

# Images of Africa

Challenging negative stereotypes  
in media and society

by OMEGA BULA

Africans, especially women, face a difficult challenge in Canada since they must struggle with the country's official policy of multiculturalism in a negative atmosphere, created in large part by media stereotyping.

The image of Africa is not only misleading and inaccurate, it is based on the modern mass media's (radio, television, print and internet) need for sensational and unfocused coverage of events. Journalism has become commercialized and so competitive that information is biased against reality and a violation of ethical norms.

African countries suffer especially from this new technological demand for speed, brevity and entertainment within information dissemination.

The negative stereotypes, inaccurate assumptions, and western (or Northern) perspectives result in Canadians receiving a view of Africa that is:

- ✘ **Violent:** civil and cross-border wars, inter-ethnic fighting, coups, riots are covered superficially and without context, portraying Africa as a continent in endless strife;
- ✘ **Disease-ridden:** the HIV/AIDS pandemic, outbreaks of ebola fever, malaria, tuberculosis are serious problems for Africa which need the world's attention to find vaccines and cures;
- ✘ **Poverty-stricken:** the world's largest concentration of refugees and displaced, huge slums filled with poor people and pictures of dying children fail to analyze the globalized nature of African poverty;
- ✘ **Homogeneous:** Africa is not one country, it consists of some 53 countries, many hundreds of languages

and cultures, a wide variety of religions and boundaries established arbitrarily by European colonizers just over 100 years ago; and

- ✘ **Underdeveloped:** after two centuries of colonial human and resource extraction for the benefit of the European and North American economies, African countries are now dependent on international donor agencies, multi-national corporations and the globalized economy at the expense of its health, education and social systems trying to

cope with an infrastructure developed by colonial powers.

Few countries would deny these problems. People are hungry, sick, poor and violated by human rights abuse. Suffering is part of the reality of the people just as it is in parts of Canada.

However, negative media images of Africa in a cycle of war and violence lack historical, economic and social context. Journalists and other observers who know and have lived in African

countries always comment on the joy, wisdom, perseverance and hope of peoples whose deep spirituality and community based values help them face suffering and hardship with great optimism.

To put these contrary images into context is the responsibility of ethical and professional journalists and observers who portray African countries and peoples to multi-cultural Canada. To do this, the context needs to include Africa's: ◆



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- ✓ **Natural beauty and cultural richness:** few who have visited Africa can avoid being struck by its diversity from mighty rivers and lakes, towering mountains, brilliant foliage, awesome deserts and rolling savannahs surrounded by oceans and seas, to the many diverse people who value dignity, assert their self-worth and live with enormous resourcefulness;
- ✓ **Indigenous knowledge and democratic decision-making:** long before the destructive colonial era, Africans had developed systems based on their physical and spiritual environment. The continent is highly diverse ethnically and culturally but wise women and men led their people in democratic processes which usually avoided the violence and calamities we see today, caused so often by imposed systems from abroad;
- ✓ **Economic creativity:** long before globalized capitalism was imposed on the world with horrible results for marginalized people, African women and men had developed systems of barter, free trade, manufacturing and distribution using the resources of the land, the waters and the minerals below the surface in ways which protected the environment and distributed wealth more equitably; and
- ✓ **Celebration of life:** the richness and simplicity of peoples' lives in community and the innate hospitality of the peoples of Africa is remarkable. The diversity of languages, cultures, food, dress, music and art has resulted in world-wide recognition by those who are exposed to it.

These samples of African peoples' positive lives are part of the context in which to understand the seemingly endless diet of violent crises, famines and epidemics with which the media feeds the "infotainment" (news as entertainment) industry. These crises serve only to support the assumption by the developed North of Africa's inferiority, a kind of racism implying that peoples in Africa cannot manage their own affairs and are dependent on northern handouts. The underlying causes of colonialism, unequal economic relations and dependency on charity are rarely analyzed in the midst of fund-raisers' videos of starving children and emaciated women.

Connected to this inferiority complex is the view of Africa and its 650 million people from all races as primitive, inferring barbarism, child-like naivete and an attachment to pre-modern ways of living which denigrates the academic excellence and skilled labour which lives and works throughout the continent.

Racism is not the only reason for Africa's negative image. There has been, since the slavery and colonial eras of the past three centuries, an historic imbalance between Africa and the industrialized world. Global political and economic systems have been designed to perpetuate control of decision-making in international power politics and economics with former colonial regimes.

Cultures in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, are not static. African women are exploited by some aspects of their culture and aberrations of the culture. Quite rightly, gender activists analyze the situation of women in much of Africa as exploited by a male-dominated set of cultural values. Women, especially rural women and poor urban dwellers, are overworked and brutalized by cultural practices. They are the primary reproductive sources of family and community life and usually must till the soil, reap the harvests and, in the increasingly difficult urbanized society, find the resources to feed and care for their families.

It is on the bent and worn backs of women that the economic and health disasters fall. As economies plummet due to the world-wide trade and financial regimes which exploit third world countries, women in Africa must turn to their most creative instincts for survival in the so-called "informal" marketplace. They turn to their strength and knowledge inherited from their ancestors to innovative and resourceful skills to survive the world economic crises.

The strength of African women in the face of great adversity is seen in the movement for gender equality and changes to legal and cultural attitudes. In addition to their centrality in life-sustaining and reproductive roles, women are taking their destiny into their own hands to effect positive change in African countries.

Stereotyping in the media and among power structures in Canada results in serious dysfunction for people of African ancestry, including immigrants, academics, business people, students and especially women. The implications of the media stereotypes are serious and affect race relations, education, employment, equal opportunity policies and laws and the image of African peoples living in Canada.

There are a variety of debates around the issues of multi-culturalism in Canada which involve people of many races and ethnic groups. However one views this debate, the representation, largely by the mass media, of Africa and its peoples is critical to the understanding of all Canadians. ◆◆

Information is crucial for both Africans and Canadians. Coverage of Africa needs fundamental change in analysis, focus and understanding. Canadian mass media should:

- **Broaden its coverage of Africa** and focus on positive as well as negative images;
- **Make a greater effort to understand** and portray the wide diversity, complexity and richness of African culture;
- **Contextualize coverage of wars and natural disasters** which produce violent and heart-rending images. Rarely do these events occur in isolation but are the result of colonial policies of divide and conquer, globalized economic regimes or world-wide environmental damage by industrialized countries;
- **Make ongoing follow-ups to disasters and wars essential.** Today's media has an extremely short attention span, hopping from one crisis to another, leaving audiences overloaded with information. The result of unfocused information is to portray Africa as being in one continual state of crisis, violence and chaos;
- **Use sources of information that are Afro-centred** so that interpretations are indigenous. Too often preference is given to non-African news and information sources; and
- **Emphasize the strong role played by women,** who make up more than half of Africa's population. Too often the media reinforces the stereotype of hewers of wood and carriers of water, the mother and wife. While it is true women are the main producers of food, there are also many highly educated professional women in all disciplines including the church, medicine, law, politics, academics, the arts and media. The involvement of women, and their perspective, is crucial to covering the varied societies in Africa.

Images of Africa portrayed by journalists, educators and artists require a high degree of sensitivity, knowledge, professional skill, fairness and balance, the same media ethics that Canadians should expect in coverage about their lives and cultures.

Consultation and feedback from African sources will strengthen the partnership between Africans and Canadians. The end of negative stereotyping cannot help but benefit Africa and Africans living and contributing to Canada, as well as helping Canada further in its quest for a non-racial and equitable country.

