

# ANNOTATIONS

## AFRICA: ITS PEOPLES AND THEIR CULTURE HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

PROFESSOR MURDOCK'S book makes two major contributions to knowledge about African peoples. It provides, in the first instance, a comprehensive ethnographic survey of the whole continent, including the Mediterranean region and Madagascar. Anyone working on African materials is immediately impressed with the bewildering multiplicity of tribal names. About 5,000 are listed in the index of this book. Some are mere alternative appellations; others designate divisions or combinations of various groups. Actually, of course, minor ethnic divisions in Africa are frequently more or less fluid and may be described in different terms by members of the same community. So the over-lapping series is shaken down to about 800 primary units. These are grouped by Murdock into about 100 clusters or cultural "provinces." Each of these larger groups is treated in its ecological and cultural context. There are frequently important ecological and cultural differences between groups within the same province, or even within a group treated here as a primary unit. Nevertheless, this systematic classification of African peoples, though subject to many possible modifications, is a valuable tool for all persons engaged in studies or administrative activities concerning Africans.

Secondly, the framework used in this classification is a reconstruction of the formation and distribution of the population of Africa and its diverse cultures. The development of this historical framework is the exciting aspect of the exposition. It involves a hundred or more independent judgments, frequently

<sup>1</sup> Murdock, George Peter: AFRICA: ITS PEOPLES AND THEIR CULTURE HISTORY. New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959. 456 pp. \$8.75.

at variance with the opinions of other scholars, formed by studying convergent lines of evidence and welded into an architectonic structure. This structure makes sense in a large way. No one is infallible, and presumably some of Professor Murdock's judgments are erroneous. Undoubtedly, he will provide happy hunting for many specialists in various fields and on particular societies. They will in some cases be exasperated by the author's failure to provide detailed documentation concerning the grounds for his conclusions. But, in the opinion of the reviewer, the broad outlines of this structure are likely to endure and, with various revisions and enlargements, to become part of all future systematic treatments of African peoples and their cultures.

Early records concerning the parts of Africa and the oceanic trade routes known to ancient and medieval writers are, of course, taken into account, as well as ethnographic information on other parts of the world. The treatment is then developed with primary reliance on three major lines of evidence (1) linguistic relations, (2) knowledge about the origins and distribution of domestic plants and animals, and (3) the analysis of cultures. On the first of these subjects, Murdock relies on the preceding revolutionary and architectonic work of another American scholar, Joseph H. Greenberg. In fact, Murdock's work seems to have been, in part, inspired by Greenberg's studies. The latter are still undergoing extensive revisions but, again, the main lines of the analysis are standing up under criticism by others and his own continued investigations. Work on the "cultigens" of domestic plants and animals is going forward rapidly, but some of the findings already established in this field have far-reaching importance. One important finding, cited in a footnote, apparently came to the author's attention as his work was approaching completion—namely, the indigenous development of one species of rice in the western coastal region of Africa. Murdock integrates his extensive knowledge on the present distribution of domestic plants and animals with that of botanists and geneticists. The author himself has for a long time been a leader in the dynamic analysis of social structure and culture, though he gives rather less attention than might be expected to the treatment of material objects: tools,

weapons, and works of art. For example, he never suggests the possible importance of the development of axes, stone or iron, in the expansion of the Bantu people through the conquest of forest regions with slash-and-burn agriculture. Similarly, although he uses archeological evidence, he does so rather sparingly and with much selectivity. For example, he merely refers to the "Sangoan culture" of West Central Africa without giving attention to its important variations and modifications through the middle and late paleolithic into the neolithic period. He also gives only slight attention to the important new lines of evidence now being developed in physical anthropology, including the very considerable and detailed information on blood groups in African populations.

One of the most exciting features of his exposition is his analysis of evidence on the early independent development of agriculture by Negroes in the upper and middle Niger region, and the movement of plants from this Sudanic agricultural civilization eastward to the region of the Upper Nile prior to the spread of agricultural practices southward and westward from southeast Asia, southwest Asia, and Egypt. Murdock posits, among these early counter-currents, an introduction of Malayan techniques, plants and people who may subsequently have formed the base population of Madagascar, probably from Borneo, the introduction of domestic animals from Asia and Europe through Egypt, and the formation of secondary centers of influence in the middle Nile valley and in Ethiopia. The importance in the African economy of plants introduced by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century from the Caribbean and Brazil, including maize, manioc, and bananas, is well known; but the importance of indigenous African plants in the economy of India has not been generally recognized. Also, if Murdock is right, the cultivation of cotton was initiated in western Sudan.

