books

Images of Africa: Old and New

Victor Ferkiss

> You are not a country,
> Africa, you are a concept, which we all
> Fashion in our minds, each to each, to
> Hide our separate years, to dream our separate dreams.
> —Abioseh Nicol

Until a few years ago Africa was almost as much a dark continent to American scholars and intellectuals as it was to the general public. This is no longer the case. Though the average American still harbors misconceptions based on Hollywood romanticism, race prejudice, and sheer lack of information, the serious student of African affairs has a wealth of material at his disposal. Indeed, as one British scholar, George Shepperson, recently noted, the imperialist scramble for Africa of the last decades of the nineteenth century has been replaced by a scholarly scramble today. The result is a wealth of information greater than the non-specialist can digest, and a confusion of information and views almost as dangerous in its effect upon policy makers and opinion leaders as was the previous ignorance.

The problem of understanding contemporary African developments and their impact upon world politics is largely one of organizing the information already available, and avoiding being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of material dealing with half a hundred political units. The need is for an overall picture that can give meaning to the details and offer significant generalizations without doing violence to disparate and often conflicting particulars if we are to have a clear image of Africa.

But as the Sierra Leonean poet Nicol suggests, everyone forms his own image of Africa, in keeping with his own emotional attachments and frames of reference. A number of recent studies of Africa and its problems provide a graphic illustration of this, and challenge the discrimination and intellectual flexibility of anyone seeking to understand modern Africa.

The oldest American images of Africa with any claims to validity are the product of two impulses: the desire of American Negroes to regain dignity for their motherland and thus for themselves, and the desire of anthropologists to understand the experience of an important segment of the human race. Negro scholars (of whom W.E.B. Du Bois was the leader and inspirer) prior to World War I proclaimed that Africa had had an advanced culture before the coming of the European conqueror, that it was not a land without a history, composed of savages who, if they could come to manhood at all, could do so only under colonial tutelage. The rediscovery of African values—the cultural aspect of African nationalism—was closely tied up with the Pan African movement of which Du Bois was also a leader. Like Pan Africanism, African cultural nationalism was originally a movement of New World Negroes, but both movements soon found followers among the rising leadership of the African peoples themselves, and the torches have since passed to African hands.

In America itself, appreciation of Africa's importance and the values of its contribution to world culture is no longer limited to a small and lonely group within the Negro community. Not only are more American Negroes responding positively to their African ancestry, but Africa has admirers as well as students among white scholars. Increasingly Negro students of Africa are trained in non-Negro institutions and work within the general framework of the growing field of African studies, so that their image of Africa is no longer a separate one, but is conditioned more by their academic disciplines than by their racial background.

It is easy enough to understand why in the past American Negro scholars who took a positive attitude toward African life found it difficult to gain a hearing for their ideas among most of their fellows, who were eager to reject Africa in favor of the culture of the dominant white community within which they sought acceptance. But in 1963 it is less easy to remember the extent to which the anthropologists who took a positive or even a neutral attitude toward African culture in the early decades of this century were also pioneers. Under the spell of Darwinism and the idea of progress, sociologists and anthropologists, both here and abroad, accepted the doctrine of the existence of inferior and superior races, and of the intrinsic correlation of "race" and culture. It was not until well after World War I, under the leadership of such men as Franz Boas, that the anthropology we know today—with its ready acceptance of the values of all cultures—came into being.

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Melville J. Herskovits of Northwestern University was one of the great pioneers in applying the new approach to the study of African culture, in both the Old and the New Worlds. His latest

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book, *The Human Factor in Changing Africa* is in a sense a monument to his long and distinguished career. Unfortunately it underlines the increasing irrelevance of traditional anthropology as a means for forming a useful image of Modern Africa. Not only is it written in a choppy prose marked by an excess of jargon, but it never demonstrates its main thesis: that in order to understand modern Africa we must understand the life of primitive Africa. This is probably true to some extent, but the reader is never shown just how the old and new are related. Much of the material is dated, more seems so because of the general failure to come to grips with the modern scene.

There is another anachronistic element in Herskovits' book, however—its avoidance of judgements of value. Africa simply is, Herskovits seems to say; neither you nor I have a right to judge any aspect of it. But this position of complete cultural relativism, the cornerstone of Herskovits' position on scientific method, makes it difficult for anyone whose interest in Africa is based on a concern with the human condition to develop a perspective in terms of which to organize his image of Africa.

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Another group of Americans with an early concern with Africa were students of international politics. Even if Africa was merely an extension of Europe politically, it was there, and of some diplomatic and strategic significance. So inert was Africa in world politics that most students of international relations relegated it to little more than footnote status in their thinking, but Vernon McKay of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies made it his specialty. His recently published *Africa in World Politics* is a masterful survey of the impact of external political forces upon Africa, of African internal international alignments, and of the role of the new African states in world affairs, especially in the United Nations. Its wealth of up-to-date and hard-to-find information makes it invaluable as a reference tool.

