

THE FACT OF AFRICAN HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION

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CIVILIZATION is the white man's gift to Africa and African peoples: such is the claim of all those who assert, whether by cruelty or by kindness, the white man's right to govern and possess. Without civilization as Europe knows it, there will be no progress, and without European government, there will be no civilization: such is the simple logic of many Europeans of goodwill and of some of another sort. "The so-called African leaders of to-day, in their criticism of the European and his ways, are not old enough to remember the horrors and atrocities which even their own grandparents knew as commonplace," an elderly Northern Rhodesian settler wrote to me, indignantly, the other day. "In the past," he went on, after glancing at the "freedom of living and of speech" which, he said, Africans now enjoy, "the Africans have done nothing by their unaided efforts to bring about this advancement they have attained. . . . If the guiding hand of the European were to be withdrawn, they (the Africans) would only fall again into confusion and worse."

This denial of human history in Africa is the corollary, of course, of another denial: the denial of African equality. Not all those who make the first denial may be prepared to face the fact that they are also making the second; and yet the two are inseparable. If Africans have no history, then they have failed to evolve, and if they have failed to evolve, then they have failed to keep pace with the rest of humanity: and if that is so, then they fall into a special category among the races of man—a sort of sub-category, comparable perhaps with that near-Man, Neanderthal, who also failed to make the grade and died out sometime during the last Ice Age.

This, you may think, is carrying the argument a bit too far: just because various African peoples have known nothing of the industrial revolution in its later, urban, phases; have remembered orally and not literally; fought without chariots; and refrained from sailing across the seas that lapped their shores, there is no ground for saying that they are not inherently as capable as anyone else. I quite agree; there is a distinction between the

practically equal and the inherently equal, and nothing in science suggests that Africans are not inherently equal. But the fact remains that these African peculiarities are often used to buttress the general European belief that all was savage chaos before the Europeans came, and to suggest that the reason for this savage chaos lay not in a certain set of objective circumstances, but in African incapacity to emerge from them. "Their thinking," a South African publicist wrote lately, "was not concerned with objective validity and was pre-occupied by the mystic powers of persons and things. This centuries-long stagnation cannot be attributed to their isolation from the main stream of civilization"; the implication, of course, being that it must be attributed to an African inability to evolve and progress.

So it is a matter of quite unusual interest and importance that the last few years should have raised the whole subject of African history—pre-European history—to a new and academically respectable status. Many scholars are producing many new facts about it. Far from being unconcerned with "objective validity" or hypnotized by the "mystic powers of persons and things," Africans, it would appear, were engaged in a great many "civilized activities," of one kind and another, for many centuries before European settlement, or even before European discovery. At a time when European mariners had yet to reach the Indian Ocean, or even the Bight of Benin, the kings and counsellors of Central Africa were eating from Chinese porcelain, and when Mr. Strijdom's forebears drove their ox carts into the old Transvaal, they encountered men and women who were not at the beginning of a long period of civilized development, but, through times of painful dissolution, were perilously near the end of one. In this tide of new information, and of reassessment of old information, the study of humanity in Tropical and Southern Africa has really begun: even if it is still in its infancy, its findings are a long way beyond the point where any but the obsessively bigoted will care to ignore them.

At this point, no doubt, one needs to be a little careful of one's terms. What *is* civilization? Is it the greatest happiness of the greatest number at any given time: or is it a largely material matter of cities, mines, and motor cars? Many African peoples, it seems to me, could argue a strong case for the civilized virtue of their tribal systems in periods before the outside world discovered them. If the Bushongo of the Central Congo still remember the 17th century as a Golden Age, and celebrate in

happiness the memory of their greatest monarch, Shamba Bolongono, who reigned sometime after 1600, there must be something in it: no one supposes that the English people remember the 17th century as a Golden Age. If the Nyakusa of the Nyasaland-Tanganyika border, such as Monica Wilson found them not many years ago, are still living their peaceful and dignified life, then they too would have a claim which most European peoples, considering their own condition, would find hard to reject. But the point I want to make here is a different one. As an introduction to the important articles that follow, my point here is to suggest that Africans south of the Sahara were in fact evolving and progressing towards destinations recognizably the same as Europeans (or Asians)—at a time long before Europeans first came across them.

A gap in social and technical development may always have existed, no doubt, between those who lived close to the cradles of ancient civilization and those who lived far from them. There is no more sense in sentimentalizing about the misery and barbarism of much of the African past than there is in pretending that European history does not tell the same kind of story. The important point is the width of the gap at any one time. If, as people like my Northern Rhodesian settler are fond of saying, the gap was *always* immensely wide, then something might well be missing from the African make-up. But if the gap, though wide to-day, had once been relatively narrow, then history will draw quite other conclusions. Now the main consequence of a good deal of recent research into Southern and Central and East African history—over the past thousand years or so—is precisely to suggest that the gap was once a relatively narrow one, and not always to Europe's advantage either.

