

## A Continent for the Taking

### *The Tragedy and Hope of Africa*

H.W.French

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French is a journalist for the New York Times, a senior writer according to the blurb. He is also an Afro-American (although I suspect to most Africans he would appear white) and thus with a claim of a special relationship to the continent, which he first visited in his twenties. One approaches the book with a certain expectation of learning something new and interesting about Africa, something that probes deeper than the scattered eyewitness accounts of abject poverty, rampant corruption, indigenous disease and widespread violence, only to have those expectations disappointed.

The Africa of French is that of the high-powered reporter sent in for a day to get a story, thus a disproportionate part of the book entails the inevitable hassles of such a life. Border-crossings, harassments by officials, threats of violence, flying in derelict planes, holed up into hotels, cultivating contacts among the powerful and corrupt. And of course the dependence upon resourceful taxi-drivers, risking their lives, being fonts of hard to get information. The Africa that emerges is that of a sea of black anonymous faces, into which a sprinkling of UN-officials, diplomats, with the intermittent missionary or doctor have been inserted.

Africa is in a mess and the standard explanations are well-known, almost hackneyed. There is of course slavery, bleeding an underpopulated continent on labor for centuries. A crime committed by the white man to the black, its infamy never to be forgotten until the end of time That slavery is indigenous to Africa is glossed over, by pointing out that this practice was not racial and the slave-populations were anyway soon assimilated. But one may also argue that Western racism was rather an effect of slavery than a cause of it. Then there is the colonialism of the late 19th century, the intrusions into the Black continent robbing it off its wealth. The case of the Belgian King Leopold II is a particular egregious example of colonial mishandling, a thoroughly degenerate monarch, treating the vast area as his personal property, extricating rubber at the costs of millions of people. French does seem to be unaware of Andre Gides excursions into Congo in the 20's reporting on the situation, as he does not refer to it, being I believe, one of the first sources to alert the public at large of the situation. And then the post-colonial mess, initialized and symbolized by the assassination (masterminded by the CIA?) of the marxist Lumumba in 1960.

Although the ties of French are to be found in West-Africa a large part of the book deals with Zaire and the fall of Mobuto, a character very much like his predecessor Leopold, only to be replaced by an equally corrupt dictator. Why is Africa really in such a mess, a mess that seems to have gotten worse, rather than improved in post-clonial times<sup>1</sup> Why

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<sup>1</sup> Up to the 1960's Africa fed itself, now it is a net importer. True this could have to do with increased populations and higher standards of what is meant by feeding yorself.

are its political elites so spectacularly corrupt? Ironically the only counterexample being (at least so far) South-Africa, a country that does not seem to have belonged to the authors' itinerary, and hence receives no coverage whatsoever. Is the experience of colonialism really the answer? Would the situation have been very different had instead local tribes formed political entities, rather than being herded together within irrelevant borders? According to French Africa is suffering under malign neglect. The continent is considered as a human refuse-heap, on whose soil the most atrocious genocides are being tolerated. French fumes against the Clinton administrations handling of the Rwanda massacre in 1994, when 800'000 Tutsis were being slaughtered. (Significantly most people in the West have a problem with knowing who is whom, victim or perpetrator.) Not only did they abstain from acting, but they were also instrumental in removing many of the safe-guards that could have defused the situation. In 1997 Tutsis invaded eastern Zaire, slaughtering in its turn hundreds of thousands of Hutu Tutsis. Yet another genocide ignored by the West, in fact its existence was being covered up. There is a telling picture in the book, that of a mass of Hutu refugees. You only see the faces, but they bear an uncanny similarities with skulls piled on top of each other. Black and skinned at the time, no doubt a few months later to be bleached and bare. Thus in addition to neglect there is malign collusion with the corrupting elites covered under a flowery blanket of sleek political rhetoric. (Marlene Albright comes in under special scorn) The polemical thrust of French book is this fury and frustration against cynical ineptness. Unfortunately the personal is allowed to dominate, thus fury is dissipated into frustration, and French flies his assignment in the end for orderly Japan. But not before having been stung with the real touch of Africa, a virulent form of malaria, which from his records, appears to having being close to killing him. Afro-American or not, he clearly got his fill.

Western involvement with Africa has certainly been disastrous up to this day. Independence and territorial integrity are key-stars, democracy a distant goal and stability an immediate. The West has clearly commercial interests, which has made it cut ignominious deals with corrupt elites, but it lacks any deeper interest. Whatever it does, it will be damned. Not intervening in Liberia allowing the country to degenerate beyond recall is justly criticised, just as intervention, as illustrated by Iraq, carries with it a destabilization of its own.

But what is real Africa? Theroux, an old peace-corps worker sentimentalizes the resilience of the country-side, seeing the blights of the urban sprawls as the nemesis of the continent. Of the quiet, unharrassed Africa, French gives no glimpse, save in the introductory pages recalling his first venture into the Sahel interior. Was colonial Africa after all a better place than post-colonial? Richer, more peaceful, less corrupt, better organized? Was in fact South-Africa, the pariah of the continent, the best place to be, whether white or black? Such questions are of course anathema, colonialism being the very source of the subsequent political and civil disaster, and the very epidemic of oppression. Yet such sentiments are implicit in the accusation that the transition from colonial rule to post-colonial independence was too abrupt, that the colonial powers had not sufficiently prepared the ground. Such arguments seem to unwittingly buttress the case of South-Africa that could after all bequest its successor with a civil society with functioning institutions. The case of South-Africa is also profoundly different, the white population is not only

sizeable but also with deep ties to the land going back to the 17th century. In fact the indigenous blacks in the southern tip of Africa arrived about the same time as the Dutch immigrants, both of them expelling the original bushmen, and as such they both may make equal claims on the land. Deplorable in principle as the apartheid laws were (and as such as laws they were a rather recent inventions, in spirit not different from those prevalent in the American South until the Civil Rights moment) the greatest sufferings the natives of Africa have experienced have been perpetrated by their own kind. (The Rwanda massacres being a case in point<sup>2</sup>) But French, as noted above, never mentions South Africa (whose urban violence admittedly is on par with that of Africa as a whole).

Africa remains a human refuse heap in the eyes of the West, and French, in spite of the subtitle, has very little hope to offer, the case of Mali being an exception. Mali also being offered as an anti-dote to the common conception that Africa was always a continent of savages having no indigenous history and culture to boast of. Such dismissals are of course rather bitter, and indeed if you are willing to dig a little a rich, but unknown history not surprisingly emerges. There were functioning kingdoms, and Islam did impose a culture on North Africa, of which the largest earthwork building - the giant Mosque in Dienne, Mali, is an example of. Never mind that the actual building was recently erected, it was after all a manifestation of a living tradition. Yet any attempts to compare African history to those of Europe and Asia are doomed to failure, the real fascination with Africa does not lie in architecture or political development but it being the cradle of mankind. The populations of Africa are very diverse, and in fact all populations outside of Africa constitute in comparison just one branch of many. Africa boasts the most intriguing heritage on earth, beyond the survival of aboriginal tribes and cultures going back tens of millenia, also still unsullied nature and a rich flora and fauna, the depletion of which in a sense makes up the deepest tragedy. This is not a tragedy of individual, but a tragedy of humanity. To preserve and exalt the archaic, and to better the prospects of the individual ushering societies into the modern world, constitute an unsolvable conflict. In modern Africa both of those irreconcilable projects seem to join in a common deluge. The case of Africa may indeed be too painful to consider deeply, and French eventually, as noted above, flees the scene, making us no wiser in the end.

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<sup>2</sup> One may contrast the atrocities of the Belgian Congo, most of them undocumented