

Representations

A cancerous image

The causes of Africa's negative and reductive image. Political and economic impact. Common stereotypes. The important role of mass-media. The role of international NGOs. Possible solutions.

by **Daniele Mezzana**

Is there a relationship between the **representation of sub Saharan**



*Students working in a library in Dakar, Senegal.
Source: Peggy D'Adamo, JHU/CCP, Photoshare, 2001*

Africa and its position within human societies, its past role, its international clout, its possibilities of development, in other words its “**lot**”? Readers of African Societies may feel the query is somewhat rhetorical as the e-magazine was expressly created to provide a more complete and realistic vision of the continent to replace the current and widespread negative, shallow

and misleading picture. Nevertheless, if we pose the question yet again, it means the answer can by no means be taken for granted, especially if we consider all the ways this material can be handled and the gamut of solutions that can be found.

Therefore, this article will attempt to provide some ideas for in-depth analysis, in particular concerning the approaches used to study the representation of the African continent (especially by the Western media – press, radio, television¹), the resulting image of Africa, the consequences of the spread (and enduring existence) of this image and the existing possibilities of reversing the trend to some degree. As will be seen, these possibilities are closely linked to the identification not only of assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices, but also of the specific players involved in this scenario, the procedures the latter adopt (more or less deliberately) and the barriers and opportunities they can be faced with.

Images and political and economical marginalization

The lines of study described hereinunder possess evident features and will therefore be presented separately, even if in many cases they are intertwined and overlapping and, as can be seen, many authors have worked in several research fields.

MORE ON STEREOTYPES

A **critical reassessment of the images of Africa** in Europe is crucial for a new cultural and economic approach between the two continents. On this background, Milan's **Centre for African Studies (COSA)** organised a **Conference in April 2002** in Milan, the proceedings of which, edited by Baye Ndiaye and Marco Padula, have just been published (*Images of Africa in Europe*, EMI, Milan 2002). The conference was attended by diplomats, representatives of international organisations, human sciences scholars, journalists, religious representatives, and cultural operators from a number of countries.

The themes addressed include: Africa's presence in Italian and US media; common misunderstandings and stereotypes about Africa's cultural reality; contributions to Africa-Europe relations from intellectuals such as Leopold Senghor; Africa's role in the global communications era; globalisation as a way to enhance diversity; sustainable development and international co-operation in the prospect of African Union.

There are a number of contributions to the text. They include a speech by the **Ambassador of Senegal to Italy, Momar Gueye**, who highlighted the **responsibilities of Western media** in spreading “one-way” information on African countries, along with the **Africans' responsibilities** in building and spreading negative images of the continent. As a further example, there was a contribution from linguist **Franco Crevatin**, from Trieste University, who stressed ways in which **the African identity is misunderstood and disparaged**, i.e.,

An initial line of study in this field embraces a series of contributions mainly adopting a critical approach and they tend to put the issue of the image of Africa on a political strategical plane. The authors taking this stance purport, that the current representations on the African continent, especially in the mass media, are prevalently manifestations of specific imbalances of power at the symbolic and communication level determined by players in the Northern hemisphere, such as governments, power groups, and multinational corporation whose interests are often concurrent woven.

Within such scenario, traditional analyses aimed at revealing the existence of old and new forms of colonialism and cultural, political and economical imperialism have been proposed once again, whereby the image of Africa in the Western media would be intentionally distorted – when not created ad hoc – in order to conform with the shared requirements and strategies of foreign, commercial and cultural policies and at the same time concealing Africa's role (especially its economic one) (Chavis, 1998) (Ebo 1992).

Other authors have highlighted the relationship between the quality of the information on Africa provided by the Northern hemisphere media and **governments'** intentions to periodically commit themselves to specific issues. For instance, think back to the 1980s and the food aid campaigns for Africa (Govea, 1992) when the real and proper presence of **hidden meanings** was underlined. For example the "discourse" on hunger in Africa and its causes, was interpreted as one of the signs of the Cold War between East and West (see further on) (Fair, 1992).

Asgede Hagos was one of the researchers who attempted to conduct an



People in line outside Amahoro stadium in Kigali, Rwanda.

Source: JHU/CCP, Photoshare, 2001

overall investigation on the **marginalization of Africa by the Western media**, especially the US media, at the turn of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s (Hagos, 2000). He underlines the close relationship between governmental bodies and the US media and records the US media's on-going tendency to neglect the African continent because it is of minor strategic

importance for the United States government. According to Hagos, the incomplete media coverage of Africa only resulted in greater dependency, exploitation and supremacy as it portrayed or replicated the idea of a continent and players on the sidelines of the world stage. The author also maintains that any media coverage was solely produced to suit precise **political or ideological requirements**, on the whole to undermine communism (for example the interpretation of phenomena, such as the antiapartheid movements in South Africa or the famines in Ethiopia and Eritrea over the period investigated).

Another study analyzes the image of Africa provided by the former USSR media over a longer time interval (1956 – 1993) than investigated in the previously mentioned US study (Quist - Adade, 2001). The former study revealed that the objectives of the existing interpretative prejudices and stereotypes differed from those reported by Hagos, but nonetheless tended to construct the same shallow and marginalized image as shown by other research on the same topic (Eribo, 2001). These stereotypes ranged from blaming the problems afflicting Africa on "imperialist scheming" to the representation of a continent unable to develop single-handed without outside help, in the

by misusing the word "dialects" when referring to African languages; applying a stigmatising distinction between (African) "ethnic groups" and (European) "peoples"; attributing an old-fashioned and magic kind of religiousness (animistic, in a derogatory sense) to the African continent - as if in Europe there were no magicians, astrologers, fortune-tellers with a mass following; describing **African thinking as puerile and naïve** compared to the Western "scientific" thinking.

D. M.

Translation: Rita Bandinelli

THE UPPSALA UNIVERSITY ON THE IMAGE OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

"Cultural images in and of Africa" is a project started in 1995 at the **Nordic Africa Institute of the Uppsala University** (Sweden), co-ordinated by Mai Palmberg. This project has among its objectives to contribute, mainly through comparative research and international workshops, to a critical review of cultural changes in Africa and the negative and biased images of the African continent that are common in North-European countries.

Issues on which the project is focused include: **culture and identity; cultural dynamics** in present-day Africa; **creation of the image** of the African continent. This last issue in particular has been explored with a view to investigating aspects such as how Northern NGOs throughout the world portray the African culture, and the images of Africa school textbooks convey.

As part of the project, an e-forum has been set up to allow an ongoing exchange of information.

The project's website is:

www.nai.uu.se/forsk/current/cult.html

Alessandra Olmi

case in point international aid that, in the author's opinion, barely concealed its **paternalistic** attitude.

Translation: Rita Bandinelli

International flow of news and newsworthiness

Over the recent decades (in particular, the years at the turn of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s)² (Malek, Kavoori 2001), numerous studies focused on the international flow of news. These investigations frequently had a quantitative approach and revealed marked disparity in the new flow. They also provided a wide empirical basis to show, for instance, the shortage (and the poor quality) of the African news reported by the Western media. News that in any case had only relatively recently reached the headlines, starting from the media coverage of some of the 1970 and 1980s disasters (famines and droughts).

There has been a drastic drop in the news on developing countries (by up to 50% in the 1990s) (Philo 2001) and it emerged, for instance, that only 2.2% of a news sample broadcast by the US television networks ABC, NBC and CBS regarded Africa⁴. Furthermore, it was seen that in the time interval October 10, 1999 to March 31, 2000 the main Italian TV news programs only dedicated 128 (0.6%) of the 21,500 news items to Africa, and that the vast majority of the news focused on catastrophes and violent episodes (Grandi, 2000). The vast imbalances are even more apparent bearing in mind that the four leading international press agencies (Reuters, Agence France-Presse, United Press International and The Associated Press) belong to only three countries and that these four agencies release most of the news to the press rooms worldwide (van der Heyden, undated).

Classic studies have also been conducted on the “newsworthiness”, or – in the case in question – on what the media feel are the vital criteria required to make events occurring in Africa, or in another developing country, international and thus marketable to some degree. Way back in the mid 1960s Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge conducted a famous pioneer study to endeavor to identify these criteria, the combination of which increased the probability of “newsworthiness” (Galtung, Ruge, 1965). For example, events that take place over a period of time that fits in with the work schedule in the specific type of media (24 hours for a newspaper), those that occur on a large enough scale (the size of the headlines depends on how violent or devastating the events are), those that present minor uncertainty (and are thus more easy to interpret) and are closer, and have more significance, to the public's culture. In other words, events that conform to the pre-existing mental image of Africa (discussed more in depth later on). Furthermore, according to Galtung and Ruge, to make the headlines events must be extraordinary, unforeseen and devastating, happen in important countries and involve important high ranking people and personal affairs.

