



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Empire of Image: The Portrayal of Africa by Western Media**

Sallah, Terenic

### **Citation**

Sallah, T. (2023). *Empire of Image: The Portrayal of Africa by Western Media*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3621545>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# **Empire of Image: The Portrayal of Africa by Western Media**



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of  
International Relations and Organisations**

**Author: Terenic Sallah**

**Student Number: s2533197**

**Instructor: Dr. Leila Demarest**

**Second Reader: Frits Meijerink**

**Word Count: 7956**

**26 May 2023**

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. The power of media and framing.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Media Platforms.....	4
Stereotypes & White Saviourism.....	6
African Voices on the Portrayal of Africa.....	8
Decolonizing the Portrayal of Africa.....	10
<b>2. Methodology.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Research design.....	12
Participants.....	12
Data collection.....	13
Interviews.....	13
Imagery.....	14
<b>3. Analysis.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.1 The African Perception.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Overall perception.....	18
Responses to the Images.....	21
Positive portrayal.....	22
<b>3.2 Impact on the Identity.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3.3 Changing and Countering the Narrative.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Conclusions.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Interview Overview.....</b>	<b>35</b>

## Introduction

In today's globalised, interconnected world, our understanding of foreign, and thereby, unfamiliar cultures and societies, is partly informed and reified by what we see in the media. As a state apparatus and democratised entity, the media serves as a window through which we glimpse the lives of people, cultures, and countries that we would otherwise never interact with or visit. Notwithstanding, the media's portrayal of Africa in Western media has often been the subject of scrutiny and criticism. The portrayal is often characterized by stereotypes, biases, and focuses on poverty and conflict. Previous studies suggest that the portrayal of Africa in Western media does not only influence how non-Africans perceive Africa and its people, but it also has a significant effect on the perceptions of Africans themselves (Chinweizu, 1986, p. 80). It influences not only their perception of the continent but also their sense of identity and might. Despite a considerable amount of literature regarding the African diaspora's perspective on how Western media depicts Africa, their viewpoint tends to be oversimplified and generalized. Insufficient attention is given to the wide range of experiences and perspectives within the African diaspora. This research aims to explore how Africans perceive the portrayal of Africa in Western media and to identify the potential pathways they believe can challenge and counter this narrative. This will ultimately be done by conducting several focus group interviews with members of the African diaspora.

The following research question will serve as the foundation for this study: *How does the African diaspora perceive the portrayal of Africa in Western media, and how do they challenge the current narrative?* By delving into the experiences and perspectives of the African diaspora, we seek to understand the impact of prevailing narratives and identify potential avenues for transformation. Hereby, I am also examining how the African diaspora actively engages with media representations of Africa and how they can help create a more accurate and

nanced portrayal of the continent. This study has the following research objectives:

1. To explore how the African diaspora perceives the portrayal of Africa in Western media and how this portrayal shapes their perception of Africa.
2. To investigate the extent to which the African diaspora feels misrepresented by Western media portrayals of Africa.
3. To examine the impact of Western media portrayals of Africa on the African diaspora's self-esteem, self-concept, and sense of belonging.
4. To explore how the African diaspora actively resists and challenges negative portrayals of Africa in Western media.

For the purpose of clarity, the paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a comprehensive overview of theories and literature concerning media coverage of Africa. The second section outlines the research methods and methodology used in this study. Finally, the last section presents an analysis of the gathered data.

## **1. The power of media and framing**

This first section of the paper looks at theories and literature that have spoken about the topic of the portrayal of Africa in Western media and what other scholars have written about it. This section discusses the following theories and topics: media and framing, stereotypes, white saviourism, African perception, and decolonization theory.

### ***Media Platforms***

Media refers to the various channels, platforms, and means through which information, news, and entertainment are communicated to large audiences (Taneja et al., 2012). It encompasses a broad range of mediums, including print

publications (newspapers and magazines), broadcast media (television and radio), online platforms (social media), and other forms of communication such as film, music, and advertising (Oparaugo, 2021)

Framing theory, a widely recognized approach, suggests that the way in which information is framed influences how people interpret it and make decisions based on it (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). Visuals in media, such as images and videos, have a powerful impact on human cognition and emotions. Research suggests that visuals enhance comprehension, increase attention, and facilitate memory recall (Mayer, 2009). In the case of Africa, we often see campaigns with starving, malnourished children, and their helpless parents. Africa is often portrayed as a continent full of poverty, conflict, and disease. Seeing these images could naturally evoke emotions in people and make them feel obliged to help the people living in those circumstances (Green et al., 2004). The text also plays a crucial role in conveying information, constructing narratives, and shaping public opinion (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). For example, during the refugee crisis in 2015, some media outlets used a '*security frame*' when they covered the issue. This frame highlighted potential security risks associated with the influx of refugees. It focused on issues such as terrorism, crime, and a strain on resources (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). Such a frame could cause citizens to view refugees as a potential threat and might even lead to more restrictive policies.

In short, frames play a crucial role in forming our opinions, evaluations, and behaviours. Frames often also have a cumulative effect over time. When people are constantly exposed to a consistent frame of reference for a social issue, they start to unconsciously internalise these frames and incorporate them into their belief systems (Goffman, 1974). This can lead to dominant cultural narratives that shape public opinion and people's attitudes toward certain issues.

## ***Stereotypes & White Saviourism***

As illustrated in the previous section, frames can influence our perceptions and attitudes toward certain issues. They can also create stereotypes. Stereotypes are defined as widely held beliefs or assumptions about characteristics, traits, behaviours, and roles that are thought to be typical of members of a particular group (Amodio, 2014, p. 670). They are often based on subjective experiences and limited information and are applied to an entire group without consideration of possible individual differences. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and are often based on various characteristics, including race, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Stroebe & Insko, 1989). Because stereotypes are often based on limited and inaccurate information, they can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and negative attitudes toward members of the targeted group (Stroebe & Insko, 1989). Stereotypes can be developed through media, socialisation, and personal experiences. For example, someone could develop a stereotype about a particular group based on a negative experience with a member of that group or exposure to negative media portrayals (Mastro, 2009).

Stereotypes about Africa and Africans have a complex history and can be traced back to the colonial and imperial eras. The European powers that colonised Africa often portrayed the continent and its people as primitive, uncivilised, and inferior (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 166). These stereotypes have been perpetuated through the media and education systems and have been passed down through generations (Bonsu, 2009). The media often portrays Africa through the lens of poverty, disease, and conflict. This reinforces the idea that Africa is a continent in need of saving rather than a continent full of diverse cultures, landscapes, histories, and accomplishments. According to Pereira & Vala (2010), these stereotypes can contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of African people from social, economic, and political opportunities. They can lead to a lack of understanding and appreciation for African culture and contribute to racism and discrimination against the African diaspora (Pereira & Vala, 2010).

