

HISTORY IS A WEAPON

African History in the Service of the Black Liberation

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Initially I had written a short supplementary paper to that which was to be presented by Mr. Richard Moore.¹ Therefore, the order having been inverted, it places me in a rather tricky position. I had intended to continue on the basis of certain things which he would have said. However, very briefly, my position is this: Moore would have spoken on African civilizations according to the program. I myself had intended and, in fact, I will consider certain aspects of African history which would not normally fall under the rubric of civilization. And in the process I would have liked to question the very concept of civilization. I entitled my paper "African History in the Service of the Black Revolution," and the first contradiction, the first dilemma which one faces in attempting to utilize African history as one of the weapons in our struggle is a realization that, in a very real sense, we, as black people, are placed in [the] invidious position of having to justify our existence by antecedents, having to prove our humanity by what went before. Now this is very invidious. Humanity is not a thing one proves. One asserts [it] perhaps, or one accepts [it]. One doesn't really set out to prove it. But, unfortunately, the historical circumstances in which black people have evolved in recent centuries have implanted in the minds of black brothers and sisters a certain historical conception and, in order to destroy that historical conception, one has to engage in this type of game of saying, "This is what the white man said but no, it isn't really so, we have a past," and that sort of thing. Now, if we are forced into that position, it seems to me that there are two rules which we can observe to make the exercise more meaningful. The first rule is that I, as a black historian, am speaking to fellow blacks. Now that means that, as far as the white audience is concerned, here and in the world at large, they are perfectly entitled to listen but I am not engaged in the game which they set up by which they say to me, "You prove, black, that you're a man. Prove it to me by showing that you have civilization," and that sort of thing. I'm not engaged in that job as far as white people are concerned. I am engaged [with], I must address myself solely to, black brothers. To the extent that they have been involved and destroyed in a process, we are seeking to re-create. And, furthermore, as I said, it's "in the service of black revolution." Those whites, those few whites who may join the Black Revolution, will certainly do so for reasons which are far more profound than their knowledge or acquaintance with African history. So that's another reason why we don't need to address ourselves to them. The second rule is that African history must be seen as very intimately linked to the contemporary struggle of black people. One must not set up any false distinctions between reflection and action. We are just another facet of the ongoing revolution. This is not theory. It is a fact that black people everywhere, in Africa and in the Western world, are already on the march. So nobody who wants to be relevant to that situation can afford to withdraw and decide that he is engaging in what is essentially an intellectual exercise. The African historian, to me, is essentially involved in a process of mobilization, just like any other individual within the society who says, "I'm for black power. I'm going to talk about the way the blacks live down in the South," etc. That's a facet of mobilization. The African historian is also involved in that mobilization. Now, having said that, I would like to illustrate the ways in which, in fact--if there's to be any proving of our humanity--it will have to be done with three examples. The first is Cuba. Cuba has proven very concretely that the way of asserting that humanity is by revolutionary struggle. And when I say it has proven that, it has proven it to the black people in Cuba. Now this is a question with which even black brothers outside of Cuba are not very familiar and so I'll, just

for a minute, indicate what the position was and is for the black people of Cuba. They started, like everybody else in the West, as slaves. They existed as slaves longer than any other group except the Brazilians, well into the 1880s. And subsequent to slavery, they became involved, very rapidly, in the new imperialist relationship with the United States, and this hardened the existing prejudice of Spanish slave and Spanish colonial society. There is a very useful book recently published by Esteban Montego, a Cuban slave who was a runaway and who reflects on his life in this period and gives some insights into the type of pressures which faced the black man in Cuba after slavery.² Now, with the intensification [of economic and political activity] by the United States [in Cuba and] the importation of Florida type qualities, a black man in Cuba was just dirt. I mean it was the South; it was apartheid. If you (the black man) were seen in a certain part of Havana after a certain hour you were liable to be shot, guilty of being black, you see. So that the black situation in Cuba was as bad as any other sector that we can point to. But within the process of revolutionary struggle, first as slaves-- because they were the first revolutionaries; we black people were the first revolutionaries, the first guerrilla fighters in this part of the world, this hemisphere--and then as freed men, the black people struggled in Cuba. They struggled, of course, alongside white people who had a vested interest in struggle--white people who wanted to break the imperialists bonds. Not white liberals who are enjoying the luxuries of capitalism and give us some platitudes about behaving in the right way and so on; white people involved in struggle. It's a completely different conception of white from the metropolitan white who, whatever category he falls into, is objectively involved in our oppression and our suppression. Every white person in this room is objectively involved in the oppression of black people so long as they live in a metropolitan center because the metropolitan center is dominating colonial black people. It is as simple as that.

