Interview with Dipo Faloyin, author of *Africa is Not a Country: Breaking Stereotypes of Modern Africa*

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Africa is Not a Country: Breaking Stereotypes of Modern Africa, Dipo Faloyin. Vintage Publishing 2022 400pp £15.99 ISBN: 9781787302952

Thanks Dipo so much for taking the time to talk about your book, 'Africa is Not a Country: Breaking Stereotypes of Modern Africa'. Your book starts with a wonderful description of your family and of Lagos. Could you tell us a bit about yourself and why it was important to start your book as you do?

Thank you so much for having me!

This book is fundamentally about identities and appreciating the specificities of the 1.4 billion people that exist across 54 African countries.

Traditionally, when people write about Africa, they adopt this birds-eye view where the land and its people feel so distant. They speak of the continent as this strange, dark, unknowable landscape full of many dangers and horrors, making it impossible for the reader to build any real connections with the region on a personal level.

Our ability to build relationships often comes from seeing ways in which our lives intertwine with others, even if it's with a culture that exists thousands of miles from you. I wanted to make that as easy as possible for the reader by immediately grounding them in the day-to-day realities of a specific identity — in this case, that of my family's, and my hometown, Lagos. I hope it builds an immediate sense of curiosity for the many other identities that have been squashed under the weight of the stereotypes that plague the continent.

Identify having specificity is a running theme and you draw out the importance of language, accents and names, and the devaluing of culture, experience and difference, that can mean people feel pressure to change themselves to fit in. I'm sure there are some very practical things people reading this can do to value each other's specificity in our classrooms, such as learning to pronounce people's names correctly. When people

say Dipo are people getting the 'o' right if they say Dip-o as in flow or is it Dip-o as in off?

That is a good way of explaining how my name is pronounced! Most people don't get it quite right: The "o" is as in "off", and it's more "Deep" than "Dip".

Simply making the effort of pronouncing people's names properly is certainly a positive step forward. It should come naturally if you are curious about the nuances of a person's history and traditions. Unfortunately, not enough people in recent history have been curious about the realities of the diverse communities across Africa.

Could you tell us about which – or perhaps more importantly – whose stereotypes of Africa you're looking to break? And does that give us a clue about both where you're writing from and who you're writing to?

The stereotypes have largely been pushed by the West who have long seen Africa as a place that contains only poverty and safari, with nothing in between. The book aims to fill in those gaps to tell a more comprehensive story of the past and present of this vast region.

I hope it is clear from the start of the book – how grounded and personal it is – that I'm targeting people who are curious about how these stereotypes were first created and pushed, and the modern mechanisms that have allowed them to endure.

A significant part of the book is given to laying out the effects of colonial powers in Africa – past and ongoing, and how people responded. For those who know less about these histories, could you explain why this is such a crucial part of what you're writing about?

The makeup of modern Africa is an entirely artificial invention by the colonial powers that makes little to no sense if your aim was to create stable, thriving communities. But that wasn't their aim when they met in 1884 at the Berlin Conference — arguably the most significant event in the history of modern Africa. All they wanted to do was agree on a path towards carving up the continent in a way that would ensure they could steal as much from the land for as long as possible.

A key component of that plan was to design these new states to be as unstable as possible, and as full of as many disparate ethnic groups as they could force into a single country to make it near impossible for the local population to organise and fight back against their colonisers. This destroyed countless communities of all shapes and sizes.

One problem the colonisers did face was that their plan was illegal, so they had to invent a justification for it. They came up with the myth that Africa was a place full of uncivilised savages who couldn't look after themselves; all Africans were helpless, the myth continued, without the intervention of the West. This mythical narrative spread throughout the world and continues to this day. Without the right context, we whitewash the damage colonisation caused and assume that the deliberate violence and division that was introduced into the region proves the myth to be right: that Africans really are uncivilised and ungovernable.

To follow up on that, for educators reading, do you think there is a risk that some ways of presenting colonial histories could actually reinforce some of the stereotypes about Africa and Africans that you're trying to address? How did you, and how might they, go about avoiding that?

It's vital educators stick as closely to the reality of events and remember that context is always key. It is okay when talking about an African country to describe the challenges that they face or highlight stories of conflict and pain, but without including the context that explains the cards these nations were dealt by colonialism, you certainly run the risk of reinforce those same stereotypes.

In thinking about the stereotypes you look to break - why do you think these stereotypes persist? You touch on the roles of media, charities, and institutions like schools and museums, and some would connect these as part of the conditions which enable the 'production of ignorance' which sustains 'racial capitalism'. Do you think they are right?

