

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-13

The White Man Myth

Paramount Hotel
Freetown, Sierra Leone
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

The Sierra Leone government appears to have decided not to sue Time. I couldn't get any official comment, but I've heard no more about it since an indignant article last week in the government-owned Daily Mail that claimed a story about the country in the July 28 edition was libelous and said the authorities were contemplating court action.

I was unable to get hold of a copy to read the story, "From Athens to an ill-run Sparta—corruption and repression in the realm of 'the Pa'." The clerk at the local distributor told me last week that it hadn't come in. This week she insisted it was sold out, although there are plenty of other old issues in stock. The August 4 and 11 issues went on sale, so apparently the government isn't holding a grudge.

There is what I take to be a good analysis of the article and the furor it caused in this week's West Africa, a magazine out of London that, you will have realized by now, I am impressed by. The writer of the weekly column "Matchet's Diary" says the Time article contains "two serious pieces of misreporting." He blames these on "Time's habit of processing and heavily editing the copy that appears in the magazine." Correspondent Jack E. White he describes as "a most conscientious reporter."

The errors Matchet cites are misrepresentations by omission, both of which compare the situation in Sierra Leone with that of Liberia before the recent coup. The first comparison points out that the Creoles, descendants of freed slaves, form an elite class here as they did in Liberia. It doesn't mention that the Creole have never had political control in independent Sierra Leone, as the Americo-Liberians did since the formation of their country in the early 19th century.

The Time article also points out, according to Matchet, that President Siaka Stevens took power after a coup by junior army officers in 1968, but doesn't mention that the officers overthrew their superiors who had prevented Stevens from assuming power after he had won a national election. The government information service stresses that this was the first, and as far as I know is still the only, opposition victory in an election in Black Africa.

Having given the indignation of the government its due,

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Matchet allows that journalistic accuracy may not be the government's main concern. He refers to a Washington Post article by Leon Dash that makes the comparison with Liberia without distortion. Even then, Matchet writes, it "is not a welcome observation." He believes the government will also object to "the general theme and tone of the article," expressed in the headline, "Sierra Leone bristles with economic discontent."

I've read only vague references to the Post article, but the government is particularly sensitive to criticisms of any kind in the foreign press at the moment. Freetown was flooded with journalists during the summit conference of the Organization of African Unity at the beginning of July and the government hasn't gotten over the unkind things that were subsequently written, particularly in the British papers, and said over the BBC.

The Sierra Leone News Agency, another government operation, issued a mordant rebuttal that castigated two reporters by name, accused British journalists in general of being cheap-skates and agents of imperialism and concluded with the demand: "Let Britain get off our backs and look elsewhere for its nefarious scheming and trouble making."

Such denunciations of the Western press are rampant in Africa. The Liberian minister of information, culture and tourism recently denounced the foreign press for its biased reporting. In Senegal, President Leopold Senghor has threatened to ban French newspapers that make "hasty generalizations" about his country "without backing them up with facts."

Why are African leaders so incensed by uncomplimentary remarks in foreign newspapers? As Senghor makes clear, damaging accounts can easily be prevented from reaching the local populace. Surely it's the man and woman on the street in Dakar and Freetown who pose a threat to Senghor's and Stevens' regimes, not people on the streets, or even in the company board rooms or government offices, of London, Paris or Washington. The two presidents shouldn't be concerned about what their brethren in other African countries will think, since they all get the same treatment. Remarks about the press at OAU get-togethers probably make old Nixon-Agnew statements sound like high praise.

The Freetown resident doesn't have to buy Time or the Daily Telegraph to read about what's wrong with his country. A local paper, The Tablet, had this to say in an August 2 editorial on the present situation:

"The high level of materialism displayed by men in public office these days has raised more than the eyebrows of the people. They too have expectations, ambitions or even just a wish to live decently. Without this wish being granted, they, however, witness the splendour and opulence of the leaders and they ask...where are these men leading us?"

I've read similarly harsh statements in the smudged ditto sheets of the free press in Dakar. With such thoughts being expressed at home, why are the leaders of these countries worried about what's being said abroad?

