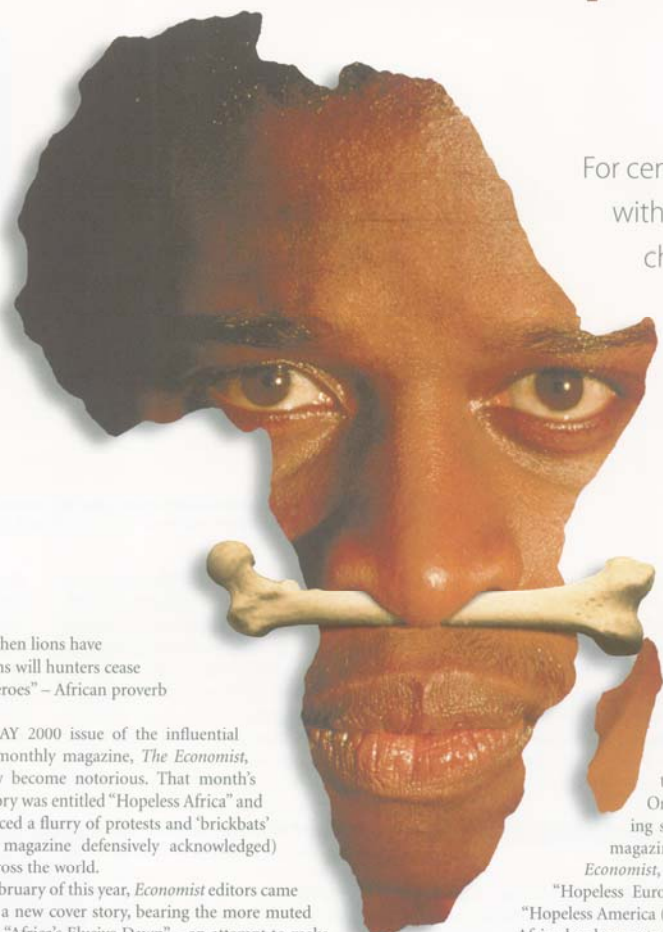


# Framing Africa

## How the western media maintains ancient prejudices

Imagine if "the world,"



"Only when lions have historians will hunters cease being heroes" – African proverb

THE MAY 2000 issue of the influential British monthly magazine, *The Economist*, has now become notorious. That month's cover story was entitled "Hopeless Africa" and it produced a flurry of protests and 'brickbats' (as the magazine defensively acknowledged) from across the world.

In February of this year, *Economist* editors came up with a new cover story, bearing the more muted heading, "Africa's Elusive Dawn" – an attempt to make slight amends for the appalling picture the earlier issue had drawn of an entire continent, without regard to its vastness, variety or regional differences. Yet the magazine did not exactly withdraw its earlier condemnations. The title rather implied a concession on the part of the editors that there still, in fact, might be some cause for hope in Africa.

Apparently baffled in their quest for signs of hope elsewhere, they concentrated on a lengthy analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of post-apartheid South Africa. This time round, they gave the rest of the continent barely a passing mention.

This careful focus highlighted, once again, South Africa's position as the Great White Hope of the opinion makers of the Western world. In spite of the traumas of a difficult transition from apartheid towards democracy (with AIDS, crime, unemployment and dangerous levels of financial inequality being worrying, destabilising factors), South Africa is still regarded as a beacon of hope on an otherwise savagely incomprehensible continent.

This point of view is not very different from that which emerges in the carefully constructed scenarios penned by H Rider Haggard, Winston Churchill or Rudyard Kipling during the age of imperialism, a hundred years before – the idea of South Africa as an outpost of a settled, comprehensible and civilised world just barely holding out on the edges of a continent of incipient savagery and chaos, a land of wealth and beauty that just might have a chance of becoming a success story.

For centuries the West has equated 'Africa' with darkness, despair, corruption and chaos – to a large degree a convenient projection based on racial subordination, economic greed and imperialist interest.

**John Matshikiza** reflects:

The key question is: why should Africa, as a continent, have to live up to any expectations at all? By whose expectations is it being judged?

One cannot imagine a leading story in an international magazine, such as *The Economist*, bearing the title "Hopeless Europe", "Hopeless Asia", or "Hopeless America (North and South)".

Africa has been set up in the Western psyche as a hopeless case, an entity that is not an entity, but which nevertheless, by its refusal to fall into acceptable norms, provides an unchallenged argument to justify its exploitation. And the Western media continues to shore up the myths that justify the continued denigration of the African continent – the same justifications that paved the way for the unparalleled excesses of the trade in millions of African slaves to Europe and the Americas between the 15th and the 19th centuries, the brutality of King Leopold's Congo estate, the German genocide against the Herero people of Namibia and the imperial and colonial eras that followed – to mention but a few.

*The Economist's* "Hopeless Africa" cover story might well turn out to have had disguised blessings. If nothing else, it brought attention to the way in which the African continent and its peoples continue to be represented in the Western media. It discredited the idea of balanced reporting, in that none of its contributors actually came from the African continent, or had a deep understanding of its issues. Prejudices were presented as hard facts – contradicting the deepest tenets of responsible journalism.

