

Richard Wright

“What is Africa to Me?”

Some impressions of a visit to the Gold Coast

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

COUNTEE CULLEN

THE table had been cleared and the coffee was being poured. The Easter Sunday luncheon was almost over and we were stirring the sugar in our cups. It was so quiet that the footfalls from the tranquil Paris street below echoed upward. It was one of those moments when, for no reason, a spell of silence hangs in the air. I sipped my coffee and stared at the grey walls of the University of Paris that loomed beyond the window.

One of my guests, Dorothy, the wife of George Padmore, the West Indian author and journalist, turned to me and asked:

“Now that your desk is clear, why don’t you go to Africa?”

The idea was so remote to my mind and mood that I gaped at her a moment before answering.

“Africa?” I echoed.

“Yes. The Gold Coast,” she said stoutly.

“But that’s four thousand miles away!” I protested.

“There are planes and ships,” she said.

My eyes ranged unseeingly about the room. I felt cornered, uneasy. I glanced at my wife.

“Why not?” she said.

A moment ago I had been collected, composed; now I was on the defensive, feeling poised on the verge of the unknown.

“Africa!” I repeated the word to myself, then paused as something strange and disturbing stirred slowly in the depths of me. I am African! I’m of African descent. . . . Yet I’d never seen Africa; I’d never really known any Africans; I’d hardly ever thought of Africa. . . .

“Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister, is going to table his motion for self-government in July,” Dorothy said.

“It would be a great experience for you,” my wife said.

I heard them, but my mind and feelings were racing along another and hidden track. *Africa!* Being of African descent, would I be able to feel and know something about Africa on the basis of a common “racial” heritage? Africa was a vast continent full of “my people.” . . . Or had three hundred years imposed a psychological distance between me and the “racial stock” from which I had sprung? Perhaps some Englishman, Scotsman, Frenchman, Swede, or Dutchman had chained my great-great-great-grandfather in the hold of a slave ship; and perhaps that remote grandfather had been sold on an auction block in New Orleans, Richmond, or Atlanta. . . . My emotions seemed to be touching a dark and dank wall. . . . *But, am I African?* Had some of my ancestors sold their

relatives to white men? What would my feelings be when I looked into the black face of an African, feeling that maybe his great-great-great-grandfather had sold my great-great-great-grandfather into slavery? Was there something in Africa that my feelings could latch onto to make all of this dark past clear and meaningful? Would the Africans regard me as a lost brother who had returned?

WHEN I awakened on the morning of the 16th of June, I was at once conscious of a strange, dead quiet. The ship's diesel engines had ceased to throb; stillness gripped my narrow cabin. We had docked! I leaped out of my bunk-bed and peered through the porthole and saw Africa. . . .

I dressed hurriedly and went on deck; an African city, under a blanket of blue mist, lay spread out before me. The heat was heavy, close, wet; and the city—Takoradi—seethed with activity at even this early hour. On the wharf was a forest of derricks, cranes, sheds, machines and, as I looked closer, I could see that they were being operated by black men—a fact that must have produced pain in the heart of Dr. Malan of South Africa, for he had sworn that black men were incapable of doing these things.

I studied the swirling crowd on the docks and found it hard to distinguish men from women, for practically everyone had a richly coloured cloth draped about him, and almost everyone was barefooted except the policemen who, to my horror, were dressed in dark blue wool! I wondered how they could stand it. . . .

I descended to the customs shed where it was twice as hot as it had been on board. A young man approached me.

“Mr. Wright?”

“Yes.”

“I'm meeting you for the Prime Minister.”

He was Mr. Ansah, short, black, alert, a personal friend of Nkrumah. He guided me through customs and informed me that a government transport bus would take me to Accra, the capital. Emerging from the customs shed, I saw Africa for the first time with frontal vision: black life was everywhere. My eyes were riveted upon a woman wearing a brightly

coloured length of cloth which held a baby strapped to her back; the infant's legs were sprawled about the woman's hips and thighs, and the tiny head of the baby lolled in sleep with sweat beading on its forehead. The cloth held the weight of the baby's body and was anchored straight across the woman's breasts, cutting deeply into the flesh. Another woman was washing in a pan set on the ground; she was bent at an angle of forty-five degrees in the broiling sun, her black child also sound asleep upon her back. The babies of other women were awake, their wide, innocent eyes avoiding the broad blank expanse of their mother's backs, looking at the world from side to side. Then I was startled by a European family threading its way through the black crowd.