This question flickered before me as I began my study of Western influences on culture in Sierra Leone. The answer I came up with after my first plunge into Freetown society is disturbing. Sierra Leoneans seem much preoccupied with thoughts

of a conceptualized white man who embodies their fears and hates and desires. The idea seems to be taking on the proportions of a myth that "the white man" is responsible for all Africa's ills.

In The Challenge of Africa by K.A. Busia, the author defines the challenge of culture in Africa as "the search for self-confidence and self-respect based on a past rediscovered and reappraised." That Africans should have to re-create a culture of self-affirmation is a regrettable legacy of colonialism. That they should try to achieve it by putting down "the white man" is demeaning rather than ennobling.

Sierra Leone has an award for gallantry called the Medal of the Mosquito. An explanation of the award is given in the government's Handbook of Sierra Leone: "Sierra Leone became known as 'The White-man's Grave' in its early history largely through the mosquito which spreads malaria. It is believed that this insect through this dreadful disease prevented the 'white-man' from making a permanent settlement in Sierra Leone which may have otherwise been another Rhodesia."

Where is the gallantry in that? Besides the inhumanity of honoring the carrier of diseases that killed hundreds of European government officials, missionaries and traders, and many of the early black settlers, how does the presence of malaria in their land reflect honor on Sierra Leoneans? If I had heard instead of read it, I might have thought the Medal of the Mosquito was the sick joke of a warped and bitter colonialist.

Throughout the Sixties, African writers produced works that depicted the good qualities of traditional African society. The purpose was to restore pride of heritage to a people culturally emasculated by colonial rule. By the Seventies, many critics had grown tired of this theme, pointing out that by harping on it writers were defeating their purpose. The worth of African culture should be taken for granted by Africans. Besides, a decade of independence should have given writers plenty of new material.

Yet two plays by the Sierra Leonean playwright Dele Charley that I saw this week repeat the old refrain. The first, "The Blood of a Stranger," written in 1975, is described in a Unesco pamphlet on culture in Sierra Leone as the country's most popular play. In it, a king's son foils a white man's plan to steal diamonds from a tribal homeland. He kills the white man and is banished by his father for breaking the law.

In the sequel, "The Return of Kindo," written in 1979, the white man, in the form of a district commissioner, is again evil incarnate. Kindo, the king's son, is again the perfect hero, unassailable in his power and omniscient of the white man's nefarious ways. Yet his grandeur is diminished by the weakness of his adversaries. Whitehead, the diamond thief in the first play, is a caricature; Stanley, the district commissioner, is a clown.

The house loved it. It cheered Kindo's condemnations of the white man and laughed at Stanley's and Whitehead's humiliations. Yet the one-dimensional quality of the plots took away their sting. I was the only white person in the audience on opening night. I felt no hostility, though I can't say I detected much good will.

The second play had an unexpected ending. Kindo is shot treacherously by a black mercenary whom the hero had subdued. As he dies a drawn-out death, Kindo spares the life of his killer. Better he should live with what he has done, the hero gasps, having sold out his race for the white man's silver.

The playwright seems to be indicting any African who has come to terms with the white man's world. Such a message would be aimed directly at the elite audiences who attend plays performed in English. Certainly the fashionably Western-dressed crowd had accepted much of the white man's world. It didn't seem to take the playwright's condemnation to heart. It laughed at Kindo's lingering demise and the suicide of his bereaved father that ends the play. I got the impression a night at the theater is strictly for enjoyment, not edification.

As I said, this was only my first dip into the cultural life of Freetown. I expect, and I hope, to find works that deal honestly with Sierra Leone's past and present problems without setting up a white straw man.

Still, I see a disturbing pattern in the examples mentioned: the excessive criticisms of foreign press accounts of problems that are similarly depicted in local newspapers; the glorification of a disease that has a high mortality rate for Caucasians; the use of the white man as a stock villain, butt of one-liners and victim of pratfalls.

It serves the interests of bad government to make a composite entity of "the white man" that can be blamed for any problem in society. The artist should try to destroy such myths, not contribute to them. White men have much to answer for in the evils done to this land by colonialism and in the inequity of the present market system. Melding them together into "the white man" conceals their individual responsibility, and as an enemy makes them appear more formidable than they are.

The real problem, however, is not people but an economic system that forces people to take advantage of each other. Some Africans are profiting from that system, and hiding behind "the white man" to do it.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn