

The Africa You Need To Know

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- What is disaster pornography? Africans define it as the Western media's habit of blacking out Africa's stock markets, high rises, internet cafes, cell phones, heart surgeries, soaring literacy and increasing democratization, while gleefully parading her genocides, armed conflicts, child soldiers, foreign debts, hunger, disease, and backwardness.

I recently found myself making small talk with an airport official in the United States. "I hear in Africa, people are very poor and hungry, they don't have anything to eat," he said.

"I saw a documentary on Africa a few days ago on CNN, and there were all these hungry people, dying children, with flies all over their faces..."

Yeah, I replied hesitantly, not knowing exactly what a correct response should be. My situation was not helped by 22 hours of travel, which had considerably dulled my reflexes.

"But you look well-fed," he queried, scanning my generous proportions.

I didn't exactly like this attention to my physical details, but I had more patriotic worries. I had to let him know that Africa is not one huge expanse of waste, but 54 countries and two islands, in different stages of development, repair, disrepair, and of course, despair. Famine in Niger does not mean hunger in Nigeria, just as war in Liberia does not mean child soldiers in Lesotho.

My short lecture had no effect whatsoever on my "student." His next question was, "But, what is the problem with Africa?" Clearly, nothing I had said could erase the "huge expanse of waste" picture of Africa from his mind.

I don't blame him. Neither do I blame another official at a different airport who asked me if Africans keep their cowries in banks. He was quite taken aback when I showed him a few Nigerian Naira notes. I also don't blame some of my American friends when they ask me how I "picked up such good English." Far from picking up good English, I tell them, I have a background of solid British education. My country, Nigeria, was a British Colony until 1960.

No one should blame these people or anyone else who displays such profound ignorance about Africa. Rather than educate and enlighten while disseminating fair, balanced and accurate information, it seems all that the western media is keen on showing the West about Africa is backwardness, disease, hunger, want, deprivation, banditry, brigandage,

slaughter fields, child soldiers, gang-raped girls, harassed mothers, wasted children, flies feasting on the living and vultures waiting to devour the near-dead. Goodness!

Africans of all leanings, from all walks of life and from every part of the continent usually have only one question each time they are faced with these gory media depictions of Africa - "Where do they get these images from?"

It is not only Africans who do not recognize their continent from the western media. Michael Ledeen, contributing editor of National Review Online, laments this caricaturing of Africa in an article titled "Out of Africa: "What The Western World Doesn't Understand about the Continent."

He says, "Those of us who love Africa almost never recognize it in the press or the movies. The racist stereotypes of Africans are so deeply ingrained in the guilt-driven worldview of Western elites that it is almost impossible to get to the truth."

So what is the truth about Africa?

Africa is not a country. It is the world's second largest and second most populous continent after Asia. Occupying 20 percent of the earth's land area, it measures roughly 5,000 miles from north to south and about 4,600 miles from east to west. This makes it about four times the size of the United States.

Africa's population of about 890 million is slightly less than 14 percent of total world population. Africans belong to thousands of ethnic groups and clans. Some of the more widely known ethnic groups in Africa are Ashanti, Bantu, Berber, Dinka, Fulani, Ganda, Yoruba, Hausa, Kikuyu, Luba, Lunda, Malinke, Moor, Nuer, Tuareg and Xhosa.

Africans are by no means homogenous. There is no African culture. Africans have diverse and varied ways of life. They behave differently from country to country, ethnic group to ethnic group and clan to clan.

There is also no African language. Africans speak about 2,000 languages. Among Africa's most widely spoken languages are Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, Bantu, Akan, Arabic, Koma and Songhai.

And far from a perpetual laggard, Africa has made and still makes quite significant contributions to the world order. History 101 says Africa provided the slave labor that developed the new world and enriched the old world. Today, Africa provides Col-tan, the mineral from which the computer chips which drive the 21st century's high-tech global economy are made."

Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Nigeria are the major petroleum and natural gas producing countries in Africa. Between them, they account for about 20 percent of the world's petroleum needs. Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa together produce 50% of the world's diamonds. Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe together produce nearly 50% of the world's gold.

Africa also contributes 70 percent cocoa, 34 percent coffee and 50 percent palm products annually to the world market. The United States imports 30 to 60 percent key African products; the French industry depends on Africa for over 90 percent uranium, cobalt, manganese, 76 percent bauxite, 50 percent chromium and 30 percent iron ore; and the British industry depends on Africa for 80 percent chromium, 65 percent lubrication oil, 55 percent manganese and 54 percent cobalt. China imports nearly 30 percent of its oil and gas from sub-Saharan Africa.

Africa is the continent longest inhabited by human beings. There are two competing theories to explain how mankind spread across the globe – from Africa

The “Out of Africa” theory suggests that between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago, modern man (*Homo Sapiens*) emerged from Africa to slowly populate the rest of the world, replacing any human species that were already there.

The other theory suggests that modern humans arose simultaneously in Africa, Europe and Asia from one of our predecessors, *Homo Erectus*, who left Africa about two million years ago.

Proponents of both theories, however, agree on one point - that all humans alive today could share common ancestry with a being in Africa who lived about 120,000 to 220,000 years ago.

History is also emphatic that Africa is the cradle of civilization. Egypt, Ethiopia and the ancient empires of Mali, Songhai, Kongo, Oyo, Kanem-Bornu and Ghana are among Africa’s early civilizations. The Nile Valley is also acclaimed for the inventions its African inhabitants bequeathed to modern civilization.

Africa also boasts of some of the best brains in the world. According to the United States Census Bureau, Africans are the most educated ethnic group in the United States.

But what do the Western media say Africa is?

Rod Chavis in “Africa in the Western Media” says, “Nouns and adjectives like hut, dark, tribe, King Kong, tribalism, primitive, nomad, animism, jungle, cannibal, savage, underdeveloped, third world, developing, etc., are pervasive when Africa is the story. 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.

“With the stroke of a journalist's pen,” Chavis continues, “the African, her continent, and her descendants are pejoratively reduced to nothing (but)... 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.”

Hugh Hamilton in “Ownership, Diversity & Race: Confronting (Mis) Representations of Africa in the US Media” also highlights the same thread. “The dominant images of Africa in American mainstream media are of a dark and desolate continent, riven by tribal conflict, beleaguered by pestilence, poverty and disease, a place of fear and futility...of despair and depression, of a lost people languishing in a lost land somewhere beyond the edge of modern civilization”

This dehumanization of Africa has become a matter of concern not only to Africans, at home and in the Diaspora, but apparently also to teeming non-Africans who have suckled at Africa’s generous breasts.

Eleven former African heads of state from all over the continent rose from the African Presidential Roundtable, 2005, sponsored by Boston University’s African Presidential Archives and Research Center (APARC), with a common conclusion. While agreeing, though with nice words, that most African governments have been despotic, corrupt, capricious, inept and thoroughly useless, “we acknowledge the need for African leadership to be accountable relative to matters like good governance, peace and stability, and transparency in our economies,” they lamented what they described as “Africa's image in the American media.”

Their Excellencies examined the record of coverage of some of America's most distinguished publications — The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and U.S. News & World Report.

They reviewed these publications over a 10-year period — from 1994 to 2004 and “found their coverage of the continent to be anything but fair and balanced.” Such an incredible labor of love, considering the fact that many of them had more than enough to do with Africa’s present sorry state.

They therefore concluded that, “the findings of this (and other) surveys indicate that coverage of Africa, by the leading sources of American media is, at best, dismissive of the continent's progress and potential, and thus leading to continued "exotification" and marginalization of the African continent. At worst, coverage disregards recent trends toward democratization, thus betraying an almost contemptuous lack of interest in the potential and progress being achieved on the continent.”

How does this negative portrayal affect Africa’s fortunes? These former heads of state, who should know, because of their former and relatively still vantage positions, were unanimous that this negative portrayal “has profound relevance to everything — including the world considering Africa as a worthy investment venue and viewing Africa as a valuable trading partner...it is reasonable to posit that negative perceptions lead to negative outcomes, namely, lower levels of aid and lower levels of investment.”

Facts are sacred and the truth must be told. Despite generous human and natural endowments, Africa is home to 32 of the 38 highly indebted countries of the world and remains the only continent where the proportion of the population in extreme poverty is growing. 36.2 percent of Africans live below a dollar a day. Most African countries are at the bottom of the United Nations' overall Human Development Index (HDI), which also measures education, life expectancy, GDP and other indicators of development. The overwhelming majority of African countries are not on target to meet any of the Millennium Development Goals agreed at the United Nations in 2000. Sad, but all true.

But those who make a living out of showing Africa's soiled behind to the world should also be fair enough to show her fair side. Ignoring one side of the story means readers and viewers are only getting half of the story. And half-truth, as the saying goes, is half-lie. To bring it home, it is like saying all there is to America is Hurricane Katrina, Skid Row, Oklahoma bombing, congressmen and congressional pagers, serial killers, child molesters and snipers. It is like airing only "American Justice," "America's Most Wanted," "Dark Heart: Iron Hand," "Lock-Up," "Skeleton Stories" and "To Catch A Predator" in Africa and implying somehow that "This is America." Yes, bad things happen everywhere, not only in Africa!

Carol Pineau highlights this lopsidedness in the documentary titled "Africa Open for Business."

"Yes, Africa is a land of wars, poverty and corruption. The situation in places like Darfur, Sudan, desperately cries out for more media attention and international action. But Africa is also a land of stock markets, high rises, internet cafes and a growing middle class. This is the part of Africa that functions. And this Africa also needs media attention, if it is to have any chance of fully joining the global economy."

Ezekiel Makunike also addresses the same concerns in "Out of Africa: Western Media Stereotypes Shape Images."

"We hear about famines and coups, but not the rejuvenation of its cities and the cultural vitality of its village life...about oppression and massacres, but not education, economic self-help and political development... about poaching and habitat destruction, but not ongoing active efforts at conservation, reforestation and environmental awareness."

The TransAfrica Forum, a body which aims to influence U.S. policy on Africa and the Diaspora, surveyed two of the most esteemed newspapers in the United States - the New York Times and Washington Post - between March and August 2000. Their study showed that the vast majority of news stories fell within only three categories - AIDS, development and conflict. The study found no reports on regional economic or political cooperation in Africa, nor one article on the private sector.

The study concluded that, "one would have expected the New York Times and the Washington Post to make an effort to inform American citizens and policymakers in a

much more balanced, detailed, and fair manner. Failure to address this issue will contribute to an increase in Afro-pessimism in America.”

A 2005 study of African coverage by Boston University also revealed nothing about fewer civil wars, economic growth or increased access to education on the continent. The survey studied coverage of Africa between 1994 and 2004 in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, US News and World Report. Disasters in Somalia, Rwanda and West Africa dominated, while transitions to democracy in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and elsewhere were ignored.

Also grievously ignored by the western media is the fact that a good number of African countries have made real progress over the last few years. In 2005 alone, Africa posted an unprecedented growth of 4.5 percent, which prompted Haiko Alfeld, Africa Director at the World Economic Forum, to declare that the African continent has "emphatically and irreversibly turned the corner."

In its review of 2005, a year widely acclaimed as “The Year of Africa,” the World Economic Forum reports “a new resolve (by Africans) to promote the African business and investment climate. Many African countries extended economic reforms and put in place structures to fight corruption.” Really? Would someone please tell the whole world that Africans are capable of helping themselves, and that they are not helpless, hapless and hopeless?

The report goes on to say, “A key development on the business front was the rapid increase in Chinese and to some extent Indian investment in African countries. In just a few years, trade and investment between China and Africa has tripled, with the pace of such engagement becoming particularly vigorous during 2005.

“The trend has continued into 2006, as has the phenomenon of South African business expansion into the continent.” And what more, the report says, “These positive trends seem set to continue beyond 2006, given their long-term nature.” Is anyone listening?

Africa indeed has turned the corner. In the last five years, Mozambique has reduced poverty from 70% to 55% and has doubled the number of children in school. Kenya has introduced free primary education, which has brought 1.2 million children back into school. In Tanzania, 1000 new schools have been built and 18,000 teachers recruited to enable Tanzania to achieve the goal of primary education for all in 2006 – 9 years before the target date of 2015.

Uganda has reduced HIV from 20% in 1991 to around 6.5% in 2001, showing that with political will, the tide of an epidemic can be turned. In 1973, only three African Heads of State were elected. Today, 40 countries have had multi-party elections. Two years ago major conflicts affected 19 countries in Africa. Today it affects only three countries.

The World Bank also reports that countries like Senegal, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Uganda and Ghana are on course to meet the target of halving poverty by 2010 - five years ahead of schedule. Botswana, with soaring literacy rates, has doubled, some say tripled, its school enrolment figures. South Africa boasts of sustained economic growth. Rwanda has the highest number of women in parliament in the whole world. Even war-torn Liberia achieved the distinction of putting the first elected African female head of state into the global club of female heads of government.

