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CHAPTER 2

The African Way of Life

It is obviously impossible to make very many generalizations concerning the way of life in a continent as large as Africa, with so many variations in climate, physiography, and population. As in any other area, at any other time, Africa presents variations in degrees of civilization that run the entire gamut from the most simple to remarkably advanced ones. At this point little more can be done than to observe various aspects of the African way of life with a view to understanding more adequately the cultural heritage of these people who have come to claim the concern of Europeans and Americans in recent centuries. If the emphasis here appears to be placed on the way of life in West Africa, it is because there seems to be merit in trying to secure as intimate an understanding as possible of the area in which the bulk of the people lived who later became the black workers of the Americas.

■ Political Institutions

Wherever we observe the peoples of Africa, we find some form of political organization, even among the so-called stateless. They were not all highly organized kingdoms—to be sure, some were simple, isolated family states—but they all seem to indicate the normal capability and desire of establishing

governments to solve the problems that every community encounters. The family state prevailed in areas where the territory was divided among a number of distinct families and where there was no inclination or desire to merge resources to organize a stronger state. In such situations the chief of state was extremely powerful because his political strength was supplemented by the strength that was his by virtue of being head of the family. In some instances, several such states, the constituents of which enjoyed a common ancestry, came together to form a more powerful state known as a clan state. If it was possible to surmount the obstacles of tradition and clannishness, several groups could come together and form what came to be known as a village state or tribe seat.

Village states flourished throughout West Africa. The growth and prosperity of some prompted them to merge, voluntarily or by force, to form small kingdoms, the most popular form of government in Africa. These kingdoms, if they met with a favorable set of circumstances—able leadership, adequate resources, and strong military organization—could grow into federations or even empires, such as those of Mali and Songhay. These various degrees of political organization were attained by Africans in their successive stages of development. Despite the fact that the states existed at different times and at different places, it is remarkable that the same essential characteristics seem to have prevailed in all of them.

The power to govern a state usually resided in a given family and was transmitted by it. Two other families, however, performed important functions in establishing a royal personage on the throne, the electing family and the enthroning family. The electing family could exercise a choice within the royal family. In this way Africans recognized the stabilizing effect that a royal family might have on the political fortunes of the people. At the same time, they were practical enough to recognize the fact that the eldest son was not necessarily the ablest or most desirable and felt free to choose their ruler from among any of the male members of the royal family. The new king could exercise no authority until he had been properly invested in office by those so designated by the enthroning family. These practices had the effect of ensuring the people a more satisfactory monarch than automatic descent of authority might give them.

Each African king of any real importance had a group of ministers and advisers. Indeed, in some states custom imposed on the king the obligation of appointing a given number of advisers and delegating real authority to them. Custom generally conferred each ministerial charge on a certain family. These ministers, together with other advisers and members of the nobility, functioned as a kind of parliament, which in some instances exercised substantial authority. It is interesting to observe that a peculiar African custom served to limit the authority of many kings. If the king did not belong to the family of the first person occupying the ground in his kingdom, he had no rights over the land. Any questions involving the land were settled by the descendants of the first occupants, who could conceivably be

insignificant subjects of the king or even prisoners of war. It seems that most kings were willing to conform to this ancient custom.

It is possible, however, to overemphasize the importance of the central political organization among Africans. To be sure, the power of the kings, ministers, and subchiefs was considerable, but beneath this semblance of national unity was the individual's strong attachment to local authority and local loyalties. Each locality had its own "king," and in many matters of a purely local nature this royal personage exercised power that was indisputable. It was this concept of the division of authority—a kind of dichotomy of sovereignty—that kept the great kings sensitive to the possibility of conflict within their realms. Few powerful kings of great empires and kingdoms ever achieved so much authority as to destroy completely the feeling of local rulers that they enjoyed a degree of sovereignty themselves. Stability could be achieved only through extensive military organization and a carefully organized central government. That this stability was frequently achieved is a testimonial to the wisdom, strength, and not infrequent ruthlessness of the various kingdoms.

