

**AFRICA:
SLAVE OR FREE?**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649138234

Africa: slave or free? by Sir John H. Harris

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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SIR JOHN H. HARRIS

**AFRICA:
SLAVE OR FREE?**

PREFACE

BY SIR SYDNEY OLIVIER, *formerly Governor of
Jamaica*

THE war has augmented the sensible importance of Africa and African peoples in the progress—whether it is to be through conflict or through co-operation—of the complex life of our world, and especially that of the British Empire; since that Empire, according to the figures which Mr. Harris gives on page 20 of this book, controls about one-third of the total population of the continent, and not far from half the total number controlled by all European Powers taken together.

The African peoples—that blended tissue of races, with all its varieties of locally adapted civilizations—in speaking and writing of which we are accustomed to bandy summary generalizations about “The Negro,” “The Black Man,” or more vulgarly “natives” or “niggers”—have both risen several degrees higher above the horizon of our general insular consciousness during the war, and have themselves, considering them and their transplanted blood-relations in America and the West Indies together, learnt a great deal

more than they knew before about the white man, the white man's civilization and his actual as distinguished from his official religion and morals.

Speaking in very broad generalities about this increased confrontation, we may note four important characteristics in the development of mutual relations and attitudes.

First there was, on the part of these African and African-born peoples, a warm and spontaneous manifestation of loyalty, goodwill and affection towards the white States with which they were associated. Naturally courageous and alert to the excitement of fighting, their men eagerly volunteered for enlistment in the Allied armies, and, whether in fighting corps or labour battalions, rendered admirable service and endured their full share of hardships, disablement and loss of life.

And their people who stayed at home sent their modest but not insignificant contributions of work and money.

Though this enthusiasm has met with some disappointments, the experience has, on the whole, I believe, reinforced the goodwill, loyalty and sense of solidarity out of which it sprang.

Secondly—the converse has happened. Many intelligent and sympathetic white men and women have had the opportunity better to realize the qualities and capacities of the African, and there has been much genuine increase of appreciation and respect towards him. Further, an attitude of enhanced goodwill and responsibility towards African races has been officially adopted and proclaimed in the Peace Convention, an attitude

which will be to some extent at least embodied in the mandates to the nations entrusted with new sovereignties in Africa by authority of the Council of the Allies.

So much to the good. Unfortunately there have been correspondingly negative evolutions.

For, thirdly, because the war has thrown many ignorant persons into positions of military or official authority, or has brought narrow-minded or stupid private citizens into contact or competition in various relations with coloured men, and because colour-prejudice is a very common attribute of ignorance or stupidity and a convenient stalking-horse for elementary instincts of self-interest and jealousy, there have been both unjust official discriminations to the prejudice of "coloured" British subjects (some of them I am glad to say, redressed under pressure) and some manifestations and preaching of colour prejudice in industrial centres and in the Press. And in the United States there have been, as was fully to be expected, even more violent manifestations of this noxious social distemper.

And, fourthly, conversely to this, the African has learnt a good deal about the seamy side of the white man. However uprightly and admirably he may have been dealt with by European missionaries, administrators and colonists, and whatever confidence and affection these may have won with him, it has never been possible for him to appraise the value and efficacy of the Christian religion, as the religion of the white man, quite so highly as the missionary and the administrator

would have had him do. And now he has seen the British Government publicly promise self-determination to African peoples in the Peace Settlement and, so far, ignore that promise, having indeed, even before it was made, assigned some of his territories by secret conventions as counters in a deal with its Allies, directly in the face of the inhabitants' imploring petitions. While South Africans were giving their services, and their women at home their poor little contributions towards the task of the war, they have been experiencing the scandalous persecutions on the part of the dominant race in South Africa which Mr. Scully has set out with such indisputable authority in the *Edinburgh Review* for July, 1919, whilst others have experienced the injustice and cruelty with which coloured men have been dealt with in connection with riots at Liverpool and elsewhere. And with regard to that excess of animalism that so often is sniggeringly imputed to them as a danger to white communities, they have encountered in our camps, our streets, our parks, and our Law Courts, abundant material for at least a defensible judgment that white men and white women are fully as erotic as their own people and much more unrestrainedly and openly licentious.

