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Full Length Research Paper

The persistence of western negative perceptions about Africa: Factoring in the role of Africans[i]

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Africa has continued to be looked down upon by the Western powers. Negative perceptions and representations such as civil wars, hunger, corruption, greed, selfishness, diseases, poverty, and the like have been the defining characters of Africa and the Africans in the minds of many Western people. While the mainstream media has been blamed for much of Africa's negative perceptions, little has been done to establish how Africans have actively assisted the Western nations to continue perceiving Africa negatively. The paper used a historical approach and secondary sources to examine the role Africans have played in the persistence of Western negative perceptions about Africa. The main argument is that the persistence of such negative views about Africa suggests that Africans have played an active and important role. It is concluded that Africa's current and future development will continue to depend on how Africans view themselves before the Westerners and how they seek to be viewed by the West.

Key words: Africa, negative perceptions, Africans, Western perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

Africa and the Africans have always been looked down upon by Western nations from long time ago. Racial theories were expounded to explain Africa's perceived backwardness, barbarism, and incapacity to develop until after they came in contact with supposedly superior races that brought them development and civilisation. To many Europeans during the 19th century, all that was there in Africa before the coming of the Europeans was savage chaos which was fortunately resolved by the conquerors as they brought 'civilisation to peoples against whom the Gates of Eden had barely closed' (Davidson, 1972, p. 9). Negative perceptions about Africa date back to the days of Herodotus who suggested that Africa was not only different, but also more threatening, sinister and dangerous than Greece (Bates, 2012). Since then, western scholars and the general public picked such ideas and carried them along as they justified their colonial political and economic subjection of Africa.

More than fifty years after attainment of political independence, Africa is still viewed negatively in the eyes of the Westerners. Even when they have come up to postulate the continent positively, with the current 'Africa Rising' buzzword for example, this is still questionable as it barely challenges the very basis of long held negative perceptions (Bond, 2014; Bates, 2012). Some commentators would for example associate recent record

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economic growth in Africa with implementation of western based neoliberal reforms, an argument which implies that recent economic growth would not have happened if not for the Western based structural adjustment policy prescriptions (Mbom, 2013).

The persistence of Western negative perceptions about Africa has generally been blamed on biased media reports and films about the goings in Africa (Tesfaye, 2014; Garrick, 2012; Ogunyemi, 2011; Evans and Glenn, 2010; Michira, 2002; Kern-Foxworth, 1985). Nowhere has Western negative perceptions about Africa been associated with the Africans, thus laying the burden of blame on the West. A proper analysis of the issue requires treating Africans as active agents in the persistence of Western negative perceptions especially now that it is over 50 years since attainment of independence. This paper, therefore, aimed at examining the role Africans have played in the persistence of negative perceptions about the continent. It finds out that the persistence of negative perceptions about Africa can better be understood in the context of active African agency. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section two describes the methodology used for this study after which follows a section of the evolution of Western negative perceptions about Africa over time. Section four presents factors for the persistence of Western negative perceptions about Africa. Building on this discussion, section five examines the role Africans have been playing in the persistence of negative views about Africa and the Africans. Lastly, a conclusion summarising the main arguments and providing implications of the findings is given at the end.

METHODS

This study was basically a secondary research. Secondary research is a type of research that involves collection of data that already exists about a particular issue/topic/community (The Wallace Foundation, 2009). The paper used a historical approach to trace how Western perceptions about Africa have evolved over time and what role Africans have been playing in the continuation of such views and perceptions. Therefore, relevant information was sourced from secondary and electronic sources that specifically address the topic of the paper. Information for this paper was, therefore, drawn from academic literature including books and journals, non-academic literature such as reports, and internet sources. Thus, only sources with information on the topic were selected for the current study. This was done in order to acquire reliable and valid information about the topic.

Western perceptions about Africa: evolution over time

Africa has been an object of Western negative perceptions for quite a long time now. Claims such as those regarding the continent and its people as incapable of any independent and meaningful development are neither new nor recent. Today, if one speaks of Africa what comes in the mind of many Europeans and Americans are images of famine and hunger, civil wars and military coups, diseases, poverty, aid dependence, corruption, etc (Cohen, 2014; Cargill, 2010; Araya, 2008; Dowden, 2009). As one scholar points out,

> The people of Africa have been traumatized. European colonizers denigrated them for centuries as "subhumans" and denied them recognition of any meaningful intellectual, cultural, and historical accomplishments or experience. Called "savages," millions of Africans were carted off in bondage as slaves to the Americas. Even when Charles Darwin speculated that it was Africa, not Garden of Eden in the Near or Far East, whence the evolution of the human race should be traced, intellectual prejudices of the time precipitated a spirited rejection of the notion that something good could originate from Africa. Allegedly, its people had no history, no culture, no civilisation, and nothing of value to contribute to the creation of the human being (Ayittey, 1992, pp. 3-4).