■ Economic Life

It would be erroneous to assume that Africans were either primarily nomadic or simply agricultural. There exists in Africa such a diversity of physical environments that it would be impossible for people to evolve identical ways of life in different parts of the continent. Essentially agricultural, the peoples of Africa displayed a remarkable degree of specialization within this ancient economic pursuit. The African concept of landownership stemmed from the importance of agriculture in the peoples' way of life. The land was considered so important to the entire community that it belonged not to individuals but to the collective community, which was comprised of the first occupants of the soil. One of the most important local dignitaries was the "master of the ground," who was at the same time the grand priest of the local religion and the administrator of the soil. The importance of this official can be clearly seen, it may be recalled, in the fact that not even the political ruler could make any disposition of land without the consent of the master of the ground. Individuals or groups of people could obtain the right to use a given parcel of land, but such permission did not carry with it the right of alienation or any other form of disposition. When the land was not used productively, it reverted to the collective domain.

Whether land was held individually or collectively—and it seems that both practices were in use—the tillers of the soil devoted all their energies to the cultivation of their crops. Soil was cleared by felling trees and burning the underbrush. The ashes were used to fertilize the ground, which was in turn prepared for planting with the use of large spades with short handles. Seeds or sprouts were planted in mounds or embankments that had been

carefully prepared. Frequent weeding was necessary, especially in new ground, in order to prevent the young plants from being choked. Millet, wheat, rice, cassava, cotton, fruits, and vegetables were commonly grown. Dotting the countryside were towers from which watchmen drove away birds and grain-eating animals. Harvest time was a particularly busy period during which grain was reaped, threshed, milled, and stored, while other fruits and grains were made into fermented drinks, and cotton was manufactured into thread and cloth.

Domestic animals were a part of almost every farm, but in some areas the rural people devoted most of their attention to the grazing of sheep and cattle and the raising of chickens and other fowl. In northeastern Africa some tribes were known for their great skill in the breeding and care of cattle. In the east many villages ascribed so much importance to the raising of cattle that wealth was measured in terms of heads of cattle. The Bantu and Khoikhoi engaged in farming as well as large-scale cattle raising.

Artisanry was a significant area of economic activity. Even among the so-called backward tribes, there were those who were skilled along various lines. Among many people, there was a remarkable knowledge of basketry, textile weaving, pottery, woodwork, and metallurgy. The Pygmies manufactured bark cloth and fiber baskets. The Khoikhoi devoted much time and attention to making clothing from textiles, skins, and furs. The Ashantis of the Gold Coast wove rugs and carpets and turned and glazed pottery with considerable skill. In many parts of the Sudan there was extensive manufacturing of woodenware, tools, and implements.

The use of iron was developed very early in the economy of Africa. From Ethiopia to the Atlantic, there is much evidence of adroitness in the manufacture and use of iron. Indeed, many careful students of primitive civilizations credit indigenous Africans with the discovery of iron. The anthropologist Franz Boas insisted that Africans were using iron when European peoples were still in the Stone Age. The simple processes that Africans were found to have used and the early date at which they began to make iron suggest that it was the natives of Africa, and not the Hittites, who first discovered its use. Africa exported iron for many years, and blacksmiths and other iron workers were found in many parts of Africa. With simple bellows and a charcoal fire, the native blacksmith smelted his ore and forged implements such as knives, saws, and axes. Africans also worked in silver, gold, copper, and bronze. In Benin, bronze and copper implements and art objects testified to the great skill of the smiths, while many artisans, including those of the Yoruba lands and Mali, devoted their attention to the making of ornamental objects from silver and gold.

The interest of early Africa in the outside world can best be seen in the great attention given to commerce. The tendency of tribes to specialize in some phase of economic activity made it necessary that they maintain commercial contact with other tribes and with other countries in order to secure the things that they did not produce. Some villages, for example,

specialized in fishing; others concentrated on metallurgy, while others made weapons, utensils, and so on. In tribes where such specialization was practiced, traders traveled from place to place to barter and to purchase. Upon returning they were laden with goods which they sold to their fellows. Some traders from the west coast went as far north as the Mediterranean and as far east as Egypt, where they exchanged their goods for the wares of traders from other parts of the world. It is to be recalled that the travels of kings and emperors did much to stimulate this international commerce. Africa was, therefore, never a series of isolated, self-sufficient communities, but an area that had far-flung interests based on agriculture, industry, and commerce. The effect of such contacts on the culture was immeasurable. It can only be said here that these routes of commerce were the highways over which civilization as well as goods traveled and that Africa gave much of its own civilization to others and received a good deal in return.

