

## THE AFRICAN IN TRANSITION

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**I**N these days, when it is fashionable to pay lip-service to what everyone calls democracy, one hears a good deal of verbal by-play with Rousseau's phrase 'All men are born equal'. No greater fallacy than that has ever been reiterated with more determined disregard of obvious truth. No matter how bitter it is, the fact remains that none of us has been born equal to anyone. Individually, we all enter and remain in this world either richer or poorer, cleverer or duller, stronger or weaker, quicker or slower, than everyone with whom we come into contact in our daily lives. This inequality of endowment stares us in the face even more conspicuously when we consider nationalities than it does on the plane of purely personal relationships. And nowhere in the international sphere does it stand out more clearly than when white men and black stand side by side amid the cataclysmic changes now taking place in Africa.

Today we live in an era when, throughout that continent, hitherto unsophisticated peoples are forming themselves into national organizations, which, although rudimentary and experimental by Western standards, will ultimately exert a very considerable influence upon our own national interests by their participation and possibly their opposition, vote for vote, in the great council chambers of the world.

It is therefore necessary for us to know something of the physical and mental heritage of African peoples in general, that our future relations with them, whether in commerce, in politics, in academics or in the mission field, may be conducted at least with understanding, if not with agreement.

Until very recent times—that is to say from the beginnings of history until a generation ago—the African lived in a state of extreme closeness to nature. His own survival and that of his race depended upon winning, often by the narrowest of margins, an unending struggle against war, pestilence and famine, conducted always in conditions of intellectual darkness. To find any comparable existence in our own country we should have to return, over many hundreds of years, to life in the reign of Stephen and the robber barons. The effect of this ceaseless struggle for existence, which continued almost up to the present time, has been to breed out races

of men who differ very considerably from ourselves in their physical and mental attributes.

Genetic studies, for example, have shown that a certain inherited blood disorder is widely disseminated throughout many African races. When this condition is inherited from only one parent, its effects are mild and often symptomless, but when a baby inherits the disorder from both its parents, a severe and chronic illness develops which makes survival after puberty very unlikely indeed. In the ordinary way, the effect of this disturbance upon the reproduction rate of a community would be to hamper fecundity, but it has now been shown that the very abnormality of blood structure which this condition produces, confers some degree of protection against malaria. Until recent times malaria has been the greatest medical scourge of people in tropical Africa, and would have had an even greater effect had the African not been fortunate enough, or unfortunate enough, to have a high incidence of this particular blood disease. Other studies on the bloods of Africans have shown that the distribution of blood groups among them differs from the distribution in Europeans. The full significance of this has not yet been elucidated, but we do know that certain blood groups are associated with certain types of illness. Therefore we might well expect that future researches will show that the incidence of disease to which the African is a natural prey will differ somewhat from that of the European, even when the day dawns when tropical infections which affect only the Africans are successfully eliminated. Already we know, for example, that rhesus-negative African mothers are uncommon and therefore the many complications which may result from rhesus-negativity, including rhesus babies, are rarely encountered.

Other inherited physical characteristics are of a much more obvious kind and include those which enable us to recognize a negroid person at sight not only by the colour of his skin and the type of hair he possesses, but also by his general bodily physique. Some of these inherited differences seem quaint and purposeless: many African babies—nearly half of them, in fact—are born with a curious spot over the lower part of the spine—a very rare phenomenon in the European.

What is of very much more importance to us, however, are the mental differences between the African and ourselves. In these days a great deal of attention is given to natural resources, and we are inclined to think of them in terms of mineral wealth, agricultural fertility, size of population, ease of communication and other essential material endowments. The mental constitution of a race,

however, to which far less consideration is given, is undoubtedly the greatest of natural resources, and we know from the experience of nations such as the Swiss and ourselves that it is possible to exert a considerable influence in the world without gigantic populations or vast reserves of raw materials, simply because the race can make up for these deficiencies by proper application of its national temperament and brain-power.

