

ASPECTS OF AFRICAN GROWTH  
BEFORE A.D. 1500

Not many of the answers, true enough, are known: what is really new in the study of recent African history—the two millennia, let us say, before A.D. 1500—is not so much that the answers are being supplied as that the questions are being put. That in itself is something of a milestone. Few may have denied the eventual possibility of tracing firm outlines for that place and period; all but the merest handful have had other fish to fry. These fish have been, and are, extremely important—as important as the study of human origins through the slow millennia of the Pleistocene or, at the other end of time, as the story of colonial beginnings through the scurried decades of the last century. It is no small thing that Dart, Breuil, Leakey, and their colleagues can now assert with solid evidence behind them that *Homo sapiens* first saw the light in Africa; while in another direction the astonishing continuity of the African story has acquired spectacular emphasis from the recovery in southeast African waters of coelacanth, a most ancient creature whose latest known fossils had occurred in rocks that are older than seventy million years. Compared with that majestic gap in time, the centuries before European preoccupation with Africa may have seemed small and unimportant; they were in any case, and for one reason or another, largely ignored.

They were not completely ignored. Unaccountable ruins, here and there, fed the imagination with possible origins of Ophir and the mines of gold and meadows of gems in which medieval Arabs, beginning to be translated into French and English in the nineteenth century, had written with the verve and spirit of exploring poets. It is just over fifty years since Randall MacIver published his findings on Great Zimbabwe and other Rhodesian ruins—and made perhaps the earliest application of sound archeological method to a purely African site. Intelligent speculation, even before that, had offered glimpses of an African past which was not so mean and lowly as the trekking settlers and concession hunters had understandably supposed from the evidence of magic, nudity, and spears.

Yet it was not until some twenty or thirty years ago that the possibility and the value of knowing pre-European history in Africa south of the Sahara became generally admitted among scholars and interested amateurs. In 1928 the British Association called for another expert assessment of the age of the Southern Rhodesian stone ruins, and a year later Miss Gertrude Caton-Thompson both confirmed MacIver in his general conclusions—that the ruins were medieval in date and Bantu in origin—and collected the material for her *Zimbabwe Culture*, a work of gemlike clarity, literary grace, and classical stature. This set a new standard of quality in the study of recent African proto-history and prehistory in British territories; thus encouraged, others were quick to follow. Little by little there was shadowed forth a body of good evidence: sparse as yet, and very tentative and yet leading always to the possibility of a coherent outline—an outline that is now, at last, beginning to emerge from mere speculation. Thus in 1933 Huntingford could write of a realization “during the last few years . . . that there existed at some period between the Stone Age and medieval times a civilization”—mainly in what are now Kenya and Tanganyika—“which has left traces over a large part of Africa.” Huntingford called this unknown civilization “Azanian” after the word that classical geographers had coined for the East African coast and its immediate hinterland.<sup>1</sup>

These “Azanians”—specifically an African people, or comity of peoples, whether of Hamitic or partly Hamitic racial type—have left behind them an imposing network of stone inclosures, stone-enforced hut circles, roads, canals, tumuli, cairns, irrigation works, and wells. Huntingford gave them a tentative date between about A.D. 700 and 1400, and what has subsequently come to light seems to approve the approximate rightness of this

1. G.W. B. Huntingford, *Antiquity*, 1933, p. 153.

dating. Two years later, carrying the story a little further, Leakey examined the newly reported stone city of Engaruka, on the Kenya-Tanganyika border, estimating that "there are about 6,300 houses in the main city . . . [and] the population figure was probably between thirty and forty thousand and I think this may be an underestimate."<sup>2</sup> Whether or not Engaruka is "post-Azanian"—Leakey thought the ruins were between three hundred and one hundred and fifty years old—they offer another challenging fragment in the mosaic of central Africa's civilizing process in the centuries before European conquest. Others, meanwhile, had already pointed out that skilfully terraced mountain sides could be found as far to the north as Ethiopia<sup>3</sup> and as far to the south as the Rhodesian-Mozambique border.<sup>4</sup>

