Images of Africa in the Western Media

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1.0 Abstract

"Misinformation about Africa has become a growth industry in the West." Ama Biney.

Africa is the second largest continent both in terms of land area and population, but it is the poorest and least developed of them all. Many people in the Western world generally display a significant lack of knowledge about Africa. They have never visited Africa and most certainly, they never will. Yet in their minds, most of them have certain images of Africa that they hold to be "true" or "real". They possess these images courtesy of the Western media through its representations of Africa – via television

programs and documentaries, the movie industry, the Internet, as well as the print media including the newspapers, magazines, journals and books.

As exemplified by the above quotation from Ama Biney, there has been, for a long time now, a systematic trend of misrepresenting Africa in the West, and the powerful Western media has been responsible for this. The Western public has been exposed to these patterns of misrepresentations, which in turn have been solidified into stereotypes or generalizations about what Africa is all about.

The popular images of Africa in the West include the "dark continent" characterized by primeval irrationality, tribal anarchy, civil war, political instability, flagrant corruption, incompetent leadership and managerial ineptitude, hunger, famine and starvation as well as rampant diseases, especially AIDS. Africa is seen as a homogenous entity comprising of uncivilized and heathen peoples who are culturally, intellectually, politically and technically backward or inferior, who are incapable of governing themselves, or at least embracing democratic principles of governance. The African continent is depicted as the "dependent Africa", "crisis driven Africa and "hopeless" or "pitiable Africa". Without exception, the images have been negative and then sensationialize the "dark" side of Africa.

Ever since the slavery and colonial times, such images of Africa have persisted in the West and they still permeate the perspectives taken by the powerful Western media personified by editors, journalists, politicians and even academics. So much so that within the past decade, we have seen parts of the Western media campaigning for the recolonization of Africa, arguing that "…the factors which will permit the revival of colonialism are in place"

Critics of these kinds of representations of Africa have pointed a finger at the commercialization of the media especially the entertainment and news industries in the West – which have perfected biased subjective presentation of inaccurate, fallacious images of propaganda about Africa, which are meant to suit the business interests of the media corporation. On the other hand, other scholars, like Stuart Hall and Dan Chandler would like us to view these as the creation of new forms or ways of understanding reality and move away from analyzing biases or stereotypes because there is no fixed "reality" or "truth" of these images.

This paper is an attempt to discuss, with examples some popular images of Africa in the Western electronic and print media, while pointing out the underlying value assumptions of these presentations. It also seeks to highlight the "missing images" of Africa, to put in perspective the reasons or sources of these misrepresentations and then suggest in general and specific terms a "way forward".

2.0 Images of Africa

2.1 Africa as Homogenous Entity. The African continent – with its 53 individual countries – is often referred and presented in the West, especially in America, as if it were one large country, the same way that, say, China, India or Russia is presented. This is a misconception that ignores the fact that Africa is a continent made of independent countries, which are in turn inhabited by peoples of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In the movies *The Air Up There* and *Endurance* (about that Ethiopian star runner Haile Gabbresellaise), any conversation or singing not in English is captioned on the TV screen as "conversation in African language" or "singing in African language" as if there is one African language. The truth of the matter is that there are numerous African languages and several of them feature in these two movies – including Swahili, Lingala, Zulu, and Amharic – and this underscores the multilingual nature of the African continent where hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken.

2.2 Africa "The Dark Continent." Since the era of slavery and colonial rule, the image of Africa as the "Dark Continent", one that is devoid of a history, has been perpetuated by Western traders, missionaries, adventurers and explorers, as well as the Western media (Africa as the white man's burden?). News or reports from Africa paint the picture of heathen peoples who thrive in backward traditions and practices, superstitions, as well as weird outdated and repugnant rites like female "circumcision" (otherwise going by the euphemistic or politically correct terminology of female genital mutilation - FGM.) There has been, in the recent past, a lot of hype and propaganda in the Western print media as well as the Internet on the way "enlightened" teenage girls are refusing to undergo FGM in Kenya. Two of these girls were, in fact, flying into the USA a few weeks ago to give lectures about FGM to students and members of the public in Massachusetts.

The manner in which the FGM question has been handled in the media fails to put that issue in the historical and cultural contexts of these specific communities where it is practiced – not all communities do, as implied by the reports. The fact that an American funded project is at the forefront campaigning to stop FGM has the value assumption that those "Africans" practicing it are either unwilling or incapable of stamping it out. Much as FGM may be a critical topic, especially in this age of AIDS, there are certainly more important events going on in Kenya that touch on the life of Kenyans. But they, of course, are not relevant to the Western audiences.

