

THE STORY OF THE NEGRO

BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

THE AFRICAN AT HOME

In the series of six articles of which the first is here published, and in other chapters which will eventually appear with them in book form, Mr. Washington proposes to tell the story of his race—not in a close order of historical sequence, nor in a scientific way, but from the point of view of a man who has known slavery as well as freedom, and whose wide knowledge of his own people has given him unique opportunities for understanding the feelings and forces which have moved and are moving the more or less inarticulate masses of that race. While the early history and traditions of the Negro have been studied with care, even this part of the narrative is related with frequent references to living persons and contemporary events. A considerable part of the story will include Mr. Washington's own observations and personal reminiscences and his interpretations of the facts and incidents related. We need not point out that, for many years, Mr. Washington has been in a peculiar sense the spokesman and exponent of his race, and that he knows the motives, aspirations, and tendencies of his people thoroughly and sympathetically.—THE EDITORS.

SOME time during the latter part of 1899, or the early part of 1900, I received through the German Embassy, in Washington, a letter saying that the German Colonial Society wanted a number of students from Tuskegee to go out to German West Africa to teach the natives how to produce cotton by American methods.

While I had been a student at Hampton Institute, Virginia, it was one of my ambitions, as it has been the ambition of a great many other Negro students before and since, to go out some day to Africa as a missionary. I believed that I had got hold at Hampton of a kind of knowledge that would be peculiarly helpful to the native Africans, and I felt that my interest in the people out there, vague and indefinite as it was, would in some way or other help and inspire me in the task of lifting them to a higher plane of civilization.

After I went to Tuskegee I gave up my ambition of going to Africa. I had not been long there, however, before I was convinced that I could, perhaps, be of larger usefulness through the work I was able to do in this country, by fitting for the same service I wanted to perform Africans who came as students to America, and by sending from Tuskegee men and

women trained in our methods as teachers and workers among the native peoples. The request I received through the German Embassy was therefore particularly welcome to me, for it gave me an opportunity to realize, in a direct way, the ambition I had never wholly lost sight of.

A group of our best students was selected for this African mission. They went out to Togoland, West Africa, and began to establish stations in different points in that colony, and then started in to grow cotton, using the native labor as far as they were able, but necessarily, at first, doing a large part of the work themselves.

They met all sorts of difficulties. They found the American cotton was not suited to African soil, and were compelled to cross it with native varieties in order to produce a hybrid type that possessed the valuable qualities of both. They had considerable difficulty at first with the native laborers. I remember that John Robinson one of the party who remained to carry out the work after the others had returned home, told me of an incident which made me see in a way in which I had not been able to see before that the education of the native African in the white man's civilization must begin much further back and

with much simpler matters than most of us are likely to imagine.

Among the other things this party had taken out to Africa was a wagon which had been manufactured by the students at Tuskegee. While this wagon was being unloaded and put together, the native porters looked on with interest, never having seen anything that went on wheels before. After the wagon had been loaded ready to start, the attention of members of the party was turned for a time in another direction. When they came back to the wagon, they were greatly surprised to see that the natives had unloaded and taken it apart, and were busily engaged in fastening its wheels and other parts on their heads, preparatory to carrying them, along with the other goods, to their destination in the interior. Mr. Robinson explained to them, through an interpreter, the use of the wagon, and tried to show them the advantage of it. They were interested in seeing this curious machine of the white man work, but they were quite positive in their conviction that the good old-fashioned way of carrying everything on their heads was the better. Now that roads have been opened up and the natives have actually seen a wagon worked, Mr. Robinson tells me they take it as a hardship if they are asked to carry anything.

During the time this experiment in educating the native African was going on I followed its progress, through the accounts I received from students on the ground and from the reports of the German Colonial Society, with close attention and intense interest. It was the nearest I had come, up to that time, to anything like a practical and intimate acquaintance with the African at home.

