

CONSEQUENCES OF MISINTERPRETATIONS OF WESTERN ETHNOGRAPHERS ON AFRICA AND THE BLACK RACE

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ABSTRACT

Of all the continent of the world, none has been so dehumanized, humiliated and relegated as Africa and the Black Race. This scenario was necessitated and enhanced by the erroneous and monumental malicious, distorted and ridiculous pictures or images presented by the Western Ethnographers about Africa and their negative conceptions of Black. They came to Africa with their ethnocentric mind set, bereft of objective study of African peoples. Consequently, African peoples, and Black Race, have been suffering the dastard and detrimental effects of the misconceptions and misinterpretations in the human history and international relations. However, the paper considers it pertinent and expedient to attempt re-creating and presenting the true and authentic image of African peoples and Black Race. The researcher employed the method of historico- critical analysis and discovers that the Ethnographers, made hasty and random sampling and conclusions about the continent. The paper discovers how devastating these erroneous interpretations dealt with the African person, his culture, religion, language and development. It finds how critical contributions of Africa is to the world's civilization and recommends that Africa and the Black Race should rise and assert their existence and essence.

Keywords: *Africa, Black, Race, Ethnography.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Who should tell the story of Africa? All people need to learn about their past and need to be able to participate in the creation of their own legacy. In the past, the story of Africa has been told and

defined by others and these ‘others’ have been considered authorities on the subject. The representation of African events and characters by non-Africans has led in many instances to the creation of a negative portrayal of Africa.” These unfortunate scenarios have been the fate of African peoples and Black Race and with the antecedent dehumanizing, humiliating, and frustrating consequences. From the hasty and random writings of their ethnographers, they presented distorted image of Africa to suit their opinion, mission and ambitions. They came to Africa with their obsessed ethnocentric mind set, which inadvertently obscured their cognitive operative capacity. However, before the unhealthy incursion of the west in whatever forms, Africa had traditional values, history, trade and commerce, culture, religion, languages and was developing in their own pace and was not stagnant, because development has not been an exclusive right of any. But they ignored some basic authentic values and facts which were not in their liking. The African collective identity was misunderstood and disparaged. They also hate the color “Black,” but black remains a powerful, versatile, important and indispensable color.

It is a highly pertinent and arduous task for indigenous scholars to attempt rewriting and salvaging the battered image of Africa and the Black Race, for proper understanding, respect and real integration in international affaires with the rest of the world.

The goal of ethnography is to produce an original and not mutilated descriptive and narrative account of a particular group against a theoretical backdrop. As an empirical mode of inquiry, it aims at deriving knowledge about a particular local community through direct engagement with the people and ways of life for a good period of time. It is also based on participant observation, by observing the people closely in their natural settings. It involves the ethnographer living among the people and taking part in their everyday activities. Actually “participant observation” is the key phrase, as it affords the ethnographer the proper opportunity for

harmonious integration and immersion in the natural setting of the particular environment or group. It also affords him the opportunity of proper originality of the ethnographic writing or reports. In the same scenario, Whitehead opines that “spending long period of time in the field is considered the crucial aspect of the classical ethnographer’s ability to comprehensively describe components of a cultural system as accurately and with as little bias as possible. In summary, from some epistemological perspectives, the classical ethnographer believes that the only way to gain a native view of his or her own world is to spend considerable time in that world.”¹ It entails descriptive, analytic, comparative and qualitative methods. Ethnographic writing does not base on generalization or on random samplings; it is an empirical study of a particular or specific historical nation. It is a holistic study. Thus, the standard works of anthropological discipline, ethnographies, should be holistic accounts in that they strive to present comprehensive accounts of another society and its culture, showing the interaction of elements such as political organization, religion, law, kinship, mythology and subsistence practices. Often the unit of analysis was as small as a single village and the society in question was a tribal one. Thus, Aronson, Wallis, O’Campo, Whitehead, and Schafer write that UNESCO observes that “the knowledge of one’s cultural heritage and that of other people’s cultural heritage is one of the keys to understanding ourselves and others.”² It does not look for generalizing the findings or making reflexive interpretations or translations.

