

BACK TO AFRICA

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A REPORTER AT LARGE

IT fell to me last summer to travel across West Africa to observe, among other things, some of the interaction between world politics and race relations, a matter on which I have been making a special inquiry for M.I.T.'s Center for International Studies. This interaction is a pretty lively affair in West Africa just now, and since my travels took me from Nigeria to Ghana and then to Guinea and Liberia, I saw and heard quite a bit of it taking place. One aspect of it in particular acquired new dimensions for me as, on my travels, I began to meet American Negroes and to talk with them about their experiences in Africa. The matters of which we talked were impersonal, in the large, but were also intensely personal, and, for that reason, in my account of these conversations I will use no names and will blur places while I try not to blur what these individuals had to say.

ONE of the first American Negroes I met was a young but highly qualified professional who had come out on a three-year contract to teach in his special field. I asked him why he had taken this job, and he said, "I came to Africa because I was looking for a place to be comfortable. I thought I might feel easier here, feel more free, just settle down and do a job and be myself." He shook his head at my unasked question. "No," he said. "I haven't."

Practically all the American Negroes

I met in West Africa had come to the ancestral continent with some form of the same idea in their minds. They had come looking for freedom from racism and prejudice, or at least for a racial situation that counted them in instead of out—that provided solace and a sense of identity in a world where everyone was black. They had also looked for a chance to share in the new pride of achievement stemming from the black man's reassertion of himself and his "African personality." In West Africa, in a small way and for a short time, the Negro pilgrim can find some of this. But it does not last long—hardly past the first flush of the sensation of being in a place where the white man is not master. Almost invariably, the Negro pilgrim in Africa soon finds himself not free at all, more than ever without solace and a sense of identity, fighting new patterns of prejudice, and suffering the pangs of a new kind of outsidersness. He had thought that he was alien in America, but he discovers that he is much more alien in Africa. Whether he likes it or not, he is American, and in Africa he becomes an American-in-exile.

The outburst by some Negroes in the gallery of the United Nations Security Council, in New York, during the Lumumba demonstrations in February at least served to make more people aware that American Negroes are experiencing their own kind of confusion over the events in emergent Africa. It is a peculiar and painful confusion, cutting to the core of what Negroes think

about themselves and about their place in American society and in the world. Everything is changing in their universe, too—those winds blow not only across Africa—forcing upon them all kinds of new conceptions and self-conceptions, and among these are new ideas and emotions about Africa itself, the hitherto remote and rejected ancestral homeland. The gallery demonstrators were merely an extremist handful, but at some point these new stirrings touch all kinds of people in every part of the American Negro community.

The idea of going "back to Africa" has a long history among American Negroes. It has always been one ultimate option for those who felt despair over the prospect of achieving their full rights as human beings in the life of America. Such was the despair that in the years after the First World War led hundreds of thousands to line up with their money for Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line. Today there is a certain despair among many Negroes over the slow pace of change in America; the faster some changes come, the more intolerable become the persisting survivals of the past. But despairing Negroes now can feel what Negroes could not feel in Garvey's time—astonishment and exhilaration over the swift pace of change in Africa, offering them for the first time the basis for a proud association with the continent of their remote origins. Hence the whole new stir of impulses among American Negroes. Hence the fact that if you go to Africa now, you meet American Negroes, working, travelling, and questing.

Most of the Negroes you meet in West Africa nowadays are travellers, come, like everyone else, to have a look at the boiling and bubbling turmoil of the African emergence. Some of these are notables—guests at the frequent celebrations, delegates to the innumerable conferences, members of advisory

commissions—and others are more ordinary folk, such as a fast-moving, exuberant Chicago schoolteacher I met at various places last summer who was spending her savings on a swift tour of the continent, all by herself, just to have a look, "so I can tell the children in my classes what it is really like." A much smaller number of the Negroes have come out on particular jobs—scholars, teachers, technical specialists on contract for one, three, or five years to various African institutions. Then, there are the Negroes scattered through the official American establishments; one, last summer, was an ambassador (he has since been replaced), and others are regular embassy staff members, cultural attachés, information officers, members of technical-aid missions—perhaps a dozen in all. Besides these short-term expatriates, there is a smaller group of longer-term, or even permanent, expatriates, who have come to try to make new lives for themselves in Africa. Leaving aside the Negroes who live in Liberia, with its history of special links with America and American Negroes, this is now a small number of individuals, varying greatly in activity and outlook. A few of the expatriates are businessmen who have come, scored, and stayed. These are people who live as American and European expatriate businessmen have usually lived abroad, sending their children home to school and getting back themselves once in a while for a visit. But there are at least two kinds of expatriates who have made rather more permanent commitments. The first consists of young women who have married Africans, usually as a result of campus romances in America, and have come to Africa to live. These may number up to several dozen in West Africa now. Finally, in the smallest numbers of all—I met only two and heard of only two or three others—there are migrants who left

America because they were no longer willing or able to bear life here as Negroes and who are committed to seeking some kind of new life for themselves in their new setting. One of the two I met was a young woman who had become a Liberian through naturalization and then a Ghanaian by marriage. She was, incidentally, the only American Negro I met in West Africa who had given up her American citizenship.

Here and there in the several countries I visited, I met individuals in each of these situations, and I listened long and hard to some of them. The forms of their experience and the details varied greatly, but with only one or two exceptions they were all moving toward the same conclusion. It was perhaps best put by a young man who had come to Africa to see if there was any relief there from the anger he carried in his heart against America and the whole world of white men: "I came to Africa feeling like a brother, but there I was, I was not a brother. I was not Senegalese or Nigerian or Ghanaian, I was American, an American Negro from an Anglo-Saxon culture, or as much of it as filtered down to me, determining what I am, what I think, what I feel. I could come back, and color might not be a problem, but I would always be an outsider coming in. It would be true of any outsider, and true of me. It's the way anybody looks at a stranger."

