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## Representing Africa in the 'Coming to America' Films

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



# Representing Africa in the 'Coming to America' Films

## Introduction

*Coming to America* (CTA) was released to critical and audience acclaim in 1988. Directed by John Landis and starring an all-black cast, the movie tells the romantic story of Akeem Joffer (Eddy Murphy), Prince of the fictional African nation of Zamunda. Akeem wanted to break with the tradition that forces him to marry a woman, who upon birth, was destined to be his wife. From infancy, this woman has been trained specifically to meet the King's expectations of a royal wife – subordinate in all her ways. That Akeem did not show interest in this woman did not seem to affect the King's choice for his son. In defiance of tradition which required acceptance of his father's choice of his wife, Akeem decided to travel outside of Zamunda to find his own wife. Akeem was looking for a woman whose intellect, preferences and character existed independently of his own. Presuming that such a woman did not exist in Africa, Akeem decided to go to America. By this presumption, the movie defined Africa as a place where women are docile and dependent on male authority figures.

Akeem assumed a new identity in America and made every conscious effort to live a simple life, an effort that his assistant Semmi (Arsenio Hall) constantly undermined. Lisa (Sheri Headley) was the beautiful daughter of the owner of the fast-food restaurant where they worked. Lisa and her father did not really notice Akeem until the day he and Semmi employed their unique stick fighting skills to halt a robbery at the restaurant. Lisa had a boyfriend, Darryl (Eric LaSalle) but she fell for Akeem. King Joffer (James Earl Jones) came to America looking for his son, and found out about his romantic involvement with Lisa. It was at this point that Lisa and her father learned of Akeem's royal status in Zamunda. The man is enamored of Akeem's riches. Lisa, however, is upset that Akeem had hidden his true identity from her. The King was very rude to Lisa and her father, treating them as paupers. He offered to buy Lisa out of her relationship with Akeem; she refused. Akeem's mother tried to intervene, but her suggestions were rudely rejected by King Joffer. It seemed like the King had succeeded in taking Akeem back until scenes showing a lavish wedding for Akeem and Lisa in Zamunda end the movie.

'Coming to America' or CTA was a major commercial success, with an estimated box office revenue of over US\$288 million (Jesudason 2021). The movie's success can also be measured in the two Oscar

nominations that it received. It inspired a TV sitcom that would be unsuccessful. Tamil and Hong Kong films adapted the story, affirming Oscar Wilde's adage that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The film "was a complete masterpiece with a major cult following that continues to relish its modern fairy tale and memorable characters" (Ajayi 2021). This success encouraged the release of a sequel, *Coming 2 America* (C2A), in 2021.

As much as CTA sought to disavow parental matchmaking in Africa, C2A also sought to change people's mind on the assumed unsuitability of women to lead. The sequel centered on the search for a new male heir to the throne. After about 30 years of marriage, Akeem and Lisa have three daughters, but no son. This was a problem because tradition of Zamunda stipulates that only a male successor can inherit the throne. The royal witch doctor, Baba, revealed that Akeem had sired a son through a drug-induced, one-night stand during his 1988 sojourn in New York. He had an obligation to find this son, the Crown Prince, and prepare him to assume the throne. Akeem found his son, Lavelle (Jermaine Fowler) in New York and took him to Zamunda, along with some relatives. The movie revolves around the resulting cultural clashes and training Lavelle to be King, to the chagrin of Lisa and her daughters.

### **Stereotyping Africa**

A combination of orientalism, mediatization and other ideological practices has sustained an "artificial" Africa that feeds the Western imagination of Africa (Bonsu 2009; European Commission 2020; Mayer 2002; Reyes and Wyatt 2019; Said 1978). The two *Coming to/2 America* movies reinforce some of these stereotypes, even if inadvertently. The sequel had to make some adjustments compared to the original. C2A, as Ajayi (2021) notes, presents Zamunda as a prosperous nation "where royals indulge in stick-fighting with their children before breakfast and princes tweeze the whiskers of malnourished lions to display courage. The original film was spared this shaky premise of Zamunda as more screen time was spent on poverty and deprivation in 1980s New York." That is to say while the films reinforce the concept of a unitary Africa, they also try to show that Africa does not always fit the commonly held negative image. CTA in particular was revolutionary in this regard, as one commentator (Jesudason 2021) observed:

Coming to America was a brash romantic comedy...But, despite its contrived plot and fairy-tale schmaltz, it was, in its own way, revolutionary...After all, Western cinema has a

long and continuing history of relegating Africans to the sidelines in films about Africa, using the continent as a backdrop for white characters' journeys of self-discovery or moral reckoning, from *The African Queen* (1951) to *Out of Africa* (1985) to more modern thrillers like *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005). Or, if films have centered on African characters, they have done so predominantly in stories of distress and suffering, such as genocide dramas like *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Beasts of No Nation* (2015).

