AZEB WOLDE-GIORGHIS

The Other Africa

There's a brighter side to the so-called Dark Continent. We really should be hearing more about it

I WAS 21 AND WANTED TO CHANGE THE world. More importantly, I wanted to change the perception people had of Africa. Originally from Ethiopia myself, I felt the need to show the other Africa, since television watchers might well believe that the continent's inhabitants are either burning, starving, embroiled in corruption, or dying of some disease. Perhaps the only positive pictures we get on television of Africa are the wildlife, the safaris, and the music.

In 1998, after being a reporter for seven years, I was fortunate enough to open the first Radio-Canada office in Africa. My aim was to show the other Africa, the one that didn't make the headlines. Revolution from within, as Gloria Steinem has said.

If we take a closer look at the continent, there are actually 12 countries currently involved in a conflict. That means that more than 75 percent of Africa is living not in war, but in peace. As the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote a few years ago, "the real war in Africa is poverty." In many places war has ended. A fragile truce remains in Sierra Leone. Ethiopia and Eritrea have signed a peace deal, and there are even signs of hope for an end to Africa's main conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Furthermore, many African countries, however slowly, have set themselves on the road to democracy and civil society. In 2001, Ghana, the first African country that freed itself from the shackles of colonial rule back in 1957, successfully voted for a change of government. As America spent months of bitter wrangling over who should be its new president, Ghana's two-round voting system (similar to the French process) ensured that there was no problem identifying John Kufuor as its new leader.

Further up the western coast of Africa, Senegal peacefully voted out Abdou Diouf and installed the veteran opposition leader, Abdoulaye Wade, as president in spring 2000. Even Nigeria, once the "bête noire" of African politics, today shows signs of real progress under President Olusegon Obasanjo, who since taking office has been crusading to pass a revolutionary anti-corruption bill. Having spent quite a bit of time in Nigeria, I can feel the change. Not long ago, walking in Lagos would have been a highly risky business both for yourself and your possessions; now you can walk freely downtown. I'm not for a moment suggesting that all of the examples I have given are without problems—there is religious tension in Nigeria, there are struggles, weaknesses—but things are improving. So why do we rarely hear of Africa's successes?

There are many possible answers to that question. First, Africa is a big continent, and relatively unknown, over 50 countries spanning

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thousands of kilometres. But despite Africa's size, most international news organizations have the bare minimum of staff to cover it. It's not unusual for there to be just one office, or in some cases, one person, to send information home about the whole continent. It's not surprising, then, that it's only the big news that shouts out loud to be covered that ends up on our television screens.

Peace in Africa or democracy in Africa doesn't sell, some would say. Only if the material is sensational—and when talking about Africa, it has to be really sensational—does it make the headlines. Thus, those images of war, famine, disease, because in news terms, Africa seems to qualify as the worst almost every time.

Isaac Makonga, a Gabonese journalist for one of Africa's independent radio stations, Africa No. 1, has said that in his experience, international journalists rarely investigate a story really hard, or attempt to explain what lies behind a story. He used the child slave story as an example: TV news teams, writers, and radio journalists descended from news bureaus all over Africa to cover the "slave trade" in West Africa. The focus was on the shock value—how more and more children were being enslaved in Africa, how evil traders were profiting from the sale of young kids. Not digging deeper, he argues, contributed to negative stereotyping of Africa by outside journalists. This media attention led me to spend a week working on a story about child labour in the Ivory Coast. I did indeed find several children working on the harvest, some as young as eight. Surprisingly, the chief of the village was proud of the fact that his own children were working in the fields. He said he doesn't have money to send them to school. In recent years, the revenue for the cocoa growers and workers has slumped dramatically; putting the children to work was a matter of survival, he said. So, it turned out, poverty was driving children into work on plantations.

It is widely recognized that international news, the way Africa is reported, plays a vital role in the process of deciding where governments and NGOs spend their money and assign their support in Africa. African countries at war, or those that face famine and natural disaster, need the support of the international community. But it often seems that there's a vicious circle at play: the TV image of a starving refugee is a compelling one, and it tugs on our heartstrings. When these images are broadcast, governments and the public dig into their pockets for cash. Once the cameras are gone, though, longer-term problems remain. The difficulty is no crisis, no media spotlight. The longer-term issues facing emerging African democracies often remain uncovered, unexplained, and therefore unknown to potential supporters from abroad.

Discovering and showing this other Africa has been my mission as Radio-Canada's Africa correspondent for the past three years. There are real and difficult issues facing African society. More importantly, Africans have the power and resources to deal with these problems. One answer lies in encouraging, financially or otherwise, African media organizations and outlets to grow and flourish.

Some groups have already started doing this. *Africa Journal* is a weekly news and current affairs program run by Kenyans in conjunction with Reuters. It reports the main news stories as well as ordinary stories from Africa.

A number of independently owned radio stations and newspapers now exist across the continent. However, there are problems: in many countries, newspapers and broadcasting groups are still directly funded and controlled by the state or political parties to such an extent that free information is impossible. It is no coincidence that in places like Ghana, Senegal, and Benin, where there is a freer press, there have also been successful elections and these countries are on the way to democracy. CNN now has a weekly half-hour show dedicated to stories from Africa. Radio-Canada has been supportive and encouraging in giving Africa time in its schedule. By supporting civil society, we will witness in the coming years a reemergence of Africa as a leading light in the world. Am I dreaming? In my view, we all have a great deal to learn from this old continent. In our hectic modern societies, we would do well to stop and take a closer look at how people in Africa are running their lives: the way elderly people are respected, how materials are never wasted, the importance of family and sharing, and most important of all, how life is lived through and with the people around you. RRJ

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