By studying the mind of the African one may eventually be able to assess this capacity and compare it with that of the European. However, psychological investigations are much more difficult than those of a purely physical nature, because after recording our observations we must decide how much of what has been found is determined by genetic or anatomical causes, which are either unchangeable or changeable only by many generations of out-breeding, and, on the other hand, how much has been conditioned by existence in a hostile environment. One worker has produced evidence that the brain of an African weighs, on the average, about 89 per cent of that of the European, and its volume is about 165 ccs. smaller. In the Bantu peoples of Africa the frontal lobes of the brain, which are concerned with higher intellectual activities such as concentration and imagination, occupy a slightly smaller proportion of the brain than it does in the European. There is general agreement that there exists a greater degree of convolution in the white man's brain, and that in the African those layers of the brain which are concerned with thought processes is only 84 per cent of that found in the European. The great criticism which is levelled at the work on which these conclusions are based, is that the investigator was dealing with adult Africans whose anatomical development in general may have been hampered, not from genetic causes, but from illness and undernourishment. More recent observations tend to show that the brain of the African is not deficient in structure, and investigations on living persons by means of a machine which measures the impulses of the brain indicate that any difference which arises in the African's mental processes is due to variation in culture and environment and not to an inborn deficit of grey matter. In Uganda it has been found that the development of co-ordination between mind and muscle proceeds at a greater rate in African children than in European. At the age of two or three weeks the development of an African infant is comparable with that of a European child of anything up to nine weeks old. In the first year of life the African child passes the accepted mile-stones of development, raising the head, sitting, standing and walking at an earlier age than the European baby.

The psychological development of the African infant up to the age of two is probably as good if not better than that of the European, since it lives in close relationship with its mother, carried on her back in a rhythmic and happy association and is breast-fed on demand for at least eighteen months. It is quite noticeable that thumb-sucking is very rare in African babies.

After the first two years of life, however, cultural differences between the two races become very striking. While the European child is introduced to building bricks and mechanical toys from an early age and spends his childhood surrounded in the home and out of doors by mechanical contrivances of all descriptions, the experience of his African counterpart is mostly verbal, dramatic and emotional, and is concerned largely with family tradition. Thus, while our children soon realize that the material world works on general laws and is encouraged to integrate his knowledge, the African's life is governed by complicated tribal taboos which are often centuries old. The European child soon knows that what he does in this world is largely of his own making, but the creative outlets of the African are confined to song and dance and he lives in a world of sound rather than of sight. It is little wonder therefore that after those formative years have been spent in such different ways the outlook of the adult African differs very considerably from that of ourselves. African culture has always developed on the lines which demand an ability for memorizing detail and for behavioural conformity within the tribal group. Owing to the pre-occupations demanded by the ceaseless struggle for existence, there is little time for experimentation and the exercise of pure thought. All African tribes have designed for themselves a way of life which has enabled them to survive in the face of great difficulties, and therefore they frown upon the expression of originality or profundity of reason. This explains why the African possesses such a great degree of mental uniformity, and a static rather than a dynamic intellectual outlook. The consciousness of the African grown-up is undivided and concentrated on external stimuli. One has only to see a group of African entertainers dancing to a tom-tom to realize that this type of mental behaviour can lead quite easily to a state of hypnosis.

There is, of course, a credit side to these mental attributes. The African is a person of great charm and is swift to give his full attention and his sympathy to things which are presented to him. He also has a great ability to continue in daily routine work. Of particular importance in the world today is the fact that his manners and poise are incomparably better than those of the European. The African swiftly forgets his wrongs and is far less given to introspection and

inner brooding than the European. Mental disorders in Africans are infrequent and when they do occur there is usually an organic cause rather than a psychological one. For instance, the suicide rate in western countries is immeasurably greater than that in Africa where suicide is rare and when it does occur is usually attributable to an organic disease or infection, such as pellagra or sleeping-sickness, which affects not only the brain but also the rest of the body. There are also differences in the proportions of the psychological ailments which afflict the two races. Mania is much more common than depression in the African and obsessional disorders are rare. For reasons which I have already given, hysteria is one of the commonest purely psychological disturbances of the African.

The picture which I have so far tried to draw for you portrays the mind of the African who is still living under the conditions of his forefathers, mitigated only to a relatively small extent as yet by the suppression of civil war, the control of disease, and the dissemination of education. They still form by far the greatest proportion of the people of the African continent and remain truly African in religion and culture. The European is not a fatalist; the African is. A Christian who falls sick does not consider it incompatible with his religion to consult a doctor; the African, ascribing his illness to the machinations of a spirit whom he has offended, will hesitate to do so for fear of adding insult to injury and inviting even greater affliction. This animism, which attributes the control of the forces of nature to a pantheon of potentially malign spirits who must forever be placated, permeates African thought and greatly determines the response to personal and communal danger and calamity. An even more powerful influence than the spirits themselves, perhaps, is the witch-doctor who is the recognized medium between the living and the dead, between the visible and invisible, who alone is capable of staving off or deflecting injury.