■ Social Organization

As among other peoples, the family was the basis of social organization in early Africa. The foundation of even economic and political life in Africa was the family, with its inestimable influence over individual members. Although the eldest male was usually the head of the family, there was a widespread practice of tracing relationships through the mother instead of the father. In areas where this matrilineal practice was followed, children belonged solely to the family of the mother, whose eldest brother exercised the paternal rights and assumed all responsibility for the children's lives and actions. In tribes that admitted only female relationship, the chief of the family was the brother of the mother on her mother's side. In tribes that were, on the other hand, patrilineal, the chief was the real father. With either group, those forming the family comprised all the living descendants of the same ancestor, female in the matriarchal system and male in the patriarchal system.

In general, a wife was not considered a member of her husband's family. After marriage she continued to be a part of her own family. Since her family continued to manifest a real interest in her welfare, the bride's husband was expected to guarantee good treatment and to pay her family an indemnity, a compensation for taking away a member of the family. This indemnity was not a purchase price, as has frequently been believed. The woman did not legally belong to her husband but to her own family. Naturally, the amount of the indemnity varied both with tribal practice and with the position of the bridegroom. Indeed, in some tribes the tradition was maintained by a mere token payment out of respect for an ancient practice that had once had real significance in intertribal relationships.

Although polygamy existed in virtually every region, it was not universally practiced. The chief of the family would defray the expenses involved in the first marriage of a male member of the family, but if the husband

Salih Bilali Remembers Massina—1844 [as reported in a letter of James Hamilton Couper]

His native town is Kianah, in the district of Temourah and in the Kingdom of Massina. . . . I infer from his conversation, that the town of Kianah . . . is a Foulah or Fellatah colony, established among the older nations of the Soudan, and differing from them in language. . . . The houses consist of two kinds. Those occupied by the richer classes are built of cylindrical bricks, made of clay mixed with rice chaff and dried in the sun. They contain two rooms only; one of which is used as a storeroom, and the other as an eating and sleeping apartment, for the whole family. . . . The poor classes live in small conical huts, made of poles, connected at the tops and covered with straw.

The natives cultivate the soil, and keep large droves of horses, cows, sheep, goats, and some asses. The great grain crop is rice. . . . Besides rice, they cultivate a species of red maize, millet, and Guinea corn. They also grow beans, pumpkins, okra, tomatoes, cucumbers and cotton. . . . The usual food is rice, milk, butter, fish, beef and mutton. The domesticated animals are horses, used for riding, asses and camels for carrying loads; cattle, the bulls of which have lumps on their shoulders, for milk and meat—sheep with very long wool . . . goats and poultry, and dogs for guards. They have no hogs. . . .

His father and mother were persons of considerable property. When about twelve years old, as he was returning from Jenne to Kianah, on horseback, he was seized by a predatory party and carried to Segou, and was transferred from master to master, until he reached the coast, at Anomabu. . . . After leaving Bambara, to use his own expression, the people had no religion, until he came to this country [the Gold Coast].

William B. Hodgson, *Notes on Northern Africa, the Sahara, and the Soudan* (New York, 1844), in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered* (Madison, 1967), pp. 147–151.

wanted to take a second wife, he would have to meet all the expenses himself. Religion played a part in determining the number of wives a man could have. Local religions did not limit the number. When the Muslims made inroads into the tribes of Africa, they forbade adherents to take more than four wives. Wherever the Christians established a foothold, they insisted on monogamy altogether. Where polygamy was practiced, it does not appear to have produced many evils. As a matter of fact, the division of household duties in a polygamous family had the effect of reducing the duties and responsibilities of each wife, a highly desirable condition from the point of view of the wives if the husband was without servants or slaves.