The first 'hard fact' was articulated in the first sentences of its editorial page. "At the start of the 19th century," it led, "Freetown (Sierra Leone) was remote and malarial, but also a place of hope. This settlement for destitute Africans from England and former slaves from the Americas had become the main base in West Africa for enforcing the British act that abolished the slave trade.

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Or if Latin America were to be junked on the basis of ongoing drug wars in Colombia.

"At the start of the 21st century," it continued, "Freetown symbolises failure and despair." The hapless former colony could do no more than look on helplessly as its last hope of salvation, the peacekeeping mission of the United Nations, "degenerated into a shambles, calling into question the outside world's readiness to help end the fighting not just in Sierra Leone but in any of Africa's many dreadful wars. Indeed, since the difficulties of helping Sierra Leone seemed so intractable, and since Sierra Leone seemed to epitomise so much of the rest of Africa, it began to look as though the world might just give up on the entire continent."

Imagine if "the world", in *The Economist's* phrase, were to give up on the entire European continent on the basis of the intractable problems of Bosnia and Macedonia. Or if Latin America were to be junked on the basis of ongoing drug wars in Colombia. That is the level of analysis that this respected journal wishes its readers to buy in to. But worse than this is its selective version of history – a history that, if more fully told, might help all of us to understand the underlying causes of the unacceptable trauma of a civil war in one little corner of the vast African continent.

*The Economist's* high-sounding "British act that abolished the slave trade" came about only after centuries of that country's benefiting from the trade in African slaves. Slave revolts

newfound American reality – a white reality that had no further need of their labour.

Europe and America were dumping their colour problem, like toxic waste, back on the nearest and most convenient shore of Africa, without regard to the complex and living realities of existing African nations. These African nations had already been destabilised by centuries of external warfare and colonial invasion – they were now nations that would be obliged to receive these unexpected immigrants. And those black immigrants from a distant world would be obliged to create a new presence, a new identity, on shores that they had never known.

In addition to this, Britain was also using its new colonies in Africa and Australia as dumping grounds for its own unwanted social elements – political and religious heretics, pirates, pimps, prostitutes and unreconstructed criminals. And so, from far afield in 19th century Britain and America, the seeds of an African civil war in the 20th and 21st centuries were sown.

*The Economist* is not a unique example of how the African continent continues to be represented in much of the Western media. The issue under discussion merely provides a one-stop example of biased reporting that fails to take into account the point of view of African people. And it contains many sweep-

called *Fantastic Invasion*, is one example. Even more notable is the work of Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, who was first sent to cover Ghana's progress towards independence by the Polish news agency in 1957, and more or less stayed on to cover the continent's unfolding dramas until the 1990s and beyond. Kapuscinski's reporting is published in several outstanding books – *The Emperor*, recounting the downfall of Ethiopia's Haile Selassie; *Another Day of Life*, an intimate and heartrending account of the Angolan civil war; and his recently published memoirs, *The Shadow of the Sun: my African life*. Of this powerful antidote to *The Economist's* imperialist reporting, a British reviewer commented: "Bound by centuries of misconceptions, our shallow views warped by ingrained prejudice, we follow Kapuscinski's trail of tears over four decades to our own enlightenment. What was dark, incomprehensible and frightening becomes clearer, illuminated by his intelligent empathy."

Africa itself produces many excellent journals probing the complexities of the continent. The French-language *Jeune Afrique* group, with its specialised monthly titles *Jeune Afrique L'Intelligent* and *Jeune Afrique Economique*, are just two examples. The critical analysis they provide on key issues across all of Africa demonstrates the existence of articulate and sophisticated African journalists who do not shy away from the major issues of the day, and are able to criticise constructively.

These perspectives seldom find their way into the more powerful organs of the Western media, in which Africa continues to be 'covered' from a Western perspective. As ever, economic control goes hand-in-hand with control over the flow of information. And as long as that continues to be the case, the idea of Africa as an endemically 'hopeless' continent continues to hold the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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(notably that in Haiti in 1804) and the modernisation of American and European economies that came about due to the wealth generated by slave-labour played a far greater role in bringing the practice to an end than did liberal thinking in Britain. After four centuries of justification, the slave trade had become redundant.

Freetown in Sierra Leone was a settlement that brought more misery than the hope that *The Economist* would have us believe in. The "destitute Africans from England" were involuntarily transported there because the England that they had been born into, or imported into as slaves, chose not to accommodate them, for reasons of colour. And the "former slaves from the Americas" had been thrust onto this "remote and malarial" coast in an attempt to remove them from the

ing generalisations from varied parts of the continent, apart from the worst-case example of Sierra Leone.

The media exert great power and influence over the minds of governments, investors and the general public alike. In continuing to spread the bad news, and failing to have eyes to recognise the good news when it is there, the media plays a potent role in maintaining ancient prejudices – and these prejudices can hardly be overstressed, considering the role they have played in allowing Northern audiences to turn a blind eye to the ravages committed against the continent and its peoples, from slavery to apartheid to the ongoing, long-range economic control of the post-colonial era.

There are noble exceptions to this type of reporting. Patrick Marnham's African journalism, collected in a volume