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## **The sociology and culture of Africa: its nature and scope**

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The Sociology and Culture of Africa  
Its nature and scope

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED ON HIS ENTRANCE INTO OFFICE AS  
PROFESSOR OF THE SOCIOLOGY AND CULTURE OF AFRICA  
FOR THE AFRIKA-STUDIECENTRUM  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN ON OCTOBER 14, 1960

BY

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*Mr. President and Members of the Board of Curators of this University, Mr. President and Members of the Board of Curators of the Afrika-Studiecentrum, Curators of this Chair, Rector Magnificus and Honored Colleagues, Professors and Docents in the University, Students at Leiden University,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

In July this year, when the Security Council of the United Nations voted to send United Nations military aid to the Congo, the Secretary-General was reported to have said on that occasion: "We are at a turn of the road where our attitude will be of decisive significance, I believe, not only for the future of this organization, but also for the future of Africa. And Africa may well in present circumstances mean the world".

That last sentence, "And Africa may well in present circumstances mean the world", is indicative of the prominent place that Africa has come to occupy to-day in international relations. News of Africa fills the front pages of the world's leading papers.

The establishment of a Chair for the Sociology and Culture of Africa at the University has come at a time when Africa stands in the lime-light of contemporary history, in the focus of world attention.

There is to-day not only world-wide interest in Africa, but also world-wide concern for its future.

Reflecting on what to say in this inaugural address, against the background of current events, I judge it most fitting to consider the nature and scope of the subject I have been appointed to further here at the University, and what contribution it can make to international co-operation and world peace.

Though the Chair in the Sociology and Culture of Africa is new, African studies are not new in this University; nevertheless, I wish to begin by taking a look at the Continent of Africa. There are some experts who deny the possibility of dealing with Africa as a whole in any context whatsoever, because of its size, and of the variety of tribes and peoples, governments and cultures found in Africa.

It is indeed a large Continent, covering 11,700,000 square miles,

40% larger than the Soviet Union, and more than three times the size of the United States, including Alaska. For its size, its estimated population of 280 million is sparse, in comparison with the population densities of other Continents; but Africa claims more distinct peoples and cultures than any other Continent.

Since the end of the Paleolithic period, Africa has been inhabited by five races: Bushmanoid, Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid and Pygmoid. These races are classified on the basis of a combination of inheritable physical traits; they all belong to the one species, *Homo Sapiens*, which includes all the peoples of the world. There is no scientific basis for the belief that some races are inferior, and some superior. Man represents only one animal species.

This needs emphasizing in relation to African Studies. The doctrine of racial inequality is by no means confined to the policy of apartheid in South Africa, but is implied in policies and practices in other countries too. It rests on the assumption that there is an inherent difference in the capacities of racial groups for the creation, learning or adaptation to culture. This would make Kipling's: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" applicable to Culture.

Sociological studies have shown that there is no scientific support for this. In fact, the processes of acculturation in Africa show that moral, political and technical potentialities are not biologically determined. There are differences in culture between racial and even ethnic groups in Africa, but they can be accounted for by differences in experience, for biological capacity is moulded by the opportunities provided by the cultural and social environment. But there are political policies which aim at ensuring and perpetuating cultural differences by denying Africans opportunities for participating fully in the total cultural environment, and so learning and adapting themselves to it. Yet an important contribution of cultural anthropology and sociology to race relations is the general agreement on the finding that culture is learnt, and that given adequate opportunity, an individual or racial group can learn and master new cultural patterns. This gives ground for optimism. Even for the most acute racial tensions in Africa, it offers the hope that the Western cultural heritage can be mastered by Africans, and that the different racial groups living in multi-racial societies, such as in the Rhodesias or in the Union of South Africa, can all participate in their common cultural environment. Sociological studies of acculturation, of the processes of contact and intermixture of the traits

and patterns of different cultures, thus assume importance in tackling the practical problems of race relations in Africa.

Another divisive factor often cited is the multitude of tribes and languages. The hundreds of languages spoken fall, according to Professor Greenberg's classification,<sup>1</sup> into eleven distinct stocks. "Furian, Hamitic, Kanuric, Khosian, Koman, Kordofannon, Maban, Malayo-Polynesian, Negritic, Songhaic and Sudanic. I hope all that sounds Dutch to you! Languages of course can be learned, and they do not constitute insuperable barriers among peoples.

