

# The Dark Continent

By Penny Randell

A couple months ago Mountain Connection published my article concerning an abbreviated assessment of Africa and their various customs. The result has led to this undertaking, for many have requested a bit more information on the continent. Indeed, the facts are vitalizing and we Westerners deserve a better understanding of what was once only called, "The Dark Continent."

Africa received this somewhat negative title because of its reputation of poverty, disease, and war. Upon entering one of their many countries, however, all outsiders are greeted with a warm, gentle, friendly outreach; often followed by a hug. Most of all, Africans revere a plethora of manners and are infinitely polite. There, what we call social skills are nothing more than basic communication that are not taught or used to solicit a certain reaction. When Africans meet, they make eye contact, smile, talk, empathize and share. There is no self-consciousness or hidden meaning. They are natural beings, cherishing music and one another.

When visiting it becomes irrepressibly obvious that Africans are bound to earthly essentials, such as light, earth, water, food, family, love, sickness and death. Unlike us, they do not engage in any kind of waste or in a time-conscious existence. If you were to ask an African to describe Westerners, they would mention the rapid gate in which we walk, and how we refuse to talk. How very unexplainable it is to them that whites, called *mzungus*, pass one another on the street and simply ignore each other. There is no greeting or signs of basic humanity. On the other hand, it's hard to pass an African without recognizing and acknowledging their presence.

For sure it's wrong to complain when in Africa. When greeting the words, "Musula mutya" are often uttered. This is a deliberate "How are you?" In response, even if there has been a death, the replies remain same: "Bulungi," meaning "OK." Bad news will find its way during the conversation...down the road some. In other words, no one is greeted with anything but good news.

It's a fact that when visitors arrive on the continent, they can find its beauty and size to be overwhelming. Folks rarely prepare to take in the people, but it's inevitable. In doing so most visitors lose inhibitions and totally open themselves to this new world. Poverty is there, but rarely in your face. Disease exists, but has been greatly tackled by modern vaccines and other preventatives. And war? Conflict that involves the use of armed force between two or more organized groups, governmental or non-governmental, defines war. These wars often fostered the "Continent of Darkness" notion, but the conflicts are far less prevalent today.

However, horror in the form of civil war gripped 31 out of Africa's 53 countries in the mid 1990s. Hundreds of thousands of people died, not from being shot, but from hunger, lack of water, and disease. Attackers survived by looting, targeting villages. Direct combat deaths were often low in number with indirect deaths being horrifically high in number. These wars were usually internal, with only a couple occurring between states. Primarily, such bloodshed was initiated over power and money. Ethnic groups often cause rifts, as well. Nonetheless, these wars lessened greatly after the turn of the millennium even though an absence of nationalism remains. Because nation states

were formed by foreigners and lines drawn by Europeans on maps, strong “national” devotion rarely exists. All but two of Africa’s sketched out countries combine a high number of ethnic groups that observe their own laws and languages. This in itself makes life difficult.

Honor to nationality may not be prevalent, but cultures are. Age old societies exist that embrace a deep sense of spiritual power. Until this day a spiritual world survives in most communities. This is not basic superstition or a condition induced by insecurity or poverty. This is true and openly honest. There is a spiritual world that lies at the heart of most Africans, be it Muslim, Christian, or traditional. Such beliefs can provide powerful defenses against despair and hopelessness, enabling folks to get on with their lives. Most of us Americans would be broken if we faced even a small percentage of their challenges. But there one is never exposed to doom and gloom and the essence of hope seems to surface above all.

Millions of Africans have never known hunger or war, but have led somewhat normal lives. This is not considered news though, and the media doesn’t cover it. Journalists seek breaking news with minimal follow-up required. And, too, the African perspective is rarely included and the complexities of the continent are usually ignored. It remains much more popular to describe it all as chaos. Stories of war and famine are not made up, but they are only a small slice of the pie and basically what people have done to survive. Concluding: to know the rich history of Africa suggests a visit.

Victims need pity, not respect or understanding. It is not true that Africans are just like us, but without money. Even aid agencies don’t go to the trouble of understanding these cultures. From the smallest NGO to the World Bank, and even on to the United Nations, few are interested in what really goes on in Africa behind the scenes of fighting. But these aid agencies, Western celebrities, rock stars and politicians cannot save Africa. Only an African can save Africa. Outsiders can only help if they take the time and effort to understand the continent. It turns out that this continent has rarely been acknowledged and understood since it was colonized by Europeans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some would even argue that disregard for Africa and its voice in its own development is as destructive today as it was under territorial imperialism 200 years ago.

It would remain impossible to study Africa without giving attention to the missionaries who are responsible for a continuous update for survival and adoption of modern life. It was colonial times when the church, plus surrounding parishes, became a powerful nucleus in many communities. These establishments were for political and social gain as well as religion, however. Eventually Africans were taught to run their own churches where priests and nuns took control. Today in all of Africa a parish means schools, health clinics, workshops and postal service. In most of Africa these churches have sponsored more development than all the governments, World Bank, and aid agencies combined. Of all African Sub-Saharan organizations, their network of priests, nuns, and church workers takes precedence.

While considering the entire continent of Africa it is important to remember the North and how it differs from Sub-Saharan Africa. Bordering the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa is Islamic and Arab-influenced. Known as the Maghreb, this land remains separate from the rest of the continent. The Mediterranean joins North Africa with Europe, and the Sahara Desert blocks most roads leading south. As it is, few folks from the North even consider themselves African. The islands

and archipelagos are as diverse as the rest of Africa, too. Seven of such are independent countries, standing alone, full of the greatest of differences. Even if you divide Africa into three distinct regions: Africa north of the Sahara, South Africa and all its countries, and the area in between, there are few common factors within such zones

Almost all of the continent is covered with distinctive pale terracotta soil. This covering is often seen as a nuisance, for it clings to human skin and it takes intense scrubbing to free oneself of it. But if there was one common thread tying these nation states together it would be music. Their passion for rhythms, melodies and harmonies is unparalleled throughout the world. Considering all the people, the animals that abound, rainforests, savannahs, forests, mountains, villages and cities, Africa is practically incomprehensible.

We Westerners can be taken aback when trying to digest all these contrasting facts and various details that go with them. Without doubt, a true understanding of the people takes an earnest desire, along with considerable effort. But when it's all said and done, it's well worth the energy expended. The rewards are noticeably life-changing.