Most of us who are Americans know little about Africa. We might have studied Africa for a few weeks in school or glanced occasionally at newspaper headlines about genocide, AIDS, malaria, or civil war, but rarely have we actually thought seriously about Africa. If we do want to learn about Africa, it is difficult to find ample and accurate information in our popular media such as television and newspapers. Africa and its people are simply a marginal part of American consciousness.

Africa is, however, very much a part of the American subconscious. Ironically, although we know little about Africa, we carry strong mental images of the continent. Once you begin to notice, you find that Africa appears in the American public space quite frequently. Although it may not figure often in the news, it shows up in advertising, movies, amusement parks, cartoons, and many other corners of our society. And although most Americans do not possess many facts about Africa, we do know certain general truths about the continent. We know, for example, that Africans live in tribes. And we know that Africa is a place of famine, disease, poverty, coups, and large wild animals.

General images are useful and perhaps necessary for our collective consciousness. We can't know everything about the world, so we have to lump some things into big categories that are convenient if lacking detail. Life is
too short for most of us to become experts on more than a couple of subjects. Thus, these images help us to organize Africa’s place in our collective mind. A war in Congo? Ah, yes, that’s more of the “African trouble” category. Elephants being used in a commercial? Yes, wouldn’t it be fun to have an elephant wash your car. There are lots of large animals living in the wilds of Africa, aren’t there?

If our general categories are reasonably accurate, they help us navigate our complex world. If, however, they are inaccurate, these categories can be both dangerous and exploitative. If, for example, we are wrong about Africa’s supposed insignificance, we will be blindsided by political, environmental, or even medical events that affect how we survive. Or, if we think of Africa only as a place of trouble, a large zoo, or a storehouse of strategic minerals rather than as a place where real people live real lives, we will likely be willing to exploit the continent for our own purposes. France’s former president François Mitterrand demonstrated this possibility graphically when, speaking to his staff in the early 1990s about Rwanda, he noted that “in some countries, genocide is not really important.” Although in the short term the exploitation of Africa might help France or us, in the long term the planet’s society and environment will pay dearly for our failure to care.

**Speaking “African”**

Anyone who wants to study Africa in depth needs to learn African languages, because language is the major key to understanding how people mentally organize the world around them. Likewise, anyone who wants to understand Americans must examine the words Americans know and use. You can begin to discover American ideas about Africa by trying some free association with the word Africa. Ask yourself what words come to mind when you hear Africa. Be aware that this is not the time to “clean up your act” and impress yourself with your political correctness. Rather, search for the words your society has given you to describe Africa, some of which will seem positive, some negative, and some neutral.

My students have helped me create lists of words that come to mind during such an exercise. Within a few minutes, a class frequently generates thirty or forty words that Americans associate with Africa. Native, hut, warrior, shield, tribe, savage, cannibals, jungle, pygmy, pagan, voodoo, and
witch doctor are commonly associated with "traditional" Africa. "Tourism words" include safari, wild animals, elephant, lion, and pyramid. There are also "news words," including coup, poverty, ignorance, drought, famine, tragedy, and tribalism. And then there is a group of "change words" (indicating Western-induced change), such as development, foreign aid, peacekeeping, and missionary. Occasionally, a really honest person will come up with "racist words" he or she has heard, like spear chucker or jungle bunny.

Although some American words might be positive—kinship, wisdom, or homeland—the overwhelming impression gained from studying American language about Africa is that Africa is a primitive place, full of trouble and wild animals, and in need of our help. A survey by a major American museum on popular perceptions of Africa found a number of widely held misconceptions, including the following: Africa is just one large country; Africa is all jungle; Africans share a single culture, language, and religion; Africans live in "grass huts"; Africans mainly hunt animals for their subsistence; and Africa has no significant history.

If you think you have escaped these concepts, you are either extraordinarily lucky or you fool yourself easily. The messages that perpetuate such impressions pervade American culture. They are ideas that have deep roots in American history as well as strong branches that entwine our daily lives. At one time in our history, most of white America did not even consider Africans to be equal as humans! By comparison, today's understanding is positively enlightened. Yet historical misperception, ignorance, stereotype, and myth still cast shadows upon our thinking. Once you begin to look for them, you see inaccurate portrayals of Africa that reproduce the blatant old images in subtler, modernized versions. In fact, a worthwhile exercise is to ask yourself where the words listed above have come from. Home? School? Church? Friends? Television? Newspapers? Magazines? Movies? Books? Amusement parks? It is difficult to get complete and balanced views of Africa in everyday American life. This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

This book investigates the histories of our inaccurate and stereotypical words and ideas and suggests alternatives. For example, Africans are sometimes referred to in everyday America as "natives." You may or may not think that native is a negative word, but its use is a legacy of the colonial period in Africa, when words were weapons employed by outsiders to keep Africans in their places. In the first part of the twentieth century,
most Americans believed that Africans could be (indeed, should be) subjugated because they were primitives, natives. The problem is not the term itself, however. The first dictionary definition of native is someone who belongs originally to a place. Thus, "He is a native of Boston" is a neutral and acceptable use of the word. We also use native in a positive political way in the term Native American, which implies that an "American Indian" has rights and connections that go beyond those belonging to the rest of us who are more recent immigrants. But the term African native evokes a negative connotation, whether intended or not, that is a holdover from its colonial meanings of primitive, savage, or unenlightened. Why can we think of Africans as natives, but never the Chinese? The answer is that we have long thought of Africans as primitive and Chinese as civilized. Today, even when we intend no insult to Africans, we have these leftover phrases and connotations that get in the way of conceiving of Africans as real people like ourselves.

You can get around the "African native" and "native African" problem in a number of ways. For example, if you are referring to an African living in a rural area, you can say "a rural African." If you mean someone who is an inhabitant of Africa, just say "an African." If you mean someone who belongs to the Kikuyu ethnic group, use the words "a Kikuyu." These phrases are more precise and therefore less likely to create images that evoke stereotypes. And, to avoid even a hint of insult, you might steer clear of phrases like "He is a native of Kenya," which in most other contexts would be neutral but in the African context might elicit musings on whether you are referring to the stereotype.

The Use and Misuse of Stereotypes

In an ideal world, we would abandon our stereotypes about Africa and learn to deal with Africans as they really are. Human cognition does not allow this, however. Everybody stereotypes. And we do it about practically everything. The reason for this is, first of all, that we are biologically wired to try to make sense of reality, even when it makes no particular sense. Whether through science, history, literature, religion, or whatever, humans strive to understand and categorize what is in front of them. We also stereotype because it is virtually impossible to know everything that
is going on in reality, and therefore we are bound to base our judgments on partial information. Moreover, we often use ideas provided by our culture instead of investigating things for ourselves. If our culture has a pre-made picture of reality for us, we are likely to accept it. One way to think about this is to invert the notion “seeing is believing,” making it “believing is seeing.” Once we “know” something through our culture, we tend to fit new information into the old categories rather than change the system of categorization.

To say that we inevitably use stereotypes is really to say that we use mental models to think about reality. But the word stereotype also implies that some models are so limiting that they deform reality in ways that are offensive, dangerous, or ridiculous. Thus we need to strive to make our mental models as accurate as possible. We should, for example, study African art, history, literature, philosophy, politics, culture, and the like so we can differentiate between Africans. We should also ask ourselves whether we cling to inaccurate models of Africa because they shore up our self-image or allow us to do things otherwise unthinkable.

Following are brief discussions that explore different reasons for the persistence of our misconceptions about Africa. Later in the book I offer extended discussions of many of these topics.

**Leftover Racism and Exploitation**

During much of American history, a large majority of Americans considered racism and exploitation of Africa acceptable. Although the United States never ruled colonies in Africa, Americans did enslave Africans and maintain both a slavery system and segregation. Moreover, we profited from our businesses in Africa, sent missionaries to change African culture, and did not protest the colonization undertaken by Europeans. This exploitation of Africa, whether direct or indirect, required thinking about Africans as inferiors. In other words, our culture has had a lot of practice, hundreds of years of it, in constructing Africa as inferior. The legacy is obvious in the words and ideas we call to mind when we hear the word Africa.

Our legacy of negativity poses a question: Can we attribute a major portion of our modern stereotypes about Africa to our just not having gotten around to changing the myths we inherited from our racist and imperialist
past? Perhaps we no longer need most of these myths, but they persist because only a few decades have passed since the end of the colonial period and it has been a similarly brief amount of time since the passage of the US Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Support for this view comes from the fact that African independence and the civil rights movement have made it increasingly unacceptable for news reporters and commentators to use the most blatantly negative of the words we once associated with race and with Africa. Likewise, schoolbooks are vastly improved in their treatment of Africa. One could argue that with greater sensitivity to the issue and more time, Americans will change. To put this idea another way, shouldn't we give Americans the benefit of the doubt and assume that most people do not consciously intend to exploit or misrepresent Africa? I believe that we should.