Herein lies one of the many contradictions in the movies – trying to portray a positive image of Africa through stereotypical representations that reinforce racist and colonial tropes, toward representational legitimacy of Western audiences (Plaquette 2020). For instance, in *C2A*, Lavelle has to pass a number of hazardous tests to be named Crown Prince of Zamunda. One such test was to cut off whiskers of a live lion. The primitiveness captured in this test is far from the reality in contemporary Africa, but it is close enough to the Western imaginary of Africa as a wild and exotic paradise, one that intimates economies of desire, interspersed with danger (Bonsu 2009). Such imagery contributes to the cultural legitimacy of the movies by converting negative stereotypes into a consumable difference that is uniquely African.

CTA was located mainly in New York while *C2A* was located in Zamunda – of course, like *Wakanda*, mythical and therefore studio-staged. Yet, CTA as well as *C2A* were grounded in racist stereotypes represented in African savagery. Here, the inherent structural inequalities between Africa and the rest of the world are transformed into comical pictures. In both pictures, but especially in *C2A*, Africa remains the exotic wild paradise with lush vegetation, dangerous animals and beautiful women trained in the ancient art of stick fighting – the “raw” – compared to their “cooked” non-African counterparts (cf. Levi-Strauss [1969] 1983). This is reminiscent of *The Gods Must be Crazy* (TGMBC), a 1980s movie series that supposedly portrayed the “raw” African on the Kalahari desert. Those images – in TGMBC, of an uncouth African man who does not recognize a Coca Cola bottle and believes it to be the source of problems in his village – are represented in glitzy forms in the *Coming to/2 America* movies. Truly, the effective marriage of cultures for legitimacy need not play on the negative stereotype of one or the other. But audience expectation and the movie’s delivery of same reference global power relations that maintains Africa at the lowest rung on the global socio-

economic ladder, by saying that however wealthy an African one may be – such as the royals of Zamunda with their flashy clothes and plush gardens – the African remains instinctively primitive.

### **Patriarchal Bargaining, Representations of African Women**

Within African stereotypes, the movies reflect longstanding representations of African women and gender relations, which can be examined under the lens of patriarchal bargain. According to Kandiyoti (1988), patriarchal bargain is the “set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce” (Kandiyoti 1988, 275). In this sense, the roles attributed to women and the representations of women in patriarchal society is the result of sociocultural constructions (Lindridge, Peñaloza and Worlu 2016). Patriarchal bargain relates to the roles that women hold in patriarchal societies and how they use these roles to meet their objectives. The *Coming to 2 America* movies show how wives and daughters, caught in a patriarchal society, employ various strategies to navigate their scripted roles. In 1988, women tended to be represented with conflicting images that included both career expectations and traditional expressions of femininity, marriage and motherhood (Roth and Dashper 2016). That was the context for CTA. A lot has changed since and one would expect that C2A would present balanced gender relationships. That is, however, not the case at all as the sequel presents women in much the same way as the first movie, albeit differently.

In the first scenes of CTA, Akeem meets the bride his parents have chosen for him after going “through a lot of trouble to select a very fine wife.” The “perfect” wife is as described during Akeem’s first meeting with his designated bride: “She’s your queen-to-be, a queen-to-be forever, a queen who’ll do whatever his highness desires – She’s your queen-to-be a vision of perfection.” In other words, a perfect wife in Zamunda is characterized by her beauty and her devotion to her husband. This subservience is evidenced by Queen Aoleon’s obedience to King Jaffer even when she was clearly in disagreement.

Queen Aoleon embodied the traditional qualities of a womanhood – beautiful, obedient to a husband or a father, and devoted to family matters – characteristics derived from gender performativity (cf. Butler 1990). She did not speak much, and never contradicted her husband. She was a product of the royal tradition and did not rebel against the tradition. She says: “When I met your father, I was terrified. I must admit, I was frightened, too. I was so nervous [...] Over the years, I have grown to love your father very much.” Though she was not able to decide her own fate,

she made the best of it – she compromised her own thoughts and beliefs. The few apparitions of Queen Aoleon are linked with messages of an obedient woman. The audience has to wait until the end of the movie for Queen Aoleon to assert: “Put a sock in it, Jaffe!” But she immediately adds: “The boy is in love.” When the Queen spoke her mind out, it was to protect the happiness of her son, as any scripted devoted mother would do.

Interestingly, Lisa shared a similar concern for family and obedience to a male authority. Though living in America, Lisa was not so free. She never spoke about her presumed career and her wishes to develop a business. She is presented as an obedient daughter, who lives with her father and works hard in his business. In her intimate life, Lisa accepted her father’s preference for a boyfriend and dated an obnoxious boyfriend, Darryl Jenks. Later, when Akeem revealed his true identity and wanted to marry her, Lisa accepted after the insistence of her father. She decided to join Akeem in Zamunda, leaving her home and her career. These elements reveal Lisa’s emotional dependence first on her father and then her husband-to-be. She departed from Akeem’s ideal of an autonomous and independent American woman, and embraced traditional scripted womanhood.

