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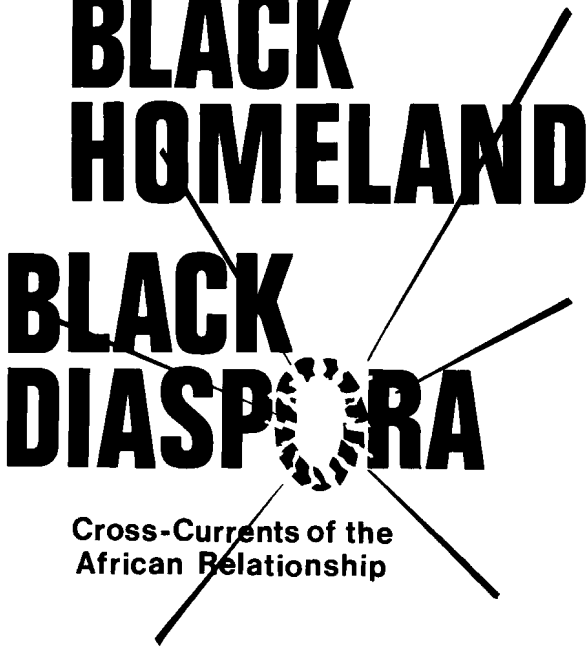

Cross-Currents of the African Relationship

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JACOB DRACHLER

Introduction

In 1898 Edward W. Blyden—the father of black nationalist ideology—published a pamphlet, *The Jewish Question,* praising "that marvelous movement called Zionism." He had been deeply impressed by Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State,* 1896) and apparently saw a striking and inspiring parallel between Herzl's ideal and his own labors to build in Liberia a Negro state and center of African renaissance.

A half century later Ralph Ellison was one of those black intellectuals who challenged the concept of Africa as a black Zion, saying that if everyone had to have "some place to be proud of . . . I am proud of Abbeville, South Carolina, and Oklahoma City. That is enough for me." He was concerned, he said, that "by raising the possibility of Africa as a 'homeland', we give Africa an importance on the symbolic level that it does not have in the actual thinking of people."[1]

For more than a century ideas about the relationship between Africa and its diaspora have been debated by black thinkers and leaders, and tested in the crucible of events. The polar opposites represented by such views as those of Blyden and Ellison define the limits between which these ideas have oscillated, but barely suggest the variety of experiences and concepts through which Negroes here and abroad have struggled to achieve a viable

[1] *Daedalus,* winter 1966, vol. 95, no. 1.

relationship that would satisfy desires for both symbolism and actuality, that would fill the needs for both pride and power.

The present collection of Afro-American and African writings is designed to explore this tortuous historic relationship, which, in the present generation, has had so momentous a rebirth. Both sides of the relationship are examined: on the one hand, how Afro-Americans have experienced Africa and conceived their connection with it, and on the other hand, how Africans have responded to the Afro-American world and its growing interest in Africa. Most of the selections have a markedly personal dimension, whether the writer appears as a pilgrim or sojourner, observer or activist, advocate or critic. The contributors—as men of letters, scholars, political leaders, and educators—have all played some part in shaping the relationship which is the subject of this book, and with the exception of Robert Campbell and Edward Blyden, are all of the twentieth century.

For generations the consciousness of Africa flickered uncertainly in the mind of the American Negro, sometimes flaring up in gusts of pride and hope, as happened most spectacularly in Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement of the 1920s. However, no previous generation of Afro-Americans has experienced so wide and steady an interest in Africa as the present one, a development directly connected with the dramatic rise of some thirty independent black states in Africa during the fifties and sixties. During the same period Negro Americans forged ahead in civil rights, political power, and economic gains. These events in the two hemispheres were significantly related. Over the years many Africans had prepared themselves for leadership by living and studying in Afro-American settings. Black Americans, for their part, had drawn inspiration from African contacts and achievements. Enfolded in these events of the mid-twentieth century lay the promise that a great historic trauma was beginning to be healed.