Of course the African realizes that European doctors, missionaries, engineers and the like can perform what would be sacrilegious for themselves to do, without coming to any harm. But this is accounted for, not by giving credit to intellectual enlightenment or special training, but to some specially acquired mystical protection, which makes them envied and also to be feared.

For the sake of convenience we may classify the group whom I have discussed so far as the pre-literate African. Those Africans with whom we find ourselves in contact in this country, or when engaged in social and professional activities in Africa, are of a different type. An ever-increasing but still far from representative semi-literate group has now come into existence. We may take as

examples those who have had some benefit, although small, from western education, and are found in the lower grades of the Civil Service, in the Armed Forces or performing the more menial tasks in commercial and industrial organizations. The life of this type of African is a much more protected one than that of the pre-literate, since he has a source of income which is not influenced by the vagaries of climatic conditions and the other hazards which confront those whose life is essentially sustained direct from the land. He is aware, and no longer suspicious, of the benefits of mechanization, and his outlook is somewhat enlightened by the fact that his education, although rudimentary by our standards, has been derived in most cases from Christian teachers. This group is, on the surface at any rate, more Christian than African. A study of this semi-literate group gives us a very good picture of the African in transition at a stage where the physical hazards of life are being reduced, but the strain on his mental faculties is gradually increasing. So far, however, there does not seem to be any increase of the incidence of mental breakdown among these people.

Traditional modes of thought still predominate among them as one would expect, since they have sprung into a class of their own, largely within one or two generations; their good rote memories serve them well in primary schools and their attentiveness to externals is well-adapted to the tasks they have to do. Although they are aware of the Christian message, and undoubtedly realize the advantages of Christian behaviour in a society which is being westernized, they are still to a great extent influenced by animism, totemism, and the other forces of natural religion. Many of them, for instance, when faced with illness, seek the aid of modern medicine, but should this fail, or the disease be incurable, they turn to the witch-doctor, often travelling long distances in desperate plight, to seek in sorcery the relief that western medicine failed to provide. I have not the experience to know how often, in the event of an apparent failure of Christian prayer, they turn in the same way to some remote ancestral form of spiritual consolation, but I suspect that it is frequently so.

The third and last group of our classification is by far the smallest and most influential of the three, and comprises the fully literate Africans of professional or managerial rank, with a completed Western education. They have very largely been brought up in, or have adopted, a European way of life, and all the evidence so far suggests that they have purchased their position at the cost of assuming the European pattern of disease. Mental stress in them produces the same forms of anxiety neurosis as we find in the

westerner, and also those conditions which we might term 'diseases of civilization' such as peptic ulcer and coronary thrombosis. From the genetic standpoint this is of great interest—it means that centuries of comparative inbreeding in a *physically* hostile environment has not suppressed the responses of the body to *mental* hardship. The psychiatric disturbances in persons belonging to this literate group are also similar to those to which white men are liable.

From the point of view of cultural behaviour, they often seem to be more sophisticated than ourselves. Their hospitality is lavish, their courtesy is impeccable and they are charming and good-humoured. Their traditional flair for the spoken word makes them good, if at times voluble, speakers, and many of them excel in advocacy and politics, to which professions a large proportion of them are naturally attracted.

What we do not, and cannot, know at the present time is the degree to which the mental characteristics and behaviour—that is to say the psychomotor activity—of the non-literate group have been inherited by the fully literate African and lie dormant within him. We know that a great deal of human conduct is conditioned by climate, culture and many other external factors. But, at the same time, there are evidences that the intellectual fibre of a man is partly sustained by the influence of remote culture, perhaps even of a culture of which he is unaware. Take, for example, a handful of Englishmen; set them down in a French hotel, and even if they speak French like natives and dress in French national costume, they stick out like a sore thumb. In fact, they betray the consequences of their national upbringing in England. But examine them more closely, individually, one against the other. The personality of one is Greek, of another, Saxon, of a third Celtic, but unless they are men of unusual learning they would know nothing of these ancient races whose traditions are reflected in their own mental attitudes. In modern psychology there are two conflicting schools of thought. One considers that heredity is the most important factor in the formation of personality, summed up in the old Romany phrase, 'You've got to dig deep to bury your Daddy'; the opposite point of view which holds that everyone is conditioned by his early environment is inherent in the Jesuitical axiom—'Give me the child until he is seven years old and you can do what you like with him after that'. You will see from what I have said that I hold, in a typical English way, a compromised opinion between these two extremes.