Related to that, there was a report on the "BBC Africa" a few months ago on the AIDS pandemic in South Africa. It reported that one third of South Africans believe in an ancient and bizarre "cure" for AIDS, and that is having sex with a virgin. The incident where a HIV-positive man allegedly raped an 8-month child received the status of a top story from Africa. The Western media was also awash with news of the barbaric sentence of stoning to death of a Nigerian woman accused of engaging in adultery. More recently, Nigeria went ahead to receive more than its fair share of image bashing in the Western media when it attempted to stage the "Miss World" pageant. According to Dan Isaacs, a BBC reporter, the beauties were first welcomed at Abuja Airport "to a huge crowd of chaos and pandemonium of music of drums…" (my emphasis)

Of course, the real pandemonium was soon to start when riots by Islamic protestors rocked parts of Nigeria following a claim by a local journalist that prophet Mohammed could have loved to marry one of those beauties. The event was promptly switched to London. The resultant image: Nigeria (and generally Africa) cannot host "anything" because of irrational faith and culture of its people. What needs to be emphasized is the fact that the media was by far the single most significant factor that caused the catastrophic debacle that became of the abortive Miss World pageant in Nigeria. Negative publicity by the Western media, especially the sensationalization of the Sharia-imposed sentence of stoning-to-death of the woman accused of adultery prior to the start of the event did a lot of damage to the image of Nigeria and so did inaccurate reporting and subjective perspectives that failed to place the Muslim opposition the pageant in its proper religious context. The irrational, inflammatory and irresponsible remark by a Nigerian journalist only served to break the final straw that brought Muslims to the streets.

2.2 Africa the Wild Jungle. Question: When does a drought that threatens millions of lives become news that fits the front page of *The New York Times*? Answer: When animals die.

In 1992, the New York Times, while covering the drought and starvation that ravaged some east and South African countries, published five substantial stories in eight days. Three of the stories were very prominently displayed and they were about the elephants, the rhino and other endangered species while the other two shorter ones appearing deep in the inside pages were on the African people themselves.

It is not worthwhile to belabor the fact that the US press gives more attention (and hence coverage) to the lover of animals in Africa than the African people in a phenomenon that has come to be called the "Animalization of Africa". There are television channels (like Animal Planet and Discovery Channel) plus a host of documentaries that devote all their attention to the wild Africa and the "Safari" adventures, rather than the people of Africa. Disney World features "Safari" boat trips representing Africa as a primitive jungle experience.

Not surprisingly therefore, just a mention of Africa evokes the images on Planet Africa and Discovery Channel in the minds of many Americans. That, it seems, is all that Africa is about. On his first trip to America, an elderly lady sitting next to the writer of this paper in the flight from new York to the Twin Cities inquired from him whether they "made friends with the lions" back in Africa! And you cannot blame her. That is all she seems to get from the media. It is imperative to reiterate that Africa has more than the wild life that receives so much attention in the West.

2.4 Hunger, famine and starvation. Of all the images of African people that permeate the Western media, that of famine and starvation is the most consistent and persistent. Not on any single day will one read the online news by various Western media outlets and miss to find a story about how famine is "ravaging" in or is "stalking" Africa. The news texts are frequently accompanied by moving pictures of some poor, emaciated and malnourished figures of women and children who are sorrily staring into the camera (the reader), their eyes empty and hopeless, as if pleading for mercy. Whether these reports and pictures are from Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Botswana or the Sahel regions of West Africa, they all tell the same tale. More often than not, the reporters and editors splash headlines that speak in general and absolute terms about hunger and starvation in Africa.

Few of these reports bother to shed some light on the underlying factors that precipitate the onset of famine in Africa. Drought, a natural calamity, plays a huge role in the cause of famine because farm produce and livestock products considerably decline during the drought spells. However, other factors include armed conflicts, some of which are fueled by Western powers who are protecting "their interests" - the result of which is a huge refugee population in Africa. The reports rarely mention, if at all, the impact of unfair and exploitive trade policies of the West that harm African countries or the land policies that place the greater percentage of fertile arable lands in the hands of few (white) farmers like in Zimbabwe. The factors that are usually cited in the Western media and in a superficial manner are corruption and mismanagement of resources as well as the effects of AIDS.

Having painted such a hopeless image of Africa, it "naturally" follows that the West must come to help Africa out of this mess. Such help can range from calls for aid from the western powers, grants from the World Bank and IMF, humanitarian and "disaster relief" operations by the non-governmental agencies like the Red Cross, World Vision, Save the Children, Medecins San Fontieres, etc., to outright appeals by the Western media for the recolonization of Africa as the only solution. In an editorial titled Weep for the Lost Continent, the Independent on Sunday declared:

"Africa is so much without hope that it is difficult to believe it can help itself. If Western countries had the will, they could recolonize the continent that they left in such haste. The Japanese and Germans could run Africa, using the British, as professional ex-colonists, as their official agents."

