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AFRICA IN THE "NEW WORLD ORDER": OLD ASSUMPTIONS, MYTHS, AND REALITY

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Introduction

Three decades after the end of colonialism in most of Africa, old prejudices—with wide and comforting appeal—continue to dominate popular thinking in many parts of the Western world, particularly in the United States. Besides the patent falsehood and dehumanizing quality of such beliefs, they also prevent us from fostering meaningful international cooperation and mutually satisfying relationships between the West and Africa.

Besides former President Bush, who, in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union and the consequent sense of triumphalism in the West, took up the crusade for a "New World Order," there is also currently a lot of talk about "globalizing" the business curriculum and internationalizing the training of several professionals. A key element in this process is teaching about the social and cultural contexts in which business and other professional contacts takes place.

In all these developments, two basic problems arise in respect to Africa. First, Africa generally continues to suffer from a tradition of neglect. And, second, even when the existence of Africa is finally recognized, the picture we get is one con-structed on the basis of the same old stereotypes of Africa—stereotypes which never had any basis in reality. These are serious problems, which can make the task of "integrating" Africa into the "New World Order" or including Africa into any globalized curriculum doomed to failure from the very start.

To address the problem, we need first to identify those images of Africa and Africans which predominate in popular American thought. This will help us to de-termine who we are trying to integrate into the "New World Order"—the "savage" of the stereotypes or the real human being? Thereafter, we may consider not only what teachers and the business community ought to know about Africa and Africans, but also how to go about delivering such information most effectively and efficiently.

Africa and the tradition of Neglect

One of the most surprising facts about Africa in the Western—particularly American—world view is the virtual condemnation of the entire continent of more than 500 million people to irrelevance. Occasionally, particularly when "those fanatically Islamic Arabs" have been "bad boys" by demonstrating their "inherent depravity," parts of northern Africa manage to escape this sentence. Similarly, the

Republic of South Africa gets in the news, especially when the rival Black political groups have had a physical engagement, thus demonstrating once again "the inherent inability of tribal Africans to govern themselves". It is apparently such contemptuous treatment of Africa and Africans that prompted Susie M. Bocoum of the African Business Referral Association in San Francisco, California, to state:

> It is a shame that a continent twice the size of America is being pushed into a corner and forgotten by Europe....While Europe is busy putting together the EEC, they will put Africa last. (1991: 12)

The situation is compounded by what goes on in schools and academia. Several current reports or books on world issues or geography talk about the "U.S.A, Japan, India, China and Africa," juxtaposing Africa, a continent, with other units that are countries. The beginning of this systematic exclusion, or at best, marginalization, of Africa from the rest of the world is rooted in the historical tradition. This exclusion is made even more ironic by the theory that Africa is probably humanity's birthplace and, therefore, may have the longest history of any of the world's continents. The assumption that Africa is an historical void prevents us from studying how the human beings who have lived and continue to live in this "void" have adapted to "their particular environments, and how they perceive themselves and set their goals within those environments..." (Shaw 1987: 1).

The early "Africanists"—primarily missionaries and anthropologists— contributed, either by design or by default, to the manner in which Africa has been presented to the West. Africans were described as essentially sub-human, or perhaps pre-human. Their defining characteristics were "paganism," "nakedness," and "cannibalism". Hence, "the white man's burden" to "civilize" them. It is in such ways that, for centuries, Western scholars have prepared the grounds for the current sidetracking of Africa in world affairs. For example, over a century ago, Hegel argued not only that Africa was "isolated" from the rest of the world, but that this physical isolation denied it the "blessings" of European "civilization", thus condemning the continent to "backwardness and barbarism." With the exception of Egypt, he believed that Africa had

> no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery....From the earliest historical times, Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world; it is the land of gold, forever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night. Its isolation is not just a result of its tropical nature, but an essential consequence of the geographical nature. It is still unexplored, and has no connections whatsoever with Europe....In this main portion of Africa, history is in fact out of the question. (155)

If we take a look at some of the comments of Ibn Batuta, the celebrated Muslim traveler (1304-1368/9) on the West African empire of Mali (1238-1468)—about four centuries before Hegel wrote his famous lines—the patent falsehood of Hegel's statements becomes quite evident:

1. The small number of acts of injustice that take place there [in Mali], for of all people, the Negroes abhor it [injustice] the most....
2. The general and complete security that is enjoyed in the country. The traveler, just like the sedentary man, has nothing to fear of brigands, thieves, or plunderers.
3. The blacks do not confiscate the goods of white men who die in their country, even when these men possess immense treasures. On the contrary, the blacks deposit the goods with a man respected among the whites, until the individuals to whom the goods rightfully belong present themselves and take possession of them (cited in Collins 1990: 22).

