

From: Curtim Keim, ~~Cultures and Emotions~~  
~~of the~~ \* Mistaking Africa

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# I

## Changing Our Mind About Africa

Most of us who are Americans know little about Africa. We might have studied Africa for a few weeks in school or glanced occasionally at newspaper headlines about Rwanda, Congo, or South Africa, but rarely have we actually thought seriously about Africa. And if we do want to learn about Africa, it is difficult to find ample and accurate information in our popular media such as television and newspapers. Africa and its people are simply a marginal part of American consciousness.

Africa is, however, very much a part of the American subconscious. Ironically, even though we know little about Africa, we carry strong mental images of the continent. Once you begin to notice, you will find that Africa appears in the American public space quite frequently. Although it may not figure often in the news, it appears in advertising, movies, amusement parks, cartoons, and many other corners of our society. And although most Americans do not possess many facts about Africa, we do know certain general truths about the continent. We know, for example, that Africans live in tribes. And we know that Africa is a place of famine, disease, poverty, coups, and large wild animals.

General images are useful and perhaps necessary for our collective consciousness. We can't know everything about the world, so we have to lump some things into big categories that are convenient if lacking detail. Life is too short for most of us to become experts on more than a couple of subjects. Thus, these images help us to organize Africa's place in our collective mind. A war in Congo? Ah yes, that's more of the "African trouble" category. Elephants being used in a commercial? Yes, wouldn't it be fun to have an elephant wash your car. There are lots of large animals living in the wilds of Africa, aren't there?

If general categories are reasonably accurate, they help us navigate our complex world. If, however, they are inaccurate, these categories can be

both dangerous and exploitative. If, for example, we are wrong about Africa's supposed insignificance, we will be blindsided by political, environmental, or even medical events that affect how we survive. Or, if we think of Africa only as a place of trouble, a large zoo, or a storehouse of strategic minerals rather than as a place where real people live real lives, we will likely be willing to exploit the continent for our own purposes. France's former president, François Mitterrand, demonstrated this possibility graphically when, speaking to his staff in the early 1990s about Rwanda, he noted that "in some countries, genocide is not really important."<sup>1</sup> Although in the short term the exploitation of Africa might help France or us, in the long term the planet's society and environment will pay dearly for our failure to care.

### Speaking "African"

Anyone who wants to study Africa in depth needs to learn an African language, because language is the major key to understanding how people mentally organize the world around them. Likewise, anyone who wants to understand Americans must examine the words Americans know and use. You can begin to discover American ideas about Africa by trying some free association with the word *Africa*. Ask yourself what words come to mind when you hear *Africa*. Note that this is not the time to "clean up your act" and impress yourself with your political correctness. You are searching for the words your society has given you to describe Africa, some of which will seem positive, some negative, and some neutral.

My students have helped me create lists of words that come to mind during such an exercise. Within a few minutes, a class frequently generates thirty or forty words that Americans associate with Africa. *Native*, *hut*, *warrior*, *shield*, *tribe*, *savage*, *cannibals*, *jungle*, *Pygmy*, *pagan*, *voodoo*, and *witch doctor* are commonly associated with "traditional" Africa. "Tourism words" include *safari*, *wild animals*, *elephant*, *lion*, and *pyramid*. There are also "news words," including *coup*, *poverty*, *ignorance*, *drought*, *famine*, *tragedy*, and *tribalism*. And then there is a group of "change words" (indicating Western-induced change), such as *development*, *foreign aid*, *peacekeeping*, and *missionary*. Occasionally, the really honest person will come up with "racist words" they have heard, like *spear chucker* or *jungle bunny*.

Although some American words might be positive—*kinship*, *wisdom*, or *homeland*—the overwhelming impression gained by studying American language about Africa seems to be that Africa is a primitive place, full of trouble and wild animals, and in need of our help. A recent survey by a major American museum on popular perceptions of Africa found many widely held misconceptions such as the following: Africa is just one large

country; Africa is all jungle; Africans share a single culture, language, and religion; Africans live in "grass huts"; Africans mainly hunt animals for their subsistence; and Africa has no significant history.

If you think you have escaped these concepts, you are either extraordinarily lucky or you are easily able to fool yourself. The messages that perpetuate such impressions pervade American culture. They are ideas that have deep roots in American history as well as strong branches that entwine our daily lives. In our history, white America once did not even consider Africans to be equal as humans! By comparison, today's understanding is positively enlightened. Yet historical misperception, ignorance, stereotype, and myth still cast shadows upon our thinking. Once you begin to look for them, you will see inaccurate portrayals of Africa in which the blatant old images are reproduced in more subtle, modernized versions. In fact, it is a worthwhile exercise to ask yourself where the words listed above have come from. Home? School? Church? Friends? Television? Newspapers? Magazines? Movies? Books? Amusement parks? It is difficult to get complete and balanced views of Africa in everyday American life. This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 2, "How We Learn."

This book investigates the histories of our inaccurate and stereotypical words and ideas and suggests alternatives. For example, Africans are sometimes referred to in everyday America as "natives." You may or may not think that *native* is a negative word, but its use is a legacy of the colonial period in Africa when words were weapons employed by outsiders to keep Africans in their places. In the first part of the twentieth century, most Americans believed that Africans could be (indeed, *should* be) subjugated because they were primitives, natives. The problem is not the term itself, however. The first dictionary definition of *native* is someone who belongs originally to a place. Thus, "He is a native of Boston" is a neutral and acceptable use of the word. We also use *native* in a positive political way in the phrase "Native American," which implies that an "American Indian" has rights and connections that go beyond those belonging to the rest of us who are more recent immigrants. But the term "African native" evokes a negative connotation, whether intended or not, that is a holdover from its colonial meaning of "primitive," "savage," or "unenlightened." It is interesting to ask why we can think of Africans as natives, but never the Chinese. The answer is that we have long thought of Africans as primitive and Chinese as civilized. Today, even when we do not intend to insult Africans, we have these leftover phrases and connotations that get in the way of conceiving of Africans as real people like ourselves.