As mentioned in the previous section, Africa is often portrayed as the continent in need and the West as the "hero" who steps in to save the day. White people tend to portray themselves as "saviours" of the African people, often doing so by organising charitable and humanitarian efforts and urging other people in Western society to do the same (Bandyopadhyay, 2019, p. 328). This has been termed "White Saviourism." The theory of 'White Saviourism' argues that such efforts can ultimately do more harm than good, as they fail to address the root cause of inequality and contribute to a sense of dependency and disempowerment among Africans (Cooney-Petro, 2019). According to Bonsu (2009), this reinforces existing power dynamics and perpetuates stereotypes of African people as helpless and in need of saving. The roots of white saviourism can also be traced back to the colonial period. European powers justified their colonisation of African countries by claiming that they were bringing civilization and progress to the "uncivilised" and 'backward' people. This same attitude can be seen in white saviourism today, where white people feel they have a duty to "save" Africans from their perceived problems (Pieterse, 1992). White saviourism may also stem from a sense of guilt or responsibility that white people feel for the historical oppression and exploitation of Africans, or "white guilt." By acting as saviours, they feel they are redeeming themselves for what their ancestors did (Rogers-Cooper, 2012).

On the other hand, proponents of white saviourism argue that charitable and humanitarian efforts can be a valuable way for white people to help people of colour if done in a way that is respectful and empowering (Eikenberry, 2009). Eikenberry also claims that such efforts can raise awareness of issues affecting people of colour and encourage others to get involved. However, critics of white saviourism argue that this reinforces the idea that non-Western countries are helpless and incapable of solving their own problems (Bonsu, 2009). They accuse proponents of white saviourism of centering these issues around



themselves and their own experiences instead of listening to and amplifying the voices of those they are trying to help.

In short, stereotypes and white saviourism are deeply intertwined, as they often reinforce each other. White saviourism perpetuates the idea that white people and Western organisations are the only people who can help non-Western countries dispense their issues of poverty, human suffering, and conflict. This mindset also reinforces the stereotype of the primitiveness and helplessness of Africa and its people.

### ***African Voices on the Portrayal of Africa***

The portrayal of Africa in Western media has been a long-standing topic of discussion and debate. While there is no single perspective on the issue, a range of African voices have expressed their views on the subject.

In her TED talk, *'The Danger of a Single Story,'* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gives a speech on how a single narrative can influence someone's perception. When she first moved to America, her college roommate was surprised at how well she spoke English and that she knew how to use a stove. Her roommate had pitied her even before they met because she had a single story of Africa in her mind, "a story of catastrophe." After spending several years in America and being exposed to the portrayal of Africa in popular culture, Adichie admitted the following: "If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and aids, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner" (Ngozi, 2009) This beautifully sums up how framing, stereotypes, and white saviourism shape and influence people's perceptions of Africa.

Adichie warns that reducing individuals to a "single story" creates harmful stereotypes and misinformation. Adichie calls for greater awareness of the power these stories hold. She argues that humans are very impressionable and vulnerable to the information presented to us in Western media. She argues that we should seek out multiple perspectives and challenge the single narratives presented to us. This will foster greater empathy and understanding between people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. Adichie makes a compelling case that the stories we tell about ourselves and others have real-world consequences and that we should strive to tell more complete and nuanced stories to build a more just and equitable world.

Remi Adekoya (2013) argues that the negative portrayal also affects the work environment in which Africans work. He states that many African professionals in Europe feel that they are constantly underestimated in their workplaces because of their background. The white European people within these workplaces often assume that because they were raised in Africa, they must have grown up in a "poor and backward environment." According to him, African university graduates working in Europe will likely have to overperform in their jobs before they are given the same respect as their European colleagues.

Other authors have also argued that the Western portrayal of Africa has also had a significant effect on beauty standards, social norms, and cultural practices. In terms of beauty standards, Komi Begehou (2015) argues that Western media has profoundly affected how Africans perceive beauty. In Western societies, the ideal beauty standards include a fair skin tone, a small nose with a defined nose bridge, and a thin physique. She states that these standards have led to an increase in the usage of skin-lightening products, cosmetic surgeries, and other beauty treatments designed to conform to Western beauty standards. In terms of social norms, Dasen (2000) argues that Western media has also played a role in how Africans perceive gender roles,

sexuality, and relationships. According to her, Western media has led to a shift towards more individualistic and consumerist attitudes, which often conflict with traditional African values of community and collectivism.

Gillespie (1995) explores the impact of Western media on cultural practices. She states that the influences of Western media have led to the adoption of Western clothing styles, music, and other cultural practices. Although some argue that this is a form of cultural exchange, it can also lead to the erasure of traditional African practices and the loss of cultural heritage (Clifford, 1994, p. 310).

### ***Decolonizing the Portrayal of Africa***

Decolonization theory, in simple terms, is “the undoing of colonialism” (Ratele et al., 2018). It seeks to challenge and dismantle the legacies of colonialism, including the distorted portrayal of Africa and Africans. It calls for a re-evaluation of historical narratives, the centering of African perspectives, and a recognition of the interconnectedness of power structures and knowledge production (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

The book *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, by Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992), is a comprehensive analysis of how Western culture has historically portrayed Africa and blacks. Pieterse argues that decolonization of the political and intellectual has taken place and is still ongoing, and what remains is the decolonization of culture. According to him, we need to take a critical approach to popular culture and understand how popular culture reinforces and perpetuates negative stereotypes. He defines cultural decolonization as follows: a process of “rethinking, redefining, and reclaiming” cultural identities that have been distorted or suppressed by colonialism. Pieterse argues that we should deconstruct the negative stereotypes and assumptions that have been perpetuated in Western popular culture

Another author, Chinweizu (1986), argues that we also must decolonize the African mind. Besides portraying Africa as a dark continent full of dark savages living in the jungle with other wild animals, Chinweizu argues that the European mindset put forth three dogmas. First, they claimed that Africans have contributed nothing to civilization in Africa. Second, they claimed that Africans have contributed nothing to non-African civilization. Third, that anything found in Africa worthy of European respect had to have been put there by white invaders of some earlier period. In short, the message was that Africans had contributed nothing to civilization and that all historical advances were made by Europeans or other branches of the white race. According to Chinweizu, this colonial mentality still “lies like a fog on the African consciousness” (p. vii). He argues that the impact of this message has had significant effects on how Africans perceive themselves and Africa. He says, “For those who came to accept it, it bred complexes of racial inadequacy, a sense of fated inferiority, a belief in the congenital superiority of whites, and a sense of the pointlessness of African initiative” (p. 80). He argues that this has fostered a paralysis of will. How could people who believe they have never invented anything ever catch up to the creators of the numerous inventions of the modern industrial world? Chiweizu also asserts that the relationship between Africa and the West entails the presence of two interconnected entities, each playing a significant role in shaping interactions within this relationship. According to him, if Africans truly wish to bring Western domination of Africa to an end, we must take control of our own story and history and steer it away from Western thought and narratives.

To conclude, the power of media lies in its ability to frame and create narratives. As mentioned before, frames play a crucial role in forming opinions, evaluations, and behaviours. In Western media, Africa is often portrayed as a land filled with poverty, conflict, and helpless people. This portrayal reinforces

negative stereotypes and influences how people in the West perceive the continent and behave toward Africans. African voices such as Ibekwe Chinweizu urge Africans to take control of the narrative and steer away from Western perspectives.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***Research design***

The research design used for this study involved conducting focus group interviews with members of the African diaspora. Focus group interviews are a qualitative research method that involves a small group of individuals who share a common characteristic or experience. In this case, all the participants are members of the African diaspora. Focus groups allow for the exploration of complex issues in a more nuanced way than other research methods.