“They are the minority here, huh, Mr. Ansah?” I asked.

He roared with laughter.

“It's good *not* to be a minority for once, eh?” he asked.

“I admit it,” I said. “Say, how do they behave?”

“All right,” he said. “It's the high officials who need watching. Individuals like these are generally polite; they have to be. They're dependent upon us, you see.”

We walked past black traffic officers, black policemen, gangs of black workmen; and, in the locomotive of a train, I saw a black fireman and a black engineer. The whole of life that met the eyes was black. I turned my attention to my host.

“You're a businessman, I take it?”

“Yes. I hope you're not opposed to businessmen.”

“Not if they're working for the freedom of their country,” I told him.

He laughed heartily and grabbed my hand.

“Just what do you do?” I asked him.

“Timber. I cut it, dress it, draw it, and ship it to all parts of the world.”

“How many men do you employ?”

“About two hundred. Say, would you mind coming with me to the store? I must do a bit of shopping. . . .”

We entered a huge, modern store that reminded me of a unit in the American Atlantic

and Pacific grocery chain; it was managed by the British but staffed with Africans. As Mr. Ansah shopped, I wandered about. I examined an enamelled pot that would hold about a quart of liquid; it was priced at £1! Or \$2.80! A salesman came up to me.

"You wish to buy something, sar?"

"No; I'm just looking."

"You're American, aren't you, sar?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"Oh, we know, sar," he said. Another salesman joined him. "What part of Africa did you come from, sar?"

I stared at him and then laughed. I felt uneasy.

"I don't know."

"Didn't your mother or grandmother ever tell you what part of Africa you came from, sar?"

I didn't answer. I stared vaguely about me. I had, in my childhood, asked my parents about it, but they had no information, or else they hadn't wanted to speak of it. I remembered that many Africans had sold their people into slavery; it had been said that they had had no idea of the kind of slavery into which they had been selling their people, but they had sold them. . . . I suddenly didn't know what to say to the men confronting me.

"Haven't you tried to find out where in Africa you came from, sar?"

"Well," I said softly, "you know, you fellows who sold us and the white men who bought us didn't keep any records."

Silence stood between us. We avoided each other's eyes.

NEXT morning a phone call came from the Prime Minister's office; I was told that at four o'clock I'd be picked up by the Prime Minister's car and that I'd see "something."

And at four o'clock a sleek car entered the driveway. A uniformed chauffeur stepped out and saluted me; I climbed into the back seat. As we went through the city black faces jerked around, recognising the car. We came to the Prime Minister's residence and pulled into a driveway. I got out and young black faces smiled at me. A few policemen hovered in the background. I was led forward into a red, two-

story brick dwelling that looked remarkably like a colonial mansion in Georgia or Mississippi. I followed my guide upstairs, down a hallway, and into a living room.

The Prime Minister, dressed in a smock, was standing in the middle of the floor.

"Welcome!" he said.

"I'm glad to see you and your people," I told him.

"How are you?"

"Fine, but panting to see your party and your comrades."

He laughed. He presented me to a series of his friends whose strange names I did not recall, then we sat down.

"I want to take you on a quick tour of the city," he told me.

"I'm truly honoured."

"Nothing has been prepared. I want you to see how these people respond to our appeals. . . ."

"What's going to happen in July?" I asked, referring to the coming meeting of the Legislative Assembly.

The Prime Minister threw back his head and laughed. I got used, in time, to that African laughter. It was not caused by mirth; it was a way of indicating that, though they were not going to take you into their confidence, their attitude was not based upon anything hostile.

"You are direct," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"You'll have to wait and see," he told me.