2. EARLY WESTERN ETHNOGRAPHERS ON AFRICAN CONTINENT

From the objectives of ethnographic studies, it is incumbent on ethnographers to produce an original, holistic, comprehensive, field-worked and participant observational reports or writings on a particular local and defined group or society in their natural settings. It is an empirical inquiry, living among the people and

taking part in their everyday activities, understanding their whole cultural system. It should never be a mutilated or random sampling report, because it is an important determinant for the true image and representation of the people. Just as the African Continent has been derogatorily referred to as the “dark continent,” it has suffered quite negative generalizations in the hands of the West and Western ethnographers. According to Erim and Uya, “the history of Africa written by Europeans has been a subject of monumental distortions, ridicule, and amusement.”³

The ethnographic studies on Africans were hastily undertaken by European ethnographers who came to Africa with African phobia and a Eurocentric mindset, which did not allow them proper “fieldwork study” and “participant observation” of the ways of life of a particular native community—the actual ingredients of ethnographic work. According to Okon, “some ethnographic reports on Africa show absence of seriousness on the part of the researchers while others could be categorized as product of random sampling without any credible evidence of cross-examinations or multiple confirmation of facts.”⁴ Also according to Thornton, the early ethnographic monographs that dealt with southern and eastern African peoples depended on and were partly shaped by European concepts of morality and identity on the one hand and the market for ideas and books on the other. Ethnography was at first written chiefly by missionaries who lived in the colonial periphery. Their work was “captured” in a sense by metropolitan scholars who wrote finished ethnographic treatises derived from the raw materials of missionaries’ monograph letters and reports.⁵

Among their erroneous and calculated misrepresentations was that African history started with their contact with African peoples and the continent. For the Europeans, they discovered Africa; even in Nigeria, it was alleged that Mungo Park discovered the River Niger. Also they erroneously held that Africans had no idea of God, no rationality, no culture, no language and even no soul, and that

informed their trading or bartering human beings for material goods. Africa had been referred to as a dark continent, where primitive people without history and uncivilized dwell. Thus in the words of Nkrumah, “the history of Africa, as presented by European scholars has been encumbered with malicious myth. It was even denied that we were a historical people... that was only propelled into history by the European contact. African history was therefore presented as an extension of European history.”⁶ And they have been taking the African continent as the place of diseases, poverty, conflicts and wars, superstition, lazy people with poor cognitive and operative capacity, incapable of planning and caring for themselves, just managing to survive and continuously needing help and aid. Also according to Okon, “being the sole victim of many disgusting episodes in human history, Africa has suffered the pains of slave raid and slave trade, conquest and colonization and alienation from common humanity. Today Africa is seen as a cripple and parasitic continent that lives and survives on the hospitality and goodwill of Euro-America through aids and loans, with a concomitant burden of repayment.”⁷

According to Washington, Africa had trading systems which had developed over hundreds of years, well before Europeans ever arrived on their shores. Europeans destroyed these systems in large areas of Africa when they developed the trade in enslaved Africans. Local systems were badly affected and overwhelmed by the demands of the new trade in enslaved Africans, a trade imposed by the better developed guns and ships of the Europeans. Certainly, European exploitation of Africa began with the Age of Discovery in the 15th century, pioneered by the Portuguese under Henry the Navigator. Africa was damaged economically, politically and culturally, and Africans’ traditional lifestyle and culture were destroyed.⁸ According to Kalu, “the erroneous conclusion of some European scholars has bedeviled the study of some cultural forms thereafter.”⁹ However, the Scramble for Africa, also known as the

Partition of Africa or the conquest of Africa, was the invasion, annexation, division and colonization of most of Africa by seven Western European powers during an era known as “New Imperialism,” between 1833 and 1914. Colonization has affected the continent of Africa with erroneous political, economic, religious, social, moral, cultural, and educational consequences on the African countries. The European imperialist push into Africa was motivated by three main factors: economic, political and social. The negative impact of European domination has clearly been seen in the economy, education and language sectors. Africa generally has suffered the problem of misinterpretation for too long. Before the Europeans arrived in Africa, Africa had vibrant economic, social, and political structures. These were severely disrupted by the invasions to create wealth for themselves. European dominance over most of Africa came through the transatlantic slave trade that lasted 440 years, from 1444 to 1885.

