

“Africa: Myth and Reality”

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Between June 27 and June 29, the Third International Social Studies Conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya. It was cosponsored by NCSS and the African Social and Environmental Studies Programme, and was the first international NCSS conference to be held on African soil. The conference, which featured more than 100 sessions, was attended by more than 400 social studies professionals from the United States, Africa, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

Why travel all the way to Africa to an international NCSS conference? The main reason is simple: the most powerful learning comes from experience matched with more formal education. This year's conference in Nairobi offered specialized tours around the city as well as formal sessions on Africa and on general social studies issues. The conference also provided participants with important opportunities to talk with colleagues from Kenya and around the world.

Whenever we travel, we find how much more interesting reality is than our preconceptions. African reality is certainly more complex than the books and movies we are usually exposed to in the United States. The conference gave me the opportunity to explore similarities and differences in politics and in educational reform. Unfortunately, not all of my discoveries at the conference were pleasant. The scourge of old stereotypes continues to plague Africa. The conference served as a strong reminder to be thoughtful in how we teach about the continent.

Political Realities

Any reality we construct of a place is only partial. No matter how much knowledge each of us brought to the conference in Kenya, we learned more. I arrived full of a knowing cynicism about corruption and authoritarian rule in Kenya. Reading the newspapers seemed only to confirm my suspicions. Yet Kenyan colleagues contradicted my presumptions, insisting that I was paying attention to the wrong part of the news stories. They pointed out that corruption and government threats were news: they were now being brought into the open, when they had once only been the subject of whispered conversations. Certainly the reporting of corruption and assassinations does not in itself constitute democracy, but open debate about them represented an enormous step toward such democracy.

Giving weight to my colleagues' argument was a visit I and other conference participants were able to make to parliament. I sat in a visitors' gallery, crammed full of young people, all hunched forward listening to the debate. It wasn't even a particularly important debate that afternoon, yet people were eager to hear the arguments. The next day, I heard sustained shouting outside my hotel room. I ran to my window to see a demonstration of young men running, carrying palm fronds, and shouting about the victory their candidate had just won in a by-election. I left Kenya encouraged by such political developments. I also left mindful of the danger of missing the unwritten but crucial context in which news stories are written.

Comparing Educational Reform

Visiting another country allows us to see familiar issues in new ways. Two presentations at the conference made me pinch myself to be sure I wasn't home in Boston discussing the frustrations of educational reform. In the first presentation, we heard a familiar tale of gender bias in textbooks, this time in Kenya. However, as the talk went on, we learned of a critical difference between the United States and Kenya: Kenyan texts are particularly important because they are frequently the only books a child ever reads. Thus, the struggle to end gender bias takes on a special urgency there.

Another presentation featured Kenyan education professors exploring the gap between intended reform and actual classroom practice. As they shared their frustration over resistance to moving from a teacher-centered to a child-centered pedagogy, I heard echoes of similar conversations in Boston. However, visiting Kenyan schools with colleagues reminded me of the difficulty of making such changes in schools where the class size is often sixty and basic materials are lacking. As a gift, I brought a world map to one school, by no means the poorest in Kenya. The students couldn't locate Kenya on it, because they hadn't seen a map before. For their art lessons, the teacher made paint by mixing wheat flour with dirt. Yet on the playground, I saw fewer differences in opportunities between the United States and Kenya. I watched children play many of the same games as Boston children: soccer, dodge ball, jump rope, and jacks. Although the school had no money for equipment, the children simply made their own. (These well-made toys and games will form the basis of a traveling kit for the Boston Children's Museum on "A Child's Life in Kenya.")

Reality and Tourism: the Maasai and the Exotic

Although these presentations at the conference offered new perspectives on old problems, other presentations were more problematic. I had hoped that by traveling to Kenya I could escape

some of the stereotyped perspectives on Africa that I have witnessed in the United States. Yet the conference organizers decided to single out the Maasai as a topic for three presentations. No other ethnic group on the continent was the subject of any presentation. Many people from outside Africa are unaware that the Maasai and other semi-nomadic groups are atypical of Kenya and highly atypical of the continent. Most Africans are farmers. It would be as if Africans were to attend an NCSS conference to find that the only presentations devoted to U.S. ethnic groups were three workshops on the Amish!¹

During colonial rule, the British highlighted Maasai life, because as colonizers they wanted to promote an image of Africans as different and nobly primitive. In U.S. textbooks we still find residues of this attitude reflected in a frequency of photographs of the Maasai out of all proportion to their actual numbers (several hundred thousand in a continent with more than 700 million people). We need to think about why the Maasai are so compelling a subject. Are we only interested in Africans as the exotic "other"? We should remember that in teaching about Africa, our mistakes tend to come not from using inaccurate or outdated information but from choosing the wrong information to focus on.