Such perceptions about Africa predate the 19th century colonial conquest. For example, in the early 19th century Hegel wrote, in his Philosophy of History, that Africa was not a historical continent, that it was capable of neither development nor education and that its people were always like that (Fage, 1989). Other scholars such as Benjamin ben Jonah had earlier in the 12th century characterized Africans as people who eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile, and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and any one they can find.... And these are the black slaves, the sons of Ham (Leviant, 2008, p. 353).

Such racial characterization and prejudices found their way through to the 17th century and beyond, thus influencing Western public and scholarly perceptions of Africa. From the 17th century, the argument was that Africa was a place of suffering because the slave trade provoked war, disease, famine and poverty; anti-Abolitionists said Africa was so forbidding as to make slavery in foreign countries a positive escape.… Colonialism went even further; because of what they thought they knew about Africa – a land of fantastical beasts and cannibals, slaves, 'backward races' and so on – the colonial powers managed to convince themselves that they were subjugating Africans (and others) *for their own good*. European violence was going to stop the wars endemic to Africa, and their enlightened (over-)rule would be to the benefit of all… (Bates 2012, para. 6&8).

This persisted throughout the 19th and 20th century colonial period. Anyone who dared speak about positive indigenous achievements in Africa was a laughing stock as racial ideas related to the Hamitic myth were still dominant. The Hamitic hypothesis/myth posited that anything of value in Africa was brought by the supposedly superior Hamitic race, allegedly a branch of the Caucasian race, which conquered and imposed its civilisation on the Africans (Sanders, 1969, p. 521). Thus, it is not surprising to see that, in 1930, Charles G. Seligman came with an argument that any achievement seen in Africa was due to the influence of the superior Hamitic race which conquered the continent and infused its civilisation to the rest of the peoples of Africa such as the Negroes and Bushmen (Fage, 1989).

Unfortunately, these negative perceptions persisted throughout the 20th century and are still lingering in the minds of the Westerners even today. In the mid 1960s when many African countries were becoming independent an Oxford Professor, Trevor-Roper, still believed there was nothing of value to be called African history; all that was there was 'the history of the Europeans in Africa', the rest was darkness (Trevor-Roper, 1965, p. 1, cited in Murungi, 2013, p. 10).

More than fifty years of independence have also not helped erase negative images about Africa. The economic and political malaise inflicting Africa since the late 1970s made matters worse to the extent of reviving the old colonial perceptions that regarded Africans as incapable of independently developing themselves. The Ethiopian famine of the 1980s shocked the world and inspired the global Band Aid and Live Aid movement (Oxfam, 2009). Although well intentioned, the movement revived the old racial prejudices and negative perceptions about Africa, depicting the continent and its

people as helpless, as people waiting for the West to come and sort their problems out (Badawi, 2014). The structural adjustment programmes had a similar consequence. Being designed by the West and forced on African governments to be implemented, the programmes had one major consequence: depicting Africans as people who need foreign thinkers and planners to think and plan on their behalf.

More importantly, such negative perceptions are unfortunately held by Western high profile officials. The former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, is one good example. In his 2007 speech at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal, he made blatant comments reminiscent of what the 19th and 20th century scholars made about Africa when he said that, the tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history.… The problem of Africa, and allow a friend of Africa to say it, is to be found here. Africa's challenge is to enter to a greater extent into history; to take from it the energy, the force, the desire, the willingness to listen and to espouse its own history (Africa Resource, 2007, para. 55-59).

Such a comment resonate very well with what the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said of Africa in 2001 when he said that 'The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it. And if we don't, it will become deeper and angrier' (Blair, 2001, para. 72).

Thus, negative images of Africa still persist in the minds of many Western scholars and common people. My experience with the African Voices Programme[1] is also revealing of this. Many children I worked with in the programme knew Africa as a place of hot temperatures, hunger and famine, poverty, wars, diseases, dirty water, a place where people walk bare footed, etc. This is despite the fact that there are attempts to encourage positive portrayal of Africa.

