

APPROACHES TO AFRICA

How Can We Make Relevant Our Increasing Knowledge?

Victor C. Ferkiss

One of the commonplaces of the rhetoric of any democratic society is the concept of the well-informed citizen. Citizens are constantly being exhorted to know more about public affairs, including foreign affairs, and many of them undoubtedly develop guilt feelings about not being "better informed" than they are: public opinion polls consistently show that many who express opinions or claim knowledge really belong in the "don't know" columns. The obligation to know, which usually equates knowledge with understanding, bears especially heavily upon individuals with a sincere interest in world peace and harmony.

Recently this drive for knowledge on the part of the concerned citizen has combined with dynamics at work within academic and political life in the Western world to produce an efflorescence of "peace research" oriented toward the scientific investigation of conflict and its resolution. But quite often such research has been abstract and barren. Walter Millis of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions recently suggested to the American Historical Association that those interested in this type of research might perhaps better devote their talents to helping the public understand particular problems seen in a meaningful context:

What I would like to do is to suggest to the historical scholar interested in placing abilities at the service of peace that he is not limited to a narrowly technical field. Whether he is dealing with, say, the Roman Empire or the world wars of the 18th century or only with the history of the United Nations police force in the Congo, his contribution will be commensurate with his sense of process, of historical significance and of the relevance of the details which he may be examining to larger patterns of experience. (*The New York Times*, December 30, 1965.)

The words Mr. Millis here addresses to historians are equally applicable to social scientists and pub-

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licists in general. Any fruitful approach to world order must be rooted in an understanding in depth of the forces at work in the particular crisis areas. It is true that some problems are almost universal—and certainly the dynamics of national and world politics can be reduced to universal terms at the abstract level. But statesmen and citizens are almost always confronted with particular choices, and to deal with them they need a well-grounded feeling for the context and the complexity of the individual case. Yet facts alone are not enough to guide action; they must be meaningfully related to their context—in the individual area and in the world as a whole—if they are to be of value to the citizen or the statesman. A surfeit of information can lead to an intellectual indigestion which renders its victim as incapable of making correct decisions as a steady diet of clichés and grandiose generalizations.

Perhaps nowhere is this so clearly evident as in the case of the events in Africa which affect world politics. Probably in no other part of the world have outside observers—statesmen as well as ordinary citizens—been more entrapped between overviews so remote from the particulars of reality as to be virtually worthless (Africa is an "emerging continent," an "underdeveloped area," an actual or potential "battleground" between "East" and "West") and an avalanche of bewildering data (of names, dates and facts either arbitrarily structured according to categories which have little or no relation to African reality or else allowed to remain an undifferentiated blur). A review of recently published books on Africa suggests that this is still largely the case.

Public and scholarly interest in Africa has triggered a virtual deluge of books on this subject; only a select handful can be discussed here, but with notable exceptions they bear graphic witness to the problems confronted by the citizen harried by a desire to know more about the hitherto "dark" continent. That this somewhat invidious appellation is even less justified today than in the past, the most casual browser in bookstores must be aware. Our information about contemporary Africa is already vast and is growing at an ever more rapid rate. A valuable reference tool which seeks to structure the

great mass of available material is *The African World* compiled by Professor Robert Lystad of the School for Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University, in cooperation with specialists in various fields.

This imposing work, which was subsidized by a foundation grant and issued under the auspices of the African Studies Association, does not attempt the all but impossible task of summarizing the findings of contemporary research on Africa but instead attempts to detail the methods, interests and achievements of the various disciplines—from law and medicine to folklore and music—in studying Africa and Africans. Although it is already beginning to date and though it might prove overwhelming to the legendary and perhaps apocryphal “general reader,” this important book belongs on the shelves of all those in public or academic life who are seriously concerned with Africa.

While such a book is invaluable to the expert, what the concerned citizen really wants and needs is a book which will tell him about events in Africa and relate them to their historical and social context. Books which attempt to do this, however, run the risk of giving the reader more information than he or perhaps even the author himself can handle. A not particularly happy example of what happens when an author is determined to present as much information as possible is provided by two recently published works by John Hatch, a former African expert for the British Labor party, who is now teaching at Texas Southern University following some problems involving academic and journalistic freedom in Sierra Leone.

