

Zebras In Africa

By: Karin vonKrenner

Airports are miserable places. All the weird art hanging from ceilings can't distract from the massed uncertainty drifting along the corridors. Airports are chaotic, intersectional hubs of crashing lives. Personally, I now view them like hospitals. Avoid if possible. I do vaguely remember when travel used to be fun! Those Vintage days of yore.

Now as travellers, we are war-weary after 2+ hours of harassing check-in processes and heart-stopping cancellations. Blindly navigating senseless mazes with no guarantee of rewards amplifies our angst. Science lab rats are treated better and have more rights. People rush in multiple directions panicked by neon lit boards directing their immediate futures. Children are dragged along with minimalized lives in dimensionally dictated baggage. Everything is overpriced and our most intimate privacies publicly displayed by inspectors more uptight about dildoes than plastic printed guns.

Passengers vaguely harbouring hopes of reaching their vacations, drape themselves across plastic seats better designed for torture chambers. Others, flattened by exhaustion are melted onto the floors. Human flotsam floating through endless hallways shoring up at identical grey steel doors guarded by unapproachable automatons. Passengers vanishing through the departure gates leave nothing of themselves behind. They are simply, gone. Herded into skies of amnesia.

I have never been a tourist. Sometimes I think I might like to try it. I imagine a pristine beach with an endless supply of colourful, exotic drinks pierced with pink straws. Days filled with the simplicity of seeing and accepting cheerful facts the umbrella brandishing guide recites off. Being part of multiple cameras clicking at proscribed vistas before rushing off to the next cultural highlight. A created innocence focused on vacuous pleasure vs historical reality. Tourists have so much more fun when uncomfortable bits of history are erased. A Cyndi Lauper echo, we all "just wanna have fun"!

A cliché states that Travel Is Educational. Having dragged my own boys around the world, enticed them into eating curry and sushi while learning how to tie a head scarf, I agree. However, revelling in exotic spas and the collection of air-miles are not enough to change cultural perspectives we are all born into. Nor, does it permanently change the colour of my skin. (My tan is temporary, unless I get a permanent membership at the local sunbed club).

No amount of pretty drinks will drown my innate "American-isms". I love cheeseburgers and wasting a Saturday morning in TJ Max looking for nothing specific. My car symbolizes freedom more than the Constitution and fireworks on the 4th of July are expected. I am American at heart.

America is a baby country. Barely 247 years old. In our short American history we have made some big global dents and for an innovative country we don't adapt easily. We tend to like ride our cultural trains until they get de-railed. Racism still spreads broader than the quintessential Live Oaks gracing Southern plantations.

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The dark thread weaving through our “White vs Black” struggle is mired in a self-righteous puritanical religion and shaded definition of humanity. Historic belief systems dictate our modern world. A stand of; *“that which is different to us cannot be, by definition, the same as -us”*.

We react to anything different from ourselves with the assessment levels of a nuclear threat. It is less- human, therefore destructible. Case in point; Native Americans and, Africans.

In all fairness, and bearing some insane level of “equality”, the US inclusively applies “race science” and the “sub-human” argument across the board to Black Americans, Native American, Chinese railway workers, Hawaiians, Mexicans, the Japanese and other ethnic races. Our persecution history is beautifully diverse. We still get more worked up about animal rights than blatant human rights abuses. It’s a mad, mad world and we call it home.

Of all the global continents, we reserve our greatest poisoned love for Africa. Touristic visions of safaris and giraffes entice us to suffer the indignities of travel. Africa is more exciting than any Great Wall, whether it’s Trumps’ or Chinas’. Make no mistake, we continue to adore China. It brings us all our prime Amazon treats, arriving beautifully wrapped in layers of non-biodegradable plastics. What’s not to love?

Africa holds a special place in corporate Americas avaricious heart. It holds more than 30% of global mineral reserves and other natural resources that Western nations crave more than Amazon pyjamas.

The history of Africa is distorted through foreign colonization. Tribal oral histories and beliefs were crushed under a new white religion and the arrogance of “bringing civilization” to the savages. (History is So repetitive! If only we actually studied it in schools..) During the "Scramble for Africa" in the 19th and early 20th centuries, European countries sought to exploit Africa's abundant resources and establish colonies. Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain were the early colonizers reshaping the African landscape to suit their own use. The USA eventually joined the African rape club with enthusiastic and imaginative new methodologies for expanding the destruction of Africa whilst stuffing our pockets.

Colonial legacies left deep imprints on African societies. Imposed borders (a very British game) brutally violated tribal and ethnic divisions, resulting in ongoing and bloody conflicts. Resource extraction favoured the colonizers, who had all the big toys like guns and mining equipment. This led to deep economic disparities and increasing poverty amongst native Africans. (Bell ringing here on Native Americans?) 20th century ‘independence’ still left Africa grappling with social, political, and economic ramifications from historical colonization in addition to a fresh wave of resource pillaging. The players have changed, but the game is still the same.