The clan, the enlarged family, was composed of all families that claimed

a common ancestor. The clan would develop in the same community or area, but as it became larger and as some families found more attractive opportunities elsewhere, the clan would separate, and one or more families would go to some other area to live. Unless the separation resulted from a violent quarrel or fight, the departing families regarded themselves as still being attached to the clan. Once the unity was broken by separation, however, the clan tended to disintegrate because cooperation in war, economic activities, and religious life was no longer practicable. Under the strain imposed by separation over the course of time, the traditions and practices of the clan tended to become obscure and unimportant. Consequently, little more than a common name bound members of the same clan together, and new environments and new linguistic influences had the effect of causing clan names to be changed or modified. In such instances, members of the same clan living in different places had no way of recognizing each other.

Early in its development, Africa showed signs of social stratification in its many tribes. At the top was the nobility, "the good men," who could prove that they had descended from free men. Since they could claim the name of a respected clan, they had a right to places and positions of respect in the social order. Next was the great mass of workers, who found it difficult or impossible to raise a genealogical tree that would bear careful scrutiny. Although they might carry a perfectly good clan name, they could not prove their right to it and therefore were not able to qualify for a position in the upper class. At the bottom of the social structure were those who enjoyed no political or social rights. They were slaves, war captives, disgraced or degraded people and those living beyond the pale of the law. It must be added that the social structure had an economic base, and wealth tended to be concentrated in the upper class. Families, moreover, rather than individuals, constituted the several classes. Since families wielded economic power, through their politically important positions or through the domination of certain crafts and other economic pursuits, they had a way of influencing the nature of the social order. Work in itself did not elevate or debase a family, but the particular kind of work did. There was a definite respectability attached to certain types of work, and the gradation toward debasement was equally definite. The working of the soil was the most noble of all pursuits. Following in close order were cattle raising, hunting, fishing, construction, navigation, commerce, gold mining, and the processing of commodities such as soap, oil, and beer. There were variations from tribe to tribe, but everywhere there was the tendency to dignify or to degrade families on the basis of the types of work in which they were engaged.

It must not be assumed that people at the lower levels of the social order enjoyed no privileges or respect. All were regarded as necessary to society and were respected for what they contributed. They were accorded numerous privileges because their acknowledged skills earned for them the right to move from one place to another and entrance into groups that otherwise would have been closed to them. Nor is it to be assumed that there was

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa, the African) Is Sold into Slavery—1756

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. . . . When I looked round the ship . . . and saw a large furnace or copper boiling and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate; and quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. . . . I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country [Nigeria] or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore. . . . I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat . . . but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables, and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast . . . and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet while the other flogged me severely. . . . One day, when we had a smooth sea and a moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together . . . preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea, immediately another quite dejected fellow . . . also followed; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew. . . .

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, 1966), pp. 25–32.

absolute rigidity in the social structure of tribal Africa. As among other peoples, tact, special knowledge, wealth, or good fortune tended to create a fluidity in African society. By taste, a member of a mining family might choose to farm; although his new occupation did not of itself elevate him from the lower social position of his family, in due time he could gain so much respect and admiration as a farmer that he would be regarded as a legitimate member of the class of noble tillers of the soil. As in almost every society in the world, power and wealth could in many instances be substituted for nobility of origin.

Slavery was an important feature of African social and economic life. The institution was widespread and was perhaps as old as African society itself. Slaves were predominantly people captured in war and could be sold or kept by those who captured them. Slaves were usually regarded as the property of the chief of the tribe or the head of the family. In law, slaves were chattel property, but in practice they often became trusted associates of their owners and enjoyed virtual freedom. Some, however, were sold and

exported from the country, while others were sacrificed by kings in the worship of their royal ancestors. The children of slaves could not be sold and thus constituted an integral and inalienable part of the family property. Enjoying such security, it was not uncommon for the children of slaves to be favored with manumission at the hands of their owners.