Participants in focus groups can interact with each other, leading to the generation of new ideas, insights, and perspectives that might not have emerged through individual interviews (Kitzinger, 1995). This method also provided the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, clarify responses, and inquire deeper into participants' views and experiences. The generated data is therefore richer and more in-depth than surveys or other research methods.

### ***Participants***

The sampling strategy for this study was purposive sampling. The participants were selected based on their self-identification as members of the African diaspora. They were recruited through personal networks, social media, and (African) community platforms. There were four focus groups, and the sample size of the groups ranged from 4 to 6 participants. This small group size ensured that all participants could share their perspectives without getting overshadowed. There were 21 participants in total, of which 13 were female and 8 were male. The age range ran from 20 to 63. All participants were either

enrolled in a university or had already obtained their degrees and PhDs. The majority of the participants are based in the Netherlands, and there will be a few joining in online from the United Kingdom.

### ***Data collection***

The data was collected through audio recordings and personal notes that were taken during the focus group interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. The interviews were conducted in English, as this is a widely spoken language within the African diaspora communities.

### ***Interviews***

The focus group interviews were semi-structured. This means that they were led by a set of predetermined open-ended questions that left room for participants to give elaborative answers. The interview started off with some general questions, after which the participants were presented with a set of images and videos that showed the portrayal of Africa in Western media. This was followed up by questions related to images. The questions were designed to elicit participants' perceptions and experiences related to the portrayal of Africa in Western media and how it affects their sense of identity. Example questions include:

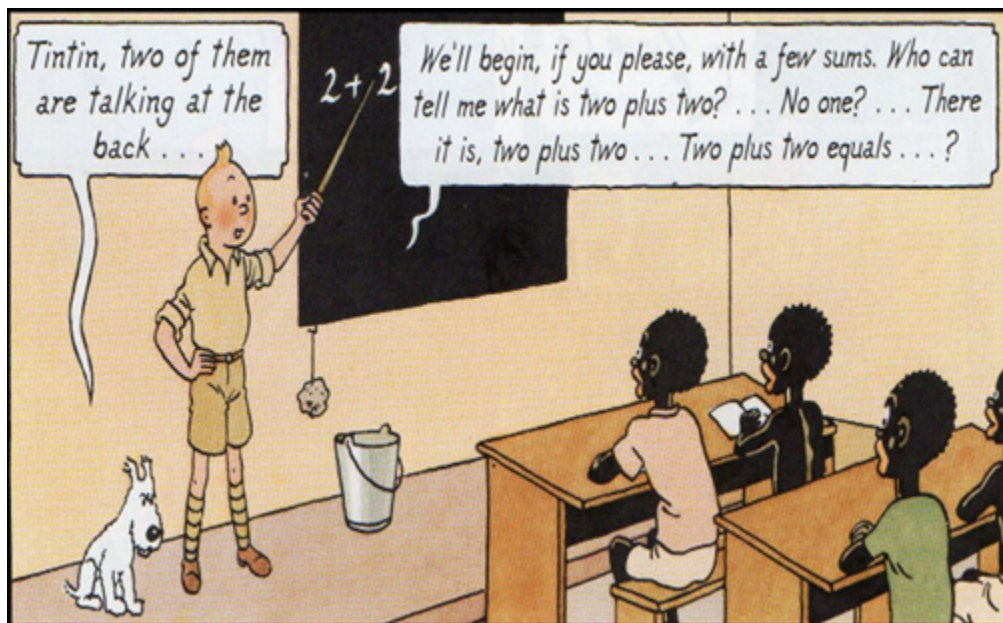
- How do you perceive the portrayal of Africa and Africans in Western media?
- Do you perceive Africa's portrayal as negative or positive, and have you seen any evolution over time?
- Can you name some examples of the portrayal of Africa in the West?
- Do you believe these images create or reinforce stereotypes or misconceptions about Africa and Africans?

## Imagery

The inclusion of images offered a common reference point, which ensured that the researcher and participants were on the same page. They served as prompts and references, enabling the participants to articulate their observations and perspectives more effectively. This section aims to provide a justification for the selection of specific images used in the interviews, highlighting their significance and contribution to the research objectives.

The first set of images are from the 19th and 20th centuries, depicting how Africans were presented in that period. They include advertisements, images from textbooks, and images from advertisements. Incorporating these images was crucial, as they represent some of the earliest portrayals of Africans. It is therefore interesting to assess whether the narratives they established continue to influence contemporary perceptions. Find two of the images below.

**Figure 1. This is an image from a popular comic book from the 20th century called Tintin. In this edition, Tintin goes to the Congo as a missionary (1931)**



**Figure 2. This is a picture postcard with the caption, "God made the little niggers, He made them in the night, He made them in a hurry, and forgot to make the white." (1922)**



The second set of images centres on more contemporary portrayals of Africa. They include social media posts and a video campaign by Save the Children aimed at soliciting donations for starving children. In addition to gathering participants' perceptions of these images, the aim is also to explore whether participants believe the narrative conveyed by these images differs from the images of the 19th and 20th centuries. Find two of the images below.



**Figure 3. This is an image of Angelina Jolie doing volunteer work in Kenya for the UNHCR.**



**Figure 4. Thumbnail of the “This is Hunger” campaign by Save the Children**



I will then present two videos to the participants that aim to challenge the stereotypes and narratives perpetuated by the negative portrayal of Africa. This is to show that organisations have started to steer away from negative portrayals and narratives.

The first video is a skit from a Norwegian group named Radi-Aid. In this video, they portray frequently used stereotypes in fundraising campaigns. Such as hunger and poverty. Their message is that we need to create engagement built on knowledge and not stereotypes. They argue that we need to change the way fundraising campaigns communicate issues of poverty and development.

The final video is a video by Dr. Chinonso Emmanuel Okorie and the General Director Lindis Hurum of Doctors Without Borders explaining how Doctors Without Borders is committed to a better representation of their diverse global workforce in their communications and fundraising despite a harmful legacy of using “white saviour” images.

### ***Data analysis***

The audio recording of the focus groups was transcribed. These were then analysed using a thematic approach. This approach involved identifying patterns and themes in the data. The transcripts will be read and re-read to become familiar with the content. Finally, the themes will be interpreted, and the findings will be presented in a report.

### ***Ethical considerations***

After confirming that the individuals were 18 years of age or older, the participants were provided with information about the study and asked to sign a consent form. They were assured of their confidentiality, and their names will not be included in the report. Since this was a sensitive topic, participants had the option to stop the interview at any time. To ensure the complete anonymity

of participants, I won't be mentioning any identifying characteristics such as age, gender, or country of origin. This is to prevent possible traceability back to them.

### ***Limitations***

The limitations of this study include the small sample size. Although it was intentional, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study will only capture the perspectives of the Africans living in the locations where it is conducted and may not reflect the perspectives of the diaspora in other locations. Finally, the study is limited to the perceptions of the participants and may not reflect the broader experiences of the African diaspora.