I studied Nkrumah; he was fairly slightly built, a smooth jet black in colour; he had a longish face, a pair of brooding, almost frightened eyes, a set of full, soft lips. His head held a thick growth of crinkly hair and his hands moved with slow restlessness, betraying a contained tension. His bodily motions were almost deliberate and at times his face seemed like a blank mask. One could almost feel the force of his preoccupations as he would jerk his head when his attention darted. His questions and answers were simple and to the point; I felt that he had much more on his mind than he permitted to pass his lips; he was the full-blown politician whose consciousness was anchored in concrete, practical concerns pointing towards a fondly sought goal. . . .

His colleagues drew him into a discussion that was conducted in tribal language; when it was over, he announced:

“Let’s go!”

His personal bodyguard stood at attention; it was composed of hand-picked militants and faithfuls of the Convention People’s Party. He led the way and I followed down into the street where his motorcycle escort, dressed in scarlet, stood lined up near their machines. The Prime Minister waved his hand to signal that all was ready. The motorcyclists raced their engines to a deafening roar; then they pulled slowly into the street, leading the way. The Prime Minister’s car, with the Prime Minister seated on my right, followed.

The sun was still shining as we moved slowly forward. The drone of the motorcycles attracted the attention of people on both sides of the street and, spontaneously, men, women, and children abandoned what they were doing and fronted the car. Others rushed pell-mell out of shacks, their faces breaking into wide, glad smiles and, lifting their hands upward with their elbows at the level of their hips, palms fronting forward—a kind of half-Nazi salute—they shouted a greeting to the Prime Minister in a tone of voice compounded of passion, exhortation, and contained joy:

“Free—doom! Free—doooooom!”

Ahead of the car the sides of the streets turned black with faces. We reached a wide roadway and the crowds swirled, shouting:

“Free—doom! Free—doom!”

“Kwame! Kwame!” They shouted his name.

“Fight! Fight!”

“Akwaba! Akwaba!” (“Welcome! Welcome!”)

The road turned into a black river of eager, hopeful, glad faces whose trust tugged at the heart. The crowds grew thicker. The shouting sounded like a cataract. The Prime Minister, smiling, laughing, lifted his right hand as he returned their salute.

The road led into a slum area, and the Prime Minister turned to me and said:

“This is James Town. I want you to see this too. . . . I want you to see all we have, the good and the bad.”

The narrow streets filled quickly and the car

ploughed slowly through nostalgic crowds of men, women, and children who chanted:

“Free—doooooom!”

I was astonished to see women, stripped to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping wildly, do a sort of weaving, circular motion with their bodies, a kind of queer shuffling dance which expressed their joy in a quiet, physical manner. It was as if they were talking with the movements of their legs, arms, necks, and torsos; as if words were no longer adequate as a means of communication; as if sounds could no longer approximate their feelings; as if only the total movement of their entire bodies could indicate in some measure their acquiescence, their surrender, their approval.

And then I remembered: I’d seen these same snakelike, veering dances before. . . . Where? Oh, God, yes; in America, in store-front churches, in Holy Roller Tabernacles, in God’s Temples, in unpainted wooden prayer-meeting houses on the plantations of the Deep South. . . . And here I was seeing it all again against a background of a surging nationalistic political movement! How could that be?

When I’d come to Africa, I didn’t know what I’d find, what I’d see; the only prepossession I’d had was that I’d doubted that I’d be able to walk into the African’s cultural house and feel at home and know my way around. Yet, what I was now looking at in this powerfully improvised dance of these women, I’d seen before in America! How was that possible? And, what was more, this African dance today was as astonishing and dumbfounding to me as it had been when I’d seen it in America.

Never in my life had I been able to dance more than a few elementary steps, and the carrying of even the simplest tune had always been beyond me. So, what had bewildered me about Negro dance expression in the United States now bewildered me in the same way in Africa.

We rode on through the cheering throngs. Whenever the car slowed, the black faces, laughing and excited, with heads thrown back, with white teeth showing, would press close to the windows of the car and give vent to:

“Free—dooooom!”

