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# Blame it on the Missionaries

J. ARTHUR MAIMANE

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FOR SOME YEARS NOW the white liberal has been puzzled by the 'educated Native's' hostile attitude towards his educator and benefactor: the white missionary. I and other such 'Natives' have for some time now been asked to explain this hostility — which I must confess I was at first not aware of feeling or displaying. My answer could of course not be a simple "I don't know", because the 'educated Native' is expected by the liberal to be omniscient, south of the colour line: he must be able to analyse himself and all other black people at the drop of a word. So I have fumbled some hastily thought-up explanation like "because they treat us like precocious and erratic children" — which is true in its own way.

But with time I knew I had to answer this question for and to myself. Why do I — if I do? And the first glimmering of an answer is that the intrepid missionary who brought us The Light, taught us to read, write and think (he would have us believe), has done us a great disservice. Not by replacing the Rain God with Christ,

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## Abiku

*Abiku* means "child born to die". A spirit child that is born by a human mother but dies young in order to return to its spirit companions. The *Abiku* may be born four or five times in succession by the same mother who will try to "make him stay" with the help of magical medicines.

*Coming and going these several seasons,  
Do stay out on the baobab tree,  
Follow where you please your kindred spirits  
If indoors is not enough for you.  
True, it leaks through the thatch  
When floods brim the banks,  
And the bats and the owls  
Often tear in at night through the eaves,  
And at harmattan\*, the bamboo walls  
Are ready tinder for the fire  
That dries the fresh fish up on the wrack.  
Still, it's been the healthy stock  
To several fingers, to many more will be  
Who reach to the sun.  
No longer then bestride the threshold  
But step in and stay  
For good. We know the knife scars  
Serrating down your back and front  
Like beak of the sword-fish,  
And both your ears, notched  
As a bondsman to this house,  
Are all relics of your first comings.  
Then step in, step in and stay  
For her body is tired,  
Tired, her milk going sour  
Where many more mouths gladden the heart.*

JOHN PEPPER CLARK

\*Dry wind from the Sahara Desert.

or making us think on the basis of a premise that was alien to us; after all, it is possible to make a vegetarian of a lion, if one begins early enough, though there is always the risk of it 'going native'.

The disservice done us was innate in the missionary. Any man who could decide, a hundred and more years ago, to leave the known risks and securities of, say, Scotland, to brave (no, blunder through) the unknown hazards of Darkest Africa or Yellowest Asia simply to "bring the light to the barbarian" had to have an unimaginative, narrow-minded, bigoted and dogmatic character. A man who would stubbornly wear a frock coat and starched collar while saying Mass on the banks of the Niger — and insist on his black converts being as "suitably" and uncomfortably dressed. A person horrified by the "corruption" of the hymns he taught into the "barbaric" rhythms that his converts were more familiar with — people, remember, who had through past centuries believed that worship was joyous, not a monotonous lament (an idea which the Church is now entertaining by experimenting with Jazz Masses to lure the Western youth into church).

STIFLING CASSOCKS and boring hymns. If only the missionary had stopped there! Then even the principle of turning the other cheek to the white neighbour one was to love even if he did not love you — though his was the Christian civilisation — could have been accepted; with the unloving neighbour excused as the heathen. But to get his converts to sweat and itch while they wailed at worship, the missionary felt he had to completely erase their civilisation — rather, customs; only a civilisation that could invent the wheel was to be regarded as such, even if the other was much older. The missionary was successful in his destruction, and today I am proudly patted on the back for being a 'detrified Native'; worse still, I take some pride in being so classified.

There have been liberal cluckings of tongues and shaking of sad heads (at the same time as the pat on the back) at the plight of the urban, "rootless" African without a past to buttress him and without the ability to assimilate Western Civilisation, which is the future: to become a black white man. If this is so, blame it on the missionary. We do — and not because we want to become black white men, just men among men. Because the missionary was first to warn us against our own civilisation, which would lead us to hell and persuaded us to adopt his — while the custodians of his civilisation ridicule and frustrate our attempts at assimilation.

But *were* we barbarians? Are "customs" barbaric when even the best attempts of a modern welfare society still cannot match them? To the missionary it was unheard-of degeneration that my tribe (and others) had

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