## **3. Analysis**

In the following section of the paper, I will analyse and discuss the content of the focus groups. This section comprises three distinct parts. The first part delves into the perspectives shared by the African diaspora regarding the portrayal of Africa in Western media. The second part examines how this portrayal potentially influences their sense of identity and connection to their African heritage. The final part delves into their perspectives on countering this portrayal and constructing alternative narratives.

### **3.1 The African Perception**

#### ***Overall Perception***

The findings from the focus group interviews indicate a predominately negative perception of Africa in Western media. Participants expressed that Africa is often characterised as a continent full of poverty, disease, and conflict. They described how Africans are often portrayed as helpless and unorganised people. A few examples they gave were images of starving, malnourished children and

helpless people drowning in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach the shores of the West, which they believe to be this promised land. Some participants also observed that Africa is often portrayed as a land without agency with an abundance of resources but a people that do not know how to successfully generate wealth from it. She stated, “They never focus on the fact that it’s over-exploited but on the fact that for some miraculous reason, these poor Africans can’t take care of themselves or their country”

Another argument that was put forward was that the media tends to view Africa through the lens of the black body, emphasising a monolithic concept of blackness tied to the continent. One participant stated, “I have talked to people who grew up predominantly in Africa; for them, the concept of blackness and Africa as a whole is very strange, because for them there is a big difference between the different countries.” This conceptualization of “blackness” in the West often ignores the significant differences between black individuals and African countries. One participant added that people in the West often view Africa as a country and not a continent consisting of 54 distinct countries. One participant also finds that there is a distinct separation between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. According to her, North Africa often receives a more nuanced and positive portrayal, emphasising its historical significance and cultural richness. She finds that this results in higher visibility and a diverse range of narratives, in contrast to sub-Saharan Africa, where media coverage is more focused on specific events, conflicts, and humanitarian conflicts.

Some of the participants also argued that there might be an agenda behind the media coverage of Africa. They argued that media outlets tend to present superficial coverage of Africa; striking and isolated images are highlighted without showing the broader context of the situation. They find the portrayal of Africa exploitative and often driven by sensationalism and the desire to solicit financial donations. This is done by showing suffering people and

underdeveloped areas. Participants also mentioned that this might be due to the short attention span of Western audiences. The intentions behind certain campaigns might be noble and good, but the images used are aimed at evoking an emotional reaction from audiences. One participant stated, “It has to be extreme for people to feel sympathy for the people in these dire situations.” Another factor that might play a role in this is the need to show something that will get enough “clicks.” A ‘positive’ story might not get as much attention. Another participant mentioned that there is a term for this “poverty porn”.

Some participants also mentioned that there might also be a political agenda behind the portrayal of Africa. “The media is a reflection of what we see but can also shape public opinion.” According to them, mainstream media such as the BBC and CNN have an impact on how Africa is seen politically. If you only see stories of corruption and failing governments, people might view the continent as dysfunctional and as mentioned before, a land without agency. They often do not show the other side of the coin. “The very people producing these images are the same people who are sponsoring divisions and problems that have led to people dying and malnourished children.” Instead of consistently showing the aftermaths of certain conflicts, they should focus more on the governmental structures that allow these conflicts to occur. Their focus is not on governmental structures because the West often benefits from those structures. There is a power structure within the media. “The West is at the top, doing great things, while underdeveloped and corrupt Africa is at the bottom.” This could be related to what Chinweizu said. Portraying Africa as a corrupt and underdeveloped continent still perpetuates the idea that they are contributing nothing to civilization and that the West is still superior.

### ***Responses to the Images***

Following the inquiries about the overall perception of Africa, the participants were then presented with the prepared images. This elicited the following responses:

When discussing the images of the 19th and 20th centuries, one participant said, “These images have led to the discrimination that people still experience today”. According to her, the discrimination that black people experience all started with the narratives portrayed by these images. Portraying Africans as stupid, dirty, or even having relations with animals strips them of their dignity. Another participant said that dehumanising Africans and portraying them as sub-humans were needed for colonial powers to justify their cruel treatment of black people. Someone else argued that the dehumanisation of Africans is still very present. She states that African migrants and refugees are looked upon very differently than migrants or refugees from other parts of the world. After the Ukraine crisis, which was indeed devastating, many countries opened their borders with open arms to offer them safe haven. In contrast, we see African refugees being refused asylum and sent back because there is not enough capacity. Another participant mentioned that we tend to think that this was far in the past, but pointed out that the Tintin strip was from 1938, which can be seen as recent. “Some people are still alive who read these strips and grew up with this narrative.” She added, “If a grandpa had racist view, they would pass it on to their children, and their children passed it down to their children. So even though these images are from a long time ago, the mentality gets passed on.”

They had the following to say about the more recent images and campaign video: “When I look at the images, the only thing I see is that the white person is portrayed as a saviour. It might be a very authentic, real intention, but the point is that the person coming in is seen as coming to save the Africans.” Someone added, “This is just building on the narrative; we moved from wanting to civilise

the people to wanting to save them.” Another argued that even though she does not like seeing these types of images, there are in fact people suffering in Africa. She said, “You cannot say that it is a false portrayal, because it does exist. She finds the problematic part of this portrayal to be when it is generalised because there are also well-developed and thriving regions in Africa.

### ***Positive Portrayal***

When asked about the positive portrayal of Africa, participants said the following: Most of the participants agreed that although there is still a lot of negativity in mainstream media outlets, social media platforms have shifted the portrayal of Africa. “Everyone with a camera can now tell a story.” Most of them argued that it is not just an outside perspective anymore. You now have African content creators who show you a whole other side of Africa. They show the developed parts and luxurious lives some Africans live. Through social media, you can see the perspectives of the people who live in Africa. Another participant argues that showing the counter perspective of luxury is not necessarily a good thing. “It’s the rich people that are getting all the attention; the poor people are still treated the same as in the past.”

Overall, most of them agreed on the fact that social media platforms show a more nuanced perspective and show the differences between African countries. Another person argued that BBC Africa has also helped; although they believe it is still very Westernised, they highlight the upcoming entrepreneurs and impressive inventions coming from Africa. Some participants also argued that streaming platforms and movies have also caused a shift in the narrative. For example, you can now watch Nollywood movies on Netflix, and you can now find many movies with African directors in Western cinemas. Another important platform the participants mentioned was the music industry. Afrobeats has become extremely popular; you see collaborations between African

and Western artists, and many Afrobeat songs can be heard on the soundtracks of Western movies. Another important aspect mentioned was the algorithm of social media platforms. The more African content you consume, the more it will pop up on your screen.

When asked about their opinions of the skit and Doctors Without Borders campaign, many participants thought the videos had a positive message. They found the skit a funny way to call out NGO campaigns for perpetuating negative stereotypes. One participant voiced the following opinion about Doctors Without Borders campaign, "Yes, I 100% agree with the message. The center has always been white people; when they could not do what they do without local support." She added, "They make it seem as if the white people do all the work, without pointing out the fact that there are people in all parts of the world who are doing the work that white people are getting credit for, I think it's good that they highlighted this."

To summarise, the interviews reveal a prevalent negative perspective on Africa in Western media. Participants emphasise the need for a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of the continent that highlights the diverse cultures and positive aspects of African life. They also think it is good that big organisations like Doctors Without Borders are trying to portray a more nuanced portrayal and taking accountability for negative portrayals. The participants praise platforms like social media and the film and music industries for creating a shift in this narrative.

