

Uzuri Wa Africa

Does Western Media Misrepresent the Beauty of Africa? *Point* writer Erin Stevens takes note at Africa Awareness' recent roundtable discussion

The beauty of Africa seems all but absent from Western media representation. The average Westerner's attitude regarding Africa is often a result of ignorance. Misguided ideas and images continue to plague the media. The prevalence of these negative

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- Pascaline Nsekera

stereotypes only further perpetuates a cycle of prejudice amongst the Western public. However, education can begin to reverse these negative perceptions of Africa and her people. On January 28th, 2005 a roundtable discussion was organized to address specific issues that related to the Western media's portrayal of Africa. This discussion was part of a larger weeklong celebration known as UBC's African Awareness Week. Student driven, the project began two years ago at the University of British Columbia in response to the lack of African related content available at this establishment. Its founder, Veronica Fynn, has been an active leader in the struggle for an African studies institute at the University. She also continues to be a strong advocate for expanding

awareness throughout UBC and its surrounding community.

Friday afternoon's discussion began with a brief introduction by moderator Pascaline Nsekera. Originally from Burundi and an executive member of the UBC Africa Network, Pascaline eloquently guided the discussion while encouraging all participants to voice their opinions. The majority of the meeting consisted of a viewing of former Israeli television journalist Erez Barzilay's documentary *A Cry for Madiom*. During his visit to South Sudan

in 1998, Erez's camera briefly captured the extreme suffering of the Sudanese people. He specifically focuses on five-year-old Madiom Madiock to illustrate the misery she experiences alongside her mother and family. Although it does not seem to be Erez's intention, the documentary was slightly biased. Instead of demonstrating the agency of Africans in this struggle, he portrays them as passive victims, their only hope being white humanitarian workers. The documentary is still effective in that

it powerfully reveals the realities of human suffering, especially that experienced by children. Inevitably, nearly the entire discussion group, including Erez himself, was in tears by the end.

The group then took the opportunity to discuss the documentary, and their responses varied. "It basically comes down to three things," voiced one participant, "dignity, stereotypes and responsibility." "Where is the agency of African people? Where are the healthy communities?" voiced another. Veronica Fynn was also concerned with this aspect of the film "Where are the Africans themselves?"

Peter Davies, a veteran documentary filmmaker and founder of Villon film, commented upon the dichotomy between how black and white bodies are portrayed in the media. The images of Sudan seem reminiscent of those of Auschwitz. "When we look upon these images of white bodies tormented in concentration camps we say: Never again." The reaction to suffering African bodies is different. It is a question of power and Africans have no powerful friends. The Sudanese peoples' ongoing

starvation is not an accident of nature, it is man made. "It is not how shocking the message, but how it is represented," remarks Pascaline,

Black bodies need the same respect as white bodies. "The darker you are, the more likely you are to be a statistic." We need a historical background if we are to truly understand and avoid stereotypes. Who owns the image of Africa? What are the sources of different kinds of misrepresentations and how can we avoid them? When looking at scenes like those in Erez's documentary one's previous knowledge should extend beyond the evening news. Informing oneself and questioning these images is key.

More information about African Awareness can be accessed at www.africa-awareness.ubc.ca. Get involved and help support African Awareness achieve their vision for an African studies institute at UBC!

- Erin Stevens

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