Research in this field has got securely into its stride since the second World War. The pace of discovery is now altogether sharper than before. "We are finding new things every six months," Mathew could tell the second London conference on African history and archeology in 1956. Already, in these postwar years, we are far from the romantic imaginings of earlier times and deep into the subsoil and understructure of the subject. A catalogue of new discoveries within the last ten years would fill many pages; even a list of the names of those who have made and are making these discoveries would be numerous and international. Colonial government, especially in British and French territories, have awakened to the importance of preserving ancient monuments and of appointing skilled men and women to investigate them. The work of the Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire and its distinguished staff is known and admired wherever such matters are discussed, in particular, the indefatigable activity of Th. Monod as head of the Institute. British governments in eastern and central Africa have found the money for the establishment of trained archeological officers; and many important contributions, especially on Stone Age history, have come from scholars in South Africa. Ghana has a chair of archeology at its University College: Africans themselves have begun to sift and study their own past. Thus the Nigerian government, together with the British government and the Carnegie Foundation, have lately combined to provide the respectable sum of £42,000 for research

2. L. S. B. Leakey, *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 1936, p. 57; H. A. Fosbrooke, *loc. cit.*, 1938, p. 58.

3. R. P. Azais and Chambord, *Cinq années de recherche archéologique en Ethiopie* (1931); C. B. G. Watson, in *Man*, XXVII (1927), 50.

4. G. E. H. Wilson, in *Man*, XXXII (1932), 298; A. Y. Mason, in *South African Journal of Science*, 1933, p. 559.

into the history of the medieval Nigerian kingdom of Benin, and the director of this research is a Nigerian scholar, Dr. Kenneth Dike. The emergence of new nation-states in colonial Africa goes hand in hand with an international endeavor at defining the cultural foundations from which, ultimately, these states will be seen to have taken their rise.

Yet the field is so wide that whole territories still remain little more than a blank on the archeological map. Of Nyasaland, Angola, Mozambique, to mention only three, there is as yet little or nothing to report. All too often, as someone has said, "it is the Public Works Department that stumbles on the object, and prison labor that digs it out." Intensive settlement, here and there, has rubbed away the traces of earlier occupation, completing the erosion that wind and weather and glazing sun have always caused in Africa. In more than one notable case we owe such knowledge of important sites as we may have to the spare-time enthusiasm of otherwise hard-pressed district officers and *commandants de cercles*. It would not seem that there is much ground for complacency; at several points of key importance on the archeological map there is now an urgent need for the promulgation of Ancient Monument orders and the spending of money on elementary preservation. Yet it stays to be recorded, on the credit side, that the worst is over. We are a long way from those high old days of pioneering penetration when a handful of energetic explorers could form an "Ancient Ruins Company Limited" for the sacking of stone ruins in Rhodesia. That company, true enough, was wound up five years after its foundation, in 1900, but it nonetheless had time to explore many of the best Southern Rhodesian sites; and, although it appears to have recovered no more than 500 ounces of gold, "the damage done was immense, for everything except the gold was treated in a most reckless manner."<sup>5</sup> Not until 1933 and the painstaking and expert investigation by South African scholars of Mapungubwe, an Iron Age site in the northern Transvaal, could some of this damage be made good and the nature of gold and grave goods in these medieval sites become clearly known from actual examples. The position now, by contrast, is that new sites are likely to be carefully reported by anyone who happens on them, and new objects are likely to be sent to experts and museums. Perhaps the most striking proof of this has been the recovery from modern tin workings on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria of anthropomorphic plaster heads in lavish quantity—the "Nok Culture," which Bernard Fagg, admirable curator of the Jos Museum, would date to the first millennium B.C.

5. J. F. Schofield, in *Man*, XXXV (1935), 19.

What outline emerges? In summarizing the evidence at this relatively early stage, it may be more helpful to define what questions are being asked; for it is perhaps the nature of the questions, now, that best defines the present character of the outline. They are not, of course, original questions; they are the questions which have had to be asked of prehistory everywhere else, whether in Europe, in Asia, or in the Americas. They fall into three broad divisions concerning, first, the dating and the course of the Neolithic; second, the dating and course of the age of metals; and, third, the nature and the limits of evolving African societies and civilizations. It is along these three parallel but associated routes into ignorance and myth that research now makes its journey to the sources of African history. If the expeditions are still a long way from their destination, at least their vigorous and various participants are into the wilderness far enough to know that the historical Niger, as it were, flows from west to east and not, as antiquity had generally believed, quite the other way about.