Its most serious drawback is that it fails to present Africa's role in world politics in terms of any coherent overall perspective. Generalizing about a continent is always difficult, but it can and must be done. Is Africa's role in world politics radically different from that of any other ex-colonial or underdeveloped area? Are not such terms as neutralism, non-alignment, regionalism, neo-colonialism and so forth categories of universal rather than purely African significance? These are questions which any definitive study of Africa's role in the world must answer. The image of Africa presented by McKay is clear in detail but blurred overall, because its Africa is a continent rather than a concept. Increasingly general studies of world politics are dealing with African problems and it may be that Africa—likely to long remain a power vacuum rather than a power center—can never usefully become a separate field of study within international relations.

The historian too has his images of Africa. Until recently histories of Africa, insofar as they existed at all, were histories of European colonialism. Professor Donald Wiedner, an American citizen teaching at the University of Alberta, has recently published the best general work on African history to date. *A History of Africa* discusses pre-colonial history without romanticizing it, gives a clear picture of colonial development and a reasonably adequate picture of the short history of independent Africa, especially of the English-speaking areas. It is a solid and relatively well balanced book without being a stimulating one. It has a large number of useful maps. This book fills a real void, but the great interpretative work on African history, the striking image of Africa through time, is yet to be written.

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Perhaps no other group has rushed as headlong into the task of offering an image of Africa as have political scientists. They had, or at least seemed to have, a head start through their studies of the governments of the European colonial powers, particularly France and Britain. But political science, especially in America, has long suffered from a blurred image of its own role, and political scientists have spent much time agonizing over the proper relationship between normative and descriptive statements. This has presented special problems in dealing with the new nations of Africa. As democrats, American political scientists have been almost uniformly anti-colonial in their sentiments.

But once African nations became independent the difficulty of establishing viable democracies became obvious, and American political scientists in order to retain their "pro-African" stance—something which was, of course, of great utility in facilitating a friendly climate for their field research—found themselves in the position of quasi-apologists for

The Human Factor in Changing Africa
Melville J. Herskovits. Knopf, 1962. $6.95
Africa in World Politics
Vernon McKay. Harper & Row, 1963. $6.75
A History of Africa
Donald Wiedner. Random House, 1962. $7.95
African One-Party States
Gwendolyn Carter, ed. Cornell University Press, 1962. $7.50.

the new authoritarian regimes, especially those of "progressive" leanings. A good example of this is the recent important volume, *African One-Party States,* edited by Gwendolyn Carter of Smith College. It consists of case studies of Tunisia, Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Tanganyika. The individual selections are written by various contributors with differing points of view, but in her introduction Professor Carter decries confusing African one-party states with the "classic totalitarian model" and says that "in Africa today . . . peoples . . . are experimenting with new political forms which . . . are sufficiently distinctive to be worthy of fresh standards of evaluation."

But as critics of this general position have pointed out, once one abandons the traditional standard concept of democracy as requiring regular institutional means for opposition and for peaceful political change—for "throwing the rascals out"—virtually any state which can claim tacit consent of the governed and some yielding to the pressure of the strongest interest groups (and no modern state, not even Khrushchev's Soviet Union or Franco's Spain can avoid doing this much) can be called a democracy.

Parallel to the acceptance of "one-party democracy" is the assumption that some kind of viable polity is possible for all existing African independent states. This assumption is directly challenged in *Power and Stability in Nigeria* by Professor Henry L. Bretton of the University of Michigan. Bretton is something of an outsider to professional Africanists and is aware of the implications of this for his work. He writes of "those students of African affairs whose astigmatism stems from their sincere but overwhelming love and concern for the people of the long-abused and exploited 'dark continent.' "

His thesis is that—leaving aside the whole question of democracy—no Nigerian state is likely to be able to replace the control mechanisms of colonial rule because of lack of an adequate degree of social cohesion, and Nigeria's future is probably one of social and political disorder for an indefinite period. His conclusions are stimulating and plausible, although inadequately documented, and his book is noteworthy because the image of Africa he presents is so radically at variance with that of the majority of his colleagues, to say nothing of an American foreign policy which still regards Nigeria as *the* bastion of stability and pro-Western sentiment in Africa—a circumstance, Bretton wryly notes, which in itself contributes to instability by identifying the present regime with forces to which important and rising elements of the Nigerian political elite are hostile.

But, it may be objected, all of the works discussed so far are the views of outsiders. What of the Africans themselves? Who might better present a coherent and valid picture of the continent than her own sons? The Africans themselves—alas—have as many and conflicting images of Africa as do non-Africans. In *The Challenge of Africa,* sociologist K. A. Busia presents the picture as it appears to a member of the older generation of African nationalists. Despite the fact that Busia, former leader of the opposition to Nkrumah in Ghana, is now in political exile, his moderate and urbane position is widely shared by Africans throughout the continent. Though he does not directly accept such concepts as Negritude and the "African personality," he is concerned with the preservation of a specially African culture, based on tradition, despite the exigencies of an equally desired economic and technical rationalization and the consequent shattering of traditional forms and moral norms. He is eloquent in his hope but unclear as to the details of the forms the new cultural synthesis might take.

