

Introduction

Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West.

Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation ...

Binyavanga Wainana¹

A West African proverb warns that before you rush in to help clean the straw out of your neighbour's eye, you should pause long enough to remove the dust from your own. There are many scenarios that might spring from this bit of African wisdom and how it could play out today. Most are not particularly good news for the heart-shaped continent.

At a recent talk to mark International Development Week at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, I spoke about the great wealth of knowledge in Africa, and how it was so often ignored or denigrated by outsiders busy trying to develop the continent in their own image. I illustrated this point with photographs of Africans in many walks of life, many of them able and able-bodied farmers beaming at the camera, or pointing with pride to their harvest. The presentation highlighted Africa's under-touted historical accomplishments, as well as its wealth and agricultural wisdom, with a backdrop medley of wonderful music from Africa.

Afterwards a middle-aged man in blue jeans approached me. The exchange went something like this. "Your pictures," he began, hesi-

tantly. “I mean, they were different. Were those in a special part of Africa?”

“No,” I said. The photographs had been taken quite randomly on farms, in villages, and in cities in six different countries on the continent.

“But was that a special group of people?”

“Oh no,” I said. “Those were ordinary everyday scenes of African farmers and in many different places in Africa. They were probably quite typical.”

He nodded slowly. “I never saw pictures of Africans who looked good like that,” he said finally, as he turned and walked away.

In May 2000, *The Economist* blasted the words “The hopeless continent” across its cover, and no reader would have had to look inside to see which continent that issue of the magazine was devoting its attention to. The media have helped perpetuate the racist stereotype of Africans as savages, and the persistent – ridiculous – notion of the continent as “dark.”² Africa’s former BBC correspondent, George Aligiah, put it this way: “For most people who get their view of the world from TV, Africa is a faraway place where good people go hungry, bad people run government, and chaos and anarchy are the norm.”³

The major North American networks tend to carry little news from Africa, so when they do, it is almost inevitably limited to the worst of the worst. Most stories will hint that there is something inherently brutal about a particular group of African people. They probably won’t ask or answer the question: Why did this happen? It is also highly unlikely that someone watching prime time television in North America will see many reports on positive things Africa and her people have to share with the world.

The good intentions of outsiders garner more media interest than good acts by Africans themselves. I recall listening to a radio interview with a man leading a team of well-heeled Canadians setting off on an adventure to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. But that wasn’t quite how the Tanzania safari was presented. Apparently, this was an altruistic act; the travellers had linked up with a group that organizes spectacular climbs to raise funds for charity. The proceeds of their trip to Africa, which they would get from donations, would go to charities. I waited to hear his answer to some of the questions that sprang to my

mind – admittedly a bit jaded after all my years in Africa. I wanted to know, for example, how much the trip would cost per person; I guessed around 5,000 US dollars (or more). I wanted to hear how much would be left for charity after the costs of their adventure, for which charities and for which purpose. I wanted to know what the Canadian travellers knew of Africa and her people. And, perhaps unreasonably, I also would have liked to hear a calculation of the environmental costs of such a long air trip and climb up a mountain already suffering the effects of climate change, visible in fact on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro where the glacier is melting. But the interview ended with those questions not answered. Ornery as I am, I question the ethics of such expensive ventures cloaked in charitable clothing, even if the destination of the travellers is Africa and the funds they raise are for Africans. The proceeds of this particular African expedition were for Canadian charities.

Another kind of media story that makes it out of Africa is the one that zeroes in on the efforts being made by dedicated development and emergency workers who are in Africa trying to ease the plight of the people there. But the aid workers – or at least their organizations – are generally not African in origin. The hero or heroes portrayed by such reports are usually people from Western countries.

There's nothing inherently wrong with reports that applaud good works by outsiders in Africa. But they offer a skewed view. Far more Africans are doing good work on their continent than are foreigners. I'm a journalist with an interest in Africa, so I would like to see a lot more media coverage from the continent because it is incredibly complex, fascinating and diverse. More and better coverage would help the outside world understand the continent, her triumphs and her problems, and perhaps encourage people to do more to support African efforts to solve their own problems and scrutinize their own country's policies at home and abroad. We could use another few – or few hundred – books like Stephanie Nolen's *28: stories of AIDS in Africa*. These books bring African voices and realities to people off the continent. They transform the meaningless statistics that are the mainstay of newscasts into three-dimensional human beings courageously confronting the great odds stacked against them.⁴

