

*In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings,
 in fastings;
 By pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the
 Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned,
 By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of
 righteousness on the right hand and on the left,
 By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as
 deceivers, and yet true;
 As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live;
 as chastened, and not killed;
 As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many
 rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

II CORINTHIANS 6:5-10

I

The African Past

*What is Africa to me:
 Copper sun or scarlet sea,
 Jungle star or jungle track,
 Strong bronzed men, or regal black
 Women from whose loins I sprang
 When the birds of Eden sang?*

COUNTÉE CULLEN

SPEAK of Africa and golden joys."

We know now that Shakespeare spoke truth.

For an academic breakthrough, which is as
 challenging on its own level as the political renaissance of col-
 ored peoples, has yielded a new perspective on African and world
 history. Africa, long considered the "Dark Continent," is now
 regarded as the place where mankind first received light. An-
 cient Africans, long considered "primitive," are now revealed as
 creative contributors to Egyptian civilization and builders of
 powerful states in the Sudan.

From Olduvai Gorge in East Africa, from caves in the Sahara
 and excavations in the Nile Valley come bits of bone and husks of
 grain which speak more eloquently than words of the trials and
 triumphs of the African ancestors of American blacks. The evi-

dence from these and other areas can be summarized briefly under four headings:

Olduvai Gorge: A series of astonishing discoveries in this Tanzanian canyon suggest that the most important and fascinating developments in human history occurred in Africa. Discoveries by Dr. L. S. B. Leakey and other archaeologists indicate that the human race was born in Africa. A growing body of research from this and other African sites indicates further that toolmaking began in Africa and that this seminal invention spread to Europe and Asia.

The Nile Valley: Important finds in the Sudan and the Nile Valley prove that people of a Negroid type were influential contributors to that cradle of civilization—ancient Egypt. Discoveries at excavations near Khartoum in the Sudan and at El Badari on the Nile indicate that Stone Age Negroes laid the foundation for much of the civilization of the Nile Valley and manufactured pottery before pottery was made in the world's earliest known city.

Central and South America: American and African-American scholars, working primarily in the United States and Mexico, unearth new archeological evidence, including carbon 14-dated sculpture, which suggests that African mariners explored the New World before Columbus. This evidence and corroborative data from the diaries and letters of explorers, Arabic charts and maps and the recorded tales of African griots indicate that there was extensive pre-Columbian contact between ancient Africa and the Americas.

"An overwhelming body of new evidence," says Professor Ivan Van Sertima (*They Came Before Columbus*), "is now emerging from several disciplines, evidence that could not be verified and interpreted before, in the light of the infancy of archaeology and the great age of racial and intellectual prejudice. The most remarkable examples of this evidence are the realistic portrayals of Negro-Africans in clay, gold and stone unearthed in pre-Columbian strata in Central and South America."

The Sahara: French explorer Henri Lhote discovers rock paintings which suggest to author Basil Davidson that "peoples of a Negro type were painting men and women with a beautiful and sensitive realism before 3000 B.C. and were, perhaps, the originators of naturalistic human portraiture."

The implications of all this are extensive, as W. M. Whitelaw pointed out in a general summary of the evidence. "Later discoveries," he wrote, "all the way from Kenya to Transvaal not only of early human remains but also of advanced anthropoid types have brought the historical anthropologists to a state of confused expectancy. Considerably more evidence will have to be brought to light, however, before even the main outlines of man's early history in Africa can be drawn. It is already reasonable, however, to believe that such evidence may be forthcoming, as will require a radical change of perspective on African history, if not on history itself."

It is already reasonable, in fact, to believe that the African ancestors of American blacks were among the major benefactors of the human race. Such evidence as survives clearly shows that Africans were on the scene and acting when the human drama opened.

For a long time, in fact, the only people on the scene were Africans. For some 600,000 years Africa and Africans led the world. Were these people who gave the world fire and tools and cultivated grain—were they Negroes? The ancient bones are silent. It is possible, indeed probable, that they were dark-skinned. More than that cannot be said at this time.

Civilization started in the great river valleys of Africa and Asia, in the Fertile Crescent in the Near East and along the narrow ribbon of the Nile in Africa. In the Nile Valley that beginning was an African as well as an Asian achievement. Blacks, or people who would be considered blacks today, were among the first people to use tools, paint pictures, plant seeds and worship gods.

In the beginning, then, and for a long time afterwards, black people marched in the front ranks of the emerging human procession. They founded empires and states. They extended the boundaries of the possible. They made some of the critical discoveries and contributions that led to the modern world.

Looking back on that age from our own, one is struck by what seems to be an absence of color consciousness. Back there, in the beginning, blackness did not seem to be an occasion for obloquy. In fact, the reverse seems to have been true, for whites were sometimes ridiculed for "the unnatural whiteness of their skin."

During this critical period in the evolution of man, blacks were known and honored throughout the ancient world. Ancient

Ethiopia, a vaguely defined territory somewhere to the south of Egypt, was hailed as a place fit for the vacation of the gods. Homer praised Memnon, king of Ethiopia, and black Eurybates:

*Of visage solemn, sad, but sable hue,
Short, woolly curls, o'fleece'd his bending head....
Eurybates, in whose large soul alone,
Ulysses viewed an image of his own.*

Homer, Herodotus, Pliny, Diodorus and other classical writers repeatedly praised the Ethiopians. "The annals of all the great early nations of Asia Minor are full of them," Flora Louisa Lugard wrote. "The Mosaic records allude to them frequently; but while they are described as the most powerful, the most just, and the most beautiful of the human race, they are constantly spoken of as black, and there seems to be no other conclusion to be drawn, than that at that remote period of history the leading race of the Western world was a black race." The Ethiopians claimed to be the spiritual fathers of Egyptian civilization. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian who wrote in the first century B.C., said that "the Ethiopians conceived themselves to be of greater antiquity than any other nation; and it is probable that, born under the sun's path, its warmth may have ripened them earlier than other men. They supposed themselves to be the inventors of worship, of festivals, of solemn assemblies, of sacrifices, and every religious practice."