THE young professional who had come out to teach because he was "looking for a place to be comfortable" had been very successful at home, a man who was among the first in his field and in his particular job. But he was weary of "being special," weary of always fighting, always being vigilant. In his college days, he had met some Nigerian students who impressed him by their air of dedication

to something larger than themselves. So when the chance came to him to teach in his field in Africa for a few years, he took it up. "I was greeted with 'Welcome, brother, you've been through a hard time'—that sort of feeling," he told me. "I did not like being patronized this way. I also found that the air of dedication was deceiving. It is the same old rat race here that it is everywhere else." He also found that being an American did not mean, if you were a Negro, only that you were a victim of discrimination. It also meant that you were used to telephones that worked and to telephone conversations that worked, too; that is, appointments that were kept, promises that were carried out, or decisions that were remembered the next day. "It's ridiculous, but I had never before realized how much of my life had nothing to do with the race problem at all," he said. "I mean just the way you do everything you do, what you mean when you say something, and how you understand what the other fellow means. I simply cannot function the way they do here. I like things put straight and got out of the way. Nothing is done that way here. Nothing is fixed. Do you realize what it means to have to bargain about the price of the bread you buy every day?" But there was a sharper and deeper edge to his feelings than mere impatience with slow or inefficient African ways. When he invited me to his home that evening to take potluck with him and his wife, I discovered that they were servantless, having fired their "steward" only the day before. In their long recital of their experience with him, it became clear that they had fired him not only because he was incompetent, dishonest, and unresponsive, and not because the unfamiliar sensation of having a servant made them uncomfortable or uncertain. The breaking point came when, after one of their final expostula-

tions with him, he argued back that he was held in contempt by his friends and fellow-stewards because he was working for them and they were not white. This was the real reason they threw him out.

The subject of relations with servants came up quite often in these encounters. Indeed, one of the more ironic experiences that an old Shanghai resident, which I happen to be, can have in West Africa these days is to listen to members of a new generation of American expatriates talking about their servants—the humor and irritations of dealing with them, and what there was to learn from them about African mores, habits, and character. There was also an echo of old China days when I dined one evening in the home of a white American who had been raised in China. “There is just no comparison,” my hostess sighed. “No comparison at all between these African servants and those wonderful Chinese servants we had!” Thus the ironies in all the talk about servants cut several ways and made a crisscrossing design of their own among the swiftly changing relationships of our time. It was not only that these were Americans, white or Negro, who would probably not have servants at home; this was largely true in the old days, too. Nor was it that they were likely to have ideas of equality and dignity that did not fit with the master-servant relationship; this was also true of some in the past. But in the past it was possible for many expatriates to be drawn quite easily into conformity with the established order of things—the colonial system was one big master-servant relationship, after all—and even to begin taking to the habit of mastery with increasing relish. Today, as everyone now knows except the Portuguese, colonialism is dead or dying. Some of its behavior patterns survive among the older expatriate hands and are still

seized upon by a few of the uglier newcomers. But, generally speaking, everyone nowadays is called upon to be as democratic and equal as possible, and Americans are more self-conscious about this than any other people, including the Russians. Hence it comes as an embarrassing shock—especially to the American determined not to be ugly—that the “new” democracy is for him to practice, while his hosts, the upper crust of the newly emancipated people, treat their own servants, and all other inferior orders, with remarkable contempt. In West Africa, as in most of Asia, there are few things uglier than an upper bureaucrat’s bearing toward a middle bureaucrat, or a middle bureaucrat’s bearing toward a lower, or the bearing of any of them toward any menials in their service. “They treat them horribly!” exclaimed a dismayed young woman, a Negro traveller who had enjoyed all of her journey until she stayed for a few days in the home of some African friends. “The servants need force, they tell you, and even say they are not human and you don’t have to worry about them. They feed them scraps from the table, they yell at them and call them names. I would try to be nice to the servants, but my hosts never liked this.” This behavior on the part of Africans is peculiarly shocking to anyone who has idealized the African struggle for freedom, or who has thought that only whites treated blacks with disrespect, and it is especially painful to Negroes, for until just the day before yesterday almost the only place open to them in society was that of menial or servant. “I run into this quite a bit,” observed an American Negro who is now a permanent resident in Africa. “In the attitude of the policemen toward the people, for example, and the customs officers at the border. There is the attitude toward servants and also the attitude among the servants—the

attitude of the steward toward the 'small boy,' of the cook toward the steward. The same in the government bureaucracy—obsequious to the higher, nasty to the lower. This does not exist among us. My mother, at home in America, is a domestic—she still is, because she likes to work. But she likes the people she works for. She is never made to feel anything like this; she is an individual. But here, unfortunately, it is very common; you get it right through the society."

There is an even more mordant aspect to the matter as well. Hardly any scorn is more justified than that felt by Negroes for whites in America who say they "know" Negroes because they have had them for servants or workhands all their lives. Yet I met Negroes in West Africa who "knew" all sorts of things about Africans—things they had gleaned almost exclusively from their servants.