**Current Racism**

I am assuming that most readers are not intentionally racist, because people who are probably wouldn't read this kind of book. While the most derogatory images of Africa can no longer appear in public spaces, they persist because we learn them in the more private aspects of our lives, from family and friends, and often through jokes or offhand comments. Unfortunately, such private racism is difficult to eradicate, because continuing efforts like this book can do little for those who would not seriously consider them. Others of us, perhaps most of us, are a different kind of racist, for although we truly want to believe that all humans are equal, we entertain undercurrents of racist doubt in our minds that make us susceptible to more subtle myths about Africa. It is this real but unintentional racism that concerns us here, because a deeper consideration of the issues can help us see Africans more clearly.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that all or even most of the public stereotypes about Africa come from unintentional racism. First, each of us has negative, nonracist stereotypes about others. Second, not all of our stereotypes about Africa are negative. Inaccuracy and insensitivity are not necessarily racist, even when they have racist roots and produce racist results. This is a fine distinction to make, especially if you are a victim of racism, and it seems a useful distinction if we are to help decent, willing people to see Africa in new ways.
Current Exploitation

We also perpetuate negative myths about Africa because they help us maintain dominance over Africans. From our perspective in the United States, it is difficult for us to see how globally influential our country actually is. In simple terms, we are a superpower. To wield this kind of might and still think of ourselves as good people, we need powerful myths. Whereas in the past the myth of the racial inferiority of Africans was the major justification for Western control of Africans, now cultural inferiority is a more likely reason. Our news media, for example, are much more likely to inform us about African failures than about African successes. And the successes we do hear about tend to demonstrate that our own perspectives on reality are correct. It doesn't take much imagination to figure out that modern Americans who deal with Africa—bureaucrats, aid workers, businesspeople, missionaries, and others—might have an interest in describing Africa in ways that justify the importance of their own work.

Entertainment

If Africa were portrayed as being "just like us," it would be quite uninteresting. "Man bites dog" sells more newspapers than "Dog bites man." The word exotic describes the point; exotic portrays African culture as excitingly different. Usually this is at the expense of African culture, which is removed from its everyday context in a way that allows us to believe that the culture is exceptional rather than common like ours. Movies and novels thrive on this sort of thing. America, too, is often portrayed overseas as exotic, and we are thus frequently mistaken. In his book American Ways, for example, Gary Allen describes an international student who was misled by myths about exotic America. Coming to the United States having watched American movies, the student expected to find a lot of women ready for sexual activity with him. Actually, he found them, but it took him nearly two years to figure out that such easy women were also marginal and often disturbed and that more desirable women were not so readily available.

I provide African examples in later chapters, but give a first illustration here. One National Geographic issue includes a short article on the gold of the Asantehene, the traditional ruler of the Asante people in Ghana. Ten beautiful photographs show the gold clothing and ornaments
of the Asantehene, his court, and his relatives. But the authors make almost no effort to tell us how all of this fits into the life of the Asante or of the modern country of Ghana. Presumably, National Geographic does not intend to portray Africans in stereotypical ways. Without (con)text, however, the reader might think almost anything.

This is exoticism. Exoticism portrays only a portion of a culture and allows the imagination to use stereotypes to fill in the missing pieces. Most frequently, when we supply the missing pieces, we extrapolate that other people are more different from us than they are similar. Thus we can too easily sustain our myths about Africans and believe that words such as mysterious and the Dark Continent actually apply to Africa.

**Self-Definition**

Sometimes we use other people, including Africans, as a mirror. We want to know about them so we can know about ourselves. This very human activity accounts at least partially for our interest in people-watching in parks and the appeal of television sitcoms, movies, literature, history, and many other cultural phenomena. In the case of Africa, we might say that many of us want Africans to be a bit savage so we can feel more satisfied with our own lot in life. The Looney Toons announcer on the Cartoon Network puts it well: “Without nuts like these, the rest of us look crazy.” Perhaps you have never thought of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Elmer Fudd as therapists, but doesn’t Africa often serve the same function? If we focus on ourselves without comparison to others, don’t we look pretty messed up? But if we can see that others are poorer, less educated, or more chaotic, then it is easier to believe that we are fine despite our problems. To put it differently, we can’t be rich without the poor, developed without the underdeveloped, saved without the sinner, normal without the abnormal, civilized without the uncivilized, and so forth.

Our culture is especially susceptible to this kind of thinking because of the way we conceive of time. Our idea of time as a continuum from the past to the future—rather than, for example, as a circle returning to a golden age of the past—is embodied in our concept of progress. For us, progress generally means going forward, moving on, getting over it, improving ourselves, growing up, and a whole collection of other ideas implying that the past is negative and the future is positive. Of course, if we believe this to be true, we will expect reality to substantiate the belief.
Indeed, one way we perceive African reality reveals this way of thinking. We see African community life as basic, but impossible to return to in our own communities. And tribalism is something we have gotten beyond. It wouldn’t help to find much that is of use to us in Africa, because that would contradict our understanding of progress.

Positive myths about Africa also serve Western self-definition. Those who are dissatisfied with modern American life might construct Africa to present viable alternatives. Some might search African customs for a more natural way to live. Some might look to Africa for a less racist culture. Some, specifically African Americans, might be looking for their idealized personal and cultural roots.

Stereotypes over Time

As Europeans spread across the world from the 1400s onward, they had to make sense of the new peoples and places they encountered. Over time, and for reasons explained later in this book, Africans and Africa became representative of extreme “otherness.” They were not the only representatives of difference, of course: there were also Aborigines, Native Americans, and so forth. But Africa certainly became a primary symbol that Europeans and white Americans used to express difference. Even black Americans found Africa’s difference useful at times.

Fortunately, with each passing decade, Americans have been treating Africans with less prejudice. Perhaps we are in the midst of a real withdrawal, however slow, from the myths of primitive Africa. Indeed, we cannot afford such myths. Africa, because of its sheer size, population, resources, and modernization, will play an increasingly important role in the world, whether for good or ill, and will have to be taken seriously. Our long-term interest in our shrinking world is to understand Africa with as little bias as possible.

The point is not that an accurate and whole picture of Africa has to be totally positive. Indeed, such a claim would be a continuation of our stereotyping. What we should strive for is a view of Africa as a continent full of real people, both like us and not like us. On the surface this seems easy: “It’s a small world after all!” “Why can’t we just get along?” “All we need is love!” “Just leave them alone.” But these stereotypical, facile solutions don’t automatically work in the real world. As you will find in the pages that
follow, seeing others as fully human without desiring to change them into ourselves is exceedingly difficult. It may be, however, the only thing that will make our home—the planet—a safe place to live.

A Word About Words

Before we go any further, a warning is in order. As I wrote this text, I realized that some of the words I use regularly are problematic. For example, the word Africa is used incorrectly throughout the book, because I mean "Africa south of the Sahara." This is a problem that might be helped by replacing all occurrences of Africa with sub-Saharan Africa. However, that would make reading difficult, and the change would not solve the problem entirely. For example, not all sub-Saharan Africans are the subjects of the stereotypes discussed in this book, assuming we consider the millions of European Africans in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and elsewhere to be Africans. Following the example of other scholars, I have opted to use the convenient expression Africa instead of a more accurate term. I assume that readers understand what is meant and will fill in missing qualifiers where needed.

Likewise, terms such as Westerners and Americans, and the pronouns we and our, are frequently distortions of the truth. There is, you will agree, no such thing as an average American, just as there is no such thing as an average African. As I wrote this book, I found myself generalizing and perhaps overgeneralizing about Americans for the sake of calling attention to "our" stereotyping of Africans. We need to remember, however, that in every era there have been Americans who did not accept the general view and who spoke out on behalf of Africans.

One of the biggest difficulties with generalizing about American views of Africa concerns the inclusion of African American views. The problem is complex because American culture is complex. Until at least the 1960s, for example, it was quite common for African Americans to think of Africans as having primitive cultures. This should not be too surprising, considering the dominance of European culture and the fact that most information about Africa was filtered through European American eyes. Thus when I say that "we Americans" believed Africa to be primitive, it can be taken as somewhat accurate for black as well as white Americans.
On the other hand, African Americans since well before the American Revolution have resisted white efforts to define black reality, and therefore they cannot be said to have invented the idea of African primitiveness, even if they believed in portions of it. They were victims in much the same way that Africans have been victims. Moreover, African Americans have largely rejected white American interpretations of race, and many have attempted to teach America about African achievements. Until the mid-twentieth century such teachers were largely ignored, but their efforts make it more difficult to generalize about "Americans."

In this book, I have usually focused on white American myths about Africa—because they have been the most dominant, the most negative, and the most in need of change. Although I include a brief summary of African American perspectives in Chapter 5, the subject deserves a fuller treatment. What seems most strikingly similar about white and black American perspectives on Africa is that all of us have generally "used Africa to think with." Whether Africa has been constructed in a negative or positive manner, we have used the continent to reflect upon who we are in relation to each other and in relation to Africa. Much of this thinking, negative and positive, has stereotyped Africa in ways explained in this book.
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 Africa look like the place they imagined rather than the one that existed.¹

While several decades later our textbooks are much better, today's most common experiences for high school students are either not to study Africa at all or to acquire more Dark Continent myths. By the time students get to college, most still have outdated ideas about the continent. 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, and overall the students' perceptions were significantly more positive. My own experience with students mirrors this study.

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. In sheer numbers of programs, Africa is actually better represented on American television than are 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. 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 many wild animals because they live in towns or in parts of the continent where the human population is dense. Furthermore, 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 Travel Channel, and other stations show Africa-related ethnographies and documentaries. What is still lacking, despite the growing number of programs, is a serious understanding of how Africans currently live. 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. An African shopping mall or television studio isn’t as interesting to us as life in an African village. Thus, greater television access to Africa as a result of the cable revolution has rarely led to a more complete image of African life. A 2011 episode of Bizarre Foods, for example, visited a rural Madagascar village and, despite its respectful treatment of individual villagers, described the village as an example of what life was like in the Middle Ages.³ The host’s Travel Channel web page adds, "Most people still live the way they did 100s of years ago—hunting and gathering for food."³

But this is not true for Madagascar or for the village visited in the program. It is true that Madagascar is largely rural, quite poor, and badly governed. But most people are farmers and herders, not hunter-gatherers, and UNICEF reports that in 2010 life expectancy was a strong sixty-six years, most children were immunized against childhood diseases, the incidence of HIV was low, 40 percent of people had mobile phones, 80 percent of children finished primary school, two-thirds of those under twenty-five years old were literate, and girls were as literate as boys.³ This is hardly the Middle Ages.