Whatever may have been the spiritual influence of the ancient Ethiopians, it is established beyond doubt that blacks *from somewhere* were an important element among the peoples who fashioned Egyptian civilization. Badarian culture proves that blacks camped on the banks of the Nile thousands of years before the Egypt of the Pharaohs. Bodies were excavated at El Badari amid artifacts suggesting a date of about eight thousand B.C. In the intestines of these bodies were husks of barley which indicated that the dark-skinned Badarians had learned to cultivate cereals. The beautifully fashioned Badarian pottery was never surpassed, not even in Egypt's days of greatest glory.

Still more evidence comes from the testimony of bones. Scholars who examined some eight hundred skulls of the predynastic Egyptians found that at least one-third were definitely Negroid. "The more we learn of Nubia and the Sudan," Dr. David

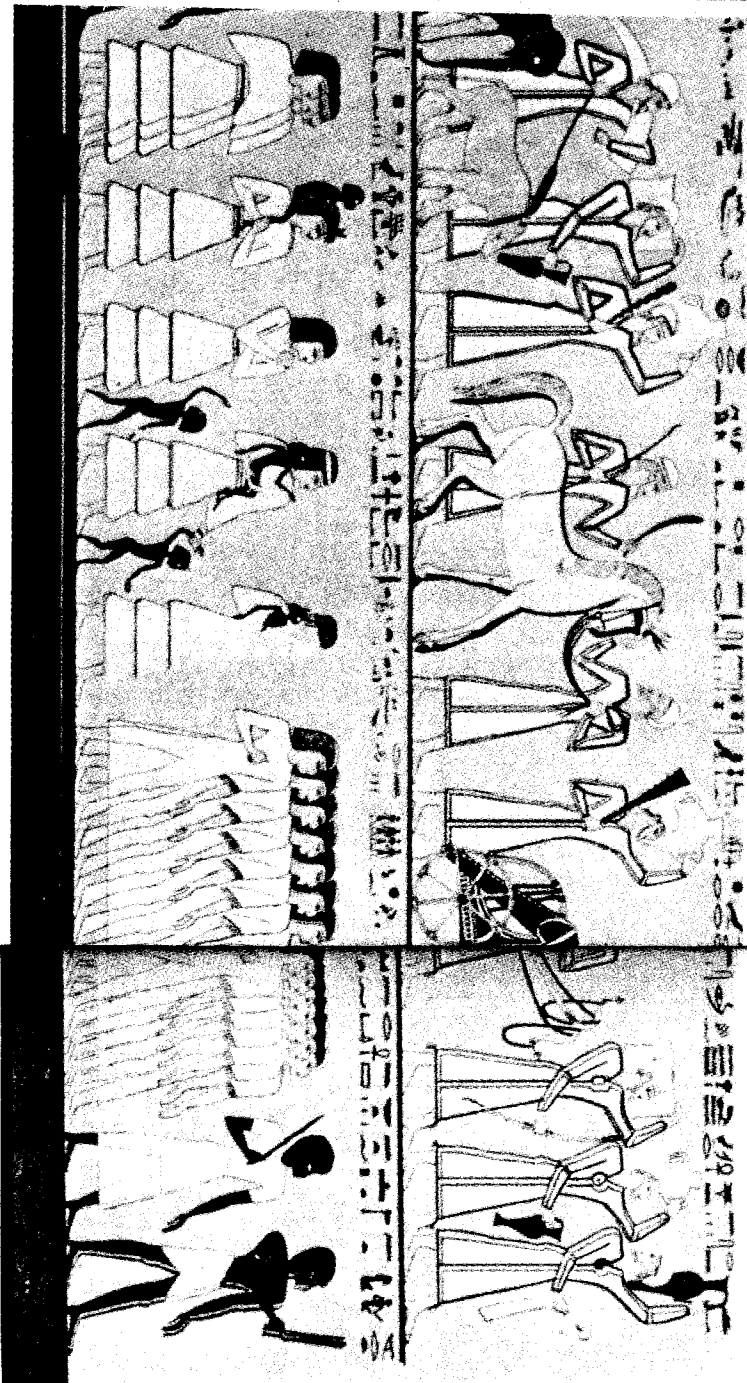
Randall-MacIver said, "the more evident does it appear that what was most characteristic in the predynastic culture of Egypt is due to intercourse with the interior of Africa and the immediate influence of that permanent Negro element which has been present in the population of Southern Egypt from the remotest times to our own day."

If black people were a major element among the peoples who fathered Egyptian civilization, who were the Egyptians? The question bristles with thorns. The only thing that can be said with assurance is that they probably were not Caucasians. The evidence suggests that they were a black-, brown-, and yellow-skinned people who sprang from a mixture of Negro, Semitic and Caucasian stocks.

How did the Egyptians see themselves?

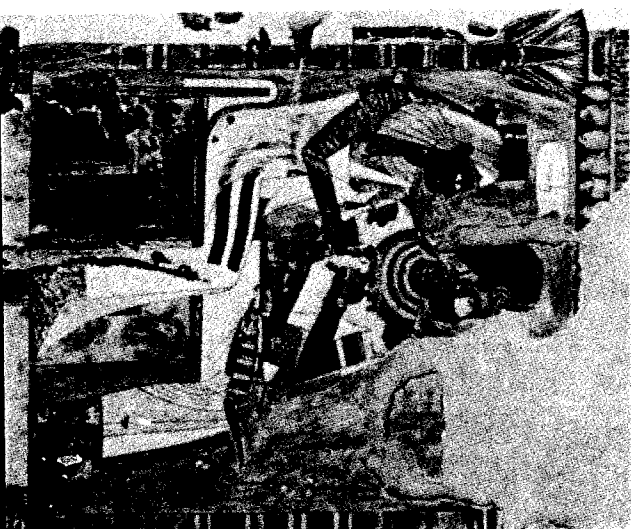
They painted themselves in three colors: black, reddish-brown, yellow. The color *white* was available to them, but they used it to portray blue-eyed, white-skinned foreigners. One of the clearest examples of this is the great mural of a procession from a tomb of Thebes in the time of Thotmes III. The Egyptians and Ethiopians in the procession are painted in the usual brown and black colors, but thirty-seven whites in the procession are rendered in white tones. Who were they? G. A. Hoskins said they were probably "white slaves of the king of Ethiopia sent to the Egyptian king as the most acceptable present."