The reviewer suspects that Murdock's picture of the distribution of races in Africa at the dawn of the neolithic is oversimplified. He tends to equate pygmies with the Sangoan culture and Bushmen with the Stillbay culture, though he does suggest some reservations on both scores in the text. Early skeletal material is very scanty in West Africa, but specialists on the skeletal material of East Africa are impressed with the

variability of their material as pointing toward more complex interpretations. Perhaps Murdock does not make adequate allowance for the possible complete absorption by expanding nations of various racial lines in the thin paleolithic population of central, southern, and eastern Africa. However, even if rather important modifications may be required by the author's neglect of some available information and by new discoveries, these need not alter the main lines of his exposition.

This study has several interesting implications for demography. It suggests the possibility of a standard system of classification of tribal affiliations by broad ethnic groups, with allowance for more detailed information wherever possible, especially for use in censuses—analogous to the broad and detailed classifications used in grouping types of economic activity. It seems important that statistical officials and anthropologists cooperate in the development of ethnic classification systems in order that comparable and useful information can be obtained in large-scale inquiries. Some agency, such as the International African Institute, UNESCO, or the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, might do well to establish a technical committee on this subject.

Other more theoretical implications concerning past and future trends of African populations are implicit in this study. The author points out that the scarcity and irregularity of water supply in large parts of the continent has severely limited population levels. A region could not permanently maintain a larger population than it could support in years of drought. This factor, plus the low fertility of many African soils, has severely checked population increase. On the other hand, the introduction of new technologies has repeatedly given rise to great population expansions. Small groups that first acquired new techniques increased rapidly and spread out to occupy lands previously held by other technically less advanced people. There was, it seems, a major expansion of Negro tribes in the western Sudan about seven thousand years ago. An increase of population in the western forest zone may have begun with indigenous plants, but the great expansion, according to Murdock, came later with the introduction of species from Indonesia. The most dramatic movement of this sort was the

tremendous increase and spread of small Bantu-speaking groups from the vicinity of eastern Nigeria or the Cameroons across the vast relatively empty spaces of central, eastern, and southern Africa. The present Bantu-speaking population of about 65 million persons was apparently formed on a small base in the course of some two thousand, possibly three thousand, years along with an absorption of smaller linguistic groups. This is entirely possible. A thousandfold increase, say, from 65 thousand to 65 million, in the course of two thousand years would result from an average increase of slightly less than 3.5 per thousand per year, or about 10 per cent per generation. At the same average rate of increase over three thousand years, this population could have been formed on a base of less than two thousand persons. The expansion of Arabs during the last 1,300 years has been even more rapid, but this has involved more large-scale absorption of other elements, largely by means of polygyny.

Similar though less dramatic increases and expansions of population came about in other regions with the acquisition of new techniques, including the later southward movement of farming and herding peoples from the upper Nile valley and the eastward spread of the Fulani across the Sudan. Other great population movements came about through chain reactions to successive intrusions from Asia, notably the movement of Arabs across North Africa and the eastern Sudan. The cultural life of Africa must have been profoundly influenced by these successive movements, conquests, and infusions. Murdock comments on the prevalence of a pattern of "African despotism" for which he sees no simple interpretation—in contrast to the oriental despotisms which he views, following Wittfogel, as based on "hydraulic civilizations." He suggests that African despotism may stem from the wide prevalence of slavery in ancient Africa. But why the prevalence of slavery? May not both these phenomena, as well as the pattern of polygyny, have been influenced by the expansive movements of people in a continent without ample resources or geographic shields for the development of secure, sedentary civilizations?

Finally, the past increases of population with slow advances in techniques suggest the possibility of even more rapid future

increases with the introduction of new scientific techniques, including new means for the control of disease. Meanwhile, the traditional readjustment of population through the movement of people in blocks is being replaced by massive labor migrations and the growth of cities. These prospects bring a series of new and very complex problems.

FRANK LORIMER

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### AMERICAN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE<sup>1</sup>

STUDENTS of migration have complained on occasion that migration statistics are the "poor cousins" in the demographic field. This dubious distinction seems also to be claimed for another area of demography. In the book under review, Jacobson states "Marriage and divorce statistics are today the least developed branch of American vital statistics." (p. 9)

The poor state of marriage and divorce statistics in the United States is perhaps one of the prices we pay for "states rights." As explained by Jacobson, "The United States is the only major country without a system of centralized collection of marriage and divorce records." (p. vii)

Whereas the United States has the longest chain of uninterrupted decennial censuses, it was a late comer in the development of national vital statistics. The reason is that whereas there was constitutional provision from the outset for a federal decennial census, the registration of births, deaths, and other vital events was left to the individual states.

Recognizing the need for national vital statistics, leaders in the field succeeded in starting a death registration area in 1900 and a birth registration area in 1915. Given standards of registration were required for admission and since 1933 all states of continental United States have been included.<sup>2</sup> Our National Office of Vital Statistics receives continuous reports on births

<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Paul H.: *AMERICAN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE*. New York, Rinehart & Company, 1959, 188 pp., \$12.00.

<sup>2</sup> Alaska was admitted to the birth and death registration area as a territory in 1950. Hawaii was admitted to the death registration area in 1917 and to the birth registration area in 1929.