If we can only rarely find a whole picture of Africa on 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, it is clear that we learn what we want to learn and that we like our picture of Africans the way it is now.

**Newspapers**

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 Gabon, 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 National Public Radio, and CNN South Africa bureau chief—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.⁶

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.

Moreover, because journalists usually do not know local situations well, they often rely on Western-based aid groups for information and perspectives. Karen Rothmyer, who studies Africa news sources, says that Western-based aid groups have an interest in exaggerating both African troubles and the Western role in solving Africa’s problems. If Africa has big problems that only outsiders can solve, then the NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) can look good and raise more money.⁷

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,
Chapter 2: How We Learn

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.8

Stories that can be characterized as “curiosities from Africa” also ap-
pear regularly in newspapers. Witchcraft accusations in South Africa,
killer of albino persons in Tanzania, crocodile attacks in Zimbabwe, lion
killing by young Maasai pastoralists—all these are reported without con-
text, so Africans are made to seem irrational rather than normal. And why
isn’t there news about normal everyday life in Africa? Weeks go by in my
local paper without any substantial news from Africa, and then the paper
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.9 Is this news about Africa? Yes. Is it in-
teresting? 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.

Magazines

We should do better in our magazines if only because they offer fewer
urgent deadlines and more space to provide context. Indeed, journals such
as the New Yorker, Atlantic Monthly, Current History, Discover, and Van-
ity Fair have published thoughtful, largely 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.
Magazines

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. 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.

One very popular magazine, National Geographic—with an astounding global circulation of over 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.” That policy, still followed more than 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.

In the 1990s and after, National Geographic continued to run articles on Africa, but they tended to feature animals. The exceptions are most frequently “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. “Curse of the Black Gold,” a 2007 piece, deals with the problems of the oil industry in the Niger Delta (Nigeria) and appropriately points 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.” This statement effectively tells the reader not to look for answers and not to act, reaffirming the stereotype of Africa as a hopeless place.

A 2004 article on modern Johannesburg would have been a good place to discuss both the positives and negatives of African urban life. But the article, “City of Hope and Fear,” focuses on fear and violence rather than hope in this South African city. The article stands out because only a
year later the magazine's sister publication, National Geographic Traveler, also included an article on Johannesburg, "Brash and Brilliant," that celebrates "Jo'burg" as a tourist destination. 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.  

While recent National Geographic articles treat Africa less stereotypically than in the past, the Dark Continent bias is still there. A 2010 article, for example, considers the issues facing people living in the Omo Valley of Ethiopia. The sympathetic article shows that the people of the area are increasingly in contact with outside forces such as the Ethiopian government, NGOs, Christianity, guns, Western education, cellphones, water pumps, and the damming of their river. But there are disturbing problems with the article. The title, "Africa's Last Frontier," is followed by this statement: "Ethiopia's Omo Valley is still a place ruled by ritual and revenge," implying with the word "still" that all of premodern Africa was once ruled by "ritual and revenge." The article also implies that ritual and revenge are ending only now because of the arrival of Western education, Christianity, and modern values spread by the Ethiopian state. This would seem to indicate that the rest of Africa got rid of the irrationality of "ritual and revenge" only by adopting Western values. Indeed, the author says that because Europeans never colonized Ethiopia, the Omo Valley and its people were left in their premodern state longer than other peoples in Africa. The author seems to know little about African history or about the ritual and revenge that takes place in modern Western politics.
The author has essentially left the Omo peoples without history or culture. To him, they are what they are because that is the nature of people before the arrival of modern civilization. We learn nothing about the human circumstances in which revenge killing is used as a way to settle disputes. We learn little about how prevalent revenge killing is among the Omo peoples or about other ways they settle disputes. We learn almost nothing about the last hundred years of Omo history that led to today's situation. And we also don't learn why the author chose to focus on revenge killings rather than the many other aspects of Omo life that are important.

Moreover, while the article at least makes an attempt to situate the local people in an encroaching modern world, the photographs try to tell a much different story. The text says that rich European tourists come to the Valley "hoping for something of the Africa that exists in the Western imagination, all wild animals and face paint and dancing. Tourists say they have come to see the Omo before it becomes like everywhere else." There is a striking photograph of such tourists with their cameras, but most of the article's photos show exactly what the Western imagination would expect of traditional Africa, including wild animals, lip plugs, face paint, and dancing. With bare breasts and naked men, it's like looking at a National Geographic from the 1940s or 1950s. The point is not that these things do not exist, but that the bulk of the images conflict so clearly with the theme of the article and with pictures taken by others in the region. The article says, with some difficulty, that these people are not so primitive as Westerners would like to think, while the photographs present a mostly contradictory message. For most readers, which message do you suppose is more powerful?

Finally, the article does not take a position on the new dam on the Omo River, which surely will destroy the lives of the 200,000 people living in the Omo Valley. To the author, the dam is merely part of modernization and globalization, and while it might be regrettable and controversial, it is inevitable. Obviously, were National Geographic to oppose the dam and its consequences on behalf of the voiceless people of the Valley, they would be unable to photograph again in Ethiopia, and they would also be shunned by governments in other parts of the world for fear of similar negative comments about what they are doing. Other organizations, like Survival for Tribal Peoples, have been more outspoken about the damage this will cause to the Omo peoples.
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, entertainment, 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 by focusing on “natural” and “traditional” Africa, and it confuses 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, 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. Africa has appeared more recently in such feature films as Tears of the Sun, Lord of War, and Blood Diamond. 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 in only 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 less prevalent. Fortunately, several contemporary films from international producers offer more enlightened perspectives. *The Constant Gardener*, *The Last King of Scotland*, *Tsotsi*, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, *Hotel Rwanda*, and *Doctor Bello* 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. As a result of protests, Busch Gardens Africa 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
realities 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.” 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.

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 rainforest (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.”

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 Savanna section of the park is set up to give visitors the sense that they are in a genuinely natural environment. Participants in the Kilimanjaro Safari, which visits the 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. You can save Africa.

Disney also evokes nostalgia for an imagined Africa in the Animal Kingdom Lodge. Here elephant tusks and other trophies give the feeling of a hunting lodge. And, "thatched ceilings, large beams, hand-carved golden-tone furnishings, real African artifacts and a vast mud fireplace in the main lobby surround you in the inimitable spirit of Africa." That inimitable spirit, the supposedly unique essence of Africa, is clearly uninfluenced by the last one hundred years of history.

In Disney's topsy-turvy world, fictional animals compete with real ones, entertainment competes with understanding, an imagined past competes with history, 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.

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, and 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 book 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 well-intentioned 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 African 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.”

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 Geraghty’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 folklore rely on biased colonial sources that modified the folktales to make Western moral points, not African ones. While most authors of children’s books profess universalism, say Maddy and coauthor Donnarae MacCann, there are still many Darkest Africa and neocolonial myths in children’s literature about Africa.

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 all night.

This sentiment, "Please don't send me to Africa," appears also in sermons, blogs, and other church literature to represent a significant sacrifice. 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 from 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. ExxonMobil, Dow, Snapple, Coca-Cola, Honda, Microsoft, and IBM, among others, have recently produced ads depicting their products in association with Africa. 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.

These are only some of the ways Africa is misrepresented in our popular culture. 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.
Across the grasslands of West Africa, the epic of Sundiata continues to be told almost eight hundred years after this hero united the kingdoms of the upper Niger River and founded the massive Mali empire. In the best-known prose translation of the epic, the singer-storyteller Mamoudou Kouyaté begins by relating his qualifications as speaker: "My word is pure and free of all untruth." For him, "the art of eloquence has no secrets." He then commands his audience to pay attention: "Listen then, sons of Mali, children of the black people, listen to my word, for I am going to tell you of Sundiata, the father of the Bright Country, of the savanna land, the ancestor of those who draw the bow, the master of a hundred vanquished kings." In any of its many versions, the ensuing story is full of confidence, adventure, and wisdom. It is the story of "the Bright Country."

How different the Sundiata epic is from the stereotypical Western view of Africa as the Dark Continent. In the Western view, Africa has been a land of primitives who practice the "darkest" of customs, including cannibalism, ritual murder, incest, witchcraft, and incessant warfare. Everywhere Westerners looked in Africa they found depravity. Or they found peoples who had never advanced beyond the stage achieved by European children. They had only rudimentary languages, forms of government, and art—even a rudimentary ability to think.
This dark view of Africa has been so predominant that we must ask where it came from. Scholars have investigated this question by going back to the origins of Western civilization to see whether Africans have always fared so badly. They have concluded that the image of the Dark Continent is a recent fabrication, developed in the nineteenth century as Europeans became increasingly interested in both science and African conquest.

Africans in Antiquity

In ancient Greece and Rome, race does not seem to have been a significant issue. Frank M. Snowden Jr., who has prepared what is perhaps the most complete study of race in the ancient Mediterranean, states that these civilizations regarded "yellow hair or blue eyes a mere geographical accident, and developed no special racial theory about the inferiority of darker peoples." Indeed, Mediterranean peoples referred to exceptional physical traits to assert the fundamental unity of humanity. Thus, the extraordinary fairness of the Scythians and the darkness of the Ethiopians became lessons in how physical difference should make no difference in judging a person's worth. Cultural conflicts did arise in these times, of course. The various city-states and empires frequently displayed ethnocentrism toward other cultures, and they certainly engaged in war. Nonetheless, at most times a certain cultural equality prevailed that allowed interaction and relatively free traffic in goods and ideas. It was not considered strange to find Ethiopians residing and thriving in Greece, Rome, and elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean.