Great black scholars, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson and William Leo Hansberry, have insisted that the ancient Egyptians, from Menes to Cleopatra, were a mixed race which presented the same physical types and color ranges as American blacks—a people, in short, who would have been forced in the forties to sit on the back seats of the buses in Mississippi. "If the Egyptians and the majority of the tribes of Northern Africa were not Negroes," Carter Woodson said, "then, there are no Negroes in the United States." There is supporting testimony on this point from Africanist William Leo Hansberry, who said that the evidence seems to indicate that "the Egyptians were a mixed group consisting of Negroids, non-Negroids and an Intermediate Group which represented, for the most part, mixed bloods." Summarizing the evidence of scientists who made a systematic examination of the skeletal remains of the ancient Egyptians, he said that "Negroids were particularly well represented



Mural from an Egyptian tomb illustrates the color ranges of the Ethiopians and Egyptians. Whites in the procession, G. A. Hoskins said, were probably slaves the Ethiopian king sent to the Egyptian king as a present.

Black Egyptian queen, Nefertari, "one of the most venerated figures" of Egyptian history, is pictured in this painting from an ancient tomb with her husband, Aahmes I.



in the pre-dynastic period. At one phase of the pre-dynastic period . . . the Negroid element amounted to 42 per cent. In the Old Kingdom, however, the Negroid percentage shows a substantial decline, although the mixed bloods totaled approximately 30 per cent. During the Middle Kingdom period, the Negroid element is again exceptionally strong, rising to 40 per cent in the 11th, 12th, and 13th dynasties. It again declines during the period of the 18th Dynasty of the New Empire but rises again toward the end of the period, particularly in the 20th Dynasty when Negroids and mixed bloods composed 40 per cent of the total population."

It is scarcely surprising, given the biases of Western scholarship, that this point is hotly disputed by various white scholars. But the dissenting scholars are contradicted by an eyewitness. Herodotus, the Greek historian, visited the country some five hundred years before Bethlehem. The Egyptians, he said, were "black and curly-haired."

Racial identity and racial origins apart, there is overwhelming evidence that Negroes or Negro types played a major role in the development of Egyptian civilization. Many, perhaps most, of the soldiers were black. Blacks toiled on the pyramids, offered prayers to the sun-god and served with distinction in the state bureaucracy. "Ancient Egypt knew him [the Negro]," Alexander Chamberlain said, "both bond and free, and his blood flowed in the veins of not a few of the mighty Pharaohs."

Ra Nehesi and several other Pharaohs have been identified as blacks by eminent scholars. So has Queen Nefertari, "the most venerated figure," Sir Flinders Petrie said, "of Egyptian history." Nefertari, the wife of Ahmes I, Egypt's great imperial leader, was cofounder of the famous Eighteenth Dynasty. She has been described as a "Negress [*sic*] of great beauty, strong personality, and remarkable administrative ability."

There was long and intimate contact between the dark-skinned Egyptians and the dark-skinned Ethiopians. For fifty centuries or more they fought, traded and intermarried. During the Middle Empire Ethiopia was a tribute-paying dependency of Egypt. Then, in the middle of the eighth century B.C., the Ethiopians turned the tables and conquered Egypt. Kashta, a bold Ethiopian monarch, began the conquest which was completed by his son, Piankhy. When Piankhy returned to his capital at Napata, he had subdued sixteen princes and was master of both Egypt and

Ethiopia. The legs of his enemies, he said, trembled "like those of women." Piankhy was keenly aware of the value of good public relations. The celebrated stela in which he recounted his deeds of valor is one of the gems of Egyptology. A modern scholar, Sir Alan Gardiner, said it is "one of the most illuminating documents that Egyptian history has to show, and displays a vivacity of mind, feeling, and expression such as the homeland could no longer produce."

For more than a century Ethiopian kings occupied the divine office of the Pharaohs. Shabaka, who succeeded Piankhy, attempted to restore the dwindling fortunes of Egypt. He sponsored a cultural revival, built a chapel at Karnak and restored a temple at Thebes. Diodorus Siculus said he "went beyond all his predecessors in his worship of the gods and his kindness to his subjects." Herodotus said he abolished capital punishment in Egypt.

Taharka, the greatest of the Ethiopian Pharaohs, ascended the throne about 690 B.C. at the age of forty-two. He was, by all accounts, a remarkable leader who improved the economic and cultural life of his realm. Sir E. A. Wallis Budge said Taharka (the Tirhakah of the Bible) was "a capable and energetic king, and under his able rule the country, notwithstanding his wars with the Assyrians, enjoyed a period of prosperity for about twenty-five years." This resourceful leader left inscriptions which indicate that he conquered the Hittites and the Assyrians—claims most Egyptologists discount. So complete was his sway and so absolute was his power that he dubbed himself "Emperor of the World." A famous Egyptologist called his reign that "astounding epoch of nigger [*sic*] domination." Dr. Randall-MacIver said, "It seems amazing that an African Negro should have been able with any sort of justification to style himself Emperor of the World."

When, in 667 B.C., Taharka was defeated by the Assyrians, he retired to Napata, where Ethiopians continued to rule for several centuries. The capital was later moved farther south to Meroë, where strong-willed queens called Candaces ruled. One of these queens, a one-eyed woman "with masculine characteristics," led the Ethiopians in unsuccessful forays against the Romans.

The connection between this civilization and modern Ethiopia is far from clear. Some scholars call ancient Ethiopia "Kush" and begin the history of modern Ethiopia with the rise of the Axumite

kingdom in what is now Eritrea and northern Abyssinia. Whatever the true origins of modern Ethiopia, there is no exaggeration in saying that it is one of the oldest countries in the world. The African kingdom, which traces its lineage back to the famous visit the legendary Queen of Sheba ("black but comely") paid Solomon some one thousand years before Christ, reached the height of its power in the fifth century, when Christianity became the official religion. With the rise of Islam, the Ethiopians of Axum were isolated and slept, historian Edward Gibbon wrote, "for nearly a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten."

