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OBSERVER

The Dilemmas of Explaining Africa

By MOSES OCHONU

African professors like me are often asked by Americans at academic gatherings, campus events, and informal social gatherings what we think of the never-ending civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the genocide in Sudan, anarchy in Somalia, last year's disastrous elections in Nigeria, the Kenyan political crisis, and other problems too numerous to list here. To volunteer information about your African identity, which your so-called accent advertises anyway, or to declare your academic expertise in African studies is to invite all manner of simplistic inquiries. You are subjected to a kind of anthropological and sociological inquisition: Why does this group of people in Africa do such and such? Are you from the "tribe" that's fighting with the so-and-so people? The list is infinite.

Whether you like it not, Americans see you as knowledgeable about every political crisis torturing your continent and about all its countries — not just the one where you were born. And many Americans take liberties with African realities, generalizing recklessly and clinging to prejudiced preconceptions. Intellectual dialogue about Africa and its travails is almost impossible with that kind of Westerner.

But what about genuinely curious Americans whose views on Africa and its peoples are not based on racial prejudice but are shaped by unflattering popular images of Africa? As a scholar of Africa, I believe that I have an obligation to help those misinformed folks understand the nuances, complexities, multilayered culpabilities, Western complicities, and cultural underpinnings of the violence, famine, disease, poverty, waste, and bad government that are persistently presented as the essence of the continent. And as an African, I feel that I am under assault each time my continent or my country, Nigeria, is stereotyped as a place of war, hunger, AIDS, and corruption.

That is one side of the moral dilemma that African academics in the West face. You feel that you have to teach Westerners about Africa. But the other side is that you do not want to rationalize, defend, or minimize the continent's many evils. As one of my colleagues put it, Africa's generous production of bad news complicates our

commitment to a balanced explanation of its problems.

Sometimes I find myself in the unsettling position of trying to account for all that is wrong with Africa. In the process, I have gotten myself entangled in logical contradictions and pedantic distinctions. I have offered explanations that were so qualified and modified that they left my Western audiences confused, entrenched in their preconceptions, or convinced that I was more interested in defending the continent than in explaining the sources of its woes.

The most troubling occasions for me are when Americans think I am unwilling to acknowledge African complicity in Africa's underdevelopment. That misunderstanding tears at me because I like to see myself as a harsh critic of bad African leaders, and as intolerant of corruption and bad government in Nigeria and the rest of Africa.

Some of my compatriots and American colleagues have even upbraided me for focusing disproportionately on African culpability in the continent's economic and political problems, and for ignoring the role of predatory Western institutions and actors. Those critics accuse me of not giving enough weight to the lending practices of the International Monetary Fund, which have enabled and subsidized corruption while leaving African nations mired in debt, and of sidestepping the fact that Western countries routinely prop up incompetent, authoritarian, and corrupt leaders friendly to their interests.

I teach an undergraduate seminar on the history of poverty in Africa. Not surprisingly, my students come to class with preconceptions about the causes of African poverty and economic stagnation. Their favorite quest, regardless of precisely what topic and era we are discussing, is to pinpoint the cause of Africa's underdevelopment. They also want to know which side I agree with in the debate about the relative importance of Western actions, on the one hand — including the historical injuries of colonialism and slavery as well as more-recent events, like the work of the IMF — and the disappointing and destructive choices of African leaders, on the other hand.

Often the students seek cut-and-dried answers, not nuanced, complicated ones. They want me to simply take a position and explain it to them, or persuade them to adopt it. But that is not my role as a teacher. I suspect that, while they enjoy my course, they are disappointed by my unwillingness to be conclusive. The notion that Africa's present conditions are caused by both external and internal factors does not satisfy all my students.

Some of them believe that Africa's underdevelopment has been caused by Africans alone, and they do not hold the West's economic relationship with the continent, expressed through many institutions and practices, responsible. Those students can raise uncomfortable questions. The examples they cite, although carefully cherry-picked for hyperbolic effect, are hard to challenge.

How, for instance, can I explain the decision of Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the late leader of the Ivory Coast, to build a Roman Catholic basilica in his hometown of Yamoussoukro for an amount roughly equivalent to his country's annual budget — an amount so large that it was almost certainly embezzled? I could point out that France, the former colonial power in the country, egged him on, but that is at best a feeble defense of his immoral behavior.

Then there are the billions of dollars that Gen. Sani Abacha and his family evidently embezzled from the Nigerian government when he was head of state. How can I convince a skeptical student that Western banks and businesses have been complicit in such monumental corruption, and thus share the responsibility for it, without reducing Abacha's culpability?

It may be unfair to expect Americans not to be seduced by the simplistic and surprisingly pervasive view that Africans are the only architects of their woes. We all love simple explanations. But Americans deserve to have a deeper understanding of Africa. That is why I will continue to try to explain the complexities of African reality to my students and to anyone else who is willing to listen.

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