You can get around the "African native" and "native African" problem in a number of ways. For example, if you are referring to an African living

in a rural area, you can say "a rural African." If you mean someone who is an inhabitant of Africa, just say "an African." If you mean someone who belongs to the Kikuyu ethnic group, use the words "a Kikuyu." These phrases are more precise and therefore less likely to create images that evoke stereotypes. And, to escape even a hint of insult, you might avoid the use of phrases like "He is a native of Cape Town," which in most other contexts would be neutral but in the African context might elicit musings on whether you have spoken the word in the stereotypical manner.

### The Use and Misuse of Stereotypes

In an ideal world, we would abandon our stereotypes about Africa and learn to deal with Africans as they really are. Human cognition does not allow this, however. Everybody stereotypes. And we do it about practically everything. The reason for this is, first of all, that we are biologically wired to try to make sense of reality, even when it makes no particular sense. Whether through science, history, literature, religion, or whatever, humans strive to understand and categorize what is in front of them. In fact, *not* trying to understand apparent reality is so extraordinary that Buddhism, as one example, has made a philosophy out of it. Buddhism's attempt to experience the "is-ness" of reality directly, without thought, promises liberation from ordinary human consciousness and suffering, but such salvation is sought only by a few. Most of us will continue our attempts to make sense of the reality in front of us.

We also stereotype because it is virtually impossible to know everything that is going on in reality, and therefore we are bound to make our judgments on partial information. Like the proverbial blind men and the elephant, we each take our separate, limited experiences and extrapolate to make sense of the whole. Moreover, we often use ideas provided by our culture instead of investigating things for ourselves. If our culture has a premade picture of reality for us, we are likely to accept it. One way to think about this is to invert "seeing is believing," making it "believing is seeing." Once we "know" something through our culture, we tend to fit new information into the old categories rather than change the system of categorization.

To say that we inevitably use stereotypes is really to say that we use mental models to think about reality. But the word "stereotype" also implies that our models are so limiting that they deform reality in ways that are offensive, dangerous, or ridiculous. Thus we need to strive to make our mental models as accurate as possible. We should, for example, study African art, history, literature, philosophy, politics, culture, and the like so we can differentiate between Africans. We should also ask ourselves whether we cling to inaccurate models of Africa because they shore up

our self-image or allow us to do things that would be otherwise unthinkable.

Below are brief discussions that explore different reasons for the persistence of our misconceptions about Africa. Later in the book there are extended discussions of many of these topics.

### Leftover Racism and Exploitation

During much of American history, racism and exploitation of Africa have been considered acceptable to a large majority of Americans. Although we never ruled colonies in Africa, Americans did enslave Africans and maintain both a slavery system and segregation. Moreover, we profited from our businesses in Africa, sent missionaries to change African culture, and did not protest the colonization undertaken by Europeans. This exploitation of Africa, whether direct or indirect, required thinking about Africans as inferiors. In other words, our culture has had a lot of practice, hundreds of years of it, in constructing Africa as inferior. The legacy is obvious in the words and ideas that we call to mind when we hear the word *Africa*.

Our legacy of negativity poses a question. Can we attribute a major portion of our modern stereotypes about Africa to the fact that we just haven't gotten around to changing the myths we inherited from our racist and imperialist past? Perhaps we no longer need most of these myths, but they persist because only a few decades have passed since the end of the colonial period and a similarly brief period since the passage of the American Civil Rights Act. A few decades in cultural history is really only a moment in time because cultures have momentum and are slow to change direction. Perhaps our myths about Africa are dying, but slowly.

Support for this view comes from the fact that African independence and the civil rights movement have made it unacceptable for news reporters and commentators to use the most blatantly negative of the words we once associated with race and with Africa. Likewise, schoolbooks are vastly improved in their treatment of Africa. One could argue that with greater sensitivity to the issue and more time, Americans will change. To put this idea another way, shouldn't we give Americans the benefit of doubt and assume that most people do not consciously intend to exploit or misrepresent Africa? I believe that we should.

### Current Racism

I am assuming that most readers are not intentionally racist, because such people probably wouldn't read this kind of book. But we have to take account of the connection between our stereotypes about Africa and current racism in America. I do not need to argue that racism is still alive in

America. The most derogatory American images of Africa are so obviously racist that they can no longer appear in public spaces, and therefore we must conclude that they persist because we learn them in the more private aspects of our lives, from family and friends, and often through jokes or offhand comments. Unfortunately, such private racism is difficult to eradicate because continuing efforts like this book can do little for those who would not seriously consider them. Others of us, perhaps most of us, are a different kind of racist, for although we truly want to believe that all humans are equal, we entertain undercurrents of racist doubt in our minds that make us susceptible to more subtle myths about Africa. It is this "real but unintentional" racism that concerns us here, because a deeper consideration of the issues can help us see Africans more clearly.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that all or even most of the public stereotypes about Africa come from unintentional racism. First, each of us has negative stereotypes about others that are not racist. Second, not all of our stereotypes about Africa are negative. *Inaccuracy and insensitivity are not necessarily racist, even when they have racist roots and produce racist results.* This is a fine distinction to make, especially if you are a victim, but it seems a necessary distinction if we are to help decent, willing people to see Africa in new ways.