The original phase of this trauma had been the cruel alienations of the slave trade, the folk memories of being sold by other black men to the white slave-traders, of being torn away from kith and kin, native customs, language and traditions. Under slavery, locked in by the white master's racist ideas and practices, the Negro would come to think of Africa as a dangerous place, its people as brutish pagans whose best hope was to be

made Christian. And this negative view of Africa and Africans was later purveyed by the Negro churches themselves, where the people would hear Negro missionaries, in self-justification, give distorted impressions of African life. Even Frederick Douglass, an indomitable defender of the Negro, spoke disparagingly of Africa. George Washington Williams, a black historian, who had been a Union soldier in the Civil War, wrote *A History of the Negro Race in America* (1883), a very influential book, which characterized Africans as abject and degraded. There were other leading Afro-American editors and spokesmen who expressed strong aversion to any association with Africa. Thus, for most black Americans the idea of being bracketed with Africans became tainted with embarrassment and shame. School textbooks, newspapers, and other popular media tended merely to proliferate and reinforce such feelings.

But there were other streams of opinion, other outlooks, among Negroes. As early as 1787 a group of free Negroes in Newport, Rhode Island, organized a "Free African Society" to urge that Negroes be repatriated to Africa. In 1815 Paul Cuffee, a wealthy Negro ship owner, took a group of freedmen to Africa at his own expense. However, as Walter L. Williams has pointed out, emigrationists tended to regard themselves as missionaries for European values; they "wished to establish a Westernized Afro-American nation in the midst of African darkness."[2] Many Negro organizations took African names like Sons of Africa or African Methodist Episcopal Church. There were important black leaders with a pro-African orientation like Bishop H. M. Turner, Martin R. Delany and Edward W. Blyden. Blyden, in an address at Hampton Institute, warned students not to believe disparagements of African civilization.

Plans for mass repatriation of blacks to Africa seem to have been far more popular with whites than with blacks. In 1818 the American Colonization Society—a creation primarily of white leaders and statesmen—succeeded in establishing a tiny colony of freedmen at Monrovia on the west coast of Africa, which was later to develop into the republic of Liberia. Some sponsors of the Colonization Society were slave owners who thought their grip on their human property would be safer if the free Negroes

[2] Walter L. Williams, "Black American Attitudes toward Africa 1877–1900", *Pan African Journal* (Spring, 1971, Vol. 4, No. 2).

were shipped out of the country. But the overwhelming majority of freedmen, numbering close to half a million, rejected ideas of African nationality and emigration. Typically, a convention of free Negroes meeting in New York in 1831 preferred to look toward the realization of democracy in America, declaring "God hasten that time. This is our home and this is our country. Beneath its sod lies the bones of our fathers; for it, some of them fought, bled, and died. Here we were borne and here we will die."[3]

Two nineteenth-century Afro-Americans, Edward W. Blyden and Robert Campbell (both born in the West Indies), were interested in founding settlements of freedmen on African soil. Blyden emigrated to Liberia and became a significant leader in its development. Campbell sought to pioneer a settlement of black immigrants in the Niger delta in what is now Nigeria. However, Campbell and his colleague Dr. Martin R. Delany failed to establish a colony. No emigration followed the expedition. It was only in the 1920s after emancipation and reconstruction had failed to bring equal citizenship to blacks, and their oppression and misery continued, that a separatist, emigrationist appeal, under the flamboyant leadership of Marcus Garvey, was able to garner significant mass support. But this movement soon collapsed, not only because of Garvey's wild mismanagement, imprisonment for fraud, and subsequent deportation. The underlying reason was summed up by the Negro historian John Hope Franklin in this way: "Regardless of how dissatisfied Negroes were with conditions in the United States, they were unwilling in the 20s, as their forebears had been a century earlier, to undertake the uncertain task of redeeming Africa."[4] The use of the word "redeeming" here is an echo of the theory of "providential design" popular among mission-minded Christians in the nineteenth century, which taught that God allowed Africans to be enslaved and civilized so they could then redeem their benighted brethren. As it turned out, however, another kind of redemption was undertaken by the Africans themselves. It is quite a different situation today, when

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[3] Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, 1951), I, 109.

[4] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1952) p. 483.

Afro-Americans as volunteers, tourists, or settlers, swarm to the homeland in order, as they often feel, to redeem themselves.[5]

Marcus Garvey's movement, with its emotional and ritualistic appeal, drew masses of uneducated and poor people together in a dream of Africa as justification, solace, and salvation, but it failed utterly with the educated classes. However, for the latter, an African orientation began to be offered by such black scholars as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Woodson founded in 1915 the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and was its director, as well as the editor of its organ the *Journal of Negro History,* for thirty-five years until his death in 1950. The influence of this association and the work of the Negro colleges led by Atlanta, Fisk, Howard, and Lincoln universities generated increased scholarly activity on African subjects.

