

# "We of Africa"

An assessment of Africa  
in an extract from  
DUNDUZU K.  
of Nyasaland

UNLIKE EASTERNERS WHO are given to meditation or Westerners who have an inquisitive turn of mind we of Africa, belonging neither to the East nor to the West, are fundamentally observers, penetrating observers, relying more on intuition than on the process of reasoning.

Our field is not that of spiritualism which is the domain of the East nor that of science and technology which is the hobby-horse of the West, but that of human relations. This is where we excel and where we shall set an example for the rest of the world.

Since time immemorial we have never claimed that we have arrested the orb of truth. As a result we believe that there is a lot to be learned from other cultures. That is why novelty has such a great pull for us and that is why we do not impose our beliefs on other people.

There is a tendency in the West, whether the Westerners themselves know it or not, for people to assume that man lives to work. We believe that man works to live. This view of life gives rise to our high preference for leisure.

With us, life has always meant the pursuit of happiness rather than the pursuit of Beauty or Truth. We pursue happiness by suppressing isolationism, individualism, negative emotions, and tension, on the one hand; and by laying emphasis on a communal way of life, by encouraging positive emotions and habitual relaxation, and by restraining our desires on the other.

We live our lives in the present. To us the past is neither a source of pride nor the cause for bitterness. The "Hereafter", we realise, must be given thought but we fail to revel in its mysteries.

Our attitude to religion has more often than not been determined by our habitual desire for change. We adhere to a religious faith only so long as it is the only faith we know. If some other faith comes our way we do not insulate ourselves against its influence. The result is that often we are reconverted to the dismay of those who converted us first. Sometimes we linger undecided between two faiths while at other times we just marvel at the claims of various religious persuasions. That we behave in this way is no indication that we are fickle; rather it is an indication of the fact that in each one of the religious faiths which we encounter

there is an element of divine truth whose fascination we fail to resist. And this is as it should be for religion is one. Iqbal has told us: "There is only one religion but there are many versions of it." Putting it figuratively Rumi, on the other hand, has said, "There are many lamps but the light is one."

IN AFRICA, WE BELIEVE in strong family relations. We have been urged by well meaning foreigners to break these ties for one reason or another. No advice could be more dangerous to the fabric of our society. Charity begins at home. So does love of our fellow human beings. By loving our parents, our brothers, our sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces and by regarding them as members of our families, we cultivate the habit of loving lavishly, of exuding human warmth, of compassion and of giving and helping. But once conditioned in this way one behaves in this way not only to one's family, but also to the clan, the tribe, the nation and to humanity as a whole.

If independent African states succeed in subordinating national loyalties to international loyalty they will do so because they have a solid foundation of lesser loyalties on which to superimpose international loyalty. To foster international loyalty among people who are steeped in individualism is to attempt to build a pyramid upside down. It cannot stand, it has no base and will topple over.

How can a person who has no real affection for his brothers or sisters have any love for a poor Congolese or Chinese peasant? When we talk about international peace, understanding and goodwill, we are actually talking about international love. But universal love does not grow from nothing; its root is family love and unless this root is there it cannot grow. The unification of mankind ultimately depends on the cultivation of family love. It would seem, therefore, that in this respect, we in Africa, have started towards that noble goal from the right end.

IN HUMAN RELATIONS, WE like to slur over the "I", "mine", etc., and to lay emphasis instead on the "we", "our", etc. Put differently, this means the suppression of individualism. Ours is a society where if you found seven men and one woman amongst them you would never know, unless told, whose wife that lady is. There just isn't that forwardness in us to declare our "personal" ownership of anything. If I happen to have some heads of cattle, a car, a house, a daughter, a fishing net or a farm, it is "our" net, it is my car just as it is my brother's, my father's, my cousin's, my uncle's or my friend's car. He or she has got as much say over it as I have. Individualism is foreign to us

---

DUNDUZU K. CHISIZA, former parliamentary secretary to Nyasaland's Ministry of Finance, and organiser of the Economic Symposium held at Blantyre in 1962, where the lecture containing the above passage was delivered, was killed in a motor-car accident on 3 September 1962.

## CHISIZA

and we are horrified at its sight.