### *Current Exploitation*

We also perpetuate negative myths about Africa because they help us maintain dominance over Africans. From our perspective in America, it is difficult for us to see how globally influential our country actually is. In simple terms, we are a superpower. To wield this kind of might and still think of ourselves as good people, we need powerful myths. Whereas, in the past, the myth of the racial inferiority of Africans was the major justification for Western control of Africans, now cultural inferiority is a more likely reason. Our news media, for example, are much more likely to inform us about African failures than African successes. And the successes we do hear about tend to demonstrate that our own perspectives on reality are correct. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out that modern Americans who deal with Africa—bureaucrats, aid workers, businesspeople, missionaries, and others—might have an interest in describing Africa in ways that justify the importance of their own work.

### *Entertainment*

If Africa were portrayed as being "just like us," it would be quite uninteresting. "Man bites dog" sells more papers than "Dog bites man." The word *exotic* describes the point; exotic portrays African culture as excit-

ingly different. Usually this is at the expense of African culture, an extraordinary portion of which is removed from its everyday context in a way that allows us to believe that the wider culture itself is wholly extraordinary. Movies and novels thrive on this sort of thing. In his book *American Ways*, Gary Althen describes an international student who was misled by myths about exotic America. He came to America after watching American movies and expected to find a lot of women ready for sexual activity with him. Actually, he found them, but it took him nearly two years to figure out that such easy women were also marginal and often disturbed and that more desirable women were not so readily available.<sup>2</sup>

I will provide African examples in later chapters, but give a first illustration here. A recent issue of *National Geographic* included a short article on the gold of the current Asantehene, Otumfuo Opoku Ware II, king of the Asante people in Ghana.<sup>3</sup> Ten beautiful photographs show the gold clothing and ornaments of the Asantehene, his court, and his relatives. But there is almost no effort to tell us how all of this fits into the life of the Asante or of the modern country of Ghana. Presumably, *National Geographic* does not intend to portray Africans in stereotypical ways. Without (con)text, however, the reader might think almost anything.

This is exoticism. Exoticism portrays only a portion of a culture and allows the imagination to use stereotypes to fill in the missing pieces. Most frequently, when we supply the missing pieces, we extrapolate that other people are more different from us than they are similar. We can too easily sustain our myths about Africans and believe that words such as *mysterious* and *the dark continent* actually apply to Africa.

### *Self-Definition*

Sometimes we use other people, including Africans, as a mirror. We want to know about them so we can know about ourselves. This very human activity accounts at least partially for our interest in people-watching in parks, sitcoms on television, movies, literature, history, and many other cultural phenomena. Yet this is a tricky business. For example, we know that people who spend a lot of time watching soap operas begin to conceive of the world as a soap opera and themselves as characters. And those who watch the local evening news feel that life is much more violent and chaotic than it really is.

In the case of Africa, we might say that many of us want Africans to be a bit savage so we can feel more satisfied with our own lot in life. The *Loony Toons* announcer on the Cartoon Network puts it well: "Without nuts like these, the rest of us look crazy." Perhaps you have never thought of Bugs, Daffy, and Elmer as therapists, but doesn't Africa often serve the same function? If we focus on ourselves without comparison to others,

don't we look pretty messed up? But if we can see that others are poorer, less educated, or more chaotic, then it is easier to believe that we are fine despite our problems. To put it differently, we can't be rich without the poor, developed without the underdeveloped, saved without the sinner, normal without the abnormal, civilized without the uncivilized, and so forth. Sometimes students tell me that they believe the reason they are required to study other cultures in college is to demonstrate how good we have it in America.

Our culture is especially susceptible to this kind of thinking because of the way we conceive of time. Our idea of time as a continuum from the past to the future—rather than, for example, as a circle returning to a golden age of the past—is embodied in our concept of progress. For us, progress generally means going forward, moving on, getting over it, improving ourselves, growing up, and a whole collection of other images implying that the past is negative and the future is positive. Of course, if we believe this to be true, then we will expect reality to substantiate the belief. Indeed, one way we perceive African reality reveals this way of thinking. We see African community life as basic, but impossible to *return* to in our own communities. And tribalism is something we have *gotten beyond*. It wouldn't help to find much of use in Africa, because that would contradict our understanding of progress.

The same is true for the way we understand nature. Although we might believe abstractly in the balance of nature, or might desire that our lives resemble a peaceable-kingdom painting where friendly lions and lambs coexist, we have been more likely to see our lives in *dog-eat-dog* terms that conform to the *law of the jungle*. Africa can be a useful metaphor to help understand that jungle and our own place in it. Africa as the prototypical jungle is useful as a myth to substantiate our view of daily life as a jungle we escape from when we go home at night.

Positive myths about Africa also serve Western self-definition. Those who are dissatisfied with modern American life might construct Africa to present viable alternatives. Some might search African customs for a more natural way to live. Some might look to Africa for a less racist culture. Some, specifically African Americans, might be looking for their idealized personal and cultural roots.

### Stereotypes over Time

As Europeans spread across the world from the 1400s onward, they had to make sense of the new peoples and places they encountered. Over time, and for reasons explained elsewhere in this book, Africans and Africa became representative of extreme "otherness." They were not the only representatives of difference, of course, because there were also Aborigines, Native Americans, and so forth. But Africa certainly became a

primary symbol that Europeans and white Americans used to express difference. Even black Americans found Africa's difference useful at times.

This is not all bad because, indeed, there is a great deal of difference between African and Western cultures. Moreover, we know that humans tend to think symbolically, so it is natural that Africa should stand for something, rather than nothing, in our minds. The real problem has been that using Africa as a *symbol* of difference has meant that the continent has been treated as an object. As an object, Africa is described and manipulated, but Africans cannot speak for themselves or make comments on who *we* are.