During the early Christian era, blacks were scattered to the four corners of the world. For many centuries black merchants traded with India, China and Europe. Other blacks were sold as slaves in Europe and Asia. By the beginning of the Islamic era, blacks—as merchants and merchandise—had integrated Europe, Asia and the Far East. By that time blacks were well known in Venice in Europe and in the deserts of Arabia. Perhaps the best known of the Arabic blacks was Antar, the impassioned lover-warrior-poet. The son of an attractive slave woman and an Arab nobleman, Antar became a famous poet and was immortalized after his death as the "Achilles of the Arabian Iliad." Fearless, impetuous, ready to fight, sing a lyric or drink wine, Antar won fame in the poetic contests which were common in pre-Islamic days. His fame spread and he was hailed as the greatest poet of his time. Like most poets, Antar had an eye for ladies and love.

*"Twas then her beauties first enslaved my heart—
Those glittering pearls and ruby lips, whose kiss
Was sweeter far than honey to the taste."*

Antar died about A.D. 615 and his deeds were recorded in literary form as *The Romance of Antar*. This book, Edward E. Holden wrote, "has been the delight of all Arabians for many centuries. . . . The unanimous opinion of the East has always placed *The Romance of Antar* at the summit of such literature. As one of their authors well says: *The Thousand and One Nights* is for the amusement of women and children; *Antar* is a book for men."

As a religious ethic, Islam seems to have been unusually effective in cutting across racial lines. All Moslems, whatever their

color, were brothers in the faith. "If a Negro slave is appointed to rule you," Mohammed said, "hear and obey him, though his head be like a dried grape."

In this climate a man could be a slave today and a prime minister tomorrow. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that many blacks played heroic roles in the rise and spread of Islam—men like Mohammed Ahmad, the Sudanese black who claimed to be the Messiah; Abu'l Hasan Ali, the black sultan of Morocco, and Bilal, the friend of Mohammed. There were also numerous black generals, administrators and poets. When, in the eighth century, the Arabs exploded and carried Islam across North Africa and into Spain, blacks went with them. Among the black personalities at the court of Almansur in Seville, for example, was a "learned and celebrated poet, a black of the Sudan, Abu Ishak Ibrahim Al Kenemi."

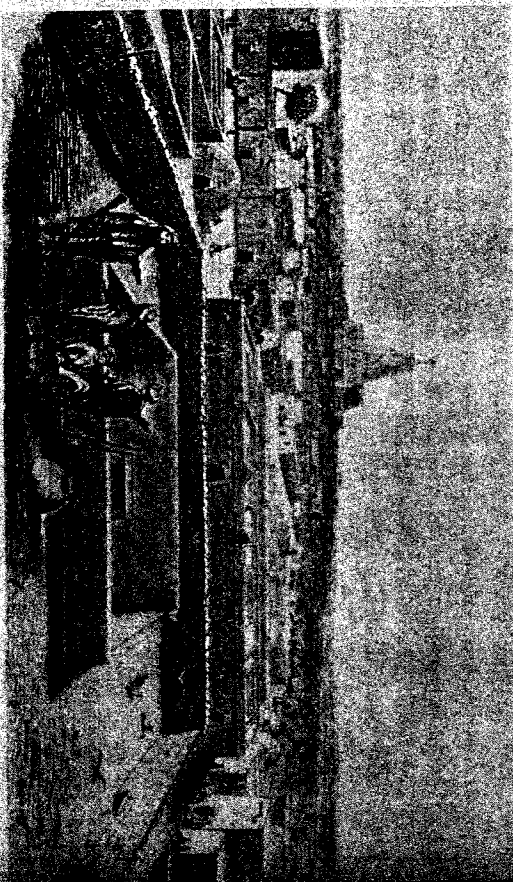
In the same period three powerful states—Ghana, Mali, and Songhay—emerged in the western Sudan, a broad belt of open country, sandwiched between the Sahara in the north and the rain forests of the Guinea Coast on the south. At one time the peoples and rulers of these countries were classified out of the Negro race. It is now known that they were blacks, some of whom were converted to Islam in the eleventh century. The extent of Moslem influence is debatable, but it seems probable that the upper classes and leaders, especially in the large cities, were black Moslems.

As political entities, Ghana, Mali and Songhay do not suffer in comparison with their European contemporaries. In several areas, in fact, the Sudanese empires were clearly superior. "It would be interesting to know," Basil Davidson wrote, "what the Normans might have thought of Ghana. Anglo-Saxon England could easily have seemed a poor and lowly place beside it."

The economic life of these states revolved around agriculture, manufacturing and international trade. Rulers wielded power through provincial governors and viceroys and maintained large standing armies. Chain-mailed cavalry, armed with shields, swords and lances, formed the shock troops of the armies. Ibn-Batuta, an Arab traveler who visited Mali in the fourteenth century, was impressed by the flow of life in these states. "Of all people," he said, "the blacks are those who most detest injustice. Their Sultan never forgives anyone who has been guilty of it."

Ancient Sudan empires reached the peak of their power in the Middle Ages. Ghana dominated the Sudan for almost three centuries. Mali rose in the thirteenth century. Songhay was a Sudan power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

West African warriors fought for the medieval African empire of Kanem-Bornu. Chain-mailed cavalry were shock troops of the powerful black states of the western Sudan.



Timbuktu was one of the world's greatest cities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The intellectual center of the black empire of Songhay, Timbuktu was famed for its scholars and its social life.

Proud, a little haughty perhaps, the Sudanese were a formidable people. When the monarch of one state was overthrown, the women committed suicide because "they were too proud to allow themselves to fall into the hands of white men." Ibn-Batuta was astonished by the servile behavior of the whites in Mali. The black viceroy who received the merchants of the caravan with which Batuta was traveling remained seated while the whites stood before him. He spoke to the whites through an interpreter, although he understood their language. He did this, Ibn-Batuta said, "solely to indicate his disdain for them."