Now to apply this to the problem of our literate class of African. It is, as yet, a small élite, trained by Western methods for the purposes of government—that is, government in the broadest sense



of the word. The work which they are performing is an exquisite psychological dichotomy; they are applying the mental processes acquired from their western upbringing and education to the basic problems of their own heredity.

Take for instance, the senior African police official who undertakes the arrest of a native sorcerer because he is practising an obnoxious rite, outlawed by westernized legislation but part and parcel of traditional African mysticism. Can we be sure that the officer will take his duty in majestic stride without a qualm, without a glance over his shoulder into the life and times of his father, or without his *hereditary* conscience grating upon his soul as he closes the handcuffs? Again, take the African political leader, confronted by a social problem which can be solved only by arousing and then exerting popular opinion against the traditional elders of his race. Are we quite certain that he does not feel the disapproving gaze of his ancestral spirits upon his back as he hurls from the platform politically progressive slogans into the ears of those who still find fear or consolation, or both, in the tribal codes of yesterday? Lastly, take an African medical officer called to a stricken invalid in the bush. Does he not think of the spells already woven about his patient as his fingers close upon a hypodermic syringe in defiance of the spirit of some departed forefather?

We may never know the answers to these questions. As the pace of African transition increases, it may not be possible to investigate African motivations with Western psychological techniques. Until an answer is obtained, however, let us at any rate understand the dilemma in which the African leaders of today find themselves. And if they appear to prevaricate, to lack decisiveness in dangerous times, or to double-back upon themselves, let us, in *our* ignorance of them, be charitable. Perhaps they themselves cannot tell whether their actions are prompted by environment or heredity, but if asked, would simply echo Pascal, 'The heart has its reasons that the mind knows not of'.

Such an appreciation is not simply a theoretical exercise. We may find in it the means of understanding some of the fantastic events now taking place in Africa. We hear, for instance, of a busload of people ambushed and cut to pieces—all save one, a priest, who survived as a living symbol of the failure of the Christian message. But he was spared, not because the assassins revered his cloth, but because they feared his powers of witchcraft; the failure was not simply one of moral teaching, but of inability to influence the pre-literate African mind in a much more profound sense.

We hear of a large telephone exchange conducted in a great



national emergency only by operatives who were blissfully confident that if anything went wrong with the apparatus, the instructions for repairing it would be found in the telephone directory. Does not that story reflect in its humour and its pathos exactly the underlying psychology of our semi-literate group?

When we consider how little regard the African has for abstraction, and how much more regard he pays to externals, can we be surprised that the contributions to Africa which Western powers have made during their consulships are so lightly regarded? What are peace, justice and civic freedom to a child whose belly groans for the lack of protein in his food, or to a man trudging wearily to a far-off destination for the want of a bicycle?

If, in conclusion, we look at the vast African community as a whole, we find a pyramidal structure with a deep basic layer of humanity still living and thinking in the ways of old; a smaller middle section reaching upwards but still anchored to the base, and an even smaller apex of fully literate leaders at the top. As we watch the changes which are taking place in this structure, we see the breaking down of the foundation and its transmutation into the semi-literate layer above. We see the apex, not securely poised upon a middle-class as we know it, but placed lightly upon the polished upper surface of a happy-go-lucky semi-Christianized stratum whose ability has hardly been tested in the world of today. Those of us who are optimists and historians may find an epoch in our own social history when the structure of our society was not dissimilar, and might reflect that eventually it was successfully amalgamized in spite of its instability. But it took many generations; Africa's greatest need today is not money or brains or man-power, but time. The new nations of that continent are, to the medical eye, like infants born too soon, dazed by premature birth, and living in a dream world where the facts of life and the phantasies of the womb are still inextricably muddled. Even if they refuse our help and mock our advice, we must, through our understanding, find it possible to give them our sympathy and wish them well.