

not the administrative power to do so, and the peasantry is unlikely to be pushed around by weak bureaucracies. Like the capitalist economic systems of the West, centralised economic models on the Communist patterns are not within the present range of choice facing tropical Africa.

WHAT THEN IS LIKELY to be the trend? Rather than adopt the misleading approach of "Capitalism or Communism" one should recognise that a variety of institutional arrangements is open to the gradually emerging modern sectors of these underdeveloped areas. "African Socialism" has not as yet matured into an easily recognisable policy, but in pursuing economic development and social justice African countries may yet provide the world with examples of economic relationships which avoid the harsh exploitations of the Western industrial revolutions or the severe exploitations inherent in Communist economic growth. It is true that increases in consumption must be checked in any economy order if growth is to occur. Britain achieved this in the nineteenth century by channelling profits into the hands of a few who then reinvested these funds. Russia kept, and keeps, wages low and in effect syphons off large 'profits' for state industries. These in turn are reinvested.

In Africa saving will also be painful, particularly given a growing realisation of high standards elsewhere. A flow of 'savings' might well have to be forced by Government taxation, and one hopes that there will be supplementary foreign aid resources for investment. What is relevant here is that, even if there is a painful process of checking consumption by encouraging and forcing savings, the economic institutions of African society need not conform to Capitalist or Communist precedents. For example, the relationships between government, foreign companies and any indigenous entrepreneurs that emerge, can be deliberately structured for co-operation. The traditional western gap in consultation between the private sector and government need not be accepted. The private sector and government may well discuss development plans, deliberately integrate their efforts and accept mutual responsibilities for growth. (Perhaps something like this is already beginning to occur in France and India.) Within industry too a variety of structures is possible. Profit sharing, worker ownership and co-operative structures in agriculture may be the hallmarks of the economy rather than the archaic divisions of employer and employee inherited by Western economies, or the stifling and inefficient weight of government that characterises the Soviet system.

In short, there are alternative institutional possibilities in encouraging the growth of new economic orders in Africa. Government agencies for development, nationalised industries, decentralised decision-making in industry and agriculture can live together in institutional forms which the peoples must themselves establish and give character to. Africa has a long tradition of communal responsibility which can spread from the tribe to national and regional societies. Given this deep sense of communal responsibility the world may have much to learn from the deep concern for social justice which is usually a part of African Nationalist movements. ●

Modern Myths of Africa

J. KIRK SALE

THE MYTH OF AFRICA as a continent of primitive savages—its history unrelieved by sophistication, culture, or civilisation until the advent of the Europeans—is now so well established in this country that it is likely to be decades before it is uprooted. Yet until it is, Americans will continue to make serious mistakes about this "emerging" continent. And, more immediately, they will continue to regard the American Negro as the inferior product of an inferior heritage.

Research on the often impressive history of African civilisation has blossomed in the past few years, largely under the impetus of the new African nations themselves in their search for legitimate, clearly non-European roots. But from all the effect that it has had on the journalists, historians, book reviewers, and the public at large, this work might as well have been done on a different planet.

TAKE THESE FEW recent examples of those self-nominated "experts" who, by ignoring the facts of Africa, are nurturing America's myths.

Stuart Cloete, in the *New York Times Book Review* (August 5):

"Until the white man came, there had been nothing new in Africa for a thousand years. Wars, floods, famines, slave raids were all accepted as natural events."

John Gunther (one of those lucky few to have built a reputation as an expert from a single, thoroughly inept book), in *Holiday* (April, 1959):

"When the British arrived in East Africa the Bantu aborigines still, for the most part, 'had their tails up in the trees'."

T. Walter Wallbank, history professor at the University of Southern California, in his *Contemporary Africa*:

"Africa is a land with little or no history. South of the Sahara the indigenous peoples cannot look back on any golden age, on any truly great civilisation."

Lord Milverton, a postwar Governor of Nigeria:

"For countless centuries, while all the pageant of history swept by, the African remained unmoved—in primitive savagery."

ALL OF THIS IS utter nonsense. It ignores the rich and literate empires of the western Sudan, the sophisticated art of Benin or the Congo, the centuries-long trade of the East African coast, the extensive gold and iron

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mining industries of Central Africa, the advanced religious and social systems found throughout the continent. It ignores, in short, the history of Africa.

