

# You let her into the house?

## Reflections on the politics of aid in Africa

**Lara Pawson**

There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952

A treasure hunt was held in a West African capital city last summer. It was a small affair. A young, female aid worker from North America was celebrating her birthday. Barbara (not her real name) invited a group of friends to take part in the hunt, which was followed in the evening by a party, involving lots of dancing and drinking. The treasure hunt had a slight twist: it wasn't strictly a hunt for treasure. Barbara thought it would be more fun to hold a photograph hunt, so, instead of clue-solving, the participants would take snaps of particular subjects. The list of pictures Barbara proposed included: a photograph of a local person urinating in public, a local man drinking beer, a local woman sitting on the back of a moped with something really large balancing on her head, and a local man watching a woman working.

The treasure hunt was held on a Saturday at the height of the hot season. Daytime temperatures were reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit, sometimes higher. To avoid the heat, teams carried out the hunt in air-conditioned cars. Barbara nevertheless insisted that speed was not important because the competition would be judged on the quality and originality of each shot. The larger the object on top of the woman's head, for instance, the better the shot. Barbara's friends responded to the challenge with varying degrees of ingenuity.

One team decided to pay their African subjects cash to help induce them to perform for the camera. This carload included a very senior US diplomat and an American Peace Corps volunteer turned businesswoman. From the comfort of their large car – possibly a D-plated vehicle – the team persuaded various people to pose. A young boy willingly peed at the side of the road and a man agreed to be photographed drinking a bottle of beer. Neither shot, however, was taken without problems. In the case of the urinating child, angry onlookers shouted at the group of expatriates to stop photographing the child. But the team still managed to get the shot they needed, pay the child and speed off, ignoring the complaints. Undeterred, they tracked down a roadside boutique where a woman was selling bottled beer. They called to a young man nearby and explained that they would pay cash if he would let them take a picture of him drinking a beer. He agreed. He went over to the boutique, took a bottle, plucked

off the lid and began to drink. Once the bottle was dry, he asked his audience for the agreed payment. The hunters handed over the money, giving the young man enough cash to pay the boutique-owner for the beer as well. But their willing subject proved wilier than they had bargained for: he scarpered with all the money, leaving the woman out of pocket.

At this point, a row broke out between the treasure hunt team and the woman from the boutique. She insisted that they pay her for the bottle of beer. After all, it wasn't her fault that the man had stolen it. But the team refused to pay up, also claiming it was not their fault that the young beer drinker had run off with all the cash. The volume of their dispute increased and within minutes a crowd had gathered to observe the confusion. The woman from the boutique became increasingly distressed and started shouting for the police. Before long, the cops appeared. The row continued but eventually the foreigners were persuaded to pay the woman for her beer, which cost about 50 pence. The crowds melted and the hunters drove off.

Meanwhile, across town, another team had devised a more relaxing way to get their photographs: they would persuade a single African to enact each scenario. The easiest way to do this was to use a security guard from the home of, a young North American man, one of the team members. Thus it was that a local man, employed by a foreign aid agency as a security guard, found himself performing for photographs that his youthful white boss needed for a bit of birthday fun.

Later, at the party, there was great hilarity as various participants in the treasure hunt recounted the events of the day. The party was held at the house of the senior US diplomat who had been involved in the beer contretemps earlier that day. This was in a wealthy suburb close to the banks of a wide river. It came with a large garden, a swimming pool and a terrace the size of a dance floor. A drinks trolley, loaded with every spirit or liqueur, wine or beer you might wish, was parked like a pram in the garden. There was a lot of discussion about whether or not the team that had used the guard should be disqualified for cheating. It was all very amusing.

### **NGO mischief**

Many of the treasure hunters were aid workers; others were diplomats or officials representing foreign donors. Barbara was a senior member of staff at a leading North American non-governmental organization that promotes condoms for safe sex, particularly among 'low-income and other vulnerable people'. Her young friend (a recent graduate), the one who deployed his security guard as a model, was running another NGO, which uses sport to teach 'the world's most disadvantaged children... optimism, respect, compassion, courage, leadership, inspiration and joy'. This was his first job in Africa and he was considered capable enough to lead an entire organization in a foreign country. Other treasure hunters included staff working for the US government's aid department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID prides itself on 'a long history of extending a helping hand to those people overseas struggling to make a better life, recover from a disaster or striving to live in a free and democratic country'. It is, claims USAID, 'this caring that stands as a hallmark of the United States around the world'.<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing straightforward, however, about this apparent benevolence. According to the USAID website, 'U.S. foreign assistance has always had the twofold purpose of furthering America's foreign policy interests in expanding democracy and free markets while improving the lives of the citizens of the developing world.' In 2002, US aid to Africa totalled US\$3.2 billion (around 0.13 per cent of the total federal budget). The vast majority of aid is subject to strict conditions, most of which serve to promote the donor's interest: as much as 80 per cent of USAID's grants and contracts go directly to US companies and NGOs.<sup>2</sup> American aid is used, among other things, to