We also know that Africa contributed to the other cultures of the Mediterranean. Pre-Arab Egypt and even the Upper Nile kingdoms such as Meroë were relatively well known to Greeks by the fifth century BCE. What we do not know is how much the Greeks and others borrowed from Africa. Some historians claim that Greek civilization actually emerged from African ideas and that nineteenth-century European scholarship tried to hide the debt for racist reasons. It will take some time to sort out the evidence, but this debate is largely a modern one over racial bias. In the ancient world, the debate would not have made much sense, because the people of that time didn't think in such racial terms.

The question of race has also been raised with respect to ancient Hebrews and Christians because they are the progenitors of modern Western
religions. No evidence, however, points to Jewish or Christian racism toward Africans or anyone else. One does find an effort in Judaism to exclude those who were not Jews, but this exclusion was based on religion and culture, not race. In modern times, Christian racists have insisted that the Hebrew Bible supports the view that God believes blacks to be inferior. Their primary evidence comes from their understanding of Genesis 9:18–29, in which Noah curses his youngest son Ham and Ham’s descendants, the Canaanites: “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” Ham is supposed by some to have been black, and the curse is believed to indicate God’s approval of slavery, American segregation, the colonization of Africa, and apartheid. But there is no evidence that the Hebrews saw it this way or that they were anti-African or racist. Today’s mainstream biblical scholars agree unanimously that the passage in Genesis was not a condemnation of the black race but an attempt to explain the rift between Israel and Canaan (the name of a people in the eastern Mediterranean and of one of Ham’s sons) and to denounce Canaan for its immoral culture. There is no indication in the Bible that the inhabitants of Canaan were black. Nor is there any indication that blacks were considered inferior.

The most frequently studied case in which race might be a factor in the Christian testament comes from the story of Philip, a Christian who baptized the black eunuch treasurer of the queen of Nubia (nor Ethiopia, as is often asserted). Superficially, this tale from the Acts of the Apostles might be understood as a comment on race and used as an endorsement of either missions to Africa or racial equality. But modern scholars assert that it was neither and that the issues of Africa and race were not important in the story. Rather, the point was that Christians should accept even eunuchs, whom Jews had refused to receive as converts. Moreover, Snowden writes, the early Christians adopted the Greek view of the unity of humanity and used both Ethiopians and Scythians to illustrate how Christianity was for all. For example, both Origen and Augustine, early Christian commentators, employed the metaphor of blackness to describe the souls of sinners. But in a play on words and ideas, they contrasted the blackness of the Ethiopians’ skin, which was natural, with the blackness of a sinner’s soul, which was acquired by neglect. All sinners were black, whereas Ethiopians who followed Christ were white. Although blackness was employed as a metaphor for sin, it was specifically dissociated from the blackness of the Ethiopians’ skin.
Chapter 3: The Origins of "Darkest Africa"

The Arab conquest of North Africa after 639 CE made direct contact between Europeans and black Africans difficult. Thus, black Africa was of minor concern to Europeans for the next eight hundred years. Black Africans did appear in Europe, however, in various roles. One of their most interesting occupations was as "black knights," important characters in some medieval epics. In these epics, African difference was treated in several ways and served as a device to construct medieval ideas about chivalry. In light of modern European racism, it is striking that in the medieval epics, black knights were considered fully human and often exceptionally competent. We also know that Europeans traded regularly with Africans south of the Sahara through Arab intermediaries. Evidence even suggests that the Renaissance in Europe was fueled by the importation of large quantities of West African gold. In addition, the works of a few Arab geographers who traveled to sub-Saharan Africa became available in medieval Europe. Indeed, until the late 1700s, the best knowledge on the interior of sub-Saharan Africa came from Arab sources.

Europeans in ancient and medieval civilizations were, it should be emphasized, ethnocentric, but not particularly racist. They all believed that their civilizations were superior and that others' civilizations were inferior. In general, the less they knew about a civilization the worse they thought about it and its inhabitants. But there is considerable evidence that Europeans considered the Africans who lived in Europe to be fully human.

Western Views of Africans,
ca. 1400–1830

With the opening of Europe's Age of Exploration in the mid-1400s, Africans and other non-Europeans fared increasingly badly in European consciousness. This time, the relationship between Europe and Africa and, indeed, between Europe and the rest of the world was quite different. The Portuguese, Spanish, British, Dutch, and French explorers, and others who followed them, were a pugnacious lot out to profit from non-Europeans, and eventually they conquered most of the world. And yet the Europeans were not mere predators. They felt a need to justify their actions in moral terms, and they frequently wondered about the meaning of their relations with other peoples.
Historian Michael Adas argues that until the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans' perspectives on their relationships with non-Europeans tended to be formulated by and confined to missionaries and philosophers. Less educated Europeans who traveled would have found it difficult to originate such broader views, because they were largely ignorant of the achievements of their own civilization. They could not have made comparisons, for example, between Europe and Africa or between Europe and China. This was fortunate for Africa in the sense that ordinary travelers who wrote accounts of African societies did not filter what they observed through any strong ideological biases.  

In his book *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850*, Philip D. Curtin makes the point more forcefully. Curtin says that in the eighteenth century, when at least six million slaves were taken from Africa, Europeans in general "knew more and cared more about Africa than they did at any later period up to the 1950s." This remarkable statement is based on two factors that were prevalent during this time: Europeans could obtain information about Africa from relatively unbiased traders and travelers, and Europeans had not yet completely connected race and culture in ways that prevented them from seeing Africa fairly.  

And yet European attitudes toward Africa were becoming more negative and more racist. According to A. Bulunda Itandala, European artists—painters, sculptors, playwrights, and poets—increasingly portrayed Africans stereotypically and unfavorably. He emphasizes that during the Renaissance, Europe still relied heavily on the medieval worldview, which divided the world into Christian and non-Christian spheres or, more starkly, into a struggle between Christianity and the devil. Thus the story of Ham, mentioned above, was used widely to justify the slave trade. As Europe's knowledge of Africa grew through exploration and trade, including the slave trade, Europeans increasingly painted Africa and Africans in negative terms. And those negative terms were increasingly associated with physical features such as color and not just culture.  

In sum, eighteenth-century Westerners preferred their own culture to all others and were not without racist ideas, but, unlike nineteenth-century Europeans, they did not presume that everything Africans did was inferior simply because of their race. Eighteenth-century links between race and culture were still largely unconscious and imprecise. Curtin calls this a form of "moderate racism," which "condemned individual Africans as bad
men—or all Africans as savage men—but... left the clear impression that Africans were men.”

One way to illustrate this attitude is to point out the efforts that Europeans made to help Africans who had been forcibly removed from Africa to return to the continent. In Britain, the example of Sierra Leone is foremost. Conceived in the 1780s by philanthropists who wanted to give free blacks residing in Britain and non-African parts of the British Empire the opportunity to repatriate, this colony on the west coast of Africa was organized on utopian principles supposedly applicable to all human societies.

The effort was clearly racist in the sense that it rid European territories of many blacks. However, such plans show that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britons still believed that blacks could not only rule themselves in Africa but also establish utopian communities if they were provided the proper tools and legal framework. Unfortunately, planners of such resettlement experiments rarely took into account the actual physical conditions in Africa, the training and skills of the settlers, or previous failed attempts to establish utopian communities. In 1808 the British government took over Sierra Leone as a naval base and as a colony in which to resettle the thousands of Africans freed during the effort to end the slave trade.

An American example also illustrates the ambiguous Western attitudes toward race. Beginning in the 1820s, the American Colonization Society supported a Back-to-Africa movement that attempted to colonize Liberia, on the coast of West Africa, with groups of freed American slaves. As in Sierra Leone, the organizers had mixed motives. Helping African Americans to live in Africa was in one sense a vote of confidence for blacks’ ability to rule themselves. However, most society members were northern whites troubled by the growing number of freed slaves in northern cities, and many saw the enterprise as an opportunity to establish Christian missions in Africa. The US government contributed funds for colonization, and one settlement was named Monrovia after President James Monroe, a member of the society. Like Sierra Leone, however, Liberia was never prosperous.

The antislavery movement provides another illustration of the “moderate racism” that existed in the minds of early-nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans. From our perspective it seems logical that abolitionists would attempt to eliminate racism in their efforts to end
slavery. But the abolitionists' arguments were primarily about the immorality of slavery and the slave trade rather than the immorality of racism. Proslavery and antislavery activists alike were racist, but both assumed that cultural factors were at the heart of the slavery question. For proponents of slavery, the Africans' inferior culture justified the institution. Antislavery activists argued that Christian charity required abolition and that Africans had the potential to acquire civilized culture.

**Birth of the Dark Continent**

Sometime in the mid-eighteenth century a new trend in the way Europeans viewed the rest of the world began to develop. It did not reach its peak for a century or more, but in hindsight it is clear that the old models were already being challenged. The reason for this transition was the series of revolutions under way in Europe: the Enlightenment, the scientific and industrial revolutions, and the resulting global revolutions in trade and conquest. These new conditions lent increased prestige and power to those concerned with the material world and with domination of other cultures. The revolutions also helped to undermine views of the world that promoted the essential equality of humanity. Europeans had a growing sense that theirs was a superior and powerful civilization.

Michael Adas argues that as the modern global revolutions began, the interpreters of the non-West were increasingly traders, scientists, technicians, soldiers, and bureaucrats. They, not missionaries or philosophers, subsequently determined what Europeans thought of the world. These new interpreters had pragmatic interests—domination rather than conversion or understanding—and they aggressively shaped European thinking to serve their goals.