Love for communal activities is another feature of our outlook. Look at any African game or pastime and you notice right away that its performance calls for more than one person. Our dances are *party* dances demanding drummers, singers and dancers. Game hunting is done in *parties*. (Even those Africans who own guns cannot abandon the habit of taking some friends along with them when going out for a hunt!) The telling of fables and stories with us calls for a *group* of boys and girls not just one or two. Draw-net fishing is done by a *group* of people. Fishing with hooks is also done in *canoe parties* of two, three or four; each canoe taking at least two people. The preparation of fields, the weeding, the sowing of seeds, the harvesting, the pounding of grains—all these activities are done in *parties* of either men or women. Even looking after cattle is not a one man affair. A boy might start out alone from his cattle kraal but he is sure to take his cattle to where his fellow cattle herders are with their cattle. Beer drinking is not only a group affair but also an affair that calls for drinking from the same pot and from the same drinking stick—(holy communion at its best!). Above all, to see Africans mourn the death of someone is to believe that few things are done individually here.

Such an outlook can only emanate from genuine love for each other—an unconscious love which has existed in our society since time immemorial. Here is that selfless love which all the prophets of God have preached. It isn't something that has just been inculcated into us nor something that has been imported from without us; it is something springing from within us. Instead of foreign missionaries teaching Africans how to love each other, they would do well to sit back and observe with amazement that the very relationship they would like to bring about is as a matter of fact already existing among Africans. Foreign missionaries should come to Africa not so much to teach love to the indigenous people but to see living examples of selfless love manifested in the African way of life.

WE ARE ALSO FAMOUS FOR our sense of humour and dislike for melancholy. Gloom on the face of an African is a sure sign that the wearer of that expression has been to a "school" of some kind where he might have got it into his head that joy and melancholy can be bed fellows in his heart. Otherwise our conception of life precludes, as far as possible, the accommodation of dejection. An African will not hesitate to leave a job if he sees that he does not get a kick out of it. For him

quitting a dull place for a more lively one, even if he has a stake in the former, is nothing to blink at. Many times I have observed people avoid the "intellectual", the reticent type of African as much as they avoid rattlesnakes if only by so doing they can escape from the melancholy of the intellectual.

Even if there are real causes for sorrow somehow our people manage to make molehills of these and mountains of the causes for happiness. The mainstay of our life is humour. So characteristic of Africa is this that most foreigners know this continent as "The Land of Laughter". What they probably do not know is that "laughter relieves tension. People who laugh easily are relaxed persons"; that people with the ability to relax possess one of the most prized qualities in this wearisome world and that a habitual sense of humour in a person is synonymous with a "positive outlook on life so desperately needed in the present negative conditioning world".

Our society stifles malice, revenge and hate with the result that we are free from these cankers. Were we disposed to avenge the wrongs that have been meted out to us by foreigners down through the ages the course of human events would have taken a different turn altogether. Were we addicts of hate, the Gospel of Jesus would have met its Waterloo on the shores of the seas that border this troubled continent. Were we to harbour malice the African empires that flourished on this continent—empires like that of Monomotapa, Songhai, Mali and Ghana—would have extended beyond the confines of Africa to the detriment of the human race. But God spared us all that. As a result we tolerate on our soil even neurotic crowds of foreigners who could not be tolerated in their own countries; we waste love on foreign elements which are inveterately selfish, individualistic and ungrateful. Above all, we do not look forward to a day when we shall have nefarious schemes against any race.

AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE studied Africa closely we have a reputation for taking delight in generosity, kindness and forgiveness. It has been said, with great truth, by some foreigners that few Africans will ever get rich "for the simple reason that the African tends to be too generous". Well, we do not want to be rich at the cost of being mean! Our society hinges on the practice of "mutual aid and co-operation" whose corollary is generosity. When our chiefs, kings and emperors gave out acres and acres of land to foreigners they weren't prompted by bribes or stupidity but by this selfsame relishable habit of generosity. Generosity is the lifeblood of our society. But even more precious, I think, is our spirit of kindness. For me to be able to walk into the home of any African between Khartoum and Durban and be certain to be accorded the utmost hospitality is to my mind a pulsating example of what quality of human relationship our society is capable of producing. It exhibits kindness at its best.

Nor is the scope of our kindness limited to our own race. Many are the days when we have preserved the life of one foreigner or another. Times without number we've gone out of our way to hunt for water, eggs,

milk, chicken, fish, meat, fruit, vegetables, etc., for a choosy stranger. We've carried literally thousands of foreigners on our heads and shoulders; we've washed their clothes; we've reared their children; we've looked after their homes; we've stood by their sides in peril; we've defended them in times of war; we've given them land, we've given them our precious minerals, nay, we've given them our all. But all the gratitude we get for all that is ridicule, contempt, ill-treatment and the belief on their part that God created us to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water". No. God knows our kindness does not stem from a feeling of inferiority. God knows we are not kind because we are fools, but because he had it that we should be kindness drunk and not pride drunk.

