

Africa Can No Longer Be Called 'Dark Continent'

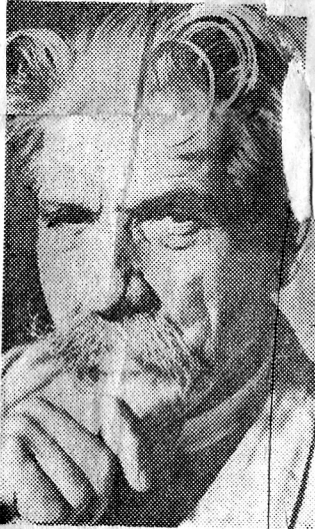
By ROBERT D. LEE*

*Special to the
Minneapolis Tribune*

IT IS TIME to throw out the clichés about Africa, in terminology, image and approach.

The practice of calling it the "Dark Continent" has, fortunately, died out in the academic world. At the same time scholars have stopped referring to the early medieval period in European history as the Dark Ages.

The reasons are similar.



ALBERT SCHWEITZER

The adjective said more about the self-centered rationalists who began using it than about either African or medieval culture.

THE WORD "dark" was supposed to imply that both Africa and the Middle Ages were seas of unmitigated ignorance. Actually, the Islamic civilization of the Middle East and North Africa was probably the most advanced, scientifically and political-

**Robert D. Lee, a Minneapolis Tribune staff writer currently on leave, recently spent several months traveling throughout Africa.*

ly, in the world at the end of the first millennium. And the early kingdom of Ghana, in West Africa, achieved surprising religious and political organization.

Popular thinking about medieval times has changed considerably in recent years, perhaps because music of the period and so-called "primitive" art have startlingly modern qualities about them.

But the notion of Africa as a dark world, full of ignorance and evil, lingers on. This may be because the word "dark" evokes both physical and spiritual images that reinforce what little most people already

know about Africa. It is not only the color of most Africans' skins, but also the way most people picture a jungle and the moral color that they ascribe to African religious practices.

In fact, one comes away from Africa with an impression of light. I have trouble remembering more than a handful of cloudy days in 10 months on the continent.

CONCRETE and steel buildings gleam in most of the larger cities, and the streets are splashed with the brilliant colors of women's dresses.

Africa's chief fault, which earned it the black title, was ignorance of Eu-

rope. Of course, Europeans were equally ignorant of Africa, but they excused themselves on the shaky ground that they had nothing to learn from a lower culture.

Only when the Europeans began finding things of value such as slaves and minerals in Africa did they take an interest in its culture. Even then this interest was primarily in proving that Africans were inferior beings with inferior ways of doing everything. This was taken as justification for colonization, which the Europeans equated with civilization.

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called the Negro graphic approach. All that is exotic — so bare-breasted — called pagan is recorded in The more modern of African countries admittedly of poor copies America, are

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This mentality has hung over in what might be

called the National Geographic approach to Africa. All that is strange and exotic — scarred faces, bare-breasted girls, so-called pagan rites, etc. — is recorded in great detail. The more modern aspects of African countries, which admittedly often look like poor copies of Europe or America, are neglected.

THE EFFECT on the average reader, whether or not it is intended, is an impression of cultural inferiority. "Gee, whiz!" he is likely to say to himself, "These are primitive peoples."

(It should be noted that a recent article on North-

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west Africa in the National Geographic could not be faulted on this score.)

The danger lies in the sympathetic paternalism that such reporting tends to generate. Such paternalism, even if it achieves the beneficence of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, has no place in the modern world.

DR. SCHWEITZER believed himself a superior representative of a superior religion and culture, whose duty it was to help

the unfortunate human beings born on the "Dark Continent." The value of his work in his tiny hospital in the jungles of Gabon is unquestioned, but Africa needs no more of his approach.

Most African countries are undergoing crises of identity. What they need most is help in rediscovering their own histories and cultures and in reconciling what they find with 20th-century technology.