Writing in 1067, the mediaeval Arab scholar El Bekri described the court of the king of Ghana such as the Arabs knew it from their penetration and eventual conquest of that country. "When he gives audience to his people," wrote El Bekri, "to listen to their complaints and set them to rights, he sits in a pavilion around which stand his horses caparisoned in cloth of gold; behind him stand ten pages holding shields and gold-mounted swords; on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited into their hair. . . ." A barbaric king and a barbaric kingdom? But were they more barbaric or less civilized than the king and kingdom that William

of Normandy had conquered the year before? Were they not, conceivably, less barbaric and more civilized?

When the Portuguese adventurers first rounded the Cape of Good Hope they were certainly as much concerned with "the mystic powers of persons and things" as the most superstitious native of any part of Africa. Their ignorance of the Eastern world was no smaller than East Africa's ignorance of Europe and was quite possibly greater. They were astonished to find the harbours of the East Coast—of what are now Mozambique and Tanganyika and Kenya—the goal and shelter of long-range ocean shipping; and when they sailed for India it was with pilots whose navigational equipment was, in some ways, better than their own. The superiority of the society of Lisbon over the society of Kilwa and Mombasa was not, in those days, by any means obvious. The one certain superiority of those Europeans was in cruelty and aggressiveness.

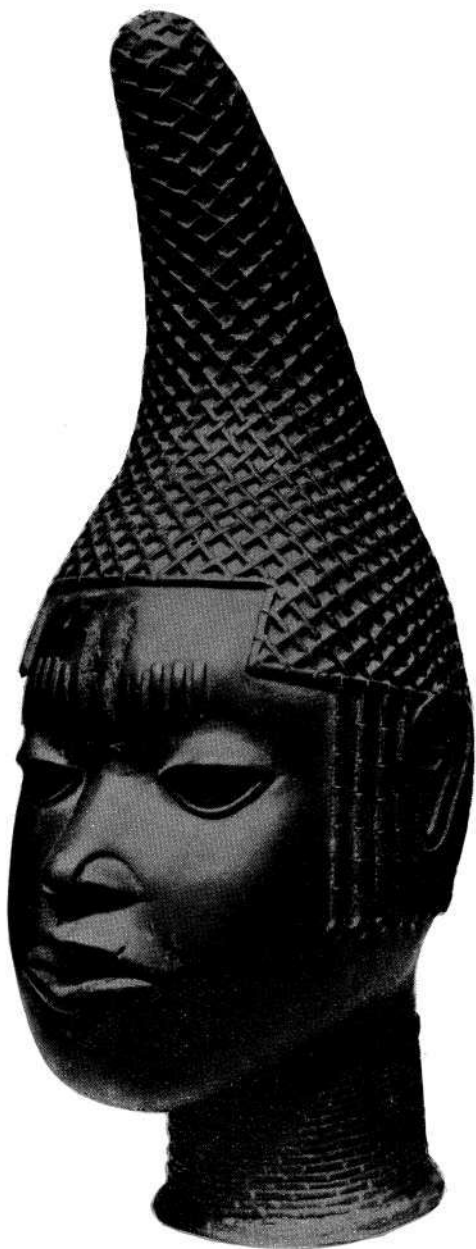
Yet three hundred and fifty years later, in the hey-day of Victorian re-discovery, the gap had grown immensely wide—so wide, indeed, that it became easy for Europeans to wonder (as many still do) whether Negroes did not after all belong to an inferior species. There is little mystery about the reasons for this widening of the gap: while Europe, freeing itself from mediaeval limits, plunged into commercialism and industrialism and won its great technical superiority over the rest of the world, much of Africa lay fettered in the oversea slave trade. The one went forward, the other went back, and the gap, narrow enough in 1500, grew into a gulf.

Historians and archaeologists are now building new bridges of explanation across that gulf. The articles which follow describe something of the reassessment that is taking place. While little that is final can be said at this stage, whether of West Africa or of Central and Southern Africa, enough is known with a fair certainty to show that many familiar ideas will have to be revised. The latest judgments, as Dr. Summers shows, confirm those of Miss Caton-Thompson and of Randall Maclver before her that the Zimbabwe culture is Bantu in origin and mediaeval in date. And now Dr. Gervase Mathew, after more than a decade of work on East African archaeology, suggests that the East Coast civilizations may not have been Arab, as opinion has generally held, but native African. He offers for consideration the hypothesis that these East Coast cities were "African kingships which had become Mohammedan and which

progressively through the 15th century had acquired the technique and the organization of Islamic states." The Arabs in East Africa, that is, played much the same role as they are known to have played in India and seaboard countries further to the east.