W. E. B. Du Bois had a large influence in spreading respect for the African heritage through his long editorship of *The Crisis* and his many eloquent books, at least one of which, *The World and Africa* (1947) was entirely devoted to a massive marshaling of materials pointing to Africa as a source of world civilization from most ancient times.

An important breakthrough was the landmark publication of a collection of essays, *Africa from the Point of View of American Negro Scholars* (1958). This richly informative volume was initially sponsored by the Paris-based Society of African Culture (SAC), an international movement launched by black intellectuals from the French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. The volume was edited by John A. Davis, the director of the affiliated American Society of African Culture (AMSAC).[6] From this book we have excerpted Horace Mann Bond's essay "Forming African Youth at Lincoln University" as an example of the fruitful interactions between Afro-Americans and Africans. A historic conference of SAC in 1956 is reviewed with brilliant commentary by James Baldwin in "Black Colloquium in Paris." AMSAC itself is

[5] At a convention of black American travel agents held at Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in October, 1972, Earl Kennedy, the president of their organization declared, "The black thrust toward Africa is real—you find black groups of the elderly, the professionals, the civil servants and even students are all trying to book a trip to Africa, back home to their source" (*New York Times,* October 22, 1972).

[6] This was followed by another significant AMSAC publication, *Pan-Africanism Reconsidered* (University of California Press, 1962) edited by Samuel W. Allen.

etched in acid by the controversial Nigerian poet-playwright J. P. Clark, in a selection from his book *America, Their America* (1964). These cross-references indicate some of the dialogue on cultural issues that has taken place between African and Afro-American intellectuals.

Almost all the African and Afro-American contributors to this volume have lived, studied, worked, or at least visited in the overseas black communities. The currents of the relationship which they portray obviously run deeper than print; they flow from historic sources and recent experiences in which these authors have shared.

In addition to the two nineteenth-century figures Campbell and Blyden, at least five twentieth-century contributors may be considered under the heading of "journeys to Africa," although each is rather different from the others. Langston Hughes's youthful account of a visit to the west coast of Africa as a member of a ship's crew is the least political or ideological, the most personal. The pages from Du Bois are political in a double sense: first, in that he is on an official mission, representing the United States at the inauguration of a Liberian president, and second, in that he employs the occasion, in keeping with his role as a Negro ideologist, to exalt the African character and culture. William Sutherland's choice of expatriation to Africa and his work for various African governments or committees are based more on his radical pacifist philosophy and his alienation from American society than on a sense of racial identity. Leslie Lacy's two-year stay in Ghana begins with a very ardent commitment to the politics of his two heroes Du Bois and Nkrumah, progresses through an intense ideological involvement with the large colony of Afro-Americans and with his Ghanaian students, and ends with the confusions and soul-searchings attending Nkrumah's decline and fall. The responses of Malcolm X to his six months of travels in Africa are on a more professional political plane, since, as an ambitious organizer of a new Afro-American movement after his break with Elijah Muhammad, he has to take into account old constituencies among Muslim-oriented blacks, while trying to build new ones on a secular nationalist base.

To Negroes suffering deprivations and indignities, searching for an identity of wholeness and pride, a number of disparate ideologies and strategies have offered themselves, pointing toward Africa

as the ancestral homeland. With reference to the writings gathered in this volume, we can distinguish the following as main tendencies:

1. *Mass emigration.* Edward W. Blyden devoted his life to the upbuilding of the republic of Liberia, founded on white-sponsored Negro emigration.[7] Robert Campbell, together with his colleague Martin R. Delany, hoped to colonize the Niger valley. Most freedmen in America resisted all such projects. When Marcus Garvey roused his thousands of messianic followers, mostly poor West Indians, no emigration followed. Even quite recently, as we learn from Tom Mboya's article, a faction of American black separatists demanded automatic citizenship rights for emigrants to Kenya. This was, of course, denied by Kenya, as it probably would be by the other African regimes. From the point of view of most black Americans, as well as of African states, mass emigration is not a very promising option. However, the advocacy of emigration has from time to time helped in restoring and building pride and morale among many black Americans, while remaining at the same time an expression of frustrated hope for full integration into American society.