promote the use of genetically modified crops. In the poor cotton-producing countries of West Africa, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow AgroSciences, supported by USAID, are pushing GM cotton varieties into use, a move that is being resisted by local farmers. Like other donors, the Americans are masters at using aid as a stick to try to force recipient countries to support controversial aspects of foreign policy. For example, in 2003 the US suspended military aid to South Africa following a decision by the South African government not to grant Americans immunity from prosecution by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. There is little doubt that Africa would be better off if it sacrificed foreign aid (and subsequent debt) for fairer terms of trade with the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> This is not simply an economic question, it is also a cultural-psychological one. Aid keeps Africa in a never-ending cycle of victimization, forever subservient to the rich countries and their handouts.

The aid worker is the friendly face of this imperial foreign policy; charitable and humanitarian NGOs are the mechanism through which it is carried out. Many of these NGOs certainly provide useful and sometimes essential services. Their political impact, however, is compatible with several of the causes of the very problems they are meant to confront. As Arundhati Roy notes, NGOs often act as the frontline promoters of the neoliberal project, 'accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among... It's almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs.' Worse still, they turn the receivers of aid into 'dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance'.<sup>4</sup> In some cases foreign aid agencies act as a surrogate state, replacing and thus fragmenting the work of a nation's own government. When aid agencies like the UN's World Food Programme move in, African administrations tend to be let off the hook. But who can object? They're only there to help. The aid worker goes to Africa to care for the African, to make the African healthier and more democratic. Perhaps this explains why many expatriates – even a large number of those who are in Africa to 'do good' – so often resort to behaviour and attitudes that reveal a superiority complex reminiscent of colonialism.

It is very rare in Africa to see white people treating Africans as equals, even in apparently trivial ways. These people are not the sort who join the British National Party. It's unlikely that they would even call themselves conservatives, let alone vote Tory or Republican. They are not the people in Europe or the United States who support a tightening of immigration laws or who remove their kids from a school that has 'too many black kids'. These are the very people who – according to their profession – want to help the developing world, who want to reduce poverty and believe, at least in principle, in equality. So, what is it that turns these apparently thoughtful and humane people into buffoons who find it easy to humiliate Africans and treat them as inferior beings? And what is it that allows African people to accept this?

### **A charitable apartheid**

From the moment a Western aid worker arrives in Africa, he or she joins the upper echelons of the social and economic hierarchy. His or her living standards are on a par with the local elite – a far cry from the average African household. For example, aid workers have their own transport: usually a large, white four-wheel drive. Many aid agencies seem to renew their vehicles with unnecessary frequency, so their four-by-fours are always shiny and clean. There is usually a local who is hired to clean the cars. That the vehicles are four-by-fours is not irrelevant: they are very large, powerful cars which guzzle fuel and cost a lot to keep on the road. Their size allows passengers a good view of the road and surrounding areas. If you have ever stood next to someone sitting in a four-wheel drive, you will also be aware that you have to look up at them; unlike a car, when you have to look down. So the large Land-Rover, Cherokee, Land Cruiser, or whatever it may be, gives the passenger an advantage of power – literally

and metaphorically. Given that most Africans walk or take public transport, they are forever looking up at the fortunate foreigner, sealed into his large, air-conditioned, people-carrying unit. Another benefit of the four-by-four is that you can avoid the stare of the beggar far more easily than you would if you were walking, on public transport or in a smaller car which is lower to the ground. Foreigners can hide behind the thick glass quite easily, and may not have to confront their consciences as much as they would were they closer to the ground, closer to the outstretched hand of the beggar. Expatriates tend to be driven by a local driver: an aid worker is ferried about town by an African, often the same person who is in charge of cleaning the car.