THE experience of American girls who have married Africans and gone to Africa to live is a subject impatiently awaiting its author. It is hard to know just how many such marriages there are now; I was told last summer that in the city of Accra alone there were then about a dozen. As more and more African students come to the United States, there will be more and more of them. In the eyes of the African, the educated American Negro girl is a great prize. By marrying such a girl he is often making a major bid to complete his passage from his own traditional culture to the new world of modernism and change. American girls are attracted to these romances for different reasons—Lorraine Hansberry showed us one of them in "A Raisin in the Sun"—but one of the most poignant is the groping of the dark Negro girl for the regard and acceptance that are still so largely withheld from her in Ameri-

can Negro society. Wherever these marriages begin, however, they soon run into rough going, or so I was told. The American wives of Ghanaians in Accra were described to me by other Negro residents and by two of their own number as a group of unhappy and frustrated women who spend much of their time sharing their complaints and trying to console each other.

The complaints vary, but living conditions are large among them. While some of the husbands manage to do well with the professions they acquired abroad, most of them have to be satisfied with jobs that give them a standard of living miles above that of the lowly African laborer but still not so high for a girl raised in modest, or even poor, circumstances in Harlem or on Chicago's South Side. Even where there is not actual poverty, or what seems to be poverty, there are the hurdles of differences in habit, taste, and diet, there are the complexities of marketing and bargaining, and there are the deeply engrossing problems of ordinary sanitation. Although these are not necessarily great things, they are not easy to adjust to, either. But much more painful, it appears, are the problems of American girls married to husbands who often have rather un-American ideas about the status of women. "In Africa," one of these wives told me, "even when they are Christians, they do not understand that a wife can talk up to her husband and that she has a right to be heard by her husband. They just don't understand this!" There was also some discussion of the peculiarly nettling combination of male jealousy, resulting in strict control of the behavior of the wife, and a freewheeling view of the permissible behavior of the husband. This is not uniquely African, but in the African setting it is often bound up with some profoundly different customs and attitudes. In certain groups, for example,

child-spacing is achieved by an imposed continence until well after the child is weaned—sometimes a matter of two years, or even more. In this period, the wife is restricted and the husband definitely is not. This may lead, as anyone can readily see, to serious problems in an American girl's marriage.

What these girls have to cope with is the familiar but always difficult pattern of contradictions and ambivalences in the ways of a human being in motion between two cultures. Only very rarely does such a person succeed in shedding all the old ways and adopting all the new. However far he does go in one direction, he is still tied by a thousand bonds of upbringing, habit, and family to the customs and practices of the culture in which he was raised. These conflicts can sometimes be gracefully reconciled, but usually they are not—especially not in an intercultural marriage involving an American girl, with her ideas of her own rights and dignity. African cultures have not assigned many rights or much dignity to women. They are the hewers and the drawers of the society; in fact, to put it quite bluntly, they appear to do all the great volume of work that the men have been able to avoid doing. African traditional culture is also still quite largely polygamous, and this is an issue about which emergent African men are going to hear more and more from emergent African women. I was not told of any American girl who was confronted with another wife to share her husband and her home. One assumes—or hopes—that this is one issue that is settled before marriage, and that an African taking an American wife knows he is committing himself to a one-and-only. In any case, there are other problems, and they are quite formidable enough. Often much worse than the matter of the husband's relations with other women is the matter of the wife's relations with her husband's

family. Even in modern and Christian families, the girl's problem of adjustment can be overwhelming. Here is part of the story of a woman of great beauty and great force of character who had accompanied her husband to Ghana strongly determined to make a success of her new life. In the beginning, it was simply wonderful.

"It was even better than I had thought it would be," she told me. "The people were so warm and welcoming. It was almost a little too much, both from the family and from strangers. First, they liked me because I was dark. I was almost as black as my husband, and my mother-in-law thought I was scrumptious. I was *real* black. 'You brought one of our own back!' she cried to her son that first day. 'Not like the others, who brought back such light girls.' And my hair was bushy and kinky. My mother had always kept telling me that it was *good* to be black, but all my life I heard so many ugly things. . . . When I came here, it was so different! Here my blackness was my greatest asset. 'She's one of us,' everybody said.

"Then, about three months after we came, a brother and a cousin of my husband's came to live in our house. They have been in the house more than a year now. They burn out the lights, they never keep clean, they mess up the kitchen and the toilets. They have dirty habits. One goes to college and one works, and the brother got married and brought his wife to the house. They are rude. They don't respect me. They feel that they are entitled to a share of whatever my husband has. My husband sees their point of view and he sees mine, but he protects them against me. He wants me to be patient. I mustn't expect them to have my attitudes, he says.

"I finally asked them to leave. They went to my husband, and he put the whole thing off. They insisted, and he

agreed they could stay, but he did not tell me that this was what he had agreed. Then, one night, he said to me, 'Put locks on the door and then they'll see you mean it.' So I put locks on the door, but his brother just pulled them off. We had a big scene. My husband began to speak in Twi to my sister-in-law. I demanded that he speak English, so I could understand what was going on. But he didn't. He just left the room. My sister-in-law smiled, and her husband said, 'We'll show you how we treat *strangers!*' That's what I really was, a *stranger*. I went after my husband and tried to get it straight with him. 'You've left me to fight them,' I said. 'You've let your sister-in-law feel triumphant over me, you don't know where to stand, you don't know where your loyalties are!' My sister-in-law had gone to her room and locked herself in. I wanted my husband to face her. But she wouldn't come out. I was really wild. I tried to break down the door. I demanded a showdown. I wanted to force him to tell them that he stood on my side. 'You must have known I wouldn't stand for this!' I said. 'If you wanted someone to take this sort of thing, then you should have picked someone else, not me!' I really went way up and began to throw dishes. Then I began to pack. I told him I could go, I could get out and make my way by myself, and right here in Ghana, too, if I wanted to."

"Would you?" I asked.

She smiled and shook her head. "No," she said. "I don't want to break this marriage. I love him intensely. I can't believe he will fall back into the old pattern. Why should he have picked someone like me and then just fallen back? No, it will work, you'll see, just the way I want it."

