



BOOK
REVIEW

THE PENANCE OF EUROPE

JOHN BERGER

Art critic and author

Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture by Janheinz Jahn.

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I REMEMBER that about five years ago I suggested to a distinguished London editor that he should publish some of the new African and West Indian poetry. "Are there any African poets?" he asked. But the question was almost rhetorical. He was convinced that there were none. And so naturally the matter was not pursued, and the poems were not published.

Today I don't think he would answer in the same way. Although very little African poetry gets translated or published in England, most people concerned with world politics and literature are dimly aware that Africa is up to something—and may even be up to poetry. Today I fancy he would ask: "Are these African poets really any good?"

I repeat this story to emphasise the relevance of 'Muntu'. Culturally England is the most parochial country in Europe, after Spain and Portugal. And so this book, which sets out to define the cultural traditions of Africa and Africans, is more than timely. There must be very few people who have nothing to learn from it: I myself have learnt a great deal. And, as always with learning, one becomes more modest and at the same time prouder. More modest about one's own limitations, prouder about the time through which one is living. But I also repeat the story for another reason. The distinguished editor

has had his prejudices about African poetry modified. In another five years they will have been modified even further. This is not because he has or will have read any of the actual poems. Nor is it because he has read about the poets as poets. It is because he too has been made aware of the great wind of change. It is because he suspects that Europe and the English-speaking world are now being challenged in every sphere. It is because Eisenhower had to cancel his visit to Tokyo, because France is being forced to negotiate with the F.L.N., because Lumumba won't stay dead, because people are asking questions about Brazil, because Cuba is through with its sugar-daddies, because Guinea speaks up and is listened to by the rest of the world, because it becomes increasingly clear that the uncommitted nations are in fact committed—committed to the progress they have been denied. In other words, this editor's reluctant recognition of African poetry is the result of political events. And in this he is in no way unique. My interest in African poetry is also the result of political events. And so also is Mr. Jahn's. Mr. Jahn is a German expert on African culture, but he would not have written this particular book if the political history of the last ten years had been different. And it is on this very point that I must criticise his book. Despite his profound knowledge of Africa, and despite his admiration for what Africa has and can produce, he seems unaware of the political nature of his own world. He understands Africa, but he does not understand progress. He condemns Europe, but he does not condemn superstitions. He loves vitality, but he does not love reason.

I want to assume that every one of my readers is going to read this book. It is well worth-while doing so. And therefore, because I assume this, I am not going to attempt to give a precis of Mr. Jahn's lessons. He is technically a good teacher. He himself has reduced a vast amount of material to a few simple expositions. And I doubt whether anyone, least of all I myself who haven't a hundredth of his knowledge, could do it better or simplify it much further. Read him and you will learn how Africans feel and think about man, death, procreation, rhythm, gods, rituals, medicine, symbols, words, dancing, poetry. And from all this you will also begin to understand the basic cultural attitudes that Africans in Africa and out of Africa share together. At this level—the level of information rather than interpretation—I would only add one warning. Mr. Jahn is clearly more at

home with philosophy and literature than with the visual arts. He has little to say directly about African sculpture or painting, and what he does say doesn't go very far.

On the assumption then that you are going to read this book for its information, I want now to discuss the attitude which is implicit in the way this information is presented. I think this is worth doing because I believe this attitude to be a dangerous one and because it can also easily become a common one, especially amongst those Europeans whose consciences have been stirred by the tragedies—no, the crimes—of Africa.

Mr. Jahn begins with a sensible generalisation. Every culture, he points out, is, according to its own standards, superior to every other. He proceeds to explain to us the standards of African culture. Theoretically he is aware of the dangers of exaggerations. He quotes Frantz Fanon, the doctor and writer from Martinique: "For us the man who worships the negroes is just as 'sick' as the man who despises them". But in practice Mr. Jahn uses so much special pleading and takes so many historical short-cuts that he ends up with the attitudes of a worshipper. He writes like a convert, a European convert to Africa. And the trouble with converts is that they refuse to allow themselves to think or argue outside a certain arbitrarily limited area.