Anyway, in Cuba that's not a position. Whites fought against the system, and in that process, the black people could be genuinely emancipated. Now, in Cuba today, barriers to entering certain buildings, certain eating houses, and that sort of thing completely disappeared. Juan Almeida, one of the members of the Politburo of the Cuban Communist Party, is a black man who was involved in the struggle from the time of the Sierra Maestra with Fidel Castro. And the position of the black people is such, not only socially and politically emancipated, but moving in a direction of reasserting their culture (the Afro-Cuban culture), of getting official encouragement to assert that culture. So that we find in Cuba today more genuine interest in the African Revolution, more interest in the African plastic arts and in African drama than there exists in Jamaica, which is a place 95 percent black, because the black people of Jamaica are still involved [in,] and are dominated under, imperialist relations. So that is Cuba and that is Jamaica.

Now, it means that for the African historian in Cuba, he can go ahead and research and talk about African history in a new social context. But for anybody in Jamaica, he can't seriously talk about history divorced from revolutionary struggle. He isn't serious if he's doing that. You can't say that "African history will proceed as normal. We'll just teach it in the curriculum and that will be fine. Let imperialism proceed." In any event, the system doesn't even want you to do a simple thing like teaching African history. The prime minister of Jamaica, a black man (you know he looks black anyway),³ was approached with a request to let African history and an African language, Swahili, be taught in the schools, and he said, "No, we can't have any of that." He gave some reason--a curious reason--something about there being so many different races in Jamaica. Very curious. I mean, 95 percent of the people are black but he can't teach an African language. They teach Latin, French, Spanish, and everything else. A lot of different reasons don't seem to come into that. But it shows that the colonial structure is itself aware of the fact you can't separate a new conception of self, which should spring from historical investigation with a new actuality, [from the] revolutionary process to change the situation that presently exists. So that for the Jamaican, the system makes it impossible for him to come to this new awareness of himself because it doesn't want him to be involved in a revolutionary process. For any historian who seeks to reconstruct the African past, to reconstruct the past of black peoples in this continent, in such a context he cannot say that the revolution will wait until people are re-educated and that re-education reaches an advanced stage because he isn't even allowed to engage in that process of re-education.

Consequently, the revolution is with us already. The history will have to be subsidiary to that, it will have to come during and after the revolutionary process. In other words, the Jamaican freedom fighter will have to be a man [who] will, perhaps in his spare time, read some African history. You know Che Guevara said the guerrilla should always carry something worthwhile in his knapsack. So the guerrilla fighter, the freedom fighter in Jamaica, would read some African history but he isn't waiting on that to move. He has to move because the only way that he can establish a relationship with his own past is, in fact, by breaking the present bonds which restrict and constrain us.