ON first arriving almost anywhere in West Africa now, an American

Negro visitor feels a tingling thrill to see black men everywhere, black men doing all the jobs, lowly and high, right up to the black men who now sit in the seats of power, occupy the palaces, and whiz through town in their limousines. It is like a dream he never thought could come true except up in the sky where that pie is. He feels a great relieving pleasure wash over him at the loss of conspicuousness in a black crowd. "It gave me a sort of joy," said a young man from the Midwest. "On the streets, the billboards with black faces, and, most of all, that great sea of black faces the day I went to the stadium." Yet almost at once this young man's sensation became mixed. He did not want to get that lost, and, more particularly, he did not want anybody to mistake him for an African.

"I will confess that sometimes I resented the fact that I was mistaken for an African," he told me. "Like going into a bank and not getting received there like an American—I mean sometimes getting special attention. This would just come as a flash in the mind. When you were mistaken for an African, you did not get that kind of service, even from Africans. Walking the street as a black man, I was just part of the crowd. But never once did I want to be an African. Why was this? I would ask myself. It was a pleasure to me not to stand out in a place, the way you do whenever you walk into a room full of white people. You don't want that kind of special attention drawn to you. In Africa I enjoyed not having this special place. But I didn't want to be mistaken for an African. When I walked into that bank, I wanted special service as an American. I put on a robe once, and sandals, but I really wanted to be seen not as an African but as an American wearing this apparel. I wanted to be understood to be an American. I can't explain this contradiction. As a Negro,

you are always pushing so many things away. Maybe I have never really faced up to it. In Africa, I wanted to get lost in that black sea as a black man, but I did not want to get lost as an American in an African culture. In America the Negro is conspicuous but also is not seen as an individual. I am not *me*, I'm some kind of 'Negro.' In Africa I was not conspicuous, and could be taken more as an individual, but I wanted to be taken as an American individual, not an African."

There was another reaction some of the Negro visitors had as they moved among these busy masses of black men so newly free of their white masters. It was a certain stab: Here were these Africans, who one had always thought were so far behind, now running so far ahead. Thereafter, the reactions would divide; some of the visitors would go on feeling left behind by the Africans, and would bow their heads lower and lower as they ran into African views on this subject; others would begin to discover virtues in their own American identity that they had never suspected were there. After a while, some actually would come to the point of saying, as one man said to me, "Please don't misunderstand, but I find myself thinking: Thank God for slavery! It got me out of this and made me what I am instead!"

In most places, the Negro visitor is still likely to get a hearty first greeting: "Welcome, brother! When will *all* our brothers come home?" There is a lot of this, but the subject of that original departure remains oddly guarded. I was told that Africans do not much like to talk about it. Few Negroes seem to have given much thought to the fact that black Africans had a good deal to do with the capture and sale of the slaves. Eight years ago, when the late Richard Wright first came to that coast, he bridled at the first African he met,

seeing him as the great-great-great-grandson of that so-and-so who sold his great-great-great-grandfather into slavery. The Negro pilgrim today can visit some of the places where such sales were made. Until recently, Kwame Nkrumah occupied one of them as his official residence—Christiansborg Castle, right on the sea at Accra. But the old slave dungeons and passages here have long since been sealed off. When I visited it—Nkrumah having just moved out to take over the Governor-General's residence in town—I came by accident on a room, now a workshop, through whose walls some workmen were tunnelling in an effort to find those dark corners of the past. Ninety miles up the Ghanaian coast, at Elmina Castle, there is more to see. To be sure, the descriptive leaflet they hand you there studiously omits any mention of the castle's role as an entrepôt in the slave trade. You are given its dates, an account of its successive Portuguese, Dutch, and British occupants, and a description of its present use as a police-training barracks. But here you can walk into the dungeons and crouch your way through the passages, look through the slits where the chiefs watched their "catch" being sold to the white traders, and follow the stone path to the slithering rocks from which the slaves were run out to the ships beyond the breakers. The pilgrim looks out over the water and into the dimness of that past and thinks his thoughts. The African policeman who acts as guide gives no sign of appreciating the emotions involved. He even seems to think the visitor has come to see the police barracks, and not a place that his ancestors may have passed through as naked slaves so long ago. I must confess that when I stood at that spot, bleakly pondering the problem of faith in the spirit of man, I had the small but faintly consoling thought that *my* ancestors, what-

ver other sins they might have been committing at the time, were sequestered in some Eastern European ghetto, and could not have been among the travelers who waited out there on those ships. The Negro pilgrim who stands here, on the other hand, can think with pride and wonder of the strength and resilience that his ancestors must have had to survive their ordeal, and the great power to endure, to sorrow, and to win that has been handed on down to him. I have one friend who stood here and felt the great burden of shame for her slave past finally lift from her shoulders. She realized that it was to her black ancestors that she owed her powerful instinct to fight for life against all adversities, and with this she at last got out to rest the obscure shame she had felt all her life in the belief that as a descendant of slaves she was somehow less than other people.

Now, in any case, the returning Negro pilgrim is greeted like a long-lost brother. Sometimes—usually in the remoter areas or among the less sophisticated people—this is a genuine, open-hearted welcome, full of admiring wonderment at the strange brother who has been far away and has become something remarkable, different, educated, successful, and, like all Americans, rich. Among the more sophisticated Africans and in the main centers, the Negro pilgrim also finds a welcome, up to a certain point. A good part of his feeling of welcome has simply to do with the fact that he finds himself at last in a place where he can go anywhere, anywhere at all, and feel blessedly free of that everlasting fear of humiliation, restriction, and exclusion. This is no small thing, and the enjoyment of the sensation can last a long, long time. Some visitors never get beyond it, and they cherish the experience. ("Two whole months," said one. "For the first time in my life, two whole months without

incidents or insults.") On occasion, the welcome is more active. Kwame Nkrumah and other African politicians are willing to exploit whatever capital there may be in the link with a politically important American minority, and both in Accra and in the United States, whenever he has come here, Nkrumah has made much of the relationship. On his first return to the United States as Ghana's Prime Minister, Nkrumah shook a crowd at the armory in Harlem with a passionate appeal to race brotherhood and kinship. He hails successful Negro athletes and performers. Negro notables who come to Accra can be sure of high-level hospitality on the cocktail-and-dinner-party circuit.