He is extremely sensitive and sharp in reply to theories and statements which betray the innate sense of superiority of Europeans towards Africa. Fine. He is imaginative about the effects of racial prejudice on members of the so-called inferior race. He quotes Fanon on this problem too: "But I say that for a human being who has no weapons but his reason, there is nothing more neurotic than an encounter with the irrational". Excellent. He attacks the sensationalism with which Europeans have approached Voodoo and other African rites; he wants to show the all-embracing, consistent logic which governs and inter-relates every African ceremony and tradition. Again, admirable. He claims that African culture is free of the fragmentation and destructive alienations with which we in Europe are too familiar. He quotes, among many other well chosen examples, a poem by Aimé Césaire. It begins:

*' I who Kra-Katoa
I who open breast
I who maelstrom*

*I would wish to be ever humbler and lower
Ever heavier without vertigo or vestige
To lose myself falling
Into the living grains of a well-opened earth.'*

Césaire, even in translations, is a marvellous poet.

But what are we to think when Mr. Jahn explains that Africans in Africa never developed any form of script for writing and then goes on to suggest that this was no great disadvantage because the invention of writing gave men the means to enslave and exploit one another? By this kind of historical logic every advance, every step in man's long progress, can be condemned, and you end up by believing only in the Garden of Eden. It is essential to take a dialectical view of history if we are to understand the opportunities that the historical process now offers us. It is true that the written word and mathematics made slave states possible. But these slave states developed architecture, astronomy, engineering and at the same time those conditions which inevitably led to the overthrowing of slavery; both the slavery imposed by men on men and the earlier slavery of all men in face of an unknown and uncontrollable nature.

Or again, what are we to think when Mr. Jahn explains the principles of African medicine and then suggests that there is really not so much to choose between African medicine and modern European medicine? The medicine man often had an extensive knowledge of herbs, and the latest findings of European medicine indicate that the patient's faith in his treatment is more important than the formula of the treatment. Both statements may be partially true, but they do not balance one another. Modern European medicine has doubled the expectation of life. It is absurd in cases of organic disease to equate a spell with a modern operating theatre.

Lastly, what are we to think when Mr. Jahn talks about art, and declares that "African philosophy stands consistently on the side of the artist"? What he means by this is that the finished work as an object in itself is considered relatively unimportant; what matters is the process of creating the work. I am sure this is true. But what Mr. Jahn forgets in his sweeping claim is that the interests and values of artists change according to the historical period. Today the modern European artists, in revolt against a social system that turns art into a commodity, may certainly sympathise with the African point of view and

agree with Mr. Jahn that African philosophy is more sympathetic to him. But to the Renaissance artist or the Classical artist, the African attitude would have been incomprehensible.

Well, what are we then to think? It seems to me we have to conclude that Mr. Jahn champions Africa in order to denigrate Europe. And this is not good enough, because it is too simple. Relative comparisons nearly always are. Time and time again Mr. Jahn contrasts Christian hypocrisy with the passion and vitality of African religion. The contrast is real enough. But the important next step is to show how both sets of superstitions have served various sectional interests and prevented man in general from understanding the truth. The choice is not between Africa and Europe. It is between understanding and ignorance. I agree that on the whole an African today is more likely to be able to grasp what is happening in the world than a Western European. But this is not because he is 'African'; it is because he has suffered and is still suffering the tortures of Imperialism. And Imperialism and the fight against Imperialism are the primary realities in the world today.

When you have read the whole of this book, you realise that Mr. Jahn gave himself away on the first page. Here he puts forward the argument he wants to destroy: the argument of European paternalism. "Europe is thought to know what is good for Africa, better than Africa herself. Admittedly, Europe offers different and rival doctrines—democracy or communism, Christianity or atheism . . . yet this alters nothing in the general pattern." Doesn't it? Are the Chinese 'European' because they are communists? Is Castro being Europeanised because he is an atheist? Is the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet a 'European' because he believes in democracy?

My own diagnosis is as follows. Mr. Jahn has become disillusioned with life as he knows it. He now calls his disillusion 'Europe' and his hope for an alternative 'Africa'. I have seen quite a number of people do this, or almost do it. At first it appears to be a rather sympathetic attitude—an attempt to make amends, to do penance. But finally it proves dangerous and is self-indulgent. We have loaded enough on to the back of Africa without now loading our discontent. If we are disillusioned with Europe, let us change it.