In the United States (and this will presumably apply in Canada also) the situation is rather different. In the United States the national bourgeoisie is powerful, the most powerful national bourgeois group in the world, and undoubtedly, it will be the most powerful national bourgeois group in the history of the world because there won't be any more powerful group after the US, you know. That sort of thing is coming to an end. Anyway, this national bourgeoisie, they have the confidence which comes from their wealth. The Jamaican petty bourgeoisie is a comprador class, the neocolonialist class. They don't have any confidence because they don't have any capital. They know they exist on handouts from the metropolitan system so they are very shaky and very uncertain of themselves. And they will even stop you from, as I said, studying African history. But the US bourgeoisie is employing a different tactic. But the brothers and sisters, and here I am addressing myself particularly to the brothers who have come up from the United States, will have to be aware of the gambit which is in fact already being utilized with respect to African history and culture. And that is this: The national bourgeoisie in the United States appears to be giving a concession. They are saying, "Okay, fine, you go ahead and study African history and African culture," and they will give you so much African history and culture [that] you just have time for nothing else. The object is to divorce the process of thought and reflection on our past from the process of changing the present so that you feel that you've gained something but you end up in some remarkable contradiction. What you will find is this (in fact it's happening already): Rockefeller--who is making most of his money out of South African gold, out of the Rand, out of exploiting and participating in apartheid, the most vicious racial system in the world--that guy is going to finance a chair in African history. That's the type of contradiction. So that if a black progressive thinks he's doing something by going into African history, using up a Rockefeller grant, all he is doing is forgetting both the domestic and external implications of American capitalism and, in fact, supporting that system because the guys don't mind if you go in a library or museum and lock yourself up all day. That's wonderful; keep you off the street, keep you out of struggle. So we have to avoid that type of myth that cultural revival, per se, is going to carry us a long way. I don't want to seem to be critical of the development of interest in African history and culture. Quite obviously not, that's what I myself am involved in. What I am trying to suggest is that sometimes, while involved in a process, we ourselves have to be very careful to delimit how far that process should go. Let's all wear afros, let's put on African clothes. Fine. But that doesn't mean we are not going to struggle. The system still has to be broken before we can express ourselves in any fundamental way. I had to make that type of introduction before I could go on to talk about African history as such. And when I go on to talk about that I will return to my initial submission that I would like, in fact, to question these categories of civilization. We start off with a conception of civilization and it can be proven, it can be demonstrated rather, that African history can provide us with examples of civilization in the terms which the Europeans have expressed. In other words, we can go to Egypt; we can go to Kush, that's in the Sudan; we can go to the Western Sudan, to Ghana, Mali, Songhai; we can take the central Sudan, Bornu and Kanem; the Hausa states; Mossi, coming further South; we can go across to the eastern part of the continent and find the early Bachwesi empires and the later developments of Bunyoro, Baganda; we can go further south into Central Africa, the Luba-Lunda Kingdoms; we can take the development in southern Bantu in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the Shona sections in the center and over in the far east, that's the Zulu rising. We can build up a picture which conforms to a European conception. In other words, we can play the game of proving to white society that "you were wrong when you said we had no history, that we had no civilization. Look [at] what we produced."

Now, I'm only going to deal with one aspect of that and that's Egypt. Everybody

knows about Egypt. I don't have to delineate the Egyptian civilization. But if you want to read about Egypt you have to go and check some books on the Middle East or you have to go and find some guy who calls himself an Egyptologist. You never find any assessment of Egyptian culture, any serious assessment, within the African continent. Not never. Of late, it is changing. But the traditional approach, the years of study of Egypt, have taken place in a context of [the] Middle East, Mesopotamia, background to European culture, that sort of thing. Africa just doesn't come in.⁴ Very curious. To begin with, we have a simple geographical description. European refers initially to either what is actually within Europe or what proceeded from Europe as a geographical entity. American the same, Chinese the same. But curiously, Egypt is well entrenched in Africa but it never appears in any assessment of African civilization. In other words, what I am trying to say, why I am taking this single point, is to show the ways in which the issue can be evaded. White society can either say you have had no history or, where they see an element of civilization in their terms, they can say that was not yours, either by saying it outright or ignoring it.