But it does not take long for the Negro pilgrim who stays on for a little and gets past the first friendly greetings to discover that he is much more of a stranger than he is a brother. As Richard Wright learned on his journey in 1953, the stranger among Africans finds his path studded with difficulty, pain, and sometimes even danger. Wright was accused of blundering, of not knowing how to appreciate and get along with Africans, of probing too hard in the wrong places. It is certainly true that some Negro Americans have managed to get along better in West Africa than Wright did, but it is also true that they have done this by settling for much less than he was ready to settle for, and by not asking the questions he insistently asked. The truth is that the Negro American in West Africa today is much more like Wright's stranger than like Nkrumah's brother. He finds this out in a host of ways—some that barely pierce the surface of his feelings, some that cut deep.

IT is painful for a black American to be rejected by black Africans, but it is both painful and unbearably ironic for him to be rejected, along with

white Americans, by black Europeans. Among the new men of power in West Africa are a great many black Africans who are more British than the British, more French than the French. Indeed, long before they dreamed of becoming free Africans—that happened only recently—many of these men aspired mainly to become black Englishmen or black Frenchmen. They took from their masters not only their language but also their systems of thought, their views of history, and their ways of buying, selling, worshipping, running schools, and operating a bureaucracy. They also took all their little and big snobisms. Mixed with their hate of the British and French colonialists was (and is) an intense desire to be as like them as possible—a familiar phenomenon in the endless complexities of the struggle between higher and lower orders—so when they moved on at last to the greater joys of sovereignty, they carried their legacy from their ex-masters with them into the places of power. Hence the American who goes to Africa still not uncommonly meets in Africans a kind of low-grade copy of a variety of low-grade prejudice he used to meet in certain types of Englishmen and Frenchmen. According to this view, "Americans" are brash, loud, pushy, vulgar, materialistic, without culture or sophistication, wit or knowledge. The West African who is so disposed applies this prejudice to all Americans, without regard to race, creed, or color. No matter how alienated he may feel from his own society at home, the Negro American in Africa usually finds it no easier than the white American to keep his hackles down when this sort of thing comes up.

A well-known Negro social scientist in a visiting post at a West African university was not invited to the home of a single one of his African colleagues during his first nine months there, and

in two years he was invited out in this circle only two or three times. When I saw him, near the end of his stay, he was still pondering the matter in some perplexity, unable to decide what kind of snobism had been at work—British, academic, conservative, or plain African. Another Negro, serving on the staff of a United States embassy, recalled with some retrospective amusement how, on his first contacts with local government officials, he had had to face down remarks like "You gross Americans . . ." A young Negro in Senegal spent a whole summer finding his way through the personal, political, racial, and cultural haze of his relations with some Senegalese students. "At bottom, I think they felt I was a barbarian because I wasn't French," he told me. "It was a schizophrenic sort of thing. They were African Frenchmen looking down on me, an American, just as they looked down on any English-speaking African. They were always talking about culture, and I finally realized that by culture they meant *French* culture!"

Besides being amusing or annoying, this snobism is sometimes damaging. Entrenched British and French attitudes about American education still govern in much of West Africa—attitudes that were built up in the past partly out of real (if deluded) convictions held by the Europeans, partly out of the wish to keep young Africans from being infected by American ideas. Until quite recently, Africans who managed to get to America and earn degrees, even as medical doctors, had a hard time getting posts from African superiors trained by the British or the French. Americans have met with the same kind of rebuff. An American Negro girl who is a trained nurse was not accepted at a hospital in Accra and is still working in the city as a secretary. Another Negro, a man who has left America for

good, was refused a teaching job because the local authorities would not recognize his degree. This pattern is breaking down, of course. Nkrumah himself was educated in America; thousands of African students are flocking to American colleges, or trying to, much to the dismay of the somewhat older group of European-trained officials; and American teachers and other specialists are making it hard for the old prejudices to survive. But meanwhile the Negro American is not likely to be overcome with warmth toward those of his African kin who throw European aspersions on his hard-won American education. It is often an odd sensation for him to feel defensively American, but he comes to it, and in matters that go still deeper.

Negroes come questing to Africa for something they call "acceptance." What they seek may not be findable by anyone anywhere; certainly they do not find it in Africa. "The Negro who comes here has to have the right attitude," said one of the older hands among the American Negroes in West Africa. "He has to know he is not going to be able to run for President here, either. He won't get into the political arena, or even into the educational arena, until they shake off the British heritage, while in business it will depend on how he operates." In other words, in Africa, as in certain other parts of the world that Negroes are acquainted with, they can get along all right if they know their place. As for business, it is true that there were a few Negro sharpshooters who came to Africa to make a killing among the brothers. Some of the people who knew Nkrumah when he was a student in America came rushing over, and one or two of them had to be rushed out. Africans—some of whom are becoming pretty good sharpshooters themselves—keep saying they will welcome Negro

entrepreneurs and specialists, and a few of those who have come have made places for themselves, but the way is not open or easy or free to all comers. "They have no intention of seeing people with better backgrounds and education come in here and take over," said a young man who regards himself as a "permanent settler" in Africa. "They don't want to let any outsider get ahead faster than Africans do." But it is not often as aspiring politicians or ambitious money-makers that the pilgrims come; the "acceptance" they want is acceptance as human beings—something to do with full freedom to be what they are and become what they can. Here, among those who come to Africa seeking this, we begin to encounter the more truly wounding discoveries of their strangerhood.

