The Primitive Beasts of a War-Torn Nation: A Film Analysis of Beasts of No Nation

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Most Americans will never understand Africa, a continent with a rich, vibrant history that is typically reduced to a place of violence and corruption in western minds. To aid against this ignorance of Africa, some people turn to films to promote a deeper understanding of the continent. While some films have done a good job of informing Western audiences, others reinforce stereotypical views of Africa. Films like *Beasts of No Nation* try to present a particular problem that Africa has faced—the story of a child soldiers. The intent of the film is apparent: to shed light on the atrocities that are committed in civil conflicts, specifically those in Africa. However, by offering only this one view of Africa, the film unwittingly perpetuates a false image of Africa to the masses. By analyzing the film *Beasts of No Nation*, I will show that the film does more damage to the African image by leading audiences to believe that Africa is solely a primitive and war-torn place, thereby continuing the negative stereotypes of the continent.

Before the film can be analyzed, one should look at who created the film to understand their goals for what the film was meant to portray, and how it failed to meet that goal. As stated, the focus of the film was to bring acknowledgment to the tragic civil conflicts that have ravaged Africa. This is where the two creators of this work, Uzodinma Iweala, the Nigerian author of the original book, and Cary Joji Fukunaga, an American film director, come into play. Unfortunately, the story they both tell doesn't fully encompass all the aspects of Africa's poltical history and results in only the violent and troubled sides being shown. Because of this, while the goals of Iweala and Fukunaga are noble, the results of their actions lead to a further push towards the negative stereotypes of Africa being presented in the film.

One would think that, due to the original book being written by a Nigerian author, the book would have very little bias in it. However, that is not the case. Film critic Matt Zoller Seitz notes in his review that Iweala wrote this book as part of his "thesis project at Harvard" and not as a case study (Seitz). This is coupled with the fact that Iweala is described as a "doctor and sociologist" with no mention of having experience in civil conflicts of Africa (Seitz). Because of this, the credibility of the book, as well as the movie, as an accurate portrayal of Africa is put to question. This is not to say that Iweala's academic

research should be invalidated. However, because of the position that Iweala is in, a doctor with no firsthand experience of child soldiers or civil conflicts, he is by no means an authority on the subject. So, when Iweala casts his findings from his ivory tower, he, like many others, sees only one side of the story; a side of the story that is missing key historical information that creates further misconceptions of Africa.

This issue of missing key historical information has been noticed by Robbie Collin of *The Telegraph* in his review of the movie. For example, he comments on the fact that the conflict that is happening in the movie is given no "details and [the] aims of the conflict are left pointedly indistinct" (Collin). With no context given about where or when this conflict is happening, the viewer is left to contextualize the movie with their knowledge of Africa. With this movie being, potentially, the only reference point some people have of Africa, the message of acknowledging violence is lost to the viewer and transformed into seeing Africa as an eternal warzone. While some could take it as an isolated fictional story, it is more likely that people contextualize the conflict of the movie to the entirety of Africa, thereby aiding in the spreading of the stereotype of violent Africa. Fukunaga's unintentional bias in portraying Africa as a violent place emerges throughout the film as well. Closer examination of the film reveals that the manner in which Fukunaga visualizes the novel shows how his goal to spread awareness of an issue, in fact, creates misconceptions about the continent.

One example of this is how Africa and Africans are represented as being primitive, or savage. While most of the scenes that involve this notion of "primitive Africa" are subtle, there are some scenes where this concept is directly addressed. One scene that happens around the twenty-nine minute mark shows the commandant of the Native Defense Force interrogating the main character child solider, Agu. While questioning Agu about what he is doing in the forest, the commandant threatens Agu by turning to one of his child soldiers and saying, "Strika, are you hungry?" while pointing at Agu, implying that Strika will eat Agu if he doesn't comply. Besides implying the violent nature of the NDF, Fukunaga is also implying a sense of savagery amongst the African forces. This fits the theme of the film, the brutality of a civil conflict, but in this context, it does nothing but drive the stereotypical image of savage Africans. In his book book *Mistaking Africa,* Curtis Kiem argues that, "many Americans believe that cannibalism existed in Africa in the not-too-distant past, and some believe it exists today" (Kiem pg.107). This stereotype is brought up again at the forty-one-minute mark, in which the NDF enters a rural village to train new initiates. In this scene, the NDF and tribal elders yell at, beat, and even kill some of the initiates while they prepare

to be part of the NDF. Again, this calls back to the violent and primitive stereotype that is placed on Africa. While it was an engaging scene to watch, it does nothing to represent how Africa is but rather shows the exotic Africa that viewers expect to see (Kiem pg.10). Due to this, the message of the film, the brutality of civil conflicts, is overshadowed by racist stereotypes of the continent.

The issues of Fukunaga's and Iweala's narrow view of discussing brutal civil conflicts manifest themselves in the movie and create the biased notion that Africa is a troubled, war-torn place. Kiem introduces this concept when he mentions the concept of a "Troubled Africa". The idea that Africa is this place where conflict is just, "natural to people who do not live in modern societies" causes people to view Africa as a less civilized place of constant strife (Kiem pg.69). Primarily, this is hitting at the point that there is no context given to the strife in Africa, just that there is conflict, which gives the idea that this is ordinary life in Africa. This is shown in numerous scenes in the movie, to the point where the excess use of war scenes and battlefields lead the viewer to believe that this is all Africa has to offer. The idea of the violence in Africa is portrayed in the characters as well. J. Olson of Cinemixtape mentions in their review that the portrayal of the child soldiers is that they, "know nothing but violence and mayhem" (Olson). Again, both these points show how the movie could be understood differently than its intended meaning. While the point is to show the causes of civil conflict in Africa, by making this the main point of the movie, it creates the image that Africa is a land of war, death and child soldiers, which is far from the truth. With this, the false backdrop of war-torn Africa is complete: a desolate continent destroyed by war and inhabited by ruthless killers, young and old.

All in all, while I understand what the film is trying to do, I can also see how this film perpetuates a negative image of Africa. The beginning of the film, in which Agu is shown living a normal life in a village, showed promise that this film would not spread more negative imagery of Africa. However, because of the narrow scope of many filmmakers, it seems to be impossible to show that Africa can be more than just a place of killers and death. Even if historical context was used in this film, the real issue here is that it seems the only stories worth telling about Africa involve this image of primitive and savage Africa. If this is to be the case, then the negative image of Africa will continue to pollute the minds of Western film watchers, and deepen the stereotypes of Africa. Even though Fukunaga's and Iweala's goal for the film was to bring awareness to the severity civil conflicts can have, they, unfortunately, created a film that strengthens the stereotypes that have plagued Africa for most of the twentieth century.

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