In the case of Egypt, a second argument is advanced: the question of color. If you press the first argument I made, then a white [person] will say, "Well, you know, the people in Egypt were white so that really it has nothing to do with Africa which is a place for black people." In that sense, one will have to go back and try to determine what was the racial composition of dynastic Egypt. And, as far as we can tell, the Egyptians represented themselves as red- or copper-colored, as distinct from lighter-skinned white peoples living outside of Egypt and as distinct from darker-skinned black peoples living outside of Egypt also, to the south. So that their own conception of themselves was certainly not white. Furthermore, the whole history of Egypt is one of southward expansion and of contacts, sometimes not very pleasant contacts, in the form of slave raids with the south. So that it is clear that the whole Egyptian population must have been infused with a large quantity of black blood, if we want to take it in racial terms.

We can go further than that. For the whole of the eighth century b.c., the Egyptian dynasty was actually in the hands of the Nubians, in the hands of the Empire of Kush. In other words, for that period, black men were ruling the society. Now, I found no evidence that the society itself was racially conscious. I'm only making this distinction in terms of race because we are attempting to break down certain myths. And the myth is quite simple. In other words, if we look at Egyptian society we see that it certainly was not white, we can take the medial position that it was brown and that it had very large elements of black, including a whole black dynasty. So this is just to illustrate the ways in which, even within the terminology which Europeans have established, one can indicate that African history exists, that African civilizations exist, that the black man can look back on this and gain the necessary revolutionary inspiration. But I want to move on from there because I don't feel that we should accept these categories that have been established by European writers. These categories are established simply by looking at European society as it has existed, extracting out the elements which they consider to be meaningful in that society, and then judging the rest of the world with these standards as though these are universal criteria. It is what I call cultural egocentrism. These fellows have no concept of judging any culture by attempting to get out of their own. They base themselves solidly in their own limited perspectives and then you judge everybody else by that.

In Africa, even apart from the state systems which I have merely enumerated and which, presumably, Richard Moore will talk about in more detail, one could find a whole variety of people, millions of people, living outside of the normal political state. And in European terms they were not civilized because to be civilized you had to be living in this large political conglomeration, you had to be writing, preferably (this is one of the criteria which is normally adduced for civilization), and you had to be engaged in a political and administrative process which is rather similar to that, let's say, of the modern United States. In other words, the greatest expression of human progress is in terms of the size of the state, in terms of the size of the armies that the fellows can send against each other to kill each other out and the like. I mean it really is amazing because, even within white society, those people who question the society--and there have been many in the postwar epoch who question the very basis of the society--would wonder if, on sheer size and population and so on, the United States is the most civilized country in the world, if we use those criteria. We know that it is the

most barbarous because of the way in which it has exercised its power, because of the way in which it has stifled its own population. And that is not only the black population but the white population. So we have to challenge those criteria and when I look back at African states, at African society in the broadest sense, I would, in fact, like to throw out the word civilization. I think it is a very arbitrary word, I don't think it gets us very far. I mean, we use it as a prop so that we can advance our thoughts and at a certain stage it will abolish itself, as it were. I abolish it on a whole variety of grounds. I mean, one could add, for instance, that we as black people--and this is a question that came up yesterday in an embryonic form when C. L. R. James was speaking--must define the world from our own position.⁵ So I want to talk about civilization and I'm a black man and i've been subjected to slavery. And I can't look around and say European society was civilized. I can't say this. i can't participate in what the French call la mission civilatrice when this is what colonialism was for them. "If that is civilization," as, was it brother Leroi who said it?⁶ "then give me back the jungle." So that is a definition which we as black people cannot accept at all. And once we throw aside that definition we have to start working with other things. We have to forget the sort of formal approach and start trying to determine what is meaningful in social relations and what were the features of African social relations which were most meaningful. Now that's what i'll talk about for a little while.

I think that, just as we can say, in the small societies, before the European arrived in Africa, certain states and certain political developments were in existence, similarly, we can emphasize the culture-history; we can try to determine, in the period before the fifteenth century, what were the lines along which African culture-history was developing. And here we must understand that Africans, for the most part, were living in small societies, some of them so-called stateless societies--just a family, an extended family; no superstructure of the state, no huge territorial delimitations. But, whatever the situation in which they lived, whether it was an isolated family unit, whether it was a clan arrangement, or whether it was a state, it seems to me that certain principles can be extracted [as] the dynamic principles of African culture. And this is what represents the civilization--having eroded the erroneous concept surrounding it--of Africa in that particular period. I'll try to select just a few [of] the most outstanding (in my estimation) of these principles.