Several great matters are clear enough. It is seen, for example, that the Sahara was densely occupied in Neolithic times but that it became relatively empty of man, and a major and often impassable barrier, at some period after about the fourth millennium B.C. This may have affected the evolving Neolithic in the Nile Valley in the sense of imposing an eastward and a northward drift, so that it may, after all, be true that inland Africa gave the gods to Egypt, and not the other way round. It appears in any case to have robbed the greater part of Africa of those southward-moving influences which might have promoted a true Bronze Age to the south of the great desert. "Climatic and archaeological evidence," Summers has written, "all suggests that Africa south of the Sahara was isolated from the Ancient World during its most formative period, the fourth, third, and second millennia B.C."<sup>6</sup> Thus it is possible to speak of a Neolithic Age south of the Sahara and also of a Metal Age; but the categories of Copper, Bronze, and Iron lose their application, just as the vastness and diversity of the continent meant that bone, stone, wood, and metal could all be in use and manufacture at the same time and often enough by the same peoples. Does this African Neolithic, even so, show the same pace and direction of growth as the late Stone Age elsewhere? But once again one has to bear in mind the absolutely different conditions under which humanity survived and multiplied in Africa and the sheer magnitude of distance that divided these peoples from the busy urbanity of the Middle

6. R. Summers, in *South African Journal of Science*, September, 1955, p. 43.

East and the Mediterranean. The Neolithic in Africa was specifically an African Neolithic, having its own character and limitations, its own failures and successes, evolving largely out of its own unaided genius.

How and when was the agricultural revolution carried into Africa? And was it necessarily carried *into* Africa? It will be rash to make assumptions. There is plenty to show that the Sahara was no real barrier to countless centuries of migration through the Old Stone Age: *Australopithecine* fossils occur on the Mediterranean coast just as they do in the Union of South Africa, and ancient *Homo sapiens* undoubtedly traveled between the one and the other and no doubt far beyond. "It seems more and more likely," Breuil has written, "that, even from times that are hundreds of thousands of years distant . . . Africa not only knew stages of primitive civilisation that are comparable with those of Europe and Asia Minor, but is also perhaps the origin of these civilisations in the classical countries of the north." If the earliest urban settlement at Jericho is now pushed by carbon-14 test beyond the ending of the seventh millennium B.C., the woodland Nachikufu culture of Northern Rhodesia—transitional between Paleolithic and Neolithic—is placed by the same measure at about 4,000 B.C., and Nachikufu tools included "the weighted digging stick, grindstones, pestles, heavy scrapers, and spokeshaves . . . bone awls and polished adzes";<sup>7</sup> and all that this appears to say with certainty is that the Neolithic advanced much more rapidly in the Middle East than it did in central Africa. The table of historical precedence is still unsure.

With advancing desiccation of the Sahara, the African continent to the south of it entered upon a long period of relative isolation—*relative*, since there was never a time when cultural drift and occasional migration across the Sahara stopped altogether, but *isolation* because the drift and movement of peoples became rare, spasmodic, muffled in time and space. Thereafter, and perhaps increasingly, the many peoples of Africa were left to their own devices. This helps to explain the astonishing continuity of cultural progression which unites, even now, the Neolithic with the burgeoning blustering industrialism of today. Yet within this continental isolation there is another governing circumstance to be noted: south of the desert the peoples of Africa mingled and intermingled so that the history of the past two or three millenniums, when it comes at last to be written, will show a complex cross-fertilization of cultures between west and east and south. Unity and diversity, continuity and isolation—these are the great central themes of African history. If the mining civilizations of the south-

7. J. D. Clark, in *Proceedings of Third Pan-African Congress on Prehistory*, 1955, p. 428.

ern plateau, for example, owed a good deal to the stimulus of Indian and Chinese demand for gold and iron and ivory, they owed infinitely more to their progenitors from west and north—from that great area of dispersion of African peoples, whether Bantu-speaking or not, which appears to have lain between Lake Chad and the southern mountains of Ethiopia and to which the contemporary inhabitants of much of central and southern Africa repeatedly, if obscurely, refer their ancient origin. Herein has evidently lain one of the peculiar features of all African development: that south of the desert humanity could find its way with relative ease through every part of the continent and even through the dense forests of the central Congo.

