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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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24.08.2023

On Military Coups and Starvation: Is Western Media's Perception of Africa Racist?

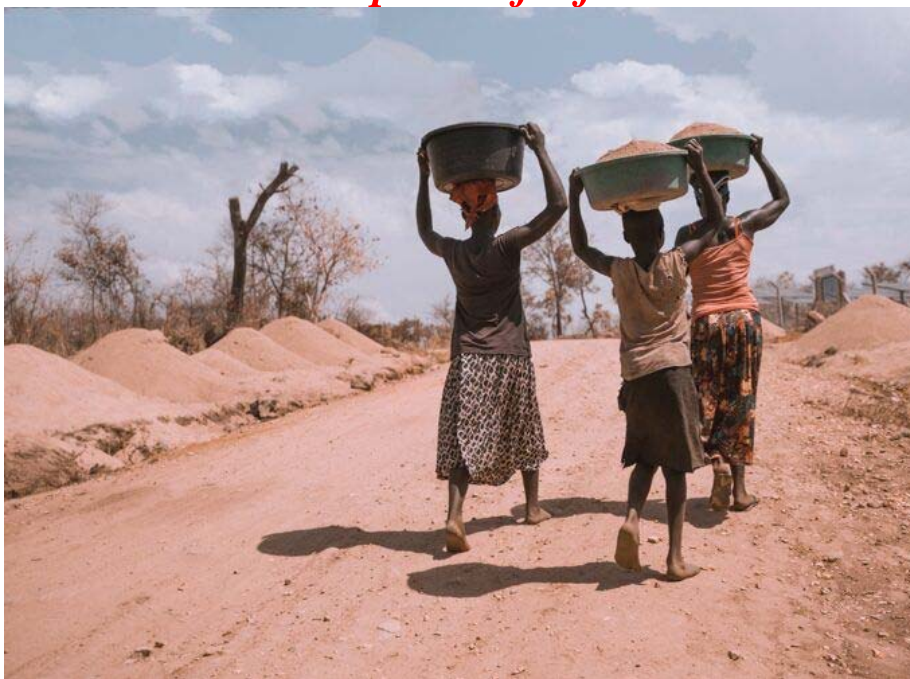


Image by Ninno Jack Jr.

Racism goes beyond the use of certain words or the discriminatory practices of everyday life. It is also about political perceptions, intellectual depictions, and collective relationships.

Consider the way that Africa is currently portrayed in the news.

From a political viewpoint, Africa is seen as a totality, and not in a positive way, as in a united Africa.

For example, mainstream Western media coverage of the US-Africa Summit, held in Washington last December, presented all of Africa as poor and desperate. The continent, one can glean from headlines, was also willing to pawn its political position in the Russia-NATO conflict, in exchange for money and food.

“Biden tells African leaders US is ‘all in’ on the continent,” an Associated Press headline announced on December 15.

The phrase ‘all in’ – a lingo used in Poker when someone is willing to risk it all – was cited many times in the US and Western media.

Biden offered unconditional US commitment “to supporting every aspect of Africa’s growth,” AP reported. But “growth” had little to do with Biden’s offerings. He merely tried to outbid Russia’s support for Africa so that the latter may adopt an anti-Moscow stance. He failed.

When a Russia-Africa Summit took place on July 27-28, US-western media lashed out, again presenting Africans as political vagabonds, while belittling the strategic value of such a meeting for both Russia and African countries.

A CNN headline began with “Isolated Putin ..,” while a Reuters headline read “Putin promises African leaders free grain.”

Very little mention was made of African leaders spending much time discussing a possible role in finding a peaceful resolution to the horrific war underway in Ukraine.

Indeed, several African leaders articulated a sincere political discourse, rejecting imperialism, neocolonialism and military interventions.

Moreover, there was little media discussion that Africa, like Europe, can negotiate a stronger political position in world affairs.

Instead, the coverage seemed to center around the Black Sea Grains Initiative – brokered in July 2022 – insinuating that Russia is threatening food security in an already impoverished continent.

But this was hardly the case.

In a speech at the Economic Forum in Vladivostok last September, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that, of the 87 grain-loaded ships, only 60,000 tons out of two million reached the United Nations’ World Food Program.

Though Putin’s overall figures were contested, the UN’s Joint Coordination Centre (JCC) said in a statement published in Euronews that “Putin is correct to say only a small amount has been shipped under the World Food Program.”

Even though Western countries have been the largest recipients of grains shipped through the Black Sea, no mainstream media has made it a mission to depict Europeans as starving populations, or worse.

Additionally, Europe is hardly presented as greedy, either. Indeed, the blame is never on Europe, its colonialism, arms, and political meddling. Yet, the blame is readily assigned elsewhere.

This headline in ‘The Conversation’ is a good illustration: “Putin offers unconvincing giveaways in a desperate bid to make up for killing the Ukraine grain deal.”

The bias is astonishing.

The truth is that African leaders were not looking for ‘giveaways’ but were hoping to negotiate a stronger geopolitical position in a vastly changing global political map. Just like everybody else.

Whether Putin’s “bid” in Africa was “desperate” or not, matters little. The bias, however, becomes clear when the alleged Russian desperation is compared to the outcome of the US-Africa summit last year.

Biden’s ‘bid’ was presented as an attempt at building bridges and creating opportunities for future cooperation. All is done, of course, in the name of democracy and human rights. The misrepresentation of Africa can also be viewed independently from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Take, for example, the way Western media dealt with the Niger military coup on July 26. Niger is part of the Sahel countries in Africa, a stretch of nations that have all been colonized by France.

Decades after these countries gained nominal independence, Paris continued to exert strong political influence and economic control.

This is called neocolonialism. It ensures the wealth of former colonies continues to be exploited by former colonizers.

In fact, Niger’s wealth of uranium ore has helped fuel more than a fourth of the EU’s nuclear energy plants, and much of France’s.

A decade ago, France returned to the Sahel region as a military force, in the name of fighting Jihadists.

Yet, violence grew, forcing African Sahel countries to rebel, starting in the Central African Republic, then Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, and, finally, Niger.

Little of that context features in the coverage of Western media. Instead, like Mali and the others, Niger is depicted as another of Russia’s lackeys in Africa.

Thus, the CNN headline, on August 2, “A Niger coup leader meets with Wagner-allied junta in Mali.” Here, CNN leaves no room for the possibility that African leaders have agendas, or political will, of their own.

The West’s problematic relationship with Africa is complex, rooted in colonialism, economic exploitation, and outright racism.

Africans are good ‘allies’ when they toe the Western line and hungry, easily manipulated, and illegitimate regimes when they reject the West’s conditions.

It is time to rethink and confront this demeaning perception.

Africa, like all other political spaces, is a complicated and conflicted region, deserving of deep understanding and appreciation, beyond the self-serving agendas of a few Western countries.

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CounterPunch 23.08.2023