There is a precise geography of “newsworthiness” as underlined by Herbert Gans' past studies that revealed the existence of a specific “cognitive map” of the world in the hands of media owners and staff. For example, in that period the US media favored news items regarding allied countries, followed by news from communist countries or their allies (it was the period of the Cold War), and dedicated very little attention to the rest of the world. This state of affairs and also the rationale described by Galtung and Ruge indicated that US activity abroad, activities influencing US politics and citizens, activities of

Abram de Swaan (1942)

is Research professor (Universiteitshoogleraar) at the University of



Amsterdam and held the chair of sociology from 1973 until 2001. He was co-founder and dean of the Amsterdam School for Social Research (1987-1997) and is presently its chairman.

De Swaan was the recipient of the biennial award of the Holland society for sciences, of the Busken Huet essay prize of the City of Amsterdam and of the annual prize of the Netherlands circle of political scientists. He is a member of several international editorial boards and of various advisory councils (a.o. Maison de Science de l'Homme, Paris). He was Grotius professor with the New School for Social Research, visiting professor at Columbia University, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris; Einaudi professor at Cornell U., European Union professor at Eötvös Loránd U. Budapest, and in 1997/'98 held the European Chair at the College de France in Paris. He is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences since 1996, and since 2000 of the Academia Europea de Yuste.

De Swaan has published numerous articles in scientific journals, cultural reviews and newspapers in the Netherlands and the USA. He published in English a.o. *In care of the state. Health care, education and welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era*, Cambridge/ New York, 1988 (translations in Dutch, German, Spanish and French), and: *The Management of Normality. Critical Essays in Health and Welfare*, Routledge, London/New York, 1990. His most recent work is *Words of the world. The global language system*, Polity Press 2001 (Dutch translation: Prometheus 2002).

De Swaan's present research interests are in transnational society, as it

Communist countries, elections and other peaceful changes in the institutions, political conflicts, disasters and reigns of terror were considered newsworthiness events (Gans, 1979). Many of these conclusions were confirmed by later research (Wolf, 1985), and it is rather obvious that – with the exception of the fall of the Berlin Wall – they still hold to some extent especially for the media coverage of African countries.

Social construction of image

Another more general type of approach aims at stressing the ways of



Kenyan girl talking on the telephone.

Source: Sammy Ndwiga, Photoshare, 1998

“social construction” of Africa’s image adopted more or less deliberately by different types of actors (media and others).

There is no doubt that in this scenario the media play the leading role (as described in depth later on), nevertheless some articles in this issue of *African Societies* show they are not the only, nor the first players. Although the present article mainly focuses on the role of the media, it must be underlined that the media merely use and handle **pre-existing cultural material** for their purposes.

Material of this kind can be found in works by Ancient Greek and Roman geographers, historians and naturalists (for example Strabo and Pliny) (Holstin, 2001). Additional material was produced by others, including explorers, missionaries, colonial officers, managers and staff of international bodies and non governmental organizations, educators, entrepreneurs and businessmen, tour operators⁵, historians, and down the line to journalists and owners of the mass media. These **players** also comprise persons above suspicion who advocate colonial rule and the theory that non European peoples “need to be guided”, for instance the liberal philosophers John Locke and John Stuart Mill (Parek, 1995).

Basically, there is an entire **system of narrative sources on Africa** (accessed not only by Westerners but also by Africans) providing a broad spectrum of information. It is made up of ethnographic museums, school books, novels, (e.g. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad)⁶, travelogues, sermons, informative dossiers compiled for investors, films (starting way back with Tarzan), cartoons, comics, music, photographs, posters, documentaries, theme parks, tour brochures, and obviously mass media communications. Yet, this data is often – as documented and described later on – incomplete, stereotyped, misleading and racist (Mengara, 2001). It has been deeply stratified in the cultures of the players involved – from long before from the age of colonization and slavery – and some authors feel that real and proper “**decolonization of imagery**” has to be achieved in the framework of pluralistic globalization of humanity (Pietrese, Parek, 1995).

concerns social policy, social identifications, and the rivalry and accommodation between language groups.

Dr. Daniel M. Mengara is now Associate Professor at the



Department of French, German, and Russian at the Montclair State University – Department of Affiliation (1996-present)

He is also the Executive Director of SORAC (Society of Research on African Cultures) and Editor-in-Chief of *SORAC Journal of African Studies*.

In 1995, he achieved a Ph.D. in Anglophone Studies at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis, specializing in African literatures and civilizations/postcolonial studies. He was awarded in 1996 an M.A. in French Studies, at the Illinois State University, specializing in second/foreign language pedagogy; in 1991 an M.A. in Anglophone Studies at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis, France, specializing in African literatures and civilizations/postcolonial studies and in 1990 a B.A. in English and Anglophone Studies at the Omar Bongo University of Libreville, Gabon.