Trade and commerce flourished in the great cities that sprang up in the Sudanese savannah, and the intellectual life was brisk and stimulating. Jenné and Timbuktu were known throughout the Moslem world as centers of culture and learning. Ibn-Batuta said the black woman of these cities were "of surpassing beauty." They were neither downtrodden nor meek, these women. Ibn-Batuta said they were "shown more respect than the men," adding: "Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever" and the women "show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves."

The power and wealth of Ghana, Mali and Songhay stemmed from the trans-Saharan trade, which exerted a profound influence on Sudanese civilization. The basis of this trade was gold. From the north came caravans of twelve thousand or more camels, laden with wheat, sugar, fruit, salt and textiles, which were exchanged in the Sudan for gold and other products. In the power politics of that day, the country that controlled this trade controlled the Sudan.

Ghana, which was old when the Arabs first mentioned it in A.D. 800, dominated the Sudan for almost three hundred years, flourishing in the ninth and tenth centuries and reaching the peak of its power in the early part of the eleventh century. The rulers of Ghana, which was one of the main suppliers of gold for North Africa and Europe, were fabulously wealthy. Al-Bakri, an Arab geographer who wrote in 1067, said the king owned a nugget of gold so large that he could tether his horse to it.

Tenkamein, who ruled Ghana in the middle of the eleventh century, had an army of two hundred thousand men and lived in a castle decorated with sculpture and painted windows. "When he gives audience to his people," Al-Bakri said, "to listen to their complaints . . . 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; and on his right hand are the sons of the princes of his empire, splendidly clad and with gold plaited into their hair. The governor of the city is seated on the ground in front of the king, and all around him are his vizirs in the same position. The gate of the chamber is guarded by dogs of an excellent breed, who never leave the king's seat, they wear collars of gold and silver."

In the eleventh century Ghana fell to a band of Moslem zealots, and the torch of Sudanese civilization passed to Mali, which began as a small Mandingo state on the left bank of the upper Niger River. Although the history of this country goes back to the seventh century, it owes its fame to two men—Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa. Keita transformed the small state into a great empire. Musa, the most celebrated ruler of the ancient Sudan, came to power in 1307 and put together one of the greatest countries of the medieval world. Musa is best known for a pilgrimage he made to Mecca in 1324. He went in regal splendor with an entourage of sixty thousand persons, including twelve thousand servants. Five hundred servants, each of whom carried a staff of pure gold weighing some six pounds, marched on before him. Eighty camels bore twenty-four thousand pounds of gold, which the black monarch distributed as alms and gifts. Musa returned to his kingdom with an architect who designed imposing buildings in Timbuktu and other cities of the Sudan.

Mali declined in importance in the fifteenth century and its place was taken by Songhay, whose greatest king was Askia Mohammed. Askia, a general who had served as prime-minister, seized power in 1493, a year after the European discovery of America. He reigned for nineteen years and built the largest and most powerful of the Sudan states. His realm was larger than all Europe and included most of West Africa. "He was obeyed," a Sudanese writer said, "with as much docility on the farther limits of the empire as he was in his own palace, and there reigned everywhere great plenty and absolute peace."

A brilliant administrator and an enlightened legislator, Askia reorganized the army, improved the banking and credit systems and made Gao, Walata, Timbuktu and Jenné intellectual centers. Certain scholars, Alexander Chamberlain in particular, believe he was one of the greatest monarchs of this period. "In personal character, in administrative ability, in devotion to the welfare of

his subjects, in open mindedness towards foreign influences, and in wisdom in the adoption of non-Negro ideas and institutions," Chamberlain said, "King Askia . . . was certainly the equal of the average European monarch of the time and superior to many of them."

Timbuktu, during Askia's reign, was a city of some one hundred thousand people, filled with gold and dazzling women. One of the most fabled and exotic cities in the medieval world, the Sudanese metropolis was celebrated for its luxury and gaiety. The towering minarets of two great mosques dominated the face of the city. From the Great Mosque, flat-roofed houses (of wood and plaster) radiated in all directions. The older Sankore Mosque, of intellectual life. The mosque and the university were of cut stone and lime. Other buildings fronted the narrow streets: factories and shops where one could buy exotic goods from North Africa and faraway Europe. Leo Africanus, a Christianized Moor who visited the city in the sixteenth century, said it "is a wonder to see what plenitude of Merchandize is daily brought hither and how costly and sumptuous all things be. . . Here are many shops of . . . merchants and especially of such as weave linen."

In the narrow streets of this Sudanese metropolis, scholars mingled with rich black merchants and young boys sat in the shade, reciting the Koran. Visiting Arab businessmen wandered the streets, looking, no doubt, for the excitement for which the city was famed. Youths from all over the Moslem world came to Timbuktu to study law and surgery at the University of Sankore; scholars came from North Africa and Europe to confer with the learned historians and writers of the black empire. Es Sadi, a Timbuktu intellectual who wrote a history of the Sudan, said his brother came from Jenné for a successful cataract operation at the hands of a distinguished surgeon. Es Sadi, incidentally, had a private library of sixteen hundred volumes.

If we can credit contemporary reports, Timbuktu, during the reign of Askia the Great, was an intellectual's paradise. A Sudanese literature developed and Es-Sadi, Ahmed Baba and other intellectuals wrote books.