One of them is hospitality, the way people related to each other in terms of hospitality. Another one is the way in which the people of a certain age in this society were treated. Another is the whole question of law in African society, the way that the law was administered, the whole ethos behind the law. I think I would like to take those three points and start to have a look at them now.

I start with hospitality. In the African systems, Europeans who arrived in the fifteenth century or Europeans who arrived subsequently within an indigenous context saw the Africans living by themselves. It's amazing the regularity with which they stressed the nature of African hospitality, the extent of African hospitality. This was not just, as it were, an individual response of Africans. It was rooted in the nature of their social organization. The extended family, for instance, was, in itself, an agency of social relief. It was, in itself, an agency which would deny the existence of the extremes of poverty and abandonment in African society, which we find in modern capitalist society. Because, as an extended family, it meant that the responsibility was theirs. All members of the family share a responsibility for others. This is the nucleus of the whole concept of hospitality. One can go further and take the principle of the family when it is projected into the clan arrangement. A clan, in a rough sense, is a whole collection of families. It's a set of people who share a common ancestor [and] common totems, [as] sometimes the term is used. Now, within that clan there are numerous people who don't know each other. They just know they belong to clan A. They've never seen each other. Their relationship in terms of physical and genetic proximity is very vague. They acknowledge an ancestor who is very remote, on the borders between history and legend. But, nevertheless, a clan brother is a brother and he's treated as a brother whenever the occasion arises. In other words, I belong to clan A and I come from three hundred miles away and I meet another clan brother; he has certain responsibilities towards me--to house, feed, clothe me. The system provides for that hospitality.

We can go further. Take the structure of authority, whether it be the chief, or a

king, or a ruling group. They too have certain very clearly defined responsibilities with respect to the action of giving, the key being hospitality. So much so that I came across a very interesting incident of a small chief in a Sierra Leone system who they were about to elect into a king and the guy says, "Well sorry, I'm not going to take that job. I just don't have the funds to carry out the type of hospitality which is normally expected from a ruler." That's his job--to keep an open house. Guys just turn up there and, as I said before, a brother is a brother, a sister is a sister.

Now, I don't know how it will appear to you but when I started off and I looked at this, to me, this is a more profound aspect of relationship than how big the state was and how many armies were jumping across to kill each other. This was an aspect of interpersonal relationship. This was a quality of life that doesn't exist in our society. It couldn't exist in capitalism which is based on profit motive. This is not to say that there aren't individuals within the capitalist system who are hospitable. All over the world one finds hospitable individuals. Here I'm talking about a hospitable society, not the odd individual. The whole society is geared towards a reciprocal relationship with those around. And this, to me, is very very striking and it seems to me that, as a principle for human organization, it is one of the facets about African cultural development to which greater attention should be paid.

Let me talk about the old men: age. Again, we'll start with capitalist society. The old people in the capitalist society have no value. Capitalism wants labor. You've finished working, well that's tough. In more recent times, you get a pension, but the system doesn't have any further value for you. In West Indian society, in the period of the slave trade, the planters used to make a concrete economic calculation. They had this discussion going. The discussion went along these lines: "Shall we let these blacks work for us for a long time and get old and try to get the maximum period of work out of them? Or shall we work them to death in a limited period of time and get new blacks?" And most of the planters, in fact, felt that it was more advantageous to avoid the problems of having old people in the society. What's an old black going to do? He can't produce. He can't work the eighteen hours a day which the plantation system required. So that it's better not to have old black people in the society. And capitalist society all over, not just on the question of race, adopts this attitude to elderly people.

