

Traveling to Non-traditional Destinations: Recommendations for American Students Studying Abroad in “Africa”

Ifeyinwa U. Onyenekwu
University of Missouri

The Institute for International Education’s Annual Open Doors Report (2014) indicates that approximately 30% of U.S. study abroad college students travel to the United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain. This compares to the less than 5% that study in sub-Saharan African countries. The author suggests postsecondary institutions need to do more to foster a balanced understanding of continental Africa.

The growing demands of internationalizing higher education, global competitiveness, national security, and economic growth require a diverse workforce with cross-cultural intelligence and intercultural skills. This emphasis has inspired universities and the federal government to support the increase of the number of students studying abroad (Stroud, 2010). Universities and scholars posit that studying abroad enhances critical analysis, deepens ways of thinking, and prepares students for the working world market. To this end, it is concerning that a low number of study abroad programs send students to African countries, especially since six of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world (Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone) are in Africa (“Growth and Other Good Things,” 2013). In addition, African immigrants have the highest degree attainment of any group in the United States (Capps, McCabe, & Fix, 2012). Rather than embracing these achievements and viewing the continent as a place to learn, the U.S. education system does little to integrate a healthy African perspective into its curriculum.

Why is Africa a Neglected Destination?

The negative portrayal of Africa in the American media and education system is largely responsible. Due to this lack of information or misinformation, I advocate for rigorous intellectual analysis and the employment of an anti-deficit framework in study abroad programs. Based on my educational, professional, and personal experiences as a two-term president of an African Student Organization, social justice educator, college administrator, and Nigerian-American, I offer strategies to engage students in critical reflection as a way to unpack the current narrative about Africa, to facilitate understanding about their own social locations, and to consider the history and relationship of African nations to the United States or other non-African nations. What follows is a brief overview of recommendations Americans should take into account before studying abroad in Africa: 1) know Africa is not a country but a continent; 2) do your research; 3) know Africans are capable; and 4) examine your privilege.

Know Africa is Not a Country but a Continent

Although it is a well-known fact to some, many people still think about or discuss Africa as if it is a country instead of a continent. In the spring of 2014, African students from Ithaca College in New York created a photo campaign to raise consciousness and dispel common perceptions

about Africa (see Figure 1). Students posed in pictures and added quotes, such as “Africa is not a country” and “Africa is not defined by poverty,” to demonstrate how such comments make them feel excluded, different, and “othered” on campus (Kermeliotis, 2014).



Figure 1. Photo from “The Real Africa: Fight the Stereotypes” photo campaign by the African Student Association of Ithaca College in New York.

With this photo campaign in mind, it is important for faculty, educators, and study abroad professionals to be cognizant of the ways they discuss and teach American students about Africa. Classroom lessons impact cross-cultural interactions and can exacerbate microaggressions directed towards African students. African scholars argue that university students know very little about sub-Saharan African countries and values (Mou, 2014; Osunde, Tlou, & Brown, 1996). This is unlikely to change in meaningful ways in the K-12 setting anytime soon. Therefore, it is extremely important for study abroad programs to frame and contextualize information in ways that help American college students make meaning of their experience before and after their trip. I recommend that students engage in critical thinking through reflection.

Reflection allows individuals to explore their biases by recognizing their social location and viewpoints (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012; Schwandt, 2007). It would be beneficial to have students write about their experiences before, during, and after they travel. The writing exercise can help faculty enhance students’ critical thinking skills and improve class lessons. Specifically, students should be encouraged to explore their social identity and America’s social and political position domestically and internationally. For instance, a lesson may interrogate America’s existing racial hierarchy that disadvantages Black people and discriminates against people of color. Faculty can also explore how America’s domestic issues with race may impact students’ observations and experiences abroad. Classroom lessons should do this while examining American foreign policies’ impact on the African continent.

It is important to be conscious of the ways Africa is being discussed. Many students hear Africa referred to as a country or compared to countries in conversation. For example, Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie, recalls in a TED Talk entitled “The Danger of a Single Story” an experience on a plane when Africa was compared to other countries. She shared, “... I still get quite irritable when Africa is referred to as a country, the most recent example being my otherwise wonderful flight from Lagos two days ago, in which there was an announcement on the Virgin flight about the charity work in India, Africa, and other countries” (Adichie, 2009). In addition, making conscientious efforts to clarify distinctions between regions (i.e., northern, eastern, western, and southern) helps raise awareness as to the diversity, geographic locations, interconnections with other continents, and landmass of continental Africa. To illustrate Africa’s frequently misjudged enormity, Kai Krause, a computer graphics expert, created a map to depict its true size. His design shows the shapes of other countries—including all of China, India, the United States, and much of Europe—stuffed into the silhouette of the African continent (Krause, 2010).