The current 'Africa Rising' mantra is one good example. Those who ascribe to this use recent record economic growth in many African countries to argue that Africa is indeed changing. But this does not go far to eliminate long held negative views. That it has come at this time when the West is still recovering from the woes of the global financial and economic crisis itself tells of the fact that the subscribers may be using it to try to cover up the long held negative perceptions (Bond, 2014; Bates, 2012). In fact, the phrase 'Africa Rising' itself may not be as positive as many think it to be. That Africa is rising now may be taken to imply that it has been stagnant all that long; that it is just waking up from a slumber. Actually, as Robert Kappel argues, such a 'Africa Rising' hype is an exaggeration of what is happening in Africa by the media and consulting firms in an attempt to create a positive image that would attract reluctant investors into the continent (Kappel, 2014).

But even with this growth mantra, it is not the efforts of the Africans that is associated with it. It is rather the structural adjustment policies prescribed by the West that have made African economies grow as they have today (Mbom, 2013; Chuhan-Pole and Angwafo 2011). In an interview with Think Africa Press, the World Bank's Africa Division Chief Economist, Shantayanan Devarajan, said the following about Africa's growth:

There is no question that one of the major reasons for Africa's growth over the last 10–15 years is because of macro-economic policies have [sic] improved.... The reason is that African policy-makers followed Structural Adjustment Programmes over the last 10 – 15 years. It worked, it delivered results. It delivered economic growth and poverty reduction. You can't dispute that (Mbom, 2013, para. 17-18).

[1] This is a programme run by the Leeds University Centre for African Studies (LUCAS). It recruits MA and PhD students from Africa at the University of Leeds to spend a day in the UK Primary schools working with children to challenge their perceptions of Africa. I worked on the programme in 2012 when doing an MA at Leeds.

This is further made clearer in a lecture delivered by Jim Adams who worked with the World Bank for 37 years:

Yet if one looks at the economic scene of Africa today, one cannot help but be impressed by the tremendous changes that mark economic performance in countries that were serious about reform. Overall growth rates are robust, budgets are far more disciplined, agricultural prices have been liberalised, market-driven exchange systems are universal, governments have been downsized, regulations have been reduced, there is broad emergence of a more effective private sector and increased resources have been deployed to expand programs in education and health. ... *I firmly believe that history will conclude that the long-term impact of the difficult reforms that marked the 80s and 90s in Africa have been overwhelmingly positive* (Adams, 2013, pp. 4-5, emphasis added).

As it appears from this analysis, it is obvious that negative perceptions about Africa continue to persist. Over time, perceptions about Africa have consistently remained negative. Labels may have been changing but the content and the message remain the same: that Africa cannot stand alone; it needs the West to develop itself and solve its numerous challenges. As one scholar argues, 'No matter how many television programmes, articles and campaigns try to change perceptions, these views dominate' (Cargill, 2010, p. 20). But the question is: why have such perceptions continued to persist?

Explaining the persistence of Western negative perceptions about Africa: the mainstream views

The persistence of negative perceptions about Africa and the Africans during the 19th and 20th century colonial Africa is understandable given the fact that European colonial powers sought to justify their activities and domination of Africa. Creating inferiority complex among the Africans was very vital for the survival of colonial rule and exploitation. This is why Africans were then regarded as sub-species of the homo-sapiens who belonged to the "child races of the world" (Chachage, 1987, pp. 13-14). But that these negative perceptions persist even in the 21st century has much more than the need to exalt European superiority over the Africans.

Many scholars emphasize the role of media coverage of Africa as being important in explaining the persistence of negative perceptions about the continent (Tesfaye, 2014; Garrick, 2012; Ogunyemi, 2011; Evans and Glenn, 2010; Michira, 2002; Kern-Foxworth, 1985). The news coverage in the mainstream media, films about Africa and those featuring the Africans, as well as advertisements about Africa are generally regarded to be biased against Africa as they overemphasise negative issues at the expense of the positive developments. A recent study about the coverage of Ethiopia on BBC and CNN news websites reports that little has changed in the way the media reports about Ethiopia because there is still a focus on the negative side and the use of negative framing (Tesfaye, 2014). This is also evident in the Economist characterisation of Africa as a hopeless continent a decade ago (though it regretted this characterisation and rebranded Africa as a rising star in 2011) (The Economist, 2000, 2011). The images portrayed in the mainstream media about Africa are so enduring that they create lasting impressions about Africa in the minds of the viewers. According to one scholar, After exposure of Americans to *Tarzan* many erroneous concepts pertinent to Africa and its peoples were developed. To date, programs that depict Africa favorably are almost nonexistent. And without exposure to media that dispel the myths promulgated by *Tarzan*, many Americans, both black and white, are left with remote ideas of what to expect or find on the African continent (Kern-Foxworth, 1985, p. 157). This is made even clearer by Richard Dowden who pounds at the media as having created an image of Africa that spells doom:

The recent campaign to change Africa's image accuses the media of creating a false impression of Africa's reality. Some even suggest there is a conspiracy against the continent by foreign journalists. Say 'Africa' to people who have never been there and they will describe a sick and starving child and men with guns. The news of Africa has been almost exclusively about poverty, wars and death (Dowden, 2009, p. 4).

