2

HOW WE LEARN

In the 1970s, scholars of Africa realized that American high school textbooks were filled with stereotypes about Africa. With the coming of independence for African countries in the 1960s and with the American civil rights movement, the most glaring myths had disappeared. 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.[1] Fortunately, several decades later our textbooks are much better.[2]

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 Despite improved texts, by the time students get to college, most still have outdated ideas about the continent. Even college graduates may not have corrected their misconceptions of Africa. In a 1996 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 most Africans to be illiterate, and 93 percent were convinced that more kinds of diseases exist 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.[3]

A 2007 survey asked American college students studying in several African countries to describe their attitudes toward Africa before and during their time there. When asked what they had *expected* to find in Africa, they provided words much like the ones described in Chapter 1, especially *poor, dangerous, hot, underdeveloped, violent, tribal,* and *spiritual.* When they described how they felt *after* spending time in Africa, they emphasized words such as *beautiful, diverse, friendly, culture misunderstood, developing, changing,* and *vibrant.* Words such as *dangerous* and *underdeveloped* did not disappear entirely, but overall the students' perceptions were significantly more positive.[4]

Both teachers and students are bombarded with mistaken images of Africa in our everyday culture, so it is not surprising that they often mistake Africa for what it is not. Correcting these errors 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, 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 examine *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 sheer numbers of programs, Africa is actually better represented on television than many other areas of the world. Regrettably, however, the shows do not provide a very accurate view of Africa, in part because of the large number of nature programs. This is actually an improvement over television a decade ago when the nature shows were joined by cartoons that featured Africa, such as *George of the Jungle, Johnny Quest,* and frequent reruns of *Mickey Mouse* and *Popeye* episodes made in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of the cartoon images of Africa were stereotyped presentations of ferocious large animals, lost treasure protected by evil genies and geniuses, and hungry cannibals. Fortunately, after about 2000 these cartoons mostly disappeared and were replaced by action cartoons that rarely use Africa as a setting.

Today's nature shows still tend to portray Africa as a place filled with wild animals, park rangers, and naturalists who battle against poachers and encroaching agriculture. By featuring carnivores, the programs also use Africa to emphasize "survival of the fittest" motifs. Yet 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 nature programs favor.

As stations on cable and satellite television have multiplied, so have programs on African *people.* The number of programs is not great, but from time to time the Learning Channel, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, Black Entertainment Television, the Africa Channel, and other stations show Africa-related ethnographies and documentaries. For example, I recently watched an excellent show on ABC about the Abayudaya Jews of rural Uganda and a PBS *Nova* episode on how termites affect a village in northern Cameroon.[5] What is still lacking, however, is a serious understanding of how people currently live in Africa. Today, 40 percent of Africans live in cities, and most rural Africans are deeply connected to cities in one way or another. Why, then, do shows about African culture rarely show a city scene, middle-class Africans, a paved road, or a farmer producing a crop that will be sold in a town or eventually reach us? One reason is that urban documentaries are more difficult to film than those about life in rural areas. Most African elites live in cities and don't like reporters and filmmakers prying into their affairs.

Perhaps a more significant reason for television's preference for rural over urban Africa is our ongoing romance with the exotic. We consider nature and the life of people with less contact with modern cultures more interesting and more enlightening than studies of everyday modern African life. Thus, despite greater television access to Africa as a result of the cable revolution, the televised image of Africa remains drastically incomplete. This is not to say that no good documentaries have been made on African urban life. For example, British directors Kim Longinotto and Florence Ayisi have made *Sisters in Law,* the powerful story of Beatrice Ntuba and Vera Ngassa, a judge and a state prosecutor, in the town of Kumba, Cameroon. This film, aired on PBS's *Independent Lens,* presents a positive, complex picture of the lives of contemporary urban women.[6] But such films are rare.

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. Yet here the picture is even bleaker. What usually prompts the infrequent appearances of Africa in the news or in news documentaries is a war, coup, drought, famine, flood, epidemic, or accident. 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 providing more context for such news events than ever before. Cable News Network (CNN), for example, occasionally runs stories produced by African reporters. And television coverage of the transition to majority rule in South Africa included a great deal about the history and life of South Africans. Since that time, however, South Africa has almost disappeared from the news except for occasional reports of trouble.

