Sociocultural Stereotypes in Media and Intercultural Communication
(Africa in the Polish Media)

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Abstract

Mass media enormously influence social life and people's perception of reality. They also form opinions and patterns of behavior, as well as language, and national culture. The aim of the following article is to provide an analysis of this process based on a particular example: the image of Africa in the Polish media. This analysis indicates the manner in which Africa is portrayed in media and how they influence stereotypes concerning the continent and its inhabitants. The media image of Africa is the basis of a negative evaluation of Africans living in Poland, which greatly hinders intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization the media sphere is highly influential. Mass media exert a great deal of impact on social life and people's perception of reality. They also form opinions, and patterns of behavior, as well as language, and national culture. Because the media operation is accessible, widely distributed, and credible among audiences we may assume that they shape the vision of reality for their recipients. As an American journalist Thomas Harris claimed, today's mass media are not only a “magic window” through which we see the world, but also “a door” through which ideas enter our consciousness (Harris, 2003). That is why the dynamic development of media needs to be examined in the context of perpetuating ethnic and cultural stereotypes.

The concept of stereotype (from Greek stereos – firm, solid + typos – impression, image), was first introduced in 1922 by an American journalist and political scientist Walter Lippmann in his book Public Opinion (Kleg, 1993). This concept meant a simple and pejorative image of reality functioning in the consciousness of an individual, concerning social groups, people, situations, and institutions, perpetuated by constant repetition of said image. Lippmann claimed that stereotypes as cultural products are forced upon an individual and manipulate one's way of perceiving certain facts and social phenomena.

Since then the concept of stereotype has become a subject of analysis of various scientific fields. Besides psychology, philosophy, theory of literature, linguistics, sociology, recently it has also been in the center of attention of media sciences. Polish authors also contributed to this field (Mitosek, 1974; Chlewiński & Kurcz, 1992; Dzienniak-Paulina, 2001).
The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the process of perpetuating the stereotype based on a particular example: the image of Africa in the Polish media. It needs to be noted that the creation of said image and its character, as well as Polish mentality, have been influenced by a variety of factors, which affect the perception of Polish and African relationships. These factors include: geographical separation, economical migration, EU politics towards African countries, literary traditions, language stereotypes etc.

2. Literary and language stereotypes

The image of Africa and Africans remains negative in Poland. In the Polish consciousness Africa exists as a symbol of low level life, famine, ethnic conflicts, violence and diseases. These clichés have been perpetuated through existence in decades of writings, mass culture and mass media. Fear, ignorance, and language stereotypes filled the rest of the image. Just the word “Africa” carries a few stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the Polish consciousness. Africa is synonymous with poverty, a place where people of another skin color live in extreme misery, where you can encounter wild animals roaming free. In the Polish consciousness the image of Africa is different than in Western literature, e.g., in fables of Henry Rider Haggard or Louis Henri Boussenard about the treasures of king Solomon, the ivory coast, and diamonds scattered at the savannah. To the contrary, everyone remembers quite racist school readings by Julian Tuwim (Murzynek Bambo [trans. The Little Negro Bambo]), Kornel Makuszyński (Awantury I wybryki malej małpkę Fiki-Miki [The Adventures and Antics of The Little Monkey Fiki-Miki]), or the novel by Polish Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz In Desert and Wilderness.

Polish literature perpetuated ambivalent feelings of love and fear towards Africa. Mostly, it introduced new vocabulary such as: ‘negro’, 'little negro', 'Bambo' to general public, which are difficult to uproot from the cultural consciousness.

The word 'negro' is a traditional term for a black person in Polish language, but literary works legitimized it as “neutral”. Polish word 'negro' (“murzyn”) probably originated from a modification of a German word “Mohr” (lat. Maurus) through the addiction of the suffix -in (Bruckner, 1993: 48). This term is a part of idioms such as: “opalić się na murzynę” [to get a sun-tan like a negro] (to get a very dark skin color from sun-tanning). In order to describe an African person one may hear a term “czarny, czarnuch” - [nigger], which is considered to be highly offensive and racist. It is worth mentioning that all the lexical units in Polish which contain a lexem “czarny” [black], meaning “illegal, dirty, evil”, only have a negative connotation: “czarna robota” [black job] (lowly paid and hard work), “czarny dzień” [black day] (unlucky day).

