

Africa in the Western Media

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by

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The purpose of this paper is to cite and address, within the time frame allocated and to the extent it can be done, some evidences of a modus operandi Western Media organizations employ to specifically dump negative news materials and information when reporting, communicating, or disseminating anything concerning Africa. The lifeways of approximately 700 million peoples in fifty-four countries representing, for non-Africans, unimaginable multicultural, polyethnic, polyreligious, multipolitical, and megaeconomic groups are perpetually denigrated. Africa's incalculable natural wealth, which is barely available to its indigenous populations, and her ecosystem, are endangered by insatiable Western consumption. This item goes unnoticed or is ignored by consumers in the metropolises of Europe, Japan, and North America-the U.S. consumes about 60% of the world's resources but has only a fraction (4.1 %) of the world's population. With the stroke of a journalist's pen, the African, her continent, and her descendants are pejoratively reduced to nothing: a bastion of disease, savagery, animism, pestilence, war, famine, despotism, primitivism, poverty, and ubiquitous images of children, flies in their food and faces, their stomachs distended. These "universal" but powerfully subliminal message units, beamed at global television audiences, connote something not good, perennially problematic unworthiness, deplorability, black, foreboding, loathing, sub humanity, etc. On the other hand, little is said about Africa's strategic importance to so called industrialized nations; her indispensability and relevance to world development, global technology, and the wealth of nations, derived from involuntary African largesse, are not acclaimed in the media. The amorphous news spin is America has to protect her strategic interests and national security. Without access to certain raw materials from Africa, Western industrial capacity would wither much like a "raisin in the sun". Even less is communicated via the media or anywhere else about the incalculable volume of African art and crafts that end up in private collections and museums: books, calendars, and artistic publications, produce minimal income and royalties, if any, for Africans creating such works of art. Mega profits are gained by expatriate marketers in royalties, commissions, exhibitions, documentaries, movies, shows, and other niches in the U.S and world art and craft consumer market. African unique textile designs are now bootlegged or blatantly copied by other international economic and globally marketing groups. Sadly, until the ban on ivory importation, elephant and rhinoceros

populations were facing certain extinction because foreign consumers, mainly in Asia, demanded their tusks for medicinal purposes and aphrodisiacs. Africans, themselves, see no value in decimating these animal populations for profit. Yet, those Western Media moguls, who can find only the negative when Africa is the subject, create Africa's world image almost entirely to serve their capitalistic greed while simultaneously denigrating the continent's global image. It is an image again that is put on Africa by outsiders, primarily Europeans, whose abiding motivation is profit. That image is as dark as the pervasive fear conjured up in their minds. On the other hand, Africa herself projects warmth and welcome. Even this aspect of the African personality is cinematographic in that it appeals to the Western tourist's palette through its media: adventure, safari, natural wonders, big game hunting, and the Sun City like attractions.

This "other" designation works always to the advantage of its creator. Usually, the "other" is not sufficiently powerful to respond to media opprobrium because of political, social, economic, and resource deprivation or disadvantageous alliances with external imperialist, political, and economic dynamics. An early historian noted, "we flatter ourselves imagining African peoples as primitive or barbarous prior to European interference in her affairs, and that it is we who have civilized them. But it is theory that lacks historical foundation...The Empire of Ghana flourished during Europe's dark ages; Mali and Nigeria had highly complex civilizations prior to European military intervention and colonial adventurism in Africa." Africa's contribution to European and world technological and later capitalistic development, exacted through infamous treaties and the concordat, especially, in the final analysis, was of no direct or collateral benefit to the indigenous owners. Africa's resources, lands, people, and cultures were expropriated. Miscreant behavior, resulting in not just massive disruption of African people's cultural norms and values, as well, artificial territorial boundaries across communal lands, forced European acculturation, etc., were sanctioned by every institution in the societies (of Europe). The press of those early Darwinian years and its successor today, continues a tradition: stereotype and bombast, bias and disdain often are warp and woof of media coverage when Africa is the subject. Western Media treat the African continent as a malignant appendage rather than as an integral, systemic part of the earth and all its natural functions in accordance with universal laws. Its indigenous populations are depicted as without value. One needs surgical removal while the other should quietly accept his biblical destiny: the curse of Ham.

Inarguably, much of what is known today, indeed, has its origins and basis in Africa: Kemet (Egypt), as the precursor in all fields of human activity and the world's foundation upon which subsequent epistemology is based, magnanimously passed on its knowledge to the world: a world that would have developed much slower without the benefit of ancient Kemet's highly developed and organized dynastic civilizations. Her gifts to the world, intellectually and in all known spheres of human development, is unequivocal: mathematics, science, astrology, architecture, medicine, building, the arts, language, metaphysics, religion, and spirituality.