African society is fundamentally different. Throughout Africa, the principle of gerontocracy prevails. The elder, by virtue of his age, is vested with certain authority and certain power. This is basic because, for them, wisdom is a reflection of an experience and, by that very fact, all things being equal, the older the man in the society, the more his experience in the problems within that society, the more his reflection on it and, therefore, the greater his wisdom. There is more to it than that: it means that the older man had had an opportunity within that society to acquire [a] certain formal education, because African society had its aspects of formal education. There was a period of intensive education when a man or a woman, or should I say a boy or a girl, was about to be initiated into the society, to become a man or a woman. That was always a period of intensive education. And subsequently, as individuals moved from age group to age group, or from one level in a secret society to another, or from one age sect to another--all these being institutions which related people on the basis of age--he was also privy to additional knowledge, so that he was going through a process of learning. So when he reached a certain stage he was supposed to be historian, lawyer, guardian of the constitution, and the president of the state. He was supposed to be a tutor to the young king when he came up, to the king's sons that is, or nephews depending on the system, and in effect, these elders were given responsibility. They were free, of course, because of the hospitality, from the task of winning a living, and the system asked them to be alert.

This is the difference. I've seen a lot of old people--in England in particular it struck me. It is not as bad in the West Indies. Our black people still manage to survive, even in old age. But I looked at English society and it has completely destroyed a certain sector of the society. These women who reach a certain age, they can't relate to anything else. They perhaps go to a little bingo party and then after a while they can't even totter out to that. And then you just herd them into old people's homes. They have no function. They do nothing, so they rapidly degenerate and become cabbages, because your mind, if you don't keep it going, is going to degenerate. And this is our society that we live in now. African society catered for a completely different conception. The man is always

growing, the man is always learning, until he dies. And that is why field researchers have found that when you go into an African society you can go and find any old man. Find him, he might be sixty, he might be seventy, and with perspicacity he will point out to you elements of the culture and recall episodes of history going back more than a hundred years--in other words, more than his lifetime. He had been trained by the society to function in that way. Now this, to me, is tremendous. A society that takes you from birth and carries you all the way so that life has meaning to the end. Well, you judge that for yourself.

I want to talk now about the attitude of the law in African society. This is my third episode, third area of illustration. The law in African society was, of course, customary law, rather than recorded law. In recent times, that customary law has become the subject of serious scholarship, and numerous treatises have been presented on African law. The principles are very complex. To begin with, we must understand the framework in which it functions, a framework, as I see it, of social order, social stability. So that immediately limits the areas in which the law is going to operate. Let me illustrate. And this, again, is using European evidence. All the things I am saying I can quote ad extantum from European sources. It is a useful technique. The man says, "No, that's not so." then you say, "well, this man said so, it wasn't me you know. White people went and saw this." So this is European evidence. They go to African society and they're amazed at the type of social security which existed there in the fifteenth century. All this stuff I'm talking about is cultural history, the period before the European arrival. Some of it carries over but I'm talking about traditional African society. All of the travelers into the Western Sudan, time and time again, they reiterated, "This is tremendous. How can we travel such huge distances from one end of the Empire of Mali to another and we don't find any robbers, we don't find any vagrants. If we lose something, when we turn up at the court of the king we find that thing has been transmitted there to be given to us." It was amazing to them because they were operating from the background of brigandage in Europe, highway robbery. I mean our society--well, capitalist society--is a robber society, so this explains the whole thing. [In] the whole development of capitalism--piracy, brigandage on highways, etc.--the security for goods and persons is a very late development in European and capitalist society and it has come about through the establishment of massive mechanisms for keeping people in their places; in other words, a police force and army. But in African society this wasn't so. it wasn't the police who were all around to see that goods and persons were secure. It was the social constraints. People just didn't do that. Mungo Park went to the Gambia.⁷ He saw a little group called the Djolas. He said these are a bunch of savages. But yet, he himself had to concede. He says, "I left my goods there for months unattended and when I went back there wasn't a pin removed." And this is a generalized type of remark that is made about African traditional society; a socially induced security. Everybody moves around and the like. Now, that's the norm. this doesn't mean that there is no crime whatsoever. I'm just suggesting the area that, in that society, was exemplary in its freedom, especially in comparison with Europe. Now, insofar as there was crime, it had to be dealt with by the law. And the principle of the law was not to deal retribution to an offender, which has largely been the principle of European law until recent times [wherein] the whole penal system is still being questioned. But, fundamentally, it hasn't changed. The law is to deal retribution, the law is a means of controlling certain individuals. And this is, of course, particularly relevant to us as black people in white society. But, that apart, what was happening in African society was that an offender was asked to make restitution, either to the individual whom he offended, or to the state if his offence was against the state, [or] against the society as a whole. So it was a question of restitution rather than retribution being meted out to him. It meant that if he stole, the object was to replace what he stole, not to put him into jail. I have never ever read of a jail in traditional African society. I have never read of stocks and fetters and chains before the slave trade. This was the African traditional society which didn't jail people. It said to them, "You replace what you have taken."