■ Religion

Certainly up to the period of the many European incursions into Africa the vast majority of the people engaged in religious practices that were indigenous to the continent. These practices were only outward manifestations of certain religious beliefs and, like symbols in other religions, they did not indicate the specific character of the religion. The religion of early Africans can most accurately be described as ancestor worship. Africans believed that the spirits of their ancestors had unlimited power over their lives. In this, as in almost every aspect of African life, the kinship group was important. It was devoutly believed that the spirit that dwelled in a relative was deified upon death and that it continued to live and take an active interest in the family. The spirits of early ancestors had been free to wield an influence for such a long time that they were much more powerful than the spirits of the more recently deceased, hence, the devout worship and the complete deification of early ancestors. Not only were the spirits of deceased members of the family worshipped, but a similar high regard was held for the spirits that dwelt on the family land, in the trees and rocks in the community of the kinship group, and in the sky above the community.

Because of the family character of African religions, the priests of the religions were the patriarchs of the families. They were the oldest living members of the descendants of the initial ancestor and had therefore inherited the earthly prerogatives of their predecessors. Thus, they had dominion over the family grounds, waters, and atmosphere. It was the family patriarch who entered into communication with the souls of his ancestors and the natural forces in his immediate vicinity. He was therefore authorized to conduct ceremonies of worship. The temples of worship could be any structures set aside for that purpose. They contained holy objects, such as the bones of the dead, consecrated pieces of wood, rock, or metal, and statuettes representing objects to be worshipped. Bells or rattles were used to invoke the spirits and the worshippers. The blood of victims—chickens, sheep, goats, or human beings—was offered as a sacrifice to appease the gods. There was never a universal practice of sacrificing human beings in Africa, but in some areas prisoners and captives were sacrificed in worship of the various deities. Libations of palm wine, beer, or some other fermented drink were offered in various forms of worship. Prayers and songs were other expressions of adoration.

It was only natural that in a society such as that found in Africa there

would be considerable reliance on the magical power of amulets, talismans, and the like. Anything that helped to explain and answer the imponderables was a welcome addition to tribal practices. Magic was, therefore, practiced on a great scale. By resorting to ill-defined powers, known only to him, the magician invented techniques and created rites designed to secure for individuals the specific ends that they desired. Where religion was a collective attempt to secure satisfaction for the kinship group, magic was an individual attempt to achieve certain satisfactions on the part of a particular person. Even in areas where animistic worship prevailed, belief in magic was widespread. Many had great confidence in the efficacy of magical practices, and it may be that this reliance on the divination of sorcerers was responsible in part for the course that the civilization of Africa took.

The elaborateness of funeral rites all over the continent attests to the regard that Africans had for the idea that the spirits of the dead played an important part in the life of the kinship group. The funeral was the climax of life, and costly and extensive rituals were sacred obligations of the survivors. The dead were generally buried in the ground either beneath the huts in which they had lived or in cemeteries. Burial often took place within a few days after death, but at times the family delayed interment for several weeks or longer. The grave was not completely closed until every member of the family had had an opportunity to present offerings and to participate in some rite incident to interment. Nothing more clearly demonstrates the cohesiveness of the African family than the ceremonies and customs it practiced on the occasion of the death and burial of a member.

In all probability the early influence of the religion of Islam on the African way of life has been greatly exaggerated. This is certainly true for the period before the fourteenth century. Muslims crossed from Arabia over into Egypt in the seventh century. In the following century they swept across North Africa where they met with notable success, but religious conversion was slow below the Sahara in the land of the blacks. It will be recalled that the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay accepted Islam quite reluctantly, while other groups rejected it altogether. Some African kings accepted Islam for what seemed to be economic and political reasons, but their subjects frequently held tenaciously to their tribal religious practices. Muslims were never able, for example, to win over the peoples of Mali, Hausaland, and Yorubaland. The commercial opportunities offered by the Muslims were especially attractive. It must also be added that the followers of the Prophet accepted Africans as social equals and gave them an opportunity to enjoy the advantages of education and of cultural advancement that the religion offered. Even as a slave, the black Muslim was considered a brother. To many black Africans these features were doubtless as important as the purely ritualistic aspects of the new religion. Even so, numberless Africans summarily rejected Islam in preference for the cults and rituals that were historically a part of their way of life.