The Kenyan tourist industry in some ways conspires to reinforce our stereotypes. Tourism is a major source of foreign exchange. What better way to encourage tourism than to stress the exotic? Once in the country, it was hard to find postcards depicting any of the scenes that were in front of my eyes. Instead, I was offered bare-breasted young women, Maasai warriors, and wild animals, all twirling on their spindles in the stores, with only an occasional shot of an urban monument thrown in. I fear that the hotel shopkeepers know what we want. In an attempt to turn the tables on these distorted images, I bought a sample of these postcards for colleagues to take into classes at home and ask students to compare with Kenyan reality. Then, they can collect postcards about their own city and discuss tourism versus reality, perhaps concluding the activity by creating their own postcards of Boston and Nairobi.

Unfortunately, it is not only the shopkeepers who know what we want. Jacaranda, one of the publishers at the conference, claims to provide "authentic African children's books from Kenya." Their managing director told me that they plan to produce yet more Maasai materials, even though they know the Maasai are unrepresentative of Kenya. Why? Because they will sell well to the United States, their principal market. The director said she had to think of their "bottom line." (Jacaranda's Mcheshi series, however, avoids this trap and is excellent.)

¹ Jo Sullivan, former director of Boston University's Africa Outreach Program, suggested the analogy between the Maasai and the Amish.

Television and Movie "Reality"?

At home in the United States, television and the movies have distorted African reality. TV offers us a narrow perspective on nature programs and disaster politics. Hollywood, for its part, has never been interested in reality, especially about black people. Perhaps that is why most films about Africa have white stars, like *Out of Africa*, or focus on animals, like *The Lion King*. We need to do careful reality checks on any media representation of Africa. We need to ask: what is truly representative of the continent? Most Africans have never seen the wild animals for which Africa is famous. A Kenyan teacher told me that her first viewing was as a high school senior whose class raised funds for all of them to visit a game park. Few African countries have big herds of elephants, zebras, and other animals. A Nigerian colleague told me the first wild animals she saw were in Madison, Wisconsin. . . at a zoo.

The Search for Accurate Teaching Materials

When we teach about Africa, a continent burdened by centuries of exploitation and continuing misinformation, we have a special responsibility. Stereotyped textbooks, picture books, films, and curriculum guides continue to litter our classrooms. We have a responsibility to ask ourselves: is this portrayal representative? is it an accurate depiction of a country? do we see urban and rural life? rich and poor? problems and possibilities? In short, we have a responsibility to learn more in order to be able to question our sources.

Fortunately, outstanding literature, texts, videos, and curriculum guides are available. The difficulty in accessing these is two-fold: first, knowing where to search for these materials, as many come from small publishers and non-profit organizations; and second, knowing how to separate the gold from the dross. An introductory guide to teaching materials about Africa is available from the Africa Outreach Program at Boston University. Besides this guide, educators can contact any of the federally funded National Resource Centers on Africa. They each have an outreach staff person to advise on purchases as well as to organize workshops and institutes in their area of the country. A list of these centers is available through the Africa Outreach Program at Boston University, 270 Bay State Rd., Boston, Massachusetts 02215.

As I was leaving Kenya, the airport offered me one last lesson on stereotyping through two ads I saw posted. The first one, next to the check-in counter, depicted a British Airways cockpit. In the pilots' seat with headphones on were a cheetah and a Masai warrior. The second ad hit me appropriately as I was ascending the escalator to depart for the United States. It depicted the familiar Marlboro man on a horse lassoing cattle. The Wild West meets Wild Africa. Clearly,

myths and stereotypes are not solely an African problem. Our challenge as educators is to replace these myths with reality.

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