3. CONSEQUENCES OF MISINTERPRETATIONS AND IMPESSIONS ABOUT THE AFRICAN PERSON, HIS CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Certainly the continent of Africa and the Black race have for too long continued to experience humiliation and dehumanization, which was necessitated and enhanced by the erroneous and monumental malicious, distorted, and ridiculous pictures or images early western ethnographers and some theorists of human race presented about Africa and the colour Black. These misconceived perceptions have lasted for centuries, and are still ongoing to date. As such the detrimental consequences have been enormous. There have been uncountable attacks on the African as a person, his culture, religion and language—ranging from inhuman and dehumanizing treatments, using them as guinea pigs or cavia cobaya for experiments, investigations or researches, alluding to them as a people without brain, intellect, no defined way of life, no knowledge of God, and never having been fully integrated in Islamic and Christian religions. According to Cherry, in a study by

Steele and Aronson, they found that when Black students were made to feel that their race was being brought to attention, they underperformed on tests. The threat of being viewed through a racial lens (known as stereotype threat) can result in anxiety and poorer performance.¹⁰

While language is always evolving and terms often become detached from their origins, it is important to recognize that the way the color black is utilized in everyday language can reflect attitudes and associations that may have racist or colorist origins. Racism has been a prevalent issue in almost every facet of human life in the world and international affairs. According to Cornell, “in the courts, statehouses, assemblies, and churches and throughout American institutions, race became institutionalized as the premier source, and the causal agent, of all human differences. Beginning in the late seventeenth century laws were also passed in English North America forbidding marriage between whites and blacks and discriminating against the mixed offspring of informal liaisons. Without clearly saying so, such laws implied that blacks were unalterably alien and inferior.”¹¹

Numerous incidents of African or Black or racial segregation abound in their numbers. In the year 2022, in Italy, a Nigerian of Igbo extraction was brutally murdered. Thus in our series of letters from African journalists, Ismail Einashe writes that many black people in Italy feel that racism is not taken seriously. For Italian-Eritrean filmmaker and podcaster Ariam Tekle, there is no doubt that the recent killing of a disabled Nigerian street vendor, Alike Ogorchukwu, in Italy was a “racist murder.” This is despite the fact that local police have ruled out racism as a motive for the 39-year-old’s killing in the seaside town of Civitanova Marche. Nevertheless, his horrific murder—caught on video—has firmly put the spotlight on racism in Italy. In 2016 another Nigerian man, Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, was killed after defending his wife from

racist abuse in the town of Fermo in central Italy. Two years later, a far-right extremist shot six African migrants in a drive-by attack in a town about 25 km (15.5 miles) from where Mr. Ogorchukwu was killed. When the police arrested him, he was wrapped in the Italian flag shouting “Viva l’Italia,” telling police he wanted to “kill them all.” Many have lost their lives and property because of their African origin or being Black.¹² Incidentally, those who openly professed or practiced racism held that members of low-status races should be limited to low-status jobs and that members of the dominant race should have exclusive access to political power, economic resources, high-status jobs, and unrestricted civil rights. Thus according to Fredrickson, “Racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates, excludes, or seeks to eliminate another on the basis of differences that it believes are hereditary and unalterable. An ideological basis for explicit racism came to a unique fruition in the West during the modern period.”¹³

However, the negative consequences of this unhealthy phenomenon have ripple effects which invariably affect everyone. And some human societies have found and concluded that racism is wrong. And it has been accepted in principle. There are people who are calling for sincere and complete eradication of racism in all its forms and degrees. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations in 1945 has given people and organizations the backing, though still in principle. Thus, Catherine S. Namakula, Chair of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, noting that two years after the murder of George Floyd sparked global anti-racism protests, the excessive use of force and killings of people of African descent by law enforcement continues with impunity in many countries. Calling on States to promote accountability, redress damages and make tangible improvements in the lives of people of African descent, she stressed the need for an international racial justice index to measure States’ performances. She commented, calling on States to ensure that children of African descent are protected from direct or indirect

racial discrimination, stigmatization, psychological and physical violence and bullying. She appealed to the United Nations and other stakeholders to “desist from using images depicting children of African descent in undignified circumstances for purposes of marketing and fundraising.” She continued, reiterating that racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance are present and impact the lives of countless people around the world; she emphasized that it is a test of the credibility of the Human Rights Council and General Assembly whether the political will can be summoned to combat these issues. She concluded, “We must in the Ad Hoc Committee be results-oriented and deliver on the mandates given to the Committee.”¹⁴