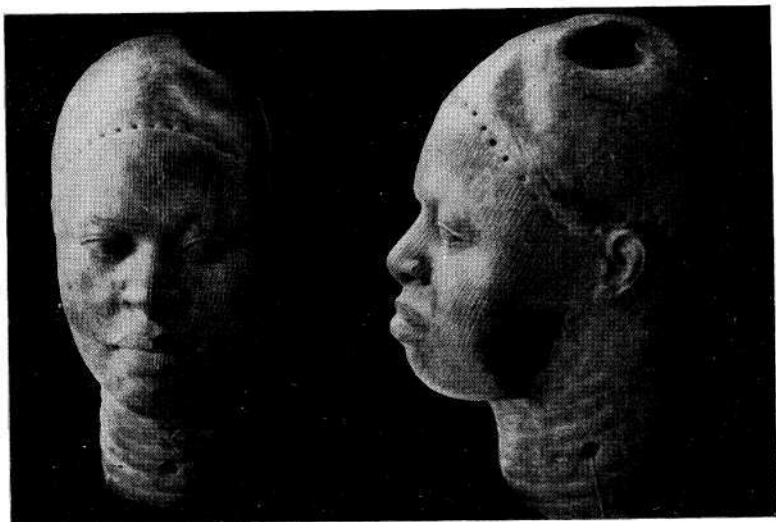
What appears to emerge from the present state of knowledge is nothing like a state of savage chaos, but, on the contrary, the long-enduring growth and development of an African Metal Age—beginning over two thousand years ago and producing, for example, the Monomotapa culture of what were Rhodesia and Mozambique in the 15th century—that went through many phases and vicissitudes, but showed remarkable flexibility of invention and resource. It is certain that there developed down the East Coast, sometime after the discovery of the trading use of the monsoon winds in the first century A.D., a flourishing and stable African trade with Arabia, Persia, India, Indonesia and China. It is probable that while the Arabs became the intermediaries and chief carriers in this trade, they were no more the originators of it in Africa than they were in India or China. They established trading posts as far south as Sofala, at points where African kingdoms already existed or subsequently grew. Behind these coastal kingdoms, in the hinterland of Africa, there was meanwhile developing a network of Metal Age polities whose growth was increasingly stimulated by the coastal and oversea demand for gold, ivory and iron. These African goods were exchanged by Africans—through Arab and Indian intermediaries—for Indian textiles, Indonesian beads, and Chinese porcelain. Only when the Portuguese arrived to monopolize this trade, and rapidly destroy it, did these coastal and inland civilizations enter their decline. The hand of the European guided, as it came about, not away from chaos, but towards it.

And what continually surprises, in reviewing the evidence so far available, is the *coherence* of these African cultures. Already it is possible to glimpse connexions, whether by cultural drift, migration, or trade, between the early kingdoms of Uganda, for example, and those of Rhodesia; between Zimbabwe and the coastal cities as far north as Gedi, sixty miles beyond Mombasa; between the wooden cities of West Africa and the stone cities of Monomotapa. All these links between African societies of the past, whether immediate or remote, have the same kind of coherence and suggestion of common origin,



Cast bronze head of a queen-mother (iyoba) wearing a headdress and collar of coral beads. From Benin, Southern Nigeria. Probably 16th century
Height, 15½ in.

With acknowledgements to the British Museum.



Ife bronze head showing tribal cicatrizations. Traditionally 13th century.
With acknowledgements to Prof. Goodwin of the School of African Studies, University of Cape Town.



Black pottery figure of a Lion, decorated in white. Shilluk tribe. Southern Sudan.
Length 7 in.

With acknowledgements to the British Museum.



Palace Gate of the Haunted City of Gedi, near Malindi, Kenya.

native origin, as those which gave the Indo-European tribes their historical affinity as they spread across the northern world. We are clearly in the presence of a large segment of the human story: of another contribution to the proof of that unity-in-diversity which scientists otherwise ascribe to all branches of *homo sapiens*.

As a footnote to this process of discovery, I should like to add that South Africa seems curiously to lag behind in this study of comparatively recent pre-European history—although, of course, South African scientists have done brilliant and important work on the distant history of man in Africa. It is twenty years since Professor Leo Fouché published the first volume of reports on the vitally important (and comparatively recent) site of Mapungubwe in the Northern Transvaal. We have had to wait some eighteen years for the next new word on the subject, published by Mr. G. A. Gardner in the *South African Archaeological Bulletin* for September, 1955; and Mr. Gardner, writing on important work carried out between 1935 and 1940, felt obliged to warn us that “it is naturally impossible here to do more than give the barest outline of what we found and the conclusions derived therefrom, although detail will eventually be given in the second volume of Mapungubwe—if it is ever published.” Should we be wrong in supposing that those who decree an inferior status for Africans to-day are determined, at all costs, to prolong the myth of the inferior status of Africans yesterday as well?