In a post-colonial developing society with free market Polish language acquired phrases indicating a certain position in a social system, based on a priority of private property and hired work; e.g., “pracować jak Murzyn”, “robić za Murzyn” [to work like a ‘negro’] and in the saying “Murzyn zrobił swoje, murzyn może odejść” [A ‘negro’ did his work, A ‘negro’ can go] (a person working uncredited or a person used for hard work). Each of these phrases underlines the backwardness and lower social status of a person who is called a ‘negro’.

According to dictionaries – including Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN [The Dictionary of Polish Language] – the word 'negro' is neutral, and does not carry a qualifier of contempt (Doroszewski, 1958-1969). This opinion is shared by some of Polish linguists (Jerzy Bralczyk, Jan Miodek). However, according to representatives of African sciences, members of “Africa Another Way”, and Africans - the word was based on a prominence of racial factor, therefore it is perceived solely as pejorative. Agnieszka Kozłowska-Rajewicz, Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, emphasizes that: “The word 'negro' is a pejorative term, violating dignity and constituting a publicly spoken discrimination, based on a skin color varying from white” (mn/gak/kdj 2012).

3. The area of research

An interesting material for analysis was provided by a report of a public opinion survey, conducted by the Foundation “Africa Another Way” in 2010 (Średziński, 2011). It was a first detailed monitoring of media in terms of presence and representation of issues concerning Africa and its inhabitants.

These issues were partly researched by the “Never Again” Association and by the Association Against Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia “Open Republic” which monitored the instances of racism and intolerance against people of non-Polish origin. On the other hand, hate speech was of interest to “Wiedza Lokalna” [Local Knowledge] Foundation, which worked on a special tool to automatically identify content published on the Internet, which would qualify as aggressive against minorities, including people of non-Polish origin. (Kornak, 2009; Społeczeństwo przeciw nienawiści [Society Against Hate] 2011, www.raportmniejszosci.pl).

In the period from 1st August 2010 to 31st July 2011 the Foundation “Africa Another Way” monitored and analyzed the Polish media – press, radio and television – as well as Internet portals, both local and nationwide. The report based on the data provided by the Institute of Media Monitoring contained basic information concerning Africa and Africans separated into: type of media, range, frequency and profile. In the monthly report all the materials to do with Africa and Africans from nationwide, local, and trade press, along with Internet portals, radio, and television were analyzed. In total there were 931
press titles, 3045 Internet portals and websites, 13 radio stations, and 16 television channels. The aim of the monitoring was to analyze the manner of portraying Africa in the Polish media. Additionally, two-person team provided supplementary monitoring of politicians' speeches, which were deemed discriminatory, but still appeared in media.

4. Media stereotypes

According to sociological and media research, mass media are considered to be a primary source of knowledge about Africa for an average Polish person. Therefore, mass media are intermediaries which provide and select information. Thus, the image of Africa and Africans largely depends on how it is portrayed in media. It is worth emphasizing that subjects concerning Africa and its inhabitants are usually not of particular interest to the Polish media. It is rare that they appear on covers of Polish newspapers and in main news bulletins. If so happens it is often because of a dramatic occurrence or other negative message coming from the African continent. Information regarding the sphere of culture disappears beneath negative news from Africa.

The monitoring conducted by the Foundation “Africa Another Way” was based on the following key-words: “Africa”, “Negro”, “Negress”, “Negroes”, “Bambo”, “African”, “Africans”. The frequency of words “African”, which is accepted by people of African origin, and “Negro”, which is considered to be offensive, was checked each month. As it is shown in the report, the word “Negro” is still in common use. The number of publications, separated into categories is as follows: those with the lexeme “African” - 177, or 41% of publications, and those with the lexeme “Negro” 257, of 59% of publications.

In the language of media describing African reality, the term that appears frequently is “wild”. “Wildlife” is what many people associate with Africa, and this term was third in public opinion survey in 2010 about respondents' associations with Africa. One could point to TV nature shows and books by Henryk Sienkiewicz and Karen Blixen as influences. The “wild” exists in the entire continent, as African people live near nature and wild animals. Furthermore, travelers usually attempt to find “wild tribes” - Bushmen, Pygmies, Maasai etc. That is how most Polish people imagine Africa (see also: Tu się lepiej nie wybierać [It is Best Not to Come Here] Nowiny 6 VIII 2010).