In spring 2014, I attended an African Student Organization forum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and heard Natasha Wilkins, a graduating senior, recount an experience studying abroad. She highlighted how her experience in Sierra Leone helped her learn more about sustainability and innovation. She also shared that her friends and family were afraid for her safety and did not grasp the magnitude of the continent’s diversity as it pertained to landmass, population, and culture. In her presentation entitled *Reflections from Sierra Leone*, Wilkins (2014) shared,

My friends, who were excited for me, stated, “Have fun in Africa.” A phrase I now view very differently. Prior to this trip, I would have told someone, “Have fun in Africa.” But since returning and experiencing the rich diversity of this continent, I have a new perspective. I feel that it is a great disservice, a belittlement to the continent, to try to extend this experience in one country to the whole continent. It can’t be done and it shouldn’t be done.

These words, so eloquently spoken by an undergraduate student, are a good example of how retrospective reflection by students can enhance their critical analysis of their own experience.

Do Your Research

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”
– Chinua Achebe (Brooks, 1994).

The trend of telling negative stories about Africa is well documented and has been embraced by academia without much intellectual debate (Hallett, 1965; Hornblower & Spawforth, 1996; Mama, 2007). In 23-79 AD when Pliny the Elder, a Roman author and philosopher, discussed Africans in derogatory ways, he was contributing to a long tradition of prejudicial descriptions based only on second-hand reports (Hornblower & Spawforth, 1996). In the third century, the geographer Solinus wrote the *Collection of Wonderful Things*, in which he describes his trip to Africa and recounts the “filthy fashion of the people of that country of the dragons and other wild beasts of wonderful nature there” (Harris, 1998, p. 4). The writer and lecturer Robin Hallett

quotes one eighteenth century French mapmaker who described Africa as a place of sand and beasts with a scarcity of water (Hallett, 1965). These are but a few examples that exemplify the long pattern of describing Africa and Africans as a homogenous place and a collection of negatives.

Currently, few colleges and education programs focus on Afrocentric pedagogy or the diversity within African populations and societies (Dei, 2012; Osunde et al., 1996). In many American universities, there are too few Afro-centered courses available as an option for study. This ultimately robs students of the opportunity to learn more about modern or ancient African societies, which were arguably the most sophisticated structural political civilizations that have ever existed. In fact, ancient Egyptians were highly intellectual people who mastered mathematics and writing, as evidenced by the great pyramids and hieroglyphics (Teeter, 2011).

The world's oldest writing systems originated from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Scholars in anthropology report that in the later period of the fourth millennium B.C. the world's first "complex societies" were emerging when Egypt (along with Mesopotamia) was "passing beyond a certain threshold of scale and integration" (Teeter, 2011). Insoll (1998) describes Timbuktu, in the Malian Empire, as a major center of trade and intellectual activities in West Africa in the later Middle Ages, flourishing through its participation in long-distance trade networks across the Sahara northward. The Malian Empire was also well known for its resources and rich kings. It is important to note that diverse and highly intellectual African societies prospered and contributed to global innovation before other countries colonized them.

Africans are Capable

Because few studies and reports focus on thriving African populations, it is easy to assume that success and innovation are uncommon. While issues ranging from corruption to poverty are a reality in most African countries, there are transformative developments and progress taking place, and those stories are just as important. For example, as noted above, currently six out of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa ("Growth and Other Good Things," 2013). In the last 10 years, Africa has made history by having three women serve as heads of state in Malawi, Liberia, and the Central African Republic.

Aware of the misrepresentation from the western world, Africans are fighting media poverty porn¹ by tweeting and reporting their own stories (Fyfe, 2015). For instance, Nigeria is home to "Nollywood"—the second largest film industry in the world. In Luanda, Angola, cell phones were widely accessible and used by the larger Angola community as far back as the late 1990s. Exposing students to the accomplishments of African people and communities is crucial to their balanced understanding of the continent.

Whether one is going to Africa to volunteer (i.e., Peace Corps), tour, participate in missionary work, invest, or study abroad, it is always best to recognize a country's independence and consult the people from the community for their input before traveling (Cole, 2012; Elliot, 2013). As a faculty member teaching a course, consider exploring an existing organization led by local

¹ Poverty porn or development porn refers to media's exploitation of impoverished persons or communities with the purpose to garner sympathy and sell newspaper or increase traffic to a website (Brooker et al., 2015; Korte, 2010).

professionals that highlights the ways African populations are working to solve their own problems. By doing this, you are helping to debunk the myth that Africans need saving from the West. Africa does not need pity. Students should be exposed to, for example, African businesses that are flourishing and creating jobs. Most notably, music artist Akon founded a project called *Akon Lighting Africa* that provides electricity in 14 African countries and employs mainly young people to install and maintain solar equipment.

