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In Memoriam

MELVILLE JEAN HERSKOVITS

The passing of Professor Melville Jean Herskovits came as a sudden and grievous shock to his many friends. Barely two months before his death he was one of those responsible for the successful launching of the First International Congress of Africanists held in Accra, Ghana, in December 1962. In a sense it is appropriate that the last public service of this pioneer of African studies in the United States should be connected with the launching of this Congress which accorded international recognition to African studies.

Herskovits was born at Bellefontaine, Ohio, in 1895. He received his education at Hebrew Union Seminary, Cincinnati, Ohio; University of Chicago, (Ph.B. 1920) and Columbia University (M.A. 1921, Ph.D. 1923). He had a thorough grounding in methods of historical research before he took up anthropology, and he attributed great importance to this in his later work. He became a student of Franz Boas in anthropology and showed Boas' influence in the breadth of his interests, his uncompromising fight against racist obscurantism and prejudice, and his concern with scientific and scholarly rigor of method. He pursued truth wherever it led him, and was never afraid to announce what he had found.

It was this fearlessness that distinguished Herskovits from a crowd of journeymen: at a time when African studies was saturated with prejudice, Herskovits struck an independent line and by adopting an objective and scientific approach to the subject revolutionized the study of the African and his culture for a generation. This contribution explains his immense popularity with Africans of all classes; they knew instinctively that he had few prejudices to unload and even when they differed from him, they were firm in their belief that he was an unalloyed student of the truth. As a result his Program of African Studies at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, attracted leading Africans of the day; heads of African States (including the Governor-General and the Prime Minister of Nigeria), statesmen, diplomats and intellectuals from the African continent visited Evanston and many of them spoke to his seminar. He was invited to independence celebrations in East and West Africa. Nothing gave him greater happiness than the liberation of Africa from colonial rule and his faith in the capacity of the African to hold his own never faltered.

He early took an interest in African studies, as can be seen from his doctoral thesis, "The Cattle Complex in East Africa," published in The American Anthropologist, Vol. 28, 1926, pp. 230-72, 362-80, 949-528, 633-64. This study was the basis of his famous paper, "The Culture Areas

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of Africa," Africa, Vol. 3, 1930, pp. 59-77, which applied concepts then current in American anthropology to the study of Africa. It oriented serious American thinking about Africa for at least two decades.

In 1923 he began his physical anthropological studies which culminated in two books: 'The American Negro, a Study in Racial Crossing' (1928) and 'The Anthropometry of the American Negro.' In 1928 he and his wife, Frances Herskovits, went to Dutch Guiana to study the Negro groups who had escaped from the coastal plantations and re-established an essentially African society in the interior. This study was published in 1934, under the title, Rebel Destiny. In 1931, he and Mrs. Herskovits spent five months in Abomey, the capital of the kingdom of Dahomey. This study was published in 1938 in two elegantly produced volumes, under the title, Dahomey, an Ancient West African Kingdom. This book has had a large influence in America, probably because it is full of ideas that cry out for further investigation and because it asks and partially answers the kinds of questions that interest Americans in Africa. Quite a few M.A. dissertations and doctoral theses have drawn heavily on this work for material. With this study the Herskovits's were firmly launched on their joint career of study of Negro life and culture on both sides of the Atlantic. Their ability to work together in the field and in writing played a large role in their success.

After teaching for two years at Harvard University Herskovits went in 1927, to Northwestern University, where he became Professor of Anthropology in 1935. He built up there the leading center of African studies in the United States, and was very active in getting his students to do field studies in Africa and Latin America.

He continued to publish on a wide range of topics, from art to economics, as his formidable list of books shows:

Acculturation, the Study of Culture Contact. 1938
Economic Anthropology. 1940 and 1952
Life in a Haitian Valley. 1937
The Myth of the Negro Past. 1941
Trinidad Village. 1947
Man and His Works. 1952
Franz Boas. (A biography) 1953
Dahomeyan Narrative. 1958 (A study of folk-tales)

He was editor of the International Directory of Anthropologists, 1950. He was editor of The American Anthropologist from 1949 to 1952. He was a member of the Executive Council of the International African Institute, and he was the first president of the African Studies Association of the United States.

Herskovits was extremely loyal to his students and worked very hard to get them fellowships to do field work. Some of the leading Africanists in the United States today were his students. Of course, like all great minds, Herskovits had critics among the anthropologists. I cannot think of a serious, principled attack on his position. The criticisms were mostly personal, and were based, in my opinion, on his indifference to considerations of tact in what he said and the way he said it.

His saving grace was that he was first and foremost genuinely fond of people. Beyond this, his contribution to African studies, both directly and indirectly, was enormous. In the American situation, he was for thirty

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years an outspoken foe of segregation and prejudice, and a proponent of the dignity of the Negro people—indeed of all people. Many Africanists were always inspired by his presence on the scene and with his wife Frances Herskovits and his daughter Mrs. Jean Kopytoff, we mourn his passing.

K. Onwuka Dike

The field of African studies and the science of anthropology suffer an irreparable loss in the passing of Melville J. Herskovits. Herskovits, through his numerous pioneering contributions was the universally recognized Dean of African Studies in the United States, and it was in merited recognition of this that he was unanimously chosen as the first President of the African Studies Association. Herskovits was an enormously prolific scholar of wide interests. In the course of his life he made significant contributions to such diverse fields as the physical anthropology of the American Negro, the descriptive ethnology of New World Negro and of African cultures, comparative economics, folklore, and general anthropological theory. None who came into contact with his writings would fail to benefit from his inquiring mind, indefatigable industry and his outstanding gift for scientific synthesis. Those who had the privilege of knowing him personally will never forget his warm and vibrant personality. In particular, his students, among whom I am proud to number myself, can attest to the fact that there was no limit to his loyalty and willingness to provide guidance and stimulation.

Joseph H. Greenberg

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