There is an image in the West that Africa is the one place where four-by-fours are actually necessary. African roads are notoriously bad. And it is true that there are some areas to which you cannot travel if you don't have a four-wheel drive. However, it is amazing how many aid workers, UN staff, diplomats and some, though fewer, well-paid journalists, drive around urban areas in these enormous vehicles. You don't need a four-wheel drive in Bamako, for example, or in Ghana's capital, Accra. Even in the run-down Angolan capital Luanda, a city spilling over with people due to the recently ended civil war, a car is quite adequate.

Plenty of people do well in a second- or third- or even fourth-hand saloon car. But in capital cities and towns throughout Africa you can be sure of seeing a myriad shiny, often white, Land Cruisers and Land-Rovers buzzing about from staff residential areas to offices and back again. Why? Safety is one argument I have heard bandied about. But you are more likely to attract attention in a large car than if you drive about in a vehicle nobody would wish to steal. Apart from Johannesburg – where carjacking is a real threat to your daily safety – most African cities are safer than London. There's something else, too: most NGOs are strictly prohibited from providing lifts to locals.

However, let's move on – to housing. Most expatriates in Africa tend to live in the best houses available. Compounds are fairly common. They range from a few houses arranged around a cul-de-sac to thirty or forty houses sandwiched between several streets. Whatever the size, the compound is characterized by high walls or fencing (sometimes electric) and guards (sometimes armed). Residents tend to be all-expatriate peppered with members of the local elite. Compounds offer security, convenience and exclusivity. At the top end of the scale, residents often have access to a shared swimming pool, tennis courts, ample parking space and other facilities. Not everyone lives in a compound. They may choose, instead, to live in separate accommodation, individual houses or apartments, usually found in the wealthy neighbourhoods or 'blocks'. It's not an accident that during the recent unrest in the Ivory Coast, much of the anger of President Laurent Gbagbo's young supporters was aimed at the exclusive neighbourhoods of the foreign elite.

Of course, there are exceptions. Some aid agencies – Médecins Sans Frontières springs to mind – put their foreign staff into one house and sometimes individuals share a room. Their facilities may include a generator plus a pretty yard – but hardly what, in Britain, would be described as luxury. Nevertheless, it is precisely on this point that the complexity of the foreigner's life in Africa begins. Most aid workers, UN staff, diplomats and reporters who go to work in Africa are viewed back home as plucky, hardy types who are roughing it under African skies to help carry the dark continent

towards the light. However, from the vantage point of the locals, it is a different story. Expatriates – be they MSF ‘volunteers’ or otherwise – enjoy a lifestyle which is beyond the wildest dreams of most Africans.

This sense of superiority has some very strange effects on people. Not so long ago, in Ivory Coast’s commercial capital, Abidjan, I was derided by my colleagues for allowing a Ghanaian housemaid to stay inside the house. I was the acting West Africa correspondent for the BBC at the time and therefore was living in the BBC residence, a spacious bungalow with three bedrooms (each with en suite shower/bath facilities), a large dining room and even a swimming pool. At the back of the bungalow was a narrow outhouse, which included a small bedroom for the maid. Unlike the bungalow, the maid’s room lacked air-conditioning. However, during my three-month stay in Abidjan, I was only using two of the bedrooms in the main house. It seemed obvious to offer the spare room to the maid.

‘You let her into the house?’ That was the reaction I received from a young North American woman who was also staying in the BBC house, with her partner. They were guests who had nowhere to live at the time because they were looking for their own luxury bungalow. But they were not at all happy with the arrangement with the maid. How could I trust her? Had I given her keys to the house? Didn’t I feel that my privacy was being invaded by the maid? Wasn’t I aware that given an inch, the maid would take a mile? Didn’t I know that ‘they’ prefer to live in the shed out the back, that the maid was probably accepting my offer in order to avoid offending me?

Another argument often put forward goes like this: most Africans prefer to work for expatriates than the local elite for the simple reason that they will benefit from better working conditions. It follows that many expats take it for granted that one should not be ‘too soft’ with staff. ‘You have to keep them in check’ is the unspoken strategy. It is important to maintain the barriers and reinforce that strong sense of otherness – even among colleagues. Local staff who work for a foreign organization will carry on living in their own homes, far from the expats’ part of town. The distance and social disparity between the two neighbourhoods often lays bare any hope of mixing or intertwining the lives of the staff. At home, local staff might be without electricity and running water. The two groups only share space when they are at work, where teams have access to computers, the Internet, telephones, walkie-talkies and mobile phones. The two-tier system runs across virtually every aspect of life, including holidays, for example. Many foreign organizations – including the UN and the BBC – have a two-tier salary system as well: local staff are paid ‘local wages’. They watch foreigners come to their country, receive very high salaries, take long holidays, drive around in four-by-fours with chauffeurs... while they carry on living off low salaries, which ‘compared to most jobs’ are really quite good.