The cultures of Africa are not as easy to classify in as distinct categories as the languages. Africa is probably the cradle of mankind. Every year, fresh archaeological evidence shows it to have been the first home of man, from the very dawn of culture history. It is claimed that Dr. Leakey's Zinjanthropus, or East Africa Man, found in the Olduvai Gorge, was the world's earliest man, and lived more than 600,000 years ago. The first achievement of a Neolithic agricultural civilization in Africa goes back 7,000 years. Different races have thus lived and interacted in Africa for thousands of years, and survivals of extremely old cultural inventions and ways of life appear alongside much more recent cultural developments.

Through Egypt, Ethiopia and North Africa came influences of the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean; through Madagascar, the ancient cultures of Asia; and in modern times, the violent impact of European cultures has been felt everywhere in Africa.

Those who deny the possibility of dealing with Africa as a whole, in any context whatsoever, give salutary warning against superficial generalizations; this should not, however, make us avoid facing questions which are asked about Africa as a whole.

The Chair to which I have been appointed has been established to further the study of the sociology and culture of Africa. The subject falls within the field of the social sciences; that is, within the disciplines which deal with the activities and behaviour of human beings as members of social groups. What is the significance of the term "the Sociology and Culture of Africa"?

I wish to take Culture first. The literature on the concept of Culture in Anthropology and Sociology is vast, and continues to grow. Franz Boas<sup>2</sup>, the American anthropologist, was one of those who gave to the concept the important role it now plays in anthropological and sociological studies. His view of culture shows the all-embracing con-

ceptual tool that it is. As he presented it, Culture includes, first of all, the multitude of relations between man and nature; the procuring, preservation and consumption of food; the securing of shelter; the ways in which objects of nature are used as implements and utensils, and all the various ways in which man utilises or controls, or is controlled by his natural environment; that is, culture includes all man's science and technology.

Secondly, the concept of Culture includes the relations between the members of a society or group as well as the interrelations between different groups and societies. All the complex social relations of human life expressed through family and kinship, political, economic, social and religious organizations fall within the concept of Culture.

Thirdly, culture includes language and beliefs, and all man's subjective manifestations expressed in ethics, aesthetics and religion, in song and art and dance. Culture as an anthropological or sociological concept thus includes every aspect of human life from technology to theology.

The concept of Culture has received different emphases and refinements in the hands of scholars, but its wide-embracing scope stands out in the conspectus of all the various definitions and emphases.

There is, however, a lively controversy as to the definition and scope of culture. Positions of idealism and realism with regard to the concept have been taken. Anthropologists like Tylor<sup>3</sup>, Malinowski<sup>4</sup>, and Boas saw Culture in terms of acquired habits, customs, institutions and modes of social living. In this tradition stands Herskovits<sup>5</sup> who emphasizes culture as the way of life of a people. Linton, Kluckhohn and Gillin, in their definitions lay emphasis on patterns of behaviour, or design for living. Others, like Kroeber, Sorokin and Spengler define culture in idealistic terms as a heritage of ideas with its own transcendent reality independent of individuals or societies, whilst others like Osgood<sup>6</sup> see culture, in his own words, as consisting of "all ideas of the manufacture, behaviour, and ideas of the aggregate of human beings which have been directly served or communicated to one's mind, and of which one is conscious". There are definitions of culture which show vastly different meanings ranging from material artifacts, through varying shades of empiricism to Berkeleyan subjective idealism. I consider Boas' concept of culture which I have briefly stated maps out the field within which the controversy over the concept of culture is taking place. It delineates the wide scope of culture which covers,

as McKeon<sup>7</sup> puts it, "historically derived patterns and socially valued habits for which data may be found in all human activities and functions, including political institutions and rules of law, constructions and influences of the fine arts, religious rites and dogmas and all forms of intellectual enquiry and speculation".

Within this wide scope, it can be shown that much work has been done, especially by anthropologists, on the cultures of Africa; on social organizations, forms of marriage and kinship, political and religious systems, and artistic creations in wood, stone and metal, in play, song and dance.

The studies have shown the intricate character of African kinship systems and rules of descent which have been classified as patrilineal, matrilineal, double, or bilateral. Ethnographic studies such as Schapera's<sup>8</sup> studies of the Tswana, Evans-Pritchard's<sup>9</sup> of the Nuer, Fortes'<sup>10</sup> of the Tallensi have demonstrated that African communities have complex, yet meaningful systems of kinship relationships; and Rattray's<sup>11</sup> studies of the Ashanti or Gluckman's<sup>12</sup> of the Barotse have shown that African communities developed complex legal systems and procedures of their own.