He taught and carried out researches in the following fields: African civilization(s) and literature(s) in French and/or in English; Diaspora Studies (African-American & Caribbean); Postcolonial Studies; African Sociolinguistics and the French language; Comparative Gender Issues; Issues in Language Acquisition and Teaching (Pedagogy); General literary and cultural issues; Literary theory and criticism; Comparative literature; Africa and the West.

Susan D. Moeller, Ph.D. is currently senior fellow in the International Security Program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. She is on the faculty of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of

As mentioned elsewhere social researchers have played a particular role in this scenario (Davidson 1969; Mezzana, 2002), starting from those working for colonial research institutes up to the present day. In reality, the application of **evolutionism** together with **cultural anthropology** (understood as the one social/human science applicable to the African context according to a tacit but on-going disguised colonial **disciplinary subdivision of the world**) has produced a strong underrepresentation of the African social reality and its real mechanisms and has attached negative labels to the whole continent (with categories such as lack of history, animism, primitivism, and so on). People like Cyril Obe reported the ethnocentrism of the current debates on Africa and underlined a **widespread practice in social research**, i.e. “allowing” local researchers merely to record brute data that are then used by Western experts to be interpreted by them as they deem fit (Obi 2001). This practice, along with other factors, has obviously favored marginalization of African scientists and their work.

As previously mentioned, all the material – let’s call it “sociological” material – **ends up in the media** that are, in this sense, means of consolidation, further transmission, and, to some extent, active construction of the representations previously created by the above mentioned agencies, albeit with specific modalities and a capability of impact somehow greater. However, the entire history of sociology of communication has clearly shown that the media’s role **never appears to represent a sort of absolute power over the public**. If anything, the extent of the media’s influence on constructing social reality – where it can be attempted – depends on the interrelationships between the activity of same media and the numerous features of the social life of **those using it**, such as social groups, networks, know how and knowledge, critical capacity, access to multiple sources, level and type of exposure to texts transmitted by the same media, intentionality and so on (Hawkins, Pingree, 1983; Wolf, 1992).

Hence, (and deferring a more detailed analysis to elsewhere and other sources - some of them previously cited), it is clear that one of the features of the media is its major role as an **information resource on realities not directly available** to individuals, and this is what the present dossier focuses on. As many studies show, this peculiar feature of the media is particularly true in the case of Africa. Even people who have never been to Africa know (or feel they know) something about it thanks to access - by no means passive, but differentiated and “negotiated” – to the above mentioned sources. And according to authors like Beverly G. Hawk, **specific cognitive structures** regarding the African continent can be identified. It is a question of library stock, myths, symbols and structures (see above) that have accumulated over time and play a part in building, or at least consolidating, the perception or misperception of unintelligible and/or little known situations. These structures determine specific **“cultural receptors” concerning the African reality** in the Western public that tend to be reflected on the same Africans (Hawk, 1992). As underlined by many persons, the commercial interests of the owners of the media and, even more so, the representations on the presumed expectations of the public are involved in building such structures (Beattie *et al.*, 1999). Besides, these expectations are usually assessed by very questionable criteria and lead to **false homogenization of the audience** that, in reality also in the case of news on developing countries and Africa in particular, has very different expectations (Philo, undated).

In this framework some authors speak about the existence of influential “discourses” on Africa, i.e. the conventions and rules shaping the

Maryland.

She is the author of *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death; and Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*. Moeller has also written and spoken extensively on war journalism, human rights, the media and public policy, and photojournalism. Moeller's professional experience includes serving as a consultant to Public Radio International and Save the Children; writing articles and columns for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *Seattle Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*; and lecturing on media coverage of humanitarian crises, third-world health issues, and social problems and public policy.

Currently, **Dr. Quist-Adade** teaches Sociology and Mass communication courses in University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. At Wayne State University, he teaches Sociological Theory and Social Psychology.



Dr. Quist-Adade attained a Diploma in journalism from Ghana Institute of Journalism, MA in Mass Communication from Leningrad State University in Russia and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Petersburg State University in Russia.

Before Dr. Quist-Adade came to Wayne State University, he worked as a newspaper journalist and radio broadcaster for the *Ghanaian Times* and *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation*, as well as a press officer for the Hungarian Embassy in Accra Ghana before heading to Russia, where he worked as a correspondent for the *London (U.K.)-based syndicated Gemini News Service* in Leningrad.