Of course, charges that 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, news programs border on entertainment. We want our emotions aroused, but not so much that we actually might feel compelled to think deeply or take some kind of action. Moreover, news from Africa is expensive. If all this is true, 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 provide about the same coverage of Africa as television news does 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 likely to find no 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, only a handful of American reporters cover Africa south of the Sahara, a region containing a population more than twice as large as that of the United States. These reporters either are based in one of the big cities, such as Johannesburg (South Africa), Nairobi (Kenya), or perhaps Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), or are visiting these cities. They report on local events, and, if trouble arises 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, Nigeria, or Zimbabwe 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 or better 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.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault—a longtime observer of Africa, reporter for the *New York Times*, correspondent for PBS, and now Special Africa Correspondent for National Public Radio—makes the point well in her book *New News Out of Africa*. She writes that

> the perception throughout Africa is that foreign media are only interested in stories that fit the old journalistic maxim "If it bleeds, it leads." Much of the shallow coverage of death, disaster, disease, and despair for which foreign media treatments of Africa are criticized derives from what is called "parachute journalism"—dropping in for a brief look at a situation, then flying back out without taking the time to delve deeply into the background or put a story in context.[7]

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 difficult 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 found that reporters tended to accept uncritically the US government position concerning our ally Jonas Savimbi. In the context of 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. Everyone, especially Angolans, would have been better served had reporting been more thorough and fair.[8]

Ironically, bias in media coverage can also be found in the desire of some reporters to treat Africa well. Ugandan journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo observes that in the 1990s younger liberal Western journalists began reporting on what they termed a "new breed" of African rulers who they supposed would bring democracy, honesty, and development to African governments and economies. In producing such reports, the journalists glossed over the undemocratic and dishonest features of the new regimes, thus allowing the new rulers to believe that the West would look the other way if they acted badly. "Africa, the continent," Onyango-Obbo concludes,

> is a collection of nations that are pretty much like others elsewhere in the world, struggling with successes and with failures, and there should be no special type of journalism reserved for its coverage. The patronizing reporting one witnesses today is as bad as the condescending work of the past. What the African continent needs is good journalism, one that tells the stories as they are reported and observed. What has happened to coverage of Africa in the Western media today offers the latest proof that there is no alternative to this proven approach.[9]

Items also appear regularly in newspapers that can be characterized as "curiosities from Africa." Weeks go by in my local paper without any substantial news from Africa, and then the paper (not a bad paper, actually) includes a front-page story about "newest version of Nigeria-based rip-off targets dog lovers," a scam luring people to send money to buy or rescue purebred puppies that don't exist.[10] Is this news about Africa? Yes. Is it interesting? Kind of. Does it give us perspective on what is happening in Africa? Not much. Is it useful? Somewhat. Is it the most important news from Africa? Not at all. Once again, however, we should remind ourselves that there has been progress. In this case, the story about puppies was not about curiosities of African village life, but about Africans living in cities with everyday access to modern tools such as the Internet.

After television and newspapers, we can examine popular magazines. We should do better here if only because our magazines offer more space to devote to pondering what is going on in the world. Indeed, journals such as the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Current History*, *Discover*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *World and I* have published thoughtful, unbiased 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 attempting to solve their problems in rational ways, even if the solutions might be different from the ones we would choose.

Most Americans read less sophisticated fare as a daily diet. In more popular magazines, most articles about Africa 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, *SmartMoney* advertises that "South Africa has it all: gorgeous scenery, fascinating cultures, rhino-filled game reserves—and, best of all, a weak [currency]."[11] In *Outside*, a 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."[12] Yet other themes include "celebrity goes to Africa," "curious customs," and "African agony." These views of Africa not only evoke stereotypes we already hold but reinforce them as well.

National Geographic

One very popular magazine, *National Geographic*—with an astounding global circulation of nearly eight million—is 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."[13] 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. Countries such as Congo (Kinshasa) and Malawi were featured in the 1970s and 1980s, but in the 1990s most African countries became unsuitable for *National Geographic*. As conditions worsened in Africa, it was increasingly difficult to be kind to modern Africa, at least from the American perspective, and the frequency of *National Geographic* articles dealing with individual African countries declined correspondingly. There are 1990s articles set in Congo and Malawi, but they treat Congo River travel and Lake Malawi water life, much safer topics than the countries themselves.[14]

A 1996 article about Eritrea demonstrates the point: Eritrea could be featured because, as a brand-new country, it was considered full of hope.[15] 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.[16] This is an example of what has been termed "development pornography." We are asked only to *look* at others' misery, not do anything about it or even understand it.