For a first thing, Africans scornfully reject the term "Negro." The great confusion among American Negroes about who and what they are has long been illustrated by the angers and controversies that have arisen over the elementary matter of a name to go by. At one time or another, the names in use have included "black," "African," "colored," "Negro," "Afro-American," and "mulatto" and its various subdivisions, based on quarterings of color. On each of these hangs a complicated history of color caste, group prejudices, irrationalities, and complexes. By now the term "Negro" is most widely accepted, although there is a large faction of conservative or older people who still insist on "colored" and a much smaller group, younger or more chauvinistic, who self-consciously champion "Afro-American." Visitors to Africa, if they are of the latter group, may suffer an even worse confusion of identity, because, while they may be glad that Africans do not accept "Negro," either, this attitude does not bring them any closer to defining what *they* are. If they are

Negroes content to be called Negro, it is not a happy thing to find that Africans want no part of the term, think of it as representing something lowly or unworthy, and, worst of all, associate it with the history of America and with slavery—that in Africa a “Negro” is someone with a stigma. African rejection of the term “Negro” is part of the assertion of African superiority over Negroes. A person who only yesterday still thought himself superior to Africans, and whose ego is fragile at best, does not take this blow lightly.

Another blow is hidden in still another kind of terminological confusion. Langston Hughes, in “The Big Sea,” was probably the first American Negro writer to report the startling experience of being called “white” by Africans. That happened nearly forty years ago, and Hughes said he was told that the designation was based not so much on color as on identification, in dress, language, and background, with the European. In the Twi language, for example, the word “*oburoni*” apparently is used for both “stranger” and “white,” and even my scrumptiously black friend, whose marriage experience I described earlier, was, to her bewilderment, called “white lady” by the market women. It sounds simple enough, but there is a confusion here that, followed far enough, can take us into some of the deepest inwardnesses of this encounter. When an American Negro, of whatever color, hears himself called “white,” it not only startles him but stirs up anew all the mixed ingredients of his sense of himself. I will mention only three of these, which indicate how critical they are: his feeling about *blackness* and being *black*; his own mixture of ancestries (black, white, Amerindian, or whatever); and his share of the *yearning to be white*, the cancer that has been eating away for so long at the Negro’s ability to accept himself. These

are matters that cannot be wrapped up in a word or two. Let the details suggest themselves in a few glimpses:

The light-skinned Negroes who had trouble convincing Africans that they were Negroes. One young man, nearly desperate, said he wanted to hang a sign around his neck proclaiming his identity.

The tan American girl in Guinea who found that Guineans believe in race purity, that you have to be black to belong to the accepted group, and that “some hold the mulatto to be inferior, lower than the black.”

The dark-skinned American who was asked, “Are all American Negroes as light as you?” This “shocked me very much, because I’ve always thought of myself as fairly dark.”

The very dark American girl who found that for a summer Africa was “one place I could be accepted without conditions.” As she explained it, “American Negroes never think of themselves as black, always think of themselves in terms of white people—this or that is what is most ‘white’ about me, my features or color or whatever. Now I think of myself as *black*. It’s given me more respect for myself.”

“Why do you Negroes want to be *white*?” demanded a group of Senegalese students as they bore down on two young American Negroes. “But we don’t,” the Negroes replied. “Then why do Negroes put grease on their hair? Why do they sell skin bleaching?” The young Negroes tried to explain—to tell who did this sort of thing and who didn’t, and how it came about—but it was hard; it was hard to explain the whole business of being a Negro in America.

THERE is a deep pool of mutual prejudice between Africans and American Negroes, and it is easily stirred up. Some of these stirrings come

from a long way down. Until the day before yesterday, American Negroes generally considered themselves superior to Africans. They rejected the thought of their kinship with Africans, wanted no association with them, even used the word "African" as an expletive to suggest wild or barbarous or ignorant or wicked ways. The sources of this feeling lay in the great, obscure tangle of the Negro's struggle for acceptance in America, his lack of footing in any non-American past, his racial mixture, his effort to escape the lowliness universally associated in the dominant white world with blackness, Negroidness—with, in short, being African. Thus, Negroes usually saw Africans only as benighted and backward creatures who had never been able to come out of the jungle. Some Negro missionaries went to Africa to "save" them, but efforts made by benevolent or malevolent whites for more than a hundred years to send American Negroes back to Africa as colonists had little success. All but a few Negroes scornfully rejected the idea. Those who did go back and founded the Republic of Liberia did not exactly make a record calculated to arouse pride and a feeling of association among many Negroes in America. The small sprinkling of Africans who began to come to American schools—especially American Negro schools—were looked upon either as barbarians or as ex-barbarians who had become snobbish Europeans. At Negro schools, they were made to feel this prejudice most explicitly and painfully; they were isolated, made the butt of harsh jokes, and generally left to huddle among themselves and nurse their counter-contempt and counter-prejudice against their American "brothers." They found that, as foreigners enjoying different accents and British passports (no Africans came from French territories until quite recently), they could often gain admission

to places where Negroes were forbidden to go—movies, restaurants, and the like, even in the South—and they often did so, sneering back at the Negro for his lack of status in his own country. Some of Africa's new leaders went through this American experience—Nkrumah; Nnamdi Azikiwe, now Governor-General of Nigeria; and others, less well known. It is against a background of such memories that they now proffer their "Welcome, brother!," and obviously their enthusiasm must have its limits. Once the American Negro in Africa gets past the surface amenities, he is often made to feel the back of an African hand.