Among the first things the Tuskegee students did in Africa was to build for themselves comfortable houses, to supply them with well-made but simple furniture, to put in these houses not only the necessities, but some of the comforts of life. I was interested to note that within a few months the natives, and especially the women, had the notion that they wanted the same kind of houses and some of the same kind of furniture. The women naturally made their wants known to the men, and before these students had

been in Africa half a dozen years the natives in their vicinity had reached the point where, with the training they had received and with the desire they had gained for better homes to live in, better tools to work with, and for all the other advantages which the black man in America seemed to possess over the black man in Africa, they were performing about as satisfactory service as the same class of human beings would have performed in any other part of the world.

Native Africans have been sent from Africa to Tuskegee. Our Tuskegee students have returned from time to time and made their reports of successes. Thus in a very vital and practical manner has our institution become connected with the progress and civilization of our brethren in the darker continent.

Some time ago, in looking through the pages of some magazine or book of science, I ran across a statement that, when men first began to study the stars systematically and with telescopes, they discovered a certain class of errors in their calculations which were due to the personality of the observers. One man's brain, acting quicker, would record the stars as moving more rapidly, another would record them as moving more slowly, than their actual movements. It became necessary, therefore, in order to make the calculations correct, to study and take account of these personal aberrations.

It has occurred to me in the course of my reading about the African peoples that it would contribute much to the accuracy of our knowledge if some study were made of the sort of errors that creep into our observations of human beings. Important as it is that we should have a correct knowledge of the stars, it is more important that we should have an accurate knowledge of men. For instance, I have noticed that a man born and reared in the Southern States invariably looks upon the Negro with different eyes than the man born and reared in the Northern States. In their reports and interpretations of the simplest facts they are often widely divergent in their views. Even when they agree with each other about the Negro, for instance, it has often seemed to me that their agreement was due to a misunderstanding.

Frequently amusing situations occur in the discussion of the Negro. Many of these have occurred in my presence. It seldom occurs, for instance, when I am traveling on a train, that the discussion does not turn on the question as to what is the physical, moral, and mental effect on the individual when he is of mixed blood. One man will argue very seriously that there should be no mixture of blood, for the reason that he is quite sure that wherever there is a mixture it results in a weakened individual, bodily, mentally, morally. Within ten or fifteen minutes another man will begin, in the absence of the first, to discuss the same subject, and will, in an equally serious and positive manner, state that wherever in all history the Negro has been able to accomplish anything of value to the world, it has been because he had some tincture of white blood in his veins.

During these discussions I am sometimes reminded of an incident that occurred during my early boyhood, which, because it illustrates a phase in the development of the Negro in America, I may be permitted to mention here. Very soon after the days of slavery, and even before the public school system had been organized, there arose in the community a discussion among our people as to whether the world was round or flat. It lasted for several days, and divided the community into two pretty stubborn factions. During the discussion a colored man came along, a school-teacher, who had very little actual learning, and made application to open a school. The question as to whether the world was flat or round was submitted to him, or rather he was asked how he would treat the question in the school-room, and he replied that he was prepared to teach either "flat" or "round," just as the individual family requested.

The continual discussion of the Negro often reminds me, as I have stated, of this story. The Negro question, like the Negro himself, seems able to accommodate itself to almost any and every shade of opinion. That explains how two men with diametrically opposite views sometimes come to an agreement about the Negro; one thinks he should be flat and not round, the other thinks he should be

round and not flat; but both agree that there is something wrong with him.

If it is difficult for people of the same race to understand one another when they are talking about things in regard to which their experience has been different, it is still more difficult for one race to pass judgment upon another, particularly when these races differ so widely from one another as the white man and the Negro. Dr. Franz Boas has called attention to this difficulty in a paper read before the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "As the white race is the civilized race," he says, "every deviation from the white type is considered as the characteristic feature of a lower type; . . . the greater the difference between the intellectual, emotional, and moral processes and those found in our civilization, the harsher the judgment of the people."¹

Under these circumstances, it is natural enough that the black man, who is furthest removed physically from the white man, should suffer more than others from the sort of prejudice Professor Boas describes. With the possible exception of the Jew, no race has ever been subjected to criticisms so searching and candid, to state it mildly, as the Negro. And yet I have found that those who have known and understood the Negro best have usually been kindest in their judgment of him and most hopeful of his future.

