AFRICA & AFRICANS
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Paul Bohannan
Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California

Philip Curtin
The Johns Hopkins University

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Africa has for centuries been seen by Europeans and North Americans through webs of myth. The myths change from time to time and place to place, depending far more on the needs and prejudices, even the ignorance, of the myth-makers than on the facts in Africa. The process of myth-making is still going full tilt, but the myths are quite different from those of only a few years ago. Understanding the reality underlying such pervasive and glib myths helps to strip them away so that we can see what is in fact there.

Africa was long known as the "Dark Continent," but the darkness was in the ignorance of the outside world, not in Africa. Europeans and Americans knew a great deal about the geography of most other parts of the world before explorers began the systematic penetration of Africa in the nineteenth century. During the colonial era—for tropical Africa, roughly 1880 to 1960—Europeans who went to govern Africa or to do business there began to learn more, and the new familiarity percolated down to the rest of the population back in Europe. British and French school children learned about great missionaries like David Livingstone or Cardinal Lavigère, as well as military leaders like Kitchner or Archinard.

Americans were spared this familiarity with "colonial history"—the history of Europeans in Africa. Few Americans went to Africa. Until the 1950s, American diplomats went only to the few independent countries like Liberia or Ethiopia. Elsewhere the United States had only a few consulates, attached to the embassies of colonial powers in their European capitals. The State Department dealt with Africa as a minor facet of European affairs.

By the late 1950s, a change was evident. The "third world" came to include Africa as well as Asia and Latin America. African Studies programs emerged at several universities both in the United States and in Europe. The politics, economics, and history of the continent joined the study of African culture, already begun by anthropologists. In North American universities before the mid-1950s, African history was taught only as a part of "Negro history" in a few predominantly Black colleges. By the mid-1980s, it was a recognized part of historical knowledge. African art and culture are prominent in American museums, most recently the brilliant Museum of African Art associated with the Smithsonian

in Washington. The continuing importance of the African heritage in shaping American popular music from jazz to rock came to be generally recognized. With the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the independence of most of tropical Africa, Afro-Americans began to be interested in their African heritage. Hundreds of them went to Africa as tourists to see for themselves the land of their ancestors.

In spite of the more systematic search for knowledge about Africa, the old myths lived on and new myths were added. Part of the problem comes from the way the news media report African affairs. From the American perspective, the important foreign news comes from Western Europe and Japan, from China and Russia, with only an occasional crisis drawing concern to other areas. The Viet Nam War brought Southeast Asia into the news in the 1960s; both Central America and the Middle East got media coverage in the early 1980s; the festering struggle over apartheid in South Africa from the mid-1970s onward, and pictures of starvation in Somalia in the early 1990s, assailed us. The rest of Africa, however, makes the news only when some especially troublesome event draws attention—most often negative attention—to it.

Over the past thirty years, ordinary newspaper readers and TV viewers would have been conscious of the Congo crisis beginning in 1960, which led to the creation of an independent Zaire. They would have read about the military coups and the general failure of newly independent African states. In the 1970s, tyrants like Idi Amin in Uganda or "Emperor" Jean Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Empire got more space and air time than the spectacular but peaceful economic progress and comparative freedom of Ivory Coast or Cameroon.

Natural disasters like the great drought in the sahel, which stretches across Africa from Senegal to the Sudan and Ethiopia, were publicized—in 1973 alone, more than a hundred thousand people died of starvation and disease brought on by malnutrition. A decade later, drought returned—this time to Ethiopia, the Sudan, and south as far as Zimbabwe and South Africa. Worldwide television showed dramatic starvation in Ethiopia. The disaster itself attracted some press and TV coverage, but internationally-famous rock stars attracted far more attention with concerts to raise money for the victims.

Exposure to such spectacular events did nothing to erase many of the old myths. In the popular mind, Africa is still associated with lions, and lions with jungles. In fact, lions don't live in the rain forest, but in open grasslands. Only about 5 percent of the African landmass can be classified as "jungle," if jungle means rain forest—
and for centuries, Africans have been clearing undergrowth in the rain forest to cultivate crops. Destruction of the remaining rain forest is one of the most pressing threats to the environment.