This is happening even in Liberia, the one country in Africa where American Negroes have had certain ties—where they have been looked upon as more successful elder cousins, and where, as helpers and supporters and as doers of good works, they have enjoyed status and prestige. The descendants of the Negro colonists from America who founded Liberia, in 1822, held fast to their American connections. Since they faced hostile tribes in the interior, rapacious Europeans on their borders, and indifferent whites in America, American Negroes were through almost all their history their only friends anywhere—and, indeed, there were not too many of them. Only a very few Negroes in America appreciated either the regard or the dependence of the Liberians, the rest being generally embarrassed by the Liberian performance. Nevertheless, those Negroes, mainly in the churches, who did interest themselves in Liberia's problems maintained the thin bonds through the years, helping to establish and staff churches and schools. The Americo-Liberians sent their sons and daughters to American Negro schools and, whenever they could, married them to Americans. An American Negro whom I met in Mon-

rovia described the position in these words: "Psychologically, they feel here that they are a part of the American Negro group. They use the word 'home' in this way. One speaks of a ship coming from 'home.' They have always looked for their American brothers to join them here. The churches are all closely connected to fellow-churches in the United States. In this society, girls born and raised in the United States are the highest prestige group, higher on the marriage scale than Liberian women. Girls born here of parents who came from the United States are the second-best group as marriage partners. No president of Liberia has been the son of two parents born in Africa; at least one has always been American-born."

This is almost enough in itself—without going into the complex history of Negro-Liberian relationships—to suggest the simmering jealousies and the rancors of dependence that must lie deep in the Liberians' feelings about American Negroes. Now, suddenly, great events are conspiring to free them of this dependence. Africa is waking up. White America wants African friends, and is beginning to spend money in Liberia—real money, not the dribble of dimes and quarters that could come from earnest but poor American Negro churchgoers. And beyond white America lies white Russia, which might be interested in helping Liberia, too, if America should not move fast enough. There is now, indeed, a faction of growing power in the Liberian government that wants to open negotiations with Moscow and begin to derive the advantages to be gained by "neutrality" in a world of contending benefactors. There is no place in this big time for the small-time American Negro benefactor who has been around all these years to serve as the Liberian's only rich uncle. "Now there has been a reaction of feeling against Negroes," said the Negro ob-

server in Monrovia whom I have already quoted. "People here feel that Liberia has been in the backwash of Africa, and some of them think this is because they have allowed the United States to be represented here all this time by American Negroes. Now they want roads and harbors, they want what the other countries are getting, and they think the answer is to get American whites and Europeans in here."

This change in the Liberian climate was signalled by the rumors that flew about in mid-1959, when the post of American Ambassador to Liberia was filled for the first time by a white diplomat. Traditionally, this had been the one post in the world reserved for some politically deserving or otherwise distinguished Negro. But now, it was reported, the Liberians were seeing this as a sign of their second-classness, and had demanded that Monrovia be graced by a representative of the United States who was white. These reports were denied by Liberians, but a white ambassador, a regular Foreign Service officer, was duly named to the post. (This matter of diplomatic appointments for Negroes in Africa is disputed from various points of view. Nkrumah was widely reported in 1957 to have intimated to Washington that he preferred a white to a Negro as the American ambassador to Ghana. Some ten years earlier, in a similar situation, Premier U Nu, of the new state of Burma, was said to have told the American government, "When you have sent Negroes to London, Paris, and Rome, then send them to us." Nkrumah was credited with similar sentiments; it was said that he wanted Ghana to have full first-class recognition, which had to come in a white skin. Many Negroes have differing and mixed feelings on the matter. They partly agree that Negroes should, of course, be appointed to more of all the available jobs, wherever they may be, but they are also nettled by the clear

African implication of Negro second-classness. President Eisenhower did appoint a Negro to be ambassador to Guinea, but he has since been replaced by a white. President Kennedy has appointed Clifton Wharton, the only high-ranking Negro in the Foreign Service, to be ambassador to Norway. Other top Negro appointments are being urged on the President, while at the other end of the scale more young Negroes are entering the Foreign Service and starting up the ladder, appearing in more and more junior posts in various parts of the world. Here, as in many other areas of discrimination, it is a matter of a little more time—time that seems so short to whites who do not know how late it is, and so unconscionably long to Negroes.)

The most direct assault on the American Negro pilgrim in Africa, however, hits him where right now he often feels weakest—in his sense of himself, and of his place and his future in American society. The African nationalist, in his new freedom from white control, now feels himself to be his own man in his own land, and is full of self-pride. The American Negro, on the other hand, is still struggling to achieve equality of status within a plural but white-dominated society, and that struggle goes slowly and painfully, is punctuated by Little Rocks and snarling New Orleans women, by unpunished murders, and is held up by seemingly immovable white supremacists in the South and by smugly self-deceiving whites in the North. In this situation, the Negro is an embattled man, and the African, swelling with self-congratulation and enjoying a certain malice, drives his point home. Examples:

“Why don’t you American Negroes stop singing spirituals and playing banjos, and get out into the streets and fight for your rights?”