But my emotions were preoccupied with another problem. How much am I a part of this? How much was I part of it when I saw it in America? Why could I not feel this? Why that peculiar, awkward restraint when I tried to dance or sing? The answers to those questions did not come until after I penetrated deep into the African jungle. . . . On we rode. The crowds surged, danced, sang, and shouted, but I was thinking of my mother, of my father, of my brother. . . . I was frankly stunned at what I saw; there was no rejection or condemnation; there was no joy or sorrow; I was just stupefied. Was it possible that I was looking at myself laughing, dancing, singing, gliding with my hips to express my joy . . . ? Had I denied all this in me? If so, then why was it that when I'd tried to sing, as a child, I'd not been able to? Why had my hands and feet, all my life, failed to keep time? It was useless to say that I'd inhibited myself, for my inability to do these things predated any desire, conscious or unconscious, on my part. I had wanted to, because it had always been a part of my environment, *but I had never been able to!*

“What do you think?” the Prime Minister asked.

“It's most impressive,” I said.

“They're an unspoiled, a spiritually virgin people,” he said.

WE came at last to a block of cement houses; from windows and doorways black faces shouted and called:

“Kwame! Kwame!”

“Free—dooooom! Free—dooooom!”

The car stopped and the Prime Minister got out; I followed him.

“What is this?” I asked him.

“This is a meeting of the Women's Division of the party,” he told me.

We entered a concrete compound and sat as the meeting, dedicated to reorganisation and instalment of new officers, got under way. A tall black woman led a chant:

“*Forward ever, backward never . . .*”

There was a relaxed, genial atmosphere; now and then an easy laugh floated over the crowd.

The men, clad in their native togas, sat in the rear, rising occasionally to aid in making seating arrangements. In front sat about two hundred women also clad in their native cloths and, for this ceremony, they wore an enormous amount of gold in their ears, around their necks, on their arms and fingers. The yellow sheen of the gold against the background of black skin made a startling combination in the red rays of the dying sun. There was one fat, black woman who, I'd have said, had at least three or four thousand dollars' worth of gold on her arms and around her neck, and it was pure native gold, mixed with no alloy. . . .

A psalm was sung in English. Next, an African of the Christian persuasion stepped forward and, in English, led the group in prayer. Then came a pagan chief with his umbrella, his staff, his “linguist” and proceeded to pour a libation of corn wine to the dead ancestors. The two religions nestled smugly, cheek by jowl, and the setting sun shone as calmly as usual; there was not a tremor in the universe. . . . After he emptied the bowl by dribbling the corn wine upon the ground, the chief had the bowl filled again and he passed it around to each person nearby and they took three sips. (Three is the lucky number among many Africans of the Gold Coast.)

A series of speakers rose, both men and women, and, in a mixture of English and tribal tongues, exhorted the women to give all their support to the Leader, to the Convention People's Party, and to the struggle for national liberation. To this already turgid brew was added still another ingredient; a woman rose and proclaimed:

“I'm Mrs. Nkrumah!”

A howl of laughter rose from the women. Puzzled, I looked at the Prime Minister; he grinned at me, and said:

“It's a joke.”

“I *am* Mrs. Nkrumah!” the woman said in a voice that sought to still all doubts.

The Prime Minister rose and, sweeping his arms to include all the women, said:

“You are *all* my brides!”

The women laughed and clapped. Nkrumah, of course, was a bachelor.

“I have to say that to them,” he whispered

to me as he sat again. “Now, tell me, do you understand what you are looking at?”

“You have fused tribalism with modern politics,” I said.

“That’s exactly it,” he said. “Nobody wanted to touch these people. The missionaries would go just so far, and no farther towards them. One can only organise them by going where they are, living with them, eating with them, sharing their lives. We are making a special drive to enlist women in the party; they have been left out of our national life long enough. In the words of Lenin, I’ve asked the cooks to come out of their kitchens and learn how to rule.”

The new women officials to be installed were called to come forward and stand fronting the Prime Minister. A short statement of aims and duties was read to them and, at the end, each woman was asked to raise her right hand and repeat the following oath (I’m paraphrasing this from memory):

“I pledge with all my life my support to the Convention People’s Party, and to my Leader, Kwame Nkrumah; I swear to follow my Leader’s guidance, to execute faithfully his commands, to resist with all my power all imperialist attempts to disrupt our ranks, to strive with all of my heart to rebuild our lost nations, Ghana, so help me God!”

