There were many reasons why the peoples of that continent were unable to share in the great and sudden surge of scientific ideas. We are only beginning to realize the great potential which Africa holds in regard to scientific study. In the field of medicine, one need only mention the classical studies on blood groups and infectious disease which have already been made there, and the present researches into cancer and heart disease which will undoubtedly benefit the whole of mankind. It seems certain that within another generation African scientists in many spheres will be contributing to the advancement of science throughout the world. For the reasons which I have given, though, it is necessary for Africa to yield up its knowledge of the humanities as well—to contribute to science in the Chaucerian sense, of learning in its widest implications.

Many African peoples are known to the sophists of the West as 'primitives', which means that their philosophies and their ways of life are extremely close to nature. This does not imply that their ideas are regarded as simpler than those of the European. Indeed, in many instances they are much more complicated. Here in Europe where we live at such a distance from nature that the sound of a song-bird in a street is looked upon as a marvel, our lives have been simplified by a host of social and legal conventions which we accept, not rationally, but because they bring us to terms with science. Many millions of people in Africa, on the other hand, still meet the challenge of living face to face with nature, overcoming difficulty with skill, and adorning their skill with beauty, just as nearly all men did in this country before science, with industrialization close behind, overtook them. Perhaps these African communities will become the only people on earth to retain a noble conception of human rights and values. Never before has Africa's opportunity been greater than it is today to enrich the lives of Western man with lessons from its history, its art, its religion and its social conduct.

Hitherto throughout the centuries one can glimpse only an occasional exchange of cultural ideas between the two continental societies. The great natural barriers of the Sahara and the Atlantic presented formidable problems to those who sought intercourse with Africa, and of those who penetrated these regions, only a few returned to relate what they had learnt. This difficulty of communication was never overcome even by missionaries, and although we learn of an occasional exchange of religious influence with Africa, such as the Coptic influence on the early Fathers of the Church in terms of its unusual asceticism, for reasons which I have never clearly understood no determined effort was made to spread Christianity in tropical Africa for hundreds of years after the religion was established. In later times, the bulk of Africa became even more inaccessible through the occupation of North Africa by hostile Moorish kingdoms.

In the realm of music for example, one of the earliest contacts between African and European was recorded at the end of the fifteenth century when Lasso, a great madrigal writer of the time, was impressed by the singing of a negro chorus which he heard in Naples. Lasso, whose own influence on Western music was by no means negligible—for instance, Bach's hymn from the *St Matthew Passion* was based on one of his love-songs—seems to have experimented in some of his minor compositions with structures of tone and rhythm taken from those strolling players.

The notorious slave-trade of the following centuries was conducted

on lines utterly barbaric and devoid of any human considerations. Exported Africans took with them, however, the only belongings they were allowed to carry—their songs, which they knew by heart, and which have influenced American music ever since. As in all cultural associations, the influential give-and-take has become a complicated one; the Negro spiritual of today may not be an entirely African inheritance, as it may well have been influenced by the hymnal traditions of the American evangelical churches to which Africans have always been admitted. At least one modern authority, Harris, doubts to what extent true Negro music has fathered modern jazz. He considers that jazz is the type of composition which would naturally emerge from any society torn from its musical heritage and isolated in a hostile environment without recourse to other musical sources or even instruments on which to perform. None the less, even though the original African element in jazz may thus be disputed, this form of music, which has had a profound effect on Western life, could hardly have come down to us at all had it not been for the American Negro. The present situation has a certain grim irony about it. Just as hundreds of African bodies once laboured and swung to the crack of a white man's whip, so today thousands of Westerners writhe and contort in frenzy to the steady thump of one black hand on a washboard.