Whilst, therefore, the white and the coloured peoples of our Commonwealth have been brought nearer together for co-operation by the increase of mutual recognition and appreciation, and the black man's appreciation of the military efficiency of the white has probably been enhanced, they have also been brought nearer together by

the enlightening education and discipline which numbers of Africans have received, and by a certain amount of disillusionment of the latter as to the boasted superiorities of the white man. I do not wish to over-emphasize this factor, but it exists, and it will be a mistake to ignore it. There has been a certain advance towards equality and to a more outspoken belief in and claim to equality.

If the negro stock, including that most ancient artistic race of the Western World, the Bushmen, whose residue finally was destroyed by South African white men, was driven, in primitive ages, by the more terrible and determined races, out of the Mediterranean lands and away into the jungles and swamps and deserts of Africa, because they were not so fierce or so clever, or because (believing with Mr. W. B. Yeats, that idleness is the divinely appointed reward of toil) they were lazier, and preferred to find their food where nature produced it abundantly to winning it by hunting or cultivation—they are not incapable of learning; and in an age in which education can aid their quick reasoning faculty and they have not to depend in competition merely on unscrupulous force, they are beginning to shape their own course for progress and to refuse to be taken solely at the white man's valuation of them as fighters or labourers.

There has grown up during the war, and there is progressively shaping itself, a greater common consciousness and determination among Africans as to the future and the rights of African races. Some white men fear this, and would seek to hold

it in check. The tradition of British statesmanship is to welcome and encourage it; and this policy of welcome and encouragement is implicit in the professions made on behalf of Great Britain and America in the preliminaries of the Peace Settlement.

But such statesmanship and its ideals have to plough their way against heavy obstruction from prejudice and material interests, or rather from the short-sighted self-interest of those who would deal with Africa and the African as mere land and labour force to be employed for their own enrichment or sustenance. Thus we see in South Africa the deliberate adoption or advocacy of a policy aimed at excluding the native from all skilled occupations and binding him on the land from which he has been dispossessed as a wage labourer and tenant at will. Thus we have British settlers in East Africa advocating the reduction of native reserves in order, admittedly, to force natives to labour on their plantations. It is encouraging to hear, on the other hand, that the American Federation of Labour has recently met the increasing influx of coloured workers into the industrial cities of more northerly states, by admitting them to the ranks of skilled workers on condition of their joining trade unions and not permitting themselves to be used to undersell white labour. *E pur si muove.*

At such a time such a book as this of Mr. Harris is of peculiar value and interest. Not only because problems of African administration, land tenure and labour are bound to come far closer

into the preoccupations of many of us than ever before, as a result of the events of the war, and during the period of reconstruction and reshaping that the coming generation has to deal with, but because it is of essential importance and value to humanity on the highest grounds that the dominant European races should come to apprehend more than they do of the true humanity of such peoples, hitherto unrealized and largely passive, as the African and the Russian.

“What,” as Mr. Harris asks in his Foreword, “is the seductive element in this continent and people which lures men and women on and ever on until at last they gladly lay themselves down in final sacrifice on the beloved altar of the African continent?”

Why do the white men who devote their lives to the welfare of African people do so? It is not because they are fascinated, against critical reason, by black skins, thick lips, and woolly hair, or other characteristics in which nature and evolution appear to European æsthetics to have played bad jokes with some African forms of humanity—the reason is simple and positive—it is that those who have to do, disinterestedly, with the negroid races come to love them—find them above the average rich and responsive and sympathetic in some of the most characteristic and delicate qualities of essential human nature. The negro is, of course, very far behind many other peoples in wide fields of human florescence, but in some of the qualities that are best to live with he is on the average far ahead of the average