Fortunately, with each passing decade, Americans have been treating Africans with less prejudice. Perhaps we are in the midst of a real exit, however slow, from the myths of primitive Africa. Indeed, we cannot afford such myths. Africa, by its sheer size, population, resources, and modernization, will play an increasingly important role in the world, whether for good or ill, and will have to be taken seriously. Our long-term interest, in our shrinking world, is to understand Africa in as unbiased a fashion as possible.

The point is not that an accurate and whole picture of Africa will be totally positive. Indeed, such a claim would be a continuation of our stereotyping. What we should strive for is a view of Africa as a continent full of real people, both like us and not like us, similar and different. On the surface this seems easy: "It's a small world after all!" "Why can't we just get along?" "All we need is love!" "Just leave them alone." But these stereotypical, facile solutions don't automatically work in the real world. As you will see in the pages that follow, seeing others as fully human without desiring to change them into ourselves is exceedingly difficult. It may be, however, the only thing that will make our home—the planet—a safe place to live.

### A Word About Words

Before we go any further, a warning is in order. As I wrote this text, I realized that some of the words I use regularly are problematic. For example, the word *Africa* is used incorrectly throughout the book, because I mean "Africa south of the Sahara." This is a problem that might be helped by replacing all occurrences of *Africa* with *sub-Saharan Africa*. However, reading would be awkward and the change would not solve the problem entirely: For example, not all sub-Saharan Africans are the subjects of the stereotypes discussed in this book, assuming that we consider the millions of European Africans in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and elsewhere to be "real" Africans. Following the example of other scholars, I have opted to use the convenient expression "Africa" instead of a more accurate term. I am assuming that readers will understand what is meant and will fill in missing qualifiers where needed.

Likewise, terms such as *Westerners* and *Americans*, and the pronouns *we* and *our*, are frequently distortions of the truth. There is, you will agree, no such thing as an average American, just as there is no such thing as an average African. As I wrote this book, I found myself generalizing and perhaps overgeneralizing about Americans for the sake of calling attention to “our” stereotyping of Africans. We need to remember, however, that in every era there have been those Americans who did not accept the general view and who spoke out on behalf of Africans.

One of the biggest difficulties with generalizing about American views of Africa concerns the inclusion of African-American views. The problem is complex because American culture is complex. Until at least the 1960s, for example, it was quite common for African Americans to think of Africans as having primitive cultures. This should not be too surprising, considering the dominance of European culture and the fact that most information about Africa was filtered through European-American eyes. Thus when I say that “we Americans” believed Africa to be primitive, it can be taken as somewhat accurate for black as well as white Americans.

On the other hand, since before the American Revolution, African Americans have resisted white efforts to define black reality, and therefore they cannot be said to have invented the idea of African primitiveness, even if they believed in portions of it. They were victims in much the same way that Africans have been victims. Moreover, African Americans largely rejected white American interpretations of race. Furthermore, there have always been African Americans who attempted to teach America about African achievements. Until the mid-twentieth century they were largely ignored, but their efforts make it more difficult to generalize about “Americans.”

In this book, I have usually focused on white American myths about Africa—because they have been the most dominant, the most negative, and the most in need of change. Although I have included a brief summary of African-American perspectives in Chapter 5, I have not done the subject justice. Unfortunately, as far as I know, there have been no studies since the mid-1970s that have attempted to investigate the whole spectrum of contemporary African-American attitudes toward Africa. Without such studies, preferably ones undertaken by African Americans, I would not want to write much more than I have already.

What seems most striking and most similar about white and black American perspectives on Africa is that all of us have *generally* “used Africa to think with.” Whether Africa has been constructed in a negative or positive manner, we have used the continent to reflect upon who *we* are in relation to each other and in relation to Africa. Much of this thinking, negative and positive, has stereotyped Africa in ways that are explained in this book.

## 2

### How We Learn

In the 1970s, scholars of Africa realized that American high school textbooks were filled with stereotypes about Africa. The most glaring myths had disappeared with the independence of African countries in the 1960s and the American civil rights movement, but less obvious myths persisted. In a 1978 study, *Africa in Social Studies Textbooks*, Astair Zekiros and Marylee Wiley detailed the extent to which our public schools were perpetuating myths and inaccuracies about Africa. They noted that most textbooks were written by “‘armchair’ authors who rely on weak sources for their own information.” Thus, no matter what the textbook authors were discussing, they tended to make Africans look like the Africa they imagined rather than the one that existed.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, two decades later our textbooks are better. In fact, one of the coauthors of the 1978 study, Wiley, became the Africa specialist for the social studies textbook used by my local high school’s ninth grade.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, schools have only a modest influence on how we think about Africa. Despite improved texts, by the time students get to college, most still have outdated ideas about Africa. Even college graduates may not have corrected their misconceptions of Africa. In a recent study of preservice social studies teachers, 82 percent thought there were tigers in Africa, 94 percent believed wild animals were common everywhere on the continent, 74 percent understood that most Africans are illiterate, and 93 percent were convinced that there are more kinds of diseases in Africa than in Asia and South America. Respondents commonly used stereotypical “African words” such as tribe (90 percent), primitive (69 percent), cannibals (60 percent), and savages (60 percent). Modern Africa was largely misunderstood.<sup>3</sup>

If our high school social studies teachers do not understand Africa, surely improved texts will have only a minimal impact on students; students are far more likely to pick up their attitudes from teachers than from textbooks. But even more importantly, both teachers and students



are bombarded with mistaken images of Africa in our everyday culture. It is not a losing battle, but it *is* an uphill one. If readers of textbooks and teachers of classes are wearing tinted glasses, even the most accurate texts will appear to be the same color as the glasses. What is the tint of these glasses? "Americana," the hue of our cultural heritage. Thus, if we want to know how Americans learn about Africa, we must look at the more general culture in which our glasses get manufactured.

