

# I want to carry always this central idea: to be African

## African research

His years in London were spent in study and research in African languages and culture. He was one of the first to make a deep, scientific study of African culture. He early identified important elements and traced them to black culture in America—"survivals"—since verified by the work of anthropologist Melvin Herskovits. More than any other culture trait, American blacks reflected an inferiority complex that led him to imitate white people, he said. It was only reasonable that, having been taught that whites are superior, "his ambition is to become as nearly like a white man as is possible. . . . I am convinced that in this direction there is neither fulfillment nor peace for the Negro."

By 1934 he had studied the legends, folk tales and folk lore of West Africa; researched West African music; learned several languages of the area. He launched into a comparative study of Indo-European, African and Asian languages; studied African linguistics and several East African languages. He emphasized the sophistication of African languages that can convey greater subtleties than English, and associated the rich spiritual heritage of Africa with that of the great civilizations of Asia.

Robeson feared that black Americans would lose their African heritage and felt "cultural independence" to be a burning need.

Robeson believed the main weakness of the West was a loss of spirituality. "A blind groping after Rationality resulted in an incalculable loss in pure Spirituality." He maintained that the person who embraced Western values entirely would find his creative faculties stunted and would become entirely dependent on external gratification. "This is a severe price to pay even for such achievements as those of Western science."

He maintained that it was to the American black's benefit that he managed to keep some appreciation of the spiritual world.

"The modern white American is a member of the lowest form of civilization in the world today," he wrote. "My problem is not to counteract his prejudice against the Negro. . . . that does not matter. What I have set myself to do is to educate my brother the Negro to believe in himself. . . . We are a great race, greater in tradition and culture than the American race. Why should we copy something that is inferior?"

He determined to use his talents to this end. ". . . in my music, my plays, my films I want to carry always this central idea: to be African. Multitudes of men have died for less worthy ideas; it is even more eminently worth living for."



Emperor Jones, 1933



Proud Valley, 1939

the portland **trailblazers**

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