BOOK REVIEW

Lauren S. Bain, Esq.

Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa

by Keith B. Richburg

Three years enduring cold fear, personal loss, and disillusionment in Africa awarded Keith Richburg one piece of unequivocal information: the fact that he is an American. This was an important discovery for Richburg, because he is a very meticulous journalist who takes nothing – especially his own values – for granted. That habit may be what preserved his sanity in Africa, where he witnessed firsthand the senseless, savage deaths of thousands, including many of his own friends, in routine massacres.

Richburg, who earned a master's degree in international relations from the London School of Economics, encountered ineffable savagery throughout Africa while a correspondent for the *Washington Post*. As a black journalist on assignment in Africa, Richburg expected to blend in, shedding the specter of minority status that shadowed his life in America. But Richburg's race was his greatest liability while in Africa, and nearly cost him his life many times. He learned quickly that black Americans face four potentially deadly liabilities in Africa: they are mistaken by any given faction for a member of the enemy tribe; they are asked to choose sides; they are without tribal identity; and they are under suspicion from all sides.

Coping with the brutal irrationalities of tribal violence and political corruption throughout his tour of duty left Richburg "bitter and largely devoid of hope, and largely drained of compassion." Initially, he kept the plight of Somalia in the headlines back home, decrying the American government's lack of compassion for the Somalis' suffering from war and the ravages of disease and starvation. His stories brought about foreign aid, and the aid-bearers ultimately were forced into retreat. "No one ever calculated what you do next if the people you come to help have no interest in being saved," Richburg notes.

Richburg cites tribalism as the "single most corrosive, debilitating influence plaguing modern Africa in its quest for democracy and development." He advocates an American society that is "truly color-blind, not carved up into racial and ethnic duchies." He identifies himself as a black American, not an African American. "If there was one thing I learned traveling around Africa," he writes, "it was that the tribe remains the defining feature of almost every African society. Old tribal mistrusts and stereotypes linger, and the potential for a violent implosion is never very far from the surface."

What is the lure of African heritage that impels Americans to don kente cloth and celebrate Kwanza? Three years of living, working, and traveling in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Zaire, Cameroon, Gabon, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, left Richburg celebrating his African ancestor's departure from Africa – even into slavery – and survival in America. For Africans, he found that life emulates a Hobbesian model: short, nasty and brutish. Chaotic skirmishes that claim thousands of lives occur regularly; tribally motivated torture and murder are ubiquitous, and survivors of massacres face death at the hands of hoodlums and from cholera and AIDS. Although the African continent contains only ten percent of the world's total population, it is home to sixty percent of the world's HIV-positive population. The most abject poverty in the world, desperate searches for employment in cities as villages are ravaged, and tribal cultural patterns have separated families, resulting in rampant prostitution, promiscuity, continued polygamy, and the uncontrolled spread of AIDS.

If anything is methodical in Africa, it is death: lives are snuffed, bodies are stacked, stacks are burned. Entire villages are leveled with sleeping sickness; 171 million people suffer from TB, and malaria, measles and diarrhea kill millions every year. Health care delivery systems are corrupt, medicines are diverted, and "the vast majority of Africans simply suffer until they die." Richburg is merciless with his vivid images. He insists that his reader share his experience. And his experience is important: properly understood, it could overhaul tribalism.

Richburg's reporting rarely fit the collectivist agendas of American Afrocentric apologists who harbored ideals of some ultimate black homeland, Mother Africa. He refused to sanction unscrupulous kleptocracies as "emerging democracies." His images were gruesome. His stories contained no victorious heroes. And Richburg faced down collectivist challenges to his racial loyalty. "After all," he says,

"I was black, a brother. I was supposed to understand." His criticism of African dictatorships and tribal chaos was contrapuntal to then-NAACP director Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis Jr.'s admonition that "we in the United States must support the emerging African democracies – the African understanding of democracy – rather than attempt to superimpose a Western standard of democracy." Richburg comments, "It's as if repression comes only in white." Frequently, Richburg's friends and relatives charged him with turning his back on his race. Blacks in power deserved support, they insisted, regardless of the circumstances. When the press failed to cheer Mayor Marion Berry, one of Richburg's relatives mourned the indictment. "They're the only role models we have," she lamented. As a child, Richburg listened to Malcolm X preach, "we have to realize we're all the same family." As a reporter, Richburg rejected the intellectual fallacies of collectivism Malcolm X expounded, aligning with what he saw to be the truth rather than tribal sympathies. He acknowledges that this was a long and painful revelation.