The subsistence economies of African tribes, primarily hunting and gathering, or fishing, or agricultural or pastoral have been studied and described in numerous works<sup>13</sup>, so also have African religions. Studies such as of the Ashanti or Yoruba or of Dahomey, for example, show that behind some African religious rites and beliefs lie subtle metaphysical ideas and psychological suppositions which can, without impropriety, be considered alongside theories of Berkeley or Kant or Bradley or Bertrand Russell in the search for the understanding of the nature of Reality. Man's ability to philosophize is not dictated by his technology; the heights of Greek philosophy were reached by men who by modern standards lived in a primitive technological environment.

In addition to ethnographic studies of particular tribes or communities, there have been symposia such as those directed by Daryll Forde of the International African Institute, on African political systems<sup>14</sup>, African systems of kinship and marriage<sup>15</sup>, African marriage and family life<sup>16</sup>, and African worlds<sup>17</sup>, being studies in the cosmological ideas and social values of African peoples. Though the cultures of African peoples have been widely covered during the present century, much still remains to be recorded and interpreted to challenge and excite enquiry.

Something of the heritage of Africa has also been bared in archaeological discoveries of vanished empires, and ruined cities, such as the ancient Roman cities of Tunisia and Algeria which were founded in the first and second century A.D., and of works of art, thousands of years old.

Much that can add to our knowledge of human life is still being uncovered by archaeologists and anthropologists who are studying the remains of the past, or traditional culture.

In his earlier studies of the Negroes of Dutch Guiana<sup>18</sup> and the United States<sup>19</sup>, Herskovits pioneered a field of great interest for studies of the diffusion of African culture.

Subsequent studies of religion and social organization in Brazil, in Dutch and British Guiana, in Cuba, the West Indies, and Surinam have confirmed that African religions, music and dance can survive under the most severe conditions of uprooting and transplanting; and syncretisms of African religion and rites of the Christian Church in these regions as well as in Africa itself give evidence of the vitality of some aspects of African culture. There is an impressive documentation of Africa's contributions to world civilization. It is a widely shared aspiration of African peoples to make even greater contributions to the ever increasing common heritage of Man.

Studies of the traditional are exciting, and of historical interest; but we must not stop there, if we are to deal with the complex problems of cultural adjustments that African peoples have to make in the contemporary situation, or that the rest of the world must make to contemporary Africa. The traditional Cultures of Africa are of value in providing a historical base for understanding the more recent events and ongoing trends of the present day.

In "Civilization on Trial" Toynbee predicted that future historians would say that "the great event of the 20th Century was the impact of Western civilization upon all other living societies of the world of that day. They will say this impact was so powerful and so pervasive that it turned the lives of all its victims upside down and inside out affecting the behaviour, outlook, feelings and beliefs of individual men, women and children in an intimate way, touching chords in human souls that are not touched by more external forces, however ponderous and terrifying"<sup>20</sup>.

The impact of Western civilization on the peoples of Africa affords the most striking illustration of the effects described by Toynbee - "it

has turned lives upside down and inside out", and made Africa an urgent and challenging field for sociological studies. I think the Chair established in the University for the Afrika-Studiecentrum is justifiably designated the Chair for the Sociology and Culture of Africa, because it draws attention thereby to the urgent need to extend our study to Africa as it is to-day; Africa as it has been made by the shattering impact of European science and technology, European rule, commerce, and education, and the propagation of Christianity by European missionaries.

Contemporary studies of Africa deal with such questions as land-tenure, law, urbanization, juvenile delinquency, the social problems of industrialization and urbanization<sup>21</sup>; the impact of technology; education; community development; population; systems of local or central government; the growth of nationalism; the problems of independence; all of which reflect the social changes going on in Africa today.

In their studies of social change in Central Africa, some twenty years ago, Godfrey and Monica Wilson<sup>22</sup>, using ideas current in sociological theory, formulated hypotheses for illuminating the processes of social changes in that part of Africa, from economies of subsistence agriculture or pastoralism to highly differentiated and specialized modern economies; from small homogeneous political units under traditional rulers to large, centralized political organizations; from all-embracing kinship groups to associations and unions; from tribal education to vocational, technical and professional training; from the familiar village to the unfamiliar town; from traditional religion to universal religions like Islam and Christianity. Theirs was one of the earliest published studies in the sociology of Africa.

The two most striking features of the recent history of Africa are the progress toward political independence from colonial status, and the process of transforming traditional and mainly subsistence economies to modern ones. Problems of economic development loom large in all discussions on Africa. Both these features give education a key role, for the need for trained personnel for administrative and technical posts becomes obvious and urgent.