Animals of the open savanna of Kenya and Tanzania, which have attracted tens of thousands of tourists, appear weekly in TV nature series and, from time to time, in spectacular films like *Out of Africa*. Neither the nature films nor Karen Blixen’s picture of settler life in Kenya are inaccurate. They tell what they want to tell very well. But, because they tell next to nothing about the life of ordinary Africans, about all they achieve is reinforcing the view of Africa as the place on earth with the most wild animals. The North American public now knows a lot about those animals. Yet none of that knowledge dispels an older and more deeply ingrained myth of Africa as a savage continent. An accurate picture of animal life high on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro coexists easily with the cartoon image of the missionary in the cannibal stew pot.

That myth of savage Africa has been part of Western thought since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even in those days, it was created out of philosophical necessity, not out of observations. The European view was that “we,” the Europeans, had the one true religion and the one true civilization in the world. If that is the case, then someone else, somewhere, must represent the other extreme—the non-civilized extreme. Such philosophically necessary “savagery” could, of course, be located anywhere Europeans knew little about. Africa was a favorite place.

The opposition of savagery and civilization got confused with other oppositions: bad and good, depravity and virtue. Europe had long had a vision not only of the “achievements” of civilization but of the accompanying idea that civilization also brought with it perils of the soul that had been unknown in earlier times and “simpler” places. The confusion is mapped in the diagram below.

### A Model of Confusion

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The myth of a savage Africa lives on today in the same way that racism in the United States lives on despite the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Like racism, the savagery myth takes subtle forms. For example, the news media report African affairs using terms like "tribe" and "tribalism"—the only other place they do that is Native American affairs. The term "tribe," in European writing about Africa, became common only in the nineteenth century. In the era of the slave trade, Europeans usually talked about different African "nations" (although that word, too, meant something different at that time than it means today).

The confusion mapped in the diagram also shows up in the opposite myth: the "noble savage" had no more empirical basis in reality than did the myth of the depraved savage. Various forms of this image turn up in Western literature about Africa and Africans. Slaves like Eliza and Uncle Tom in Uncle Tom's Cabin showed natural innocence and Christian virtues, as contrasted with the moral failings of the drivers and planters (who supposedly had the benefit of the full Christian message, yet failed to measure up to its demands).

A similar myth is still alive—only a few years ago, Alex Haley's Roots portrayed an eighteenth century African society on the banks of the Gambia River as innocent of the evils of the slave trade. The people (the myth goes) went about unarmed, while European slavers filled their ships by kidnapping. In fact, the Gambians not only bought and sold slaves, they were heavily armed. The Gambia River had been an artery of the slave trade for more than three hundred years. In the eighteenth century, the hometown of Haley's hero, Kunta Kinte (the present-day rural village of Juffure) was a thriving center of that trade. The Kinte family have been traders by tradition and were no doubt involved in the slave trade themselves. One can only guess that Haley used the innocence of the Africans as a literary device to highlight the crimes of the European slavery and planters, much as Harriet Beecher Stowe had done more than a century earlier.

Only a few years after Roots appeared as a television spectacular, a similar picture of innocence with more obvious political intent appeared in the South African movie, The Gods Must Be Crazy. There, the San people of the Kalahari (whom the movie called Bushmen, though the word has fallen out of anthropological use) were shown leading an innocent and good life, in tune with nature, so far removed from any understanding of the modern world that they could not even recognize a Coca-Cola bottle. The implication was clear: such people could not face the modern world on their own, and were hence better off under the benevolent guidance of an apartheid regime.

Both versions of the myth of a savage Africa neglect one important fundamental fact. European and African culture and social organization have a great deal in common, developed over a very long run of history. They have more in common, for example, than either does with the cultures of eastern Asia or native North Americans or Australians. Agricultural techniques and traditions belong to a single cultural sphere. Market organization was similar. Religions were variations on the same basic themes. Family organization reflects pretty much the same values, even though Africans tended to be polygynous and Europeans claimed to be monogamous. The same kind of similarities are not found among the Chinese or the Aztecs. Europeans and Africans share a common set of diseases and immunities to disease that Native Americans and the peoples of the Pacific did not share. This deep similarity was to become one of the fundamental reasons the Americas today are occupied by descendants of Africans and of Europeans.