These giant strides are, however, lost in what has been described as “disaster pornography,” a disturbing trend in western media tradition, which tallies with Ezekiel Makunike’s assertion that “for American readers or viewers to be interested, news out of Africa must be negative. It must conform to the traditional stereotypes in its spotlight on grotesque and sensational events. It must show misery, corruption, mismanagement, starvation, primitive surroundings and, as in the case of Somalia, chaos and outright anarchy.”

Rakiya Omaar and Alex de Waal in “Disaster Pornography from Somalia” tell of “pictures of grotesque human degradation, with foreign angels of mercy ministering to starving children, juxtaposed with images of trigger-happy teen-age looters”

Putting an indelible question mark on disaster journalism, they say, “Reduced to nameless extras in the shadows behind Western aid workers or disaster tourists, the grieving, hurting and humiliated human beings are not asked if they want to be portrayed in this degrading way.” Has anyone ever considered this?

They also reveal that “Somali doctors and nurses have expressed shock at the conduct of film crews in hospitals. They rush through crowded corridors, leaping over stretchers, dashing to film the agony before it passes. They hold bedside vigils to record the moment of death. When the Italian actress Sophia Loren visited Somalia, the paparazzi trampled on children as they scrambled to film her feeding a little girl - three times. This is disaster pornography.”

Richard Ngamba, in “Reporting Africa in Western Media Style” also relates an interesting experience while collaborating with some western journalists during the filming of the documentary titled "Darwin Nightmare," in Mwanza City, on the southern shores of Lake Victoria

He says, “... in the documentary, it is claimed that the presence of the fishing industry has caused the outbreak of street children in Mwanza, with most of them eating parking materials used by fish processors to pack their fillets, because they can't afford to buy fish.

“Yes, in this documentary you can see street children gathered at Kamanga ferry area in Mwanza, trying to cook their food with their faces showing sorrow and grief, but this is a fiction which was directed and paid for by the authors of this documentary.

“The facts is that all street children seen in this film cooking food were paid between Tshs 1000/- and Tshs 5000/- by the producers of the film and then directed to do what they are doing, paving the way for my guests to film what they then termed "striking images."

Strange and disturbing revelations indeed! Are these “striking images” of disaster actually man- made “pseudo-events,” planned, contrived, concocted and synthesized for believability? Daniel Boorstin describes pseudo-events as “more vivid, more attractive, more impressive, and more persuasive than reality itself.”

So what is the cost of these attractive, impressive, persuasive, enticing and highly believable “pseudo-events” to Africa?

Wilson Rutayisire, post-genocide Director of Rwanda Information Services says "the way Africa is covered in the international media is not only charged with a partisan view but also responsible, to no small measure, for the perpetuation of prejudices that exacerbate Africa's problems.

“Although the media coverage Africa receives is not the principal cause of the problems Africa faces, it provides the superstructure within which Africa is perceived and foreign policies on Africa are prescribed.”

According to Carol Pineau, it ... “comes at a high cost, even ... the cost of lives. Stories about hardship and tragedy aim to tug at our heartstrings, getting us to dig into our pockets or urge Congress to send more aid. But no country or region ever developed thanks to aid alone. Investment, and the job and wealth creation it generates is the only road to lasting development. That is how China, India and the Asian tigers did it.

“Yet while Africa, according to the U.S. Government's Overseas Private Investment Corporation, offers the highest return in the world on direct foreign investment, it attracts the least. Unless investors see the Africa that is worthy of investment, they won't put their money into it. And that lack of investment translates into job stagnation, continued poverty and limited access to education and health care.”

Rwandan President, Paul Kagame also says, "The constant negative reporting kills the growth of foreign direct investment. There has even been a suggestion that it is meant to keep Africa in the backyard of the global economy.”

According to Charles Stith, former US ambassador to Tanzania, "One thing blocking a fuller perception of Africa's progress may be implicit racism. There is a historic framework that by definition sees Africa ... and Africans as inferior and negative and makes most stories about the continent negative. By contrast, China has problems, but we see and hear other things about China. Russia has problems, yet we see and read other things about Russia. That same standard should apply to Africa."

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