Christianity became entrenched in North Africa early. It was there when

Islam made its appearance in the seventh century, and these two great faiths engaged in a life-and-death struggle for the control of that area. In West Africa, where the population was especially dense and from which the great bulk of slaves was secured, Christianity was practically unknown until the Portuguese began to establish missions in the area in the sixteenth century. It was a strange religion, this Christianity, which taught equality and brotherhood and at the same time introduced on a large scale the practice of tearing people from their homes and transporting them to a distant land to become slaves. If the Africans south of the Sahara were slow to accept Christianity, it was not only because they were attached to their particular forms of tribal worship but also because they did not have the superhuman capacity to reconcile in their own minds the contradictory character of the new religion.

■ The Arts

In some areas of art Africans attained a high degree of expression. In carvings and sculptures of wood, stone, and ivory, their work displayed an originality both in technique and subject matter that marked them clearly as a people with an abundant capacity for aesthetic expression. There was, of course, a great degree of variation from place to place in the level of expression attained, but hardly any tribe failed to show some inclination toward the use of certain art forms. Benin bronze and brass works of rosettes, doorplates, and metal vases reflect great skill in the use of this difficult medium. Among the Yoruba the delicacy of form seen in the terra-cotta pieces is a testimonial to the rare artistry that these people possessed. The statuettes of people and animals widely used by African tribes in religious rites serve as a reminder that almost everywhere some Africans concerned themselves with artistic activities. From Timbuktu to the Congo there was considerable work in wood, gold, silver, ivory, clay, and the like, and it cannot be denied that many of these pieces bear witness to the fact that African art was not only indigenous but also worthy of the name.

To enhance the beauty and value of the items that they made to be sold or used, Africans decorated them in various ways. Ornamented and glazed pottery, delicately carved spoons and knives, golden jewels of filigree, and elegantly woven mats, cloth, and tapestries are outstanding examples of the application of art in industry. In the construction of houses, royal palaces, and temples, this same proclivity toward ornamentation is apparent. When Muslim architects and scientists came to the region south of the desert, there was a marked improvement in the symmetry and beauty of West African architecture. It must be added, however, that there is abundant evidence to support the view that many basic elements of beauty in African architecture were evident before the incursion of the Muslims.

An important medium of aesthetic expression in Africa is music. Among

the principal musical instruments developed in Africa were the xylophone, drum, guitar, zither, harp, and flute. The most frequently used musical form was, of course, the song, with or without instrumental accompaniment. Songs were usually antiphonal and were characterized by highly developed rhythms. Some were quite complex with respect to scale, rhythm, and general organization. There was also great variation in the types of African musical forms, ranging from lullabies and dance songs to work songs and sacred melodies. Likewise, there were many forms of the African dance. Some were for recreational or social purposes, while others served ritualistic or religious functions. Africans regarded both music forms and dance as integral parts of their culture.

The numerous spoken languages found in Africa always constituted a barrier to the development of literary forms. From the Atlantic to Ethiopia, through the heart of the continent, the languages of the Sudanic group are spoken. In the southern half of Africa, Bantu is spoken. There are at least ten Semitic dialects, ranging from the Arabic in North Africa to the Berber dialects heard in the Great Desert. Besides, there are many tribal dialects and languages that have no apparent relationship with the principal language groups. Among these are the languages of Suto, Ruanda, and Banda. Thus, where there is so much heterogeneity in the spoken language, even within a relatively small area, the almost insurmountable difficulties involved in the evolution of adequate means of extensive communication become readily apparent.

In early Africa few of the languages were reduced to writing. The literature was, therefore, predominantly oral, and there was an abundance of it. Handed down principally through the kinship group, the oral literature was composed of supernatural tales, moral tales, proverbs, epic poems, satires, love songs, funeral pieces, and comic tales. Some individuals, griots, made a specialty of collecting these bits of oral literature and purveying them before kings as well as ordinary families. They sang, told stories, and recited poetry. They kept in their memories the history, law, and traditions of their people and were themselves living dictionaries who occasionally performed invaluable services to their communities. The use of Arabic by educated Muslim Africans after the fourteenth century was rather extensive and made possible the reduction of some of the oral literature to permanent form. Examples of this are *Tarikh-es-Soudan*, a history of the Sudan written by Es-Sadi, and *Tarikh-El-Fettach*, written by Kati, a Sudanese. Some African scholars even sought to adapt the Arabic alphabet to the writing of one of the African languages by adding diacritical marks to represent sounds that do not exist in Arabic. This extremely difficult feat made possible the more extensive use of Arabic in developing a written literature among Africans.