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A radically opposed point of view is that of Ezekiel Mphahlele in *The African Image.* Mphahlele, a South African writer, also in political exile from his homeland, rejects not only such conceptions as Busia's but the whole family of images based on the idea that Africans are essentially different from other human beings. Claiming to speak for most South Africans and in the interest of American Negroes as well, he says in effect: Let us forget this nonsense about race and culture. Regardless of our past we are black men living in a modern industrial society. Our art and our lives must respond to this. His book is a rambling discussion of contemporary African literature and literature about Africa, but his message is clear: Down with racism in reverse; culture is as universal as humanity.

In *The African Nations and World Solidarity,* Mamadou Dia, the recently ousted prime minis-

Power and Stability in Nigeria
Henry L. Bretton. Praeger, 1962. $6.00
The Challenge of Africa
K. A. Busia. Praeger, 1962. $4.00
The African Image
Ezekiel Mphahlele. Praeger, 1962. $4.00
The African Nations and World Solidarity
Mamadou Dia. Praeger, 1961. $4.85
Pan-Africanism Reconsidered
Edited by the American Society of African Culture.
University of California Press, 1962. $7.00

ter of Senegal, offers a kind of middle way. He acknowledges the interrelatedness of human culture but he claims for Africa the right and ability to make its own special contribution to the world community. Though Dia is principally concerned with developing the economic and political aspects of his philosophy, the cultural implications are obvious. For Dia, independence is a prerequisite to full participation—economic, political and cultural—in the broader international society. Dialogue, he insists, must replace dependence; there must be mutual respect and a recognition of mutual advantage to be gained from cooperation. But independence – whether economic, political or cultural – is only a means, not a goal. The goal should be integration, though not necessarily complete assimilation, within a world community which the nation (or region, or race) has had a part in shaping.

Most of the crosscurrents of thought which have given rise to the various and conflicting images of Africa which are presented to us are reflected in a symposium held recently under the auspices of the American Society of African Culture—the American affiliate of the international and Paris-based Society of African Culture, an organization dedicated to Negritude, the concept of a uniquely African way of life claiming the allegiance of all persons of African ancestry throughout the world. Its theme was *Pan-Africanism Reconsidered,* and it was devoted to a discussion by Africans, American Negroes, and white American Africanists, of the past development and future prospects of the idea originally spawned by Du Bois: continental nationalism, cultural and political.

Contributions deal with developments in social thought, art, education, economics and culture generally, but especially with political problems. Can and will the newly independent states unite in a supranational organization, or will local nationalisms triumph? Are North Africa and the South African area potential elements in such a state and under what circumstances? But even in discussing these political issues the underlying focus is cultural: what, in fact, is this distinct thing, this Africa, that we seek to unite.

As the search for the meaningful image goes on, it becomes clear that it cannot be found in the historical or anthropological past nor even in the political present, but only in the future. John A. Davis says in his keynote address: "The image of the new African states in the eyes of America and the world will . . . depend on their success as states when judged against the social, political and economic factors they must face." Africa – and hence any clear image of her—is still in the process of creation.

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current reading

World Without Want

Paul G. Hoffman. Harper & Row. 144 pp. $3.50. Photographs.

The Managing Director of the UN Special Fund considers the problems and procedures of aid to underdeveloped nations, and submits a brief for greater use of the UN as the channel for administering aid to these areas.

The Permanent Crisis

Kurt London. Walker & Co. 328 pp. $6.00.

Factors which have contributed to the "rapid deterioration of traditional relations among nations" since the emergence of "totalitarian ideology and organization" are examined by the author. A reappraisal of U.S. policies and methods in the international arena is urged.

The New Soviet Society

The New Leader. 251 pp. 75 cents.

The text of the Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, adopted at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, is presented here with an introduction and extensive annotation by Herbert Ritvo of MIT's Center for International Studies.

Escape from Red China

Robert Loh as told to Humphrey Evans. Coward-McCann. 378 pp. $5.75.

A first-person account of life on mainland China from 1949 to 1957 by a Chinese national who did graduate study in the United States, returned to his homeland with enthusiasm for the new regime, and escaped in fear and disillusionment after eight years.

In the Eyes of Others

Robert W. Gleason, S.J., ed. Macmillan. 168 pp. $3.95.

"Common Misconceptions of Catholicism," as the volume is subtitled, are explored by eight eminent Jesuit scholars. Among the topics they consider are "The Church and Politics," "Catholics and Corruption," "The Catholic Church and Censorship."

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Hans J. Morgenthau. University of Chicago Press. 3 Vols. $25.00.

These three volumes, composed of essays written since World War II by one of America's leading political theorists, are individually entitled "The Decline of Democratic Politics," "The Impasse of American Foreign Policy," and "The Restoration of American Politics."

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