Besides teaching, Dr. Quist-Adade publishes and edits *Sankofa News* a community-oriented newsmagazine. He is also the Windsor correspondent of *Gemini News Service* and occasionally he strings for various newsmagazine in London, England. In addition, he produces and hosts the

content of stories and news on Africa, and relate such content to much wider bodies of **social knowledge**. According to Jo Ellen Fair, the media in particular tend to package, re-use and spread discourses produced by politics, science, religion, education and other knowledge producing organizations (Fair, 1992). Among others examples the author cites the case of the 1984-85 **famine** in Ethiopia and Sudan that sparked off four other different “discourses”, i.e. the discourse on the crisis (how famine was defined); the discourse on the aids providers (related to their objectives, their political stances on the international checkerboard – it was the period of the Cold War – their works); the discourse on the receiving governments; the discourse on the peoples (in other word the poor in the countries receiving aid) that were only barely represented just to confirm the well known stereotypes of passive populations incapable of looking after themselves without aid (discussed later on).

It must be pointed out that many of the cited studies do not simply analyze the texts produced and disseminated, but they also examine the crucial factor of iconography (photographs, drawings, maps, prints, posters, food labels and the cinema) (Pieterse, 1992). Recently, in the field of photography alone, the **knowledge of the social reality produced by photographers** has attracted attention (Mitchell, 1994). It is by no means a neutral production (Bolton, 1992) and often, as in the case of Africa, as shown by the special “tematic analysis” proposed by the Glasgow Media Group (Philo, 1998), it tends to portray individuals or human groups as **plain “bodies”** – more often that not in need – totally removed from the historical, social and political context they live in. This approach adopted by photographers has been, and still is, used to support aids campaigns, and often has devastating effects on the image of the continent and its peoples (discussed alter on). Not to mention the iconography linked to the **African woman** – special victim of the distortion of Africa’s image (Mengara, 2001; Presley, 2000) – and the predominantly folkloristic, rural and naturalistic iconography generally provided by the above mentioned sources that the same cooperation organizations promoting development find difficult to steer clear of. Thus, within the framework of “geopolitical aesthetics” (Jameson, 1992) there has been a longstanding debate on how to achieve a more accurate **photographic representation** of Africa. And Sebastião Salgado’s contemporary “**documentary photograph**” approach is gaining ground as many people feel it conveys more effectively the complex lives of the persons in the photograph.⁷

“Safari Pan-Afrikana Show” – a show on news, music, commentaries on issues concerning continental Africa and African Diaspora- on the local CJAM, the University of Windsor and Community radio station He is author of many articles and essays published in books and journals.

Recurring assumptions and stereotypes

As mentioned, numerous specific stereotyped representations and



*A record store in Lagos, Nigeria.
Source: JHU/CCP, Photoshare, 1989*

images of Africa have accumulated over the years and have created a sort of **body of knowledge**. This body is accessed by individuals during socialization processes and becomes part of **semantic memory** (Woodhall, Davis, Sahin 1983). It is also automatically retrieved and often used as a real and proper **interpretive shortcut** to

understand the African reality (more than often considered as unique and undifferentiated) and to decipher its facts. Such representation and

images can be considered real and proper “**assumptions**”, in particular **negative myths** that are difficult to discuss and assess critically. Some researchers believe that the media plays a key role in creating a sort of “**social ignorance**” of the masses (Schechter 1998). The various studies examined (both those mentioned previously and the ones cited hereinafter) provide a brief list of these stereotypes (some of which have already been indicated).

The **standard stereotypes** indubitably portray the Continent Africa as a place of major natural catastrophes (floods, volcanic eruptions, droughts, etc.) and brutal and violent social conflicts, but also as a breathtakingly beautiful wild habitat. In other words in westerners’ eyes Africa is rife with danger (Hawk 1992), yet at the same time it is an exotic continent, the land of adventure. The first reports given by the nineteenth century explorers described a continent where the people were “different” to us, their pigmentation was different, their anatomy was different (positively or negatively), their traditions were different. Nonetheless, they depicted the inhabitants as simple, hospitable, authentic and kind in line with the myth of the “good savage”. It is also an “allochronic” land (Corbey 1995) where time is believed to flow differently, if at all, to the diachrony experienced by the rest of humanity, or at least in the northern hemisphere. And this is enhanced by the alleged exclusively “rural” nature of the continent.⁸

Recurring stereotypes of African peoples’ **cultural characteristics** stress their “alterity” and inveterate diversity compared with Western models. The connotations behind the expression the “Black Continent” has to be extended to take in the supposed darkness, dullness, impenetrability and the occult side of the African world. As can be seen in Jean-Loup Amselle’s article in this issue, only some purely aesthetic elements (African art, the interrelationship between their life and the cosmos, African sexuality, Africans’ sense of community) are recuperated or appreciated.