In the 1990s and after, *National Geographic* continued to run articles on Africa, but they tended to feature animals. The exceptions tend to be "trouble in Africa" articles that, for example, warn against environmental deterioration, describe problems with oil extraction, and decry violence. Although often useful, these articles, even taken as a whole, offer a distorted picture of Africa. A 1997 article on Central Africa provides a brief but generally accurate analysis

of the history of the civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi. Yet most readers would be unable to decipher the implications of the article's points because the author provides little background on post-independence international influence and competition in Africa.[17] A 2003 article on national parks in Gabon rightly praises Gabon's conservation efforts but is entitled "Saving Africa's Eden," thus stereotyping Africa's environment as both idyllic and prehistoric.[18] (Also see Chapter 4.) "Curse of the Black Gold," a 2007 piece, deals with the problems of the oil industry in the Niger Delta and appears to take the side of Africans by pointing to the failure of aid programs and the neglect of international companies such as Shell. However, the article ends on a pessimistic note, giving no suggestions for action and claiming that there are "no answers in sight."[19] This statement effectively tells the reader not to look for answers and not to act, reaffirming the stereotype of Africa as a hopeless place.

In a 2004 article on modern Johannesburg, "City of Hope and Fear," the author focuses on fear and violence in this South African city.[20] The article stands out because only a year later the magazine's sister publication, *National Geographic Traveler*, included an article on Johannesburg, "Brash and Brilliant," that celebrates "Jo'burg" as a tourist destination.[21] Although portions of South Africa do have high rates of violent crime, as do portions of the United States, journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, quoted earlier, chastises the media for focusing on the violence of Johannesburg:

> Many people say that they want to visit Africa for the adventure, for some of the world's greatest natural wonders, and because it is the last best place to see animals not in a zoo. Many tell me they are making plans to go there, especially to South Africa, whose struggle against apartheid engaged so many of them. Then, in the next breath, they express concern about the reports of crime they've heard. One caller shared with me the report his son came back with that "everyone" in South Africa carries a gun, which was news to me, a Johannesburg resident of almost ten years.[22]

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 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. Forty years ago *National Geographic* would not have published on topics such as environmental degradation and oil extraction, as it does today. But even if the magazine doesn't actively exploit, it does reinforce our stereotypes and confuse us by asserting that beauty, safety, and bland analysis are somehow equal to science and geography.

Movies

Movies, too, teach us our African stereotypes. Whether oldies such as *The African Queen*, *Mogambo*, and *Tarzan the Ape Man*, or newer pictures such as *The Constant Gardener* and *The Last King of Scotland*, 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. One funny movie, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a South African shoestring production that has become popular as a video and DVD release, is an exception because of its many scenes featuring African 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. Africa has appeared more recently in such feature films as *Blood Diamond*, *Tears of the Sun*, and *Lord of War*. However, as their titles suggest, these movies perpetuate myths of Africa as remote, exotic, and full of violence and disease. All three films echo Leonardo DiCaprio's line in *Blood Diamond*: "God left this place a long time ago."

Tears of the Sun, an action film, is an example of how difficult it is to portray *Africa* as savage while portraying *Africans* as civilized. The premise of the film is that the Navy SEAL commando played by Bruce Willis delves into war-torn Nigeria to extract an American doctor from the cross fire—the war being flippantly explained in terms of "tribal hatred," as if that phrase is enough to encompass the whole array of causes for war and to silence any hopes of remediation. However, despite its stereotypical basis, the film treats its African characters with relative dignity. African refugees in *Tears of the Sun* arm and defend themselves, and two of them have personalities that are as well developed as those of the white characters. Thus the film's image of Africans as rational,

functional human beings conflicts with its overall message that African wars are caused by ancient, "tribal" rivalries and cannot be ended by rational means.

Lord of War tells the story of an international arms dealer and features Africa only in its second half. The movie represents Africa as a heart of darkness, the geographic equivalent of the Nicholas Cage character's descent into human depravity in the arms trade. Dialogue from the movie reinforces this idea: the main (white) character refers to the outskirts of Monrovia as "the edge of hell." Individual characters are also shallow: African men are all members of a corrupt and licentious governing elite, and the women are hypersexual and mute. The film gives the sense that Africa is a place even a hardened international arms dealer finds unsettling. Gratuitous images of violence, such as a dead man lying unattended in the street beside a hotel, reinforce this image.

