

beyond stereotype

Africa is much more than refugee hordes, famine victims, rebel armies in camouflage and fanatical despots. Yet often the international media reduces it, in words and pictures, to these identities. We asked several photographers who have made pictures around the continent to choose one of their photographs that somehow runs counter to popular African stereotypes. From their comments, all four photographers represented here are committed to showing Africa in all its complexity. One photographer questioned the nature of stereotype itself.

Africa's Catch 22

They say perception is reality. Certainly with regard to how the mainstream media internationally reports Africa, this is true. The general perceptions of Africa revolve around guns and starving children, revolution and corruption.

From many quarters in Africa these truisms and perceptions are being challenged and confronted. Fingers are being pointed at journalists and publications and accusations of tunnel vision, bias and racism thrown about.

One reality is that there is no shortage of horror stories from Africa, and the media would be at least negligent, at worst complicit, if they did not report these stories. It is the duty of the media to report them, and the responsibility of the media to highlight failures in social systems. It is also a reality that the media generally never have and probably never will reflect the broad range of social activity – they focus on aberration.

Another reality is that there is no shortage of journalists or publications writing about the many good and human stories that happen in Africa. For many '1st worlders' there is an abundance of positive stories from the continent which for the interested and open-minded can provide some balance to the negative stereotypes. These often appear not only in the mainstream press, but also in a variety of easily available progressive publications.

Over the last few years I have travelled

Images of Africa should reflect

both its horror and its inspiration, writes

photographer **Eric Miller**. Fortunately, a significant number of media

organisations want the pictures of drive and development, and not just despair...

extensively around Africa with a variety of correspondents for different West European and Scandinavian publications. We have covered the consequences of war and famine, but looking beyond these we have also found stories of human resilience, compassion and positivity.

In South Sudan last year, in two weeks of travelling through various areas under rebel control, I shot images of death and hunger in Bar el Ghazal province, as well as reconstruction and growth in Yei County. The latter area had earlier been liberated by SPLA rebels from government control. In Yei County we found a growing community focusing on rebuilding normal civil life – stable functioning markets, small businesses, developing agriculture. Several of these 'reconstruction' images were used recently in a major piece in a leading Danish newspaper highlighting the 'normalisation' of the region.

Colleagues of mine have recently reported on advances in countries like Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Uganda and Zimbabwe on women's issues such as female circumcision, following the Beijing Women's conference. Greater awareness and openness on issues like family planning and women's reproductive health care also received a boost in the aftermath of the Cairo Population Conference, and were reported quite widely by European media.

In Zimbabwe strides have been made with courts dealing with rape and abuse,



especially regarding children; in Nigeria democratisation inches forward and gains are made on human rights issues. Similarly, Tanzania moves forward towards democracy. These are stories that have been documented in words and pictures.

In many cases in Africa, people prosper despite the excesses and iniquities of their (often elitist) governments. They make much out of very limited resources and very often, despite perceptions to the contrary, often manifest the supportiveness and humanity embodied in their cultures in ways that have been lost to many First World communities.

A majority of the pictures I have published, both through my agency in South Africa and agencies I work with overseas, have reflected the demand in a wide range of publications for coverage of developmental issues and other aspects of African life, both traditional and transitional, which do not focus on the death and deprivation. Very often the guns and hunger images are used uncritically to reinforce preconceptions or promote partisan interest.

A strong example of this was a pre-election request in South Africa by the National Party for any image showing starving children in Africa. One wonders at the use they planned for such a picture. On this occasion, there were none available.

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We have a right, perhaps even a duty, to be interested and informed of events, whether banal or diabolical. And though there is no easy way of looking at suffering, stereotypes go a long way towards softening the blow, ultimately alienating the viewer through their relentless sameness.