The reasons given for the continued negative portrayal of Africa in the Western media have to do with commercial interests given the fact that it is negative news that sell (Dowden, 2009): '…media organizations take their lead from ratings. When it comes to Africa, the ratings seem to vote for stories of despair and neediness…' (Garrick, 2012, para. 4).

Such images are also prevalent in the films about Africa or those that feature African characters. It is not uncommon to see black characters portrayed as aggressive, rebels, thieves, etc in many western films; thus perpetuating the long held negative perceptions. For example, in an examination of five movies (*Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *The Interpreter* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006)), it was found that 'these films effectively create an image of Africa as "other to the 'economically developed,' safe west" and equate the continent with famine, disease, violence, and political turmoil, even if this was never the journalists'—or filmmakers'—intention' (Evans & Glenn, 2010, p. 15). Unfortunately, such negative labels about Africa and the Africans are not only directed to the Africans in Africa but to dark skinned Americans of African descent. Examining media coverage of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Chaney and Robertson report that media reports assign different labels to tragic deaths of white and black people i.e. the word 'angels' only used for the white children shot dead while at school and never applied to Black children who were tragically killed in the inner city (Chaney and Robertson, 2013).

Related to media portrayal of Africa are the international nongovernmental organisations fund raising campaigns for their activities in Africa. The strategies and images they use are also significant in the persistence of negative perceptions about Africa. In their quest to raise funds for their administrative and 'humanitarian' activities, most NGOs find themselves compelled to use images of child soldiers, emaciated children, slums, dirt, etc. to make viewers compassionate about the situation and therefore convince them to donate funds. Though these images usually help NGOs to raise needed funds, they unfortunately paint a negative image of Africa. Even the words and facts used are carefully chosen to attract attention and compassion. Visit the website of Save the Children and you will realise the following statements are carefully and tactfully designed to make potential donors to donate as well as make them believe they are a reason for why many children in Africa are alive today:

Sub-Saharan Africa, [sic] is the poorest region in the world. Half of all the deaths of children under the age of five occur in the region. West and Central Africa has the world's highest numbers of babies dying within the first 28 days of their life (http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/africa).

And then this one, *Poverty colours every aspect of children's lives in Tanzania*. But it doesn't have to be that way. *Because of our work*, babies who once would have died in their first weeks are surviving. Children stunted by malnutrition are growing up healthier. Children subject to violence or abuse now have recourse to justice (http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/where-we-work/africa/tanzania, emphasis added).

Western children and adults looking at these images and reading such statements are made to receive unchallenged messages about the developing world and this forms their impressions of people and places there (Tallon, 2012). By using such images and statements, NGOs find themselves entangled in the paradox of simultaneously endorsing, constructing, and undermining the humanitarian principles espoused by the NGOs concerned (Manzo, 2008, p. 635). This reinforces negative perceptions about Africa.

The media is not the only one at the forefront of perpetuating negative stereotypes about Africa. Academic analysis and writing about Africa also tend to be pre-occupied with negative depiction of the continent. There are so many books about Africa whose cover images and titles are negative. Such books as *The Trouble with Africa* (Calderisi, 2007), *Africa in Chaos* (Ayittey, 1999), *Africa Betrayed* (Ayittey, 1992), *No Refuge: The Crisis of Refugee Militarization in Africa* (Muggah, 2006), and *Everyday Corruption and the State: Citizens and Public Officials in Africa* (Blundo & de Sardan, 2006) only help to paint a negative image of Africa even if the writers do not intend it to be that way. Instead of being specific and cautious of sweeping generalisations, writers and publishers seem to find it easier and convenient to title their books negatively to capture the attention of their readers. Sometimes, arguments made in the books and journals also enhance the persistence of negative perceptions. Arguments such as the following that call for more donor funding to alleviate poverty on assumption that the poor cannot afford the cost of poverty reduction only serve to perpetuate the thinking that Africans cannot do it on their own without assistance from the West (Evans and Glenn, 2010):

Without donor funding, alas, the necessary investments simply cannot be financed. No matter how hard a government might try- through taxes, user fees, or privatisation- the poor households at $300 per person simply do not have enough income to meet their basic needs and at the same time finance the accumulation of capital (Sachs, 2005, p. 250).