Lord of War also evokes African remoteness. In one scene the central character is forced to make an emergency landing and unload his cargo of AK-47s before an Interpol agent catches him. He does so by offering the contents of his plane to a crowd of poor villagers, who strip the plane not only of its contents but of its structure as well, dismantling it for scrap materials.

Blood Diamond, the most offensive of the three films, damages the image both of the continent and of the individual African. Solomon, the film's only significant African character, is hollow, unintelligent, and aggressively instinctual. During a scene in which he and the character played by Leonardo DiCaprio are hiding from passing trucks of militants, Solomon thinks he spots his missing son and cries out, alerting the enemy to their presence. He does not seem to realize his mistake even the following day, after a sharp rebuke from DiCaprio. Later, in another chaotic fighting scene (instigated once again by an act of stupidity), in which everyone is using firearms, Solomon picks up a shovel to bash in the head of the man who kidnapped his son.

In *Blood Diamond*, the whites are always the ones scheming, plotting, dealing, and above all, *thinking*. The film's Africans never so much as protest at the injustices of their society, let alone fight back. Solomon, apparently motivated by little more than animal instinct to protect his son, is unable to think through his actions. Dialogue also makes ample use of the abbreviation TIA (for "This is Africa") to dismiss anything violent or distressing that occurs, implying that in Africa, misery is the only way of life.

While it is no longer acceptable to create a film set in Africa that does not feature Africans or that makes overtly racist statements without encasing them in the dialogue of unsavory characters, Hollywood stereotyping of

Africa has become veiled rather than growing less prevalent. Fortunately, several contemporary films from international producers offer more enlightened perspectives. *The Constant Gardener*, *The Last King of Scotland*, and *Hotel Rwanda* are particularly good, though each has its problems. These problems are small, however, compared to those of films produced entirely by Americans.

Amusement Parks

Busch Gardens Africa in Tampa, Florida, is another prime example of how we learn about Africa and also 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, and the wife looking on passively. His children also follow 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.

Twenty years later, this racist and sexist poster is no longer used. As a result of protests, Busch Gardens has tried to change its "Dark Continent" image. Now the park focuses instead on neutral images: the large animal park, replicas of African houses, African-made tourist art, and rides that have mildly African themes. Nostalgia for nineteenth-century stereotypes persists, however, and thus there are endless inconsistencies. The idea of Ubanga Banga Bumper Cars in the section called The Congo would be hilarious except for the underlying message this stereotypical "African" name sends about Africa. It is strange to think of the Dolphin Theater and Festhaus restaurant being in Timbuktu, a town on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. 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 to anyone who knows little about Africa, these inconsistencies aren't readily apparent.

Busch Gardens claims to offer a chance to "immerse yourself in the culture of the African continent as you experience its majestic wildlife."[23] How is observing wildlife equal to participation in anyone's culture? Moreover, how does Busch Gardens' silly version of African culture represent the complexity of

African realities? Instead, Busch Gardens Africa teaches Americans damaging stereotypes about Africa. Perhaps in another twenty years we will look back at this version of Busch Gardens as a misguided and misinformed (if not racist) approach to both Africa and entertainment.

Another amusement park, Disney World in Orlando, has become a global pilgrimage destination. When I visited, I was reminded of Africa at several turns (literally) as I took the Jungle River Cruise in boats named after real rivers and places in the Congo rain forest (not jungle): Bomokandi Bertha, Wamba Wanda, 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.

The boat trip guides have a rollicking time telling jokes during the trip. For example:

> On the left, a friendly group of native traders. Ukka Mucka Lucka . . . Ubonga Swahili Ungawa . . . Wagga Kuna Nui Ka. . . . It's a good thing I speak their language. [*Turns to guest*] They want to trade their coconuts for your [*wife/child/husband*]. . . . I think we should hold out for at least four.
>
> This is my good friend Sam, who runs the Cannibal Cafe. The last time I talked to Sam was at his cafe. I told him that I didn't like his brother very much. He told me, "Next time, have the salad."[24]

These couldn't be funny if our culture hadn't put Dark Continent images in our heads before the trip.