For instance, the late Miss Kingsley, an Englishwoman who seems to have entered deeper into the mind of the West African than most others, says of the West Coast Negro:

The true Negro is, I believe, by far the better man than the Asiatic; he is physically superior, and he is more like an Englishman than the Asiatic; he is a logical, practical man, with feelings that are a credit to him, and are particularly strong in the direction of property. He has a way of thinking he has rights whether he likes to use them or no, and he will fight for them when he is driven to it. Fight you for a religious idea the African will not; he is not the stuff you make martyrs out of, nor does he desire to shake off the shackles of the flesh and swoon into Nirvana. . . . His make of mind is exceedingly like the make of mind of thousands of Englishmen of the stand-no-nonsense, Englishman's-house-is-his-castle type. Yet, withal, a law-abiding man, loving a live lord, holding loudly that women should be kept in

¹ "Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science," Vol. XLIII, 1894.

their place, yet oftentimes grievously henpecked by his wives, and little better than a slave to his mother, whom he loves with the love he gives to none other.'

Concerning the affection which the African has for his mother, Miss Kingsley quotes the Rev. John Wilson.

Mr. Wilson was born and educated in South Carolina. In 1834 he went to Africa as a missionary, and remained there for eighteen years, in close contact with the civilization of the forefathers of the present American Negroes. He was among the first missionaries to Africa. He remained in the active service of the Southern Presbyterian Church until his death, in 1886. While in Africa he studied the languages and reduced the native tongue of some of the tribes to writing. He says :

Whatever other estimate we may form of the African, we may not doubt his love for his mother. Her name, whether dead or alive, is always on his lips and in his heart. She is the first thing he thinks of when awakening from his slumbers and the last thing he remembers when closing his eyes in sleep; to her he confides secrets which he would reveal to no other human being on the face of the earth. He cares for no one else in time of sickness; she alone must prepare his food, administer his medicine, perform his ablutions, and spread his mat for him. He flies to her in the hour of his distress, for he well knows if all the rest of the world turn against him, she will be steadfast in her love, whether he be right or wrong.

If there be any cause which justifies a man using violence towards one of his fellow-men, it would be to resent an insult offered to his mother. More fights are occasioned among boys by hearing something said in disparagement of their mothers than all other causes put together. It is a common saying among them, if a man's mother and his wife are both on the point of being drowned and he can save only one of them, he must save his mother, for the avowed reason if the wife is lost, he may marry another, but he will never find a second mother.²

Mr. Wilson points out that the Africans of the Grain Coast have long since risen above the hunting life; they have fixed habitations, cultivate the soil for means of subsistence, have herds of domestic animals, construct for themselves houses which are sufficient to protect them alike from the scorching heat of the sun and the chilly damps of the night; they show a turn for the mechanical arts, and in the

fabrication of implements of warfare and articles of ornament they display surprising skill.

"As we see them in their native country," he continues, "they show none of that improvidence or want of foresight for which they have almost become proverbial in this country, which shows that circumstances have made them what they are in this respect. They plant their crops with particular reference to the seasons of the year, and they store away provisions for their future wants with as much regularity as any people in the world, so that times of scarcity and want are less frequent among them than among others who pretend to a much higher degree of civilization."

Referring to the farms of the Kru people, the tribes from which the seamen of the West Coast are drawn, Mr. Wilson says :

The natives of the Kru country cultivate the soil to some considerable extent. Their farms are generally two or three miles distant from the villages, and are made at this distance to keep them out of the reach of their cattle. Nearer to the villages they have inclosed gardens in which they raise small quantities of plantains, corn, bananas, peas, beans, and a few other vegetables.

Of the mechanical skill of the neighboring Ashanti people, whose territory is in the English Gold Coast colony, Mr. Wilson tells us that "they manufacture gold ornaments of various kinds, and many of them of much real taste. They fabricate swords, agricultural implements, wooden stools, and cotton cloths of beautiful figures and very substantial texture."¹

From time to time, as Tuskegee graduates have returned from the various stations in Africa in which they have been at work, they have brought back with them specimens of native workmanship in iron, wood, and leather. I have frequently been impressed with the beauty of some of the designs that native craftsmen have worked out upon their spears and in their homespun cotton cloth. The leather tanned by some of these native tanners is often surprisingly beautiful in color, design, and finish. Some of the specimens of the native handicrafts have been placed on exhibition in the museum at Tuskegee, and in one or two cases we have been able

¹ "West African Studies," p. 373.

² "Western Africa," pp. 116, 117.

¹ "Western Africa," p. 187

to reproduce in our classes in basketry the shapes and designs of some of these native articles.

"Nothing, perhaps," says Professor Franz Boas, "is more encouraging than a glimpse of the artistic industries of the native African. A walk through the African museums of Paris and London and Berlin is a revelation. I wish you could see the scepters of African kings, carved of hardwood and representing artistic form; or the dainty basketry made by the people of the Congo River and of the region of the Great Lakes of the Nile, or the grass mats of their beautiful patterns.

"Even more worthy of our admiration," he continues, "is the work of the blacksmith who manufactures symmetrical lance-heads almost a yard long, or axes inlaid with copper and decorated with filigree. Let me also mention in passing the bronze castings of Benin and the West Coast of Africa, which, although perhaps due to Portuguese influences, have so far excelled in technique any European work that they are even now almost inimitable."¹

The blacksmith seems to occupy a very important place in the social life of Africa. Travelers have found these smiths at work in the most remote and inaccessible parts of the continent, where they may be seen collecting the native iron and copper ores, smelting and reducing them, and then working them in their primitive forges into hoes, knives, spear and arrow heads, battle-axes, wood-working tools, rings, and hatchets.

Just as everywhere in the Southern States to-day, especially in the country districts, at the crossroads or near the country store, one finds the Negro blacksmith, so in some of the remote regions in Africa every village has, according to its size, from one to three blacksmiths. Each smith has an apprentice, and his art is a craft secret most zealously guarded.

Samuel P. Verner, a Southern white man and missionary of the Southern Presbyterian Church, says in his book "Pioneering in Central Africa" of these blacksmiths:

The proficiency of some of these men is astonishing. I frequently have my work

¹ Atlanta University Leaflet No. 19.

done by them, and their skill amazes me. They have the art of tempering copper as well as of making soft steel. Some of the objects of their craft which I placed in the National Museum at Washington are revelations to the uninitiated in their remarkable complexity and variety.

Mr. Verner's mission station was in the Congo Free State, on the upper courses of the Kasai, in the heart of savage Africa, where the people have never been touched by the influences of either the European or Mohammedan civilizations. Speaking of the carving and wood-working of some of these tribes, Mr. Verner says:

Some of these Africans are wonderfully adept. They can produce a geometrical figure whose perfection is amazing. Their tools are of the simplest, yet they can carve figures of men and animals, pipes, bowls, cups, platters, tables, and fantastic images. I saw a chair carved out of a solid block of ebony. Their work in ivory is also rare and valuable, and I believe their talent in those lines ought to be developed.

Throughout West Africa, wherever the European has not established his trading factory, the native market is an institution which is a constant source of surprise to travelers. These markets are the native clearing-houses for the produce of the soil and the fabricated articles of the land. They are generally the center of the trading operations of a district ranging from ten to thirty miles. Here will be seen vegetables and fruit, poultry, eggs, live pigs, goats, salt of their manufacture, pottery of their own make, strips of cloth, grass-woven mats, baskets, and specimens of embroidery and art work, besides numberless other articles of various sorts and kinds which are essential to African comfort and well-being. From the small group of native merchants who travel with their wares within a radius of thirty or fifty miles, to the large caravans of the Hausa traders who cross the Desert of Sahara, and at times reach the eastern and western confines of the continent, everywhere in Africa the black man is a trader.

Among the more primitive tribes the village markets are confined to two or three hundred buyers or sellers, but in the greater markets, like those of Kano and Upper Nigeria, twenty or thirty thousand traders will be gathered together at certain seasons of the year. It is an inter-

esting fact, as indicating the African's interest in trade, that in many tribes the market-place is considered sacred ground, and, in order that trade may be carried on there without interruption, no strife is permitted within its precincts.

Professor Boas, writing in 1904, said :

The Negro all over the African continent is either a tiller of the soil or the owner of large herds; only the Bushmen and a few of the dwarf tribes of Central Africa are hunters. Owing to the high development of agriculture, the density of population of Africa is much greater than that of primitive America, and consequently the economic conditions of life are more stable.

It may be safely said that the primitive Negro community, with its fields that are tilled with iron and wooden implements, with its domestic animals, with its smithies, with its expert wood-carvers, is a model of thrift and industry, and compares favorably with the conditions of life among our own ancestors.¹

It is just as true in America as it is in Africa that those who know the Negro intimately and best have been, as a rule, kindest and most hopeful in their judgments of him. This may seem strange to those who get their notion of the Southern white man's opinion of the Negro from what they see in the press and hear from the platform, during the heat of a political campaign, or from the utterances of men who, for one reason or another, have allowed themselves to become embittered. Southern opinion of the Negro, particularly as it finds expression in the press and on the platform, is largely controversial. It has been influenced by the fact that for nearly a hundred years the Negro has been the football in a bitter political contest, and there are a good many Southern politicians who have acquired the habit of berating him. The Negro in the South has had very little part in this controversy, either before or since the war, but he has had a chance to hear it all, and it has often seemed to me, if, after all that has taken place, the Negro is still able to discuss his situation calmly, the white man should be able to do so also. But that is another matter.

Nineteen times out of twenty, I suppose, a stranger coming South who inquires concerning the Negro from people

¹ Ethical Record, March, 1904.

he meets on the train or on the highways will get from these men pretty nearly the same opinion he has read in the newspapers or heard in political speeches. These criticisms of the Negro have been repeated so often that people have come to accept and repeat them again without reflection. The thing that shows this to be true is that the very men who denounced all Negroes will very likely before the conversation is ended tell of one, and perhaps half a dozen, individual Negroes in whom they have the greatest confidence.

A Southern white man may tell you, with the utmost positiveness, that he never knew a single Negro who would not steal—except one. Every white man knows one Negro who is all right—a model of honesty, industry, and thrift—and, if he tries to remember, he will think of other Negroes in whom he has the greatest confidence and for whom he has a very genuine respect. Considering that there are a good many more white people in the South than there are Negroes, it seems to follow, logically, that, in spite of what one hears about the Negro in general, there are a good many individual Negroes who are pretty well thought of by their white neighbors.

It is well to take into consideration, also, that when Southern people express their confidence and their respect for an individual black man, they are speaking of one whom they know; on the contrary, when they denounce in general terms the weakness and the failure of the Negro race, they have in mind a large number of whom they know a great deal less.

I do not mean to suggest that there is no justification for the criticism of the Negro that one often hears in the South. I have never thought or said that the Negro in America was all that he should be. It does seem to me, however, that the Negro in the United States has done, on the whole, as well as he was able, and as well as, under all the circumstances, could be reasonably expected.