. . . An oath to a Leader? In the 20th century? Then I reflected. Well, why not? This oath was perhaps the most rational pledge that these women had ever given in all of their lives. Before this they had sworn oaths to invisible gods, pagan and Christian, and now, at last, they were swearing an oath that related directly to their daily welfare. And would these illiterate and myth-minded women have understood an abstract oath taken to a flag or a constitution? In the light of their traditions and culture, this oath seemed logical to them, for the swearing of oaths was a common feature of their rituals. And, in a society ruled by chiefs decked out in gold and silk, what symbol other than that of a living man, a man whom they could see, hear, speak to, check upon his actions—what symbol other than a living one could make them feel that their oath was really binding . . . ? Indeed, the taking of this oath was per-

haps the only act in their lives that they had performed over whose consequences they would have some measure of control.

NEXT morning, when I awakened, my sense of amazement at what I’d seen was, if anything, stronger than it had been the day before. I’d seen something new under the sun. What a bewildering unity Nkrumah had forged: Christianity, tribalism, paganism, sex, nationalism, socialism, housing, health, and industrial schemes . . . !

Last night I hadn’t had time to question myself closely regarding that snakelike, shuffling dance, that strange veering and weaving of the body. . . . That there was some kind of link between the native African and the American Negro was undoubtedly true. But what did it mean? A certain group of American anthropologists had long clamoured for a recognition of what they had quaintly chosen to call “African survivals,” a phrase which they had coined to account for exactly what I had observed. And now, as I reflected upon last night’s experience, even more items of similarity came to me: that laughter that bent the knee and turned the head (as if in embarrassment!); that queer shuffling of the feet when one was satisfied or in agreement; that inexplicable, almost sullen silence that came from disagreement or opposition. . . . All of this was strange but familiar.

The bafflement evoked in me by this new reality did not spring from any desire to disclaim kinship with Africa, or from any shame of being of African descent. My problem was how to account for this “survival” of Africa in America when I stoutly denied the mystic influence of “race,” when I was as certain as I was of being alive that it was only, by and large, in the concrete social frame of reference in which men lived that one could account for men being what they were. I sighed; this was truly a big problem. . . .

Restless, I sought the streets of Accra just to look at Africa. And while strolling along I found, for the first time in my life, a utilitarian function for nappy hair; the clerks and school children stuck their red and yellow pencils in

their hair in order not to lose them, and they never did, so close and secure did their kinks cling to those pencils. Some children carried their ink bottles and schoolbooks on their heads, their arms swinging free as they walked. I saw a little girl peel an orange to eat it; she broke the orange in two, put one half of it upon her head and proceeded, as she walked along, to eat the other half; when she had devoured it, she reached up nonchalantly and got the remaining half of the orange and commenced to nibble away at it.

Bracing myself to encounter rebuffs, I strayed off the main thoroughfares and entered a maze of warrens—compounds—enclosed by stone walls. I blinked; before me was a scene crowded with scores of people, men, women, children, and everything seemed to be happening at once. . . . The over-all impression was that the black human beings had so completely merged with the dirt that one could scarcely tell where humanity ended and the earth began; they lived in and of the dirt, the flesh of bodies seeming to fuse insensibly with the soil.

Wilted from the heat, I made my way back to the government bungalow and found a strange young African waiting at the door to talk to me.

“What can I do for you?” I asked him.

“Dr. Wright——” he began.

“Please, I’m no doctor of any kind,” I told him.

“Well, sar,” he said, smiling. “I work for the English family next door. . . .”

“Yes?”

“You’re an American, sar? Aren’t you?”

“Yes; I am.”

“Maybe you can help me, sar? Please,” he begged.

“I’ll try. But what is it?”

“You see, sar, we don’t like the British. I met American soldiers during the war and they were nice, sar,” he explained. “Now, sar, I want to educate myself. I want to take a correspondence course from America and I need help, sar.”

“Just what sort of help do you need and what kind of a course do you want to take?” I asked.

“I want to be a detective, sar,” he said.

“What?” I thought that I hadn’t heard him.

“A detective, sar. Like the ones you see in the movies,” he made himself explicit.