These arguments, like those in the media, are appealing to writers and students of Africa. They are very common in the industry of writing about Africa. They rightly conform to an ironic argument by Wainaina (2008) that if one wants to write about Africa, he/she must treat Africa as a single country and as a place where hope rests upon Western philanthropy.

Even those scholars who come out to challenge long held negative perceptions about Africa find themselves concluding with more or less the same observations. In one of his recent books, Graham Harrison criticises unfounded Western negative perceptions about Africa but he himself concludes in a way that reinforces the same perceptions: 'If the World Bank, the IMF, and associated donors and policy advocates retreat, governments might pursue more aggressively strategies of dispossession, patriarchal neotraditionalism and simple self-aggrandisement' (Harrison, 2010, p. 148). Such a conclusion falls within the same perception that left alone, Africa is not capable of addressing its own development challenges.

Also significant is how the international community designate African countries and how this makes the Western continue perceiving Africa as a place characterised by poverty, failed states, etc. For a very long time now, Sub-Saharan African countries have been classified as the Least Developed Countries (LCDs) or Least Income Countries (LICs), Third World countries, highly indepeted poor countries (HIPCs), etc. Income measures such as economic growth, gross domestic product (GDP), gross national product (GNP), GDP per capita, poverty line, etc have been used to designate African countries as LDCs and LICs. All these labels connote negativity, thus making Africa appear as a hopeless continent that is characterised by poverty and with many people living below the poverty line.

As a result, what one hears in the international discourse is how many people live below the $1.25 a day and how they need to be assisted to become economically prosperous. Little mention is made of the assets they possess, how they define themselves and who those living above the poverty line are and how they escaped 'poverty'. Unfortunately, therefore, many people are made to

uncritically believe that this is the reality that defines Africa.

Consequently, the complex and diverse nature of economic conditions of the Africans is reduced to sweeping economic generalisations and characterisation. As long as this serves justifying international institutions, organisations and the aid industry's activities in Africa, no one dares to question the categorisation and generalisation of African conditions, not even the Africans themselves.

All that said, what appears from this analysis is the fact that explaining why negative perceptions about Africa persist today has largely been externalised. How Africans have aided the West to continue perceiving the continent negatively has not adequately been established. Thus, examining how Africans have made negative perceptions persist is critical for a balanced analysis of the phenomenon and for treating Africans as active agents in the process of development and accompanying perceptions of their continent.

THE PERSISTENCE OF NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT AFRICA: THE ROLE OF AFRICANS

The persistence of negative perceptions in the 21st century may have more to do with what Africans do and how they perceive themselves against the Westerners. There are several ways through which Africans have actively assisted the West to continue perceiving the continent and its people negatively.

One of the ways by which the West has been defining Africa is through wars, political instabilities and corruption. Although these are by no means what characterize Africa in its entirety, the fact remains that these have really existed and continue to exist in some parts of Africa. The continent is ranked the most corrupt region in the world in one of the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Indices (Transparency International, 2010). Similarly, it is estimated that Africa loses $ 148 billion, equivalent to 25% of the GDP of African states, to corruption every year (Blunt, 2002). On a similar note, Africa is also said to be losing much of its needed financial resources to capital flight and illicit financial outflows. A recent study estimates that Africa has lost about $1.8 trillion to illicit financial outflows in a period from 1980 to 2008 (Global Financial Integrity, 2010, p. 1). These financial resources loss are too high to be compensated for by the inflows of foreign aid and investment.

In all this, African leaders have been central to the losses. No one came to teach Africans to be corrupt. The most corrupt African leaders for which Africa is known (such as Mobutu Sese Seko and Sani Abacha) were Africans who were born and grew up in Africa. They amassed billions of dollars and stashed the monies in offshore accounts. They knew what they were doing and what impact that would have on their countries and their people.

Although one may argue that Mobutu, for example, was a foreign stooge supported by foreign powers to loot Zaire (now Congo DRC), no one can dispute the fact that he was a rational human being who knew what he was doing. No matter how much Africans try to externalize such corrupt practices, the reality is that corrupt African leaders were not taught nor forced to be corrupt by the West. Because Africans have actively engaged themselves in corrupt practices, and many times helped the West loot the continent, there is no doubt that externalising Western negative perceptions of Africa is just unfair and biased.