### **3.2 Impact on the Identity**

When the participants were questioned about the impact the portrayal of Africa had on their sense of identity and African heritage, they provided mixed responses. While some expressed that it had not affected their sense of identity, others said it did influence their perspectives.



The reasoning for those who said no can be summarised as follows: They said it did not affect their sense of identity because they were proud of their African heritage. One participant stated, "While witnessing such hardship, I do not perceive myself as inferior to others." She adds that she acknowledges that there might be people who do experience feelings of inferiority. " The first-generation diaspora said they have lived in Africa and know that there is more to Africa than what the West portrays. Some participants had never stepped foot in Africa but said the way their parents raised them and the anecdotes they heard made them feel proud of their heritage as well. One participant added that it might not necessarily affect him personally but does affect how non-Africans perceive him. He said this sometimes even extends into the workplace, where bosses and colleagues may have biased views. As a result, people of African descent, despite possessing all the necessary qualifications, might be overlooked, or underestimated due to such biases.

Another interesting perspective that was brought up was that of a participant who said they remain unaffected because they choose to educate people about Africa. She argued that by educating others about African culture, many are often eager to learn about it and appreciate it. "All they know is what they have been taught in school and seen in the media, so we should take the liberty to educate them." It was also intriguing to hear that people with a bi-racial heritage had a unique perspective on the topic. One of them stated, "I recognize that the media is unlikely to portray a mixed-race child in a negative light; you never see images of starving mixed kids." She feels that these portrayals have not diminished her African identity. Another participant who is also of bi-racial descent said that when she was younger, she wanted to become a humanitarian worker and go and teach children in Africa, even though she herself lived in Africa. Although she genuinely wanted to help the children, she said this was a

form of internalised white saviourism. “The depictions made me identify more with my white heritage.”

In contrast to this, most of the participants argued that the portrayal of Africa does indeed affect their sense of identity. For starters, some argued that they have a constant feeling of having to defend Africa and often carry the burden of representing a whole continent. “They expect you to have expert knowledge of Africa, but it's not injected into my DNA.” Although they feel they have a responsibility to challenge misrepresentations of Africa, it can take a toll on one's mental well-being. One participant said it is psychological: “You are always trying to prove yourself to somebody, silently or loudly, and you are never completely at home or accepted.” One participant mentioned that when she was in middle school, she found herself losing interest in embracing her African culture and struggling with her identity as a Kenyan living abroad. She later realised that this sense of disconnection was due to the negative media depiction of Africa, which weakened her connection to her African homeland. Another participant mentioned that in African culture, there is an emphasis on dignity and respect. “Constantly portraying them in a state of suffering strips them of this dignity and autonomy.” According to her, this has lowered the self-esteem of many Africans.

Some argued that the impact of these media portrayals extends beyond Western audiences and affects even Africans within the continent as well. One participant said that there have been reports of children in Africa altering their behaviour to attract the attention of white tourists. “They have learned that if they put a bit of mud on their face and wear torn clothes, they are more likely to receive attention or money.” While it is crucial to acknowledge the need for help, it is disheartening that putting oneself in a vulnerable and humiliating position has become associated with receiving aid. Another participant said that this can also be seen on social media. On platforms like TikTok, you see people

making fun of their poor circumstances because they are aware that this is the image the West associates with Africa. "There is this famous TikToker that answers stupid questions. One of the questions was, "Do you have cars in Africa?" and she would be like, "No, we don't have cars in Africa we walk everywhere," meanwhile there are cars driving past in the background." This can also be seen as an amusing and innovative way to challenge certain stereotypes.

Another participant made an interesting point: he finds the statement "Black lives matter" problematic. He said, "When you say, "Black lives matter," psychologically, it gives the impression that you are not human and not like other people." According to him, saying "black lives matter" and not "all lives matter" already identifies you as somebody who is not part of a whole. He says that by saying "black lives matter," you subconsciously internalise that you are sub-human and that your life does not matter.

In conclusion, the portrayal of Africa does have a significant impact on the majority of the participants. It places a burden on them to defend and represent an entire community, often leading to feelings of frustration and inadequacy. This relates to what Ngozi said in her TED Talk about "the danger of a single story." According to her, the media never shows the diverse cultures, histories, and accomplishments of Africa; instead, they portray it as a continent full of poverty and conflict. Moreover, the perpetuation of stereotypes and biased narratives not only affects the perceptions of Western audiences but also infiltrates Africans' subconscious beliefs and behaviours. They can weaken their ties to their cultural roots and create a sense of disconnection. Media representation ultimately has profound psychological consequences.

### 3.3 Changing and Countering the Narrative

The last question I ask the participants is, “What other steps can be taken to improve the portrayal of Africa, and what role can the African diaspora play in shaping this new narrative?” This elicited the following responses

They argued that there are still several steps that need to be taken to challenge the negative portrayal of Africa. First and foremost, it is crucial for Africans to take control of the narrative and tell their own story. One participant said, “We cannot keep blaming the West; we also have a major role to play in it.” Someone else responded to this by saying that Africans are also partly responsible for the exploitation of suffering people. According to him, too many Africans, especially political leaders, are willing to collaborate with third parties and exploit their own people. He states, “Africans will sell Africans. When we ourselves stop selling Africa, we will see a change.” He urges Africans to take responsibility and stop putting all the blame on the West.

According to the participants, building a strong media presence is also a key step. By countering negative images with positive ones, Africans can challenge the prevailing narrative. One participant argued that we are already shifting the narrative because, as mentioned earlier, we are already seeing positive changes through social media and other media platforms. Another participant argued that he agrees with these points but that it is going to be difficult to change a narrative that was imposed on Africa. He said that it is a continuation of a colonial agenda that began with slavery and now focuses on legitimising African politics as it does not yet adhere to Western standards. He says that although there has been some positive change, we still have a long way to go. He states, “It is not easy to build something like BBC or CNN, but in a small way, people are still selling Africa in a positive light on other media platforms”.

Another point that was brought up is that we also must tackle the biases present in school systems. He said, "I asked a young girl today what she thought in school about Africa, and she replied, "Mostly about slavery." According to him, education plays a vital role in challenging media portrayals. It is important to question and challenge the Eurocentric lens of Africa's history.

Another point that was brought up is that Africans cannot start telling our story with all these negative portrayals still circulating. "If you were able to get your hands on these historical images, that means that anyone can and that it still influences their perception. They need to be destroyed." Someone reacted to this by saying that they do not personally think that those images should be buried or destroyed. "You can't just bury them; they are the basis of the so-called commodification of Africa, which presented Africans as objects and not human beings." He finds that they clarify the ill-treatment of black people today and why some people still look upon them as inferior; burying them would erase an important part of history.