“And you want to take all of this in the form of a correspondence course from America?”

“That’s right, sar,” he said, smiling, glad that at last I’d understood him.

“Now, just how can I help you in that?”

“Well, sar, money is controlled here. I went to the post office, sar, to buy dollars and they wouldn’t sell them to me. They said that I’d have to go to a bank, sar. Well, I went to the bank and they said no; they wouldn’t sell me dollars, sar. They said I’d have to get the government to okay my application for dollars. Then I went to the government, sar, and talked to a young Englishman.”

“And what did he say?”

“Sar, he said I couldn’t have any dollars. . . . You see, sar, the English are jealous of us. They never want us to do anything, sar. . . .”

“Why wouldn’t the Englishman let you have the dollars?”

“He just wouldn’t, sar. He said that I could take a course in how to be a detective from London, sar.”

“From London?” I echoed.

“Yes, sar; that’s exactly what he said, sar.”

I looked at him, at his pleading eyes, at those half-parted, waiting lips, at the slight stoop of respect in his bodily posture.

“Come onto the terrace,” I told him.

He followed me and stood respectfully as I sat.

“Sit down,” I said.

“Thank you, sar,” he said, sitting.

“From where did you get this notion of becoming a detective?”

“In a magazine. . . . You know, sar. One of these American magazines. . . . They tell about crimes. I got it right in my room now, sar. Shall I get it for you, sar?”

“No; no; that’s not necessary. Now, just why do you want to become a detective?”

“To catch criminals, sar.”

“What criminals?”

He stared at me as though he thought that I’d taken leave of my senses.

“The English, sar!” he exclaimed. “Sar, we Africans don’t violate the law. This is *our* country, sar. It’s the English who came here

and fought us, took our land, our gold, and our diamonds, sar. If I could be a good detective, sar, I'd find out how they did it. I'd put them in jail, sar.”

It was all clear now. But the pathos of it stilled my tongue for several moments. . . .

How could I get at the boy? He was hugging to his heart a delusive dream and he was determined not to surrender it; if he had to let that dream go, he'd hate whoever robbed him of it. But that false dream stood between him and his seeing reality for what it was, coloured his vision regarding the value of being a detective. . . .

“I'll have to think about this,” I told him with a sigh.

He thanked me and left; I went upstairs and sat in a chair and shook my head. Good God. . . . Did the men who had administered this colony before the coming of Nkrumah know that this sort of rot was simmering in the minds of boys? Maybe they had known it and had not cared? No; I was inclined to feel that they had not known it, for, if they had, I was sure that they would have been frightened. But what stunned me most about the boy was his absolute distrust of the British; it was by far the deepest emotion of his life.

ALL the metal in my toilet kit turned a deep, dark red. I rubbed my fingers across the metal and a soft mound of wet rust rolled up. What a climate. . . . What could last here? Suppose the Gold Coast was cut off from the Western world, for, say, ten years? Would not the material level of existence be reduced to that which existed before the coming of the white man? Practically nothing, under British colonial policy, was manufactured in the Gold Coast. Indeed, the only ostensible difference between the environmental conditions of the bourgeois blacks and the tribal blacks consisted in the possession by the upper-class blacks of a mass of imported British products in their homes. The British argument until now has been that the climate ruled out industrial production, but I was convinced that this was a British “rationalisation” to keep down potential industrial competition. I was sure that if

the British *had* to industrialise the Gold Coast, they would have found a way of doing it. . . . Until some effort was made to preserve metal against corrosion, this place was under a sentence of death. And I realised that whatever history was buried in this hot and wet earth must have long since decayed, melted back into the red and ravenous clay. No wonder that archæologists, no matter how long and earnestly they dig, could find little or nothing here. Throw the whole of Detroit into this inferno of heat and wetness, and precious little of it would be left in a hundred years.

Restless, I wander again into the streets and am struck by the incredible number of mere tots engaged in buying and selling. I've begun to feel that, as a whole, there is no period of “youth” here in Africa. Here, at one moment, one is a child; then, almost overnight, at the age of eight or ten, one assumes the status of an adult. Children toil at minding smaller children, cooking, carrying water on their heads, trading in the market place, assuming responsibilities long before the children of the West. Perhaps “youth” is a period of luxury which middle-class Westerners alone could give their children?