In 1998 Disney 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. There are, for example, 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."[25]

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 sold here. And visitors are escorted in buses outfitted to give the feeling of a "real" safari. Further, as visitors pass certain points, underground sensors trigger events in the fashion of similar tours at 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, we're told, 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.

San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park offers the same conquest nostalgia as the parks described above. In a children's storytelling arena, a live "Dr. Livingston" entertains visitors in the evening. The park's "Journey into Africa" tour claims to represent an authentic Africa. The website reads, "As you approach your tour vehicle, you start getting a sense of this place called Africa. . . . Lift-up flaps, maps, and cultural artifacts establish a 'sense of place.'" [26] What is this sense of place? It can hardly be a sense of the whole, complex continent of Africa. Rather, it is a canned production designed to echo the safari mythology of our own culture.

The zoo clearly feels it needs to transform seeing African animals into an African adventure, and what better way to do that than to evoke African stereotypes that the visitor can connect with? Journey into Africa includes "the heart of Africa" (a colonial phrase), which turns out to be "its amazing diversity of species." You enter the "Nairobi Village" through a portal that simulates "the ceremonial chamber of a Ugandan king," and you visit the "Mombasa Lagoon," modeled on a "Congo fishing village." The allusions to an Africa filled with villagers, tribes, nonmodern political organizations, and animals go on and on.[27]

A more positive example is Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa, Florida. A smaller park, Lowry does not attempt to compete with the entertainment and advertising strategies of nearby Busch Gardens and Animal Kingdom. It features

an "Ituri Forest" region, designed to mimic the tropical rain forest habitat in the northern Congo River Basin.[28] Concerned only with animals, the zoo makes no pretensions of showing African culture to its visitors, nor does it make overtly stereotypical statements about Africa.

Celebrities

Is it possible that celebrity attention to Africa's problems could actually reinforce our stereotypes about the continent? This generation's celebrity attention to Africa began in earnest in 1985, when stars Bob Geldof, Bobby Shriver, and others organized the first LiveAid concert, an international event mounted with the intention of raising funds to fight AIDS and poverty in Africa. Since then, additional concerts and a steady stream of celebrity visitors (among them Bono, Mia Farrow, Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Madonna, Guy Ritchie, Jessica Lange, Oprah Winfrey, and Simon Cowell) have helped call attention to many African issues. Some of these celebrities have been criticized in the media for seeking publicity at Africa's expense. And Jolie and Pitt were accused of "celebrity colonialism" for effectively using the government of Namibia to provide privacy and security so they could have a special birthing experience in what she called "the cradle of human kind."[29] Narcissism is certainly alive and well.

Nigerian novelist Uzodinma Iweala says that while Africans appreciate help, the continent does not need to be saved. Celebrities and others use Africa not only to call attention to themselves but also as a prop in their fantasy worlds:

> My mood is dampened every time I attend a benefit whose host runs through a litany of African disasters before presenting a (usually) wealthy, white person, who often proceeds to list the things he or she has done for the poor, starving Africans. Every time a well-meaning college student speaks of villagers dancing because they were so grateful for her help, I cringe. Every time a Hollywood director shoots a film about Africa that features a Western protagonist, I shake my head—because Africans, real people though we may be, are used as props in the West's fantasy of itself. And not only do such depictions tend to ignore the West's prominent role in creating many of the unfortunate situations on the continent, they also ignore the incredible work Africans have done and continue to do to fix those problems.[30]

Many have doubted the sincerity of celebrity efforts to help Africa, but it might be more useful to examine the effect of these efforts rather than their motives. In Chapter 6 I discuss the overall effectiveness of American efforts to help Africa. Our purpose here is to ask whether celebrities teach us stereotypes about Africa. Michael Holman, former editor of the *Financial Times*, a British newspaper, suggests that "celebrity aid" reinforces stereotypes by promoting gift giving rather than deep analysis of African problems. If we continue to see African problems as susceptible to redress only through aid, we will continue to see Africans as helpless and inferior. What message, for example, is sent when celebrities make high-profile adoptions from Africa? That Africa has no future? Holman suggests that celebrities could do the most good for Africa if they would abandon stereotypical help-for-poor-Africans strategies and focus on starting debates about questions that matter. Things might really be different, says Holman, if Madonna, who adopted a child from Malawi, would, say,

> respond to the fact that the diaspora of Africa's educated is swollen by 60,000 a year. This has led to the bizarre, outrageous situation that more doctors who were trained in Malawi are practicing in England's second city of Birmingham than in Malawi itself. If one of Malawi's main exports is health professionals, that is not in itself a bad thing—what is unacceptable is that there is no organised replenishment.[31]

Holman doubts that the celebrities' "armies of advisers and publicists and sponsors" would permit such statements. What do you think? I believe that intelligent entertainment celebrities (that's not necessarily an oxymoron) could help spark much-needed debates and still remain celebrities. For now, celebrities tend to reinforce Dark Continent stereotypes and thus keep us from addressing real issues concerning how the world—the one inhabited by both Africans and Americans—is structured.