But pick up any American newspaper or magazine and there, lurking under the surface of any article on Africa or on the American Negro, sits that image of the primitive, savage black man. It is no wonder that virtually every American—even (or should I say “especially”?) the American Negro himself—is steeped in the vulgar ethnocentric myths of Africa.

Strange as it may now seem, the myth of Africa's brutal and uncivilised past was not established until the beginning of the nineteenth century. For 350 years before that the European saw only that the African way of life was different from, but not necessarily inferior to, his own. The sixteenth-century Portuguese did not think of Africans as “savages”; they noticed instead that they were very much like people they had left in Europe, wearing their swords, for example, “on the left side, as we do, in sashes of coloured stuffs like gentlemen.” And if they learned of a bloody tribal battle or despotic chief, they would not think it out of the ordinary, for had they not themselves come from a continent with its own battle scars and petty tyrants?

IN THE NINETEENTH century, however, the pattern changed. First, of course, Europe was moving into a technological world—and if it could still send a six-year-old child to work in a factory for eighteen hours a day, it could also point to material benefits on a scale which had never before been seen. It was not long before the European mind began to believe that material accoutrements and civilised culture were synonymous.

Second, and more important, Europe needed a few ready myths to clothe its naked desire to extend its economic, religious, and political hegemony throughout the world. Thus it was convenient for colonial administrators and zealous missionaries to create the fiction of an African eking out a life that was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Shaw described this process best:

“When the Englishman wants a thing he never tells himself that he wants it. He waits patiently until there comes into his mind, no one knows how, a burning conviction that it is moral and religious duty to conquer those who possess the thing he wants. . . . When he wants a new market for his adulterated Manchester goods, he sends a missionary to teach the natives the Gospel of Peace. The natives kill the missionary; he flies to arms in defence of Christianity; fights for it; conquers for it; and takes the market as a reward from heaven.”

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BY THE BEGINNING OF THIS CENTURY the myth was firmly established. Not only was Africa a primitive continent that we whites just fortunately resurrected from a morass of sin and sloth, but its descendants in America were as inferior as their ancestors—a simple, docile, brutish lot, with an amazing sense of rhythm, perhaps, but obviously endowed by God with certain inalienable handicaps, among them stupidity and incompetence.

Today, then, the American who views Africa or American Negroes does so through a jungle of century-old fables, fictions, and fabrications. Let us try to cut down a few of them.

The Missionary-in-the-Pot Myth

THIS PRODUCT of the cliché-ridden cartoonists is now so much a part of the American picture of Africa that it seems unlikely that facts will wash it away. But here they are, anyway.

Out of perhaps 400 missionaries who went into East and Central Africa before 1900 (that is before European governments established control), fewer than ten were killed by Africans, and then not to satisfy a menu but to prevent white encroachment in sovereign black territories. There is no evidence that any of those killed were eaten, even by those comparatively few tribes which practiced cannibalism; it is absolutely certain that none was ever boiled alive in a large iron pot, since none of the iron pots found in Africa is big enough to hold a man.

It would pay us to remember the words of David Livingstone, the forerunner of all the missionaries: “There is perfect security for life and property in the interior.”

The Illiterate-Thus-Stupid Myth

“WHY, THEY didn't even have an alphabet,” the white South African will tell you, “and that proves they're stupid.” The simple fact that Africa's withering climate, voracious insects, and non-acquisitive tribal systems militated against the establishment of written languages is thus enlarged into a conviction that the Africans are incompetent. Actually, however, elaborate and often reliable oral records have been kept by practically every tribe, and at least three tribes are now known to have developed their own original systems of writing; for purposes of communication, the often-mocked talking drums proved superior to any other means short of radio.

Moreover, where the Arabic alphabet penetrated into Negro Africa, it was used with great distinction by Africans. A seventeenth-century poem in Swahili (an African language which used modified Arabic characters) has been called “the equal of the ‘Divine Comedy’ in image and power,” and two invaluable works of history by Africans of Timbuctu in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stand as important works of scholarship today. In fact, Timbuctu in the Middle Ages was the centre of one of the finest Moslem universities in the world (run, taught, and attended by Negroes), and one of its professors reported just before his death in 1607:

"Of all my friends (in Timbuctu) it was I who had the smallest library, and I possessed 1,600 volumes."