As for as mentality is concerned the classic and well known recurring **stereotypes** of Africans represent them as constantly and inevitably primitive, irrational, superstitious, lazy, as well as incapable to plan or care for themselves plans, if anything just managing to survive. When these characteristics are transferred to know how and professionalism, the result is a picture of individuals and groups possessing poor cognitive and operative capacity, ill suited to managerial positions⁹ and depending on outside aid for any emergency.

On a **political level** the current stereotype is one of anarchic tribalism (an African specialty!) whereby the political fights of the African populations are mainly thought to be driven by blind and irrational forces (in other words “tribal” in the worst sense possible) instead of nationalistic tensions, or any sort of values ideological or implications (Maloba, 1992). Other frequently adopted categories include depict despotism and corruption that, ascribed to this continent, immediately become endemic possessing folkloristic features. The tacit conclusion is that nothing can work in Africa and no form of government is possible, let alone a democratic one.

The outcome is an image of a **continent that is perpetually in crisis**, without any hope of advancing without palliative and charitable aid, or at the best, without assistance provided and managed by good willed (non African) actors.

Professional procedures and practices

How do the media produce and, if possible, re-elaborate certain representations of the African continent, what procedures do they follow? Some researchers (including Beattie *et al.*, 1999; Biney, 1997; Hawk, 1992; Ardesi, 1992; Chavis, 1998) in the wake previous studies on media operators' professional practices and routines, have identified some recurring mechanisms. These include:

- processes of **selection/omission** of news items connected to the cultural, organizational and professional mechanisms of the so called “agenda setting” (i.e. deciding which news items to concentrate on) (Shaw, 1979) and that preside over the newsworthiness of events (see above);
- **decontextualization**, i.e. reporting facts stripped of any historical, social, political, cultural or economic information that could explain them, help in making sense and relate them to other facts (interest towards Africa swells whenever background information is added to the events described or shown) (Philo, undated);
- a consequent **evenemential** approach, i.e. the highest degree of sensationalism whereby when speaking about Africa only crises, coup d'états, wars, revolts, famines, epidemics (just think of the issue on the alleged origin of AIDS), and if possible episodes of cannibalism are reported;
- **dramatization** or description of the events, processes as well as human and social relations in terms of dual conflicts between individuals (usually leaders) and groups;
- **oversimplification** or attribution of the above mentioned events, processes and relations to clichéd, clear cut, shallow schemes (would anyone ever blame the Holocaust on the alleged violent nature of the Germans?). Regarding Africa clichés of this kind are the norm;
- **dehumanization**, or elimination of the actors, in favor of entities or abstract processes or stereotypes (as occurs for example when certain conflicts are blamed on certain racial trades, such as “violence among blacks”);
- on the contrary the excessive **personalization** or individualization that can trigger off leaderism (this can occur describing events and historical periods, when, for example, national governmental leaders are put in the limelight and the role of civil society is put in the shade);
- the use of **simple binary oppositions** to describe complex situations (for example, primitive/modern);
- the use of **synecdoche** (i.e. a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole), for example when populations such as the Maasai are used to represent the entire African continent;
- the **abuse** of specific terms, for example the excessive use of words like “tribal”, “primitive”, “animism”, “savage”, or “jungle” (why is the Amazon Forest instead is not called a jungle

but Forest?)¹⁰ or also the collective term “African/africans” for realities referring to a continent comprising 54 sovereign states.

Channeling emotions and the role of international NGOs

The role of what has been defined the use of the **players-mediators** to legitimize specific interpretations of the African reality and, to some extent, **to channel the public's emotions** must not be overlooked in this framework. These player-mediators often include **non governmental organizations** that, intentionally or unintentionally, at times can be involved in portraying Africa as incapable of going it alone and in victimizing the African actors (for example, in conflicts, epidemics, famines), are depicted as mere passive receptors of outside aid. This representations in turn, enhance the prestige of those who help the “victims” and make the providers’ action more acknowledged, all of which has a great impact on the fund raising plans.