In more serious music great difficulties seem to confront the interplay of ideas between Africa and Europe. The tonal implications of African melodies are far removed from Western conventions, and thus far only the rhythmic nature of their compositions has captured the imagination. Unhappily, too, it is easier and financially more rewarding to write music for the feet rather than for the mind, and any young African composer may be forgiven for succumbing to the temptation of satisfying popular rather than critical demand. A few established composers have tried to pave the way for the introduction of serious African musical ideas. The modern Brazilian master, Villa-Lobos, stated that he had been influenced by the music of African descendants in South America, although this is not by any means obvious in his writings. Others, such as Fela Sowande of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, show in their own compositions a manful attempt to set traditional tonal language to Western types of harmony. Although I find the results interesting rather than enjoyable, they certainly do not sound as unpleasant to me as the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky when heard for the first time. Perhaps the best way of introducing African music to Western ears would be through folk-song. The musical idioms of folk-music vary greatly from tribe to tribe in Africa, and some are more acceptable

to European taste than others. Personally, I could listen with pleasure for a long time to a male chorus of Tiv—a relatively small ethnic group of people in the middle belt of Nigeria whose men are naturally gifted with strong, mellifluous baritone voices. A chorus of Hausa girls, too, is not without its vivacity and charm. The whining falsetto of so much of the Ibo song, however, makes it tedious to the Western ear, apart altogether from the formidable linguistic difficulties. Promoters of African music will have to grapple, too, with a number of purely mechanical problems of instrumentation. The majority of instruments played by a Western concert orchestra were built for performances in the relatively equable climate of Europe. Anyone who has kept a piano or a violin for any length of time in tropical Africa will appreciate the difficulties of maintaining such instruments at concert pitch in the teeth of the sudden and often extreme changes of temperature and humidity which the seasons bring. The recent performance of a Katanga Mass at Westminster Cathedral nevertheless shows how much can be done with the voice and instruments of a traditional kind.

Africa has not only a history but a prehistory of the greatest importance which justifies our calling her the cradle of mankind. So far the discoveries in Africa of important links in the story of mankind's evolution have been made by the European as a result of scientific technology. Yet it seems that the important revelations made in South and East Africa are but the forerunners of greater palaeontological resources of the continent. One looks forward to the day when the interpretations of future findings may be made by Africans themselves, for it would seem that those who have lived so close to nature until recent historical times would be better qualified to make deductions concerning aboriginal and ancient ways of life than those whose acquaintance with primitive African life is derived only from academic sources. Unfortunately for Africa the compilation of a historical record depends upon a succession of vulnerable factors: the event to happen clearly, the eye to see, the hand to write it down, and the kindness of posterity to keep it preserved. The great barrier to Africa's historical aspirations is her past illiteracy, and this makes even more urgent the need to record at once the oral traditions which remain from the comparatively recent past. Much work of this kind has been done by Europeans, but no one can tell as yet how much distortion and loss of accuracy is entailed by translation and a necessarily alien verbal imagery. The important thing is to record, in the vernacular, the traditions of Africa's past, permitting learned men later to separate the legendary from the factual by techniques of historical analysis. In Ghana and Nigeria this is being

done, much of it by broadcasting organizations, so that in future years a historical record of adequate size will provide the starting point of an African literature that could enrich the libraries of the West as much as the Persian and Arabian stories of the past. The record of Abuja in the centre of Nigeria, related by two Hausa mallami, has been faithfully chronicled by Frank Heath, who has also retold a number of these tales of African chivalry and romance in English poetry which is truly delightful. Surely, one imagines, the day cannot be far away when the full story of the 'Hausa bokwoi', those great Habe rulers of the Sudan who sprang from a distant ancestor in far-off Baghdad, will find an author capable of setting them in a volume which will grace our shelves alongside the great human legends of Arthur, Tristan, Charlemagne and Scheherazade. But for a masterpiece of that kind the author must be inspired, and able to experience in his own heart the fortunes of his characters. Only an African can fulfil these demands.

This immediate need of patient historical research is, of course, greatly jeopardized by commerce and politics. The educated African looks naturally towards industrial technology, with all its material rewards, to repay him for his scholarship. The temptation is great to turn his back, already grown round-shouldered over books in his student days, upon his heritage, and barter it for the rewards of management and professional influence. But he will do so at his own loss. For when he turns again to his fathers and his uncles to seek in later life the consolations of their experience, he will find their tongues silenced for ever. And with them will have gone a traditional knowledge that he, with all his Western education, can never replace. The political climate of Africa, too, which is naturally concerned with forward trends, is inhospitable to the scholar interested in the study of what has gone before. Many Africans who have had the benefit of Western education despise their forebears, and seek even to distinguish themselves from their kindred. This attitude is mistaken. It is worthwhile remembering that the ancestors of African peoples did what no others could have done under their circumstances—they kept the race alive.