2. *Pan-Africanism.* In addition to doing a great deal of research and writing about Africa, W. E. B. Du Bois was the founder and guiding spirit of the Pan-African movement which sought to link black independence forces in Africa with leaders of Negro rights struggles in the diaspora. Du Bois had originated the slogan of this movement: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," had organized four Pan-African conferences between 1919 and 1927, and a fifth in 1945, before leaving in advanced old age to become a citizen of Ghana.

Today the term "Pan-Africanism" connotes at least three distinct approaches: first, efforts to increase areas of cooperation among the Negro nations in Africa, and on a continental scale as well; second, cultural and scholarly contacts between Africa and the diaspora communities (such as those conducted by the

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[7] But even Blyden, who so ardently advocated a black exodus to Africa, said, "That exodus may never come for all; but the feeling and aspiration on the part of the exile must ever be towards the Fatherland, as the Jew, wherever he is, looks to Palestine. . . ."

above-mentioned organizations SAC and AMSAC);[8] third, a pragmatic, issue-oriented politics on both sides of the Atlantic; e.g., declarations on African topics by black American leaders, and statements made by the Organization of African Unity on problems of blacks in America. The excerpts from Malcolm X and Tom Mboya in this book suggest further examples of this approach.

Kwame Nkrumah's drive for a kind of preemptive Pan-Africanism seems to have been impelled by a characteristically grandiose ambition to put himself at the head of some sort of continental superstate before the individual African governments had a chance to settle into their separate sovereign establishments. This project might better be called Nkrumahism than Pan-Africanism.

3. *Expatriation.* Of course, some Negro Americans, like certain white compatriots, have chosen to become expatriates—as individuals—in various corners of the globe. Well-known cases are those of Richard Wright and James Baldwin, both of whom lived for many years in Paris. Ernest Dunbar, in his book *The Black Expatriates,* reports on a number of others. In the present context those Negro Americans who chose to settle in Africa are the relevant cases. Mr. Dunbar's very interesting interview with Bill Sutherland in Tanzania is included here, along with Leslie Lacy's fascinating account of the Afro-American expatriate community in Ghana, of which he was a part. Many individuals, according to their talents and interests, and their discontent with their life in the United States, will undoubtedly exercise this option in one African country or another. Thus, conceivably, individual expatriation—including families or groups of friends—could become a sizable trend.

4. *Separatist nationalism.* The Black Muslims discussed by Dr. Essien-Udom in the selection "In Search of a Saving Identity" are an ambiguous example of this particular orientation, because they are more likely to refer to the Arabic-speaking countries of Africa and the Middle East as their homeland, and to treat prospects of an "exodus" as a distant, if ultimate, goal. Possibly

[8] Dialogues on the cultural plane have, since independence, continued in such events as the Negro Arts Festival held in Dakar in 1966, and the Black and African Culture Festival scheduled to be held in Lagos in 1975.

Garvey's movement also fits under this "separatism-without-emigration" rubric if we are to believe Garvey's widow Amy Jacques Garvey when she states, "There was no Back-to-Africa movement except in a spiritual sense."[9] Several other separatist nationalist groups exist or have existed for a time, but none as successful as the Muslims or the Garveyites.

5. *Pluralist integration.* "The point of our struggles," says Ralph Ellison, "is to be both Negro and American and to bring about that condition in American society in which this would be possible." This statement may serve as a definition of pluralist integration. It is a point of view shared, with varying nuances by the largest number of contributors to this anthology: the Afro-Americans Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray; the Africans Taban lo Liyong, E. U. Essien-Udom, and Tom Mboya—and probably others, too, in both sections.

It is a striking fact that the three great contemporary Afro-American novelists, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin have all expressed skepticism about the importance of African cultural survivals in American Negro life. All three are distrustful of the Negritude mystique, or of any ideology which attempts—as they see it—to blunt their very keen sense of the particularities of the black experience in America, out of which they write.[10]

Again and again writers of this tendency on both sides of the Atlantic maintain (1) that the past of Negro Americans is most significantly an American rather than an African past, and (2) that present tasks should be faced with an eye to exploiting the viable resources of world cultures rather than to nostalgic preservation of cultural relics. Not that the African heritage is to be summarily dismissed. "This remote heritage," says the Nigerian sociologist Essien-Udom, speaking of the American Negro, "no

[9] "The Ghost of Marcus Garvey", *Ebony,* March, 1960. The redoubtable Mrs. Garvey, interviewed more recently, at the age of 77, repeated this idea with a riposte entirely in the tradition of her husband's antagonism to middle-class, educated blacks: "He never meant there should be mass migration of black people from the United States to Africa. A lot of intellectual niggers wrote a lot of hooey about Garvey" (*Miami Herald Magazine,* May 6, 1973).