### Television Culture

One way to study how we learn about Africa is to look at *popular culture*, the ordinary information we get from television, magazines, movies, novels, and other common sources. This approach leads us first to television because it is our most pervasive everyday source of ideas about practically everything. In about 1990, I began to wonder what programs my cable company offered on Africa. At first I supposed there would be very few, but I found that Africa was better represented than many other areas of the world, sometimes with ten or twenty shows a week.

The shows did not provide a very accurate view of Africa, however, because they were almost all cartoons or wild animal shows. But if we learn our basic ideas about Africa from television, this is where it all begins. Africa appears prominently in *George of the Jungle* and *Johnny Quest*, and regularly in the frequent reruns of cartoons made in the 1940s and 1950s such as *Mickey Mouse* and *Popeye*. Even the newer action cartoons use Africa as a setting in some episodes. Which Africa? Most of the images are stereotyped presentations of ferocious large animals, lost treasure protected by evil genies, and hungry cannibals.

Television nature shows tend to portray Africa as a place filled with wild animals, park rangers, and naturalists who battle against poachers and encroaching agriculture. They also use Africa to emphasize "survival of the fittest" motifs by featuring a great many programs on carnivores. This misrepresents what most of Africa is like. Most Africans never see wild animals because they live in towns or in parts of the continent where the human population is dense. Furthermore, the relationships in nature are vastly more complex than those symbolized by the few large animals that are the favorites of animal shows.

Cartoons and shows about animals have not improved much in the 1990s, but there are a few more programs on African *people* now that the Learning Channel, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, Black Entertainment Television, and other independent stations are available. From time to time I can watch ethnographies, documentaries, and reruns of Ali Mazrui's *The Africans*. Because I sometimes teach with these same videos, I'm happy they are available to the public.

What is still lacking, however, is a serious understanding of how people live currently in Africa. Today, 30 to 40 percent of Africans live in cities, and most rural Africans are deeply connected to cities in one way or another. Why, then, do the shows we see on television rarely ever show a city scene, a paved road, or a farmer producing a crop that will be sold in a town or eventually reach us? This is partly because rural ethnography is less difficult to film than documentaries about the problems of modern life. Most African governments don't like reporters prying into their public affairs, and they are especially sensitive about urban affairs because that is where they live and operate. Moreover, many American viewers would not appreciate critiques of what Americans and other Westerners are doing in Africa. The American controversy surrounding the production of *The Africans* is a case in point. The video series was partly funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities during the conservative Ronald Reagan years. There were protests in Congress when the Kenyan-American producer, Ali Mazrui, even mildly criticized the West for its imperialist and neoimperialist policies in Africa.

Perhaps a more significant reason for television's preference of ethnographic Africa over modern Africa is that we have a romance with the exotic. We consider rural ethnography and nature more interesting and more enlightening than studies of urban life. Thus, despite the so-called cable revolution and its improved access to Africa, the television image of Africa as full of large animals and tribal natives persists.

If we can't find a whole picture of Africa on most television shows, we should be able to turn to television news to find out about contemporary Africa. Unfortunately, there the picture is even more bleak. During the infrequent times that Africa does appear in the news, it is because of a war, coup, drought, famine, flood, epidemic, accident, or American diplomatic mission. Such events certainly occur, but they are not the essence of Africa or of any other part of the world. To be fair, despite the problems, our reporters are treating such news events more fairly than ever before. Cable News Network (CNN), for example, occasionally runs stories produced by African reporters. In 1994, television coverage of the transition to majority rule in South Africa included a great deal about the history and life of South Africans. Unfortunately, since that time, South Africa has almost disappeared from the news except for occasional reports of trouble.

Of course, charges that our news reportage is biased are common for all areas of the world including American cities. Defenders of television news say that reporters have too little time to provide background and that Americans don't want to watch it anyway. Increasingly, network news programs border on entertainment. We want our emotions to be aroused, but not so much that we actually might feel compelled to think deeply or take some kind of action. Moreover, we could add that news

from Africa is expensive. If all this is true, then the point here should be that we learn what we want to learn and that we like our picture of Africans the way it is now.

### The Print Media

Newspapers give about the same coverage of Africa as television news and for the same reasons. Unless you subscribe to a world-class paper such as the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, or the *Washington Post*, you are not likely to find more than a couple of column inches of space devoted to Africa *per week*. And the stories tend to be of two kinds, "trouble in Africa" and "curiosities from Africa." The "trouble in Africa" reporting usually follows a pattern. At any given time, there is usually only a handful of American reporters in Africa south of the Sahara, a region that has a population larger than the United States. These reporters are either based in one of the big cities, such as Johannesburg (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), or perhaps Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), or they are visiting these cities. They report on local events, and, if there is trouble in a neighboring country, they fly in, get the story, and fly out, or they collect what information they can from where they are. News about Congo or Nigeria might be broadcast from Abidjan. It sounds authentic because it comes from Africa, but it might as well be from the United States, which has equally good communications with most African cities. When there is a big story, reporters flock to it, stay for a while, then leave. And because reporters rarely speak local languages or have well-developed local contacts, the result is shallow reporting. In many cases, we hear nothing from a country for months or years, and then it appears in the news once or even every day for a couple of weeks before disappearing until trouble occurs again.

