

Welcome to this part of the program called Africa in the picture.

First of all, thanks to the World House and the UvH.

As a young boy, I often heard Africa being referred to as the 'dark continent', inhabited by primitive savages. I often wondered why. One day, on the way to the market, I asked my grandmother why. She said that anyone who referred to Africa as a dark continent was very ignorant indeed. 'Africa is dark only when the sun goes down at night'. That made a lot of sense. Then she added that there were parts of this world where the people did not see the sun for many months at a time. These places were so cold that people had to light fires in their houses in order to stay warm. Those were dark places indeed. I experienced it myself when I visited Europe in the middle of winter, after the end of the civil war in Nigeria.

So why was Africa referred to as the dark continent?

I finally came to the conclusion that those phrases were coined by those who were trying to convince the world that they had the justification for going to Africa to 'save' it from itself, to enlighten and to 'civilize those barbaric savages'. At their disposal they had religion, so-called education and colonialism as instruments to achieve their goal. But in reality they were going in to exploit and plunder Africa of its mineral and natural resources, and to go on and send millions of men, women and children into slavery. The colonialists, Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal, but to mention a few, basically divided Africa between themselves, thereby creating borders that never existed previously, causing conflicts between peoples that till that time had lived side by side in peace. They followed a policy of subdue, divide, rule and exploit. Africa's dark days really began when the white man first set foot on that continent.

By the time I reached secondary school, I was eager to learn about African history. One of the textbooks we had to study was published by Longmans, a publisher that printed 'educational' books for the colonial masters, according to policy toward their colonies. To my surprise, the very first chapter of that book basically told me that Africa did not have a history. According to Longmans, the reason that records of historical events could not be trusted was because they were handed down verbally from mouth to mouth and from generation to generation, making them untrustworthy. Nothing could be further from the truth! The keepers of ancient knowledge were very well respected and had no reason to give false information about past events. And there were other ways that history was recorded. In the music, the dances and the arts. Those types of 'educational' books told outright lies, denying the now well-known fact that apart from the verbal transfer of information, there were also alphabetical systems in many parts of Africa that were in place, and were recording historical events. It is now a known fact that stretching from North Africa, through to the South, there were cultures that had developed complicated and sophisticated alphabetical systems. A few examples are the Ethiopic system of Ethiopia, the Vah, bassa and Vai systems of Liberia and the Mende from Sierra Leone and the Osmany from Somalia, to mention a few. There were great learning centres throughout Africa that produced scholars, philosophers, mathematicians, doctors, architects, lawyers, astrologers, artists and musicians etc. There were extensive trade-routes criss-crossing the whole continent. Ideas, traditions and cultures interacted and knowledge was expanded. There were societies that were well structured, with kings and queens, councils of elders and advisers and lawmakers. There were great artistic traditions like the metal workers of Benin, the terracotta of Ife and the Nok peoples. There were representations of distant galaxies found in the caves of the Dogon peoples of Mali. There were remnants of great architectural structures found in what is now Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and in Djenné in Mali and indeed, throughout Africa. Some of those structures stand to this day. But yet the colonialists refused to believe or admit that 'primitive

savages' were capable of such achievements. Admitting these facts would make their reasons for 'civilizing' Africa quite absurd. It would be like they intended going to Africa to teach monkeys how to climb trees. So they invented the dark continent myth to justify to the world their own dark intentions. Their atrocities have been well documented. Whole cultures and traditions were destroyed, their treasures plundered and looted to adorn museums and institutions throughout Europe and beyond. Men, women and children were brutally mutilated if they defied or disobeyed their imposed laws. Torture and executions were quite commonplace. Leaders and rulers were either imprisoned, exiled and in some cases, even murdered or executed. The royalty and the rich of Europe came with their parties to hunt loins, rhinos, buffalo and other wildlife indiscriminately, and solely for their own pleasure.

As I mentioned earlier, millions of men, women and children were shipped off to far-away places, never to return to Africa again. This mass displacement of people and other atrocities have left deep wounds and scars that may never heal. And they dared to call Africa 'the dark continent'.

Coming back to the present, it is unfortunate that most news that comes from Africa these days is mostly bad news. The world hears of poverty, disease, famine, wars, corrupt governments and dictatorships, economic decline, terrorism, natural disasters, environmental pollution and yes, even piracy. But these negative things are not only unique to Africa. They occur on every continent on this planet so I will not dwell any further on the subject. This exhibition, AITP, is designed to show another side of Africa, an Africa rich and diverse in traditions and culture, a colourful and joyful Africa. An Africa that still exists, but sadly, is greatly affected by progress and technology. I have had great pleasure in making them. For me it has been like a journey through Africa. I hope to finish the whole continent someday. I will finish with my grandmother's words; 'Africa is only dark when the sun goes down at night'. Enjoy the exhibition. Thank You.

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