Maybe that was why one so seldom encountered what might be called “idealism” in Africa? Perhaps there was no time for dreaming—and how could one get the notion that the world could be different if one did not dream? Though the African's whole life was a kind of religious dream, the African scorned the word “dream.” Maybe the plant of African personality was pruned too quickly, was forced to bear fruit before it had a chance to grow to its full height? What would happen to a romantic rebel in an African tribe? The African takes his religion, which is really a waking *dream*, for reality, and all other dreams are barred, are taboo.

IN THE late afternoon a rainstorm broke over the city; it had been threatening for some hours and when it did come, it came down with a violence that made you feel that some malevolent being was bent upon harm. Nature here acts with such directness, suddenness, that the

mind, in spite of itself, projects out upon natural events animistic motives. After the first cloud-burst the rain settled down to a long, steady downpour. The air was still; I could almost feel the moisture enter my lungs as I breathed. It was not until after ten o'clock that the sky cleared and the stars could be seen, distant, mingled with clouds.

Again I poked about the alleyways of James Town. Now that the rain had stopped, the gregarious natives were returning to the streets. At corners women were lighting candles and huddling themselves besides their piles of staples. Plantains were being dropped into cauldrons of boiling fat. Finding myself out of cigarettes, I paused in front of a woman.

"A can of cigarettes," I said, pointing.

She stared, then opened a can and took out one cigarette.

"No; I want to buy a can," I said.

She turned and called, summoning help. Cigarettes were sold in round tin cans of fifty each and they were vacuum-packed against the moisture. A young girl came; she and the woman chatted.

"No; she sell you *one*," the girl was emphatic.

"Why won't she sell me a can?"

"She can't," Again she talked to the woman in tribal language, then she turned to me once more. "She sell can for one pound."

A tin of cigarettes cost but seven shillings. Was she trying to cheat?

"That's too much," I protested.

"You can buy *three*; that's all," the girl said.

I finally understood the crisis that I'd brought into the woman's life. In this poverty-stricken area rarely did a native buy more than one cigarette at a time, and I had confronted her with a demand for fifty, which was wholesale business!

I pushed forward in the dark down lanes of women sitting besides their boxes, their faces lit by flickering candles. As I strayed on I heard the sound of drums. Yes; I'd find them. . . . Guided by the throbbing vibrations, I went forward until I came to a vast concrete enclosure. The drums were beating behind that high wall. . . . Could I get in? I went around the wall until I came to a narrow

opening. Discreetly I peered through and saw, far back into the compound, a group of people dancing to drums; kerosene lanterns lit up the tableau. Ought I go in? They were black and so was I. But my clothes were different from theirs; they would know me for a stranger.

A young man came towards me; he was about to enter the compound. He paused and asked:

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," I said, smiling at him. "What's going on there?"

"You're a stranger, aren't you?"

"Yes; I'm an American."

"Come on in," he said.

I followed him in, noticing as I passed a row of dim-lit rooms that in some rooms only men were seated and in others only women. . . . We came to a swirling knot of men and women; they were dancing in a wide circle, barefooted, shuffling to the demoniacal beat of the drums which were being pounded by a group of men near the wall. The ground was wet from the recent rain and their bare feet slapped and caressed the earth.

"Why are they dancing?" I asked the young man.

"A girl has just died," he told me.

There was no sadness or joy on their faces; they struck me as being people who had to go through with something and they were doing their job. Indeed, most of the faces seemed kind of absentminded. Now and then some man or woman would leave the ring and dance alone in the centre. They danced not with their legs or arms, but with their entire bodies, moving slowly, undulating their abdomens, their eyes holding a faraway look.

"Why are they dancing?" I asked again, recalling that I'd asked the same question before, but feeling that I hadn't had an answer.

"A young girl has just died, you see," he said.