The world's major media – especially ones feeding stories to North America – are short on African correspondents. They are equally short on African editors and on publishers who have an in-depth knowledge of the real issues on the continent. Some of those issues are historical – the past wrongs that Africa has suffered at the hands of the slave-traders, the colonists and neo-colonial 'friends' and 'helpers.' Some of these latter-day helpers intervene with good intentions. But sometimes these *blind* good intentions have paved the road to more dependence, trouble and still bigger problems. "Africa has become a 'comfort zone' used by the West to calm down its masses," writes Baffour Ankomah, editor of *New African* magazine. If any African cities were ever shown in full flower, he observes, Westerners might see that their cities are not the only nice places on earth, and that 'comfort zone' would whittle away.⁵

Others in the business of helping Africa are not so well intentioned. They may disguise their interventions as charitable and helpful and play on public goodwill, when they are actually motivated by self-interest. These groups are much more concerned with creating policies orchestrated to re-chain Africa, to reshape it to fit rigid and unhelpful economic and political doctrines – with increased profits at home.

The effort to push feminine hygiene products on Africa is a fine example of such 'charity.' The Proctor & Gamble companies, Always Canada, Tampax and Being Girl, have a project called "Protecting Futures" with a "Pad Program" to provide African women with sanitary pads.⁶ Well-meaning consumers in the wealthy world are encouraged to contribute to this venture because, chimes the Always Canada website: "It's amazing to think that a small thing like a pad might have such a dramatic effect on someone's future." Exaggeration certainly, but also misleading to Western consumers whose goodwill is being lassoed by companies claiming that purchases (of tampons and pads) will somehow secure a girl's future in Africa. Indeed there will be "dramatic effects." There will be increased profits for these companies carving out new markets, and a new dependency on imported, costly and environmentally unfriendly consumer products in Africa, while the perfectly good traditional methods (pieces of cloth) will be made to look suddenly old-fashioned and inferior. A

concocted problem with a lucrative (for Western companies) solution. Straw and dust.

Europe and North America have never felt the need to hold any “truth and reconciliation” commissions, which would allow the ordinary citizens to know more about their own foreign policies, past and present. Neither the ills imposed on the world both during the centuries that European countries were stealing and settling new continents nor those of the more recent neo-colonial interventions that spread “disaster capitalism,” as described in Naomi Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine*, are open for discussion.⁷ Klein documents the imposition around the world of unpopular Milton Friedman-style economic reforms, reforms which benefit the rich and powerful. Enacting these reforms requires heavy-handed political oppression to contain any opposition from the ordinary people adversely affected by the economic dogma. Given that most of the world views sub-Saharan Africa as a never-ending disaster, and given the region’s weak and impoverished states with presidents who toe the economic reform line (or else), Africa has been an easy mark for disaster capitalists from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Western donors that control them, and other lenders cum creditors. The pillars of this disaster capitalism, which Klein calls the “free market trinity,” are privatization, deregulation and cuts to social spending. These neo-liberal or market fundamentalist policies have been the prevailing economic dogma applied in Africa – and around the world – for almost three decades, resulting in an increased disparity between rich and poor. By 2006, two percent of the world’s population owned one half of the world’s wealth.⁸

Economic reforms don’t come in isolation. As elsewhere, in Africa they require compliant leaders to enforce them, so long as they are not compliant or soft when their people take to the streets to protest rising prices, unemployment and growing poverty. Some of these African leaders are not very good leaders at all, and they probably wouldn’t be able to stay in power very long without their friends in the West. In fact some might never have made it to power without their friends in the West, some of whom haven’t been stellar leaders either.

The situation in Africa today is not all that different from the one created at the end of the 19th century by Belgium's King Leopold, which was detailed so graphically and powerfully by Adam Hochschild.⁹ Leopold managed to convince his backers in Europe and the United States that his brutal plundering of the Congo was not plundering at all, but a humane effort to fight the slave trade and 'civilize' the natives.

Paradoxically, Africa is crippled with debt to the West, when in fact the West owes Africa so much. Gerald Caplan passionately articulates this: "We should give back what we've plundered and looted and stolen. Until we think about the West's relationship with Africa honestly, until we face up to the real record, until we acknowledge our vast culpability and complicity in the African mess, until then we'll continue – in our caring and compassionate way – to impose policies that actually make the mess even worse."¹⁰

"In April this year [2008], I caught a replay of *Idol Gives Back*, an offshoot of the reality TV singing competition called *American Idol*," writes journalist and musician Khadija Sharife. "In under an hour, the show managed to raise \$18 million for disadvantaged African and North American children and families. The visual images of Africa were potent, tattered clothing, starving babies, machetes, guns, rape and famine – they did not mention that Africa is still the place where multinationals derive their coltan, oil, gas, uranium, gold, diamonds, copper and other strategic minerals. They did not say that Africa is a rich continent whose people interestingly 'are poor', and why they are poor!"¹¹

In this book I take a look at this question and at some of the ways the West is both culpable and complicit in Africa. I examine some Western interventions – often covert or at least 'quiet' – that favour one leader or political/ethnic group over another. Interventions that arm and enrich those who promote Western interests, meddle in African political and economic affairs, and create dependence, despair, disaccord and pain.