Again, the contrast with Europe is clear on all these points, and what I am developing, therefore, is the idea that there are principles of human activity which we need to look at which are quite distinct from the so-called principles of civilization, and that when we look at that, we begin to see how tremendously meaningful African life was.

Now, we as black brothers, we look around--in the West in particular, and even in Africa this happens because Africans too have been subjected to the processes of white cultural imperialism--and you want to engage in the exercise which I mentioned at first, that is trying to destroy the myths which the whites have prepared. Even though this places you in a defensive position you have to do it for your own benefit and for the benefit of your brothers and sisters. And you look at the Western Sudan, and that is great. You see in the fifth century--and, no doubt, brother Richard Moore, [who] is here now, will talk at length about that--states which are developed in a period comparable to the European Dark Ages and Middle Ages. I shan't go into that, as I said. But there is a trick in that, when you are finished saying we have states, we have civilizations like the European, the guys are then going to say, "Well, what happened afterwards. We developed, we produced the modern state." And that leaves you in a rather bemused position if your initial premise was that human development can only be expressed in its highest form in that type of structure which Europeans call a state and within the terms that they consider civilized. So that at some stage you have to supplement your awareness of the great achievements, of the striking achievements of African society. I know this from personal experience. I go to a black and you can see anguish in him. He says to you, "I want to know something about the great achievements [of] Africans. Tell me something striking." So you start to tell him about Lalibella and about rock churches shorn out of sheer rock in Egypt. You tell him about the pilgrimages of Mansa Mussa to Egypt. A hundred years after, people in Egypt were still recalling it. He carried so much gold that, years afterwards, the Egyptian economy was still disjointed. You tell him about the sculpture of Benin and Ife and suggest to him that these things are the marvel of the modern European world. But then you go further. I would go further. I'm suggesting to the black brothers and sisters that we need to go further than that in illustrating these principles which I indicated earlier. For an actual political purpose related to the revolution, we have to indicate that this cultural basis existed quite independent of states because, if not, there are certain types of contradictions into which we fall. Here I have in mind the way in which the white world normally plays up certain aspects of African contemporary development as relapses into barbarism. You say that what's happening in Nigeria, what happened in Congo, this is sort of atavism--the blacks have gone back to the primeval savagery once the restraining hand of white civilization has been removed. And to counter that type of nonsense one doesn't only have to point to the development of so-called civilization. One also has to show these aspects of everyday life which were meaningful long before the Europeans arrived, and if we were to pursue the process, we could see how, in fact, these things were distorted during the era of contact with Europe; how they were distorted, particularly in West Africa, during the era of the slave trade.

