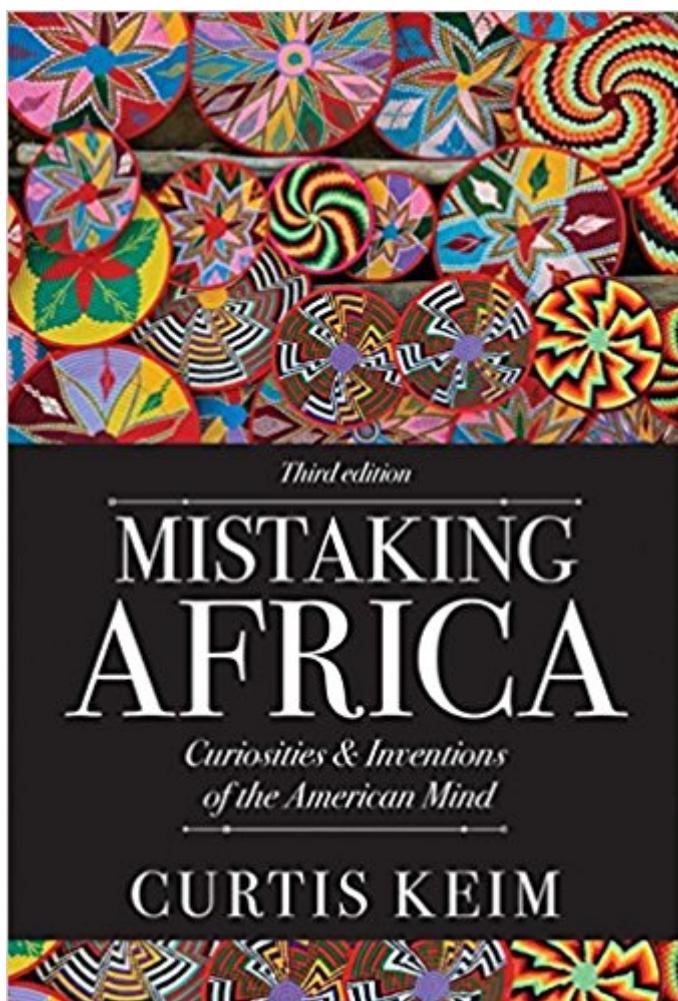


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# Mistaking Africa: Curiosities And Inventions Of The American Mind



## **Synopsis**

For many Americans the mention of Africa immediately conjures up images of safaris, ferocious animals, strangely dressed tribesmen, and impenetrable jungles. Although the occasional newspaper headline mentions genocide, AIDS, malaria, or civil war in Africa, the collective American consciousness still carries strong mental images of Africa that are reflected in advertising, movies, amusement parks, cartoons, and many other corners of society. Few think to question these perceptions or how they came to be so deeply lodged in American minds. Curtis Keim's *Mistaking Africa* looks at the historical evolution of this mind-set and examines the role that popular media plays in its creation. Keim addresses the most prevalent myths and preconceptions and demonstrates how these prevent a true understanding of the enormously diverse peoples and cultures of Africa. Updated throughout, the third edition includes a new chapter, "Where Is the Real Africa," discussing the multifaceted nature of the question and the importance of not grasping onto stereotypes of Africa's mythical past. Keim also includes new examples and new images to expand the visual narrative of western views about Africa. *Mistaking Africa* is an important book for African studies courses and for anyone interested in unraveling American misperceptions about the continent.

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 248 pages

Publisher: Westview Press; 3 edition (August 6, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813348943

ISBN-13: 978-0813348940

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.6 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.4 out of 5 stars 14 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #69,546 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #30 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Africa #36 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > African #138 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Political Science > International Relations

## **Customer Reviews**

Praise for the Second Edition:"With this new edition, Professor Keim has updated and expanded an important book for the teaching of Africa in the West. This book does the intellectual heavy-lifting of

deconstructing our notions of Africa, but does it in a way accessible and meaningful to students and non-students alike."â "Jeffrey Fleisher, Department of Anthropology, Rice University"This book strikes a perfect pitch. Keim takes a serious subject and presents it in a thoughtful, concise, and highly engaging manner. He mixes humorous observations with sophisticated anthropological and historical concepts to make them easily accessible to generalist audiences. As a result, *Mistaking Africa* contains valuable insights for the novice and experienced Africanist alike. It is a great book for introductory courses on Africa, across a range of disciplines, as well as more specialized courses such as US foreign policy toward Africa."â "Scott D. Taylor, Associate Professor and Director, African Studies Program, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

Curtis Keim is professor emeritus of history at Moravian College. He is a recipient of the College's Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching and he is coauthor of *African Reflections: Art from Northeastern Zaire* and coeditor of *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*.

Most people would probably like this book. I did not like it because I never have seen Africa as a dark continent or one of fierce animals or tribes. I know that Africa is civilized and I did not like the author making "all or none" statements about his opinion of what others think. He did not cite any of these remarks.

good condition

OK.

Required Reading for Son's College Course, excellent deal, son learned a lot from this book, very interesting according to him and he's not a fan of reading. :)

I love it!

Keim's purpose is tell what Africa is not. He doesn't stick to that purpose and goes far afield in explaining the development of racial ideology in the West. He discusses African images in the Western mind but forgets to delve deeply into what isn't African. He does a fine job of challenging popular opinion of what the West believes Africa is - poor, diseased, economically disadvantaged. He clears up those myths. For that it's worthwhile. Not for an advanced scholar but excellent for a

casual reader.