Other Sources

The other places where we learn our ideas about Africa are too numerous to discuss here. How about children's books, place mats in restaurants, Africa-themed resorts, billboards, and computer games? I've seen Africa

used in exotic, inaccurate, and sometimes offensive ways in each of these examples.

My impression is that children's authors are ahead of many others in our culture in trying to portray Africa accurately. Nonetheless, there are matters to pay attention to. Yulisa Amadu Maddy, a Sierra Leonean theater artist and 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 that grows in the marketplace as her personal property and refuses to give mangoes to children unless they pay. She buys a Mercedes Benz with her profits and then begins selling her mangoes to a jelly factory at such a high price that the villagers cannot afford them. In the end, 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 reinforce community values and favor 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 are no doubt greedy people in Africa, but this short book—despite its positive intentions 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."[32]

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 based on African folktales rely on biased colonial sources that modified the folktales to make Western moral points, not African ones.

Another study of children's literature asks whether books about South Africa give children a realistic picture. Linda Labbo and Sherry Field took a selection of American books to South Africa to ask teachers there what they thought. In general, the teachers were impressed and wished that their own students had access to the materials, but they also found that books about children and African animals or about village life could easily give a mistaken impression of life in South Africa. Most South Africans live in cities, and very few have money to visit game parks or private game farms, practically the only places to find wild animals. The South African teachers also suggested that

when American students read about village life, they should read several books so as to begin to understand the variety of South African cultures.[33]

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 or helping poor, unenlightened savages in the old-fashioned missionary mode. The refrain of a 1998 Christian song entitled "Please Don't Send Me to Africa" encapsulates such an attitude toward the continent:

> Please don't send me to Africa
> I don't think I've got what it takes
> I'm just a man, I'm not a Tarzan
> Don't like lions, gorillas, or snakes
> I'll serve you here in suburbia
> In my comfortable, middle-class life
> But please don't send me out into the bush
> Where the natives are restless at night[34]

This sentiment, "Please don't send me to Africa," appears also in sermons and other church literature to represent a significant sacrifice.[35] But while intended to satirize the faintness of Christian hearts, it does a severe disservice to Africa. Africa is mistaken as a wild, distant place where animals and restless natives abound and discomfort is standard.

And museums? It's remarkable that we continue the nineteenth-century practice of putting animals and "native" peoples in the same museum, the "natural history" museum. In the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., and many others, the implication is that premodern African cultures belonged to the history of nature rather than the history of civilization. Moreover, such treatment implies that animals and Africans can be considered separately from ourselves in our understanding of the world. Aware of these problems, natural history museum curators do what they can to overcome them.

Art museums pose a somewhat different problem. Art 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 a display of African art—in which masks and statues are usually overrepresented—we see something entirely different than what most 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 often 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 assuming that the public is interested in the exotic. But because museums are also committed to accuracy, exhibits since the 1990s and their advertising have displayed much less stereotyping.

Corporate advertising also uses Africa to sell products. Exxon Mobil, Dow, Snapple, Coca-Cola, Honda, Microsoft, and IBM, for example, have recently produced ads depicting their products in association with Africa. Some of these ads are shown in Chapter 10. 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.

Once you are aware of the ways we commonly treat Africa, you will soon (and perhaps frequently) see Africa treated stereotypically in everyday life. I hope 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 unintended stereotypical references are all the more indicative of how we see the world. Clearly, they indicate that our belief in an Africa full of animals, "the bush," and desperate people is so embraced by Americans that we do not even see it as derogatory. The problem, of course, is that such views become self-perpetuating. Even if we want to avoid portraying Africa in stereotypical terms, we are bound to do so because we have few other models of Africa to which we can compare these images.

PART TWO

EVOLUTIONISM