The phenomenon that exists in the language of media is the traditional comparison of Poland to countries that are worse and underdeveloped, if only in the Polish people's consciousness. As soon as any ranking indicated that Poland received a bad mark, it was immediately compared with an African country. That is what happened in the case of Global Gender Gap Report. Poland did not place particularly well, occupying remote 43rd place behind Uganda and Mozambique. Titles such as W Ghanie biznes ma się lepiej niż u nas [In Ghana business is better than here] or Polska za Mozambikiem [Poland behind Mozambique] (Grabau, 2010) were supposed to reinforce the negative message of articles, as in the consciousness of Polish society there is only misery in African countries.

As it is indicated by the research, the map of journeys undertaken by travelers has few and constant points: Rwanda, Congo, Somalia, Sudan. This map also provides certain associations: Rwanda – carnage, Somalia – famine, Congo – rapes, Sudan – civil war. In media reports about Africa there is a “law” that the authors of the report named “the law of deaths per kilometer”. According to this law, the more remote (both geographically and culturally) the region of the world, the less it is interesting, so in order for it to become more appealing, media needs a more drastic, bloody message. It is the reason why Polish audiences receive reports mostly about conflicts: armed, ethnic, religious, in addition to socio-economic issues.

Armed conflicts and “plagues of Africa” are presented without distinguishing countries and regions. Occurrences are not precisely located and presented without extended journalistic research, without explaining the causes of catastrophes and conflicts. Such generalizations as “conflict in Africa”, “African ethnic war”, “famine in Africa”, “AIDS in Africa” are constantly used clichés in the Polish media. Thereby a drought in Sudan, or famine in Somalia become continental catastrophes, in opposition to reality (Leszczyński, 2010; Leszczyński, 2011; Gierak, 2010).

As for tourist and cultural attractions the map is even more limited. Tunisia and Egypt – holidays, Kenya – safari and Maasai. The rest of the continent remains unknown.

In turn woman’s magazines are eager to publish articles and reports on the situation of women in Africa. The main issues are: circumcision of women, sexual violence (e.g. the series of articles published in “Bravo Girl” in 2010: Mapa przemocy: piekło dziewczyn [The Map of Violence: Women's Hell] (nr 16), Zmuszanie do małżeństwa [Forced Marriages] (nr 17), One też chce żyć [They Want to Live Too] (nr 19)). We cannot learn about the emancipation movement of women in Africa, about the works of women's non-government organizations, or about the achievements in the field of literature or social/political work.

The main theme among African subjects in the Polish media remain issues concerning immigrants. The manner in which this subject is presented proves that in Poland and other European countries the ethnocentrism aimed against immigrants is on the rise. Texts about this matter magnify the scale of the phenomenon, calling it “the overflow”. Writers usually focus on issues such as economical dangers, unemployment rate, rise in crime, ethnic based conflicts etc. However, as statistics show, none of these “media visions” is true to reality. Because of the political transformation after 1989 and the membership in EU, Poland was included into a group of immigration countries. Still, most of the immigrants in Poland come from Ukraine,
Belarus, Russia, Vietnam and Armenia. According to the data provided by Office For Foreigners, as of 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2013, based on valid residence cards there are 5 thousand citizens of African countries, which constitutes 4% of all foreigners possessing these documents\textsuperscript{1}.

According to writers the inflow of African countries' citizens since 90s of 20\textsuperscript{th} century was caused mostly by the economic situation in Africa and willingness to find a place for prosperous life. Non-economic aspects of migration from African countries to Poland, such as aspirations of highly-educated people and so called network of migratory connections (social, family ties) are not analyzed.

The media are especially interested in discussing Nigerians, who are the most numerous people of African origin in Poland\textsuperscript{2}. Journalists have introduced a new phrase to Polish language - “Nigerian scam”, which describes a fraud supposedly created by a Nigerian, even though fraudsters come from various countries, not only African.