Especially since World War II, the rapid acceleration of political and economic development in Africa has had the dimensions of a social revolution. Measures of economic development have affected the densities, distribution, mobility and stratification of populations<sup>23</sup>. Political changes have altered patterns of authority, allegiance, and

social groupings. New nations and political forms have emerged. Some of the new states are developing rigid one-party authoritarian forms, in which traditional rulers are being swept away or swamped in the stream of change; others, paying more attention to local history and tradition, seek both progress and stability in federal forms; and in others, traditional monarchies seek to guide and preside over the inevitable change. Thus states like Ghana and Guinea, or Nigeria, or Ethiopia, or Uganda provide students of political systems with new typological models.

New ideologies and aspirations, too, are among the forces of change, bringing Africa into contemporary ideological conflicts. All these pose problems for the social sciences; for fact-finding, analysis, interpretation, understanding and comparison.

Studies of the social structures and cultures of African communities in the process of technological and economic change afford opportunities for using and testing, confirming, reformulating or discarding some of the methods, theories, and concepts that are current in the social sciences; and for those who have the perspicacity and scholarship, for initiating new methods or theories or concepts; for situations of rapid social change are the experimental fields for sociological methods, theories and concepts. The concepts selected must depend on the focus of attention of a particular study.

Examples of applicable theories are provided by Spencer<sup>24</sup>, Durkheim<sup>25</sup>, Max Weber<sup>26</sup>, Tonnies<sup>27</sup>, Redfield<sup>28</sup>, and Talcott Parsons<sup>29</sup>, to mention a few of those who have formulated theories which are particularly relevant because they contrast industrial with pre-industrial societies. Of special interest for the study of culture change in Africa are current theories of tradition and traditionalism.

Weber<sup>30</sup> described tradition as "the psychic attitude-set for the habitual workaday and to the belief in everyday routine as an inviolable norm of conduct". Shils<sup>31</sup> defines traditionalism as action based upon "the self-conscious, deliberate affirmation of traditional norms, in full awareness of their traditional nature".

I refer to these theories in particular because, along with the plans and activities designed for change, there are also examples of a conscious return to a past golden age, in search for Africa's own social heritage, and for norms rooted in a great past, whose revival, it is hoped, will again ensure grandeur and stability.

The choice of the names of Ghana and Mali for the two new

states in Africa, and the philosophical concept of "negritude" of African intellectuals may be given as examples of traditionalism. Ghana goes back to an African empire which flourished in Western Sudan between 1000 and 1500 A.D. It was displaced as the dominant state of West Africa by Mali which reached the height of its power and grandeur in the 14th Century, under King Kankan Musa whose authority spread from the coast of Senegal to the region of Niamey. Mali reached a degree of civilization which astounded Arab travellers, and won the esteem of the Mediterranean countries of the Middle Ages, because of its fabulous wealth. The choice of these names tells us that even where the wind of change is a hurricane, brakes may be provided by the pull of the past.

Hence the conscious search for thickets of the past, hitherto ignored.

The concept of negritude has been the work of African intellectuals, particularly of Aimé Césaire, the poet, Alioune Diop, the secretary of the Society of African Culture, who propounds negritude as the values which are the "vindication of the dignity of persons of African descent", and of Léopold Sédar Senghor, scholar and politician, who sees negritude as the psychic traits of the negro African, "his heightened sensibility and his strong emotional quality"; "emotion" says Senghor "is negro". In the study of the Sociology and Culture of Africa, concepts like this, or sociological theories, such as those to which I have referred, give opportunity for coming to grips with the search for theories both systematic and philosophical.

The philosophy of negritude of African intellectuals, whether we agree with it or dispute its validity, should bring it home to us that the peoples of Africa are seeking not only material culture, but also non-material values rooted in their own past, which will contribute to stability and sound progress, and national pride.

The study of the Culture and Sociology of Africa must inescapably concern itself with values, not only because the right ordering of the moral and social life is the ultimate goal of human endeavour, but also because Africa is concerned with the behaviour of different groups towards one another. The relationships and tensions between ethnic and racial groups is a matter of particular importance in East, Central and South Africa.