2.5 Endemic Violence, Conflict and Civil War. It is a fact that many regions of Africa have experienced various forms of violence, ranging from "tribal" clashes, armed conflicts, and civil wars to genocide. Be it the Somali crisis, the government versus rebels wars in the Congo and Angola, or the Rwanda genocide of 1994, reports of this kind have a high premium in the Western media and they automatically earn a headline or at least "top story" status.

While it may be difficult to achieve total objectivity in media reports, it is not lost to many observers that reports in the Western media about war and conflicts in Africa are often crisis-driven in such a way as to imply that Africans are naturally savage, warlike, violent and steeped in primordial tribal feuds. The perspectives taken by the reporters, the kind of headlines, pictures, statistics, and the language that they use, all point to a picture created to serve certain interests and agendas. A lot of information is usually omitted (sometimes added) to give the Western audiences and governments what they want.

The news analyses purposely choose not to mention the fact that the US supported, both materially and militarily, certain despotic regimes in Africa that it required during the Cold War. It has, over time, also been supporting some undemocratic governments as a means of creating a conducive environment for the exploitation of Africa's natural (mainly, oil and mineral) resources. Siad Barre of Somalia and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire are just but two of such. Yet this does not seem to be relevant to the western audiences. The bloody civil war in Angola that has claimed thousands of lives is directly connected to the fact that the US financed and armed rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, perceiving him as a "freedom fighter", while the Russians did the same to the government of Jose Edwardo dos Santos.

The Western media conveniently avoids to talk about the connection between these civil wars and the role of the colonial legacy of politicizing ethnicity by pitting certain "tribes" against others in the "divide and rule" policy adopted mainly by the British and Belgian colonial governments. Moreover the artificial (nay, arbitrary) drawing up of national boundaries during the "scramble and partition" of Africa saw the division and polarization of African communities that had otherwise lived as one for centuries. Such issues never see the light of day in the Western media.

2.5 Political Instability and the Coup Cycle. Owing to the violence and civil wars, Africa is portrayed as experiencing endemic political instability. Where there are no such wars, there are corrupt dictatorships in control or coup de tat after coup de tat as the only way of changing regimes. The assumption here is that Africans cannot embrace democratic principles of governance. They can only operate under dictatorial regimes, corrupt ineptitude despots or military rulers.

The Independent on Sunday, true to its mission, had one of its reporters, Patrick Marnham wondering, "whether Africa can ever be governable" and then proceeding to claim that "in Africa, no known system of government works." A BBC report on a story entitled "the African coup cycle" said thus:

"for over thirty years, from 1960 to the start of the 90's, coups were practically the only means by which changes of government were achieved in Africa." Such media reports do not tell the audience that while there are coups and dictatorships in some African countries, many countries have never experienced the "virulent military virus" (to quote that report) and that they have conducted elections on a regular basis.

2.6 Africa and AIDS. In the past two decades, AIDS has had a devastating impact on the social and economic development of the human race. Statistics provided by WHO and other humanitarian agencies vindicate the fact that the majority of the HIV/AIDS sufferers are in Africa. Out of the 42 million HIV positive people worldwide, almost 30 million reportedly live in sub-Saharan Africa. Given the aforesaid, the Western media have succeeded in giving Aids an African face. With highly sensationalized headlines and pictures of the infected population, they seem to tell their audience that this is "their" problem, not "ours". The media attributes the rapid spread of HIV and Aids in Africa to ignorance, the reluctance to change sexual behavior, as well as backward cultural and religious traditions that make talking about sexuality and AIDS taboo. Such explanations are prominently fronted.

The issue of poverty is then mentioned as to having a role to the spread of the disease. Related to poverty, however, is the fact that the majority of those poor people do not have access to medical care that their

counterparts in the opulent West have. But his is not given due publicity. As long as the gap between the rich West and the poor African countries continue to grow, AIDS, Ebola, malaria and a plethora of other diseases shall remain wearing an African face. And as far as the Western Fourth Estate is concerned, "Africa faces a grim future", or rather "Africans face extinction" unless the Western governments and humanitarian agencies comes to its rescue.

3.0 Justifying the Media Images

Critical study of media representations of Africa in the Western media reveals different explanations of this phenomenon.

3.1 Commercialization of News and Corporate Factor. The media corporations that own the various media outlets in the West are driven by the profit motive. These corporations are, by law, required to make profits for their shareholders, failure to which they may face lawsuits. Therefore commercial interests shape the portrayal of the world events. The media select stories that can sell and omit those that cannot; then they report those selected in a way that makes them sell well. The result is the trend of crisis-driven journalism of churning out news faster and faster, going for the quick and headline-seeking superficial coverage that seizes on the outrageous, the dramatic and the exceptional without bothering to place it in its proper context. Quality, professional, objective and balanced reporting takes back stage and instead "the bottom line" is what the GE/CEO wants reported and how it is done – usually the GE/CEO knows what sells. It does not matter whether the reports are biased, sensationalized or inaccurate, as long as they sell.