Africa Today—and Tomorrow is a handbook which attempts to tell the reader everything he needs to know about Africa. Unfortunately, the reader who knows nothing else about Africa than what he learns from Mr. Hatch will probably understand very little of what he does learn. The narrative is primarily political, and political leaders, initials of movements and parties, and sometimes obscure events are combined in a rather bewildering kaleidoscope. Like so many essentially journalistic approaches to Africa (and to other “trouble spots” of the world) the effect is somewhat like reading back issues of *The New York Times* for ten hours at a stretch. Even Mr. Hatch is occasionally overwhelmed by his own material, as when he tells us on page 280 that the future of Ethiopia will depend on its ten million inhabitants, while in his appendix he gives the population of Ethiopia at the more realistic (though not necessarily accurate) U.N. estimate of 21 million. Value judgments abound and are not always as clear

and consistent as they might be. Mr. Hatch's value predispositions are generally those one might expect given his Labor party background—anti-imperialist, pro-“socialist,” and “democratic”—but why then complain of the “demagogy” of the Casablanca powers as compared with the more moderate Monrovia group? The difficulty of putting journalism between covers is attested to by the fact that this revised edition is brought up to date by the addition of new chapters rather than by integrating new material into the original text, so that the old emphases and perspectives remain unaltered, compounding the confusion. In addition, the index is grossly inadequate.

Hatch's *A History of Postwar Africa* is a better book—better organized, more unified, and apparently composed in a more leisurely fashion. The introductory chapter on the pre-1945 period, which sets the stage for the detailed discussion of subsequent events which constitute the main subject matter of the book, offers an inadequate and outdated view of pre-colonial Africa, and the discussion of colonialism reflects an acceptance of ideological demi-Marxist clichés. But the body of the work is generally unexceptionable, especially that part which deals with former British Africa, the area the author knows best. Mr. Hatch is well-informed and his firsthand knowledge of personalities and events would be extremely useful to someone who already had a perspective on Africa which he could use to assimilate them. Again, the focus is narrowly political and the savor of African life is lost; we never really see the wood for the trees.

Yet if we go beyond journalism to the specialist scholarly literature in seeking a better structured and more comprehensive picture of events, what do we

Robert A. Lystad, ed., *The African World: A Survey of Social Research*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965. 592 pp. \$15.00.

John Hatch, *Africa Today—and Tomorrow*, 2nd ed. revised, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965. 372 pp. \$6.00 (paper \$2.50).

John Hatch, *A History of Postwar Africa*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965. 432 pp. \$8.50 (paper \$2.95).

James S. Coleman and Carl G. Rosberg, Jr., eds., *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964. 730 pp. \$10.00.

find? Pretty much what we would expect—books addressed to a limited group of peers or to particular student audiences. In *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, James Coleman of UCLA (now on an extended teaching stint in Africa) and Carl Rosberg of Berkeley have brought together a number of case studies of the role of particular parties in a selected group of countries. The studies (which are, in the words of the cliché, “uneven in quality,” though always informed and judicious) have a common intellectual focus—the conditions leading to the prevalence in Africa of the one-party state—and the authors’ summary does much to integrate the individual contributions into a coherent whole. But this book is aimed at readers with some knowledge of and tolerance toward the current jargon of the political scientist’s trade and is no one’s first book on African politics.

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A *Political History of Tropical Africa* by Professor Robert I. Rotberg is aimed at a somewhat different audience; it is designed primarily for the college textbook market. This book offers a lavishly illustrated and well-documented treatment of its subject, and is appropriately expensive. It covers all of the history of tropical Africa since the emergence of man on that continent, and although the author is more conservative than some when it comes to the achievements of pre-colonial African societies, his sober narrative will come as a shock to those who still believe Africa was a culturally barren jungle before the coming of the European conqueror. It may well, as its publishers intend, “become the standard resource of Africa history for our generation,” but this strength is a weakness as well. Like many history textbooks it is long on discrete facts and short on overt interpretation and perspective. Only one or two paragraphs are devoted to such basic problems as why colonialism came to Africa and what brought about the modern surge toward independence on the continent; and developments in Africa are never really placed in the larger context of world history.

The needs of the general reader are better served by David Hapgood, a free-lance journalist and consultant on Africa, who was able, with foundation support, to spend several years on the continent. From his extended residence in particular areas he draws a graphic picture of some of the difficulties faced by the new Africa. His thesis—which bears some resemblance to that of René Dumont’s *L’Afrique noire est mal partie*, which will soon be published in this country—is that the major obstacle to African development is the fact that the leaders of

the independent African nations have become a new privileged class, just as distant from the people and for the most part just as ready to exploit them, in practice if not in theory, as were the colonialists. Only a new concern for the insights as well as the well-being of the grass-roots African, Hapgood says, can prevent disorder and stagnation. Needless to say, his thesis—possibly because of its validity—has made him *persona non grata* in many African and Africanist circles. But *Africa: From Independence to Tomorrow*, while it is short on proper nouns and attempts to talk about everything, is an indispensable book for anyone seriously interested in that continent’s future. It has the additional and rare merit of being well-written, which may only show that clear thinking and good writing go hand in hand.