Among all the other myths, one of the most generalized and difficult to tear away hovers around the matter of race. Americans, both black and white, live in a society that is extremely conscious of race. Yet Europe too was a racist society from the nineteenth century onward. Europe is now increasingly troubled by racial conflict that grows out of the great immigration from overseas after the 1950s. There, as in North America, color and physical appearance far too often carry social implications.

The cultures and the histories of sub-Saharan African societies have much in common. Many commentators in the past have associated this common experience with common race. Yet all sub-Saharan Africans do not belong to a single race—not even if comparatively recent arrivals like the European-derived minorities of Zimbabwe and South Africa are left out.

The problem of race and Africa is not an African problem. Africans note racial differences, but Europeans and Americans are hung up on what they call "race." No scientifically viable measures exist for defining a similar group of people as a "race." For geneticists, the word "race" means an interbreeding population with distinct and heritable characteristics. In ordinary usage, the characteristics are not genetic but are a cultural classification of visible, physical appearance. There is no scientific reason for "counting" the shape of a person's nose and not his or her haemoglobin characteristics or proclivity for heart disease as "racial" characteristics. As an everyday badge of racial identification, North Americans recognize as "Black," "Negro," or "Afro-American" anyone with any degree
of African descent, measured by skin color, facial configuration, hair texture, and so on. In Liberia, “white” is measured in exactly opposite terms. A person can be “black” in the United States and “White” in Liberia. Obviously, definitions of race can only be cultural. Geneticists estimate that about 25 percent of the gene pool circulating within the Afro-American community is European, predominantly from the British Isles. This means that more of the ancestors of the “typical” Afro-American come from Britain and Ireland than come from any one particular region of Africa.

African assessment of race is as socially conditioned as is American assessment. In the past, before anthropology was able to separate race, language, and culture and to demonstrate that the three may be connected by history, but never by genes, Westerners postulated that cultural characteristics like language were heritable. When Africans think about race, they too tend to include a lot of learned characteristics. Even the most stereotypically African-appearing of Afro-Americans cannot easily “pass” for African in West Africa. Africans will almost universally classify them as “European,” from the way they walk, talk, and carry themselves.

Africans tend to see quite a different set of physical traits from Americans and Europeans when they examine “racial” differences. There are, within Africa, physical differences that Europeans and Americans are not conscious of. Sometimes this recognition is no more significant than the ability to guess a stranger’s nationality—whether Swede or Italian, Pole or Spaniard. In other instances, recognizable physical appearance marks ancient social divisions between superiors and inferiors. Rwanda and Burundi in central Africa have a common, Bantu language and a common culture, but the physical difference between the Tutsi, the former masters, and the Hutu, the former subordinates, is usually clear even to outsiders. On the Kenya coast, nearly everyone is conscious of the physical differences among the socially dominant Afro-Arabs, descendants of former slaves from the region of Malawi, and the up-country Kikuyu and Luo who hold many government posts—to say nothing of the Wazungu, or European tourists, whose spending helps to support the economy. Differences in physical type also go along with important social distinctions in Ethiopia.

The point is that the racial myth—the belief that physical type is a guide to inherent ability or cultural characteristics—is completely exploded. What remains is the fact that physical appearance serves to demarcate certain social groupings. It is something like the various accents in Great Britain: English people use accent to rank others—distinctions that are totally lost on most Americans.

In North America, the African cultural heritage and African racial heritage have mixed in a very complex way. We tend to think of the United States as settled mainly by Europeans, which is true; however, our common myth fails to distinguish the timing of the European arrival. The median date for the arrival of America’s African ancestors—the date by which half had arrived and half were still to come—is remarkably early, about 1780. The similar median date for the arrival of our European ancestors was remarkably late—about the 1890s. It was not until the 1840s that more Europeans than Africans crossed the Atlantic each year.