3.2 Monopoly of Ideas and Opinion. Western media dominate global news. The media is owned exclusively by Western corporate giants whose financial and technological wealth allows them to dictate not only what is reported about the whole world, but they also determine what is reported (or rather "exported") to the African media about Africa and the world in general. As a direct consequence of the free market or competitive forces operating in the Western media sector, the giant corporations are merging and swallowing smaller ones and coming up with fewer and fewer conglomerations. These conglomerations not only own the production of the television programs, film and video industry, the Internet, newspapers and magazines, books, etc; they also control the circulation and distribution of the same. In so doing, there is no chance for diverse or alternative perspectives to anything that they report on.

For instance, such conglomerations as AOL/Time Warner, Walt/Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, News Corporation, etc, control a huge market of the media in USA and Europe. Two news agencies – Reuters and Agence-France Presse - control an estimated 93% of the news that flow into Africa.

3.3 Foreign Policy and Western "Interests" in Africa. The portrayal of Africa as "dependent," "in a crisis," "facing a grim future," "needing help" or even as "needing re-colonization" not only informs public opinion in the West, but also informs Western governments' foreign policies. Such kind of images justifies the galvanization of the Western humanitarian agencies and governments to "intervene". The images of starvation splashed by the western media during the 1984 Ethiopian famine led to an international response called Band Aid. In neighboring Somalia, the US government's military intervention in 1991-2 was a direct response to the television images of starving Somalis. Nevertheless, the Operation Provide Relief turned out to be a disaster. Minear, Scott and Rienner succinctly put it thus:

> "pictures of starving children, not policy objectives, got us into Somalia in 1992. Pictures of US casualties, not the completion of our objectives, led us to exit Somalia."

When terrorists attacked Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the US and Western media in general gave it abundant coverage because US "interests abroad" were targeted. The American casualties were given more prominence; never mind that they were less a quarter of the Kenyans who died. A similar trend followed when just last month, the terrorists were back hitting an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombassa killing, 3 Israelis and at least 10 Kenyans. Israeli interests were under attack and, therefore, so were the US interests.

3.4 Textbooks and the School Curriculum. Unlike the average African high school student who studies not just African history but European history, American history, among other world histories, the average American student either is not exposed to the history and geography of Africa or is exposed to materials that contain inaccurate information. The textbooks that cover Africa only perpetuate the popular images by giving inadequate information, using popular constructs and featuring pictures of "wild" "exotic" Africa where the animals take center stage. Sometimes, such books highlight the socio-cultural representations of non-representative groups like the Maasai, the San and the Bushmen.

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions. The images of Africa in the Western media are, by and large, images of misrepresentation. Whether this is a result of biased, unbalanced and subjective reporting, or is a consequence of a new way of perceiving reality where few corporate giants are creating commercialized representations of Africa in order to maintain their own businesses and ideological agendas (as Dan Chandler would argue) is not the issue. The issue here, it seems, is that these representations are always focused on the negative, the awkward, the weird and the absurd, the wild and the exotic. The fact remains, however, that these images are not all that Africa is about and, moreover, some of those images are not unique to Africa.

4.2 Recommendations. All efforts must be undertaken both by the private sector and the governments in the Western world and elsewhere, to destroy the global monopoly that a few corporations have in terms of ownership of media outlets as well as the production and distribution of media materials. Secondly, media personalities – especially reporters and editors need to uphold the professional ethics of journalism that call for the highest possible level of objectivity, neutrality and balance in reporting, even as they operate in the cut-throat atmosphere of Western competitive media.

African governments and private sector are under obligation, now more than ever, not to depend wholly on the Western media in terms of what is reported in the African press. They need to establish alternative media corporations to counter the aggressive Western media; and by so doing, they will help destroy the monopoly of ideas and opinions and create alternative or divers perspectives on global issues. URTA and PANA need to rise to this challenge.

Fourthly, the Western public (or audience) needs to be exposed first-hand to Africa, and thereby reduce their dependency on Animal Planet, Discovery Channel or Disney World to inform their perception of Africa. Many Americans who have visited Africa as tourists relief workers, government officials and students on exchange programs and even journalists all get "shocked" about what the reality about Africa is vis a vis what the American media makes them believe. A member of a group of journalists who recently visited Africa was "pleased" to "discover" that the continent is not a land of unrelenting disaster as portrayed by the American media. He said:

> "Americans only see and read about war, famine, HIV/AIDS, depleted economies, and all sorts of awful things, as if the continent is on fire. Where is the fire?"