It was not unusual, particularly in the early part of the last century, to find among the slaves men who could read and write Arabic and were learned in the lore of the Koran. W. B. Hodgson, a

Southern slaveholder, published in 1859 a paper in which he gave an account of a Negro slave who had translated the Gospel of John into Negro dialect, using "the letters of the Koran, the book of his first religious instruction, in transcribing the Gospel, the book of his second instruction and conversion, into the adopted dialect of his land of captivity." Most of the others came from what were known as the pagan tribes of the coast. In spite of the fact that so large a proportion of the slaves came from these interior tribes, it was not until Mungo Park made his famous first journey to the interior of the Sudan in 1795 that the Western world knew anything definite about that region. The eminent German traveler and scholar Dr. Henry Barth first reached the famous commercial city of Kano in 1850, and until 1900 it was said not more than five Europeans had ever visited that city. The accounts that travelers give of the region and the people presents a picture of African life so different from that of the coast cities that I am tempted to quote at some length from these descriptions.

Several peoples, of strikingly different characteristics, contributed to form the several loosely connected states which now form the British Colony of Northern Nigeria, of which Kano is the principal city. The most important and interesting of these are the Hausas and the Fulahs, or Fellani, as they are sometimes called. The Fulahs are noted for their military spirit; the Hausas for their commercial enterprise. One has a light complexion, and the other is dark.

The Fulahs are an equestrian people, with a cavalry armed with lances and swords. They are zealous Mohammedans, with a knowledge of how to "divide and govern." Their independent character is described by the proverbial saying that "a Fulah man slave will escape or kill his master, and that a Fulah girl slave will rule the harem or die." The Hausas are superior to the Fulahs in the arts of peace. They are possessed of unusual industry, judgment, and intelligence, and have a considerable degree of literary taste. The Hausas carry on the internal trade of the North and Central Sudan. They are well clothed and have many well-built cities with populations sometimes of

from twenty to sixty thousand. Barth, in describing Kano, which is, perhaps, to West Africa what Chicago is to the United States, tells us that he mounted on horseback, "rode for several hours round all the inhabited quarters, enjoying at his leisure from the saddle the manifold scenes of public and private life, of comfort and happiness, of luxury and misery, of industry and indolence, which were exhibited in the streets, the market-places, and in the interior of the courtyards." Here he saw "a row of shops filled with articles of native and foreign produce, with buyers and sellers in every variety of figure, complexion, and dress." Now an "open terrace of clay with a number of dye-pots and people busily employed in various processes of their hand-craft; here a man stirring the juice and mixing with indigo some coloring wood in order to give it the desired tint, there another drawing a shirt from the dye-pot, there two men beating a well-dyed shirt;" farther on, "a blacksmith busy with his tools in making a dagger, a spear, or the more useful ornaments of husbandry;" and, in another place, "men and women hanging up their cotton thread for weaving."

The market of Kano, said to be the largest in Africa, is celebrated for its cotton cloth and leather goods. Traditions of Kano go back over a thousand years. It is surrounded by walls of sun-dried clay from twenty to thirty feet high and fifteen miles in circumference.

The greatest chieftain that ever ruled in West Africa, Mohammed Askia, lived in Kano. He became ruler in 1492 and held sway over a region probably as large as the German Empire. Barth tells us that Mohammed Askia was an example of the highest degree to which Negroes have attained in the way of political administration and control. His dynasty, which was entirely of native descent, is the more remarkable if we consider that this Negro king was held in the highest esteem and veneration by the most learned and rigid Mohammedans. Not only did he consolidate and even extend his empire, but he went in 1495 on a pilgrimage to Mecca accompanied by 1,500 armed men, 1,000 on foot and 500 on horseback, and founded there a charitable institution.

He extended his conquests far and wide from what is now the center of Nigeria, westward almost to the borders of the Atlantic Ocean and northward to the south of Morocco. Askia governed the subjected tribes with justice and equity. Everywhere within the borders of his

extensive dominions his rule spread well-being and comfort.¹

The career of Mohammed Askia is possibly the best example of the influence of Mohammedanism on that portion of Africa from which our American slaves were taken.

¹"Discoveries in North and Central Africa," by Henry Barth. See also "A Tropical Dependency: An Outline of the Ancient History of the Western Sudan, with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Virginia," by Flora L. Shaw (Lady Lugard).