Yet for all its merits, Hapgood’s work—because it concentrates on demonstrating a particular thesis—cannot provide much in the way of detailed infor-

Robert I. Rotberg, *A Political History of Tropical Africa*, New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1965. 440 pp. \$12.50.

David Hapgood, *Africa: From Independence to Tomorrow*, New York: Athencum Press, 1965. 221 pp. \$5.00.

Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965. 368 pp. \$8.50.

Donald N. Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965. 315 pp. \$10.00.

mation about the African continent. Perhaps the citizen in search of an understanding of Africa might better begin by becoming familiar with some of the particular nations that compose the continent. But here too he is beset by difficulties. Monographic studies of particular African nations abound—almost every nation and many ethnic groups and regions have had virtually definitive studies written about them by competent observers in recent years. But generally they, like studies of the continent as a whole, are either written for academic specialists with extensive previous knowledge and lean heavily on professional jargon or are journalistic potboilers of dubious reliability and deficient perspective. But two recently published books on particular aspects or areas of Africa deserve special attention.

Sylvia Leith-Ross' *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* was written in 1938. Yet it remains valuable. In it, the author avoids the methodological fussiness which, however intrinsically justified, makes almost all anthropology—especially the British brand—heavy going for the general reader. Mrs. Leith-Ross, who lived and worked for thirty years in Nigeria, presents a straightforward, empirical picture of life as lived by Ibo women in an era of transition from traditionalism to modernity. Much of what she has to say of the independence—indeed, the near dominance—of women in Ibo society could be said of many other African groups, and the passage of time has not destroyed the significance of her observations (though it has revealed some archaisms of style and perhaps also of attitude). *African Women* is an unusually useful book for anyone interested in the human beings who, behind the transitory masks of party and nation, make up the new Africa.

Wax and Gold is in a class by itself. Many sociologists are sensitive human beings as individuals but they do not always allow their humanity to penetrate their work. Professor Donald N. Levine of Chicago has done so and has produced a masterpiece. His subject is the culture of the Amhara, the dominant group in Ethiopia. His object, as he tells us, was to answer three questions:

- 1) What is the nature of the traditional culture, and what are its more enduring beliefs and values?
- 2) What aspects of modern culture are of interest to the society, and what are the processes by which they are introduced and institutionalized?
- 3) Given this interest in modernization, in what ways has it been frustrated by certain features of traditional culture?

He succeeds in his task through a judicious combination of painstaking research and inspired interpretation. His theme and title were inspired by the *double entendres* basic to Amharic poetry and speech, the dual levels of response and meaning in the communication process of this ancient and subtle culture. *Wax and Gold* is not only an unusually good book about Africa, it stands with—and in many respects above—Lucian Pye's brilliant book on Burma as a model of what creative research on a developing nation can be.

Through learning about particular African nations it is possible to come to understand much about the continent as a whole. Yet for anyone concerned with Africa's role in world politics some parts of Africa are necessarily of more importance than others. In this respect, the Republic of South Africa is surely in a class by itself. It is far and away the most in-

dustrially advanced nation in Africa and the one in which the racial domination of blacks by whites is practiced on a scale unique on the continent.

Interest in South Africa almost necessarily entails controversy, and the tendentiousness which lies just beneath the surface of most popular and even some scholarly writing about Africa comes to the fore in works dealing with the Republic. Two recent books on South Africa, however, strive for objectivity with some success. *White Laager* by Professor William Vatcher, whose untimely death has meant the loss of a promising student of African affairs, confines itself to a documented history of the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. While incidental parts can be faulted by specialists, it offers a clear picture of South Africa as an African nation, and Afrikaner nationalism as a genuine African nationalism, despite the racial background of its proponents. This is no settler community with one foot in the land from which it came, and the resolution of South Africa's problems involve crises and perhaps creative possibilities of a different order of magnitude from events in Kenya or even in Rhodesia. While Professor Vatcher shares the civilized world's aversion to apartheid, his description of it is in formal and legal rather than human or moral terms, but his very dispassionateness is valuable in giving a clear picture of one aspect of the roots of today's incipient tragedy.

South Africa, a Study in Conflict by Pierre L. Van Den Berghe is a more ambitious and ultimately less successful work. Its author, a white sociologist born in the Belgian Congo, attempts to apply sociological concepts of conflict and role analysis to the current dynamics of South African society. The result, however, is a fairly commonplace albeit useful his-

William Henry Vatcher, Jr., *White Laager: The Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965. 324 pp. \$6.95.

