

Why Africa Matters

By Cedric Mayson. Orbis Books, 2010. 217 pages. \$20/paperback.

Reviewed by David Morse

In 1884, delegations from Britain, Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Spain gathered in Berlin to carve up Africa with boundaries that would serve the interests of the European colonial powers. No Africans were invited. Africans soon found their ancestral lands taken over by Europeans, their belief systems attacked by Christian missionaries.

Today, the mainstream media rarely give us a full African narrative. We get glimpses: emaciated children, corrupt leaders, brutal warlords, hotspots of violence, all reinforcing the worst stereotypes of Africa, and prompting viewers and readers to throw up their hands and declare that Africans must put their own house in order.

But colonialism still dominates. Firestone essentially owns Liberia, much as DeBeers and Anglo-American own South Africa, and PetroChina owns Sudan. Transnational corporations prefer the term “post-colonialism,” but little has changed. Africa remains a captive market for industrial goods; the World Trade Organization recently crushed Africa’s infant textile industry, which cannot compete with cheap textiles from China.

Cedric Mayson's *Why Africa Matters* portrays Africa not as victim, despite the history of exploitation, but as a continent with valuable spiritual traditions from which we might learn: "Africa is older, bigger, and richer than most of us realize and has much to offer that is needed by the rest of the world. What some see as a basket case is in fact a treasure chest."

Mayson is a white South African minister who worked with Nelson Mandela in the struggle against Apartheid. His core thesis is that we westerners are stunted by another apartheid – "the apartheid concept of Western civilization, which keeps the spiritual separate from the secular." African belief systems, in contrast, are more inclusive and tolerant because, unlike Christianity and Islam, they are not religions of conquest. Christianity, he reminds us, became the official religion of the Roman Empire, then accompanied the European conquest of Africa and the Americas.

Within all the major faiths is a split between their founders and the institutions that evolved later. "There is a vast difference between the teachings of Jesus, which are focused in the Gospels, and the teachings of the church, which are focused on the Creeds." The Creeds, Mayson observes, were forged in an era of empire, corruption, and persecution, and had little to do with the teachings of Jesus. This was "the message of fear and damnation which the colonial Christians carried around the world." Today that schism gets expressed most dangerously in the fundamentalist extremes of Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

By contrast, traditional African religions celebrate ancestors and *ubuntu*, a Zulu word meaning a sense of oneness, of shared humanity. Many African languages "have no word for 'religion': it does not exist and does not need to be called

anything. It is not a separate category but simply a way of handling life that everyone shares.”

As for African corruption, while it’s true that much of the substantial mineral wealth “disappears into the pockets of corrupt African politicians, government servants, and influential individuals, this conceals the real problem – which is not the bribed but the bribers, not the corrupt but the corruptors. The simple fact is that the civilized world is corrupt through and through: it is the way it does business. These are the agents of corruption in Africa.”

Occasionally, the author nods. His portrayal of African spirituality runs to the romantic, or at least is too short on particulars to convince. And his perspective is from the southern edge of this huge and diverse continent, so when describing the inroads of Christianity, he seems to forget that Ethiopia was Christian long before most of Europe. He also has a few distracting verbal tics – referring to humans as “Earthlings,” for instance. But Mayson’s prophetic voice is well worth hearing.

Why Africa Matters provides an antidote to the despair one can feel in response to the stereotypes promoted by the corporate media.