We can see this shift in perspective in Western attitudes and actions toward China, which had been celebrated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as an example of a gifted civilization. A popular artistic style, chinoiserie, imitated Chinese motifs in furniture, architecture, art, fabrics, porcelain, gardens, and the like. In the same way, Chinese laws, administration, commercial practices, and ethics were considered solid, if not perfect. By the late eighteenth century, however, China's image in Europe was in severe decline. European traders complained about excessive bureaucracy, corruption, and trade restrictions. Protestant missionaries
complained about superstitions. And many observers derided the Chinese for not achieving more in science and technology. By the time of the First Opium War (1839–1842), when Europe demonstrated its brutality as well as its new technological superiority, Western assessments of China had turned overwhelmingly negative. In the United States, meanwhile, the use and abuse of Chinese laborers in the American West contributed to this image.

For Africa the shift was equally significant but less noticeable, because Africans had never been held in high esteem among Europeans. In the last half of the eighteenth century, portrayals of Africans became increasingly negative, and they increasingly linked African race and African culture. This growing race consciousness was frequently expressed in the new language of science. One of the questions addressed was whether science supported the biblical account of the origin of the different races. Until the scientific revolution, the Hebrew Bible provided the most common explanation of human diversity: God created humans and they were dispersed after the fall of the Tower of Babel. Those who thought more deeply about the question, however, found problems with the biblical stories. How, for example, was it possible for Adam and Eve’s sons to find wives (Genesis 4)? And if all humans descended from Adam, how could they have achieved such physical diversity?

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the principal contending explanations for human diversity were either that all humans descended from Adam—the monogenist position—or that separate creations accounted for separate races—the polygenist position. Slavers and slaveholders tended to be polygenists because the belief in separate races implied that God could approve of inferior treatment for blacks. Reformers tended to be monogenists, but they nonetheless believed that Africans had degenerated and needed a great deal of help to return to the level of Europeans, if such a return was possible at all.

The Bible could not settle the debate, but scientists in the United States believed they might. They began to ask whether nature, by itself, could have produced the immense diversity of plants and animals on Earth. They made two basic assumptions: that nature could bring about diversity through the influence of climate and that the biblical account of creation was correct in dating the age of Earth at between 4,000 and 5,000 years. The scientists then concluded that nature could not have produced
Earth's biological diversity in such a short time. Therefore, by the 1840s most American scientists believed that science supported the polygenist, multiple-creation position, a view consistent with racism.\textsuperscript{20}

Nineteenth-century science was, of course, heading for a collision with the biblical view of creation. The monogenists and polygenists both assumed that the biblical account of creation was fact and that science needed only to fill in the details. Meanwhile, new archaeological discoveries in Egypt near the turn of the nineteenth century began to cast doubt on biblical chronology by demonstrating that human life on Earth was far older than the Bible indicated. And the study of fossils began to show that Earth itself might be vastly older than the Bible allowed. If these findings were accurate, neither the polygenist nor the monogenist theory could explain human origins or human interrelationships.

As the long chronology of evolution became more apparent, scientists began to work toward understanding the actual biological mechanism by which diversity could occur. For example, among the theories proposed early in the century was Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's inheritability of learned traits. Then, in 1859, Charles Darwin described the theory of natural selection in The Origin of Species and showed how species could evolve through interplay between biology and the environment. Darwin's natural selection theory prevailed, of course, but it caught on very slowly. Moreover, it still lacked an adequate explanation of the biological mechanism by which individuals came to vary from each other.

Darwin himself remained a Lamarckian, believing that learned traits were inherited. He thought that biological variation arose because parents learned traits they passed to their offspring at conception. Interestingly, the Lamarckian understanding of variation seems at least partially responsible for the fear some European colonists had of "going native" (taking on African customs) while in Africa. Many believed that by dressing up formally for dinner while in the African "bush," they were more likely to give birth to civilized children. It was only in 1902 that Gregor Mendel's work with plant variation was rediscovered after being lost for a century in an obscure journal, and the genetic theory of variation began to spread. Not until the 1920s and 1930s did American scientists commonly accept the genetic theory of evolution; American cultural acceptance took decades longer. In fact, belief in these theories still has not permeated all corners of our society.
Well before Darwin, the new scientific theories of evolution began to add fuel to Western racism. Race logic in America and Europe concluded that if humans had evolved, presumably from apes, some humans had evolved more than others. Such logic naturally kept the creators of the new myths—white, upper-class, northern European males—at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy. Below them came women, other races, and other classes. Among the inferior races, Asians were most advanced, then Africans, Native Americans, and Australian Aborigines. These scientific theories, unlike the older race theories, inextricably linked race and culture. Curtin notes that "whereas race had been an important influence on human culture, the new generation saw race as the crucial determinant, not only of culture but of human character and of all history. Hundreds of variant theories were to appear in the mood of this new emphasis." The scientific proof seemed to be everywhere—in the shape and size of heads, in skin color, in differences between males and females, in comportment, in the complexity of societies, and in the nature of art and religion. The greater the perceived physical and cultural difference from European culture, the less developed the race.

While Europeans developed these pseudoscientific ways of linking race and culture, they also became convinced that they had to conquer Africa. What is striking here is that they waited so long to begin. By the time Europeans invaded sub-Saharan Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, Africa had long remained the only continent unsubdued by European power. Reasons for the delay included the difficulty of the environment, the danger of violence, the slave trade, and the lack of easily tapped mineral wealth. But the second half of the nineteenth-century brought the end of the slave trade; improvements in guns, boats, and medicine; an intensified search for industrial raw materials and markets; and heightened nationalist competition among the European states. Explorers set out to "discover" the African interior, traders staked out regions, and missionaries founded stations as far inland as they could while still maintaining their supply lines. As the century progressed, interest in Africa grew until it finally became impossible for European governments not to colonize the continent.

This shift toward imperialist thinking was already apparent by mid-century. In theoretical terms, the shift was marked by fewer arguments for the conversion of Africans than for European trusteeship over Africans. Conversion had been an attempt to make Africans more like Europeans,
implying that Africans were just as human as Europeans. In Senegal, for
every example, the French allowed some educated Africans to become French citi-
zens. Trusteeship, however, implied that Africans were biologically inferior
and needed to be taken care of, a perfect justification for conquest. Euro-
peans in Africa naturally began to look for evidence that Africa needed Eu-
ropean help. Educated Africans, who had formerly been entrusted with
responsibilities, were moved aside and labeled incompetent. African cus-
toms were increasingly described as savage. Cannibalism was imagined in
practically every corner of the continent. Childhood became the universal
metaphor for the African state of mental and cultural development.

A Myth for Conquest

Thus the myth of the Dark Continent was born. It originated in mid-
nineteenth-century Europe when scientific race theory was developed,
without reference to the actual cultures of Africans in Africa. Then it was
transferred to Africa by Europeans who had both a theoretical and a prac-
tical interest in seeing Africa as primitive. And when scientific race theory
combined with imperialist urges to conquer, there was no end to the primit-
iveness that could be found.

The Dark Continent myth is still with us a century and a half later, at
least in diluted form. Its legacy leads us to many of the “African” words
listed in Chapter 1. Anyone who reads the literature of late-eighteenth-
century European travelers in Africa—who describe Africans as human—
and then reads the literature of late-nineteenth-century travelers—who
criticize Africans as depraved—will wonder if this is the same continent. In
the eighteenth century, Europeans on the whole were genuinely interested
in discovering what Africans were doing, even if they disapproved of what
they found. For example, Mungo Park—considered by some to be the first
modern European explorer of Africa—traveled to the upper Niger River in
1796; although he underwent many difficulties, he evaluated individuals
and experiences on their own merits and did not generally condemn whole
groups or cultures. By the late nineteenth century, however, Europeans
could see only a primitive continent full of tribes of savages and barbarians.

Of course, a great deal of hypocrisy was involved in this attempt to re-
duce Africans to the lowest forms of humanity. European violence erad-
icated African violence. Christian love justified missionary control. And
the white race, which had only recently stamped out its own slave-trading and slaveholding practices, called Arabs and Africans inferior because they traded and held slaves. When European slave trading in Africa came to an end in the 1870s and 1880s, Europeans engaged in an antislavery campaign against Arab slave traders on the Nile and in East Africa, and then against African traders. As discussed above, in the antislavery campaign in Europe in the early part of the century, the arguments made by both sides were more cultural than racial. Now, however, Europeans demanded that racially inferior Arabs and even more racially inferior Africans allow themselves to be saved from their depravity by racially superior Europeans. Patrick Brantlinger, a scholar of Victorian literature, writes:

The myth of the Dark Continent defined slavery as the offspring of tribal savagery and portrayed white explorers and missionaries as the leaders of a Christian crusade that would vanquish the forces of darkness. . . . When the taint of slavery fused with sensational reports about cannibalism, witchcraft, and apparently shameless sexual customs, Victorian Africa emerged draped in that pall of darkness that the Victorians themselves accepted as reality.34

Actually, several versions of the Dark Continent myth were available, the choice depending on whether the source was Christian or secular evolutionist. In the Christian version, God becomes the sponsor of the colonial effort. Christian missionaries, who were mostly whites, were called upon to save God’s pagan children in Africa. This version can be seen clearly in the mission movement that grew dramatically during the nineteenth century. More secular versions of the myth ranged from a crass survival-of-the-fittest conquest to a more sophisticated “trusteeship on behalf of civilization.” Official government policies tended toward the latter definition, and twentieth-century colonial bureaucrats spoke in terms of the care they were providing; colonialism was, they claimed, a generous gift to Africans.