Before I turn from the potential contribution of Africa in historical terms, there is one final consideration. The march of history throughout the continent during the last fifty years has been equivalent, in many ways, to the previous millenium in Europe. And let us not deny it, that leap has been promoted by European domination. That domination is now being relinquished, not altogether to ancestral chieftains, but to a new class of political leader. It is natural for them to wish to remove, or to allow to decay, the traces

of European occupation. And yet when the last fifty years of African history are assessed in the distant future, not in the harsh light of political rancour but in an atmosphere of impartial scholarship, they will be regarded as an essential for the realization of Africa's destiny as the Roman and Norman occupations of this country have been to our peoples. And yet I have often witnessed the destruction of tomorrow's African history. At Ibi on the Benue River I watched the wall of a fort being demolished by African workmen. The wall had been built by the old Niger Company and marked the scene of a battle which, in Nigeria's history, may come to be thought of as much as we regard Hastings today, a battle recorded in the Gazetteer of the old Muri Province as being singular for the valour and bravery of warriors on both sides. I asked the foreman why the wall was being demolished. 'For the bricks', he replied. I asked what they were worth, and he answered, '15s. a thousand'. Fortunately for our historical monuments we price the legacies of our conquerors rather more highly than that. In Calcutta there has been established a museum of British Rule; Northern Nigeria has now begun a schedule of historical monuments, and one can but hope that before long these examples may be followed elsewhere in Africa.

I have already alluded to the contributions Africa might make to world literature in a historical context. The problem of unifying the literary resources of a multilingual continent such as Africa are fortunately not nearly so formidable as those which face Europe. Just as in the early days of European writing, authors used Latin, so now, nearly every literate African has a basic knowledge of at least one major language—and a living one at that. There is no need for African writers to be persuaded by ardent nationalists that the language of their forefathers should be jealously retained to the exclusion of all others. If you have any doubts on this point, get the comments of any Irish engineer whose government made him pass examinations in Erse! In Britain we revere our anthropological background: the Welsh sing like nightingales at an annual festival in a language that scarcely anyone outside their country understands; the Scots perform graceful and athletic war dances with weapons that have not seen battle for two hundred years, and English maidens are occasionally to be found dancing prettily on the perimeter of a maypole—a practice of whose ancient symbolism the charming participants are blissfully unaware: but these races can communicate with each other in the same language. As far as Africa is concerned, works such as Amos Tutuola's 'Palm-wine Drinkard' have already shown what an impression can be made by the African scene described in a European tongue. The writing really derives its

power and conviction from the fact that the authors are African, and if they are the heralds of a school of African novelists, then we in Europe have much to look forward to. In literature, as in music, however, the temptation to write for public applause and to create sensation is hard to withstand. It is easy for a naturally gifted writer to drift into journalism. And bad journalism, more than anything else, is the greatest threat today to African aspirations.

In contrast to the field of literature, in which Africa's contribution lies in the future rather than in the past, the art of that continent has already made a lasting impression on the Western world of sculpture and painting. In West Africa, no one can tell how far back in time the creation of works of art began. They may or may not have existed there before the ancient civilization of Egypt. At Ife, as long ago as the thirteenth century, there flourished a school of bronze and terra cotta unsurpassed in Africa for its naturalism; indeed, much of it shows striking similarities with the Western classics of Greek and Rome. From this school, the bronze, ivory and wood carvings of Benin, the great African empire of the middle ages, may have been derived, before the Portuguese association began in 1486. Although the creations of Ife and Benin bear evidence of Mediterranean influence, the majority of carving and sculpture from other parts of Africa is generally described in the West as 'primitive'. Again this rather unhappy word is used, not in a derogatory sense, or to imply crudeness, but rather to indicate that the artist's conception is a direct one, derived from his own past traditions, without the intervention of an alien intellectualism or foreign material techniques.