Learning more about the continent from which the African immigrants originate, could be valuable in overcoming these stereotypes. This does not occur, as media mostly presents snippets of negative information. Such media titles as 

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Epidaemia z Afryki} [The Epidemic from Africa] (Mazuś 2010),
  \item \textit{Swoją chorobą przywlokłem z Afryki} [I Dragged My Disease from Africa] (PAK 2011), or
  \item \textit{Masaj z komórką} [A Maasai with a Cellphone] (Wniecki 2010),
  \item \textit{Marzy w sejmie} [A Negro in a Parliament] (Czarnecki, 2010)
\end{itemize}

are racist and offensive to Africans.

Polish journalists are also full of contempt towards Africans. As a representative example, there is a quote from Wojciech Cejrowski, published in 2008 in “Rzeczpospolita”, an influential newspaper: “Africans are the biggest danger to themselves. I believe that the perfect way to remedy this evil would be to have a white man rule in Africa for some time. […] White men civilized Africa, and black men destroyed this achievement. […] In South Africa it is imperative to restore apartheid” (Rosiak, 2008). It is worth noting that Cejrowski’s shows are believed by viewers to be a valuable source of knowledge about Africa.

The poor state of Africa is confirmed not only by reporters and travelers, but also by celebrities going there to help. Media send a message about humanitarian actions, which are focused on the specific parts of Africa struck with disasters. Even though organizations work in a few particular places, their problems are believed to cover the whole continent. Stereotypes are reinforced and the negative image of Africa prevails. While writing about humanitarian help media do not show a positive image of Africa, influencing the consciousness and associations of respondents surveyed in 2010.

The current negative media image of Africa obscures the real one, as there is not just famine in Somalia, carnage in Rwanda and the continent is not a huge village deprived of water. Another important issue of Polish journalism are “double standards” in its professional ethics, quality and credibility. Writing about Africa is full of factual mistakes, incomplete analyzes, exotic terms loaded with stereotypical associations, which would be unacceptable while describing European reality. The norms concerning description of sexual and conflicts’ victims are rarely maintained when writing about Africans. Photographs of starving children and rape victims are common in press and television. Amidst masses of uninformed texts; individual pieces of factually correct writing do not stand out. The following authors base on professional journalism: Dariusz Rosiak in “Rzeczpospolita”, Szymon Hołownia in “Newsweek”, or Wojciech Jagielski in “Gazeta Wyborcza”, who studied under Polish master of reportage Ryszard Kapuściński.

5. Final remarks

The surveyed respondents indicated three main areas of association with Africa: bad living conditions, dangerous and unstable political situation, and beautiful, dangerous nature. Bad conditions were understood as: backwardness, poverty, famine, lack of drinking water, low hygiene level, diseases, epidemics, AIDS, lack of medical care, lack of medicine, high rate of mortality (especially among children), poor education, illiteracy. The unstable political situation meant: cruelty, war, lawlessness, refugees, humanitarian help, tribal conflicts and terrorism. The analysis shows that the portrayal of Africa in media influences the persistence of stereotypes about the whole African continent and its inhabitants (Ejsmont, 2007: 84-85).

The gathered material proves that the psychological impact of media is one of the most topical and intriguing issues nowadays. The capabilities and the strength of media influence are perceived individually and are open to discussion. However, the media image of Africa leads to negative evaluation of Africans living in Poland, severely hindering conflict-free intercultural communication. As a Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie said: “the biggest danger brought on by the stereotype is not the fact that it is untrue. The problem is that we learn snippets of truth, yet take it as a whole. Sentimental

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\textsuperscript{1} Residence cards prove that a person is legally permitted on the territory of Poland. They are issued in the following instances: residence permit for a long-term resident of the EU; residence permit for a fixed period of time, or as a form of protection (refugee status, subsidiary protection, tolerated residence permit). All of the statistical data about African citizens are refer to the state on 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2013 and were compiled on the base of data provided by USDC, which runs and electronic database about countries of origin “Światość”

\textsuperscript{2} The real reasons of emigration, as well as the life of Africans in Poland are discussed in a novel by a Nigerian writer Ifa Nwamana, who lives in Warsaw: \textit{Stadion. Dzieteliskie igrzyska} [trans. Stadium. Devil's Playground] (Nwamana, 2009).
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pity towards Africans is the best friend of the stereotype. And the most dangerous, because it gives us the banal, but not deserved, feeling of moral satisfaction.” (Kowalczyk, 2010).

References


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