What do negative media images, conveyed by the Western Media about Africa communicate? What darkness prevails in the mind of the producer(s)? What gains for whom derive from journalistic bombast and unmitigated stereotype of a whole continent? Nouns and adjectives like hut, dark, tribe, King Kong, tribalism, primitive, nomad, animism, jungle, cannibal, savage, underdeveloped, third world, developing, etc., are yet pervasive when Africa is the story. Historically, since at least the issuance of the Papal Bull of 1455, when the Pope of Rome authorized Spain and Portugal to go out into the world, the one east and the other west, to bring salvation to the heathens, -and, coincidentally, set up new territories for the crown-, word of mouth initially and now sophisticated, globally reaching electronic news organizations, maintain a negative reportage policy when the subject is Africa. Balance is rarely evidenced; why? Must a news organization demonstrate objectivity, responsibility, ethical standards, and fairness? Images of Africa in the Western Media, many times, are deeply troubling psychologically and emotionally, especially to those claiming her as primordial heritage, lineage, and descendancy. They portray a no there there: no culture, no history, no tradition, and no people, an abyss and negative void. Dark or black connotes fear, foreboding, and evil. Africa, as a continent, African nations, African peoples and lands, in the Western Media, and its constituencies, conjure up Richard Wright's classic Native Son or Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man; she is the bastardized other, an ectoplasm, subjected to relentless vitriol and eternal marginalization while her vast resources are ruthlessly extracted by neocolonialist forces, new world order syndicates, and interlocking global corporate entities. For example, a recent U.S. ex-president, is a principal in a mining operation in Zaire, a country the size of the U.S., West of the Mississippi. Why is Zaire so poor, with all that wealth underground: copper, diamonds, gold, manganese, cobalt, inter alia. Modern media, more than religious organizations and the academy, have the ability to broadcast to every nook and cranny on the planet, instantaneously,

any "news" or image concerning anything and do. Africa is bludgeoned repeatedly by the press: famine, warlords, coup d'etat, epidemics, drought, tribalism, and on and on it goes.

Early inquiry into and pontification about the origin of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) contraindicated any origin for the disease other than out of Africa. Subsequent research has rebuffed such unsubstantiated theory. However, just recently, an article appeared in a local newspaper citing DNA studies of a man in Zaire who had AIDS in 1959. Is it prudent for the scientific and medical research community to find someone or thing to blame AIDS on or would resources better be used to develop public education campaigns as well as prevention and intervention strategies that together will eliminate the threat of AIDS to future populations anywhere on the planet? Does the scourge of AIDS restrict itself to national or international borders or territories? Does it selectively kill? What do the media gain by spreading dubious information, information that has not been thoroughly documented or researched prior to reporters and journalists rushing to meet press deadlines? Investigative reports by the broadcast and print media have devoted talent and monetary resources to influencing and shaping world opinion: AIDS came out of Africa. Did such hype save one life?

Similarly, the recent terrorist bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (August '98), countries in East Africa, did not receive precise reportage. Headlines suggested Africa is a country rather than fifty-four sovereign nations. Most people have no understanding of world geography, let alone specific nations in Africa. Why does the media not promote understanding in its "objective" reportage? Conversely, the Oklahoma City bombing (April 1995) was given infinitesimal reportage; specifics on the people, region, local culture, lifestyle, and environment were given for viewer consumption repeatedly. Ostensibly, such detailed coverage was important so as to heighten a sense of national empathy. Local residents were interviewed to add authenticity of how real lives were utterly disrupted or destroyed by the heinous crime. How does the media justify perpetrating disparities, circumvention of objectivity, and sometimes questionable journalistic and professional ethics in reporting critical newsworthy African events for domestic and global consumption? Why is it "ethnicity" in Bosnia or Kosovo and "tribe" in Africa? Why are certain African cultural groups, residing in "jungles" designated pygmies while northern, caribou herding Europeans of similar physical stature are referred to as Laplanders? Why were the Sans People (South Africa) renamed Hottentot? Can one conclude that negative reportage of events in Africa, compared to other reporting and spin tactics, by major news organizations, like racism in America, is systemic? Can the news chroniclers, wire services, media organizations, and other gatherers of news, find nothing of value to report when Africa is the subject-and a sound byte at that? The media industry practice of consistently practicing the opposite is deeply troubling.