This early arrival of our African ancestors had important cultural consequences. Anthropologists used to write about the survival of “Afrikanisms” in Afro-American culture. They sometimes failed to point out that cultural Afrikanisms were not a part of physical inheritance. They were brought by the African immigrants through the slave trade and remained strongest within the Afro-American community, although many became part of American culture at large, first in the South and then in the rest of the country. Afro-American cooking, for example, has many traits from Africa; but gumbos with their African-derived okra are now part of a much broader tradition of “Southern” cooking, partly traceable to Africa, partly not. African music made an enormous formative contribution to jazz and its successors in American popular music, which has done much to set the tone of popular music throughout the world. Just as Afro-Americans share a racial inheritance from the British Isles with Euro-Americans, all Americans share a cultural inheritance from Africa.

One of the most difficult and persistent sources of myth about Africa comes from a blind spot in American thinking about the rest of the world, caused in part by the long-term rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union that dominated world international relations for forty-five years after World War II. American political leaders tended to see Africa as a group of small countries that could help or hinder the rivalry with the Soviets. The polarization made both the Americans and the Soviets see African nations either “with us” or “against us.” Africans never did see the world that way—they were never much concerned with big-power rivalries. Rather, they have been and are for Africa, sometimes defined as their own country, or even for some smaller group within it. They were thus “for” anybody who was “for Africa” defined that way. They were against anybody who was “against Africa.”

Western courting of African countries to keep them out of the clutches of “the Communists” rose and fell with changing
administrations in Washington. The Reagan years were peculiarly blind to the fact that regimes labelled "Marxist" were not automatically captives of the Soviet Union. Nor were regimes that found it to their interest to support the United States, like Mobutu's Zaire, genuine friends of democracy as we understand it. Many African governments "changed sides." Egypt switched from Russia to American support in 1972, Ethiopia changed from American to Soviet support in 1974, and Somalia changed from Soviet to American support in 1975.

Several African governments have adopted names like the People's Republic of Benin or the People's Republic of the Congo, but that never did mean that they had "gone Communist" in the sense of modelling their institutions on those of the Soviet Union or joining the Warsaw Pact. Neither had those who claimed to be friends of the United States "gone Western" in the sense of instituting Western-style democracy.

In the years since the demise of the Soviet Union, the images of Africa that have appeared on our television screens have been of starving Ethiopian, Sudanese, and Somali children, and of "warlords" and "clan fighting." We have seen crowds of demonstrating South Africans mowed down by gunfire. Yet, during the same period, forward-looking African business people have been profiled in Forbes magazine. The task still remains: to look at Africa whole, without the myths and without the images built on our own ethnocentrism.

One last point must be made clearly, although it is easier to do today than it was a few years ago. The West does not so much have an African problem as Africa has a European problem. The white South Africans talk about a "native problem," but it is they who are the troublesome minority in that African country. Elsewhere European settlers have tended to make the best of African rule, and few African governments have been more than temporarily anti-European.

Well before the period of colonial conquests, the West began extending its cultural influence into the rest of the world. Christianity was and is an expanding, proselytizing religion. Perhaps more important, nearly simultaneously with its overseas conquests, the West discovered the power of industrial technology, which made it possible for people to produce and consume material goods on a scale completely unprecedented in the world's earlier history. The rest of the world, including Africa, wants to have control of this technology for its own purposes. Once they see how rich others have become, they are no longer content to be poor. Even if they are better off than they were before the colonial era, the contrast between their relative poverty and the wealth elsewhere makes them deprived.

Lives of tremendous dignity and valued rewards can be lived without the trappings of Western civilization. However, once the technological possibilities are known, a new day has arrived. The relative deprivation in Africa is not simply in contrast to Europe, North America, and Japan; Africans are also conscious of what has happened in recently industrializing countries like Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. They see other peoples becoming comparatively rich without becoming completely Westernized. Africans do not want to become European or American in their culture; they want to keep what they value in their old way of life.

Our task in this book is to present briefly and as accurately as we can the facts about African society past and present. We know that we must, necessarily, be affected by the needs and myths of our own times—but we also hope to be among the first to correct whatever distortions appear as time passes, as more research is done, and as we all live longer and learn more.