The existence of a sort of “**structural synergy**” between many of these organizations, the occurrence of catastrophes and the action of the media in the various forms of so called “disaster reporting” has been postulated (Ronning, 1998)¹¹. It must be pointed out that in order to avoid, and if possible, to **prevent such a risk** some of the most attentive non governmental organizations, such as Oxfam, Save the Children and EveryChild launched reflections of the “ethical use” of images of African people way back in the 1980s.¹²

Indubitably, the issue that Susan Moeller calls “**compassion usury**”, in other words a reduction or excessive selection of the collective emotionalism required to mobilize the public's conscience and support has to be tackled. For instance, in emergencies and crises this usury is fueled by the non stop broadcasting of negative images by humanitarian organization and media operators showing the plight of the victims produced. This situation is even more complicated by the fact that these events often occur over the same time interval and therefore they “vie” for visibility, and this triggers off the mechanism of being sensitized the public “for only one crisis at a time” (Moeller, 1998).

Barriers

The literature reported in this field has revealed **barriers** impeding better and more informative coverage on the African continent (Hawk, 1992; Moeller, 1998) over and above the previously mentioned ones, e.g. the imbalances in economic and political relations, in international flow of news, on the methods of social construction of the African reality.

It is evident that some of the barriers are **material and operational**, for example: the financial problems of Western newspapers that do not have the funds to open up local offices in the various African countries; the scarcity of resources (technical and/or financial) of the African media¹³; the inadequate telecommunication systems (the well known digital) and transport systems; the direct or indirect censorship that can be enforced by some African governments and the ensuing reluctance, (or fear), shown by many local sources to provide information.

The **cognitive barriers** are no less important. They regard social representations, inbuilt professional models and politico-cultural relations between actors scattered in various corners of the globe. These cognitive impediments include: the postulated minor interest Western



A print shop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Source: Hugh Rigby, JHU/CCP, Photoshare, 2001

readers have for African reality (as shown this supposition is to a great extent produced *ad hoc*); the different conception of the media's role whereby to the Western media is recognized (not without producing new stereotypes) a role of "control" or even criticism towards the public powers, while the African media are given a "supporting" role (constructive or merely propaganda); the diffidence

African journalists show towards their Western counterparts; the on-going use of an "imported" northern hemisphere model of journalism by African media operators (see the article by Monica Mofammere published in this issue); the silent complicity of African reporters and intellectuals vis a vis the images of their countries, i.e. the lack of total commitment to provide adequate information on these countries; the idea that distance (also physical) between the Western correspondents and certain African realities makes the reporting more objective (giving rise to difficulties in having direct and reliable on site sources), and so on.

In this context media reporting on Africa **never shows the "achievements"** of African societies, nor does it report the prevalent **values** or issues of "**normality**" (fashion, consumption, curiosities, sports – with the exception of the world soccer championship, etc.) that are generally transmitted by northern palimpsests and are reported on during news programs. Speaking of which, the recent debate between those (like the writer Wole Soyinka) who affirmed the *a priori* right of an African nation to host even a trivial event like the Miss World competition and those who were against this choice (long before any of the serious incidents that occurred in November 2002) in the name of ethico-political prejudices, rather than apprehension concerning public order or the handling of the relations between the religious groups, is emblematic.

The question of the **African media** (both the international media such as Panapress agency¹⁴ and the national and local media) actively involved in the difficult task (see later) of processing and proposing new representation modes of the continent is a totally different issue and should be tackled elsewhere including the use of the **Internet**. The network of networks as a special feature in this magazine attempts to show is a (pluralistic) source able to produce a real and proper "**counterimage**" of Africa. Via the Internet important information on the modern social, economic, political and cultural reality of the entire African continent can be retrieved and fill in the full, otherwise hazy, picture. Today the major impact of the Internet on the image of Africa is clear, and will probably increase in the coming years.

Effects

It will not be easy to eradicate the **damaging chain effects** created by the above mentioned cultural and social models, policies and organizational routines.

Also in this case these effects include **cognitive** based ones. The main one is the invisibility of Africa in the media (Hagos, 2000) and especially the non coverage of countries that “hit the headlines less “. Nonetheless there are other, deeper effects that need to be underlined. For example, by spreading the idea that the African crisis is “natural”, whereby the “good news” about the continent reported in this magazine is the exception to the rule, minor attention is paid to African societies and their potential nowadays. Today Africa’s dual representation catches the interest, i.e. its mythical image of a former garden of Eden now gone (or at best surviving in few natural or anthropological “parks”) opposed to the image of a near and pending Apocalypse. While on this topic the stereotyped representation of conflicts must be stressed as to consider them as mere expressions of atavistic ethnic conflicts, and what’s more socially created ones (see the case of Rwanda) (De Swaan, 2002; Biney, 1997; Allen, Seaton, 1999) only fires the underlying reasons for the conflicts, legitimizes them and creates a vicious circle.