Western culture was seen as the most advanced and inherently superior. Societies in Africa were viewed as more primitive. Racism can long persist and even flourish under any guise or ideology. There exist deep-seated cultural differences and bias, deep-seated colour differences and bias, and deep-seated language differences and bias. On this, Oguejiofor opines: “Finally, the history of colonialism has also brought about cleavages in language groupings within Africa which is negatively influencing the evolution of contemporary African philosophy. It goes without saying that the most widely spoken languages in the continent today are French and English.”¹⁵ Certainly, these unfortunate misconceptions of Africa, the Black Race and the colour black have shaped wrongly and amorphously the perceptions of Westerners, also elevating their cultures and languages above those of Africans.

4. AFRICA’S CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION AND WORLD DEVELOPMENT FROM THE CRADLE

The African Continent existed before the Western invasions. The Western world did not create nor discover the Continent. It was never stagnant before their incursions either. Africans from the

cradle have been engaging themselves in varying activities, trying to actualize themselves, to master and control their natural and material environments. They created forms of social, economic and cultural relationships and systems of beliefs which together constitute the superstructures. Development, however, could be seen as an overall process which is dependent upon the outcome of man's efforts to deal with his natural environment. They were developing, though not at a supersonic level, but gradually.

For Africans, trade is as old as human society. It occurs because people need and want certain goods and services which they could not produce and provide but which were produced and provided by others. The African continent, with its many human societies and natural material resources, had engaged in many human activities—ranging from learning, some level of production, to trading of all sorts—for centuries before the Western incursions. The Igbos of Nigeria regarded the market and trading in their society as old as man himself. Thus according to Afigbo, “although subsidiary to agriculture, trade was nonetheless an important aspect of Igbo economic activity. Just as ‘Chukwu’ (God) is believed to have instituted agriculture, so he institutionalized trade and marketing, by creating the Igbo market days.”¹⁶

However, much of what is known today in Western civilization indeed has its origins and basis in Africa: Kemet (Egypt) as the precursor in all fields of human activity, and the world's foundation upon which subsequent epistemology is based, magnanimously passed on its knowledge to the world—a world that would have developed much slower without the benefit of ancient Kemet's highly developed and organized dynastic civilizations. Her gifts to the world, intellectually and in all known spheres of human development, is unequivocal: mathematics, science, astrology, architecture, medicine, building, the arts, language, metaphysics, religion, and spirituality. Also the ancient origin of philosophy was traced to Egypt. According to Oguejiofor, “in fact there is enough

evidence that the greatest of ancient Greek philosophers held Egypt as the origin of their philosophy which we named the historical current was championed by diaspora Africans.”¹⁷

It has been on record that many of those enslaved and brought to the New World were people who had participated in local and long-distance trade. Depending upon their resources, they were skilled agriculturists; artisans of textiles, bronze, gold, ivory sculpture, jewelry and sacred objects; craftsmen of wooden tools, furniture, and architectural elements; as well as potters and blacksmiths. Others were skilled linguists in more than one African language and often one or more European languages as well. In some cases, they had developed trade languages that facilitated between-group communication even among African peoples whose language they did not know. Thus, African people did not arrive in the so-called New World without a past that is culturally naked. The Western view or conception reflects their ignorance of the African person and African cultural diversity.