It is also imperative for students to seek out African writers, novelists, and scholars in order to get other perspectives. Fortunately, expansions of technology and access to social media have made information more accessible today than ever before. With these advancements students should also learn about the next Silicon Valley in Kenya, the growth in telephone banking in Tanzania, or the developments in telecommunications that are responsible for equipping over 650 million African cell phone subscribers (Higgins, 2014; The World Bank, 2012). There are other stories that do not focus on misfortune, and those stories are equally significant. As a critical thinker, it is important to recognize strengths and commonalities rather than focusing on and believing the deficit perspectives so often portrayed.

Explore your Privilege

“If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.” – Teju Cole (Cole, 2012).

Before traveling abroad students should examine their own social identity and privilege. Peggy McIntosh (2004) described the advantages and unacknowledged privilege white individuals possess, and the ways this privilege disadvantages and oppresses others. Through a series of questions, McIntosh assists people in identifying the ways their race provides advantages that may not be apparent.

Although McIntosh (2004) focuses on white privilege, on a global scale, all Americans (particularly American students), despite race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, hold a certain level of advantage. Education, especially postsecondary education, is a luxury that many people in the world do not have access to or cannot afford (Komba, 2009). For example, Boko Haram, a terrorist group, received international attention in 2014 when they kidnapped and thus prevented over 200 Nigerian schoolgirls from continuing their education (Giroux & Gilpin, 2014; Madden, 2014). This heinous act serves as a reminder to the global community about the barriers people face trying to obtain an education. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 7% (or 5.2 million) enroll in higher education, compared to the 65.9 % of students enrolled in the U.S. (McCowan, 2014).

Furthermore, most Americans do not have to worry about having electricity or clean running water. Whereas in sub-Saharan Africa more than 600 million people currently lack access to electricity (Brew-Hammond, 2010), and 40% of the 783 million people are without access to drinking water (United Nations, 2012). Receiving an education and securing the resources to travel to an African country are privileges and American students should examine the ways their privilege may impact their understanding of their study abroad experience.

Learning about growing economies and having conversations with African scholars could help provide context and perspective. Several countries (i.e., Sierra Leone, Republic of Congo, and Liberia) have experienced wars related to the demands for resources that the United States imports (Montague, 2002; Ross, 2003). For example, countries with oil, gold, diamonds, and coltan (material found in cell phones) are challenged by conflicts fueled by global demand (Cole, 2012; Le Billon, 2013; Ross, 2003). Having dialogue or discussions about students' consumer power and America's economic interests in African countries will allow students to understand how African populations navigate and overcome these challenges as part of the world market.

Studying abroad is an opportunity to learn how others view you and respond to your presence. It is common during a study abroad trip that U.S. universities will collaborate with a university or organization from an African country. It is likely that the accommodations may not be similar to American university housing. However, it is important to note that hosting visitors can be a draining and exhausting task. People abroad may be concerned with the ways American students portray or make meaning of their daily lives. Hence, studying abroad is an opportunity that should be undertaken with great seriousness.

Conclusion

If international education is concerned with creating cross-cultural relations and transformative experiences that produce global citizens, it is crucial to encourage critical thinking and place value on student reflection for students who choose to study abroad. Value needs to be placed on independent discovery. By unpacking negative projections and the superficial and often amateur coverage provided by the media—what I would call a *mediaocratic milieu*—reflection can move the focus from pity to appreciation and understanding. Faculty has the opportunity to extend conversations past African devastation and instead draw attention to the exponential growth taking place on the continent. African communities continue to work together and African-led projects create innovative life-changing technologies and solutions. These positive developments need to be explored and presented to American students. In doing so, students can shift their perspective and think of Africans as not only consumers but as *producers* of knowledge, in control of their destinies.

As African economies continue to grow and engage with the world market, it would be beneficial for American students to be more familiar with this part of the world. More specifically, higher education institutions can make students aware of how they can connect their skills and education to professional opportunities in Africa. Finally, much remains unknown about the experiences and learning outcomes of American students who study abroad in non-traditional destinations. I am very aware of missed opportunities with returning students who were not asked for their reflections after the transformative experience of a study abroad program. Future research should capture reflections of returned students to assess and evaluate study abroad programs to African countries. In addition, future studies can also monitor the experiences of African and American students' interaction, especially after study abroad. A rich world of possibilities exists for program designers in connecting study abroad students with African students on campus, tapping into reflections of the returning students, and giving voice to more genuine and meaningful experiences from underrepresented study abroad locations.

Author Notes

Ifeyinwa U. Onyenekwu is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Missouri.

Correspondence concerning this commentary should be addressed to Ifeyinwa U. Onyenekwu at onyenekwui@missouri.edu.

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