Timber, cocoa beans and fruits are some of the agricultural commodities produced across the continent. However, what attracts the big sharks are, the minerals. It’s a feeding frenzy in Nigeria (“The Giant of Africa”) which is “blessed” with; crude oil, lead, zinc, gold, coal, gemstones and tin. Botswana shines with its’ diamonds while S. Africa brings magnesium, platinum and titanium to the feast. The Republic of Congo (DRC) one of the wealthiest

African countries in natural resources offers; cobalt, copper lithium and tantalum. Niger joins the beleaguered party with uranium while Egypt is decked in natural gas, copper and zinc. Ghana, Namibia, Mozambique and Zambia are equally cursed with coveted abundance. Natural treasures that historically and currently support viral abuses and wars across the continent and it's peoples. Supportive corporate boards choose to see Africans as "sub-human" in the pursuit of Wall Street profits and bigger yachts.

The African continent is a complex tapestry of colourful and diverse cultures. Tribes deeply influenced by traditions that crash against the complex interactions and the desires of foreign influences. Throughout history, the continent has suffered under the convergence of global powers seeking resources, trading routes, and territories. External forces that have shaped Africa's trajectory leaving indelible scars on its societies. From missionaries to diamond mining, Western influence has not held the best interest of Africans in mind. It has excused every abuse with a variation of the White vs Black (Human vs sub-human) argument.

Amid this messy, dark story, African women emerge as powerful, positive agents of change. Throughout it's history, African women have been dodging cultural bullets like veterans in an obstacle course. Traditional norms, colonization and patriarchal structures have tried their best to drive them into silence. But guess what, they are Women! (In general, ask most man, women are a rather untameable and frustrating species). In Africa, an unstoppable drive for women's rights and gender equality continues burning brighter than any safari sunset. Even in the "vintage" days of African societies, women set off tidal waves of change in agriculture, trade, and governance. They multitasked tribes, countries and an entire continent by juggling families, crops, social collaborations and generally running the show while men offered advice and focused on standing on one leg. (Not to undermine standing on one leg, it's hard to sustain for long periods unless you're a yogi or Masai.)

African post-independence movements brought African women centre stage in anti-colonial and human rights struggles. These ladies did more than flag waving or wearing pink hats. They demanded front-row seats to justice, knocking over a few men still left standing on one leg in the process. Like lionesses protecting their young, women's organizations sprang up faster than poachers in animal refuges. They fearlessly advocated for gender equality and women's rights with a focus that would make a stalking cheetah jealous.

Fast-forward and the efforts of those fierce trailblazers set the stage for some serious current girl power. Contemporary women's empowerment initiatives illuminate the African landscape with opportunities and continue smashing barriers like rhinos at a tourist safari jeep. Not creatures to be messed with! African women are shaking things up, not just for themselves, but for everyone.

In the globally complicated story of women's rights, several African women have emerged as fierce protagonists rewriting the scripts of their societies. (No men standing on one leg were harmed in the process. I think.)

Graça Machel (Mozambique): Co-founded The Graça Machel Trust. She's taken on education, health, and economic empowerment like a true Boss Lady. –she's one of the "Wonder Woman" of Africa.

Dr. Nawal El Saadawi (Egypt): Think feminist ninja. Armed with her pen and fierce activist spirit, she has shattered norms, tackled taboo topics like female genital mutilation, and left many scrambling to catch up. (Women writers are a force to be reckoned with.)

Dr. Leymah Gbowee (Liberia): A standing ovation to Nobel laureate Dr. Leymah Gbowee, peacekeeper who turned the page on Liberia's civil war. A real-life superheroine who doesn't just talk about peace; she marches right in and demands it. She may even have a cape in her wardrobe.

Bineta Diop (Senegal): Never heard of the African Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace, and Security? Meet Bineta Diop –architect of “Femmes Africa Solidarité” an organization to economically and politically empower women. This lady literally means business.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia): Making history with a sense of style, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became Africa's first female head of state. She focused on education and women's rights, proving that female leadership can be smart and look great too.

Dr. Helen Rees (South Africa) A giantess in the arena of ethical medicine in Africa. Despite being born in the UK, she took on the African pharmaceutical giants armed with science and a healthy dose of "you shall not pass" spirit. She raised her voice against the illegal tactics of drug testing, leaving corporate rabbits with no place to hide. In Africa, where pharmaceutical companies behave like toddlers with unlimited access to candy, Dr. Rees advocated for medicine for healing, not economic exploitation. This lady has guts.

These formidable women, in company with so many more, are orchestrating a symphony of change in Africa. Proof that women are not merely on the side-lines but are major headliners. Women rewriting old narratives and breaking barriers for generations to come.