It is this factor of constant movement across many centuries—of the absence of impenetrable barriers—that makes any neat racial classification of African peoples south of the Sahara as meaningless and profitless as the application of chronological periods by type of metal. Some thirty years ago Seligman proposed five primary races of man in Africa: Hamites, Semites, Negroes, Bushmen and Hottentots, and Negritos (or Negrillos). “It would not be very wide of the mark,” he thought, “to say that the history of Africa south of the Sahara is no more than the story of the permeation through the ages, in different degrees and at various times, of the Negro and Bushman, aborigines by Hamitic blood and culture”; and today this still seems as much as can usefully be said on the subject. No doubt the Bushmen, Hottentots, and Negritos were the earliest traceable inhabitants of much of Africa; they had probably come from the north, and their former extension “over practically the whole of Africa is shown by the distribution of its relics, especially rock-paintings, skeletal remains, and even place-names.” No doubt the Negroes also came from the north, moving in small migrant groups toward the south and west through the uncounted centuries, intermarrying with Bushman and Hottentot, and evolving that numerous and various family, the Bantu, who have taken their name from their related languages. And no doubt the Hamites came the same way; yet “the Hamites entered Africa—or, if the African hypothesis of their origin be maintained, enter Negroland—in a long succession of waves of which the earliest may have been as far back as the end of the pluvial period,” and it is precisely the blending of the Hamitic type with the Negro type that has differentiated the Bantu from the true Negro.<sup>8</sup> I make these points only to emphasize that the decisive factor in African growth over the past several millenniums has been not racial but

8. C. G. Seligman, *Races of Africa* (London: T. Butterworth, Ltd., 1930), p. 15.

environmental. One could emphasize it in a different way by recalling that the latest waves of Hamitic invasion southward from the Horn of Africa—at some time, evidently, not long before A.D. 1400—brought pastoral peoples who overran agricultural peoples but whose superiority of organization was of the same order as that of the Goths in the Roman Empire or, long before, that of the Indo-European invaders of Mohendjodaro and the civilizations of the Indus Valley. It was not, that is to say, the superiority of a more advanced culture. Those who approach a study of the origins of contemporary Africa along race-type lines will raise more problems than they solve.

Today, in any case—and for many hundreds of years it has been the same—it is the Bantu-speaking “racial type” which occupies the greater part of Africa south of the Sahara. Whence did they and their Negro cousins come, and how did they multiply? To pose these questions is to pose the great central theme of human adjustment and survival in these hills and forests and limitless plains. All the evidence suggests, at any rate since late Neolithic times, that mankind has reversed the Palaeolithic migratory trend from south to north. Nearly all the solid body of tribal legend, as well as other evidence, points to a general movement from north to south or else to a complexity of east-west-east movements (coming now into very recent times) whose ultimate springs came probably from a southward-moving impulse. How much reliance may be placed on tribal legend will no doubt vary with time and place; there is no doubt at all that the medieval period brought wave after wave of southward-moving groups and subgroups, and it is to these historically well-attested but recent movements that tribal legend will generally refer. Yet it seems reasonable to conclude that southern, central, and western Africa was largely peopled with its present inhabitants by complex and long-enduring migration from the north. Not, of course, that all the people now living in southern Africa have ancestors who came from the north; we are much more likely in the presence not of massive immigration but of steady drift, adjustment, intermarriage, survival, and multiplication of groups that were initially quite small.

