

In an editorial in June last year I wrote that the question of the relevance of classical studies for Africa has not yet been discussed in depth. Since then the changing political situation in South Africa has made such a discussion even more urgent. It has become very popular to say that South Africa should look to Africa, not Europe, in political as well as in cultural matters: "Eurocentric" has very nearly become a term of abuse.

To some extent one can sympathize with this point of view. For many years scholars and critics have judged all art and literature by European standards and tended to despise African culture. On the other hand it must be stressed that one cannot ignore more than a century of European influence on Africa. It is impossible to set the clock back and restore African culture to its former purity. The most reasonable attitude seems rather to be that a combination of the most valuable elements from Europe and Africa can lead to a completely new culture. In this process our classical heritage can play an important part, as can already be seen in some African countries like Nigeria.

The situation in Europe during the Renaissance provides an interesting parallel. Before this period Europe had its own medieval culture in which certain classical elements, like the scholastic interpretation of Aristotle, also played a rôle. During the Renaissance, however, classical civilization was rediscovered, with the result that critics were now inclined to regard classical art and literature as the summit of perfection and to despise their own art. Thus the rediscovery of the Classics did not always have a beneficial effect. In Italy and France at first it severely hampered the development of their own drama. But when classical and indigenous elements were combined, as in England and Spain and later in France, it led to a flourishing dramatic literature.

There is another aspect of classical civilization to which modern Africa can relate. Our knowledge of the Classics is mainly derived from European scholars who refined it and selected only those elements with which they could identify. But there are also other more "primitive" elements which go back to the roots of human consciousness. I am thinking, among other things, of the important rôle played in Greek and Roman society by ritual, especially fertility rites. In many cases the resemblances to African ritual are striking; in an article in our previous issue M. Lambert demonstrated this in the case of Demeter and Nomkhubulwana. Another resemblance can be seen with regard to the part played by oral literature; it is very interesting to compare the development of the Homeric poems with that of African oral poetry. It is not surprising that classicists have regularly taken part in the conferences of the Oral Documentation and Research Centre of the University of Natal.

Therefore it can be argued that classical culture is not something completely alien to Africa but is part of the general cultural heritage of all mankind.

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