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"Africa for the Africans"

Centuries of Self-Rule Brought a More Terrible Bondage

BY JOSEPH E. EVANS

Americans, marveling at the swift disintegration of the Congo and the rapid rise of autocracy in other new African nations, may well wonder if there is something about Africans that makes them especially incapable of effective self-government, much less democracy.

One stock answer is that if they are not prepared for self-government, it is the fault of the colonial powers which refused to prepare them. India, it's noted in contrast, did have some experience, through the courts of the Maharajahs and Moguls as well as the British civil service.

Yet, whatever sins of commission or omission may be charged against the Europeans in Africa, the fact is that the Africans enjoyed self-government throughout almost all their history; the period of European domination, starting only in the last century in some parts, is negligible in historic time. Today's nationalist cry of "Africa for the Africans" tends to make the world forget that the Africans had Africa—for centuries upon centuries.

And it seems, by comparison with other areas of the world during the same millenia, that they did remarkably little with it. Indeed, if past is prologue, the future of self-governing Africa doesn't look so good.

Granting the dangers of generalizing about Africa below the Sahara, let us take a look at primitive African tribal life as it was lived before the European "bondage" (and of course as it still is to some extent). Such a picture emerges from a little book, published a few years ago in Nairobi and hardly available in this country, called "Before the Dawn in Kenya." It is by an Englishman long a resident in Kenya, Christopher Wilson. Mr. Wilson has observations of his own, but much of his book is a distillation of accounts by eyewitnesses in various parts of Africa before the Europeans took over or as they were doing so.

First, the stereotype of a happy savage, untroubled by tensions and anxieties such as afflict modern man, is totally false. The insecurity was tremendous; there was constant danger from and fear of disease, animals and human enemies. This was no stable or happy life but, in the words of one observer, "a state of continual strife and disturbance," a life of inexpressible squalor.

Witchcraft's Hold

Custom, superstition and witchcraft formed "an unholy trinity" which assumed a stranglehold on the tribe and the individuals in it. The fraternity of witch-doctors held the community in "a grip which paralyzed all unorthodox initiative." A missionary speaks of the imaginary fears which fill every day with terrors and pervade the people's intimate lives. Magic made life a "spiritual nightmare."

Customs and superstitions were murderous, quite literally. A baby born feet-first had to be suffocated. If a baby of some months old cut its upper teeth first, it had to be killed. Female circumcision was practiced.

There was utter pitilessness toward man or beast, a notable weakness of family affection, lack of forethought, and pervasive indolence.

As for "government" beyond the tribal level, there was that too, from time to time and place to place, in the form of dynastic chiefs or kings.

A contemporary observer, Speke, describes the court of Mtesa (died 1884): "All acts of the king are counted benefits, for which he must be thanked. . . . The thanks are rendered by groveling on the ground, floundering about and whining after the manner of happy dogs. . . . This is the greater salutation; the lesser is performed kneeling in an attitude of prayer. . . . No one dare stand before the king whilst he is either standing or sitting, but must approach him with downcast eyes and bended knees, and kneel or sit when arrived. To touch the king's throne or clothes, even by accident, or to look upon his women, is certain death."

And here is a court trial witnessed by Speke: "A large body of officers came in with an old man, with his two ears shorn off for having been too handsome in his youth, and a young woman who, after four days' search, had been discovered in his house. They were brought for judgment before the king.

"Nothing was listened to but the plaintiff's statement, who said he had lost the woman four days, and, after considerable search, had found her concealed by the old man, who was indeed old enough to be her grandfather.

"From all appearances one would have said the wretched girl had run away from the plaintiff's house in consequence of ill-treatment, and had harbored herself on this decrepit old man without asking his leave; but their voices in defense were never heard, for the king instantly sentenced both to death, to prevent the occurrence of such impropriety again; and, to make the example more severe, decreed that their lives should not be taken at once, but being fed to preserve life as long as possible, they were to be dismembered bit by bit, as rations for the vultures, every day, until life was extinct."

Commenting on the rule of the kings of Uganda, Sir Charles Eliot recalled: "Among the most conspicuous and terrible features of the old regime were the constant executions and massacres ordered by the kings, which were a veritable scourge. Even now one not infrequently sees persons who have been horribly mutilated. One of the most frightful distortions of the human face imaginable, and worthy of being introduced into any representation of the Inferno, is produced by cutting away the lips and cheeks and leaving only the yawning cavern of the mouth. This was a favorite punishment of Mwangas (son of the aforesaid Mtesa), and there are still some unfortunate creatures, grinning ghosts in human shape, who have suffered it and not died."

"Again and Again"

Exceptionally rough African kings, perhaps? Mr. Wilson, the book's author, says:

"There is no reason to think that they were unrepresentative of their class: On the contrary, there is reason to believe that the story has recurred again and again throughout African history."

And, taking a more general look at that history of African self-government, he observes that "we can imagine the recurring course of the history of the peoples of Africa, through all those past thousands of years, when other countries were developing their civilizations. They alternated between the elementary disorder of lawless barbarism and the crushing oppression of ruthless tyranny. Every 'empire' eventually dissolved into its primitive disorganized components of witless barbarians; until these were overwhelmed and exterminated or absorbed by another tribe, or until a new tyrant arose amongst them, to crush them once more into the conglomerate of a hopeless serfdom."

Still, it may be said that bestiality and vicious misrule are not uncommon elsewhere throughout the ages, or now either. But Africa seems to have been singularly and unrelievedly so beset. And what seems close to unique is that practically nothing ever came out of it all, either in growth in self-government or generally in culture—always granting scattered and sporadic exceptions.

Yet Africa was not physically cut off from the mainstreams of civilization; one of the great civilizations, Egypt, was in Africa itself but built by another race. Sub-Sahara Africa was frequently visited throughout history and colonized in places. Little or none of it rubbed off.

Nor can the persistence of aboriginal existence be ascribed, as is sometimes argued, to the climatic environment—the idea that nature was so bountiful that man remained indolent; the environment was actually harsh and the life, as we have seen, violently insecure both physically and psychologically.

Two Alternatives

Whatever the full explanation of Africa's unusually backward condition, it is a little short-sighted to blame it all on the European colonizers. By any rational standard they brought, along with undoubted exploitation, the dawn of a humane existence. In the civilizing they did lies what hope there is for any ultimate self-government that deserves the name.

Against the background of Africa as the Africans were running it, only a hundred years ago in some cases, today's rape, pillage and breakdown of law and order in the Congo, and the rise of dictatorial rulers elsewhere, become more understandable.

That recent past, dramatized by the present-day Congo, also suggests how far-off real self-government is likely to be. And, ironically, how much it can be delayed by the speed with which nationalism is sweeping Africa. As Mr. Wilson puts it, the African has—or perhaps it should be had—two alternatives:

"If given time, he can adjust himself to the complications of modern civilization, gradually fitting into the strange complexity of its economic system, until he can play his full part in the affairs of his country. Or, he may be pushed into a premature bid for political power, which, if successful, would eventually result in a relapse into the poverty and misery of the time 'before the dawn'."