Lastly, an important aspect that was brought up was that Africans should stop using the West as a measuring stick. One participant argued that the diaspora often imposes Western ideals on Africans living in Africa, wanting them to catch up with Western standards. One participant stated, "When people go back home with the intention of rebuilding their countries, they impose Western ideals on the people instead of engaging with the local people and asking them what they think needs to be done." Another participant added, "For example, my grandma, who lives in the countryside, would hate being in the city or near cars, she likes living that kind of life. We should not take away the value of that or see it as inferior." She continues, "So I must correct myself and what I said earlier and see people just as human beings instead of being like we need to be the same for me to respect you. So by just respecting the fact that there are different cultures and different people, we as a diaspora need to stop feeling the

need to say, “We have cars too, we have cities,” to be valued as human beings. I do not think that is right.”

As illustrated in the section above, the African diaspora has varying opinions on the portrayal of Africa in Western media and how this should be countered. While some argue that the historical portrayal needs to be destroyed before moving forward, others argue that, although this is a distorted portrayal, it is still a significant part of Africa’s history. The pursuit of a more nuanced portrayal requires a multifaceted approach, as there is no singular method to achieve this goal. It necessitates undertaking numerous steps across various fields to bring about this desired outcome.

One of the most important findings is that instead of imposing Western ideals on Africa, the diaspora should listen to the voices of those living there. What the diaspora thinks will help develop the continent might be quite different from their perspective. Therefore, the diaspora should use their privilege and resources to elevate those voices is critical. As Chinweizu emphasised, there is still a long way to go before the African mind is decolonized, but as this section has shown, the African diaspora is already slowly changing the narrative. By collectively taking these steps, Africans can contribute to the ongoing efforts to challenge the media portrayal of Africa in Western media. Fostering a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the African continent and its people.

## **Conclusions**

The portrayal of Africa in Western media and its impact on perceptions is a complex and multifaceted issue. This discussion has highlighted the stereotypes and historical biases that influence the presentation of Africa. The voices we have explored were filled with determination, resilience, and a deep love for

Africa. They have expressed that they are tired of having the responsibility to defend and represent a whole continent. Many of the participants have already witnessed positive changes and initiatives taken to shift the portrayal, especially through social media. We have witnessed the recognition that Africa must take ownership of its narrative and tell its own story, free from external biases and distortions. The responsibility lies not solely with Western media, but with Africans themselves. Africans need to amplify their voices, reclaim their agency, and challenge the stereotypes that have persisted for far too long. By building a strong media presence, promoting collaborations, and supporting initiatives that uplift African voices, Africans can gradually change the narrative. Therefore, it is also crucial to recognize the interconnectedness of power, production, and knowledge. By diversifying the voices behind media production and dismantling the remnants of colonial agendas, we open doors for a more nuanced representation and ensure that Africa's story is told with more diversity, dignity, and accuracy.

A potential avenue for future research is exploring the role that social media, grassroots initiatives, and independent voices play in reshaping the narrative about Africa. Investigating how African media outlets and content creators are utilising digital platforms to challenge the narrative would yield valuable insights into strategies and approaches to enhance African media presence. Although it may appear daunting to alter a long-standing narrative, every small step holds significance in the pursuit of change. Africans have been so focused on building their institutions modelled to the West and embracing Western institutions and practices, but it's time to take a look inward and start embracing their own cultural realities and practices, or even take a look back at pre-colonial institutions to find out what works best for Africa.

## Bibliography

Adekoya, R. (2013). Why Africans worry about how Africa is portrayed in western media. *The Guardian*, 28(11).

Adichie, C. N. (2009). The danger of a single story.

Amodio, D. M. (2014). The neuroscience of prejudice and stereotyping. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 15(10), 670-682.

Bandyopadhyay, R. (2019). Volunteer tourism and “The White Man’s Burden”: globalization of suffering, white savior complex, religion and modernity. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(3), 327-343.

Begedou, K. (2015). Decolonizing the mind and fostering self-esteem: Fanon and Morrison on skin lightening practices in the African Diaspora. In *NAAAS Conference Proceedings* (p. D1). National Association of African American Studies.

Bonsu, S. K. (2009). Colonial images in global times: Consumer interpretations of Africa and Africans in advertising. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 12(1), 1-25.

Brantlinger, P. (1985). Victorians and Africans: The genealogy of the myth of the dark continent. *Critical Inquiry*, 12(1), 166-203.

Chinweizu. (1987). *Decolonising the African mind*. Festac Town: Pero Press.

Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, 10, 103-126.

Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural anthropology*, 9(3), 302-338.

Cooney-Petro, E. S. (2019). *Branding White Saviorism: The Ethics and Irony of Humanitarian Discourse on Instagram* (Doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University).

Dasen, P. R. (2000). Rapid social change and the turmoil of adolescence: A cross-cultural perspective. *International Journal of Group Tensions*, 29(1-2), 17-49.

Eikenberry, A. M. (2009). Refusing the market: A democratic discourse for voluntary and nonprofit organizations. *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*, 38(4), 582-596.



- Gillespie, M. (1995). *Television, ethnicity and cultural change*. Psychology Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Green, M. C., Brock, T. C., & Kaufman, G. F. (2004). Understanding media enjoyment: The role of transportation into narrative worlds. *Communication theory*, 14(4), 311-327.
- Greussing, E., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2017). Shifting the refugee narrative? An automated frame analysis of Europe's 2015 refugee crisis. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 43(11), 1749-1774.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative research: introducing focus groups. *Bmj*, 311(7000), 299-302.
- Mastro, D. (2009). Racial/ethnic stereotyping and the media. *Media processes and effects*, 377-391.
- Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia learning*. Psychology Press.
- Nederveen Pieterse, J. (1992). *White on black : images of Africa and blacks in Western popular*
- Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2019). Decolonizing the university in Africa. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*.
- Oparaugo, B. (2021). Media and politics: Political communication in the digital age. Available at SSRN 3780554.
- Pan, Z., & Kosicki, G. M. (1993). Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse. *Political communication*, 10(1), 55-75.
- Pereira, C., Vala, J., & Costa-Lopes, R. (2010). From prejudice to discrimination: The legitimizing role of perceived threat in discrimination against immigrants. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(7), 1231-1250.
- Ratele, K., Cornell, J., Dlamini, S., Helman, R., Malherbe, N., & Titi, N. (2018). Some basic questions about (a) decolonizing Africa (n)-centred psychology considered. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 48(3), 331-342.

Rogers-Cooper, J. (2012). *Polemical Pain: Slavery, Cruelty, and the Rise of Humanitarianism*.

Saini & Begum, 2020: *Demarcation and Definition: Explicating the Meaning and Scope of 'Decolonisation' in the Social and Political Sciences*

Stroebe, W., & Insko, C. A. (1989). Stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination: Changing conceptions in theory and research. *Stereotyping and prejudice: Changing conceptions*, 3-34.

Taneja, H., Webster, J. G., Malthouse, E. C., & Ksiazek, T. B. (2012). Media consumption across platforms: Identifying user-defined repertoires. *New media & society*, 14(6), 951-968.

# Appendix

## Interview Overview

Hey everyone, thank you all for your participation; I really appreciate it. The purpose of this interview is to gain insights into what you, the African diaspora, think of the portrayal of Africa in Western media and how this might have affected your sense of identity.