If we try to put a positive spin on reporting about "trouble in Africa," we might concede that our reporting is about the best we can hope for considering the conditions under which reporters must work. We are badly served, however, because our news is superficial, sensationalist, and infrequent. In some cases, it is also clearly biased. In a study of media coverage of the civil war in Angola, for example, Elaine Windrich notes that reporters tended to accept uncritically the U.S. government position concerning our ally Jonas Savimbi. In the context of the 1980s and the Cold War, this was considered acceptable, but the American public was clearly duped. Savimbi was actually a tyrant and a liar, and we eventually had to drop him in favor of his enemies, whom we now support. Everyone, especially Angolans, would have been better served had reporting been more thorough and fair.<sup>4</sup>

Items that can be characterized as "curiosities from Africa" also appear regularly in newspapers. Weeks go by in my local paper without substantial news from Africa, and then the paper (not a bad paper, actually) includes a two-inch story about a man accused of being a witch doctor who was beaten to death in South Africa. Or, there is a brief mention of a hippo that upset a safari canoe at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. The white tourists were uninjured, but a black Zimbabwean guide drowned and a white Zimbabwean guide lost his arm.<sup>5</sup> Is this news about Africa? Yes. Is it interesting? Yes. Does it give us perspective on what is happening in Africa? Not much. Is it useful? Helpful? You judge. Once again, however, we should remind ourselves that there has been progress. In the hippo story, an ordinary African was identified by name, was not called a "native guide," and was portrayed as a hero.

After television and newspapers, we can examine popular magazines. We should do better here, because in our magazines there is more space to devote to thinking deeply about what is going on in the world. Indeed, journals such as the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Current History*, *Discover*, and the *World and I* have published good articles about Africa in the last few years. Once again, progress. Yet the number of "trouble in Africa" articles outweighs the number of articles that help us to see Africans as real people who are attempting to solve their problems in rational ways, even if the solutions might be different from the ones we would choose. A recent article by Robert D. Kaplan in the *Atlantic Monthly* has been severely criticized for being a classic example of American mythmaking about Africa. Writing in the *Utne Reader*, Carole Collins and Steven Askin take Kaplan to task for perpetuating the popular media image that Africa suffers because of its primitiveness rather than because of how it has been treated by the world.<sup>6</sup>

The above magazines are not scholarly, but they do tend to be high-brow. Most Americans read less sophisticated fare as a daily diet. In the more popular magazines, most articles about Africa typically are of the "African safari" genre. A few wild animals, a few natives, a camp, a curio market, a little art, a gourmet meal, and you're home. For example, *Smart-Money* advertises that "South Africa has it all: gorgeous scenery, fascinating cultures, rhino-filled game reserves—and, best of all, a weak [currency]."<sup>7</sup> In *Outside*, a promotional blurb for an article quotes a safari brochure as promising "unfiltered Africa, an extremely rare, hard-core, expeditionary safari in the oldest style." It also notes that when the author of the article arrived in Zimbabwe, he experienced "fabled wildlife, and mutiny on the veld."<sup>8</sup> There are also the "celebrity goes to Africa," "curious customs," and "African agony" themes, of course. These views of Africa not only evoke stereotypes we already hold, they reinforce them.

## National Geographic

One very popular magazine, *National Geographic*—with an astounding global circulation of nearly 9 million—is quite literally America’s picture window on the world. What are we likely to see through this window? The editorial policy of the magazine since its early days has been to avoid controversy and print “only what is of a kindly nature . . . about any country or people.”<sup>9</sup> That policy, still followed a century later, directs the organization toward wild animals and ethnography and away from the social, political, and economic conditions in which Africans live. In fact, as conditions worsened in Africa in the 1980s, it was increasingly difficult to be kind to modern Africa, at least from our perspective, and there was a corresponding decline in the frequency of *National Geographic* articles dealing with African countries.

Countries like Congo (Kinshasa) and Malawi were featured in the 1970s and 1980s, but now these are widely recognized as repressive and have become unsuitable for *National Geographic*. There are 1990s articles set in these countries, but they treat Congo River travel and Lake Malawi water life, much safer topics than the countries themselves.<sup>10</sup> A 1996 article about Eritrea demonstrates the point: Eritrea could be featured because, as a brand-new country, it was considered full of hope, unlike most other African countries.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the magazine’s 1993 treatment of the life of blacks in South Africa came long after the world had chosen sides on the issue, which made the subject safe and, to my eye, exploited the situation by printing gripping photographs.<sup>12</sup>

A 1993 article on the Horn of Africa also exploited African misery. To me, beautiful photographs of starving children in a magazine that has no pretensions of activism are exploitative. This is an example of what has been termed “development pornography.” We are only asked to *look* at others’ misery, not do anything about it or even understand it. The author writes that he “found problems common to much of a continent whose people have leaped from small traditional societies to late-twentieth-century nationhood in only a few generations: ancient tribal rivalries, illogical borders imposed by colonial powers, and the legacy of repressive and corrupt regimes supported by the Cold War superpowers.”<sup>13</sup> Here, in a bland nutshell, the reader gets a weak analysis of Africa’s problems: precolonial (“tribal rivalries”), colonial (“illogical borders”), and postcolonial (“repression and superpower intervention”). But this is a caricature of reality, distorting any genuine understanding of the continent. In the end, you are left with the vague impression that Africa is only a “place of troubles.”<sup>14</sup>

Most Africa articles in *National Geographic* treat less controversial subjects or more specifically scientific ones such as rain forests, elephants, gorillas, and the evolution of humans. An article on the slave trade describes

how the trade affected Africa.<sup>15</sup> A piece on “fantasy coffins” in Ghana is beautifully illustrated but exotic because it takes a small part of African life and focuses on difference without providing the context for a holistic understanding of African culture.<sup>16</sup>

*National Geographic*, our window on the world, is rarely a place to get a balanced picture of Africa. This magazine calls itself scientific, yet avoids controversy, thriving on beautiful photography and safe topics. It would have to take such an approach in order to be so widely accepted in the United States and indeed in the world. Is this publication then useless? No; beauty and safety have their places, and, like our other media, *National Geographic* is improving. Thirty years ago *National Geographic* would not have even published on topics such as pollution or environmental degradation, as it does today. Certainly it responded favorably to charges in the 1960s that it exploited Africans by publishing pictures of bare-breasted women. But even if today the magazine doesn’t actively exploit, it does reinforce our stereotypes and confuse us by asserting that beauty, safety, and bland analysis (and stereotypes) are somehow equal to science and geography.