My final reflections, before I give over to this brother, concern some other questions which brothers, in my part of the world anyway, have been asking. They say, "Well, if you recall African history and you recapture African culture, to what extent is it possible to practice this today? Is it just a question of doing this as a sort of catharsis to throw out what the Europeans said or is there a possibility of using these principles in constructive contemporary action?" For Africa, the answer is clearly yes. In African society, any serious attempt to revolutionize the society will have to take serious cognizance of these principles. And the best example is the work being done in Tanzania today and the type of analysis being carried out by that remarkable man, Julius Nyerere. Take a document like "Socialism and Rural Development," which is something blacks should all read.⁸ He is attempting to select the elements of culture in Tanzania, the process of cultural history before the Europeans arrived and as it was affected by European arrival, and then from that, to try and come to terms with the modern situation. So you can extrapolate, you can see the process. It's not just going back and taking out, harum-scarum. It has to be a dialectical, you have to see what still exists in the contemporary situation that comes from the traditional roots. And, in that sense, the analysis of culture-history is extremely relevant to the present revolution. Now, I wouldn't go that far for the New World. I would not be able to say what the shape of this society is going to be. It's a very tremendous question, but one that I don't really need to ask. White people always keep asking, "After Black Power, what?" This is not really for all of us to determine. That's another epoch. It's like Marx writing about the class struggle

and he says, "After all that is finished, the history of humanity will begin." Well, I see it that same way. When we have achieved what we want to achieve, the history of humanity will begin. So humanity will work out its history. We are concerned now with the blacks. The blacks have to get something done and I don't think, really, that we can use African History in the Western World in the sense that Nyerere used it. I think we can only use it in the first sense, as a sort of catharsis towards action. We probably could do more with our own history, the history of black people in the New World, as a basis for working out what is a revolutionary strategy in the New World and what will be revolutionary in the new situation. But that is another matter.

For me then, African history, as carried out by the black brothers and sisters, will have to be a process of coming to grips with all the aspects of African history and with trying to determine what are the categories into which we should fit things, as distinct from saying, let us start and try to determine whether we can reconstruct African history along the same terms in which European history has been reconstructed. Because that analysis, where you utilize only the European criteria is itself the same process of bastardization; the guy oppresses you and then he selects your terms of reference [for you]. Even when you're fighting him you use his terms of reference. But what I am trying to suggest here is that we have to break out from those terms of reference. Thank you.

Notes

1. Richard B. Moore was born in Barbados. Described in the Congress brochure as a "deep student of African and Afro-American history," and as someone who "played a significant part in founding the Barbados Labour Party," Moore is the author of *The Name "Negro": Its Origins and Evil Use* (New York: Afro-American Publishers, 1960), among other books. Moore, who spoke directly after Rodney, presented a paper titled "The Civilizations of Ancient Africa."
2. Esteban Montejo, *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1968).
3. The reference is to Hugh Shearer, who was prime minister of Jamaica between 1967 and 1972.
4. Aspects of this important debate were recently precipitated by the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987). See the debate assembled in *Black Athena Revisited*, ed. M. R. Lefkowitz and G. M. Rogers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
5. Rodney is perhaps referring to the negative response of some members of the audience to James's comment that Greek civilization represented humanity's highest achievement. Reference to this can be found in the 15 October 1968 issue of the *McGill Daily*, 3.
6. Rodney is referring to poet Leroi Jones, otherwise known as Amiri Baraka, the renowned African American poet, playwright and politico whose work helped to define the Black Power period of the sixties and seventies.
7. Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa in the Years 1795, 1796 and 1797* (London: printed by W. Bulmer and Co. for the author; and sold by G. and W. Nicol, 1799).
8. Julius K. Nyerere, "Socialism and Rural Development," *Uhuru na Ujamaa/Freedom and Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

[This is a transcription of a lecture given by **Walter Rodney** on 12 October 1968 at the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal, Canada. The original audiotape of the lecture and the others from the 1968 Congress of Black Writers are in the possession of the Alfie Roberts Institute, Montreal, Canada. They were entrusted to David Austin by the late Alfie Roberts in 1995. Before his untimely death in July 1996, Roberts and Austin were in the process of preparing the speeches for publication. The original lecture was transcribed from audiotapes by Mrs. Astrid Jacques and subsequently edited by Austin. The footnotes have been added in the process. Special thanks to Adrian Harewood for his comments on the text.]

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