Works of this kind from all parts of Africa trickled into Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were donated by the explorers and navigators who brought them home to museums and private collections where they remained in isolated groups undocumented, uncomprehended and covered with dust until the turn of this century, when they began to be enriched by acquisitions from modern expeditions. It was then that their exotic forms, which range from complete naturalism to extremes of stylization, came to be appreciated by Western artists. In this way African art came to the rescue of the new ideas which were meeting such determined orthodox opposition in Europe, and took its place as a most important liberating factor in the rise of modern painting and sculpture. Over the ensuing years the interest kindled by African masterpieces in the minds of Western artists is spreading slowly to a wider public. But much of this art is still utterly divorced from an understanding of the background from which it springs. An



enormous amount of work is needed to acclimatize it and to restore it to its proper context in the story of art in tropical Africa. I remember seeing a picture of a very fine carving, most probably from Dahomey, now exhibited in Paris. The aesthetic pleasure given by this piece would have been tremendously enhanced by a description of the traditional ideas, the period, and the peoples who created it. The label simply bore the laconic message 'Bought in Marseilles'. We are still accustomed to a standard of explanation little better than that—Dahomey headdress, sacred tom-tom, Benin bronze slab—which would be considered deplorable if referring to a catalogue of old Flemish masters or the works of Ghiberti. Can you imagine a Rembrandt in the National Gallery simply labelled 'Bought at Christie's'? I suppose the lack of background information and chronology helps to make primitive art all the more mysterious, and intensifies the dark speculations of the Western mind concerning voodoo rites in the unknown jungle and all that sort of thing. But it does not help in an intellectual appreciation of these inspired works. Much more light needs to be shed on primitive art, and we shall need for this a critical apparatus in which Africans themselves take a full share. So far, we in the West have speculated about primitive art, in the same way as we have done with pre-historic art—as if we never had any hope of getting into touch with the peoples who created it or the culture which put it to use. The visitor to a European museum sees, shall we say, a Wobe mask from the Ivory Coast hanging from a nail on the wall, suspended, toothless and unseeing, described, perhaps, as 'Mask' (which is obvious) 'Ivory Coast' (the whereabouts of which not one in a hundred of the great British public has the faintest idea). The great British public does its best, attempts to create a mental parallel between the mask and some frivolous disguise worn by a clown at the last Olympia circus, decides on balance that it prefers the clown, and passes on to the next exhibit, with five hundred years of African tradition still gazing down, mutely pleading to be understood.

In the long run Negro art will be assessed, not by what Europe thinks of it, but by what the African thinks of it. We still await the day when a school of African artists and critics will sit in judgment on these works and give the Western world an understanding of the total purpose of these creations, the day when masks and the panoply of ritual display are shown, enacted and explained by touring African players in the theatre, the cinema and, if you must, the television; the day when African artists come to our art schools, not to learn but to teach. It is not enough to look back upon the influence that Negro art has already had upon the work of great painters such as

André Lhote and Picasso. In the future we await the interpretation of these objects by African scholars, to bring home the fact that to understand African art it is necessary to have some conception of African religious and social behaviour. The day of primitive African art is passing. As new philosophies and beliefs become part of the personality of future generations of Africans, new art forms must arise. One can but hope that the cross-fertilization of ideas between Africa and Europe will benefit both sides.

The mass production of curios for tourists might well lead to a great loss of artistic value, especially as the work which will be admired the most will be that which satisfies the alien criteria of the Western purchaser. All types of art need critics, as well as a public. It is a common fallacy to believe that the purpose of art is to please people, and if this false but attractive principle is followed, it can lead only to a deterioration of standards and a readiness to delight the greatest number in the easiest way. Art, as we know it, is the creation of perfect illusion, and it should be immaterial whether the illusion itself is pleasant or otherwise. A good critic dismisses the impact of the work upon his own emotions, and views it with complete objectivity. If African culture is to make a lasting impact upon the West, criticism is imperative, and should be made by Africans rather than Europeans, to ensure that what is exported, so to speak, is not merely quaint and unfamiliar but represents the best work of the 'avant-garde'.