## Amusement Parks

Busch Gardens in Tampa, a park that uses Africa as its theme, is a good example of how we learn about Africa and also of how this learning process is changing. In the 1970s, the park was called “Busch Gardens: The Dark Continent.” At that time, a poster advertising the park depicted a white family in an African environment, the husband in a safari suit and pith helmet holding a chimpanzee and pointing to some off-poster sight with his wife looking on passively. His children are also following his gaze, from the back of an elephant. An Arab or Swahili guide in flowing robes looks on, while three barely visible black African men dressed in loincloths carry the family’s luggage.

Fortunately, twenty years later, this racist and sexist poster is no longer used because Busch Gardens has changed its “Dark Continent” image as a result of protests. The 1996 press packet focuses instead on neutral images: the large animal park, replicas of African houses, African-made tourist art, and rides that have mildly African themes. A new section based on ancient Egypt opened in 1996. Now a brochure forestalls criticisms with “a Pledge and a Promise” to provide entertainment plus “education, conservation and research” (cultural presentations, award-winning programs, captive breeding, over 3,000 animals, and so on). There are endless inconsistencies, however. The idea of Ubanga-Banga Bumper Cars (a stereotypical “African” name) in the section called The Congo would be hilarious except for the underlying message it sends about



Africa. It is strange to think of the Dolphin Theater and German Festhaus restaurant being in Timbuktu. The park's Stanleyville area is named after the violent white conqueror of the Congo River, Henry Morton Stanley, and the colonial town that bore his name. Modern Congolese found the name odious enough to change it to Kisangani. And the real Kisangani doesn't have warthogs, orangutans, or a barbecue smokehouse. The conflicts with reality go on and on, but if you knew little about Africa, these inconsistencies wouldn't be apparent. Perhaps in twenty more years we will look back at this version of Busch Gardens as a somewhat silly and misinformed (if not racist) approach to both Africa and entertainment.

Another amusement park, Disney World in Orlando, has become a global pilgrimage destination. On a visit, I was reminded of Africa at several turns (literally) as we took the Jungle River Cruise in boats named after rivers and places where I have lived in the Congo rainforest: Bomokandi, Wamba, and so on. It was all fun and a bit hokey, of course, and the site's designers included elephants and a pygmy war camp. But pygmies don't have war camps—they are more like conservationists than soldiers—and Africa is certainly more than elephants, jungles, and riverboats.

Now Disney has expanded its treatment of Africa with Animal Kingdom, an animal theme park located near Disney World. The African Savannah section of the park is set up to give visitors the sense that they are in a genuinely natural environment. Most importantly, there are no fences between the visitors and the animals. The illusion of real wilderness is made possible by hidden moats around the predators that give the impression that carnivores and herbivores are living in the same space. They are not, of course, because it would be too costly to allow lions to eat gazelles. Besides, viewing real predatory activity would upset most tourists.

But to merely experience nature is not considered entertaining enough. As one brochure puts it, "The imagination of Disney is going to take you on a journey into the mysteries, marvels and thrills of the ever-unfolding story of animals." Indeed, Disney advertises that the park tells the story of *all* animals, "real, imaginary and extinct." Participants in the Kilimanjaro Safari, which visits a recreated African savanna, buy tickets from a window in a building that looks like a decayed colonial-era outpost. Conquest nostalgia is being sold here. (The building is not likely a comment on the maintenance of modern African game parks.) And visitors are escorted in buses outfitted to give the feeling of a "real" safari. Further, as visitors pass certain points, underground sensors trigger appropriate events in the fashion of similar tours in Disney World and Disneyland. This is wild nature on demand. And there is a story line: You are hot on the trail of a group of poachers.

In Disney's topsy-turvy world, fictional animals compete with real ones, entertainment competes with understanding, and corporate profits compete with what is termed scientific research. Captivity promotes wildness, while African complexity is further reduced to stereotypes. And the hunt for poachers models Disney's other enterprises, which from their founding in the 1950s have epitomized the Western dream of the conquest and management of nature through science and technology.

### Other Sources

Movies, too, can be examples of stereotyping, whether oldies such as *The African Queen*, *Mogambo*, and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, or newer pictures such as *Out of Africa*, *Congo*, and *The Lion King*. There are dozens of such "African" feature films, and each tells a story that seems to be about Africa but in which Africa only provides an exotic background. *Gorillas in the Mist*, perhaps the best of the lot because it deals with a truly African problem, is only a partial exception because the story is mostly about whites and about the personality of Dian Fossey. One funny movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a South African shoestring product that has become popular as a video release, is another exception because it has many scenes in which Africans are actors. However, it is full of South African white stereotypes of hunter-gatherers, Bantu villagers, Cuban revolutionaries, African dictators, and white damsels in distress—pure entertainment. There is nothing wrong with entertainment, of course, except that this is where we pick up our ideas about Africa. One of my students informed me that in high school he was tested on the content of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which his teacher had considered an authoritative source on African life.