Ancient man, after all, was a rare animal. He lived in numerically insignificant groups. Wherever he multiplied, he moved on because he had to move on, and in this way he gradually spread across the earth through an immensely long time in which his culture scarcely changed. But he multiplied most at those points where he could solve his food problem by new methods; crucially, he solved it by inventing agriculture. He



solved it in this way, no doubt, because conditions made this solution easier than the old alternative of moving on. It may be relevant, for instance, that the sedentary civilizations of Central America should have arisen precisely at those points where conditions were unfavorable for the extension of hunting but favorable for the growing of food. These hunting peoples came down into the bottleneck of Central America and the narrow valleys of the Andes and found, because they had to find, new methods of subsistence. In this respect the valleys of the Euphrates and the Lower Nile were also narrow corridors of great potential fertility. Perhaps this may seem too neat an answer. For Africa, though, it must be part of any answer that there were no true bottlenecks, no narrow corridors, that could not be spread or extended. Short of fish and game at any one place, the early inhabitants must simply have moved elsewhere. And if it is true, as it may be, that temporary conditions created the scarcity that could lend the impulse to invention of agriculture, it is also true that the pressure could never have been long maintained at any one place. It may be that in this absence of long-maintained pressure for economic change at any single place we can detect one of the great limiting circumstances—relative isolation was obviously another—in African development from primitive to less primitive types of social organization.

However that may be, there seems little doubt that ancient man in Africa was relatively rare, as he was in other continents, and that the multiplication of the ancestors of the Negro depended both on discovering agriculture or adapting it to the conditions of rain forest and sunbaked plateau and on learning the use of iron. For iron, just as agriculture before it, lent a new mastery of environment. Of course the suggestion that African peoples could not multiply without the use of iron can be no more than a useful generalization; here and there it was simply not the case. Among the numerous and ingenious Ibo of Southern Nigeria, for instance, living where no iron ore exists, there is an extensive use of wood: “wooden swords, fighting sticks, wooden hoes beside the usual extensive use of wood for domestic utensils and for ceremonies.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the coincidence of iron and relatively advanced Negro societies appears too strong to rest without some intimate connection; the use of iron not only must have improved hunting and hoeing but must also have promoted the growth of those chiefly hierarchies which became, later on, an integral part of much African development. The wood-employing Ibo, we may note, do not have any system of centralized chiefly government; but they

9. M. D. W. Jeffreys, *Proceedings of Third Pan-African Congress on Prehistory*, 1955, p. 255.

live alongside other peoples who do; and one of these peoples, the Yoruba, can look back upon a spectacular use of metal in their social history.

How old is the use of metals in Africa south of the Sahara? We are coming now, no doubt, to some of the vital dates in any consideration of African growth before A.D. 1500. It appears safe to assume that iron was well known in central Africa before the building of Zimbabwe in the eighth century or earlier, and Summers has pointed out that gold-mining began in Southern Rhodesia about A.D. 900. "The Iron Age may have started considerably earlier, perhaps 1500 or more years ago."<sup>10</sup> Writing on the sub-Saharan fringe, Mauny and Hallems have estimated that "the sub-Saharan world passed slowly from the Neolithic to the age of iron (300 B.C.–100 A.D. approximately)."<sup>11</sup> A Greek document of the first century A.D. mentions a regular export of Arabian lances, hatchets, and daggers to the coast of what is now Italian Somaliland and British East Africa.<sup>12</sup> Iron goods from Meroe on the Upper Nile—from what Sayce called "the Birmingham of ancient Africa"—must have gone far south into inland Africa as well; and the piling slag heaps of Meroe probably do not date back to much beyond the first century B.C.

Yet here is a curious thing. Early Iron Age levels in Northern Rhodesia are securely dated to about the first century A.D.<sup>13</sup> Supposing, as many do, that it was Meroe which introduced the Iron Age to inland Africa, this speed of movement seems improbable unless one is prepared to assume a great capacity for local invention and adjustment. It is worth comparing this early use of iron in central Africa with the story of its passage up the Nile from Lower Egypt. "At Napata"—the early capital of ancient Ethiopia, north of Meroe—"the series of pyramids begins with Kashta, c. 750–744 B.C.; and bronze models are the regular thing until at last after 400 years we reach Pyramid 13, that of Harsiotef c. 397–362 B.C. Here at last iron models are found for the first time among the usual bronze ones."<sup>14</sup> While the earliest scraps of iron found elsewhere at Napata may be as much as two hundred years prior, the full Iron Age of Meroe seems not to have begun until two hundred years later.<sup>15</sup> And yet within two hundred years

10. R. Summers, in *South African Journal of Science*, 1950, p. 95.

11. R. Mauny and J. Hallems, *Proceedings of Third Pan-African Congress in Prehistory*, 1955, p. 255.

12. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, trans. Wilfred G. Schoff (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1913), par. 17.