As for wars and political instability, Africa is well known. Political instability and wars have been an enduring feature in some of the post-independence African states (Kieh, 2009; Ong'ayo, 2008). It is argued that,

Over the last 40 years nearly 20 African countries (or about 40 percent of Africa south of the Sahara (SSA)) have experienced at least one period of civil war. It is estimated that 20% of SSA's population now lives in countries which are formally at war and low-intensity conflict has become endemic to many other African states. *This state of affairs has created stereotypes of Africa as a doomed continent with inescapable ethnic cleavages and violent tribal conflict. The more incidents of political violence we observe in Africa, the more support for this simplistic and negative perception* (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000, p. 244, emphasis added).

Moreover, During the four decades between the 1960s and the 1990s, there have been about 80 violent changes of governments (Adedeji, 1999, 3) in the 48 sub-Saharan African countries. During the same period many of these countries also experienced different types of civil strife, conflicts, and wars. At the beginning of the new millennium, there were 18 countries facing armed rebellion, 11 facing severe political crises (Adedeji, 1999, 5), and 19 enjoying more or less various states of stable political condition. And some of the countries in the last two categories have only recently moved from the first category (Bujra, 2002, p. 1).

Unfortunately, some African countries are still beset by such conflicts and instabilities. Countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo DRC), Central African Republic, etc are good examples. That said, what should be blamed for countless wars and instabilities in post-independence Africa? Scholars have debated on what has been the root cause of the wars in Africa. Some have emphasised that wars and instabilities have been a function of poverty, struggle for resources, and failed political institutions (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000). Others however have laid blame on elite struggle for capturing the state, transition to democracy and its consequence on ethnic diversity and identity for many of the conflicts in Africa (Bujra, 2002). Whatever side one takes, it is obvious that wars and instabilities in Africa are a reflection of internal weaknesses rather than external manipulations. Even where external factors have had an important role (in Angola and Congo DRC, for example), this has been because of the enabling conditions in Africa.

Nowhere in Africa has a conflict been imposed from outside the country. Wars and instabilities have therefore been triggered and sustained by the Africans themselves. As such, it is not surprising to see the West continuing to perceive the continent negatively. As long as wars and instabilities persist in African countries, the West will continue perceiving the continent negatively. Notions such as 'a continent in turmoil' will persist.

A plethora of surveillance/monitoring organizations such as the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the Embassies and the United Nations that are spread everywhere in Africa on assumption that African governments need to be monitored (Bujra, 2002) is a reflection of the long held view of Africa's incapacity to stand on its own, itself surviving on the actions of the Africans themselves. As one scholar argues, we cannot continue blaming the West for political instabilities in Africa; we should rather blame the leaders for having neglected lessons from history (Bassey, 2014). The continued Western negative perceptions about Africa on the basis of conflicts and wars rests upon the fact that these actually exist and that they have not been imposed on the Africans by the West (although they may have been supported by the West). The primary responsibility rests on the Africans who create conditions for the occurrence of the conflicts.

Secondly, negative perceptions about Africa have persisted because the African leaders and the Africans have accepted them as what should define them. Although many Africans are discontented by the Western negative perceptions about the continent, their practices suggest the contrary. Many African leaders would repeat the negative images associated with Africa when they are in international meetings. As long as poverty, conflicts, diseases, etc continue to provide them with an easier route to foreign aid attraction, African leaders continue to repeat these same images and at times would want to make international allies believe these are what define Africa. Think of the impact of the statements of African leaders that portray poverty as a reality people live with in Africa (Kikwete, 2014) can have on largely Western participants to forum on ending extreme poverty. Or such statements by H.E. the late Meles Zenawi that 'African states are by definition weak…' (Zenawi, 1999, p. 2, cited in Bujra 2002, p. 42). Some would publicly declare that Africa cannot go anywhere to develop itself without foreign 'partners'; despising local investors as having no capacity to invest in some sectors. A classic example is provided by a recent row between Tanzania's minister for Energy and Minerals, Professor Sospeter M. Muhongo, and the Tanzania Private Sector Foundation (TPSF) following the minister's statement that local Tanzanians are incapable of investing in natural gas exploration; that they can only invest in fruit processing plants and that the government will not waste time discussing with them (Domasa, 2014).

