

Africa: Teach it like it is

BY KEITH E. BAIRD

"In a rapidly shrinking world, an educated person, and indeed, the general population, can no longer consider the history of Africa as a matter of indifference. Knowledge of Africa must be a part of universal human knowledge."

BACK IN THE 18th century, Jonathan Swift could chide his contemporaries with this satiric observation:

*So geographers, in Afric maps,
With savage pictures fill
their gaps, -
And o'er unhabitable downs
Place elephants for want
of towns.*

It is interesting, and even ironic, that today, more than 200 years later, a case should have to be made for the teaching of African history in American schools. But there are still too many individuals who question the existence, to say nothing of the relevance, of the history of the world's second largest continent.

School systems throughout the United States are now realizing, some with startled alacrity and others with more deliberate speed, that the role of African peoples in world history and particularly, at this time, in U.S. history must be fully and properly made known. The tendency, however, is to place the emphasis on the last 350 years' sojourn of Africans in America—i.e. Afro-American history—and to make only a more or less perfunctory reference to the "African background."

It is not necessary, in relation to

curriculum, to refer to Afro-American history as separate and distinct from African history on the one hand, and American (i.e. U.S.) history on the other. One does not ordinarily study or teach Anglo-American or Irish-American or Italian-American history, for example, but rather European history or American history. A well conceived program in African history will include not only the history of African peoples on the continent of Africa, but will embrace as well the history of African populations in other parts of the world, notably in the Americas.

There exists today a considerable and constantly growing body of knowledge concerning the history and culture of Africa. From the Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions and the writings of early commentators such as Herodotus to the 20th century researches of scholars such as Cheikh Anta Diop, L.S.B. Leakey, W.E.B. DuBois and Basil Davidson, there is a continuous record of the African contribution to world civilization. With the re-emergence of some 35 independent states of Africa in the last 20 years, the countries of Africa assume a new and cogent importance in the area of international relations. This develop-