Amid unique challenges, women continue re-shaping Africa's social rights fabric. The African Women's Decade (2010-2020) was like a starter pistol for progress, fired by none other than the African Union. While progress is evident, major issues remain. Gender-based violence continues to plague many African countries, demanding new, comprehensive legal frameworks, education and societal shifts. Challenges, like old CEOs', don't retire easily. Gender-based violence remains prevalent. Yes, we are talking about destroyed vaginas. (Men cringe if you talk about lopping off bits of their penises, but it's ok for girls?) .WHO statistics state that over “More than 200 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM) in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia where FGM is practiced on girls aged from infancy to 15 years old. Men, WTF?!!

Foreign influences are still the uninvited guests that refuse to leave after the party. The pharmaceutical industry's history of testing drugs in African countries, often without proper oversight could fall under crimes against humanity. In the shadowy corridors of medical history, Africa has often played an unwitting role in a de-humanizing drama. A theatre where

pharmaceutical companies cast the continent as a testing ground for experimental drugs prior to FDA approvals. It's a cryptic morality puzzle. Where does the pursuit of medical progress intersect with the ethical questions of humanity? We are left pondering the fine line between scientific advancement and evil exploitation.

For decades, pharmaceutical giants have seen Africa as a convenient blank canvas, where the complex brushstrokes of drug testing can be applied with less scrutiny. The allure of fast-tracking clinical trials, cutting costs, and navigating looser regulations has drawn these companies to Africa's door like moths to a flame. In the pursuit of scientific innovation, Africa's human complexities are reduced to a footnote, overshadowed by the promise of profits and a quest for the next medical breakthrough.

The consequences of this narrative are forever etched into the generations of those who unknowingly participated in these trials, often in exchange for subsistence compensation, basic healthcare or, nothing. Vulnerable communities that should have been safeguarded were in many instances, left victims to the unintended consequences of these experiments. It's imperative to acknowledge these chapters in Africa's history. Through them, we are compelled to question where the boundaries of ethics, justice, and responsibility lie for all of us.

Now. Would I be your favourite, controversial columnist if I failed to support your curiosity in a “naming names”? Of course not. Every good opinion demands to be spiced with some uncomfortable facts. When we want entertaining Kardashians updates we hit the gossip rags. (What Does that girl use on her hair, mine could do with some.) In that vein of inquiry, here is the Stars short list of pharma companies with shady ethics in Africa:

Pfizer: One of the most notable cases involves Pfizer's testing of an antibiotic called Trovan during a meningitis outbreak in Nigeria in 1996. The trial was marred by allegations of inadequate informed consent, lack of proper controls, and inadequate medical care for participants. This case sparked significant controversy and legal battles. On the bright side, it led to further investigations on drug testing in Africa. Do we say “thank you”?

GlaxoSmithKline (GSK): GSK is our next Star. They faced criticism for clinical trials for a pneumonia vaccine in Malawi in the early 2000s. The company was accused of not providing appropriate compensation to families of deceased children who had participated in the trial. Did you miss the “deceased children” bit? Read it again- and weep.

Novartis: This Swiss pharmaceutical company faced backlash for clinical trials of a heart drug called Diovan in South Africa in the early 2000s. Concerns were raised about the ethical standards of the trials and whether participants were adequately informed about the potential risks.

Roche: The company conducted trials for an HIV drug called Tenofovir in Cameroon and other African countries. While the trials aimed to test the drug's effectiveness for preventing HIV transmission, questions were raised about the fairness of trial conditions and potential side effects.

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Johnson & Johnson: This company has conducted clinical trials in Africa for various drugs, including HIV treatments and tuberculosis medications. While some trials were praised for their ethical practices, others faced scrutiny for issues related to informed consent and participant welfare.

I know. It's a hard hit on personal purchasing decisions. Johnson and Johnson was my baby go-to brand. Roche was my skin care guru. Am I exempt from responsibility for terrible events happening "over there" of which I knew nothing? Yes, medical testing is a tough topic with layers of ethical nuances. Pharmaceutical companies often engage in clinical trials worldwide to develop life-saving medications. Covid vaccinations are a recent endeavour.

But. In the world of theoretical benefits can we justify erasing ethical concerns? Are we still guilty of practicing "race science" by accepting that some populations are more expendable than others? Personally, I would like to be a tourist in Africa without worrying if my medications have killed off an entire tribe.

Africa's history is a mosaic of foreign influences and indigenous resilience. Amid this complexity, African women continue as catalysts for change, advocating for women's rights, equality, and social justice. The legacies of colonization, intertwined with efforts to build progressive societies, form the backdrop against which women are shaping Africa's new narratives. They have immense hearts caged in courage.

These women, whether through organizations, advocacy, or political leadership, are influencing policies, eradicating harmful practices, and empowering communities. Africa's future hinges on their efforts, as they contribute to the continent's ongoing transformation, forging a path toward gender equality, social justice and a brighter global future for all of us.

Hats off Ladies, we applaud you.

END.

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