CULTURAL RELATIVITY is one of the chief cards played by anthropologists against the besetting sin of ethnocentrism, but the moral relativity entailed is one of the dilemmas with which thoughtful anthropologists perennially wrestle. So for once I will be bold and state my conviction that the warrior tradition is neither relevant nor useful for contemporary Africa. It inevitably summons up the colonial image of the noble savage, poised on one leg in nilotische stellung, fierce, courageous, independent, every inch a man and visibly male, honest and clean, lion-spearing, the virtuous though primitive contrast to the lying, thieving, spoilt “mission boy”. On the one hand it is a beguiling fantasy, – alter ego to discontented, disillusioned, frustrated, civilized, urban man; on the other hand a compensatory antidote to the troublesome real life native for the harassed imperial administrator.

The adulation of the warrior image never hampered the efficient suppression of resistance to the spread of imperial rule by local patriots fighting to preserve their freedom. Such local valor was soon quashed, and quite forgotten by later foreigners who came and found the Pax Colonia remarkably stable, and on the surface peaceful, so that its more violent and stern beginnings lay conveniently buried until recent Africanists dug them up again out of the archives and popularized them as “primary resistance movements,” (Ranger, 1968).

In so far as the warrior tradition continues to find expression in the verbal bellicosity and excessive military spending of some African leaders, it is a suicidal mockery, effectively destroying any hope of sound economic development and threatening nobody except fellow Africans, whether inside or outside the states which perpetrate it. Now that effective warriorhood depends directly on economic strength, which is Africa’s greatest weakness, martial posturing becomes a transparent exercise in vain machismo.

Furthermore, the African peoples whose poverty and economic backwardness are exploited to perpetuate the sentimental warrior image, on cinema and television screens, in game parks and tourist shows, or white men’s entertainments in South African mine and factory compounds, are not for the most part even those who posed the greatest military threat to the establishment of the Pax Colonia, nor yet those who in the previous era had been themselves the
most successful warriors in military expansion. They are, rather, those who have been left high and dry in inaccessible and inhospitable areas, far from the sources of new wealth, power and change, so that faute de mieux, their primal existence has continued colorful and unchanged.

There are deep and insidious dangers, as well as intellectual fallacies, in fostering the warrior image as a positive symbol in contemporary Africa and, as an example of it, flattering Field Marshal Hajji Idi Amin Dada as a mystical heir of Shaka the Zulu. Prancing about with tanks and guns may be a suitable posture for a charismatic army commander inspiring his soldiers in combat situations, - a General Patton seriously playing a boyish game as a grown man at the right moment, - but it is totally inappropriate for the head of a poor nation, as even Amin has increasingly had to discover, and as Nasser, Nimeiry, Boumedienne, Mobutu, Gowon and other African Soldier leaders had done before him, not to speak of Castro in Cuba or Suharto in Indonesia.

It is too early to tell clearly whether, or in what respects, Amin will destroy Uganda, (as the Economic War appears to be doing so far), but to justify Amin by certain positive and mostly unintended results of his rule would be like the German people justifying Hitler and eulogizing their own defeat on the grounds that Hitler restored their ethnic and racial pride, wounded in World War I, and that their destruction in World War II enabled them to rebuild their economy as the most powerful productive machine in Europe. The ultimate threat to Amin must come from within the warrior tradition which he has tried to revive. As highly educated and technically expert young officers come back from training in Russia or Libya they are bound in the end to insist on taking over the régime and introducing a more genuine modernization and efficiency, provided they are not all systematically eliminated on their return for this very reason, as has already been rumoured.

The Amin-Shaka identification commits the error of confusing the three domains which Social Scientists have always had to keep clearly distinct for analytic purposes: the personality system, the cultural system and the Social System.

There is also the empirical error that the Warrior Image does not, in fact, appear to be important in African states today. Soldier statesmen have not used it, as already pointed out. A Zairois scholar has characterized the successful image construction of General Mobutu Sese Seko Waza Banga (to give him his full, though fabricated name, as it must be used in Zaire, though rarely elsewhere) as la deification d'un chef. Even more recently, Mobutu has made it quite plain that his Party has, indeed, taken the place of the church. The images of chief, of divine King, of mystical supernatural power, are those which seem to be more often used. The naked power is palpable enough in many African states today. What it needs, even from the cold perspective of power maintenance, is not further emphasis by Warrior imagery, but sanctification. Of course, the images which are projected internally and externally need to be carefully distinguished and separately manipulated.

President Jomo Kenyatta, despite his radical and revolutionary past, dress-