13. Clark, *Proceedings* . . . , and a personal communication to the writer.

14. G. A. Wainwright, *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1945, p. 5.

15. See H. Alimen, *The Prehistory of Africa* (London, 1957), p. 125.

of this latter date the people of Northern Rhodesia, infinitely remote from Meroe, were smelting iron for themselves. Something more than migration or the slow drift of cultural borrowing seems required to explain this.

By the end of the first millennium A.D., in any case, southern Africa was well into its Iron Age. An Arabic compilation dating from the middle of the twelfth century notes the importance of iron exports *from* southeast Africa. Writing of Sofala (roughly the coast of what is now Mozambique), Edrisi says that the Indian Ocean merchants of that period (Arab, Indian, Indonesian, Chinese) “come here to find iron, which they transport to the continent and to the East Indian islands, where they sell it for a good price, since it is a commodity of great commercial importance and in great demand in India.” The iron of Sofala, he explains, was much superior to the iron of India, as well for its abundance as for its quality. “The Indians excel in the art of fabrication,” making the best swords in the world from it, for nothing would cut so well. “It is universally recognized, and no one would deny it.”

What was the level of African metallurgy? The same writer describes how the “gold of Sofala” was smelted.

The gold that is found in the territory of Sofala surpasses in quantity as in size that of other countries. . . . It is melted in the desert by means of fire fed by cow dung, without which it would be necessary to use mercury for that process, as is done in West Africa; there the inhabitants collect their fragments of gold, mixing them by means of a coal fire, so that the mercury evaporates and nothing remains but the gold, fused and pure. The gold of Sofala does not require that process, but is melted without requiring any device to alter it.

Lastly, Edrisi notes that the people of Sofala made ornaments of copper for themselves.<sup>16</sup> It is true that Edrisi had not been to Sofala himself but that by that time many thousands of Arab merchants had. These Africans, in short, had long entered their metal age. The first millennium A.D. was thus a crucial period of growth in numbers, technology, and social organization; however contrastingly, it set the scene for later growth in central and southern Africa as surely as the same period far to the north would set the scene for medieval Europe.

By the early centuries of the first millennium A.D. there were present, in several regions of Africa, the growing points of Iron Age cultures emerging from a thoroughly indigenous agriculture (which would not,

16. *La Géographie d'Edrisi*, trans. P. A. Joubert (1836), p. 59.

of course, exclude hunting and pastoralism), a widespread use of several metals, and a multiplication of peoples both by migration and by settled increase. There are here some suggestive concordances of date. The earliest Arabic authority for the existence of the sub-Saharan polity of Ghana is El Fazari soon after 800; Ghana, by that time, was not new. "It is almost certain," Biobaku considers, "that the Yoruba migrations from the northeast [elsewhere he makes it clear that he means from Upper Egypt] occurred between 600 and 1,000 A.D."<sup>17</sup> There is a good deal to suggest that the Lacustrine Kingdoms of what is now Uganda took their rise in much the same period, or not much later. The newest carbon-14 dating for Zimbabwe gives a period between about A.D. 500 and about 750 for the initial occupation of the site. Huntingford, as we have seen, thought that the "Azanians" founded their East African civilization in about A.D. 700. Lebeuf and Detourbet consider that the Sao civilization of Lake Chad began at the end of the tenth century—"unless later research pushes that date still farther back."<sup>18</sup> Throughout much of Africa, then, the first millennium of our era brought rapid growth and crystallization.

Thus the first European (and mainly Portuguese) accounts of southern Africa were written at a time when these Iron Age civilizations had some ten centuries of history behind them. It was, of course, the history of illiterate cultures. But if we cannot know what these kingdoms and empires were like from native documentation—except the often distorting documentation of oral tradition—we can infer a good deal from the abundant writings of mariners, merchants, missionaries, and administrators who came out from Europe after the last quarter of the fifteenth century; just as, here and there, we can infer as much or more from earlier Arab writings. It happens that southeastern Africa has an excellent Arab source of the tenth century. This is El Masudi, greatest of the Arab geographers, who drew much of his information on the East African coast from his own journeys and published it shortly before 950. El Masudi describes the people of the gold-bearing region of Sofala as having a strongly organized, animist, pastoral, and agricultural society with a great skill in mining. They were Zendjes, Negroes, and they lived at the ultimate extension of the land of the Negroes, for beyond them was the land of the Wak-Wak (who were possibly Bushmen-Hottentots, although Grottanelli agrees with Ferraud that Wak-Wak was probably Madagascar). Consider El Masudi's account of their kingship.