And yet, in spite of all this ingratitude, we are still capable of forgiving and forgetting. We are in a position to do this because in our society forgiveness is the rule rather than the exception. Professor Richard A. Brown of Bluefield State College (U.S.A.), has this to say about this quality of forgiveness in us:

"The simple spirituality of the Negro and his African brother, their deep rooted belief in God, their matchless capacity to love and forgive even those who mistreat them, their natural humanity; all these characteristics of these people, tempered and refined in the furnace of trials and tribulations down through the years, are qualities the world stands most in need of in these difficult times."

ANOTHER OUTSTANDING CHARACTERISTIC OF OUR outlook is our love for music, dance and rhythm. Our throats are deep with music, our legs full of dance while our bodies tremor with rhythm. The proper sub-title for Africa should have been "Land of music, dance and rhythm". This three pronged phenomenon is indeed the spice of our life. We sing while we hoe. We sing while we paddle our canoes. Our mourning is in the form of dirges. We sing as we pound food grains in mortars. We sing in bereavement just as on festive occasions. Our fables always include a singing part. We sing to while away the monotonous hours of travel. We sing to the strains of our musical instruments. The pulses of our drums evoke in us song responses. We sing under moonlit nights. We sing under the canopy of the blue sky. Gramophone record music entrances us not because it's foreign or something out of the way, but just because it's music. With us music, as also dance and rhythm, is a relishable obsession.

We have war dances, victory dances, stag dances,

---

## Africa Diary

A WEEKLY RECORD OF  
EVENTS IN AFRICA

*Published by Africa Publications (India)*

AIRMAIL, WITH BINDER  
PER YEAR R20 (£10)

*from South African Agents*

INSIGHT PUBLICATIONS (PTY) LTD  
P.O. BOX 2068 CAPE TOWN

---

remedial dances, marriage dances, dances for women only, mixed dances, dances for the initiated only, dances for the youth—but all indulged in with ecstatic abandon. We nod our heads, rock our necks, tilt our heads and pause. We shake our shoulders, throw them back and forth, bounce breasts and halt to intone our thanks to Him who ordained that we be alive. We rhythmically hefty shake our rear ends, our tummies duck and peer, our legs quick march, slow march, tap dribble, quiver and tremble while our feet perform feats. "Dance!" What a world of emotions that word calls forth in us!

But dance and music by themselves are crude art, rough hewn and devoid of sublimity. So to these we unconsciously add rhythm for a blend that possesses both charm and grace. Rhythm is our second nature.

There is rhythm in the winnowing and pounding of grains, there is rhythm in the gait of our women folk; there is highly developed rhythm in coition, there is rhythm in the groan of a sick person, there is complex rhythm in the milking of a cow, there is rhythm in pulling a drownet to the shore, there is rhythm that beggars description in the beats of our tom-toms, there is rhythm that defies analysis in "marimba", there is rhythm in almost everything we do.

FINALLY, WE HAVE a strong dislike for imposing our beliefs on other people. British people established themselves in their erstwhile and present day dependencies with the self-assuredness of angels. They believed with puritanical fervour—that the British way is the God-vouchsafed way of doing things. Their way of living is what mankind was destined to evolve up to; their ideas the gospel truth; their beliefs the paragons of man's triumph over "superstition". No other way—least of all the colonial people's way—could measure up to it still less be better than it. So they believed there was nothing for them to learn from their colonial subjects while the colonial indigenes had to be recast into the British mould of life, thought and belief.

That mode of thinking was all very well for purposes of empire building. To rule a people successfully you've got to drill it into their heads that you are in every way superior to them and that, therefore, it is the right thing for them to be under you. But for purposes of progress, the preoccupation of man, that way of thinking actually stops short of arresting progress itself. The advancement of man uncompromisingly demands a ceaseless synthesis of ideas, a blending of ways of living, a come and go of beliefs and above all a willingness to believe that the best is yet to come.

If persisted in, this attitude of finality, superiority and self-deception can only promote hate and racial discord. When other peoples do not assert themselves it isn't that they haven't got something to be proud of, something that they believe is unrivalled, but just that they haven't got the same vulgarity of throwing their weight about and imposing themselves and their beliefs on other people. They are willing to live and let live. Further they have the sense of knowing that the part of a listener and an open mind are the "open sesame" to the fortune of knowledge and wisdom. There is a great deal that foreigners, here as well as abroad, have to learn from the colonial peoples. ●