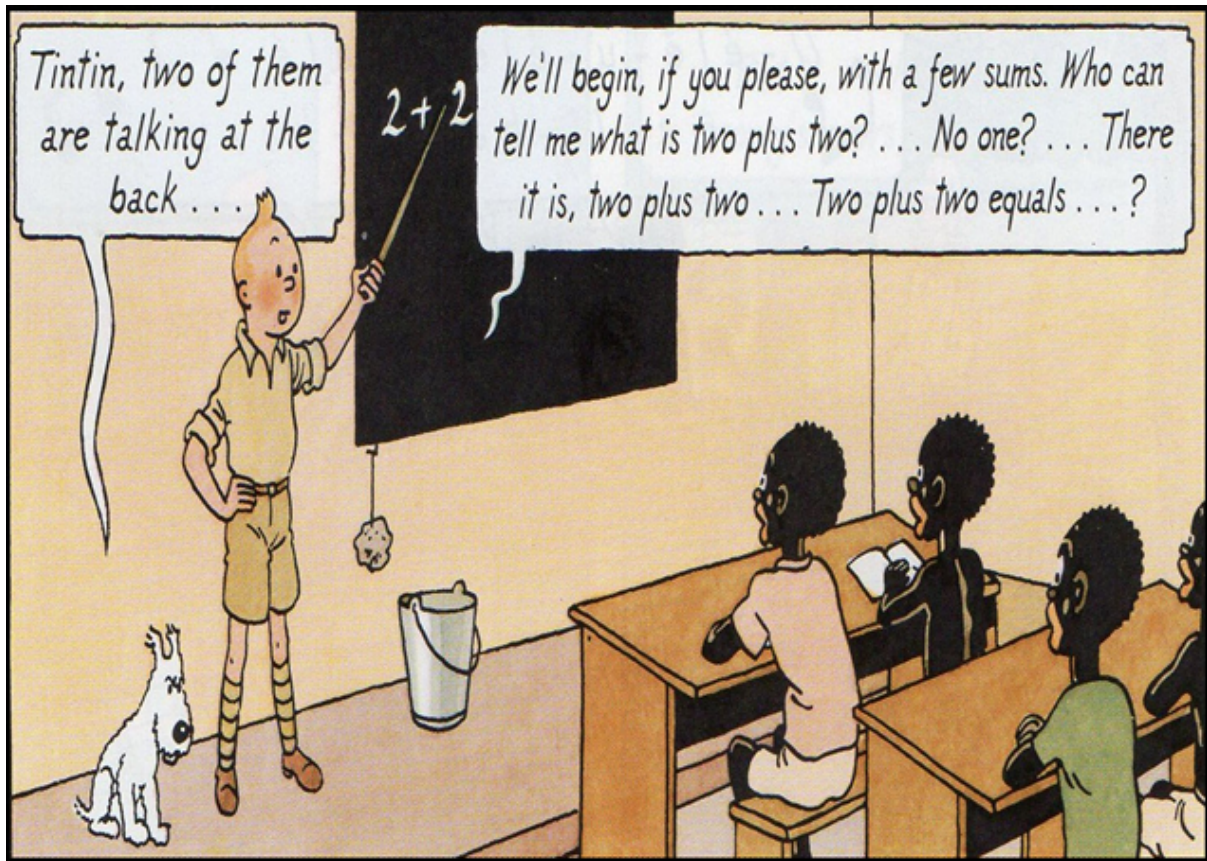
This interview will be conducted in a semi-structured format, consisting of a series of open-ended questions that will allow you to share your thoughts, experiences, and perspectives on the topic. The interview will be approximately an hour long and will be recorded and later transcribed. Before we start the interview, I want to ask again if I have your consent to record this conversation and use the information from the interview for my final report.

We will first start with some general questions, after which I will show you some images and videos and ask you what you think of them and how they make you feel. If at any time during the interview, you feel uncomfortable or want to stop, just let me know.

- **How do you perceive the portrayal of Africa and Africans in Western media?**
- **Do you perceive Africa's portrayal as negative or positive, and have you seen any evolution over time?**
- **Can you name some examples of the portrayal of Africa in the West?**
- **Do you believe that the portrayal of Africa in Western media has an impact on how Africa is viewed globally/ Why or why not?**

The following images are from the 19th and 20th centuries. They include advertisements, illustrations from children's books, and illustrations from textbooks.

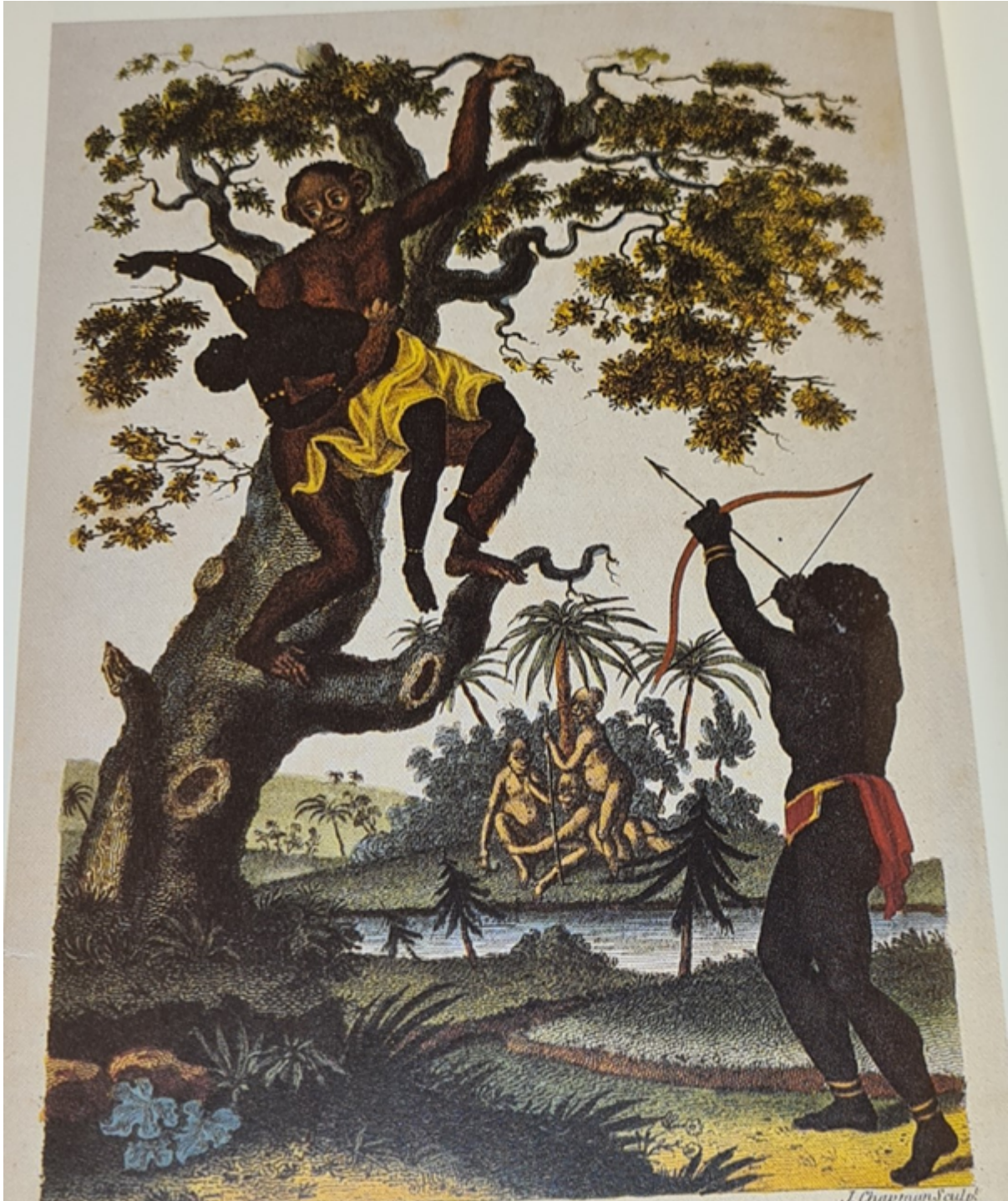
This is an image from a popular comic book from the 20th century called Tintin. In this edition, Tintin goes to the Congo as a missionary (1931).



