

By **HARRIETT MUHAMMAD**

DEAR HARRIETT: I have a friend who, like myself, is very much interested in the cattle of Africa. Do the Africans have cowboys as we do? Do they really worship the cow, like I heard some one say? Do they exchange women and cattle?

My friend and I have had several arguments over these issues, and knowing that your paper, **MUHAMMAD SPEAKS** has many articles about Africa, I thought I'd write you to see if you know anything about the cattle of Africa.

—J.S.V.

DEAR J.S.V.: Cattle are very important for many Africans—for social as well as economic reasons. I don't know of any African cowboys as we picture them but they most certainly do have people that tend the herds, and in this sense could be called cowboys. Cattle are not raised in certain areas of Africa because of a social disdain for cattle, or because of the tsetse fly which carries disease to cattle and because of lack of pastoral areas. In the areas where they are found—especially the East African zone, they furnish milk and other dairy products, meat, tools, sleeping hides, ornaments and dung fuel.

Cattle are used also as a source of wealth. Some African people do make a gift of cattle to the family of the girl they marry, but it is not thought of as an even exchange but rather as a means of helping out the girl's family who is losing her helping hands.

In an area where subsistence depends upon the joint and cooperative efforts of a family, the loss of a daughter or several daughters can be severe. With this in mind, cattle which are a source of wealth, labor, prestige and subsistence, are given to even the work forces between the two families, since the new bride will be quite an asset to the man and his family.

Among the **NUER** of Central Africa, cattle are not worshipped but rather have a religious significance to the people. An initiated boy is equated with an ox and the clan or ancestral group is equated with the ancestral herd of the group, which is thought of as having nurtured and maintained it from its beginning.

The cattle are not treated as sacred in everyday life, but are related to the Nuer by "identification." A bull calf is given to a boy at the time of his initiation and becomes his friend and companion—even shares his name. This is when the youth and ox are thought to have entered into a new relation with God—it is a point of meeting between the boy and his spiritual being and to the Nuer, has a sacramental character.

But the ox is not worshipped—it is merely a means of communication between the Nuer and their God. This ox of initiation is preserved for sacrificial purposes. Whenever circumstances deem it necessary, at funerals, weddings, etc. an ox is sacrificed in the place of a man—this is why their relationship is said to be one of identification.

This is a very complex and interesting area and if you would like to learn more of the details, read **CULTURES AND SOCIETIES OF AFRICANS** by Simon and Phoebe Ottenberg.

These studies by anthropologists are pretty reliable and are studied and used by Africans as well.

Something on your mind? Write and tell me about it.

Harriett Muhammad

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