

BOOK REVIEWS

Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa. By Jacques Maquet. Oxford University Press, 1972. Translated by Joan R. Rayfield.

Few books attempt to synthesize African social life from a philosophical or ideological point of view. These are important not only for their uniqueness, but because there is a distinct need for them by beginning students of Africa as well as by the general reading public. When such a work is presented in graceful and simple style by a specialist of such wide background and profound knowledge as Professor Jacques Maquet, it is indeed a hopeful occasion. *Africanity: The Cultural Unity Black Africa* is such a work. Its greatest strengths, predictably, are in those areas which the author has himself personally studied: African art in its professional and 'folk' incarnations; the nature of kingship and political systems; kinship and marriage; and social differentiation in various African societies. This latter, in the form of caste, class and slavery, is especially valuable, although he inexplicably omits a discussion of sexual inequality and suppression. There is, in Maquet's estimation, something called 'africanity' which characterizes part of the African continent and which has made a contribution to world culture, especially in the realm of the arts--sculpture, music and dance, and oral literature--and in human relations. No doubt, few people would disagree that these various achievements are now the 'common heritage of humanity.'

But what is this 'africanity' which so excites the author? It is the cultural unity of 'black' Africa ... 'the unique cultural face that Africa presents to the world.' This unity, he makes clear, is based not upon race, but rather upon cultural foundations. It springs from basically four sources--a shared subsistence technique, intense cultural diffusions, the isolation of the interior of the continent, and finally, the entry of Africa into the outside world in the age of industry (p. 113). The scope of africanity is sub-Saharan Africa, south of the desert and west of the Abyssinian bloc. One might question why Mauretania, for example, is included in his cultural area and Somalia is excluded; or why claims that the Saharan countries exhibit 'africanity' instead of identifying them with the northern African bloc. Maquet's somewhat arbitrary division into sub- and supra-Sahara may also imply the balkanization of countries like Ethiopia and Sudan; yet, on the other hand, he

writes that Khartoum, in the northern Sudan shares africanity with Conakry in west Africa. Maquet cites 'well-established' academic traditions for separating north Africa from the lands to the south, but seems unaware of the colonialist bias of such a tradition as well as of the ways in which it has worked to the detriment of African studies, and particularly north African scholarship. And indeed, one of his own touchstones of africanity--linguistic identity (p. 5)--transcends his arbitrary Saharan barrier, as does the African religion of Islam, which for unknown reasons is scarcely acknowledged in his book.

But it is unrewarding and time-wasting to quibble over dividing lines of culture--this ground has already been covered many times over by DuBois, Diop, and their respective antagonists. More to the point here, what is the value of this 'conceptual tool' of africanity? It would seem in many ways to be a mystification, an artificial construction differing little from *negritude*, which Maquet rightly rejects. And as a tool for understanding, it is both idealist and static in its conception and thus adds little to our overall perception. While Maquet does not ignore materialist factors in African history (technology, migrations, etc.) nonetheless specifically historical experience counts for little in his schema. Thus, he mentions trading relations and foreign conquest, but many important events in the African past--especially of the last century--are either ignored, played down or even misinterpreted. The slave trade, for example is mentioned only because, in Maquet's view, it led to cultural isolation, one of the sources of africanity; he sees it as a one-way trade, benefitting only one side...it was 'no longer commerce but fraud.' Whether this is true or not is beside the point. But the slave trade, as well as the experience of slavery, is part of the historical record and has influenced the traditional heritage, Maquet's africanity. Nineteenth and 20th century events may be even more significant. It is clear, for example, that during the last century Africa underwent great--some would argue revolutionary--change; although our understanding of these events is less than complete, we should simply note that there was a growing volume of trade, an increase in the number of large political entities; there was the important *mfecane* in southern Africa and perhaps the importation of guns led to what Davidson has called an increasing tide of violence. These larger currents must of course be understood against the narrower patterns of local history, but on no account should they be overlooked. And finally, African wars, revolts and resistances *vis-a-vis* European colonialism must be seen as essential

to an understanding of modern Africa. Certainly there is a qualitative difference between the events I have outlined here and the tribal migrations of perhaps centuries ago or the fact that people have similar artistic styles throughout the continent!

Another weakness of the book is Maquet's analysis of the nature and operation of imperialism. He would have us reject a Leninist approach and characterize European imperialism as a kind of intensive, unrestricted cultural borrowing. It is true that Maquet writes of forced labor, taxation, cultural oppression, etc., during the colonial period but he cannot find a way to integrate these phenomena into his general picture of africanity. This is the case, in my view, because africanity is a mere cosmological fiction, an ahistorical concept which ignores much of the actual past.

Maquet's concept of africanity seems to demonstrate the shortcomings of traditional anthropology in dealing with the contemporary situation. At best, this tradition revealed the positive features and inner workings of African societies and is thus of great historic value. At worst, however, it merely patronizes non-white peoples along the lines of Rousseau and the 'noble savage' school of thought. Maquet tries to keep his appreciation (I hesitate to say adoration) of Africans and their civilizations within bounds. He does, however, in my opinion, overemphasize their allegedly humanist social relations and is on even weaker ground when he contrasts them to 'alienated western man'. African child-rearing practices are likewise contrasted with a false and 1984-like image of 'western' babies, fed on rigid schedules with fixed amounts of formulae, seemingly uncuddled and unloved. How then would Maquet account for the departures from those humanist social relations which periodically are reported from Africa, i.e., events in Burundi, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, etc., to say nothing of the southern part of Africa? As indiscriminative cultural borrowings from Europeans? So it would seem. Also characteristic of old-fashioned anthropology is Maquet's insistence upon the uniqueness, the 'otherness' of African peoples. But can he actually demonstrate that the African experience has been radically different from that of other peoples--the Asians, Latin Americans, Middle Easterners, or even North Americans and Europeans? Those political activists who hope to change Africa, to liberate it from colonialism, neo-colonialism and underdevelopment, reveal a different outlook. They emphasize similarities and common aims between Africans and non-Africans. This seems clear from the writings of Nkrumah, Cabral, Rodney, and Marks, to cite only a few of

the most articulate revolutionary leaders. The activist perspective provides an approach to the culture and heritage of traditional Africa which is at the same time respectful of the past, dynamic in conception and suggestive to political strategists. Maquet's africanity, on the other hand, ignores the political content of culture as well as its overwhelmingly historical nature, in the sense I have described it. Africanity therefore exists in a kind of non-political, ahistorical vacuum.

This is no doubt the weakest link of africanity. Possibly related to this is Maquet's failure to discuss or account for the semi-proletarianized peoples of southern Africa. Could he find no africanity in the mines, factories, or poverty-stricken rural areas of South Africa? Do these existential situations imply different kinds of unities or new strategies not to be found in his 'conceptual tool' of africanity? We also are left to wonder where Africans of Asian or European or party-Asian, partly-European, origin fit into Maquet's framework. Can they simply be written off as not sharing in his defined cultural unity? In light of such basic contradictions, it is hard to accept Professor Maquet's argument that 'africanity is not a mysterious "essence", not an esoteric body of knowledge, not a configuration of characteristics...' For in fact, as I hope to have demonstrated, africanity is just such an obfuscation as he here decries. For despite an extensive knowledge and understanding of numerous individual elements of African societies, Maquet fails in his major aim of interpreting the African experience in terms of today (see chapter four, 'The Prospects of Africanity'). And yet, we must restate that *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa* can still serve as a useful introduction to its subject. For specialists, however, though it will be entertaining and at times quite stimulating, its theoretical assumptions and conclusions should be seriously questioned.

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