17. S. O. Biobaku, *Lugard Lectures* (1955).

18. J. P. Lebeuf and A. M. Detourbet, *La Civilisation du Tchad* (Paris: Payot, 1950), p. 175.

For, to return to the Zendjes and their kings, the name of the kings of the land is *Waklimi*, which signifies the son of the Supreme Lord; they so call their sovereign because he has been chosen to govern them equitably. And if he should exercise tyrannical power and depart from the rules of justice, they kill him and bar his posterity from accession to the throne, claiming that, in conducting himself thus, he ceases to be the son of the Lord, which is to say, of the King of Heaven and Earth.<sup>19</sup>

Here, in 950, is a picture of some of those African kingship characteristics that would be noted by modern anthropology a thousand years later. Evans-Pritchard wrote of that people of the Upper Nile in 1948:

We can only understand the place of kingship in Shilluk society when we realize that it is not the individual at any time reigning who is king, but *Nyikang* who is the medium between man and God and is believed in some way to participate in God as he does in the king. . . . Our authorities say that the Shilluk believe that should the king become physically weak the whole population might suffer, and, further, that if a king becomes sick or senile he should be killed to avoid some grave national misfortune, such as defeat in war, epidemic, or famine. The king must be killed to save the kingship and with it the whole Shilluk people.<sup>20</sup>

If the “divine kingship” of inland Africa really derived from Meroe, and not the other way round, then it had long reached far into the south by the year 950.

The striking thing which emerges from all these early writings is, in any case, the high degree of adjustment and invention which these Iron Age civilizations could show. Whatever they may have borrowed from the north, across the centuries behind them, they had become specifically African. They had grown into their environment. Thus, although their feudalism appeared so European to the early Portuguese, who hastened to introduce them to the felicities of aristocratic rank, there is no doubt that it was always a peculiarly African feudalism, profoundly influenced by Negro habits of thought. The chiefly hierarchies seldom became autocracies; and oligarchy was normally controlled by the democracy of tribal custom. In the kingdoms of the Lower Congo the Portuguese found that “the King of Loango was obliged to marry a princess of the royal blood of Kakongo, while the Mani of Kakongo had earlier had to choose from a princess of the royal blood of Congo.”<sup>21</sup> Yet it was of these same

19. El Masudi, *Les Prairies d'or*, trans. C. Barbier de Meynard (Paris: Imprimerie Imperiale, 1864), III, 29.

20. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk of the Nilotic Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), pp. 7 and 18.

21. A. Ihle, *Das Alte Königreich Kongo* (Leipzig-Engelsdorf: C. & E. Vogel, 1929), p. 23.

peoples that another Portuguese writer, even as late as 1837, after the degeneration of three hundreds years of oversea slaving at its worst, could write that "the government of 'Bailundu' is democratic. These heathen mix with the infamous humiliations of the orientals the unbridled coarseness of the English people at election times in England. The kings defer to and flatter their counsellors; these are they who elevate a king to the throne and also cast him down."<sup>22</sup>

Oral tradition has much to add. Thus the oral literature of the old Ugandan kingdoms has the story of an ancient farming people who were conquered by a cattle-keeping people "from the north." These invading Bahima and sedentary Bairu—Hamite and Bantu, no doubt, by racial type—continued to live together; the weaker were not exterminated.

The Bahima chose to dominate the Bairu because it paid to dominate. Although the agricultural technique of the Bairu did not produce a great surplus, it could produce, under pressure, enough beer and millet to make domination profitable. . . . The Bahima, then as now, lived upon their cattle and forced their serfs to give them as much beer, millet, and labor as possible without destroying their source of supply.<sup>23</sup>

This was the amalgam which produced the massive earthworks of western Uganda with their great ditches and inclosing walls—ditches that are still nineteen feet deep at some places.<sup>24</sup> And, although these conquerors tried hard to maintain their supremacy—forbidding intermarriage with their subject Bairu, forbidding Bairu to own productive cows—history was too strong for them; and gradually the two merged into one and produced the historical kingdoms of Uganda, which now, in our day, cross the threshold of a new independence.