“You Negroes are fools, imitating the white Americans. Isn’t it high time you set out to be what you are—*black men, Africans?*”

“Why don’t you Negroes stand up and fight for your freedom, *the way we did?*”

The American Negro who gets sneering questions like these thrown at him usually feels vulnerable—so vulnerable that most of the time he bows his head and takes it. He is often too oppressed by anger, despair, and self-hatred to give full, self-respecting value to his heritage of struggle in America. The truth is that his heritage of struggle is by far the longer, and is filled with more men who suffered and fought, and is adorned by a vastly greater number of remarkable leaders, tribunes, and fighters, than one can easily discover in the short histories of the West African movements now so suddenly crowned with power. He so underrates himself that only seldom does it occur to him to ask his jeering tormentor, “Tell me, my friend, about *your* struggle to be free.” No question could be more unwelcome to all but a few West African nationalists, because the fact is that the great bulk of the new West African politics came into being to *receive* power and not to *struggle* for it. This is neither a popular nor a widely acknowledged truth among Africans nowadays. They are much too busy building up new mythologies that will forever hide it from their view. So they bound angrily away from any such threat of exposure. The result of all this on both sides of the exchange is rarely relaxing or clarifying.

On the African side, what goes on is a reinforcement of the established pattern of prejudice. This is how a young American woman describes the views of her Ghanaian husband and his friends: “The Ghanaians feel that Negroes in America are stupid to

keep on begging for something, while if they had the right frame of mind, they would come back here and really try to work for Africa. But no, they think the Negroes would rather go on begging favors from the white man through the N.A.A.C.P. and that sort of thing. That's what my husband says. He has no sympathy for American Negroes and doesn't want them to come here. I won't say he looks down on them. He just feels they're stupid. Well, yes, I guess that is looking down on them, isn't it? All I can say is that if a Negro comes over here who believes in this fighting for civil rights to become part of white America, he just won't be accepted here, that's all."

But even if you are a Negro who has abandoned that struggle, even if you have come to Africa to make a fresh start among your African brothers, it seems that you are not accepted very warmly, either. As yet, there are not many such individuals. Most Negroes, however alienated they may feel, still come to Africa in a much more tentative, seeking way. But in Ghana I did meet one young man who had left America for good, he said, some eight years ago and had been struggling ever since to get a feeling of being "inside" with the Africans. He had not succeeded in doing so. "When I first came," he said, "I couldn't get my college degree accepted. It almost made a patriot out of me, I was so mad. An American college degree is actually much better than any degree from Oxford or Cambridge in the things that people need here. But I couldn't get into the educational system or the civil service here. I married an African girl and that helped, it made some difference. As far as jobs went, I certainly remained outside. But I have begun to get a certain superficial warm welcome in many circles. I'm invited around, though I don't have a very busy social life. When I first arrived here,

an old lady said to me, 'What took you so long to come back?' Ordinary Ghanaians do often have a sentimental attachment to American Negroes. But upper-class people immediately add to this, 'Watch out, we don't want outsiders coming in and taking over.' Still, I will stay in Africa. I left the United States both rejected and rejecting. On the whole, I think it may be more satisfactory here for me, since I grew up on a fence, partially accepted, partially rejected, and I know this is the way an exile feels anywhere. It was the same in the United States. It is the same here."

But most of the Negroes I met in West Africa during the summer were not ready to give up their fight against second-classness in America simply to accept second-classness in Africa. Nor was this only a matter of being a Negro, an American, or an outsider. In much of West Africa these days, it takes no profound discernment to see that however sweet it may be to be relieved of the power of the white man, the new power of the black man does not yet smell much like freedom—certainly not like the freedom to which the American has learned to aspire. So, stung by the African's scorn and rejection, by his stubborn refusal to accept the American Negro's *bona fides*, many a visitor finds himself cast in an exasperating role: an alienated Negro American passionately defending segregationist America against the attacks of a national-chauvinist African. This was the summer odyssey of one young American who, like so many others, had come to find out whether in Africa he might have the chance he felt he would never get at home. His story:

"As hard as I could ever push it, I could never really think of myself as an American, not ever. When I was in Japan and Korea with the Army, I always thought of myself just as Negro,

not even as hyphenated Negro-American, just Negro. But what I have found is that you might get rid of the color problem, but you get into something else. You know, in the beginning I had exactly the same experience Richard Wright had in Indonesia. I got called up in front of a line of Europeans and got waited on first. This was discrimination in reverse, and I have to say I enjoyed the sensation, even though I began to feel guilty about enjoying it. By the end of the summer, I'd thought a lot about it, and I just wanted to get away from there. I had to see that I could never become Nigerian, or any other kind of African, never really become part of it. I could not run away. Maybe the truth is that as an American Negro I have no place to go at all. Maybe that is the situation.

"When the African students talked about American Negroes' wanting to be white, I had to agree this was true. They also said we hadn't done enough to push for equality, that we should get guns, if necessary, and go out onto the streets. But they hadn't done this, either, I reminded them. I tried to trace for them the development of what had been done.

"There was one fellow, a most articulate Marxist type. He kept attacking American Negroes, how American Negroes weren't doing any of the things Africans were doing in Africa. We finally had a real run-in one day, when we were tired and irritated. He said something, and I found myself defending America, the whole thing, in a way I could never have imagined myself doing. I said yes, there was Little Rock on one side, and a lot of things on the other side, people pushing and fighting; all sorts of things can happen and do happen. As I was talking, I found myself being pinned against the wall. They kept coming back at me with 'You try to be white!' And that is true. I

realized I was defending something I wasn't even sure I wanted to be defending. But I think at that moment I began to understand. Here I was defending this thing. But it was because I knew there were other sides to it. As big a racist as I am—and I am a racist—I could see that they would only hear of Little Rock and New Orleans, and would never hear of the lunch counters integrated in Nashville. They wouldn't hear it even if you told them about it! I said to myself, 'All right, but I'm going to see that they hear all sides, hear *our* side.' I don't know if they ever believed anything I tried to tell them."