Is there a historical precedence for denigrating Africa, the continent that most anthropologists agree, Lucy, humankind's grandmother, came from some two million years ago? Does life thrive in light or in darkness? Dark Continent is an oxymoron of the highest order. As Ralph Ellison questions in his seminal work, Invisible Man, would Lucy, our African progenitor, and exponentially great grandmother lament, "when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed anything and everything except me". Others gained their knowledge and information about Africa from Greek stalwarts of history whose histories "often were regarded as being equal in truth almost to the Bible". Scholars like Ptolemy, Herodotus, and Pliny the Elder were prodigious in documenting events, peoples, cultures, and histories of Africans along the northern or Mediterranean rim of the African continent from the Western Sudan to Egypt: Herodotus, visiting the region in the 5th century BC, describes his entourage of young men as being "suddenly surprised and captured by a company of little black, swarthy (author's sic) dwarfs who took them to their city by a river filled with crocodiles". Ptolemy the geographer, living in Egypt during Roman times, meaning Egypt was under foreign domination and not in control of her own national affairs, suggested southern Africa was connected to Asia by a land bridge. Through The Travels of John Mandelville, one learns, "the whole of Africa is Mauritania, and folk of that country be called Moors, still others have a foot so large it shadoweth the body against the sun; in the southern parts one finds people with no heads, their eyes be in their shoulders". To some degree, European knowledge about Africa was only correctly compiled and presented by a 16th century Moor from Spain (Leo Africanus: History and Description of Africa). Contextually, in order to justify subsequent motives as to their business in African lands, critical to his mission, seeking riches, gold, etc., the European denigrated the African for psychological purposes as strategy to fulfill Machiavellianism, later Darwinism, Imperialism, still later

the so called white man's burden, colonialism, and neocolonialism, the final stage of imperialism eruditely presented by the late Ghanaian President Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Europeans, seeking to expand their national borders by reaching beyond the political, economic, social, and civil chaos of Europe, insidiously, focused their entire attention on controlling and raping Africa. In doing so, they effectively knelled Africa's demise and collateral underdevelopment, which persists today. Media organizations were present in yesteryears lauding Europe's takeover of a continent through the infamous Berlin Conference 1884-5; Africa was Balkanized without any regard for her people, ancestral and communal lands, culture, lifeways, etc. The media of today is even more powerful and influential. Its sophisticated approach to creating the African image, shaping and reshaping, goes largely unchallenged by those directly affected. Often, they do not know how their image is disseminated to the world.

Driven by greed, the spirit of conquest in distant lands, far from fourteenth and fifteenth century Europe, early explorers, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French navigators, set out to find solutions to domestic economic and political turmoil through exploitation, systematic usurpation of lands and territories of indigenous Africans they encountered along the coastal areas of Africa, West and East. Extension of alien European monarchial rule, papal authority, bogus treaties, and agreements, as modalities to "legitimize" nation stealing and their wealth of material resources but a systematic insidious theft of the posterity of infinite millions of Africans, followed. From that point in history the fate of Africa and her peoples' fate, then and now, was determined not in favor of the land, its wealth or the people whose lifeways, cultures, and futures depended on the richness of those lands.

Africa's image in the Western Media is not a self-portrait. It is not a what you see is what you get. Because media conditioning shapes, molds, and monopolizes those images, references to Africa are received sometimes with disdain and contempt. Even African descendants, who have virtually no cultural competence, actually contribute to how Africa is projected globally. Ashamed of their "heritage and historical past" they side with media characterizations projected through stories, datelines, specials, and nightline episodes. This attitude, while supremely disturbing, also abets the media-as if they need assistance-in denigrating Africa. Of course, the Cherokee, Apache, Lenape, etc., indigenous peoples here in America, encountered the same thing when their lands were targeted for annexation and foreign domination and control. Continual portrayals of Africa in a bad light only perpetuates ignorance in a world much closer in proximity than ever before a media industry that thrives on the negative.

Africa's negative and contrived image, promoted in the Western Media, pervades the psyche, pre-empts behaviors, infers worthlessness, disregards African humanity, and devalues the mind, while it attenuates human spirituality and connectivity: key ingredients in equitable planetary wealth sharing. Do media organizations, in the words of Shelly, "have responsibility for their creations"? What level of journalistic professionalism must be achieved in order to obtain balanced, objective, and fair reportage on events as they occur anyplace in Africa? Because the modus operandi is so entrenched, so readily applicable to news treatment and for putting a local or provincial spin on news, newsgathering organizations feel no compunction to do anything different or right. For example, two German doctors working in Kenya conducted a significant study on Kemron, as a possible cure for AIDS. As mentioned earlier, the research community was busy campaigning to lay the blame for AIDS on Africa. AIDS is alive and well. How many advertising dollars were wasted in that effort: dollars that may have been better put into research activity.

In conclusion, I wonder why the Western Media has devoted a great deal of its resources and energy toward painting the continent of Africa in a negative light. The fact of the matter is the continent's mineral resources, strategic metals, and natural resources are significant factors in the wealth of European Nations, America, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, top name a few. Continual denigration of Africa and, by implication, its people there or in the Diaspora, is a function of white supremacy, plain and simple. Those so affected by this practice must instigate its demise. Thank you for your attention.

LIST OF SOURCES

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Degraft, J.C. Johnson, African Glory

Richard Wright, Native Son

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

David Kilray, A Plague of Nations

Kwame Nkrumah, Neo Colonialism: the Final Stage of Imperialism

Percy Blythe Shelly, Poets of the Lake

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