

Blacks' Romanticism with Africa

By Jon Michael Spencer
African and Afro-American
Studies Curriculum

When in the summer of 1992 I spoke at a church in South Africa's southwest township, Soweto, and then joined the church membership as a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the black struggle, the elders of the church filed by to greet me and one of the women whispered, "Welcome home." Everywhere I went in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya I was given this kind of reception. I felt especially "familiar" among Africans who spoke English and had interests and education similar to my own, just as I feel most "familiar" with such African Americans. I felt a greater cultural gap and least "familiar" when I stayed that night at a rural village in Zimbabwe, just as I feel least comfortable among African Americans who maintain a rural way of life.

On another level, I felt greater political kinship with Africans who (as with African Americans) were involved in the kind of insurgent intellectual struggles against imperialist ideologies that I am involved in, and who consider their religion (whatever it may be) to be relevant to that struggle. I certainly felt more culturally at home in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya than I felt when I passed through Belgium and England.

These comments doubtlessly lay exposed for ready criticism, for it is now vogue to claim that African

Americans are overly romantic about Africa and to support that claim by showing Africa as it really is—allegedly mired in misery. The Sept. 7, 1992 issue of Time magazine, with its feature title "The Agony of Africa," has as its cover a photograph of a naked, wailing African child standing against the lifeless background of drought-worn soil. In one of the cover stories, "Africa: The Scramble for Existence," Lance Morrow spoke of Africa's "contending dooms": AIDS, overpopulation, tribal conflict, drought, starvation, economic mismanagement and corruption. Because of these "contending dooms,"

Morrow deems Africa "the third world of the third world... a vast continent in free fall."

In another of the feature articles in Time, "In African-American Eyes," Jack White claims that every African American who travels to Africa seeks, as he himself had sought, an answer to the question, "What is Africa to me?" He concludes that Africa for African Americans is an "imagined" continent. Unable to claim any particular region, tribe or language as their own, African Americans, says White, sometimes transgress the boundaries of rationality by adopting the entire continent as "home." This supports the claim, heard else-

where, that even the racial epithet "African American" is overly romantic.

One young African-American professor, in telling a reporter for the local Durham Herald-Sun about the expectations he had upon his first visit to Africa, played right into the hands of those who chant our incompetence. The professor said

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he was extremely eager to arrive to a land where he might run into people he was related to. He also commented that the idea of kinship bonds among Africans themselves is disproved by the fact that Africans sold their continental kindred into the European slave trade. To the contrary, the African involvement in the slave trade, no matter how pernicious the reality, does not preclude the possibility of kinship. Are there no kinship bonds between African Americans themselves who treat their fellow African Americans (sometimes even their relatives) likewise—selling them out to drug addiction or to gender and class divisions?

Notwithstanding this logic, when the African-American professor's expectations were not satisfied he drew a conclusion that is fully antithetical to his initial enthusiasm, rather than attempting to find some middle ground. He said, "The cultural cleavage is vast. The ties that bind us are perhaps merely historical." The scholarly and mass media that are entrenched in the ideology of white supremacy feast on such statements; for them, only bad news is good news when it regards the black community. The negative implication of the professor's statements is that we have no significant cultural root beyond what we imitated of white American cul-

ture during American slavery. In stating that the ties that bind African Americans with Africa are "perhaps merely historical," is it not being suggested that we forget about our Afro-cultural past?

There is a little doubt that Africa—as many African Americans know it (indeed, as the world knows it)—is partly an "invention" evolving from emotional and ideological sources. To be more accurate, it is certainly true that there is some misconception regarding Africa that results from educational ignorance. Because of the way Africa has been portrayed in history texts and popular culture, even people of European origin sometimes imagine

Africa to be a paradise of big-game hunting or a last vast wilderness through which young adventurers can hitchhike; or they sometimes perceive Africa to be a "dark continent" in which missionaries can work out their salvation by washing black souls "white as snow."

However, when the claim is made that African Americans' perceptions of Africa are mere romanticism, a double-standard and often a stereotype have been imposed where we alone are made to appear uncritical in our understanding of political, economic and social realities. The reality is that a child who has been separated from her parents at birth and raised by foster parents cannot expect to feel at home when, as an adult, she finally finds her biological parents. However, the romance of child and parents brought together in a new relationship can be nurtured so that as the biological and cultural linkages become recognizable the trans-Atlantic cleavage can be better closed. Many African Americans, such as myself, are involved in this kind of romance with Africa, but we are not otherwise overly romantic about Africa.

There is indeed something romantic and perfectly legitimate about reconciling a severed relationship with the homeland of one's recent ancestry, something rewarding about being amidst the people who remember various aspects of the African past without interrupted lineage, something revealing about recognizing the cultural root of what in the diaspora often remains a remnant or residue of the original fruit. If in the reacquaintance of African Americans and Africa there is a dynamic that functions on the emotional level, it does not necessarily have anything to do with political, economic, natural or epidemiological turmoil on the continent; it has to do with long lost children who did not leave their homelands as immigrants, but as captives, returning as near as possible to the land and the loins from which their foreparents sprang.

The Black Ink staff will be holding a meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 13 at 6 p.m. in the Black Ink Office. Anyone interested in joining the staff is invited to attend.