Some people argue today that what aid agencies are good at is emergency work. There’s clearly a good case to be made in defence of food distribution programmes, for instance in the circumstances created by the current conflict in Sudan’s western region of Darfur. But even in emergency situations not all aid workers work by the same rules. Most agencies pull their staff out of an area if their lives are threatened, and in Darfur certain aid agencies have done just that. What we hear about less is that often – not always – when NGOs pull out staff, they are referring only to foreign staff. Meanwhile, local staff remain on base because the area in which they are working is often the area where they live, where they were born and where they have spent much of their life.

For example, towards the end of the Angolan war, the city of Malange in the centre of the country became the target of fairly consistent shelling by rebels from the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Many displaced people had already fled to the city from unprotected villages which had been targeted by rebel and government soldiers. Consequently there were also a lot of aid agencies in Malange,



providing aid to the displaced groups. However, when the UNITA shelling began in earnest, the NGOs pulled out. In other words, they removed all foreign staff working in the city. Most agencies completely closed down operations, leaving local staff without a job or salary. Others left a skeletal office in operation, run by local staff, who carried on working throughout the bombing campaigns. Some Angolans carried out the most heroic acts, working day in, day out to provide aid to people who had lost practically everything. Meanwhile, their expatriate colleagues were safe back in Luanda or out of the country entirely. Double standards? It would seem so: a sort of apartheid policy in liberal clothes.

Given the institutionalized discrimination practised by many foreign organizations working in Africa and elsewhere, it is no wonder that some staff – such as our party-goers on their treasure hunt – exploit local people for their own entertainment. Some aid workers are just as likely to exercise their superiority complex as the British and North American soldiers working in Iraq. Those who were hunting for photographic treasures in that West African capital might not have noticed, however, that they played their game just days after pictures of the Abu Ghraib abuse were published in the local newspapers.

## Notes

1. [www.usaid.gov/about\\_usaid/](http://www.usaid.gov/about_usaid/).
2. Italy's record is even worse: about 90 per cent of Italian aid ends up benefiting Italian 'experts' and businesses.
3. Net aid to Africa in 2002 was US\$22,296 million, including US\$1,048 million from Britain and \$2,063 million from France. See the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, [www.oecd.org/home/0,2605,en\\_2649\\_201185\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/home/0,2605,en_2649_201185_1_1_1_1_1,00.html).
4. Arundhati Roy, 'Public Power in the Age of Empire', *Socialist Worker* Online, 3 September 2004, [www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/510/510\\_06\\_Roy.shtml](http://www.socialistworker.org/2004-2/510/510_06_Roy.shtml).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect those of the BBC.

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<p><b>Date</b></p> <p>Friday, 6 May</p> <p>Wednesday, 11 May</p> <p>Wednesday, 18 May</p> <p>Friday, 20 May</p> <p>Friday, 27 May</p> <p>Friday, June 3rd</p> <p>Friday, 10 June</p> <p>Friday, 17 June</p> <p>Saturday, 18 June</p>	<p><b>Speaker and title</b></p> <p><b>Jean-Luc Nancy</b> <i>Mad Derrida</i></p> <p><b>Hillis Miller</b> <i>The Late Derrida</i> Brunei Gallery SOAS 6.30pm</p> <p><b>Jacques Rancière</b> <i>Does 'Democracy' mean Something?</i> La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Gayatri Spivak</b> <i>Responsibility and Remembering</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Slavoj Zizek</b> <i>Respect for Otherness? No Thanks</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Film Derrida</b> Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Etienne Balibar</b> <i>Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal</i> La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Alain Badiou</b> <i>The Passion for Inexistence</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Drucilla Cornell</b> <i>Who Bears the Right to Die</i> Birkbeck, Clore B01 6.00pm</p> <p><b>Film GhostDance</b> Directed by Kenneth McMullen La Lumière Cinéma, French Institute 4.00pm</p>
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