It was evidently much the same with the strong-knit cultures of the southern plateau. They too appear to have evolved, some time in the middle of the first millennium, from the fertilizing process of invasion by stronger groups from the north, by the settlement and fusion of these groups with indigenous peoples, and by cattle-keeping, agriculture, and mining—this last being greatly stimulated by increasing demand for iron, gold and ivory from the other countries of the Indian Ocean and from China. Unluckily for them, the Portuguese arrived in a period of dynastic

22. G. M. Childs, *Umbundu Kinship and Character* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 61.

23. K. Oberg, in *African Political Systems*, ed. M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1940), p. 126.

24. G. Mathew, in *Antiquity*, 1953, p. 215.

collapse and upheaval. Injecting small military expeditions after the middle of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were gradually able to secure the upper hand and destroy the slow fruit of hundreds of years of social and economic growth.

Light on the nature of these southern civilizations was gained from the excavation of the Northern Transvaal site of Mapungubwe in 1933–35.<sup>25</sup> Here at last it was possible to examine the graves of a ruling class or caste and to find, along with porcelain from China and beads from India and Indonesia and gold ornaments of local workmanship, the evidence for ruler and ruled that could give this medieval site its comparison with feudalism elsewhere. A little farther to the north, on the border which separates Southern Rhodesia from Mozambique, the imposing forts and terraces and pit circles of Inyanga-Penhalonga add another chapter to the story. Here one may see the same skill and stubbornness in the use of stone that Huntingford and Leakey and others have noted for the stone ruins of Kenya and Tanganyika. “The walling both of the terraces and of the buildings connected with them,” Summers has recorded, “looks at first sight rough and unfinished, but further acquaintance with it reveals its finer points and leaves one in no doubt about the skill of builders who with the greatest economy of labor regularly used boulders weighing anything up to a ton for their building.”<sup>26</sup> The population was evidently much larger than it is now, for, although the countryside is watered, the Inyanga people found it necessary to evolve their own system of irrigation—just as the people of Engaruka, far to the north, were probably doing at about the same time. MacIver noted of Inyanga fifty years ago that

the stream was tapped at a point near its source, and part of the water deflected by a stone dam. This gave them a high-level conduit, by which the water could be carried along the side of a hill and allowed to descend more gradually than the parent stream. There are very many conduits in the Inyanga region, and they often run for several miles. The gradients are admirably calculated, with a skill that is not always equalled by modern engineers with their elaborate instruments. The dams are well and strongly built of unworked stones without mortar.<sup>27</sup>

The numerous stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe can show an earlier use of the same skill and power of organization.

Such were the fruits of growth over a thousand years of relative isola-

25. L. Fouché, *Mapungubwe: Ancient Bantu Civilisation on the Limpopo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937).

26. R. Summers, in *Antiquity*, 1952, p. 73.

27. R. MacIver, *Mediaeval Rhodesia* (1906), p. 12.

tion from the outside world; not chaos, not stagnation, not stunted incapacity, but a continuous and complex advance toward centralized government and the intensive exploitation of environment. In terms of social organization and individual adjustment to society—at any rate, up to the eleventh century—it may be hard to claim that the more advanced of these medieval African civilizations were in any inherent sense inferior to their counterparts in Europe. The cultural gap, whenever it really existed, was narrow and not broad. But then, of course, the factor of isolation played its part; the rapidly interacting polities of Europe advanced swiftly after the eleventh century, so that by the time of European discovery the material and technical gap was a good deal wider. Thereafter followed the black centuries of oversea slaving and of conquest, and the gap widened into an abyss. What may, after all, be found to be most interesting, as speculation hardens into certainty, is not that the cultural gap between Europe and Africa grew wide but that the growth of civilization in Africa could nonetheless overcome its isolation and evolve, out of its own genius, so steadily and so far.