"In Timbuktu," Leo Africanus said, "there are numerous judges, doctors, and clerics, all receiving good salaries from the

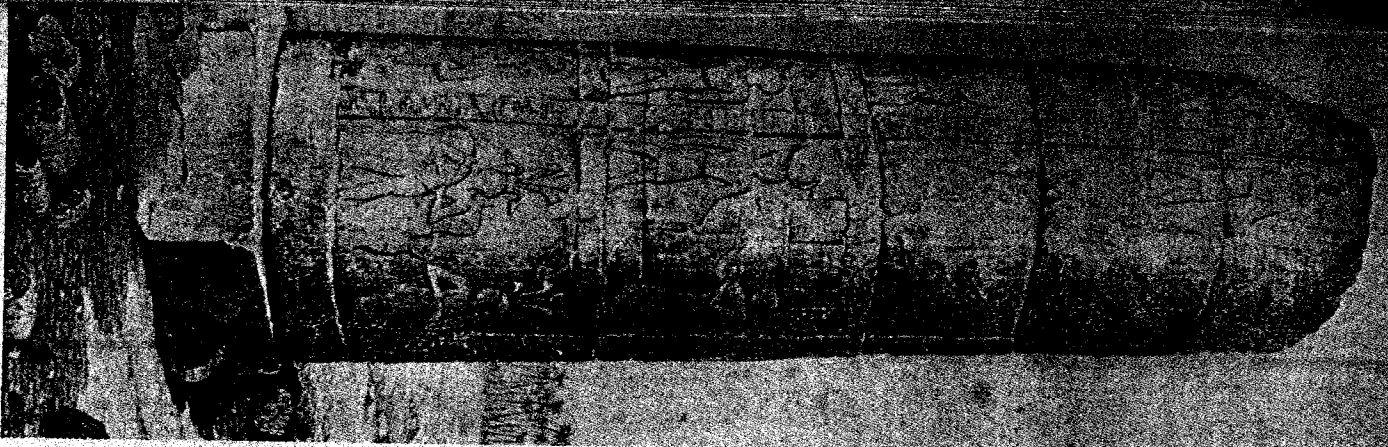
king. He pays great respect to men of learning. There is a big demand for books in manuscript, imported from Barbary. More profit is made from the book trade than from any other line of business." Since man first learned to write, few cities have been able to make such a claim.

The University of Sankore and other intellectual centers in Timbuktu had large and valuable collections of manuscripts in several languages, and scholars came from faraway places to check their Greek and Latin manuscripts. The seeds scattered here put down deep roots. Hundreds of years later Heinrich Barth met an old blind man in the Sudan. "This," he reported, "was the first conversation I had with this man. . . I could scarcely have expected to find in this out of the way place a man not only versed in all the branches of Arabic literature, but who had even read, nay, possessed a manuscript of those portions of Aristotle and Plato which had been translated into Arabic."

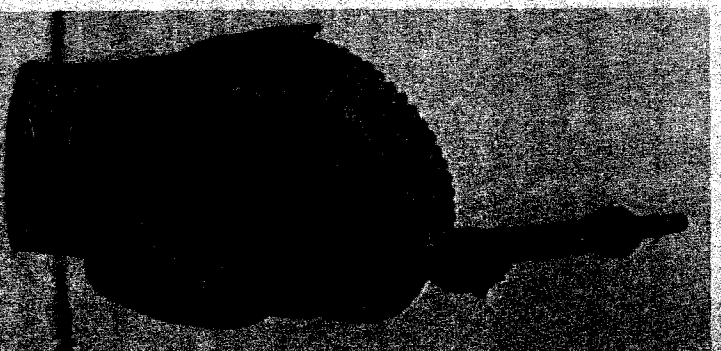
How did the people of Timbuktu amuse themselves? If the writers of Songhay can be believed, Timbuktu was Paris, Chicago and New York blended into an African setting. Shocked Songhay historians said most of the people amused themselves with parties, love and the pleasures of the cup. Music was the rage (orchestras with both male and female singers were preferred) and midnight revels were common. The dress of the women was extravagantly luxurious. Men and women were fond of jewels, and the women dressed their hair with bands of gold.

Dramatic displays, including dancing, fencing, gymnastics and poetic recitations, were popular. So was chess. The story is told of a Songhay general who bungled a military campaign and explained that he became so engrossed in a chess game that he paid no attention to the reports of his scouts. Askia—a liberal man who had several wives and one hundred sons, the last of whom was born when he was ninety—was disturbed by the free and easy life of Timbuktu and attempted, apparently without too much success, to curb the social excesses.

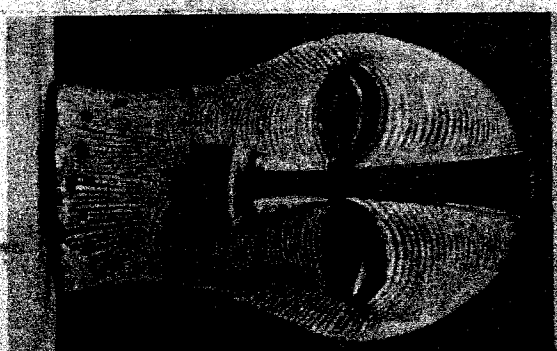
Timbuktu and the civilization of which it was a flower declined in the seventeenth century and the reign of the great West African states came to an end. Why did Sudanese civilization collapse? W. E. B. Du Bois says it fell before the triphammer blows of two of the world's great religions, Islam and Christianity. Other students cite the difficulties of defense in the open Sudanese



Sandstone column is part of the ruins of an Ethiopian temple. There are monuments in Ancient Ethiopia which rival the ancient treasures of Egypt in grandeur and beauty.



Naturalistic bronze head from Ife, West Coast art center, and abstract rendering of human face in mask (below) show the great variety and strength of African sculpture.



savannah and the corrupting influence of the slave trade. Es-Sadi, who wrote the *Tarikh al-Sudan* in the dying days of the Songhay empire, advanced another reason—social dissolution. The people, he said, had grown fat and soft on luxury and good living. "At this moment," he said, "faith was exchanged for infidelity; there was nothing forbidden by God which was not openly done. . . . Because of these abominations, the Almighty in his vengeance drew upon the Songhai the victorious army of the Moors."

The age of the great Sudan empires ended, but several states to the east and south, notably Mossi, Hausa, Kanem-Bornu and Ashanti, retained political identities down to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Great Zimbabwe and other stone cities in Southern Africa suggest that strong states flourished inland. Vigorous centers of culture also existed on the East Coast, where black and Arab merchants traded with India and China.