Stereotypes do not ask questions of themselves, but present a view they expect to be corroborated. They are easily forged, simply understood. They are currency and are traded. An image presented as a *fait accompli*, legitimised as fact and form on your printed page, can, as stereotype, become an insult, with a presumption that you understand the reference and

May 1998, bush hospital, Katigiri, South Sudan. A hernia operation is in progress on a bamboo operating table. The two medics have been trained by foreign doctors to assist them in operations at a clinic in a village about a day's walk from their own.

These volunteer doctors travel on foot to assist their community by performing basic surgery. Hernia operations are common; many people suffer from hernias as a result of poor diet combined with strenuous physical labour.

The importance of the pic for me lies in the concern these two medics had for their community, the amount of effort they were willing to put into helping their community and how this is reflected in the nurses mopping their sweaty brows.

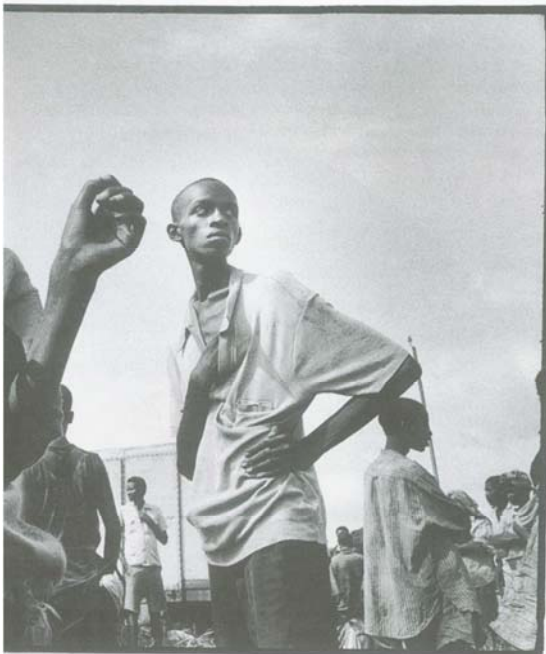
All this in a region that has suffered through one of the longest civil wars Africa has ever seen, as well as repeated famines.

—Eric Miller, Cape Town



Young boys in Guguletu township, Cape Town, enjoy the simple pleasure of play. Despite the harsh environment and other hardships, the enduring qualities this image celebrates are curiosity, ingenuity, resourcefulness and warmth of welcome. It is indicative of the positive nature and spirit of ordinary people in most of Africa.

—Orde Eliason, Link Picture Agency, London



are beguiled by its superficiality.

A stereotype places the viewer outside an experience or event, saying: "Look how different this is from your world." A non-stereotype does the opposite; it tries to say, "Look how much this is the same." A choice of stage, whether a music hall in Lagos or a Zairean jungle, is incidental. Photographers need to communicate, in a gesture, in a look, and all within the mysterious wiles of composition, what is common amongst us. The coining of a stereotype is not in the stage that is chosen, but the way in which what happens on it is shown.

Though most of us don't understand the deprivations shown in this scene from northeastern Zaire, a photographer should try to find within himself and illicit in the viewer an understanding of what is shown that is sympathetic, caring and fearless. This is a better way to challenge stereotypes, better than simply changing the focus and, inevitably, creating others.

—Guy Tillim, Cape Town



I was in Burkina Faso in January 1998, my first time in West Africa, to cover the African Cup of Nations soccer match. I was in a taxi driving to my hotel, and I saw this picture of this woman with the strawberries. I couldn't communicate with the driver, he spoke French, so I tickled his shoulder and he stopped. I jumped out and got the picture, and got back into the taxi. The driver smiled. It was nearly 45 degrees (centigrade).

I sent the photo to London and they sent it all over. What it says to me is how African people, even starving, work for a living by whatever means possible – particularly the women. All over Africa you find it is the women who work the hardest. This woman has a look of desperation, maybe for the responsibility she feels for her children.

These women are all over the place there. There are lots of strawberries, it's so hot, and they're not expensive. But you never see a man riding with strawberries on top of his head. They're too busy doing something else.

—Juda Ngwenya, Reuters, Johannesburg