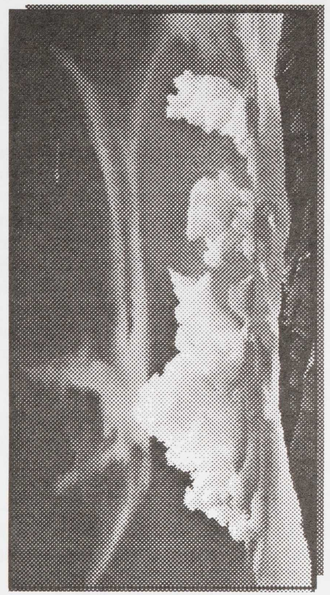
Richburg admits to feeling alienated everywhere. He experiences tension stemming from race-consciousness in Detroit, New York and Washington, D.C. Now the *Post's* Hong Kong bureau chief, he shares his sense of alienation with white and black colleagues alike. Africa posed the peculiar challenge to Richburg to lay claim to his African heritage or not. "Maybe if I had never set foot here [in Africa], I could celebrate my own blackness, my 'African-ness.' Then I might feel a part of this place, and Africa's pain might be my own. But while I know that 'Afrocentrism' has become fashionable for many black Americans searching for identity, I know it cannot work for me. I have been here, I have lived here and seen Africa in all its horror. I know now that I am a stranger here. I am an American, a black American, and I feel no connection to this strange and violent place."

Had Richburg not undertaken the rigorous values clarification of his three years in Africa, American Afrocentrists would have one less cloudburst on their parade. But he did, and his book is a gripping blow to tribalism – cultural relativity in contemporary parlance – and all of its domestic affiliates.

*****

Lauren Bain, a retired attorney, lives and writes on Vashon Island, Washington.

Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa, Keith B. B.Richburg, BasicBooks, Harper Collins Inc., 1997, 257 pages.



Superior Quality Photoprints
Mind Over Matter
by Sylvia Bokor

$125. each includes shipping and handling/Continental USA only. All others add $10. *Payable in US funds only.* **Photoprint size: 13" x 24".** Hand-pulled on matte paper. Colors are predominately blue and white. To see color, access http://www. netonline.com/cordair/bokor/bokor.htm. To order, please PRINT name and address to which the photoprint is to be sent, make check or money order payable to **Sylvia Bokor** and mail to:
4105 New Vistas Court NW Albuquerque, NM 87114

LYCEUM INTERNATIONAL, INC.
DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAM

A rational, objective approach to...

ECONOMICS
LITERATURE
HISTORY
PHILOSOPHY
PSYCHOLOGY
SCIENCE

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A RATIONAL, OBJECTIVE NON-PC EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVE?

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR UNIVERSITY LEVEL COURSES TAUGHT BY OUTSTANDING INTELLECTUALS, WITHOUT THE RAMPANT RELATIVISM SO PREVALENT ON TODAY'S CAMPUSES?

INTERACTIVE COURSES YOU CAN TAKE LIVE FROM YOUR HOME?

Though currently nonaccredited, the Distance Learning Program provides university-level course to an international student body, live, via teleconferencing and delayed via the internet. The Distance Learning Program affords one of the finest educational experiences available today: a rational, objective approach to economics, literature, history, philosophy, psychology and science. All instructors are outstanding intellectuals, all classes are interactive and are offered only through Lyceum International.

Registration is now open for the Fall 1998 session. Early registration closes August 15, 1998. Some courses may have limited enrollment, all have fifteen hours of instruction and Q & A. Homework and assignments are at the discretion of the instructor; exams will not be given at this time.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: 360-479-4765 WEBSITE: www.lyceumintl.com