European penetration and the slave trade debased much that was vital in African culture. The popular myth depicts the conquering European carrying the blessing of civilization to naked "savages" who sat under trees, filed their teeth and waited for fruit to drop into their hands. The truth is less flattering to the European ego. On the West Coast of Africa, from whence came most of the ancestors of American blacks, there were complex institutions ranging from extended family groupings to village states and territorial empires. Most of these units had all the appurtenances of the modern state—armies, courts, and internal revenue departments. Indeed, more than one scholar has paid tribute to "the legal genius of the African." Anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits said that "of the areas inhabited by non-literate peoples, Africa exhibits the greatest incidence of complex governmental structures. Not even the kingdoms of Peru and Mexico could mobilize resources and concentrate power more effectively than could some of these African monarchies, which are more to be compared with Europe of the Middle Ages than referred to the common conception of the 'primitive' state."

Agriculture was the basis of the economic life of these states, although herding and artisanship were important. Specialization was advanced, with one nation, for example, concentrating on metallurgy and bartering with another nation which specialized in

weaving or farming. A money system based on the cowrie shell was in use before European penetration. Contemptuous of the concept of private property, West Africans believed that the land belonged to the community and could not be alienated.

Iron was known and used from the Atlantic Ocean to Ethiopia. With simple bellows and charcoal fires, the Africans smelted iron and manufactured beautiful implements. "It seems likely," Franz Boas said, "that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron. . . . It seems not unlikely that the people who made the marvelous discovery of reducing iron ores by smelting were the African Negroes. Neither ancient Europe, nor ancient western Asia, nor ancient China knew iron, and everything points to its introduction from Africa."

The core of West African society was the family which was organized in some tribes on a matrilineal basis—that is, descent was traced through the mother. Polygamy was common, although, in practice, the poor, like poor people everywhere, contented themselves with monogamy. Social life was well organized. The old, the sick, the infirm were cared for. Spinsters were rare; prostitution was unknown. Some nations, incidentally, were acquainted with the allegedly modern practice of birth control. Bantu people said it was not good for a woman to give birth to more than one child in a three-year period. Some nations vaccinated for smallpox and said there was a cause and effect relationship between the mosquito and malaria. A European traveler in Abyssinia reported that "the Natives herabouts say that Malaria is caused by the bite of the mosquito, but, of course, we know better—it is caused by the miasmas of the swamps!"

The West Africans were a bewildering mixture of various stocks. Centuries of contact and interbreeding had already produced different types. Some of the West Africans were short and broad-nosed. Some were tall with straight hair and aquiline noses. They were of all colors: chocolate, asphalt, café au lait, persimmon, cream.

Although West Africans spoke many tongues, there was a common substratum. Only four African languages were reduced to writing before the coming of the white man: Egyptian, Ethiopian, a variety of Berber and an invention of the Vai people of Liberia. Though not reduced to writing, African languages were

far from simple. There is no better summary of the flavor of these languages than Mario Pei's analysis of Swahili, which, he said, "is a complete refutation of the rather general belief that languages of 'primitive' peoples are necessarily primitive, and consist largely of grunts, groans and mixed-up ideas. Swahili has a complexity that is comparable to Italian, with clear, distinct sounds, vowel endings, and a most pleasing arrangement of syllables that consists for the most part of consonant-plus-vowel. It is capable of such absolute precision that the Swahili version of the Pentateuch contains fewer words than the Hebrew original, without the slightest loss or distortion of meaning. Its grammatical and syntactical structure is logical, almost to the point of being philosophical."

Of whatever tongue, of whatever color, Africans were a deeply religious people. For a long time their religion was written off as a form of animism. We know now that it was a great deal more complicated than that. Like advanced peoples everywhere, the Africans wrestled with the big questions. What is man? What happens to him after death? Is life a gigantic hoax or has it purpose and meaning?

The answers Africans gave to these questions determined the form of their religion. There was, to begin with, a supreme God who created the earth. There was also a pantheon of lesser gods, identified sometimes with terrestrial objects. Intertwined with these concepts were the cults of fate and ancestor worship. Underlying all was the basic concept of "life forces." The life force of the Creator was thought to be present in all things, animate and inanimate. This force, "a kind of individualized fragment of the Supreme Being itself," continued to exist, even after the death of the individual. It continued, the African said, in a pure and perfect state which could influence the lives of living things.

This sophisticated concept bears a striking resemblance to Henri Bergson's *élan vital* and other modern philosophies and theories. Bernard Fagg, an expert on these matters, found some parallels between African philosophy and modern subatomic physics. "African thought," he said, "is conditioned by their ontology, that is, their theory of the nature of being; for them being is a process and not a mere state, and the nature of things is thought of in terms of force or energy rather than matter; the forces of the spirit, human, animal, vegetable and mineral worlds

are all constantly influencing each other, and by a proper knowledge and use of them a man may influence his own life and that of others."

Religion, to the African, was life. Every event was charged with religious significance, and the climax of life was death. The African's attitude toward death, anthropologists say, survived the Atlantic crossing and took root in the soil of black American life. Another religious root, spirit possession, thrives, they say, in the shouting and ecstasy complex of some black American churches.

Art, like religion, was a life expression. There were no art museums or opera houses in pre-white man Africa. Art and aesthetic expression were collective experiences in which all the people participated. Art, in short, was not for art's sake, but for life's sake.

The different faces of beauty—line, color, sound, rhythm—fascinated the African ancestors of American blacks. And their plastic art—embodied in cubistic masks, terra-cotta pieces, gold figurines, three-dimensional objects and naturalistic representations of the human body—is one of the great flights of the human spirit. Fascinated by the abstract geometry of African art, Picasso and other modernists turned their backs on the Greco-Roman and Renaissance visions and adopted the vocabulary of Benin, Ife and other West African art centers. In 1907 Picasso altered the faces of his huge canvas, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, to resemble African masks. This was the beginning of a cubism, a turning point in Western art.

Before the coming of the European, music and rhythm were everyday things in Africa. Music was everywhere and it was grounded in two techniques which survived in the New World: polyrhythmic percussive technique and the call-and-response pattern (leader and chorus alternating). The poetry of tomtoms, the symphonies of synchronized bodies: these ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of life. Men and women danced because dancing had a social and religious meaning and because dancing *was* meaning, was life itself. This attitude came to America, too. The Afro-American dances from Afro-Cuba and the Afro-American dances from Afro-Harlem are rooted in an African *mystique*. It is of more than casual significance that films made in an African village contained a perfect example of the Charleston.

