

Glimpses of Home

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YEARS AGO, Langston Hughes, the American Negro poet, novelist and playwright, visited Africa's west coast. The Africans could not believe that he was "black": indeed he had a fair complexion then. Although he had looked forward to setting foot on African soil, almost as a religious act, he did not take himself seriously like the late Richard Wright, another Negro writer, when he came to Ghana in 1949. Wright was most depressed by the African's coldness and even hostility towards himself. He subsequently had some unsavoury things to say about the African way of life. But then to begin with, Wright was always Wright's greatest enemy anyhow.

Now and again one meets the black nationalist among American Negroes who almost literally grovels on his stomach so as to rub Africa's earth into his skin as a symbol of identification. This type has the irritating habit of trying to teach Africans how black and pure they are and how proud they should feel about it; and how insufficiently anti-white they are and how oppressed they actually should feel. He exhales and inhales blackness all round and attaches himself to some African intellectual or politician who knows when to talk fire-cating nationalism and when to forget it. Our Negro guest eventually succeeds in getting himself thrown out of the country of his pilgrimage with the same pitchfork he has been fondling. If he is not thrown out, he makes such a thorough nuisance of himself that the Africans regard him as a huge transatlantic joke. This is enough to drive him out.

But by and large the American Negroes coming to Africa these days are more enlightened much humbler. Mr. Joseph Kennedy, research director at A.M.S.A.C., came to West Africa for research a few years ago. He wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 1962: "From my experiences I am convinced that a very special relationship exists between the African and the American Negro, that is a skin-colour affinity which creates an unusual bond of warmth and draws the two together. This is not to say that this bond is immediately apparent, that the African immediately reaches out to embrace the American Negro. Indeed, the first reaction on the part of the American Negro to being in Africa is one of mixed and confused feelings."

He observes that the American Negro coming to Africa for the first time must arrive "with an uncertain image of Africa and of what to expect." For in his own country he has heard Africa spoken of as "the dark continent," associated in his mind with tribal life, bush, mud-huts, dances, primitive black people (Hollywood films set in Africa have helped reinforce this image with their emphasis on wild life, the untamed jungle).

Relating his own experiences, Mr. Kennedy describes how often Ghanaians told him that he was "white" and not one of their kind. This was among the illiterate Africans. But he says he found a warm fellow-feeling among the educated people towards people of his kind. It was usually through an educated man that he entered a village. He discounts the view he says is expressed by many Americans, namely that "these demonstrations of African-American Negro ties among the educated are political, that it is politically expedient to profess such relationship, that if there is preachment of 'pan-Africanism,' there certainly should be this kind of verbal service to the concept." He argues that many of the people he met were not politicians but teachers, farmers, clothweavers, clerks, taxi-drivers—"just people who seemed truly moved by and happy at seeing their brothers from America."

WHILE AMERICAN NEGRO leaders have been actively interested in African affairs, the rise of independent states in Africa since Ghana was granted freedom in 1957 has given the American Negro a new sense of pride, a stronger feeling of identity with Africa. The man who was regarded as the child of a dark continent now governs in his own land and this has become a source of inspiration for the American Negro in his own plight.

The survivals of Africa in American Negro life are several. One should look at the way American Negroes dance in performances that do not contain consciously-composed movements: they are African; then there is much of the African gait in their walk. It is suggested that foot-tapping in American Negro entertainment is a substitute for the African drum-beats. Many American Negro folk tales are based on African legends. There is clear evidence of African religious expression in American Negro worship in independent churches: hand-clapping, foot-tapping, the confession and conversion rituals, jumping and leaping.

Dr. Davis says in his paper that Africa's influence on American dancing is seen clearly in dance creations such as the rumba of Cuba; the samba of the West Indies and Brazil and those of the American Negroes.

A Negro anthropologist, Lorenzo Turner, found on the Sea Island of South Carolina African dances that Americans call the "Charleston," the "Black-Bottom," the "Buzzard Lope" and the "Ring Shout." Americans are now imitating African dances in the creation of new types of jitterbug as in the "Watutsi," the "Monkey" and the "Waddle," with a minimum of bodily contact between the sexes.

The Calypso is African in origin. The American Negro's great contribution to the world of music has been his spirituals and gospel songs and his jazz. The manner in which a leader in a spiritual makes a statement that is

then repeated by a chorus is, according to authorities, African in origin. "It took the American Negro," says Dr. Davis, "three hundred years to accustom the white American to stop time or downbeat, which is also syncopation, along with overlaid rhythmic patterns."

Quoting another Negro authority, Dr. Davis states that the central genius of American Negro music is its use of the human cry. "From the gurgles and hunger cries of babies to the cries of men in joy, elation, victory, effort, anguish, and pain, the human cry remains the most communicative of all sounds made by humans. The work and religious cries and shouts of the African and American Negro are the basis for the work songs, the blues, the spirituals." The Negro singer Ray Charles demonstrates this very well.

Mr. Aminu Abdullahi, the Nigerian jazz critic who conducted an eight-day jazz workshop at Chemchemi early in 1965, demonstrated the African qualities we find in American jazz, and also the fact that, as Dr. Davis says, the genius of American Negro musicians lies in the effective way in which they have made their instruments speak like human voices.

Margaret Just Butcher has this to say in her very valuable book, *The Negro in American Culture* (a Mentor Book published by the New American Library, New York, 1956), a book based on materials left by the late Alain Locke: "The whole matter of Africanism and African survivals has been a historical dilemma that for generations has troubled the Negro mind and spirit and divided Negro thought. There has been a conflict between deep-seated emotional pride of race and equally deep-rooted shame of and distaste for race. This dilemma was recognised immediately as the after-effect of slavery, which rudely cut Negroes off from their ancestral African culture and taught them to ignore or despise their racial past. Haiti, with its proud tradition of self-emancipation and nearly one hundred and fifty years of political independence, has been less victim of this psychological aftermath of slavery than any other American area with people of African descent. Nevertheless, we must note that generally speaking—and even sometimes in Haiti—Africa and things African have been misunderstood and disparaged for lack of proper evaluation of their cultural significance. By and large the Negroes have been at a loss to implement their pride of race, to give it proper force and authority, or to supply it with intellectual directives. Long after the physical ills and handicaps of slavery ceased, the psychological stigma persisted."

THE NEGRO POETS WRITING in the 1920's and 1930's were fired by thoughts about Africa. In some, it was sheer nostalgia, a poetic response to oppression; in others, it was a realisation of pride in one's blackness; in others again, it was an escape to what was regarded as the primitive and innocent Africa. The poetry alternated between self-pity and an angry upward pushing of shoulders that told the white world in effect: "We are black and to hell with you!"

Langston Hughes writes in his Afro-American Fragment published in the journal *The Crisis* (national organ of the N.A.A.C.P.) in 1930:

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

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