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Review

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The American Image of Africa: Myth and Reality. By Felix N. Okoye (Buffalo: Black Academy Press, 1971. 157 pp. with notes, postscript, and bibliography. \$8.00).

Non-Western people are accustomed to reading about their past in books written by Americans, but it is a recent experience for Americans to read their history as written by non-Westerners. With the postwar rise of African states, an independent African historical profession has matured, most of these new African historians concentrating on the history of their own continent. But Dr. Felix Nwabueze Chukwueneka Okoye, born in Nigeria and educated in Britain and the United States, is part of a newer segment of African historians who are specializing in American history.

Okoye uses early travel accounts of Europeans and Americans in Africa to show that racial stereotypes of a "Dark Continent" did not predominate. Only after Americans began to feel a psychological need to justify slavery was the inferiority of African peoples and cultures emphasized. Much of the claim for African inferiority was based upon the supposed ugliness and *a priori* inferiority of a dark skin, since a light skin was thought to be necessarily more beautiful. Okoye demonstrates that Africans saw dark skins as more beautiful, and initially thought of the pale Europeans as skinless horrors who were unfortunate enough not to have been blessed with a healthy black body. By using this comparative approach, Okoye explains that both the African regard for dark skin and the European fondness of light skin were merely common tendencies of men to view themselves as the ultimate in beauty and intelligence. This ethnocentric ideal was intensified in white-dominated America for the obvious purpose of making the slaves more contented with their condition, when placed in contrast to the alleged total depravity of Africa.

The ideas about Africa as expressed by Americans like Thomas Jefferson, the founders of the American Colonization Society, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Benjamin Rush, show that American scholars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries usually held a stereotyped view of Africa. Inevitably the condemnation of Africa reflected upon the character of black

slaves in America and tended to justify their enslavement. What is important to realize is that these social commentators rejected existing accounts that pictured Africa more favorably, and they concentrated upon racial stereotypes which viewed Africa as socially, if not biologically, nonhuman. That this interpretation of Africa was not the sole view for Americans is demonstrated by writers like the Quaker John Woolman, who saw Africa in the light of cultural relativism and who transcended a strict ethnocentrism. These early relativists recognized that even though Africa might be vastly different, its lifestyles could fulfill Africans' needs the same as Western ways could fulfill European needs. Accordingly, African political organization, marriage patterns, religions, social customs, and physical type were not seen as inferior.

Although the author concentrates on the late colonial and early national period of American history, when stereotypes about Africa were being carefully constructed, more than a few of these same interpretations have continued until the present era. During the stereotyping period, Americans wrote about Africans as having no capability for love, friendship, loyalty, or kinship ties. Africa was said to have no history, no civilization, and no change from a totally confused, anarchical existence. The African was labeled as a separate species that was inherently incapable of rising to the level of the god-like Caucasian. The remarkable fact is that these stereotypes were not constructed in ignorance, but required a deliberate rejection of contemporary accounts which did not portray Africa as inferior. Much of the justification for white social relationship with black slaves was based on the concept of a savage Africa. In some respects, this book serves to analyze the foundations for the conceptual basis of the social system of slavery.

There is a significant but all too brief chapter on Afro-American images of Africa, which are shown to be directly related to the black experience in the United States. In some aspects there had been an antipathy toward Africa resulting from racial definitions of Africa as inferior, but in other respects American blacks could turn to Africa for a sense of identification denied them as Americans.

Although the style is generally good, the usefulness of this book is lessened by some disorganization and by the lack of an index.

At times Okoye becomes too involved in refuting racist stereotypes, which might be justified for the uninformed reader but are unnecessary for anyone with the most fleeting knowledge of African history and ethnography. A more thorough analysis of the social influence of these attitudes, and how they directly related to the perpetuation of slavery, could have been undertaken. The great social influence of leaders like Jefferson, however, cannot be denied, and Okoye might have fallen into a trap had he tried to separate the influences of these attitudes upon social behavior from the influences of American society upon the image of Africa. The very fact of the survival of the image into the twentieth century demonstrates the deep impact on the social and intellectual life of the United States. The main deficiency of the book is that it does not by any means cover the entire span of American attitudes toward Africa. Okoye limits himself primarily to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and there are aspects of American images (i.e. the missionary impulse) that are not adequately covered. Nevertheless, Okoye's study is a valuable and provocative beginning for a subject long neglected.

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Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century. By Franklin W. Knight (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970. 228 pp. \$10).

While American historians have been eager to remove the discussion of slavery in the United States from the context of good and evil engendered by the debate over abolition, they have tended to swallow whole the myths engendered to excuse slavery in Latin America. A great deal of distortion about Latin American slavery has gained currency during the past decade. Franklin Knight's book is a signal contribution toward placing the problem