[10] Langston Hughes was also of this orientation when he wrote, "I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem" (*The Big Sea,* New York, 1940).

matter how insignificant its content may be, is part and parcel of the Negro's being. This, too, like his Americanism, should be understood."

In recent decades an assimilationist "melting-pot" model of America has been replaced by the pluralist concept. In this framework, Negro ethnicity takes its natural place in the cultural orchestra of America. In fact, it has been there for a long time, whether recognized or not. In his book *The Omni-Americans* Albert Murray speaks of "a process of Americanization that has now equipped and disposed [Afro-Americans] not only to reclaim and update the heritage of black Africa but also to utilize the multicolored heritage of all mankind of all the ages."

On the African side, the Uganda-born writer Taban lo Liyong believes that "African culture is to be a synthesis and a metamorphosis—the order of things to come," and he winds up his essay "Negritude: Crying over Spilt Milk" with this exuberant peroration:

> This is the crossroad and cross-breeding place. No mules are born. Trespassers will not be prosecuted. Indeed, New York (and Paris, and Moscow, and Peking) 'let the black blood flow into your blood'; let it flow uncontrolled. A racially and culturally mixed person is the universal man; all is in him; he identifies with all; he is kith and kin to all other Homo sapiens. This leads us to a super-Brazil. He will have slant eyes, kinky hair, Roman nose, Red Indian knight-errantry, democratic folly, dictatorial changeability, Maori tattoos, use English as a tool for rebuilding Babel Tower. All these (and more) will make him the hundred per cent African; the descendant of Zinjanthropus, the culturally and racially mixed man of the future.[11]

Of course, this vision of a miscegenetic utopia does not tell us what has actually been happening in Mr. lo Liyong's East Africa, where thousands of long-settled Asiatic and other non-African residents were forced to leave for the economic and political convenience of the new regimes, and where many thousands of Hutu and Tutsi succumbed to mutual genocidal pogroms. Such events indicate some of the realities that stand in the way of the cultural assimilation which Mr. lo Liyong envisions.

And as for the United States—whether or not it may become a "super-Brazil" at some future time, the present scene suggests that a strong mood of separation, of drawing in and consolidating the inner resources of the Negro people, has accompanied

[11] Taban lo Liyong, *The Last Word* (Nairobi, 1969), p. 206.

their economic and political advances, and that this is very much a part of the pluralistic tenor of the country. In this ethnic consolidation the sense of a proud relationship with Africa has been a very considerable factor. As always, the relationship is akin, in unresting changefulness and continuity, to the ocean which separates the black homeland and its diaspora. The intellectual exchanges and living interactions, exemplified in the present collection, reflect both the promise and the problems of a many-dimensioned mutuality. It is not difficult to read in the record of this relationship a growing power.

This record is expertly brought up to date in the special prefatory essay, "Afro-Americans in Africa: Recent Experiences" by Professor Boniface I. Obichere, director of the African Studies Center at UCLA and editor of the *Journal of African Studies*. Dr. Obichere brings to bear both scholarly resources and personal experiences in illuminating the many fruitful interactions between Afro-Americans and Africa. He suggests that the significance of this relationship should not be measured merely in terms of the numbers of black Americans present in Africa at any given time:

> In looking at the whole picture, one can posit the theory of the critical mass. What we see in this case is a small number of highly skilled and well-educated Afro-Americans interacting with African societies in the new African states. The important thing is that they have produced lasting results in his interaction.

But the numbers are also there, he adds:

> The most important facet of the present relations between Africa and Afro-Americans is the astronomic increase in the number of short-term visitors and tourists who pour into all parts of Africa every year. These black Americans are keenly interested in Africa and its peoples. There is a touch of messianism in the pilgrimage of Afro-Americans to contemporary Africa.

His paper documents several interesting cases of long-term settlers who have taken up permanent residency in Africa as business entrepreneurs, technologists or professionals.

On a more controversial plane, Dr. Obichere is concerned to challenge what he considers inadequate or tendentious reports by certain white as well as black writers on the African relationship. Among the blacks, he singles out Leslie Lacy, author of *The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro,* as a disputed source of information as to what went on in the very large Afro-American colony in Nkrumah's Ghana. Dr. Obichere says, "Many of Mr.