There was much, to be sure, that was mean and base in African life: slavery, for example, although it was a thousand times more

moderate than American slavery and, of course, the use of humans by humans. Humans used other humans in Africa, as they did in Greece and Rome. The only thing that can be said for human exploitation in Africa is that it was as well organized as it was in "more advanced" cultures.

The individuals who emerged from this African chrysalis were courageous and creative. They were not soft; they were hard. They had fought the tsetse fly and hundreds of nameless insects, and they had survived. They had wrested from the hungry jungle gaps of land and they had found time to think beautiful thoughts and to make beautiful things. They were used to hard work and they were accustomed to an elaborate social code. If they were aristocrats or rich merchants or priests — if, in short, they belonged to the upper classes, as did some who came to America in chains, they were used to political responsibility, to giving orders and taking them, to making and altering rules, to governing. In fine, as Stanley M. Elkins said, in an otherwise questionable essay, they were "the product of . . . cultural traditions essentially heroic in nature."

Was this rich cultural heritage transplanted and preserved in the American environment?

Some scholars find little in African-American life that can be traced to the African past. Others, like Melville J. Herskovits, find Africanisms (survivals of African cultural patterns) in the family life, motor habits, religious practices and music of black Americans. Lorenzo Turner found a large number of survivals in the syntax, word-formations and intonations of black Americans. Among the words he found "in fairly general use . . . especially in the South" were goober (peanut), gumbo (okra), ninny (female breast), tote (to carry), yam (sweet potato). Turner also found "several hundred" African names among Americans on the South Side of Chicago, including the following:

Bobo, one who cannot talk (Vai)
Ceeji, a language and tribe in Liberia
Agona, a country in Ghana (Twi)
Ola, that which saves (Yoruba)
Zola, to love (Congo)

It is obvious from this — from the evidence of the names and habits, religious practices and music of African-Americans —

that Africa's golden past is crucial to an understanding of black America. What is equally true and equally important is that Africa's past is critical to an understanding of white America. For it is impossible to understand white America, it is impossible to understand Thomas Jefferson or George Washington or the U.S. Constitution, without some understanding of Africa's gift to the New World. And what that means, on the level of history and on the level of reality, is that America, contrary to the generally accepted view, is an African as well as a European invention.

*One three centuries removed
 From the scenes his fathers loved,
 Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
 What is Africa to me?*

York and New Jersey, 1664; South Carolina, 1690; Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, 1700; North Carolina, 1715; Georgia, 1750.

1641

1644

February

-- First black legal protest in America pressed by eleven blacks who petitioned for freedom in New Netherlands (New York). Council of New Netherlands freed the eleven petitioners because they had "served the Company seventeen or eighteen years" and had been "long promised their freedom on the same footing as other free people in New Netherlands."

1649

--- Colonial officials reported that "there are in Virginia about fifteen thousand *English*, and of *Negroes* brought thither, three hundred good servants."

1651

July

24 Anthony Johnson, a free black who was probably one of the first twenty settlers, received a grant of 250 acres of land in Northampton County, Va., for importing persons. Johnson established a settlement on the banks of the Pungoteague River.

1652

May

10 John Johnson, a free black, granted 550 acres in Northampton County, Va., for importing eleven persons.

1654

November

21 Richard Johnson, a free black, granted 100 acres of land in Northampton County for importing two persons.

1663

September

13 First serious slave conspiracy in colonial America of white servants and slaves in Gloucester County was betrayed by an indentured servant.

1664

September

20 Maryland enacted first antiamalgamation law to prevent widespread intermarriage of English women and black men. Other colonies passed similar laws: Virginia, 1691; Massachusetts, 1705; North Carolina, 1715; South Carolina, 1717; Delaware, 1721; Pennsylvania, 1725.

1688

January

18 First formal protest against slavery by organized white body in English America made by Germantown (Pa.) Quakers at monthly meeting. The historic "German-town Protest" denounced slavery and the slave trade.

1704

Elias Neau, a Frenchman, opened school for blacks in New York City.

1708

Slave revolt, Newton, Long Island (N.Y.). Seven whites killed. Two black male slaves and an Indian slave were hanged, and a black woman was burned alive.

1712

7 Slave revolt, New York City. Nine whites were killed and twenty-one slaves were executed.

1723

13 Massachusetts governor issued proclamation on the "fires which have been designedly and industriously kindled by some villainous and desperate Negroes or other dissolute people as appears by the confession of some of them."

1731

November

9 Benjamin Banneker, black inventor and scientist, born in Ellicott's Mills, Maryland.

Brown. The new president's inauguration was characterized by diversity and the highest level of black participation in history.

If the new Clinton era did not immediately inaugurate a new season of American renewal, President Clinton called "a new sense of hope and energy. And across the months that followed, African-Americans reversed some of the policies of the Reagan-Bush years and occupied new ground. Forced back on themselves by external pressures, buffeted by new technologies and new modes of pacification and oppression, they nevertheless found within themselves new resources and reorganized themselves around new axes. Regardless of racism, regardless of unemployment, regardless of everything, they worked, prayed and danced and endured. Having come so far with so much against so many, they honored the human spirit by refusing to give up the long march that Ralph Ellison called "one of the great human experiences and one of the great triumphs of the human spirit in modern times, in fact, in the history of the world."

Admirals and Milestones

1619

30

Virginia House of Burgesses met at Jamestown. First colonial legislature in America passed a measure which legalized white servitude. Similar measures were passed later by other colonies. White indentured servitude lasted for more than two centuries and involved most of the first white immigrants.

1624

History of Black America began with landing of twenty blacks at Jamestown, Virginia. John Rolfe said the ship arrived "about the latter end of August" and that it "brought not anything but 20 and odd Negroes." Surviving evidence suggests that the twenty blacks were accorded the status of indentured servants.

1641

First black child born in English America christened William in the Church of England at Jamestown.

Massachusetts became the first colony to give statutory recognition to slavery. Other colonies followed: Connecticut, 1650; Virginia, 1661; Maryland, 1663; New