Lisa reprised her role in C2A as Akeem’s queen. She expressed her disagreement with Akeem’s decision to bring a “stranger” who would be king, over her daughters. Though she was uncomfortable with the situation, she accepted to host her husband’s new son, asking: “What happened to you, Akeem? You were supposed to change things. You were supposed to bring this kingdom into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But instead, you push our daughter aside, someone who has dedicated her life to this country. And because she’s a woman, she can’t be your heir?” She later decided to make the best of the situation, negotiating a comfortable existence for herself and her daughters.

Her three daughters were not so compromising, as they do not seem to support the tradition that only a male child should inherit the throne; a tradition that ignores the skills and abilities of the child and focuses on biological anatomy. Meeka the eldest daughter and better qualified descendant to rule the kingdom (which should maybe be a queendom) of Zamunda decides to ally with her recently discovered half-brother. She understands that he is a victim as much as she is: they are treated in specific ways, not because of who they are but because of what their positions represent to others. During the last scenes, we see the daughters fighting, beating the men. There are no weak women in the

movie. But they nevertheless navigate within patriarchal rules to make their voices heard, rather than rebel overtly against these rules.

Indeed, the female characters in C2A are presented as strong and of their own minds, boldly expressing their perspectives even in disagreement. On this note, the film succeeds in crafting a counter image of the docile African woman. Apart from the daughters, Mirembe (played by South African actor Nomzamo Mbatha) – the royal groomer who eventually marries Lavelle, the reluctant prince – chooses her own path and considers starting her own business. If, however, the evolution of Lisa's character in the CTA/C2A franchise is anything to go by, then we can expect that the strength and character shown by the three daughters shall eventually be turned into submission to social norms as they age. Living outside of Zamunda, Mirembe may have a better chance at independence, even though patriarchal tendencies around the globe can perhaps stifle her dreams also.

### **Concluding Comments: Stereotypes and representations in collective imaginaries**

The Western imaginary has a long tradition of representing others in tales, songs, and movies, often a means of subjectivising these "Others" by way of gender, race or other categories. For instance, many classic Western tales portray women to be solely dependent on the male for their social standing. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White are among many such stories. Stereotypes about Africa abound in Western folk culture, children literature, and songs. For instance, the famous Tintin in the Congo, a comic written in 1931, is a depiction of imagined colonial times. In the Netherlands, young children are raised in the tradition of Sinterklaas, a legendary white bishop assisted by Zwarte Pieten, who are helpers dressed in Moorish attires and in blackface. Africans and women are not the only ones misrepresented by the Western imaginary in the name of power. Indian, Chinese and other communities have had to bear the brunt of colonialism, being deemed inferior to the Westerner.

The movies have been an effective tool in this propaganda, but it is the same tool that is being employed to change attitudes and opinions of "Others". The popularity of movies such as *Black Panther* speak to the increasing voices of opposition to the essentialization of Africans. The commercially successful film depicts Africans in a mythical country, Wakanda, that is more advanced, more prosperous and more egalitarian than contemporary America (Bowles 2018, Eckhardt 2018). The movie *Crazy Rich Asians* attempts to present Asia as a highly developed continent, in contrast to the common representations of poor Asian



migrants (Zhao 2019). In spite of this progress, the ideological underpinnings of colonialism sustains the old stereotypes into the present. Consider that conspiracy theorists are now using the coronavirus pandemic as a tool of racism against people of Chinese origin, manifested in President Trump's description of the pandemic as a "China disease".

Colonial and other experiences would suggest (Said 1978; Ives 2018) that storytelling is an effective tool for oppression. In fact, the negative images of Africa that are so engrained in people have been facilitated in significant part by a strategic, but perhaps unconscious, effort to socialize audiences into an identity construction process that casts Africans as inferior. The strength of this ideological effort lies in part in its ability to define the story in such a way that many are unable to carefully discern fiction from reality (Bonsu 2009). That appears to be the case with the makers of the *Coming to/2 America* movies, who seem to promote negative stereotypes of Africa even as they try to shine a good light on the continent. While presenting Africa in glitzy ways, the moviemakers also present Africa as a frozen laboratory for ancient human experiences – exotic and dangerous – that must be preserved and enjoyed by current and future generations of audiences in the West. In the end, Lavelle did not want to be King. He became an ambassador for Zamunda; one of the daughters would become Queen. A small victory for the feminist agenda but that is merely a veneer covering the raw and savage Africa that audiences expect and are served in abundance in these films.

Long Live, Primitive Africa!

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