The damaging chain of effects snakes on and can be seen in the misconception or **delegitimization of the African political, economic and social actors**. If all the leaders really were corrupt, if there were no middle class entrepreneurs, if civil society were a mere collection of edifying models of solidarity, then there would be really no hope for the continent. Luckily it is a different story, but the prevalent representations tend to conceal all this and fuel the so called of “**Afropessimism**” strain (Okigbo, 2002).

Down the line this system of representation of Africa hinders international cooperation interventions, and makes governments and enterprises very **reluctant to invest** in the continent. The latter is very negatively influenced by the stereotype of a “single” Africa, whereby problems related to operating in an area of conflict are projected over the whole continent to take in peaceful countries that have not experienced clashes since decolonization. Speaking on this point an observer revealed that the conflicts waging in Sierra Leone, the area of the Great Lakes and in the Horn of Africa were not the only wars on the planet, but that nobody would have dreamt of associating the concomitant violence in East Timor, South Lebanon, Chechnya, Sri Lanka and elsewhere to Asia as a whole¹⁵.

On an operational level the immediate effect of the bad image of Africa can be seen. It involves the upsurge of **more or less evident proposals to recolonize** the continent (hopefully an “enlightened recolonization”) and the almost forced spread of western development models, or even worse, of economic solutions that by-pass a cultural and social dimension that is considered hard to manage today.

Some strategies and proposed solutions

If this is the state of affairs, **is there a way out?** Several **actors** have tried to find one. First of all the most sensitive section of the scientific communities in Africa and the northern hemisphere has launched widespread teaching activities and conducted research on the image of Africa and, indubitably, this will have effects on new generations of



The Chamber of Commerce in Dakar, Senegal.
Source: Sara A. Holtz, Photoshare, 2001

intellectuals and media
operators. As previously

mentioned, the most attentive sectors of non governmental organizations cooperating for development have long carried out specific training and sensitization programs aimed at preventing or restricting the effects of any negative image of Africa their collaboration may produce. Moreover, several international agencies (such as PNUD, INIDO, UNESCO and OSCAL, the World Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and others) are adopting special programs in an attempt to promote a more realistic picture of the African continent in the context of global community. Numerous conferences have been held to achieve this goal and programs like the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa- UNSIA have been launched.

But what **strategies** and **proposals** have been formulated to find a way out? It is patent that it is useless to complain about the current state of affairs, or challenge the more or less explicit politico-economic conspiracies against the African continent. On the contrary, many feel it is opportune to identify areas where intervention is feasible, in other words “medium range” **areas where significant changes can be promoted** and achieved. Generally speaking it has been stressed that it is by no means enough to guarantee more informative coverage on the African continent, but that action must be wide reaching. The solutions identified over the recent years – identified in the sources consulted – include the following.

On what can be defined as a sociological and cultural level, it has been proposed that the **stereotypes** on Africa must be **deconstructed** using scientific and educational tools. Furthermore, the **media’s approach** towards Africa **must be revised** and their informative strategies realigned to consider the trends, contexts and positive events occurring in the continent.

Sensitization and **education** programs involving the Western public are required at various levels to promote the desire to have better in-depth and qualified information on the African reality.

Programs addressed to **human resources in the media** are crucial. It is advisable to select correspondents who have lived and worked in Africa, or those who intend staying there some time, and to train Western journalists (via training courses on history, African culture courses, methods for selecting and handing news) and African reporters (not only professional updating courses but also special courses to revive cultural identity and social responsibility).

Networking has been suggested. Involvement of “friends of Africa” no matter where they are and what field they operate in, as long as they commit themselves to spread a more exact image of the continent, even via horizontal exchange between civil society actors. Obviously a special role can be played by members of the African **diaspora**, contribution can be invaluable in the gap between cultures and societies.

In this scenario, the setting up of a real and proper **international ombudsman** able to represent a benchmark for analysis and accurate intervention on the image of Africa was proposed way back in the mid 1980s. But, no such figure was created (not even a network of actors) and at present there are no plans to identify it and make it operative.

Obviously there are programs aimed at **sustaining the growth** and the **international presence of the African media** providing financial aid

and technological infrastructure. This framework includes programs whose goal is to triumph **over the “digital divide”** existing between African countries and the rest of the world. This ditch jeopardizes African politics, its economy and technology as well as the media image of the entire continent 16.

These are but a few examples of the operational programs that have been, or can be, implemented. It is very important also in this regard to be aware of how much the current image of Africa **is rooted** in global imagery and how it derives from a **collective social production** with various degrees of intentionality. This in order to be able to reverse the previously mentioned processes that put at risk the African presence of Africans on the global scene and the development of the continent.

[Notes](#)

[References](#)