Sometimes, African leaders would go an extra mile to despise their traditional institutions and policy choices, and praise Western based policy prescriptions as having saved Africa from economic and political crises. Even when it is obvious that these policies have had similar or adverse impact on the African majority, the leaders would just disregard the negatives and focus on the 'positives' of the Western based economic and political reforms. Rarely do they speak of the positives of local initiatives soon after independence. The following quotation from H.E. Jakaya Kikwete's recent key note speech in Washington, DC is revealing of this:

My dear country Tanzania is a typical example of a country that enjoyed uninterrupted peace and stability since independence yet we are one of the LDCs from 1971 when LDCs classification started. Besides a hostile global environment, economic policies pursued soon after independence which did not succeed has [sic] a big hand in this state of affairs. As a matter of fact, the economy declined to dangerous lows. *Things began to change after the introduction of economic reforms from the 1980s. We have stayed the cause of reforms ever since with remarkable success. The country is now enjoying strong macro-economic performance with the last decade being exceptionally successful* (Kikwete, 2014, para. 8, emphasis added).

Such statements resonate very well with Western views that Africa is incapable of independently developing itself; that it needs foreign assistance. When these statements are uttered by Africans and especially by the leaders, they are so powerful that they leave a permanent negative image in the minds of the Westerners who have never been to Africa. And this means that one cannot speak of the persistence of Western negative views about Africa without contextualising it in the way Africans characterize the continent before the West. While it may be true that such negative labels may have been created by the West, their continued use in the 21st century suggests that Africans have done little to define themselves otherwise; they have rather picked them up and used them to define themselves and their continent. This only provides an opportunity to the West to cling on their negative perceptions about Africa.

Africa's dependence on foreign aid and investment has also meant that the perception that Africa cannot develop itself is sustained. Since independence in the 1960s, many African countries have been dependent on foreign aid to finance their development projects and for humanitarian and military activities. It is reported that Official Development Assistance (ODA) to sub Saharan Africa was equivalent to about 12% of the continent's Gross National Income (GNI) (excluding Nigeria and South Africa) in 2005 (Moss et al., 2006, p. 2). Furthermore, about half of the region's countries received more than 10% of GNI in ODA, and 11 countries received more than 20% (Moss et al., 2006, p. 3). While many

believe aid has done more harm than good to the recipient countries and suggest that it should be stopped or reduced (Moyo, 2009; Glennie, 2008; Calderisi, 2007), there are others who still believe aid works and more needs to be pumped into Africa (Riddell, 2014, 2007; Commission for Africa, 2005; Sachs, 2005).

Many African leaders have been touring the developed countries begging for aid to finance their development. Today, it is not surprising to see some leaders listing winning confidence of donors as one of their regime achievements. For example, when H.E. Benjamin William Mkapa, the former president of Tanzania, was leaving office, one of the achievements his regime recorded was putting Tanzania into the list of countries to be forgiven of their debts, and continue receiving loans and grants (Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), 2011; Chama Cha Mapinduzi, 2005). Today, the reason the Kikwete regime gives to defend numerous and costly international journeys is that each journey brings in significant aid and investment money. In other words, one may say Kikwete goes around the world begging for aid, a pratice that strengthens Western perceptions about the inability of Africa to develop itself. This has become a common practice even in the NGO and civil society organisations (CSOs) circles where funding is heavily drawn from donors. NGOs and CSOs would do whatever it takes (even if it is by using images that are negative and biased against Africa) to secure funding from donors, many of whom are in the West (Odembo, no date).

It is not the intention of this paper to go into the details of this debate. What can be discerned, however, is the fact that reliance on foreign aid is not only making Africa a prey of Western economic interests but also helping keep the long held negative perceptions alive. This is because dependence on aid has made many of us worship a 'mzungu' (Mills, 2011) and allows them to think on our behalf while many times we uncritically take on their thinking. It is common, for instance, to hear some African leaders telling their citizens that Africa cannot develop without foreign investors! Today, it is fashionable for many oppositional political leaders to threaten to report the ruling governments to the international community and the Western donors, not to the citizens, if they are not accountable! This makes Africans and their leaders to act childish and fail to think beyond aid money and foreign direct investment for financing development. This is why, for example, the fomer President of Tanzania, Benjamin William Mkapa, openly and without a second thought pleaded for help at the 2005 World Economic Forum (WEF) as he unashamedly said that 150,000 children were dying of Malaria every month due to lack of protective nets (Heierli and Lengeler, 2008). Similarly, because of dependency, it is not an issue to see that even the small radio announcements such as those encouraging the use condoms in Tanzania are sponsored by the United States!