At the popular level, Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “The White Man’s Burden” illustrates the secular trend. Although not specifically about Africa, Kipling’s verses summarized the secular justification for domination of Africa and other parts of the world at the turn of the century. “White man’s burden” is now a common phrase used to capture the
essence of the colonial mentality. Kipling's poem was sent to President Theodore Roosevelt just after the American annexation of the Philippines in 1898. It urged Americans to embrace colonialism as Britons had done:

_Take up the White Man's burden—_
_Send forth the best ye breed—_
_Go bind your sons to exile_
_To serve your captives' need;_
_To wait in heavy harness,_
_On fluttered folk and wild—_
_Your new-caught, sullen peoples,_
_Half-devil and half-child._

_Take up the White Man's burden—_
_Ye dare not stoop to less—_
_Nor call too loud on Freedom_
_To cloak your weariness;_
_By all ye cry or whisper,_
_By all ye leave or do,_
_The silent, sullen peoples_
_Shall weigh your Gods and you._

For Kipling, race itself is the sponsor of the colonial enterprise. The colonial burden is not a call from God, but from whiteness. Americans are urged to send "the best ye breed"—presumably upper-class white males—to serve people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy who are "half-devil and half-child." One might presume that the "half-devil" reference is a plea to Christians, but the poem's audience has "Gods"—plural—who are surely secular as well as Christian. Kipling is considered a defender of secular colonialism, not of religious missions. And the reference to "half-child" is pure scientific racism: the more racially different, the more childlike other peoples were thought to be. Furthermore, Americans were to serve their captives forever, in "weariness," because the captives were biologically incapable of learning the ways of civilized peoples.

The most public examples of Dark Continent thinking among Americans come from Henry Morton Stanley and Theodore Roosevelt. Stanley, an orphan who left England as a young man, served on both sides
during the American Civil War and was a newspaper reporter on the western frontier. He went to Africa in the late 1860s as a reporter for the New York Herald. His goal was to find the famous missionary David Livingstone, who had not been heard from in several years, and create one of the biggest news stories of the century. Stanley found Livingstone, of course, but more important, he became attached to Africa and spent the rest of his life involved with the continent. From 1875 to 1877 he crossed the continent from east to west, and he later described the harrowing journey down the Congo River in his book Through the Dark Continent. In the late 1870s and throughout the 1880s, Stanley participated in the conquest of the Congo by King Leopold of Belgium.

In both Britain and the United States, Stanley was easily the most influential explorer of nineteenth-century Africa. Stanley’s reputation was made as a bold adventurer who conquered every obstacle, both natural and human. Although some believe that he was not a racist because he did not use the racist jargon of the day, he was nonetheless quick to judge Africans as inferior and quick to turn to violence against those Africans who stood in his way. Throughout the white world, red-blooded men and boys read and talked about Stanley well into the twentieth century. Anyone interested in Africa certainly read Stanley, and a direct line of influence extends from his books to nearly every one of the white adventurers who followed him to Africa. Stanley also inspired the stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs (who created Tarzan) and H. Rider Haggard, authors read widely by Americans.

Theodore Roosevelt also read Stanley and developed a remarkably similar outlook on colonialism. Although Roosevelt belonged to the American upper middle class and was not known as a violent man, he was nonetheless a conqueror. He was an enthusiastic proponent of American colonies, including Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and as president he supervised the construction of the Panama Canal. Like Stanley, Roosevelt saw a similar “wildness” in the American West and in Africa. After his presidency, Roosevelt spent a year on safari in Africa (described in Chapter 9). In a 1909 dispatch from Africa to American newspapers, he commented that, “like all savages and most children, [Africans] have their limitations, and in dealing with them firmness is even more necessary than kindness; but the man is a poor creature who does not treat them with kindness also, and I am rather sorry for him if he does not grow to feel for
them, and to make them in return feel for him, a real and friendly liking." This is, of course, a restatement of the sentiment of "The White Man's Burden." Roosevelt's paternalistic and racist views, encapsulated in the adventure of his safari, were widely read and appreciated in the United States.

For most Americans—whether missionary, scientist, or ordinary citizen—Roosevelt's Dark Continent perspective was unquestioned in the first part of the twentieth century. Indeed, this view has been so widely and firmly held that it still persists in various forms and will likely survive well into the twenty-first century.
"OUR LIVING ANCESTORS"

Twentieth-Century Evolutionism

Heart of Darkness, by Joseph Conrad, is widely considered to be one of the finest works of prose fiction in the English language. In the story, the character Marlow describes his 1891 trip up the newly explored Congo River in a small, wheezing steamboat. His mission is to find the ivory in the hands of Kurtz, a white trader who has "gone native" in the deep interior of the vast Congo rain forest. Conrad's story is gripping because it uses entry into Africa as a metaphor for entry into the dark heart of the human subconscious. As Marlow ascends the river, he experiences ever deeper human depravity until he finally reaches Kurtz, who lives among his own tribe of shouting cannibals with his sensuous African mistress. "Going up that river," says Marlow, "was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings." "We were wanderers," he recalls, "on a prehistoric earth."

It is a superbly written story, but many consider it racist. Indeed, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe argues that Heart of Darkness cannot be considered great literature, no matter what its aesthetic merits, because it rests on racist premises. One might hope that in a future era the story will not make sense without an extensive introduction to the way people in the nineteenth century connected Africa with the primitive. For the present, however, the story is quite comprehensible because we are still not sure that Africa is not the Dark Continent or that Africans are not primitives.
We can see similar thinking, for example, in a 1990 *National Geographic* article about a trip up the Congo River. The author specifically compares the Congo today with the river as portrayed by Conrad: "As the days passed, the river appeared just as it had to Conrad a hundred years ago: Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world."

Knowing little of African languages or African thought, the *National Geographic* author jumps from noting that in the Lingala language the concepts for *yesterday* and *tomorrow* are expressed by the same word, to concluding that for Congolese, "time seemed to stand still.... There is now, and there is all other time in both directions." Although this makes for intriguing reading, it is bad science, bad linguistics, and bad reporting. Nonetheless, it represents a common American understanding of Africa as representing a primitive past.

**Biological Evolutionism**

The key to our thinking about Africa as primitive is our idea of evolution. Primitive means less evolved. Therefore, if we are going to untangle ourselves from Dark Continent myths, we need to deal with evolutionary theory. The problem is not the modern scientific understanding of evolution but an old-fashioned view that still has some currency in American popular culture. This view features three articles of faith relevant to this discussion: evolution takes place along a single line that leads to progress; some species and subspecies are more evolved than others; and species claw their way to the top.

In this older version of evolutionary theory, change occurs along a line that stretches from the simplest living forms to the most complex, from microbes to mammals. As each successive species evolves, a new and higher rung is added to the evolutionary ladder. Humans, who have climbed to the top, are the most advanced of the species. But all humans are not equal. White human males of the upper socioeconomic classes are at the very top of the human segment of the ladder. Others trail in a biological hierarchy constructed according to class, sex, and race.

The mechanism by which evolution worked according to this nineteenth-century theory was "survival of the fittest." Those species and subspecies that could dominate others would rise to the top. The exact
way this would happen was not clear, because scientists did not have a firm grasp of genetics until well into the twentieth century. What did appear clear was that species were in competition with each other for survival. The "law of the jungle" was eat or be eaten.

When Conrad wrote in Heart of Darkness that he was going back in time as he went into Africa, he did not just mean that he was going back in historical time. He meant that he was going back in evolutionary time. Africans were literal biological specimens of what whites had once been. Whites had left these living ancestors in the evolutionary dust. In America, as in Europe, this "truth" was held almost universally. Theodore Roosevelt, writing to Americans from East Africa in 1909 shortly after the end of his presidency, echoed this view: "[In Africa,] nature, both as regards wild man and wild beast, did not and does not differ materially from what it was in Europe in the late Pleistocene."²⁵

**Evolutionism**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, evolution became one of the primary ideologies by which Westerners organized and perpetuated their world. They applied theories of biological evolution to societies and devised a system that became known as Social Darwinism. Since Darwin's version of evolutionary theory was more accurate than the versions used in Social Darwinism, the association of his name with this social theory is somewhat unfair. Many scholars, therefore, now refer to it as Social Evolutionism, or simply evolutionism.

Evolutionism is composed of a variety of nineteenth-century theories about how societies advance from the simple to the more complex and how the degree of advancement in one's society reflects the degree of advancement of one's race. In America, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–1881), an upstate New York lawyer turned anthropologist, developed a widely used model. He described three categories of peoples: savage, barbarian, and civilized.⁶ Savages were hunters and gatherers, barbarians were agriculturists, and the civilized lived in cities, used writing, and had organized states. For Morgan, progressive human inventions allowed early humans to evolve psychologically, and as a result, societies advanced toward civilization.

William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) proposed a more overtly racist theory, arguing that all men were not created equal and that competition
within and among the races would result in the elimination of the ill-adapted and encourage racial and cultural progress. Sumner, a Yale professor, was widely known in America as an ardent advocate of laissez-faire capitalism, individual liberties, and evolutionism. Culture, he believed, originates in instincts such as the sex drive and hunger. He was against society providing any help to the lower classes, because of their biological inferiority and because it would drain resources from the superior middle class.

