

Good example of stereotypical africa vs. real africa essay

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



As a prelude to writing this essay, I would like to admit that I have never been to Africa. Further, my opinion about the “black continent” has been shaped by what I have seen or read in media. When I think about Africa, the images that first come to mind are; various wildlife programs on National Geographic channel; Michael Jackson’s music video “Black or White”; various campaigns by world leaders to eradicate poverty; and dictators and ethnic strife. And off course the campaign against apartheid in South Africa. I don’t know for what reason, but the image I get does not include the northern Arabic influenced part of Africa. As if that was a separate continent. Maybe it has got to do with how media perceives that region.

With this background, I will go through Curtis Keim’s book, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the African Mind*. While reading this book, I plan to explore my own biases as against what has been written in this book about Africa. The key words that come to my mind while thinking about Africa aren’t very different from those quoted by Curtis’s students. I too think of the place as the native world thanks to Darwin’s theory of evolution and subsequent research work that makes to textbooks and television program. However, it does not resonate with me as much a native land should. I believe that could be because of different physical features Africans have as compared to ordinary Americans. More so, we don’t know about the historical link as Africans moved out to rest of the world. The historical link between America and modern day Europe is well documented and studied. But, very little is known about such historical links between Africa and Europe. I believe it is because of this there are emotional disconnects between us and Africans. Though we are aware of their

conditions, we don't feel that a part of us is suffering.

The news in general makes the places like Africa seem as if hell filled with belligerent people. In the news, it is portrayed as if war is always going on, and it is a dangerous and deadly place.

I would agree with Curtis students that there is a popular perception that people in Africa live in huts. I believe it has come out of the indirect portrayal of huts in various wildlife programs. It is obvious to expect huts along the fringes of various wildlife reserves. But, it would be pure naïve to presume that everybody in such a vast continent lives in huts. Each of these African nations would have their own set of infrastructure to run the affairs. And among the most prominent would be their airports, which are the entry points to these places. I guess this again proves the point that these impressions are borne more out of travel than actual experiences. Related to huts, is the image of its people like warrior. I believe we must have got this impression out of portrayal of a wildlife reserve, and people who traditionally live there. Their unique attire along with the weapons they possess. It is realistic to believe such people do live near the reserves, but it could very well be that many get dressed up in traditional attire for the event. We must also realize that there is a lot of world out there that is not covered with TV channels and print media. When media cannot cover every nook and corner, and every aspect of American life; it would be unrealistic for us to presume that they'll be able to provide such coverage of Africa. In other words, that is a whole lot more to Africa that we get to see. The place may not be as prosperous and affluent as America, but would surely have the same elements, albeit in fewer numbers. The same logic would hold true about the

image of a shield.

Among other impressions would be the prevalence of tribes in Africa. It would indeed seem strange to anybody living in America that people will still be following the tribal order. In this context, we should not forget that Americas is a new world. In the rest of the world, some remnants of tribal culture still exist. Even though developed and most of the developing nations have adorned modern outlook, some of these societies have to a varying degree maintained their tribal affiliations. We should not forget that surnames of people reflect in some way their tribal or clan affiliations. Even close to home, various Native American people still keep their tribal affiliations, even though participating in American life in every possible way. Coming to the notions of savage, cannibals, jungle, pygmy, and pagan, I wouldn't know the sources of these notions. Though factually correct about African history; I believe they came more out of works of fiction which are set against African background. Africa indeed has a lot of jungles, but I don't think anybody believes that savages and cannibals exist there today. In fact, such people have been there in other parts of old world, particularly South-East Asia. To my knowledge pygmies, if at all exist, are more in remote islands of South-East Asia than in Africa. I notion of pygmies in Africa is based on other false-notions about the continent. As it is easy to equate pygmies to other keywords under consideration, like jungle, savages, huts, and warriors. The notion of pagan culture could have come because of various religious cultures existing in Africa predating the Abrahamic religions. It should be understood that elements similar to Dharmic religions, which weren't advanced enough to resist Abrahamic religions, were

considered in general to be pagan. In rational sense, they can be called regional religion-cultures whose elements still exist. Taken in this context, it wouldn't be wrong to think of pagan, when thinking about Africa. In that context, Native American beliefs can also be called pagan.