Such was the way of life in Africa up until the end of the sixteenth century. It was at this stage of development that Europeans began to make incursions for the purpose of engaging in the trade in humans. It was by no means a simple way of life that the whites found. The basic problems of existence

had been solved; political, economic, and social institutions were, on the whole, stable. Whether the states were great empires or modest political entities, they were well organized with limited monarchies and a myriad of public officials. Well-defined concepts of law and order prevailed, and even if there was considerable rivalry and strife among states, there was a remarkable degree of order within the several governments. Citizens seemed to take their responsibilities and loyalties seriously. The peoples of Africa were on the whole well disciplined, and records of rebellions and revolutions are not common. This does not mean that all rulers were benevolent or that all their subjects were completely free from oppression. What it does mean is that a relatively satisfactory balance had been achieved between the people and their government. Usurpers and pretenders did emerge, to be sure, and at times they created considerable chaos, but these situations were perhaps no worse than the strife and chaos that erupted in the states of Europe during the late medieval and the early modern periods.

There was usually enough stability within African states and among them to make possible healthy economic development. The division of labor and the practice of specialization in occupations display a remarkable versatility and variety of talents and tastes. The interest in commerce and the understanding of the economic importance of contact with the European and Asian worlds show a realism similar to that of contemporary states in other parts of the world.

Nothing is more impressive in viewing the social institutions of Africa than the cohesive influence of the family. The immediate family, the clan, and the tribe undergirded every aspect of life. The rule of discipline enforced in the family was responsible in large measure for the stability that has been observed in various aspects of life. The influence and hold that the patriarch had over the members of the family was largely responsible for the stability that was characteristic of the area. The deep loyalty and attachment of the individual to the family approached reverence and indeed was the basis for most of the religious practices, in which ancestor worship played such an important part. The religions of Africa were a product of an environment in which the population lived close to nature. These sacred rites were manifestations of a people who were in a desperate search for answers to the imponderables. Their gods functioned intimately in their daily lives, and the adherents demanded effective, practical demonstrations of their deistical power in terms of better crops and victory over warring enemies. If Africans displayed a measure of religious skepticism in their willingness to accept new tribal gods or even new religions from the outside world, it was because they failed to see why additional gods would give them greater opportunities for success in their undertakings.

These people who of necessity had to devote most of their energies and attention to the important problems of existence did not neglect the aesthetic aspects of life. Evidence can be found everywhere of pronounced proclivities to artistic expression. Whether in painting, sculpture, or carving there is a

delicate sensitivity and an appreciation of the beautiful that reflects a basic regard for the finer things of life. Even in the industrial arts and crafts Africans took the time to beautify their products by applying to them the best of their artistic talents and knowledge. Song and dance played an important part in their social life. With stringed and rhythm instruments they made merry with their friends, worshipped their gods, and buried their dead. Nor is their aesthetic proclivity absent from the area of literary achievement. As in every other endeavor, the literary activities of Africans were tied up closely with their everyday life. Their oral literature, made up of tales, proverbs, epics, histories, and laws, served as an educational device, a source of amusement, and a guide for the administration of government and the conduct of religious ceremonies. If their written literature was limited, it was certainly not for a want of literary interests but rather because of the technical obstacles in the way of developing written languages. The extant treatises, largely in Arabic, show that when a written language was mastered, the resulting works were worthy of serious comparison with their contemporaries in other parts of the world. Most important of all, however, is that they were worthy of esteem on their own terms and by their own standards.