Other places we get our ideas about Africa are too numerous to discuss here. How about children's books, place mats in restaurants, and computer games? I've seen Africa used in exotic, inaccurate, and sometimes offensive ways in each of these examples. Yulisa Amadu Maddy, a Sierra Leonean theater artist, director, and novelist, has taken an interest in American children's literature related to Africa. He notes that although children's books today intend to capture the positive spirit of Africa, they still contain mistakes that confuse readers and insult Africans. In *The Market Lady and the Mango Tree*, for example, a greedy market lady claims a mango tree in the market as her personal property and refuses to give mangoes to children unless they pay. She is able to buy a Mercedes Benz with her profits and then begins to sell her mangoes to a jelly factory at such a high price that the villagers cannot afford them. In the end, however, the market lady's guilty conscience makes her sell the car and give the mangoes to children free of charge. It is a good story, meant to be fa-

avorable to community values and children, except that it portrays the market lady as a stereotypical, rich, power-hungry African elite and the village as responding in helpless, un-African ways. There is no doubt that there are greedy people in Africa, but this short book—despite its positive effort and excellent illustrations—gives a distorted picture of reality. Says Maddy, “No one in his or her right mind, no matter how greedy, would claim a mango tree in the marketplace as private property.”<sup>17</sup>

Maddy also notes that in Ann Grifalconi’s *Flyaway Girl*, east and west are confused: a mask and a food item from West Africa are associated with the Maasai of East Africa. In Paul Geraughty’s *The Hunter*, African ivory poachers are blamed for killing elephants when, in fact, Western demand for ivory should also be blamed. Frequently, adds Maddy, stories that are based on African folktales rely on colonial sources that are particularly biased. In such sources, the folktales have been modified to make Western moral points, not African ones.

Churches and missionaries also play a role in reinforcing the idea of Africans as primitives. Missionaries returning from Africa often communicate to churches in the West that non-Christian Africans need fundamental change because they are culturally, if not biologically, primitive. Ironically, missionaries themselves are often more respectful of African cultures than parishioners in the United States. Those parishioners who give money for African causes frequently want to feel that they are converting poor, unenlightened savages in the old-fashioned missionary mode.

And museums? It’s remarkable that we continue the nineteenth-century practice of putting animals and “native” peoples in the same “natural” history museums such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The implication is that Africans belong to the history of nature, but not the history of civilization. Moreover, such treatment implies that animals and Africans can be considered separately from ourselves in our understanding of the world. Natural history museum curators know of these problems and do what they can to overcome them.

Art museums pose a somewhat different problem. Curators must help us understand that what we consider *art* is not a universal category appreciated in the same way by all humans. When we see African art—in which masks are usually overrepresented—we see something entirely different than what Africans themselves do. I might add that curators in both art and natural history museums are frequently ahead of their advertising departments in teaching us about Africa. Curators are frequently trained as specialists in African studies. Publicists, by contrast, are trained to attract an audience, so they often play on exotic and stereotypical aspects that reflect public interest in Africa. They are correct in as-

suming that the public is interested in the exotic; but museums are also committed to accuracy, so recently exhibits and their advertising have displayed much less stereotyping.

Corporate advertising also uses Africa to sell products. IBM, AT&T, Visa, and American Express, for example, have run ads depicting Africa to show that their products are used worldwide. They may well be, but very few Africans have the access that the commercials imply. For example, in an IBM commercial filmed in what may be South Africa or Zimbabwe, an African chorus gets its pitch from a child’s computer. But such commercials falsely imply that technology equals development and that African villagers are on the verge of a technological revolution. Not only is Africa being misrepresented, its image of backwardness is being exploited to sell *us* technology.

Range Rover, Toyota, Nissan, and other automobile manufacturers sell the idea of durability using African landscapes. If you want to show how strong your product is, have it take on the rigors of Africa. And Samsonite uses an African village to demonstrate that its luggage is “world proof.” Advertisers easily pick up on our stereotypes and use them to convince us to buy. Moreover, they educate us about what our culture already “knows” about Africa.

Despite our efforts to treat Africa more fairly, it is difficult for us to do so. Two final examples illustrate this point. In the mid-1990s, AT&T published an internal newsletter with a map of the world depicting its global telephone network. On each continent there was a person in local dress talking on a telephone connected to other continents via wires and telephone poles. In Africa, however, there was a chimpanzee talking on the phone. After objections, the artists apologized, stating that they meant no harm and were just trying to add interest to their drawing. One might consider this racism, but it is more likely ignorance and the unwitting persistence of racist stereotypes. Likewise, in a recent book of essays by non-Americans about their experiences in America, the compilers introduce each author with a short paragraph. The sole African contributor is described as being “native to Zaire,” while every other author was “born” or “raised” in their country.<sup>18</sup> This is not meant to be pejorative, and the construction “native to” is not necessarily wrong. But one wonders about the stereotypical association of Africa with “natives” and about how our minds work.

Once you are aware of the ways we commonly treat Africa, you will soon (and perhaps frequently) see Africa treated stereotypically in everyday life. You will also begin to think about why our stereotypes persist. Few such treatments are conscious attempts to make Africa look bad. Far from it. Despite American racism, or perhaps because of it, we are probably more sensitive to this question than most other people in the world.

At least in the public sphere, we make explicit efforts to avoid derogatory allusions to Africa or Africans. Therefore, such stereotypes are all the more indicative of how we see the world. They must indicate that our shorthand references to Africa as full of animals, "the bush," and primitives are so acceptable to Americans that we do not even see these as derogatory. The problem, of course, is that such views become self-perpetuating. Even if we do not want to portray Africa in stereotypical terms, we are bound to do so because we have few other models of Africa to which we can compare these terms.

## *Part Two*

# Evolutionism