Pierre L. Van Den Berghe, *South Africa, A Study in Conflict*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1965. 371 pp. \$8.95.

Colin and Mary Legum, *South Africa: Crisis for the West*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1964. 333 pp. \$6.95.

Ronald Segal, ed., *Sanctions Against South Africa*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964. 272 pp. \$1.25 (paper).

tory, one which seems to differ little if at all from any straightforward empirical analysis, while the concluding theoretical chapter seems merely tacked on. Though he strives for and usually achieves objectivity, his ethical point of view is curious. He tells us in his introduction that "he is nearest the truth whose situationally transcendent ideas represent the interests of social forces which are favored by the historical process"—an Hegelian version of the notion that might makes right.

The authors of two other recent books on South Africa strive not so much for objectivity as to rouse their readers to action. Colin Legum and his wife Mary in their *South Africa: Crisis for the West*, present a reasoned and relatively calm argument for world sanctions against South Africa to end apartheid. Of particular interest is their analysis of the forces and organizations in the West which are—in increasing tempo—resisting such attempts. The news reports that President Johnson's mail has been running against support of British sanctions against Rhodesia is an indication of this sometimes neglected dimension of the problem. Ronald Segal, a white South African-born journalist and opponent of his country's policies and regime, now in exile concentrates in *Sanctions Against South Africa* not on the justification for sanctions, which unlike the Legums he assumes rather than seeks to demonstrate, but with collecting opinions from various persons—"experts" and otherwise—as to how such sanctions can and should be applied. This is no place to discuss the merits of the case against South Africa; what is noteworthy is that such books as the Legums' and Segal's underscore the fact that South Africa's problems are world problems. Surely Walter Millis' injunctions apply here too and a first step toward evaluating the problem of sanctions is a more profound understanding of South Africa itself.

What is true of South Africa is of course true of Africa as a whole. The great need of the would-be informed citizen is not more information but precise and relevant information placed in a perspective which makes understanding possible. A few years ago the then president of the African Studies Association, Professor Margaret Bates, now of Smith College, urged her fellow Africanists to enter the lists and provide the general public with equivalents of what the French call *haute popularization*—readable yet informed works which go beyond journalism in enabling the layman to understand the complex realities which the scholar's craft had discovered. Despite a few exceptions, the latest crop of books on Africa only underlines the timeliness of her unfulfilled plea.

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The Revolution of Color

Thomas Patrick Melady. Hawthorn. 208 pp. \$5.95.

This volume, designed for a general audience, is the first in a "Revolution of Color Series" published in cooperation with the Africa Service Institute of which Dr. Melady is president. Here the author examines the "rise to power" of the peoples of Asia and Africa, the "modern confrontation of men and cultures," and the hopes and problems occasioned by this meeting.

Bread from Stones

John S. Badeau & Georgiana G. Stevens, eds. Prentice-Hall. 133 pp. \$3.00/1.50 (paper).

The Near East Foundation, a private agency which pioneered in the field of technical assistance, looks back on its fifty-year history of "helping others to help themselves." Included are case studies contributed by local technicians who participated in the Foundation's work in their native lands.

The United States and Japan

Herbert Passin, ed. Prentice-Hall. 169 pp. \$3.95/1.95 (paper).

This work was prepared for the October session of the American Assembly at Arden House, a date which coincided with the 20th anniversary of the end of the war in the Pacific. The contributors—Edward Seidensticker, Robert E. Ward, Lawrence Olson, William

W. Lockwood, Kinhide Mushakoji and the editor—are concerned with the way America and Japan have viewed each other, the legacy of the American occupation, economic and political issues affecting the relationship, and future developments with implications for Japanese-American relations.

Freedom Today

Hans Kung. Sheed & Ward. 176 pp. \$3.95.

"Freedom is the right, indeed it is the very grace of each and every Christian person. Freedom is God's supreme gift to men. Freedom is the sacred duty of men who will live in the service of God," Father Kung writes in the preface to this volume—the first in a series called "The God of Every Day," under his general editorship. He investigates "what all this means" for the individual Christian, the Church, for theology, for the world religions and for a Pope.

Britain, China, and the Antimissionary Riots, 1891-1900

Edmund S. Wehrle. University of Minnesota. 223 pp. \$5.50.

With the aid of newly opened records of the British Foreign Office, the author evaluates British policy in China during a period when the Christian missionary movement was disrupted by a growing number of anti-foreign riots. This was the time, Wehrle notes, "that China's hatred and distrust of one of the West's most cherished institutions was both confirmed and intensified."

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