According to Rod, “with the stroke of a journalist’s pen, the African, her continent, and her descendants are pejoratively reduced to nothing.... These ‘universal’ but powerfully subliminal message units, beamed at global television audiences, connote something not good, perennially problematic unworthiness, deplorability, black, foreboding, loathing, sub humanity, etc. On the other hand, little is said about Africa’s strategic importance to so called industrialized nations; her indispensability and relevance to world development, global technology, and the wealth of nations, derived from involuntary African largesse, are not acclaimed in the media... Yet, those Western Media moguls, who can find only the negative when Africa is the subject, create Africa’s world image almost entirely to serve their capitalistic greed while simultaneously denigrating the continent’s global

image. It is an image again that is put on Africa by outsiders, primarily Europeans, whose abiding motivation is profit.”¹⁸

From the Natural History Museum, concerning the origin of man, “scientists are sure that *Homo Sapiens* first evolved in Africa and we know that every person alive today can trace their genetic ancestry to there. It has long been thought that we began in one single east or South African population which eventually spread into Asia and Europe.”¹⁹

5. CONCLUSION

The destructive consequences of misrepresentations have been beyond human comprehension. It brought with it hatred, violence, discriminations, segregations, exploitations, abuse, low self-esteem, backwardness, unequal relationships, superiority-inferiority quagmire and no meaningful developments.

Most western ethnographers, explorers, and historians, without in-depth ethnographical fieldwork and participant observational studies, into some African traditional institutions, values, practices and cultures, have done great disservice to humanity, especially; the Africans, Blacks and some other prejudiced races in the world. Due to their malicious distorted, misrepresented and misinterpreted writings and images about the continent of Africa and Black Race, humanity have been struggling to be at peace, proper integration and harmonious cooperate existence. There have been official rationale and theories justifying enslaving Africans, colonization, capitalist exploitations, imperialism and racism. Before the Western incursions Africa had traditional values, history, trade and commerce, cultures, religion and languages. From the cradle, Africans have contributed in varying degrees to the global civilizations and developments.

However, in spite of all the terribly dehumanizing and humiliating experiences and with the battered images, African scholars have

arisen to assert self-existence and essence by themselves. And to tell their own stories. Also, to continue initiating and enhancing the basic and well-articulated African oriented processes of self-awareness, self-realization, authentic people's oriented developments.

ENDNOTES

¹ Tony L. Whitehead, "Basic Classical Ethnographic Research Methods," *Cultural Ecology of Health and Change* 1 (2005): 1-29.

² Robert E. Aronson et al., "Ethnographically Informed Community Evaluation: A Framework and Approach for Evaluating Community-Based Initiatives," *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 11 (2007): 97-109.

³ E. O. Erim and Okon Uya, *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, 1984).

⁴ Emeka E. Okon, "Distortion of Facts in Western Ethnographic Study of African Religion, Culture and Society," *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 3, no. 1 (2013): 92-101.

⁵ Robert Thornton, "Narrative Ethnography in Africa, 1850–1920: The Creation and Capture of an Appropriate Domain for Anthropology," *Man* 18, no. 3 (1983): 502-520.

⁶ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

⁷ Okon, "Distortion of Facts," 92-101.

⁸ A. Washington, "The Underdevelopment of Africa by Europe," Renaissance North West Museums for changing lives. Revealinglistories.org.uk

⁹ Ogbu Kalu, "Formulation of Cultural Policy in Colonial Nigeria," in *Readings in African Humanities: Traditional and Modern Culture*, ed. Ogbu Kalu (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1985).

¹⁰ Kendra Cherry, *The Color Psychology of Black*.

¹¹ Drucilla M. Cornell, "Material Composition," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

¹² Arian, "Letter from Africa: How Racism Haunts Black People in Italy."

¹³ George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Catherine S. Namakula, as quoted in J. Obi Oguejiofor, *In Praise of African Philosophy* (Awka: Nnamdi Azikiwe University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Oguejiofor, *In Praise of African Philosophy*.

¹⁶ A. E. Afigbo, “The Establishment of European Rule in West Africa,” in *The Making of Modern Africa*, vol. 1, ed. A. E. Afigbo and Okon Uya (London: Longman, 1986), 115-125.

¹⁷ Oguejiofor, *In Praise of African Philosophy*.

¹⁸ C. Rod, “Africa in the Western Media” (paper presented at the Annual African Studies Consortium Workshop, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, October 1998).

¹⁹ Amanda Kemp, *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures* in JSTOR.

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