■ The Transplantation of African Culture

Students of Africa and America have discussed for many years the question of the extent to which African culture was transplanted and preserved in the New World. Of course, a considerable number of students formerly contended that nothing existed in Africa that approached civilization and that there was, therefore, nothing for Africans to bring with them. As evidence to the contrary began to pile up, that position was no longer tenable. Questions still remained as to whether Africans continued to be African in ways other than color and whether any substantial elements of Africa became part of the general acculturative process taking place in America. Sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier and Robert E. Park have failed to see anything in contemporary African-American life that can be traced to the African background. On the other hand, scholars like Carter G. Woodson, Melville J. Herskovits, Lorenzo Turner, John Blassingame, and Albert Raboteau have insisted that the African cultural heritage can still be seen in many aspects of American life today. In the 1960s and 1970s the debate was revived when many blacks and some whites began to insist that a substantial portion of African culture not only survived the Atlantic crossing but has persisted to the present day. Although the controversy continues unresolved, it nevertheless seems possible to make a tentative statement about this important problem.

African slaves came from a complex social and economic life, and they were not overwhelmed or overawed by their New World experiences. Despite the heterogeneity characteristic of many aspects of African life,

African peoples still had sufficient common experiences to enable them to cooperate in the New World in fashioning new customs and traditions which reflected their African background. To be sure, there were at least two acculturative processes going on side by side in the New World. As Africans of different experiences lived together, there was an interaction of the various African cultures. This produced a somewhat different set of customs and practices, but these were still manifestly rooted deep in the African experience. This was especially true where large numbers of Africans resided in the same place, as in the Sea Islands, where they could preserve certain religious practices and even language patterns. At the same time, there was the interaction of African and Western cultures, which doubtless changed the cultural patterns of both groups. It is to be remembered that European institutions did not exist everywhere with the same degree of fixity, and where European practices were relatively weak the opportunities for African survivals were correspondingly strengthened.

In the cultural conflict that took place in the New World following the introduction of Africans, the acculturative process varied in different places and under different circumstances. In some places it was all but stymied where there was a sufficient consensus of experience among Africans to take the Western culture and reinterpret it almost wholly in terms of their own experiences. In other places, mainly Brazil and some Caribbean islands, successful revolts made possible the transplantation of an African way of life to a considerable degree. Elsewhere, the normal or gradual development of the process can be observed, but always at least some survival of African culture is obvious. When it comes to measuring or evaluating the persistence of African culture in the New World—and especially in the United States—the problem becomes much more difficult. It can be seen in the language in such words as “yam,” “goober,” “canoe,” and “banjo.” In literature the persistence of African culture can be seen in the folk tales that have been recorded in recent years by American writers. In religion there are divinations and various cult practices, some of which can be traced to the African background. In work, in play, in social organizations, and in various aesthetic manifestations there are some evidences of African culture.

The survival of varying degrees of African culture in America does not suggest that there has been only a limited adjustment of Africans to the New World situation. On the contrary, it merely points up the fact that they came out of an experience that was sufficiently entrenched to make possible the persistence of some customs and traditions. There is a certain amount of validity in the view that in the conflict of cultures only those practices will survive whose value and superiority give them the strength and tenacity to do so. African survivals in America also suggest a pronounced resiliency in African institutions. There had been sufficient intertribal and interstate intercourse to give Africans the important experience of adopting many of the practices of those with whom they came in contact while at the same time retaining much of their earlier way of life.

CHAPTER 3

The Slave Trade and the New World

■ European and Asian Interests

When the Christians of Western Europe began to turn their attention to the slave trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were not introducing a new practice. Although they displayed much originality in approach and technique, they were engaging in a pursuit that had been a concern for countless centuries. As a matter of fact, slavery was widespread during the earliest known history of Africa as well as of other continents. Doubtless there was cruelty and oppression in African slavery as there was anywhere that the institution developed. At least in some portions of Africa there was no racial basis of slavery. The Egyptians enslaved whatever peoples they captured. At times they were Semitic, at times Mediterranean, and at other times blacks from Nubia. Slavery in the Greek and Roman empires is well known. In both periods the traffic in human beings from western Asia and North Africa brought a continuous stream of slaves to perform personal services and to till the fields for the ruling class. Neither in Greece nor Rome was menial service regarded as degrading. The opportunities for education and cultural advancement were, therefore, opened up to slaves. It was not unusual to find in this class people possessing a degree of intelligence and training not usually associated with slaves.

When the Muslims invaded Africa, they contributed greatly to the