The book came with 40 pages loose from its binder. It's still a great read.

Africa is a continent of great contrasts and poignant ironies; a place and its people simultaneously idealized and vilified in America's popular imagination. On one hand, Americans' views of Africa are characterized by media-driven images of a debased Hobbesian existence. Images of the fleeting post-colonial optimism and promise once surrounding Africa have been replaced with news bites depicting famine, corruption, and seemingly intractable patterns of violence. Neo-Malthusians believe that uncontrolled population growth, rapid environmental degradation, and increasing resource scarcity consign Africa to this miserable fate. On the other hand, Americans envision Africa as a land of idyllic beauty, replete with images of exotic animals, the mythology of the big game safari, and Disney-inspired images. For Westerners, the lack of dissonance from these inconsistent stereotypes underscores our collective ignorance. Ironically, Africa occupies a large part of the American subconscious, though we know little about the continent and are indelibly connected. In *Mistaking Africa*, renowned Africanist Dr. Curtis Keim attempts to elucidate the deeply rooted stereotypes that refract and distort our understanding of Africa. In this relatively short monograph, Keim examines both the evolution of a hegemonic racist Western ideology used to justify centuries of colonial and post-colonial exploitative behavior and the way contemporary media images perpetuate and refract this fundamental misunderstanding of Africa and its myriad cultures. Currently the dean of faculty at Moravian College, Dr. Keim is a professor of history and political science who specializes in African art. His previously published works include an examination of the scramble for collectible art for profit in Central Africa, including an in-depth exploration of the way that the Mangbetu and Azande tribes have adapted their art to meet the anthropomorphic expectations of their European customers. In short, Keim is a well-established critic of the way Americans have pilfered, misinterpreted, and distorted African art. His latest, and arguably most important work, expands this critique regarding how Westerners have done the same with all of Africa and its people. *Mistaking Africa* is divided into four distinct parts: a brief introduction that describes the misuse of stereotypes and the way contemporary media and society perpetuate them; a description of how nascent racist attitudes in the West expanded and metastasized to suit an exploitative imperial agenda; an examination of racist assumptions that continue to reverberate based on a unilinear view of history and progress; and a brief call for change. On the whole, *Mistaking Africa* is an excellent primer for students exploring the way that Americans' understanding of

contemporary Africa is only loosely based on fact. However, because he is intentionally writing this as a primer, Keim attempts to cover too many topics, often too quickly, thus the work falls short in several critical areas. While urging the reader to view Africa as a continent filled with real people and not as an object, Keim consciously decides to misuse the word Africa itself. Rather than describing the continent's disparate regions and cultures, he uses Africa while speaking solely of the sub-Saharan region. This reification deprives the reader of that which is most beautiful about Africa: its rich cultural, historical, geographical, and ecological diversity. In his conclusion, after having spoken in authoritative generalities throughout the book, Keim concedes that he knows of "no one, not myself or any African, whom I would trust to define what Africa represents, because sub-Saharan Africa is a huge region with nearly forty countries, more than a thousand separate cultures, and hundreds of millions of people. One person can only begin to understand a small corner of the continent." Ironically, Keim is forced into dealing in generalities as he expands his focus beyond his traditional examination of a small "corner of the continent." His infrequent use of historical primary source documents detracts from what is otherwise an important work. For instance, his etymology of the word tribe is a masterful microcosmic depiction of the way that latent racist attitudes in America evolved into something far more destructive. Originally an innocuous word used to describe people from different political organizations in ancient societies, the term mutated in the late eighteenth century to become inextricably linked to a "Dark Continent" mythology used to justify otherwise immoral extractive and exploitative policies. In short, the term became imbued with an increasingly primitivist connotation. After the Civil Rights movement in America and subsequent rise of African studies in the 1960s and 1970s, the use of the term fell into increasing disfavor. The author fails to leaven his description of the history of this word with reference to a single primary source document. Keim's efforts would also benefit immensely had he better organized his monograph around more unifying themes. While each section is thematically organized, as a whole the book feels like it is less than the sum of its parts. Similar to Michael Oren's *Power, Faith, Fantasy*, the title of which reflects three distinct existential ideas that have shaped America's interaction with the Middle East, Keim could have packaged his argument around the themes of hegemony, stereotypes, and race as an artificial or social construct. The author's failure to deal directly and sufficiently with racial identity as an artificial construct is the book's greatest weakness. While Keim makes oblique references to this issue as he describes how the detritus of racial constructs once used to justify exploitative imperial agendas continue to reverberate today, his failure to explicitly address it shortchanges readers. Although the hegemonic power often wields disproportionate influence, racial meanings are created and changed through a dialect

process in which all parties have agency. In fact, rather than being solely victimized by exploitative colonial powers, Africans have profoundly altered Western culture. This failure to examine social complexities once again casts Africa in an overly simplistic, uni-dimensional light. As an undergraduate primer on how latent racist assumptions still refract and distort our understanding of contemporary Africa, Keim's work helps to enlighten those with limited experiences with the continent's myriad cultures. However, for seasoned professionals who work closely with Africa in all of its wondrous and rich complexities, *Mistaking Africa* is of limited utility.

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