One wonders if such observations would have been true of places in Medieval Europe. Yet, these African people are Hegel's barbarians.

Old habits do indeed die hard. Thus, over a century after Hegel, the renowned British historian, Sir Hugh Trevor-Roper asserted in 1963 with all confidence:

Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness....And darkness is not a subject of history. (871)

Others have referred to Africa as "on the fringes" of the world, an area which in the mid-nineteenth century "constituted by far the largest single barbarian reservoir left in the world," an area whose physical conditions helped to preserve "a degree of autonomy and cultural independence for African barbarian and savage communities into the second half of the nineteenth century" (McNeill: 480, 559, 724-5).

This historical excursion explains how the stage was set for the neglect of Africa. If Africa has no history other than European history, then it makes sense that Africa be excluded from the news, except insofar as it has something to do with the West. This, by and large, is the situation in world affairs today: the same pattern of thought—or the lack thereof—about Africa continues in one form or another. In fact, the neglect is often justified on the basis of "business" considerations, which is to say that a region should be of interest only for its economic potential.

True enough, in the short term, Europe, Asia and parts of Latin America may be undergoing a lot of changes, changes which warrant the extra focus. But things are also happening in Africa. Africa, it must be remembered, has a large population which is not about to disappear and which represents a potentially rich market. This is the kind of thinking which the White House often echoes in explaining its China policy in the face of obvious significant human rights abuses, a fraction of which

would have condemned most African countries to pariah status. The starting point for an ultimately mutually beneficial relationship is learning about one another, something that cannot be achieved until we recognize one another's existence.

Western/American Stereotypes About Africa

A second—and often more severe—problem concerns the age-old stereotypes of Africa and Africans with which vast numbers of Americans grew up and which continue to be nurtured in adulthood. Most, as I have already pointed out, have their genesis in earlier historical accounts written by Europeans, misguided missionaries or colonial officials. These have been reinforced, more recently, by the mass media. Together, these groups have established an unholy alliance which is hard to break. Particularly in America, with the history of slavery and institutionalized racism, it has been easy to find comfort in those racial stereotypes about Africa, at least to try to ease the conscience and rationalize a tradition and an attitude toward African-Americans that has been neither civilized, Christian, nor rational.

More than anyone else, the television industry and Hollywood have been guilty of fostering stereotypes. Think of the list of Hollywood movies, beginning with the Tarzan series, which defined and have continued to define Africa for a majority of Americans. Joel Samoff in a spirited article titled "Triumphalism, Tarzan, and Other Influences: Teaching About Africa in the 1990's" demonstrates the pernicious influence of television on the continuing process of inventing Africa. He asked his college students in the San Francisco Bay area to search weekly television sched-ules for images of Africa. While one half of the class expected wildlife/native images to predominate, the other half was roughly divided between those who expected im-ages of conflict and those who expected pictures of hunger and starvation. They were all wrong. *Tarzan* led, followed by *George of the Jungle* (an animated *Tarzan* spoof), and feature films (ranging from Abbott and Costello and Bob Hope in Africa to Sidney Poitier's exploits in Africa) in that order. It should be shocking to find that in the late 1980's, in one of the largest television markets in the United States, viewers saw more of Tarzan than any other image of Africans. Certainly, this is the major source of the popular myth about the "jungles" of Africa: in actuality, the rain forest occupies less than 5 per cent of the African land mass. The psychological impact of this image is even more damaging than the ignorance of geography:

> Consider for a moment what the Tarzan image portrays. Here is a white man, dropped suddenly in the middle of Africa, who very quickly is able to do nearly everything better than anyone else in sight. He can run more quickly, swim faster, shout louder, outfight opponents better, communicate effectively with the animals, enlisting their support regularly. He is also able to communicate with all the people he meets, even though they are apparently unable to understand each other. He can tell the good guys from the bad guys at first glance, both Black and White. A grand metaphor for modernization (Samoff 1992: 20).

Among the "classics"—if one were to judge by the frequency with which they air on television and how often they are cited by the American public—are *The African Queen* and, of course, *The Gods Must Be Crazy I & II*. Other more recent examples include *Out of Africa* (naturally focused on the emotions of the Westerners) and *Gorillas in the Mist* (the title speaks for itself). The first two give us the usual fare of fierce-looking and stupid Africans, and, of course, the know-it-all white men, who not only marvel at the incredible childishness of Africans, but have to impose order. The naked dancers are never far behind, with the chattering and nattering of the half-clad savages, nor is the inevitable wild life, literally crawling all over the place. Even in Eddie Murphy's famous *Coming to America*, the half-clad dancers are ubiquitous, women are second class citizens, and elephants stroll in people's backyards. It is difficult to resist the temptation to lay a charge of institutionalized racism and ethnocentrism at Hollywood's doorstep, particularly when one puts the facts here together with the stereotyped portrayal of African-Americans in Hollywood movies such as those satirized in Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle*.