With this trend, who would convince a Westerner who believes Africa cannot stand on its own to believe otherwise? By flying to and begging for aid money for our development and even for the small things like mosquito nets, aren't we making the Westerners cling on their perceptions? Afterall, it is not the Europeans who come begging to assist Africa!

While much of the blame has been on mainstream western media coverage of Africa, less attention has been addressed on what the Africa based media report about the continent. In one way or another, African local media have strengthened negative perceptions about Africa. What they report about Africa, the sources of their information and how they perceive the West all add to the long held negative perceptions about the continent. Very few African media cover the continent positively but many fall victim of the biased reporting of the continent (Gathara, 2014). Accordingly, many local media 'do not think of Africa so much as a story that needs to be covered, but as part of the rest of the world and take their cue on reporting it from the western outlets' (Gathara, 2014, para. 4). Their main source of information about Africa is the Western media outlets such as BBC, CNN, etc which are continuously accused of misreporting Africa. As such, many local African media find themselves reporting about the negative issues such as diseases, hunger, conflicts, corruption, etc in a manner that calls for external intervention; the very same issues we blame the Western media for reporting. Following African media outlets in the recent months, one realizes that the preoccupation has been on Ebola, the Congo DRC conflict, the Burkina Faso popular uprisings, etc. The consequence of all this is that such reporting prepares the Africans to see themselves as having problems and needing external intervention to help them sort out their problems. This is why, speaking at the occasion of the CNN multichoice awards, the executive director of IPP media, Reginald Mengi, challenged African media houses to report a balanced story of Africa.[2] If the local media can't go beyond the limits of Western media coverage of Africa, there is no way one can think of having Africa positively portrayed in the Western media. By concentrating on negatives, the local media outlets are helping the persistence of Western negative perceptions about Africa.

Conclusion

Africa continues to suffer at the behest of long held Western negative perceptions about the continent and its people. Negative images such as wars, famine and hunger, dirt, poverty, diseases, etc dominate in most analyses and media coverage of Africa. However, such perceptions are not new for they have been there since as early as the 11th century AD. While it is understandable that they were in the past used to justify

[2] Independent Television (ITV) News Bulletin, 20.00 hours, 17 October 2014.

Western colonial political and economic domination of Africa and the Africans, it is clearly disturbing to see such perceptions persisting even today, more than fifty years of independence.

This paper has argued that although the persistence of Western negative views about Africa and its people may be explained by such factors as the hangover of the colonial perceptions, the classification of African countries as belonging to LDCs/LICs and Third World countries, how Africa is portrayed in the media, films and literature, and images used by NGO fund raising campaigns, a balanced analysis would be that which captures the role played by the Africans themselves. Much of the available discourse tends to lay blame on non-African agency as if Africans were passive in this phenomenon.

The paper has argued that Africans have in many ways kept active the Western negative perceptions about the continent and its people. This is because all the labels which the West use to describe Africa actually exist although they are by no means what define the entire continent. And many such labels/issues are instigated and kept active by the Africans themselves. Such issues as corruption, wars and conflicts and negative media images are actually promoted by the Africans themselves. Any African based NGO/CSO seeking funding from the West will usually strive to use derogatory labels and images in order to capture the attention and compassion of the donors. Local politicians will seek to report the negatives of the governments in power to the donors and the local media continues to cover Africa the same way mainstream Western media do. African governments continue to do all in their capacity to impress the Western donors and investors so that they continue pouring aid and investment into the continent. All this shows how active Africans have been in determining and assisting the West to continue perceiving the continent negatively. It also shows how the Africans have sought to define themselves before the West and how they have wanted the West to define them and the continent.

As long as Africa continues to behave the way it behaves now, negative perceptions will continue to persist in the minds of many people in the West. And as long as negative perceptions persist, Africa's quest for a locally driven inclusive and sustainable development cannot be achieved. As such, Africa's current and future development continues to depend on how Africans view themselves before the West and how they seek to be viewed by the West. Fortunately, some Africans have started taking lead in promoting positive portrayal of the continent. This is encouraging and needs to be encouraged. More needs to be done to make this development sustainable and impact on the way Africans define themselves before the West and how the continent is portrayed. Definitely, there is still much to be done to address the challenge. Africa's positive portrayal will continue to depend on Africa's concerted efforts and desire to paint a different image of Africa and the Africans. Of course, that will require liberating the African mind.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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