This is an image of Surinamese natives at a human exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883.



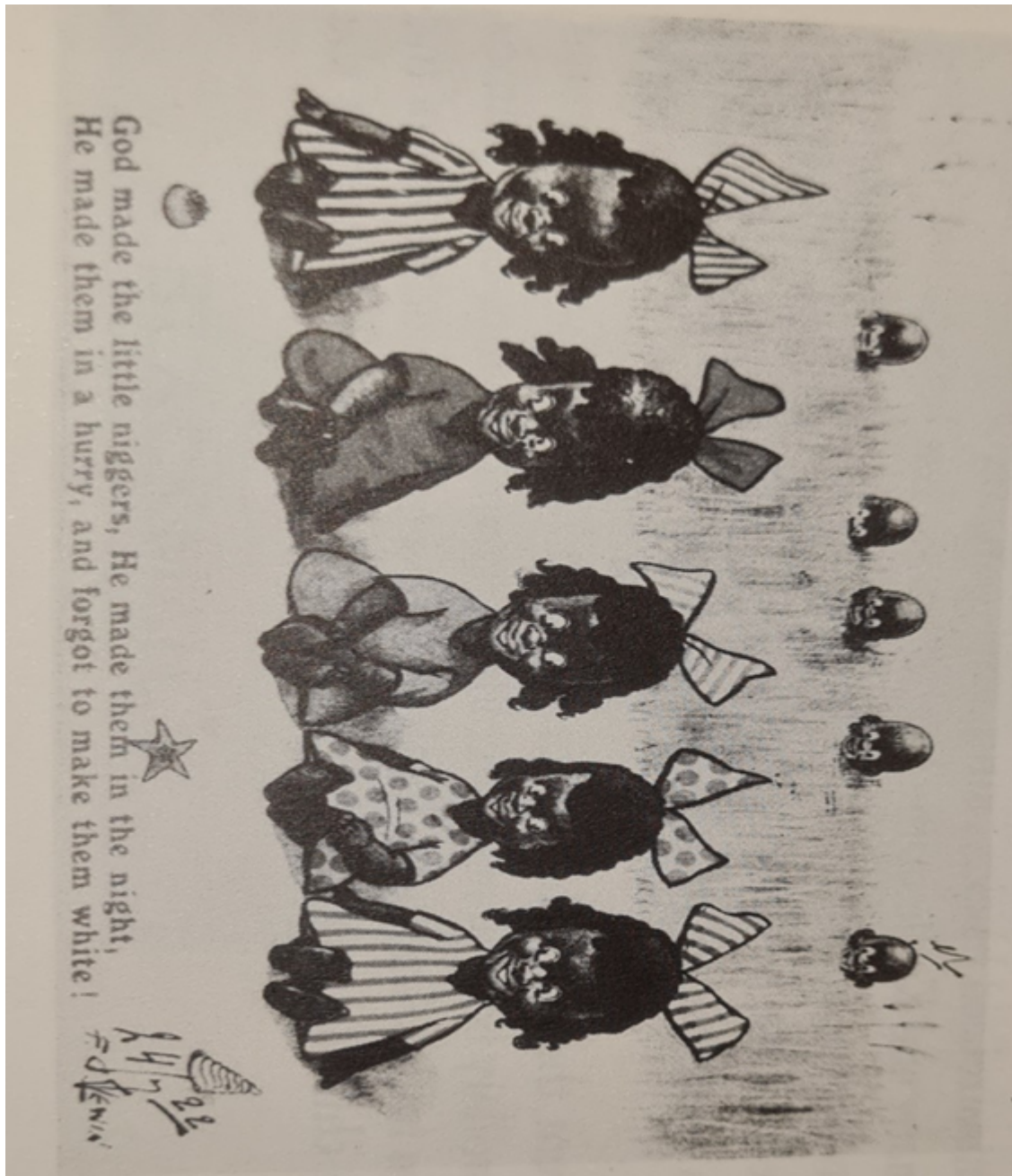
This is an image of an 18th century fable. It depicts intercourse between apes and African women; this was represented as a fact. The offspring of the apes and African women appear in the background (1795).



This is a poster advertising Dobbelmann's Karmemelkzeep. The text on the poster read, "If only you too had washed with Dobbelmann's Buttermilk Soap."  
1910



This is a picture postcard with the caption, "God made the little niggers. He made them in the night, He made them in a hurry, and forgot to make the white." (1922)



- What do you think of the images I just showed you?
- Do you think people's perceptions of Africa, are still being influenced by these portrayals?



The following image and video are more recent images of the portrayal of Africa.

**This is an image of Angelina Jolie doing volunteer work in Kenya for the UNHCR.**




**This is an image of a group of volunteers working at a local school.**



This is an image of a famous model posing with a group of African children.



carolinagynning 

Ghana



This is an image of a doctor treating an African girl.



<https://youtu.be/omm9sfbDmag>

- What do you think of these images? Are they comparable to the images from the 19th and 20th centuries or quite different?
- Do you believe these images create/reinforce certain stereotypes or misconceptions about Africa and Africans?
- Do these portrayals affect your sense of connection to your own African heritage and identity?
- Do you feel this portrayal of Africa affects how non-Africans perceive Africa and Africans?
- Have you ever had personal experiences where people treated you differently based on their perceptions of Africa?

- **Have you seen positive changes in the portrayal of Africa in Western media in recent years?**

[https://youtu.be/xbqA6o8\\_WC0](https://youtu.be/xbqA6o8_WC0)

This video is a skit from a Norwegian group named Radi-Aid. In this video, they portray frequently used stereotypes in fundraising campaigns. Such as hunger and poverty. Their message is that we need to create engagement built on knowledge, not stereotypes. Why? We need to change the way fundraising campaigns communicate issues of poverty and development.

- **What is your opinion on this video and what do you think of the message?**

<https://youtu.be/8DFemg94ufU>

Dr. Chinonso Emmanuel Okorie and MSF (Doctors Without Borders) General Director Lindis Hurum explain how MSF is committed to better representation of our diverse global workforce in our communications and fundraising despite a harmful legacy of using “white savior” images.

- **What is your opinion on this video and what do you think of the message?**
- **What other steps can be taken to improve the portrayal of Africa in Western media?**
- **In your opinion, what role can members of the African diaspora play in shaping the portrayal of Africa in Western media?**

**Those were all the questions I had. Is there anything you would like to add?**