Sadly, even the best that television has to offer, Public Television, usually falls into the same mode of thought. Virtually any segment of perhaps the best and most popular children's program, *Sesame Street*, that talks about Africa, shows you children who are ill-fed, scantily clothed, living in huts, and going to school in the most deplorable conditions. I have yet to see in Africa such a village school or even a city school. Even though I went to elementary school over thirty years ago in a very small town in southwestern Nigeria, I never saw any school like those which are supposed to be the norm in 1993 Africa. Nor did my father who is now 85 ever live in a hut or go to such a school, even though he lived in an even smaller town over seventy years ago!

Finally, popular television series like those by *National Geographic* always manage to find images of nomads, starving children, "Pygmies," the Masai, etc., which are then held up as the image of Africa. It is much like pointing to the Amish and concluding that they represent America (no pejorative meaning intended). We may also consider the impact of showing only the extremely poverty-stricken Mississippi Delta, the wooden shacks in the Ozarks, the worst of Chicago's slums, scenes or movies centered only on the homeless, drug addicts, drug wars, and KKK rallies as the image of America. Although I gently pointed these facts out to my students, it made little impact on a core of them, who felt not only that I had lied about Africa, but that knowledge about Africa and Africans was of no value.

Besides television, the print media contribute to the invention of a "primitive" and "backward" Africa. They reinforce those same images and carry even more authority, because their reports are supposedly based on "investigative journalism." Here, then, in the 1990's, in the wake of "triumphant capitalism," we easily discern a refurbishing of traditional images of Africa, "the poor and pitiful 'other'". In its projection of images of decay and disaster, for example, the cover story in the September 7, 1992 issue of *Time* clearly illustrates this tendency. Even positive

stories, such as the crumbling of apartheid in South Africa, are rendered negative by the constant presentation of "Black on Black Violence," which stands in stark contrast to a "White world of responsible leadership," signified not only by De Klerk, but also by White "radicals." Similar stories are featured in the September 1992 issue of the magazine of youth style, *Details*, in which the discussion of opposition to apartheid is restricted to the rejection of conscription by "young White radicals."

Writing on the prevalence of these African stereotypes among American students, Richard Corby says:

> Stereotypes and myths about Africa still abound in American published materials and in the media. Some of these distortions are obvious to discerning readers, others are more difficult to detect. These stereotypes and myths contribute to the "Tarzan" image of Africa that many of our students develop about the continent and retain throughout their lifetimes. (1985 : 76)

Of course, it is not only the students who have such grave misconceptions; adults are often worse. A school teacher who participated in a University of Florida Summer Institute on African Studies visited Ghana in 1977. Her summary of the concerns of people, both before and after her trip, are quite illuminating:

> Preceding my trip...quite a few intelligent adults revealed some of their erroneous perceptions of Africa by asking me questions and giving me advice....They were (1) worried about my safety among the primitive tribes, (2) concerned that I might be treated by a "witch doctor" in case of illness, (3) afraid I would be overcome by the heat of the jungles, (4) thinking I could be harmed by wild animals, and (5) wondering if I'd be threatened because of my belief in Christianity. ("How Americans View Africa": 1).

Predictably, even though she reported upon her return about *the only wild animal* she saw—a monkey in a short stretch of rain-forest—but more about the modern airports, the busy city streets, the beautifully landscaped grounds of the university campuses, the lovely hotels, the people dressed in Western style clothes, etc., her audience continually queried her as if these reports were not "for real". Years of being schooled in stereotypes had built up in her audience an automatic attitude of disbelief in a positive image of Africa and Africans, even when they were refuted with credible, personal evidence. Such also was my experience with a group of students in my composition class here at GVSU. I had shown them a video from the Ali Mazrui series, *The Africans*, (which originally aired on Public Television). The video dealt with the theme of tradition and change in Africa, one aspect of which was the rise in religious fundamentalism—both Christian and Islamic—in Africa. We were supposed to learn something about Africa and also develop an essay on religious fundamentalism and intolerance in the United States. I was shocked when I, as well as Mazrui, were roundly castigated by several students, both orally and in writing, for

presenting a false picture of Africa! They wanted to know where the "starving children" had all gone. Showing a picture of an Africa which was not threatened by famine, civil war, or AIDS is to lay oneself open to charges of fabrication!