By the time African countries were able to win their independence in the 1960s, the rest of the world had grown to believe the myths about them. Colonisers angry that they had been kicked out were more than happy to point to the challenges many of these young nations were facing and claim that they were right all along, that Africans needed them to survive, without, of course, acknowledging their foundational role in the chaos.

These stereotypes found new wind – albeit for very different reason – when charities and development agencies in the 1980s realised that they could raise a lot of money very quickly by producing these incredible slick, celebrity-fronted campaigns that heavily featured images of starving, malnourished children and adults clearly unable to look after themselves. The most successful of these was Band Aid's 'Do They Know It's Christmas'– a song that claims Africa is a land of dread and fear where the only water flow is bitter sting of tears.

We carried these images forward in our subconscious and because they were packaged in these extremely clean ways that were built around making positive change, we saw nothing wrong with them. And many would go on to replicate them when they travelled to the continent to do charity work. It certainly works to enable this continued hierarchy of sorts that claims African countries as being somewhat incapacitated by their own inabilities, in turn making it so much easier to exploit them in the open without consequences.

Is it fair to say that you argue that a consequence of breaking those stereotypes wouldn't just be replacing problematic 'geographical imaginations' of places with more nuanced ones, but would also involve material consequences – such as the powerful case you make around returning artifacts, as well as wider social, environmental, economic, and political consequences?

Absolutely. It has been easier for governments across the world to exploit African countries because of the widely-shared myth that they are incapable of looking after themselves. A perfect encapsulation of that is in the continued hoarding of artefacts from Africa in museums around the world – institutions that openly claim these treasures are better in their possession because they can look after them better than African countries can.

Countries have been unable to tell their own stories because the single narrative of pain and suffering has overrun the imaginations of the rest of the world who look towards the continent as a region that needs saving on not, for example, as a place they would like to visit or start a business or raise a family. That's what I hope this book changes.

As well as focusing on serious and hard-hitting issues, I found the book to be full of warm and sharp humour and of love for people and places. Could you say a bit more about what must have been difficult choices on what to include?

I didn't want the book to feel like a textbook or just a long list of names and dates, battles won and lost. I wanted it to feel as though it was written by a human being, ideally to be read by humans, too. And so I'm certainly delighted so many readers have come away having been entertained as well as educated. Getting the balance right between hard histories and joyful presents was certainly a challenge, but I think I was broadly able to include everything I set out to. An earlier draft did have a little bit more about football rivalries across the continent but I quickly agreed with my editors that perhaps readers didn't need to know the ins and outs of Zambia's successful 2012 African Cup of Nations campaign.

The answer might be 'both!', and 'be more specific!', but how do you see different people and countries imagining and working towards brighter futures – is it more looking to recover pre-colonial pasts, or something more post- or decolonial?

I end the book trying to answer this very difficult question. For me, the best predictor of the future is always in the actions people are taking in the present. And what we're seeing from youth-led activism movements from across the continent are a generation focused on issue of social justice, climate change, fighting gender-based violence, and repairing many of those manufactured ethnic divisions of the past.

My guess is that recovering those pre-colonial identities will prove too challenging – so much has been scattered across too many countries. But that doesn't mean there won't exist plenty of curiosity for all that was lost, and a desire for that to be used as a way of bursting the myth of African civilisations as historically backward. Also, young people will (and should) relish the opportunity to continue the work of shaping the identities of these young nations in a way that is meaningful and forward-looking, while certainly borrowing from the best, most exciting practices of the past.

In preparation for the interview, it has been fascinating to follow how the book is being picked up around the world. What's that been like? And have the responses from both those living in African countries, and those who identify with the African diaspora been important to you?

The response has been incredible. I'm extremely lucky that so many schools in the UK in particular have decided to welcome the book into so many classrooms. I've also had such brilliant responses from across the continent from people who have wanted to see this task taken on, and from a diaspora that is always looking to build stronger connections with the continent.

Thinking then about the response you, and the book have received, what are your hopes now for it?

I just hope the book acts as a foundational piece text for anyone looking to understand this vast, incredibly diverse region. And I hope this new found curiosity leads to publishers, Hollywood, development agencies, and educational institutions purposefully trying to seek out stories from across the continent. There are an abundance of untold narratives still to be mined. I don't want another generation growing up with the idea that to be African is to have lions and elephants as pets in your garden as you wait around for another aid package to get delivered.

Thanks so much for your time Dipo, and very best wishes with the book and your future projects.