Africa is rife with pain. Much of it is self-inflicted and by not focussing here on the self-inflicted pain I have no intention of diminishing those tragedies caused by it. The tragedies of ethnic hatred that can lead to genocide, of greed and corruption that drive African

elites to perpetuate the crimes of the colonial era on their own peoples, or the heartbreak of lives thwarted or lost because of the lack of a few dollars to pay for schooling or medical care, and the great disaster of HIV/AIDS, with the suffering and hardship that brings.¹²

Over almost a quarter century of living and working in Africa, I've seen many social ills and crimes of which Africans were the authors. I've picked my way through villages where the stench of death was like the breath of hell burning my lungs, around dismembered corpses of children after warfare in northern Ghana and over bodies tossed into mass graves and water wells in Côte d'Ivoire. Young men in fatigues, weighed down by grenades and guns and good luck charms, told me they were invincible because of their magic charms and that they had "not yet killed enough."

I've also met with and interviewed African leaders who made my skin crawl. Among them, former Rwandan Prime Minister Jean Kambanda serving a life sentence in a Malian prison for genocide and crimes against humanity in his country. A special wing had been built on the otherwise dismal prison for the six convicted Rwandan *genocidaires*, which cost 40,000 US dollars and offers them comfort and privileges not accorded to Malian prisoners guilty of petty theft – or even to the majority of Malians. When I interviewed Kambanda, he refused to acknowledge his crimes. Instead, while he fingered a gold cross around his neck, he complained bitterly about the food and heat in the Bamako prison.

Another was the smug and sinister Liberian president, Charles Taylor, who replied to my questions while sitting on a throne-like chair of cane, as women acolytes knelt fawning at his feet. Taylor is now on trial for war crimes by the United Nations-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone.

There is also Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, who was implicated in the assassination of his predecessor, the dynamic young president Thomas Sankara, and in arms trafficking and diamond dealing that perpetuated conflicts in Liberia, Angola and Sierra Leone. In the eerie silence of a high-security compound in the Burkinabé capital of Ouagadougou, just weeks after the death of Sankara in 1987, Compaoré dismissed his bodyguards and greeted me with a chilling attempt at seduction, grabbing my arm and stroking it,

telling me it had been too long since I had come to interview him. Another female journalist from a major French newspaper suffered a more grievous encounter with him and headed, still sobbing, straight to the airport to board a flight back to France. Compaoré, the man his own people once called the “snake in the grass,” allegedly involved in assassination, illicit weapons and illegal dealing in conflict diamonds, and countless human rights abuses, is still in power today, one of Washington’s new allies and better ‘friends’ on the continent.

There were countless days in Africa that I despaired over the corruption, unnecessary famine, disease, and conflicts that solved absolutely nothing and pitted despairing Africans against each other. But these are the stories that sell easily; these are the tales of tragedy that fill our screens and dominate our media coverage from Africa. I’ve sold a lot of them myself. They have produced a seriously distorted view of the continent and they rarely tell the whole story of *how* a tragedy came to be, what factors led to it.

Africa has been drowning in crocodile tears wept by politicians and leaders for years. They were flowing like hyperbolic rain when President George W. Bush, whose popularity at home was bottoming out in early 2008, took a trip to Africa – a “mission of mercy” – and announced that it broke his heart to see children dying of malaria. Has George W. Bush or his speech writer ever seen a child die of malaria?¹³

Many citizens in Western countries think their development aid is charity and believe that the rich north is ‘helping’ the poor south. It’s not their fault. This is a convenient myth created by Western governments and lending agencies to make their kind and good citizens happy, even if it’s not really true. Aid resources that flow from north to south are a mere fraction of what flows in the other direction through “unfair trade agreements, abusive transfer pricing and capital flight,” not to mention the cost of all those technical experts sent out from the wealthy world who can consume a major percentage – sometimes all – of the official aid budget that tax-payers may have thought was intended to help poor people in Africa.¹⁴

I examine quite a few myths in this book, and ask a lot of questions that sometimes do not have logical or satisfying answers. How, for example, can Western benefactors help solve Africa’s problems

when, as I learned over years of reporting on those problems, so many of them have their roots in the capitals of the world's major economic powers, many of them in the West? What is Africa losing in the way of wealth and wisdom, and why? What will be the fate of people in Africa in this century as their water resources dwindle because of climate change, a global calamity for which Africa has almost no responsibility? How can Western countries call themselves donors when they are the very creditors that have taken out far more out of Africa in debt servicing, unfair trade, natural resources and cheap commodities than they ever give back?¹⁵