Evolutionism eventually filtered into the popular imagination in Europe and America. Gaetano Casati, an Italian explorer, expressed the survival-of-the-fittest model quite graphically as he described what he observed in Central Africa in the mid-1880s:

The life of primitive nations is an incessant agitation for the attainment of progressive comfort, which leads to higher civilization. Ignorant of the future and careless of the present, the savage tribes instinctively attack and destroy one another. Sooner or later the weaker are reduced to impotence, the stronger fortifies itself, rules, and assimilates with the conquered, and in the end makes the weaker submit to its caprices.⁹

Roosevelt described Africans in evolutionist terms that are both unilinear and racist. In the foreword to his collection of dispatches from East Africa, he noted that “the dark-skinned races that live in the land vary widely. Some are warlike, cattle-owning nomads; some till the soil; . . . some are fisherfolk; some are ape-like naked savages, who dwell in the woods and prey on creatures not much wilder or lower than themselves.”⁸ Roosevelt also included descriptions of the low state of African culture, such as the following: “Most of the tribes were of pure savages; but here and there were intrusive races of higher type; and in Uganda . . . lived a people which had advanced to the upper stages of barbarism.”⁹

According to the logic of evolutionism, race and culture were one; superior races produced superior cultures, and naturally, the white race and white culture were superior. Who would devise such a theory and put themselves anywhere except at the pinnacle? Evolutionist theories also had a self-justifying aspect. Other cultures were defined not just in terms of how they differed from Western culture but also in terms of what they
lacked that Western culture had. With this kind of logic, other cultures and races were always bound to lose out when compared to the West, because Western culture and the white race were the only standards that counted. Africans as well as others with very different cultures were inferior by definition.

The Primitive African

The logic of evolutionism assumed that Africans were mentally equivalent to children and therefore could not produce art, religion, language, writing, literature, or political structures as advanced as those of the West. Perhaps in the distant future, in hundreds or even thousands of years, Africans would evolve to become capable of higher forms of culture.

Let me illustrate by describing the Western evaluation of the Mangbetu of northeastern Congo (Kinshasa), the African culture with which I am best acquainted. In the eighteenth century the Mangbetu consisted of many small and separate clans that spoke closely related dialects. Interspersed among them also lived clan groups of peoples speaking several unrelated languages. Toward the end of the century, one particular Mangbetu clan, the Mabirì, began to dominate the others through force and clever marriage alliances. By the mid-nineteenth century the Mabirì leader had carved out a small kingdom, which he organized into chiefdoms ruled by family members. Over time, the king could not maintain the unity of his lands, and some of the subordinate chiefs broke away to found new kingdoms. In 1873 the original kingdom itself was conquered by non-Mangbetu neighbors, leaving the purely Mangbetu kingdoms arrayed in a ring around the usurpers. The usurpers largely adopted the Mangbetu culture of their subjects.

This centralization of the Mangbetu kingdoms led to a courtly lifestyle for the rulers. Georg Schweinfurth, the first European to visit the region (in 1870), was greatly impressed as he described the capital of the central kingdom in his travel account. The large village included a broad central plaza surrounded by the houses of King Mbulza’s favorite wives, a meeting hall that measured 150 feet long and 50 feet high, and a large royal enclosure where the king had storehouses of weapons, food, and regalia. Thousands of people were present for public gatherings. Schweinfurth employed words such as elegant, artistic, and masterpiece for the wide range
of Mangbetu artistic culture he observed—music, dance, dress, architecture, metallurgy, woodworking, basketry, and pottery.11

Although all of the Europeans who visited the Mangbetu were impressed, they did not consider the Mangbetu their biological or cultural equals. Instead, they fit them into the evolutionist hierarchy, proclaiming the Mangbetu to be more evolved than their neighbors, who had not yet developed kingdoms. The Europeans perceived the Mangbetu rulers as having slightly more European physical features such as lighter skin and longer noses, and they deemed this to be the reason for the higher level of Mangbetu culture. But they still considered the Mangbetu less evolved than the lighter-skinned Arabs who came to the region to trade in slaves and ivory.

Schweinfurth qualified his positive evaluation of the Mangbetu so he could fit them into the racial hierarchy. He portrayed the Mangbetu as advanced savages, noting, for example, that in Africa it was possible to speak of "culture, art, and industry in but a very limited sense."12 He also depicted Mbunza as "a truly savage monarch," in whose eyes "gleamed the wild light of animal sensuality."13 Most important, Schweinfurth created the myth that the Mangbetu were the world's greatest cannibals, with Mbunza dining daily at cannibal feasts (see Chapter 7).

It is astounding today to realize that Schweinfurth evaluated the Mangbetu after spending only a few days in the area and without speaking a local language or even mixing with the Mangbetu more than a few times. He excused his lack of language skills by declaring that the Mangbetu language was rudimentary and that direct observation was a superior way to understand others. Even more astounding, Schweinfurth's 1870 evaluation went unchallenged until after the 1960s. Those who followed him as explorers, conquerors, colonizers, and missionaries largely accepted his perspective. Regarding cannibalism, for example, when others found that the Mangbetu were not as hungry for human flesh as Schweinfurth had reported, they attributed this to the fact that Europeans had outlawed the practice.

The Western evaluation of the Mangbetu and their neighbors is duplicated for African groups everywhere south of the Sahara. The more an African culture resembled a Western culture, the more evolved its creators were supposed to be. The lighter an African people's skin, the more Europeans found advanced features in their culture. In all cases, however, Africans were still deemed primitives.
Virtually every Western academic discipline worked out classifications that connected African culture to biological inferiority. In religious studies, for example, use of magic and witchcraft, worship of multiple gods, and reverence for ancestors were considered not only backward but irrational. Missionaries who labored to convert Africans therefore believed that although many Africans outwardly complied with the forms of Christianity, they would always need missionaries because, like children, they could not understand the religion's deeper meanings and were always in danger of backsliding.

Psychologists, led by such notables as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, believed that Africans and other "primitive" peoples could provide clues to the human subconscious because Africans were thought to operate at a more basic mental level than Westerners. Freud wrote: "We can . . . judge the so-called savage and semi-savage races; their psychic life assumes a peculiar interest for us, for we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early state of our own development." He added that "a comparison of the psychology of the primitive races . . . with the psychology of the neurotic . . . will reveal numerous points of correspondence." Other theorists proposed that Africans actually desired a dependent, colonial relationship with superior Europeans. In popular culture, Africans who began to think and act like Europeans were frequently said to "ape" the Europeans because such Africans' actions were considered imitative rather than fully intelligent and conscious.

Likewise, African artists were regarded as only basic and imitative. Westerners came from an artistic tradition of realism, so the abstractness of much of African art was thought to be an indication of African inability to produce realistic depictions of natural forms such as the human body. Because Westerners value overt displays of creativity in art, they did not recognize that in Africa forms tended to endure, though artists played with variations on those forms. Assuming that Africans did not know how to create, Western observers missed the significance of abstraction, the subtle creativity within similar forms, the importance of individual artists, and the wide variety of African creative arts not linked to religion or leadership.

One of the major ways Westerners evaluated Africans was in terms of science and technology. European culture was strong, of course, in its understanding of the elements of nature and in its ability to combine those elements into practical tools. Whether it was firearms, clocks, trains, boats, medicines,
matches, cloth, or axes, Westerners could produce more, higher-quality, and less expensive goods than Africans. We might even say that in the late nineteenth century, Europeans were so far ahead of Africans in the technology of domination (guns, boats, trains, medicines, and so forth) that the gap between the two has never been larger, before or since, thus making conquest easier and cheaper than it would have been at any other moment in history.

This technology impressed Europeans as much as Africans. Indeed, many scholars believe that the whole evolutionist idea of progress became primarily associated in the late nineteenth century with the conquest of nature and the acquisition of wealth. For Westerners, the symbol of progress was machinery, with each new invention symbolizing ever greater progress—the clock, steam engine, locomotive, lightbulb, telephone, automobile, airplane, radio, rocket, television, and computer. Africans in the nineteenth century did not have trains or steamboats. They did not even have wheelbarrows or plows.17

What Africans did have was knowledge of overall human dependence on nature and the technology necessary to survive in many different African environments. Dependence on nature was frequently expressed through elaborate rituals that evoked natural powers, spirits, and ancestors. However, Africans also utilized their extensive and accurate knowledge of nature in their methods of hunting, gathering, farming, herding, fishing, house building, pottery making, woodworking, and in their other economic pursuits. Westerners frequently mistook African ritual for African science and therefore made erroneous comparisons with Western science and technology. Yet, despite its degradation of African knowledge, colonialism always depended heavily in practice on African understanding of both society and nature.

Changing Paradigms

Most of us no longer talk or even think about Africa in the stark evolutionist terms discussed above, because our civilization made significant changes in this regard during the twentieth century. It is important to reflect on how we have changed and how our own views of Africans are still in the process of changing. For the sake of simplicity, we can divide the ways our views have changed into three broad categories: views of ourselves, views of others, and views of nature.
Changing Views of Ourselves

The Dark Continent portrayals of Africa developed at a time when Westerners envisioned themselves as potential masters of both society and nature. Indeed, there was much to encourage them. The peoples of Africa were subdued and organized into colonies that produced raw materials for the West’s growing industries, while the Asian colonies continued to increase their output as well. Scientists made regular and important discoveries, and technological advances poured forth in medicine, transportation, communication, weaponry, electricity, and many other fields.

But even while the West was making such progress, Westerners began to discover that colonialism, science, and technology had limits and drawbacks. World War I serves as an example of certain ambiguities in this progress. The Allies confidently heralded the conflict as the “war to end all wars,” yet it was only among the first of many twentieth-century wars. Moreover, using new inventions of modern genius, including airplanes, tanks, machine guns, and chemical weapons, Europeans killed each other by the millions.

The rest of the twentieth century produced similar ambiguous “successes.” Despite their progress, Westerners continued to experience massive setbacks: a global economic depression, a second world war even more destructive than the first, the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, the decline of colonialism, and threats to the environment. Achieving global empire proved impossible, and science and technology became problematic. The United States experienced the difficulties of a pluralistic, urban, consumer-oriented society in which racial, ethnic, gender, and class relationships were in constant turmoil. Westerners had to take second and third looks at the optimistic assumptions they had made about themselves at the beginning of the century. They could no longer be sure that they had all the answers.

Changing Views of Others

A second major way in which twentieth-century thinking has changed concerns Western views of other cultures. Two primary influences forced a reinterpretation of non-Western cultures: anthropology and the collapse of colonialism. Anthropologists were among the first to take the so-called primitive cultures seriously. From about 1900 onward, a growing number of them assumed that Africans were humans equal to whites, with complex
cultures, significant histories, meaningful philosophies, high art, and so forth. This transformation took a century to complete and, in a sense, is still in progress; however, by mid-century it was well under way and spreading quickly to other disciplines.

There is no one moment or place where this transformation began, but the work of Franz Boas, an American anthropologist, is illustrative. A German-born and German-educated natural scientist, Boas became interested in the 1880s in the cultures of the Native Americans of western Canada and the US Pacific Northwest. Originally convinced that natural laws governed human conduct and social evolution, Boas changed his mind after he had lived with and studied Native American peoples. Once Boas began to accept these peoples on their own terms, he found them to be his equals. He concluded that the differences among human societies are due solely to the various ways by which those societies learn to adapt to their circumstances. In addition, Boas came to understand that all societies had "evolved," but in a multilinear fashion. To Boas, there were no primitive peoples and no primitive cultures. He became a proponent of what is widely known as cultural relativism, the idea that each culture should be understood on its own terms rather than in comparison to others.

Boas proposed that to discover how a particular society came to be the way one found it, one had to take into account many different factors including environment, history, cultural practices, nutrition and disease, invention and discovery, and borrowing and trade. The anthropologist therefore had to adopt a holistic perspective on culture, studying practically everything a society did. Boas insisted that professional anthropology had to include fieldwork, in which scholars actually lived with the peoples they studied and participated in their daily lives.

In the evolutionist climate of the day, Boas’s work was not immediately accepted by scholars or by Americans in general. Over time, however, his influence on anthropology and on the American view of other cultures has become enormous. He taught at Columbia University for forty-three years (until 1942) and trained many of the most famous American anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Melville Herskovits. Boas is considered the founder of modern anthropology in America. Not surprisingly, the race supremacists of Nazi Germany rescinded his PhD and banned his books in the 1930s.
When anthropologists began to adopt relativist perspectives and undertake serious fieldwork among Africans, they found that they agreed with Boas. The customs the West had considered primitive were found to be both rational and creative efforts to cope with environment and history. Indeed, after about 1960, anthropologists began to look at European and American societies in the same way they looked at nonmodern societies, and they discovered that the West was no more rational or creative than African societies.

Building on the work of Boas and many others, anthropologists of today are reticent to make generalizations about cultures or to trust systems that purport to explain the evolution of societies. Although many anthropologists categorize the world’s societies according to different types, virtually none links categories to race or considers one type of society to be superior to another. Some anthropologists have abandoned classification entirely, because they see that all labeling does injustice to the enormous variety of societies and situations.

The discoveries of twentieth-century anthropology spread slowly to other disciplines and then began to filter into American popular consciousness. Scholarship was not, however, the only force pushing us toward new views of other cultures. The West’s colonial empires began to crumble after World War II; Europe was simply too exhausted and too preoccupied with rebuilding itself to hold on to them. India and Pakistan gained their independence from Britain in 1947, and other European colonies in Asia followed, by consent or by revolution. The Philippines, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico moved away from US colonial control, either by gaining outright independence or by modifying their relationship with the government in Washington. In the United States, African Americans made headway against racism. And in Africa, Western-educated Africans led the push for independence in the 1940s and 1950s. By the mid-1960s, only a few African territories, including the five white settler colonies of southern Africa, remained under white rule.

The newly independent countries of Asia and Africa were fragile, frequently in need of aid, and vulnerable to pressure both from their former European colonizers and from the two global superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. But global realities were nonetheless changing. In the mid-1970s, a news commentator observed that a recent global summit had been the first occasion when world leaders had all sat at one
table and each had considered everyone else to be fully human. Essentially, the commentator’s observation was correct. The independence of Africa had finally forced the West to consider Africans as real people, even if they were poor or powerless.

**Changing Views of Nature**

The third major twentieth-century change that modified our view of Africa is the transformation in the way we view nature. The old evolutionist model of unilineality, separate human races, and survival of the fittest has been deeply undermined by the biological sciences. In fact, we now know that many of the evolutionists’ ideas about nature were completely backward. Instead of life evolving along only one pathway, it evolves along many. Instead of humans belonging to many races, they belong to only one (see Chapter 11). And instead of survival of the strongest, there are multiple survival strategies, including the ability to cooperate and fit in.¹⁸

At first, evolutionists and racists attempted to take the new biological knowledge and turn it to old purposes. They were, for instance, deeply interested in linking discoveries in genetics with human behavior. An example is eugenics, advocated by the English scientist Francis Galton in the second half of the nineteenth century. Galton suggested that marriage partners ought to be selected so that superior men and women would breed and produce a superior race. The American Eugenics Society, founded in 1926, argued that immigration from the “inferior” nations of southern Europe ought to be limited; that insane, retarded, and epileptic persons ought to be sterilized; and that the upper classes attained their positions because of their superior genes. Indeed, the US Congress did limit immigration, and many states passed sterilization laws. Eugenics began to lose followers, however, after the atrocities of Nazi Germany, which called for the elimination of Jews, Gypsies, blacks, homosexuals, and others based on such reasoning.

One of the most important biological lessons of the twentieth century is the realization that we must cooperate and fit in with one another if we are to survive. The relatively new biological science of ecology is founded on the model of life as a web, not a line or a ladder. The late Lewis Thomas, a physician, scientist, and author of thoughtful essays, reminds us of the dangers of one-path evolutionism and the belief that only our path represents progress:
Lingering Evolutionism

A century ago there was a consensus that evolution was a record of open warfare among competing species, the fittest were the strongest aggressors, and so forth. Now it begins to look different. The great successes in evolution, the mutants who have made it, have done so by fitting in with and sustaining the rest of life. Up to now we might be counted among the brilliant successes, but classy and perhaps unstable. We should go warily into the future, looking for ways to be more useful, listening more carefully for signals, watching our step and having an eye out for partners.20

Lingering Evolutionism

Evolutionism is an attractive theory for many Americans because it puts whites (and especially white men) at the top of nature's ladder. A theory like this will certainly die a slow death in the minds of those whom it comforts most. Indeed, deep pockets of evolutionism remain despite the twentieth-century lessons of history, anthropology, and biology. The most apparent Dark Continent images of the first half of the twentieth century are thankfully behind us, but more subtle versions remain.

One source of lingering traces of evolutionism is contemporary racist thought. It is difficult, however, to find specific examples of the ways racism affects our current attitudes toward Africa, because since the mid-1900s, most Americans have learned to hide their race prejudices from public view. Perhaps the clearest cases we find are in off-the-record comments made by national leaders. We know, for example, that President Richard Nixon and many prominent members of his staff routinely used racist slurs when talking in private about African affairs.20 More recently, in 2002, the Senate Majority Leader, Republican Trent Lott of Mississippi, said that had the country voted in 1948 for Strom Thurmond, then the declared racist candidate for the presidency, "we wouldn't have all these problems over all these years, either." As a result of his comments, Lott lost the leadership of the Senate, but his unguarded comment makes us wonder how much covert racism affects our national policies regarding both African Americans and Africans. We also have seen many veiled references to race surrounding the election and presidency of Barack Obama.

Some segments of our society, however, do not hesitate to express openly their race prejudice toward Africans. As just one example, Stanley
Burnham, in *America's Bimodal Crisis: Black Intelligence in White Society*, includes a chapter entitled "Primitive Society in Africa." Repeating practically every Darkest Africa myth in his discussion of precolonial Africa, Burnham concludes that "cognitive deficiency" was the cause of Africa's perceived backwardness. Likewise, his chapter on modern Africa is filled with horror stories; Burnham quotes psychologists of the 1930s and 1950s to document a "real-life personality profile" that characterizes Africans as having "a short attention span, an impatience with abstractions, and a relative inability to empathize with others." In light of what we know today about culture and psychology, it might seem that Burnham himself fits the profile better than any African. But to see such untruths in print serves as a painful reminder that the harshest of American race evaluations of Africa have not completely ended.

Even if Americans were to rid themselves of racism, they might still maintain substantial portions of the evolutionist myth. For example, I frequently hear people say, "Africans are living as we did seventy-five years ago!" or ask, "How far behind us are Africans?" Such statements and questions imply a kind of cultural evolutionism, the idea that African cultures will someday evolve to look like our culture. Cultural evolutionism is plausible because we know that a hundred years ago we, too, lived in a mostly rural society and that Africans are currently moving into cities and adopting modern ideas. Thus, many assume that Africans will inevitably pass through certain historical stages—"like we were in the 1920s" or "like we were in the 1950s"—and then eventually "catch up" to us. But history doesn't work that way. A more complete discussion of the problems with "catching-up thinking" can be found in Chapter 6.

The idea that there are no backward peoples, no primitives, is difficult to grasp. It is not the same as saying that there are no ideas, individuals, or societies that are dysfunctional. And it does not mean that there are no irrational or incompetent individuals. It merely means that, on the whole, other people are about as rational and irrational as we ourselves are. If they are different, it is because they have lived in different circumstances and have had different understandings of reality and different problems to solve.

The Pleistocene era is long past, and we find ourselves living together on the planet in the twenty-first century. People most unlike us are just as much a part of the present as we are. They should not make a headlong
rush to "catch up" to what Lewis Thomas called our "classy and perhaps unstable" Western culture. We have many lessons to teach the world, and we also have much to learn in order to build a society that is able to sustain all of us, as well as the planet itself. Our best partners may be those who are not going in exactly the same direction as we are.