During the development of Afro-European relations, cultural exchanges have been overshadowed by the influences of religion, through European missionaries, and politics, through European administrators. These are matters on which the West has dogmatized for centuries and it is hardly surprising, therefore, that the intellectual traffic until quite recently has been largely in one direction. Here, in Europe, Christianity has always been taught on very academic lines. Catechism is learned by rote at an early age, the profoundest theological conceptions are hammered home with little attempt at pre-digestion, and the New Testament is taught in the same way as a mental exercise in European history. One hears little of the simple biblical truth that human beings in their natural surroundings are intimately involved with their Creator. In my Catholic boyhood I got the impression that the Old Testament, far from being a study of God and primitive man, was a collection of rather naughty stories read only by people in the Church of England. The present apathy towards Christianity in the West is due, not so much to indifference to its valid messages, but to the way in which they are taught. A priest is looked upon, not as a man of the people, but as a kind of

back-room boy, like an atomic physicist, who has a world of learning at his fingertips which is beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals. From what I have seen in Africa, Christianity is taught there in just this very seminary style. And so much greater is the pity, for the impulses which characterize many African religions go to the heart of man's search for God through himself and the gifts of creation. The animism which permeates so many tribal religions teaches a personal relationship between man and the natural forces about him over which his control can never be absolute, such as the wind and the seasons and the movements of earth and sea, and inspire in man a reliance of biblical simplicity on God's dispositions. Even human capabilities, such as the power to hunt or the skill to carve are ascribed to sources outside oneself—looked upon as special gifts which, if disregarded or abused, may be taken away from their possessors. Totemism focuses special relationships which bind individuals together with a fortitude seldom seen among Christians in their practice of the second commandment. Christianity is a social religion, too, but why do we see, among so many good Christians, a kind of moral isolationism, as if each person had to work out his own destiny in a spiritual vacuum?

It has been said that there was no sin in Africa until the missionaries went there and introduced it. Of course, that is no more true than that Africa was free from disease until the arrival of European doctors. Yet it is a fact that primitives are enviably free of religious obsessions about good and evil and reward and punishment, and it really makes one wonder whether Christian religious teaching in Europe and Africa begins at the right end. Instead of starting with an emphasis upon sin and hell, would it not be better to teach by parables drawn from our life and times, and, in Africa at any rate, use the overtones of primitive religion as an introduction to revealed truth. I have often listened to missionaries relating experiences of ju-ju, witchcraft, and obsession and have marvelled at their acquaintance with all that is wrongful and sordid in African tribal religion. They seldom intimate that they have studied the genuine religious impulses that lie behind the primitives' search for God. And the loss is ours, for if those principles were better known to the West, they would help us to understand in simpler terms the human basis of our own spiritual impulses.

As a doctor I have often been struck by the relationship between the tranquillity of the dying and their attitude towards God. Here in the West, death is regarded, notwithstanding the message of Redemption, almost as an irreversible calamity which must be delayed as long as possible. Two thousand years of Christianity in

Europe has taught very few people to make friends with death. Yet here is an extract from a recent medical paper describing the deaths of a primitive people from an incurable, always fatal, epidemic affliction which paralyses, blinds and silences its victims in the relentless course of its progress. 'A remarkable aspect is the attitude with which the patients and their relatives accept the disease. Patients know they are to die: they have observed the terminal stages of the disease in others. They laugh at their own stumbling and falls, their inability to get food into their mouths. The family lives with the dying patient, sleeping with their paralysed brothers and sisters, or with their paralysed children cuddled to them, and a husband will patiently lie beside his blinded, muted, foul-smelling spouse. Relatives and friends never cease to give strong emotional support and security to the patient, who has accepted his inevitable impending death, since the onset of the illness, with equanimity.'

Surely the ultimate test of religion lies in its ability to prepare man for death. Why then do so many Christians die in fear and apprehension, while those who have never heard of Christianity face eternity without a qualm?

I have attempted to indicate, from my own experiences, some of that 'new corn' which the West might reap from Africa's 'old fields'. Since the harvesting requires scholarship and literacy on both sides, it is today made only on a restricted scale. But there is everywhere a burning desire for knowledge, and it is impossible to imagine that the application of a universal education system throughout Africa can be long delayed. Of course there are and will be difficulties, such as the incongruous regulations concerning the admission of students to certain universities in South Africa, regulations which, in fact, render those same institutions the very antithesis of universities. But the day will come when higher education is within every African's reach. And then the men of scholarship in both worlds will march forward together, not as along a bush path in single file, but treading the broad highway of human destiny side by side.