Because of the considerable degree of cultural variability among the peoples of Africa, the student of African society cannot avoid asking

to what extent the values of these various cultures are similar, and to what extent they are dissimilar. This, it is clear, poses a fundamental question for international relations. Can peoples, despite differences in race and culture, share values which make co-operation and peaceful co-existence possible on the basis of equality? The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the search for international law, or for a common moral language for international society are wider extensions of the question posed within the context of ethnic and racial groups in Africa, and its kaleidoscope of changing cultures. I have already expressed the opinion that studies of acculturation point an answer to this question.

Kroeber<sup>32</sup>, summarizing the results of an international conference on the Social Sciences held in 1952 wrote as follows: "Not only were the Social Sciences late. From the first, they were practical, concerned with welfare rather than the values of humanity. They aimed at applied science from the beginning. They were not really fundamental at all. Whatever theory they developed was really secondary and quite special, or came in on a logico-philosophical level as with Comte. They were utilitarians. They were ameliorationists. When not themselves reformers, they believed in the utility of their knowledge."

I have spoken of methodology and theories and systems in the Social Sciences. These are abstractions. They are conceptual tools, and not the reality. Sometimes, in the preoccupation with theories and systems, the reality is abstracted out of recognition; even out of existence. But the social sciences are human sciences. In the search for laws and systems, for concepts and objectivity, we do well to remember constantly that our studies concern human beings; that they deal primarily with men and women, with their happiness and suffering; with harmony and discord in social relations; with peace and war. Should the Social Sciences become only a matter of the head, obsessed only with the search for abstract theories and intellectually satisfying systems, without the human heart that shares human love and suffering, they will fail to serve mankind.

It is my hope, therefore, that in the study of the Sociology and Culture of Africa, we shall be sharing in the quest of the peoples of Africa to conquer poverty, disease and ignorance; in their struggle for stability and harmony in ever-widening groups, increasing in their range, complexity and heterogeneity; in their striving towards

creativity in art and science; in their yearning for acceptance as equals in the worldwide Brotherhood of Man.

To grasp this, is to see the study of the Sociology and Culture of Africa here as part of man's quest for understanding, co-operation, and peace; and for survival in our increasingly interdependent world.

*Mr. President and Members of the Board of Curators of this University,*

The University of Leiden is one of the most illustrious seats of learning in Europe. On the 22nd June 1737, Jacobus Eliza Johannes Capitein, an African from my country, came to study here at Leiden. I feel it a great honour, not only to myself, but to my country also, that I should be appointed a professor here over two hundred years after the first of my countrymen to study here was enrolled as a student at Leiden. It is humbling to think of the challenge and opportunity for research and scholarship which the office presents.

We in Africa owe a great debt to this University and other seats of learning in Europe. I regard my appointment here as an opportunity to show in a small way something of the deep gratitude we feel to this and other great universities of Europe that have made it possible for us to become heirs with you of the wisdom of the ages.

*Members of the Board and Mr. Secretary-General of the Afrika-Studiecentrum,*

It was on your initiative that approval was given for the establishment of this Chair, and for my appointment to it as the first incumbent. To you therefore I wish to address a word of special thanks, especially to Professor van Lier, the President of the Board, and to Mr. Idenburg, the Secretary-General, who have given me such a warm welcome and friendly co-operation; and to the Staff of the Afrika-Studiecentrum for taking so graciously and cheerfully the additional tasks I have laid on them.

*Honored Colleagues of the University of Leiden,*

It is a source of happiness and pride to me to become an official colleague of yours. My first and most vivid impression of this great University was of its devotion to truth and freedom. I believe it is upon this that its greatness is founded. I come from a Continent where we



still have a lot to learn of this spirit of devotion to truth and freedom. I look forward to learning a lot from our association. I know that both by example and kindly precept you will help me to become a worthy member of your distinguished and highly respected fraternity.

*Mr. Rector, honored colleagues of the Institute of Social Studies,*

I thank you for your presence here to-day. You as my colleagues at the Institute have given me a fellowship marked by a sincerity and warmheartedness which make me feel quite at home. You have also made it possible for me to perform the rare feat of sitting on two Chairs, without falling between them. My office at the Institute is just one more link in the close ties between it and the University of Leiden.

*Students of the University of Leiden,*

I regard myself as one of you, for I too am a student. I am always learning. I have addressed you in a language which is neither my mother-tongue nor yours; though it is closer to you, for it is spoken by your not very distant kinsmen across the water. I already know your admirable command of tongues. I hope in the studies in which you and I will jointly participate, we shall not only get to know Africa better, but also discover every day that every human heart is human the world over, and that there is a deep likeness of mind and spirit which makes all mankind kin.

Ik heb gezegd.

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