I still didn't know why they were dancing and I wanted to ask him a third time. An old man came to me and shook my hand, then offered me a chair. I sat and stared. The lanterns cast black shadows on the wet ground as the men and women moved slowly to the beat of the drums, their hands outstretched, their

fingers trembling. *Why are they dancing . . . ?* It was like watching something transpire in a dream. Still another young man came and joined the two who now flanked my chair. They mumbled something together and then the young man who had brought me in stooped and whispered:

“You’d better go now, sar.”

I rose and shook hands with them, then walked slowly over the wet earth, avoiding the rain puddles. *Why are they dancing . . . ?* And their dancing was almost identical with the movements of the High Life dancing that I’d seen in the outdoor dance hall. . . . At the entrance I paused and looked back; I was surprised to see that the young man had discreetly followed me.

“You say that a young girl has died?”

“Yes, sar.”

“And that’s why they are dancing?”

“Yes, sar.”

I shook his hand and walked into the damp streets, my eyes aware of the flickering candles that stretched to both sides of me. Jesus Christ, I mumbled. I turned and retraced my steps and stood again in the entrance to the compound and saw that the men and women were now

holding hands as they circled round and round. The young man stood watching me. . . .

“Good night!” I called to him.

“Good night, sar!” he answered.

I walked briskly and determinedly off, looking over my shoulder and keeping in the line of my vision that dance; I stared at the circling men and women until I could see them no more. The women had been holding their hands joined together above the heads of the men, and the men, as though they had been playing London Bridge Is Falling Down, were filing with slow dignity through the hand-made arches. The feet of the dancers had barely lifted from the ground as they shuffled; their bodies had made sharp angles as they moved and I had been surprised that they were moving much quicker than I had thought; they had given me the impression of moving slowly, lazily, but, at that distance, there was a kind of concentrated tension in their gyrations, yet they were utterly relaxed. I had been looking backward as I walked and then the young man pulled the wooden gate shut and it was gone forever. . . . I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me.

David Riesman

Man and Machine in America

TECHNICAL progress certainly remains an ideal for a great many Americans —Jacques Barzun has referred to “America’s romance with practicality.” But it is usually European novelists and philosophers who have seen the United States on the rapid road to technocracy. It is worth noting that the American technicians themselves, with rare exceptions, have no such visions; on the contrary, many are quite uncomfortable about their present situation. As an illustration of this, I can cite several recent reminders of the increasing defensiveness of engineers—a group which, as recently as the Age of Hoover, had ranked comfortably high among the professions as the bearers of progress, hard common sense, efficiency, and other indisputably good things. On one occasion an engineering society invited me and a colleague of mine to advise them about what could be done to make engineers more “cultivated”: the group felt very apologetic about being good with slide-rules or transistors but not with people or Shakespeare. On another occasion, students at the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale expressed their bewilderment and resentment at the fact that, when they spoke to their girl-friends or to literary Yalermen about jet engines, they were accused of “talking shop”; while the latter, when they chatted about Proust, Elizabethan poetry, or the future of the United Nations were thought to be unequivocally “cultivated” and fit for social gatherings! In each instance, the engineers rather mournfully asked what they must do to be saved.

But at the very moment when the prestige associated with Technics is uncomfortably retreating in America before the prestige of Culture, many of the less industrially developed countries are seeking to attain self-respect and national status by going in for steel plants and automobile assembly lines, even where it can be demonstrated to them that improvement of agricultural techniques or of means of transportation might promise more tangible economic gains. When, at a meeting in 1952 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an American economist, Walt Rostow, made this point, he was criticised by representatives of “underdeveloped” countries for his emphasis on “mere” material well-being! He was put in the position of having to reply that of course he was not against ideals—he understood the quixotic appeal of assembly lines. Indeed, it was the Africans and Asians at this meeting who tended to be the “eager-beavers,” the romantic strivers after “efficiency,” the unquenchable optimists, whereas the Americans were worldly-wise, full of sober second-thoughts, and quite free of missionary zeal or cant. It was almost as if the traditional trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific conversations had somehow got their labels switched.

As we Americans begin to rise above the industrial evangelism of our own past, we also make things very annoying for those of us who are in love with older definitions of efficiency. Even in his best days, the efficiency expert, Frederick Winslow Taylor, had a terrible time trying to persuade Americans to work