The Natives-are-Restless Myth

COMING TO A continent where they succeeded in disrupting both the long-established, prosperous trade and the stable balance of political power, the Europeans then wondered why they saw so many African tribes fighting each other and concluded that it was their moral duty to bring peace and harmony.

In truth, of course, before the Europeans came Africa had known many large and well-governed empires in which tribal warfare was a good deal less frequent, and less bloody, than in medieval Europe. Moreover, tribal warfare was traditionally designed to minimise rather than maximise death. While medieval Europeans often fought "more like wild beasts than soldiers" (as one historian has put it), the Africans conducted warfare within carefully observed limits: it was traditional not to encircle an enemy (so that, if losing, he would run away rather than keep on fighting and cause more casualties), and to begin battles a few hours before darkness (so that the losing side could withdraw, relatively unhurt, under cover of darkness).

The White-Man's-Burden Myth

THAT MUCH-BANDIED notion of "bringing civilisation to the natives" fades when confronted with reality. Here is a partial record of Europe's job of "civilising" Africa.

Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese explorer, reported in the early sixteenth century:

"The king (of Kilwa, an East African port), for his great pride, and for not being willing to obey the king of Portugal, had this town taken from him by force, and in it they killed and captured many people"; at Mombasa, he records, "the country was ravaged, and much plunder was carried off from it"; the city of Brava, "a place of trade, has already been destroyed by the Portuguese, with great slaughter of the inhabitants."

After just fifty years of Portuguese "civilisation," the booming ports of East Africa were reduced to rubble.

In West Africa, likewise, the dominant interest of Europeans was not to bring in civilisation—but to take out slaves. At a conservative estimate the European "civilisers" removed some 4 million slaves from the continent in a period of 400 years; and while the lush profits from this trade were building the plantations of the Americas and the shipping cities of Europe, Africa's once-stable lands were being torn apart.

The Continent-Without-a-History Myth

THE RECORD OF Africa's rich past, though far from complete, is there for anyone interested enough to look. We know of the kingdoms of the western Sudan, lasting from the third to the sixteenth centuries, from the writings of medieval Arab travellers. El Bekri (1067) tells

of the king of ancient Ghana and his fabulous golden riches; Ibn Battuta (1350) writes of the Africans' adherence to law and mentions that they "have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people"; Leo Africanus (1510) reports on the cultured cities and the "great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men."

We also know of the East African ports and the interior kingdoms from which they drew their trade. El Masudi (955) speaks of the interior tribesmen who "have chosen their king to govern them with equity (and who must not) depart from the rules of justice." Duarte Barbosa (1510) details the extensive commerce, including the "great trade in gold." Joao de Barros (c. 1550) writes of the riches of the interior kingdoms and of a palace "so rich and magnificent . . . that it may be said to vie with that which distinguishes a monarch of the East."

In short, we do have records of many aspects of Africa—its politics, its trade, its riches, its governments—which attest not only to Africa's history, but to the grandeur of that history.

The Continent-Without-a-Civilisation Myth

THE CRUDE ETHNOCENTRICITY of the West has, of course, been battered often in recent years, but generally it remains as firm as ever when focussed on Africa.

African art is still called "primitive art" despite the ample evidence of its high sophistication; William Fagg says simply that "it has come to be regarded very highly among the world's great art traditions" (by artists and art historians, of course, not by the public). African religion is usually dismissed as "crude demonology" by those who know only that they don't understand it; those who, like Janheinz Jahn, have bothered to study it feel that it could well add something to our own religions, "by enlivening and making meaningful once more (the West's) one-sided materialistic orientation in human relationships." African governments are often thought of as "savage dictatorships," despite the abundant proof that they not only established rules of law but lived by them and that they were democratic sometimes to the point of inefficiency.

Indeed, whatever one wants to encompass in the term "civilised"—short of the dubious "civilised" aspects of modern technology—he will find it in Africa. Given its particular problems and its particular solutions, Africa evolved civilisations that were easily the equal of many of those in medieval Europe, and in some respects—in its adherence to codes of morality, in its respect for systems of law, in its emphasis on the importance of society—it might even be said to be superior to the world we know today.

AFRICA—AND ITS DESCENDANTS—have suffered badly from the ignorance of those trapped unwittingly in the jungle of myths. Africa, of course, will eventually be able to recover from this sad failure of the West, for it is strong, eager, and extremely dedicated.

But—and this is the important point—will we? ●