I would agree with Curtis if we have not come across these notions, when we weren't probably paying enough attention. This is because we come across these notions in our daily life. Not, only through media but also through our social interactions, whether it is serious discussions or casual conversations. For example, the word Native may seem innocuous at first, but historically it has severe negative connotations. Linked to it is history of oppression of those who were natives of America and Africa. Though it is considered technically correct to use these words, it somehow impacts our subconscious negatively. Also, that media for obvious reasons, which is western controlled, shows white people helping black but not black people helping black. This too has a negative impact that black people are unable to help themselves. I would agree that not all stereotypes against Africa would be intentional racism. It is hard to comprehend, but not all stereotypes are racist. Also, not all stereotypes about Africa are negative. These stereotypes could be due to inaccuracies and sensitivities, which need not necessarily, are racist. However, this fine distinction is hard to make.

Quite significantly, the book talks about how we need to have powerful myths to see ourselves as good people of the only Superpower. Earlier we created the myth around our racial superiority over Africans to justify our control over them. Now, we are using our cultural superiority to do the same. As a case in example, the American media is more likely to inform about

African failure than successes. However, I would like to give them the benefit of a doubt. All media by their very nature solves the domestic purpose. It is not by any intent or order from higher ups. In that context, it is but natural for media to portray its own country's achievement, and contrast them with other's failure. I would expect the African media to have the same approach. They have every right to highlight their achievement, and bring to light any grievances they might have against us.

A very valid point is self-definition; as it allows us compare ourselves to others. This comparison allows us to know more about ourselves. It cannot necessarily be called as stereotyping or racism, rather as a means of comparison. It is something that happens at individual level, as well. In the context of Africa, it can be said that many of us would want Africans to be portrayed as a bit savage so that we can feel satisfied with our way of life. Put differently, we cannot be considered as rich without comparing ourselves with those who are poorer than us.

Another important reason about why we feel this way is because how we perceive about progression of time. Unlike the eastern cultures, our idea is of continuum of past to the future. In the case of former, it is more like returning to the golden age of the past. Consequently, for us progress means going forward, moving on, getting over it, improving ourselves, growing up, and a whole set of ideas that prompt us to presume that the past was negative and future holds positive. It is this psychology that makes believe that those behind us are technologically and culturally inferior to us. And they have a lot of catching up to do. For example, as we consider tribalism a thing of the past, and so its presence in Africa would contradict our notion of

progress. All is not negative about our thoughts of Africa. Those of us who are dissatisfied with their lives in America can seek inspiration from life in Africa.

Historically, what has happened is that when Europeans started travelling out in the 1400s, they needed to make sense of other places they visited. It so happened; that over time Africa and the Africans came to be seen as the other extreme. The real problem is that due to this tendency to make ourselves stand out, Africa has continued to be seen as an object of comparison. Even worse, Africa's image is described and manipulated, but Africans are not in a position to speak about themselves. I wonder why world media had devoted so much of its energy in the negative portrayal of Africa. The continent is full of mineral resources are expected to become a significant factor in the progress of the industrialized world. Also, Africa has a relatively high number of women in parliament. Still the stories that come out in media are generally of oppression and poverty. More recently, a woman from Kenya had won Nobel Prize for Peace.

Fortunately, with each passing decade, Americans have been treating Africans with less prejudice. Perhaps we are in the process of deep introspection. We cannot to have myths about Africa because of its size, population, resources and modernization. Against this background, it is expected to play a leading role in the world for good. Therefore, it is destined to its rightful place in the world, and been taken seriously.

What we should strive for is a view of Africa as a continent full of real people, both like us and not like us. It may be, however, the only thing that will make our home - the planet - a safe place to live.

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