As one final example of the difficulty of teaching facts as opposed to accepting stereotypes about Africa, consider the following account of the reporting of two interviews I granted in 1991 to a reporter who worked for two newspapers in Statesboro, Georgia: *The Statesboro Herald* and *The Eagle,* a student newspaper. He sat in on my hour-long class on Yoruba, a Nigerian language, and then had a further one and a half hours of a one-on-one interview with me, in which he was provided with written material on the language and the people. Nevertheless, in *The Herald's* published version of the article, Yoruba was still called a "dialect" (as opposed to a language like English), Nigeria—and Africa in general—consisted of "tribes", and "all Yorubans [sic] greet each other formally: e.g., when their parents enter a room, children greet them by lying down on their stomachs," as if the children are like dogs, rolling over for their master's pleasure. In *The Eagle's* article, the ritual of prostrating or kneeling down to greet older people was presented more dramatically, as a primitive, reprobate custom akin to treating children like groveling animals. These virtually predictable characterizations certainly suggest a definite mind set that somehow manages, not necessarily out of malice, not to hear what is said.

A Presentation of the African Experience

It seems to me that the situation that I have described here makes all the more urgent now a revision of the curriculum throughout the entire school system to ensure that our students acquire a factual knowledge of Africa and Africans. It is equally important that teachers be aware of and educate themselves about which Africa they will present to their children: the invented Africa or the real Africa. The extent of damage usually already done to the minds of college students before they arrive in college makes it mandatory that African studies be pursued more seriously in the earlier stages of their education. In colleges, then, Africa must find a voice not only in General Education courses, but also in courses in a variety of academic disciplines, ranging from literature and history to anthropology and biology. Such is one of the goals of the informal group at Grand Valley State University currently trying to develop an African and African-American Studies Program. What I specify below are the basic issues that should guide a General Education course at the college level and that could also serve for an inclusion in the middle/high school curriculum.

The major themes in African life which should serve to provide a unifying frame of reference in our program can be grouped into two broad categories: cultural and economic. Among the cultural themes are eating customs and foods, education, dress, family relationships, languages, and adaptation to environment. Economic themes include types of work, the nature of the political economy, the standard of living/quality of life, the spending of leisure time, and, again, adaptation to environment. All these should be placed within a historical context.

The central purpose of teaching about Africa is to encourage students to understand Africans (or indeed members of any other culture) as people like themselves, as people who create and express themselves in a wide variety of ways. Specifically, they should understand the distinction between myth and fact about peoples and further:

1. that all peoples have a significant past.
2. that all peoples have to deal with similar basic problems: e.g., obtaining food, clothing, and shelter.
3. that family and kinship ties are essential in shaping the character and structure of societies and in determining the parameters of individual decision-making.
4. that many characteristics of a society are directly related to, or dependent upon, the physical environment within which culture develops.
5. that human societies perform similar functions but differ in the cultural patterns which they develop to accomplish these functions.
6. that every society develops patterns of acceptable individual and group behavior and provides means for their enforcement.

Clearly, this list is not exhaustive. But it does reflect the essential goal of preparing participants for meaningful and productive interaction with their target cultures.

African Studies programs or courses must also foster in students at all levels the ability to place differences in a cultural perspective. This is especially critical for Americans who, despite espousing the ideals of self-determination and individualism, somehow consistently manage to believe that anything that deviates from the "American norm" is "weird," "strange," "unchristian," or "downright wrong". Furthermore, American judgments that are passed on to other cultures have particularly significant negative consequences around the world.

Conclusion

Today, in the absence of old belief systems and structures, we (especially our students) face a new danger. If there is a focus on ideas as all relative, or on a belief that ideas are free of the power relations that perpetuate them, it becomes all the more imperative for teachers to place what we do in the social-historical context. Regardless of discipline, we need to look at the history of Africa and at U. S. policy toward Africa. We must also learn to pay greater attention to the African images our students consume both from print and electronic media. The biggest challenge for all teachers at whatever level may indeed be to try to understand and deal with what the "New World Order" means and with how Africa is perceived or projected in the media for our students.

Learning the truth about others is not a luxury. It is both a spiritual and pragmatic necessity for us as members of the human community on the eve of the twenty-first century. No race or continent is about to disappear for the convenience of another. In

fact, if anything, we see our world literally shrinking as we become increasingly inter-dependent economically and otherwise. Knowledge of the truth about others, rather than an ostrich-like clinging to old myths and stereotypes, is central to our success. Today, Africa may not be on the center stage of world economic activity, but we must look ahead and prepare for a future in which it may be.

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