In the 1990s, when I was working at an international agricultural research centre in Kenya, I was shown a press release prepared by an expensive public relations firm in New York to convince the American government to continue financial support for the network of international agricultural research centres, many of which shared Board members with multinational agrochemical companies. The headline announced that for every dollar the US donated to this international agricultural research network that claimed to be improving agricultural output in the tropics, it received two dollars in return. I suggested to my boss that this was not something to brag about. He said it was; this would keep the funds flowing in for agricultural research. Yet the stated mandate of the research centre was to "put money in farmers' pockets."

As I write, a new scramble for Africa is raging, with the US and her Western allies (and especially their multinational corporations) squaring off with China in a fierce battle for African oil and other resources and the political alliances that provide access to them. The competition between the West and China – one as rapacious as the other – manifests itself as a new version of the Cold War on the continent, with India also moving in on Africa in search of oil, gas and other natural resources.¹⁶ All this undermines the efforts by indigenous and international human rights groups, and social justice movements, to help Africans build peace and improve their governance, human rights, health, education and natural resource management on their own continent.

At the same time, an increasing number of concerned and caring people in the wealthy world are anxious to “do something good” or “make a difference” in the lives of people in Africa. This is a heartening trend. But doing something good and making a difference starts with learning about the continent, its past, its present and what its people say they need. Do people in Africa really need containers filled with second-hand teddy bears or more cast-offs from the rich world undermining local efforts by Africans to produce what they consume, consume what they produce? No matter how good the intentions behind many aid projects, they may be useless – or worse – if they are not based on a deep understanding of the problems in Africa, and the source of those problems.

Some development workers head off to the continent armed with loads of goodwill but not much in the way of knowledge of its geography, political boundaries, history, ethnic make-up, cultural diversity, political leadership, or of Africa’s own knowledge base and its real needs. Many Africans are glued to their radios all day, listening to international broadcasters, UN radio where it’s available, and their own local stations. They are always thirsty for more knowledge, political news and understanding of African and world affairs. Many of them wonder just what kind of help that ill-informed outsiders can possibly offer. People who head to Africa to listen *and to learn* are sure to find their mission rewarding. Many have done so, finding it hard to leave and returning home richer for their experiences.

Much can be learned from Africa and its philosophies and cultures that might ease some of the less attractive aspects of modern societies where material things can seem more important than living things, such as human beings. Africa is rich in spirit, though the continent is rapidly losing its own identity, its pride, its forests, its waterways, its natural resources and its cultural wealth in the headlong push to develop economically – which unfortunately has yet to pay off economically. It is now drowning not just in crocodile tears but also in plastic and rubbish, and suffocating under toxic clouds from burning garbage.

If I may be so bold, I would also request that the experts pause – put down their spreadsheets, their reports, and tuck their economic dogma out of sight for just a few moments – to take a hard, unblink-

ered look at the unsustainable path that the wealthy industrialized world has followed, despite all the evidence of environmental devastation and climate change it is causing. If they refuse, which they well may, then the export of our mistakes (along with a good deal of our junk and toxins) to Africa will continue. The world's impoverished majority are the most vulnerable to the changing climate, but they haven't enjoyed the sumptuous lifestyles that caused it.

This book is my own attempt to make some sense of the contradictions that plague many of the development schemes in Africa, with stated intentions and actions often not jiving with real intentions and actions. It has emerged slowly, forming over the many years that I lived, raised children, worked in, reported from Africa and ever-so-slowly began to grasp the two realities that have so adversely affected the continent. First is the enormity of the injustice Africa suffered in the face of European colonization and then neo-colonization. Second is the danger of the Western mindset that seems condemned to judge other cultures and continents from the road it has decided is the high one, the only path to take, the one-way street to its own definition of progress.

Without a major shift in the modern mindset and approach to the planet that sustains us, I believe that we could all be condemning Africa – already suffering from changing rainfall patterns that affect their subsistence crops and their water supplies – and ultimately everyone on this planet to a bleak future. Escalating food and fuel prices, hunger and unrest among the world's poor are just the tip of the melting icebergs.

Africa knows best how to live without all the modern energy-guzzling amenities that are generally equated with progress. Perhaps it is time we tried to learn from the wisdom on the continent, before that wisdom is lost completely. Time to make sure that those off the continent who have the power to shape Africa's future and propose solutions for the continent's problems have a little more knowledge and understanding in their minds – and no dust in their own eyes.