

At Issue

## Academic Melancholy, Romantic Cynicism and The Road Not Taken

LISA McNEE

Depression, Gavin Kitching writes, made him abandon African Studies for more fruitful terrains. Afro-pessimism and other forms of depression related to on-going African crises beset many academics in the field, for they, like Kitching, wonder what value their efforts have when little seems to have changed for the better since they began their careers full of hope in the 1960s. Those heady days are over, Kitching writes, and cynicism has led him to do research in the Asia Pacific region, where development projects have met with greater success than in Africa.

For those of us who began our careers in the 1990s, our elders' cynicism carries both a warning ("you, too, must face Afro-pessimism") and a reminder that the Baby Boomers' perspective was perhaps from the onset overly idealistic, even naive. The unprecedented prosperity in the West in the aftermath of World War II probably fueled extreme idealism and hopefulness, as did the initial results of the Green Revolution. But we must remember that the Green Revolution depended on pesticides and herbicides whose harmful effects only became apparent years later. Those of us who remember the recession and stagflation of the 1970s, and who went into academia with the persistent fear that a degree would not lead to a job at all, obviously view our careers from a different perspective. Rather than assuming that our efforts could and would change the world, most of us simply hope that our work will have a positive impact somewhere, sometime, even if we do not see the effects personally.

As a scholar of literature and cultural studies, I had to face the issues that Kitching mentions before I even began my academic career. Almost every student of African literature I have met asks him or herself what good literature can do, when the continent has so many pressing needs. I have no pretensions that research on literature will feed the hungry; however, I sometimes ask myself whether resources given to scholars and students of literature shouldn't be diverted to feed the hungry. Yet Africans themselves clearly believe in the importance of the arts; whether oral or written, literature has a large and enthusiastic audience. Music, dance, the visual arts, fashion and other forms of aesthetic expression are vibrant and important on the continent, even in areas where people are hard-pressed to pay for necessities. Why do Africans

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2-3a13.pdf>

believe the arts are important, when they may not have enough to pay the rent, fill prescriptions, or feed the baby? Although I have not done a study on the subject, my guess is that most Africans realize that life should mean more than bills and work.

Kitching is depressed because he feels ineffective. What of Africans, who must feel they are running as fast as they can to stay in the same place, or even fall behind in the race toward development? In spite of extremely difficult conditions, most Africans that I have met during my visits to the continent have impressed me as friendly, capable, and perseverant people. In the face of grinding poverty, they manage to find solutions to daily problems, and share what they have with others. One friend in Senegal was the sole earner in her family. She supported her aged father, her sister, her brother, her two children, a nephew, and a niece. Although the stress weighed on her, and she suffered from stomach ulcers because of it, she always managed to cheer others up and even gave her neighbor money on occasion if she had nothing to feed her children. I have great respect for adults like these who can give their children a sense of security by sparing them full knowledge of the difficulties the family faces. Her children could play and enjoy life, rather than worrying about money alone. This story is typical; moreover, she had fewer people to support than most salaried workers in Africa.

Kitching is depressed, but seems to be using the word depression loosely, rather than as a precise psychological term. What about the Africans whose plight he bewails? Mental illness does strike Africans, of course, and sometimes strikes in spectacular ways that are culturally specific. In Louga (Senegal) in 1993, one elderly mentally ill woman regularly came to my friend's house for food during the noon meal. She was almost naked most of the time, and received no health care at all. Although I shook hands with her and greeted her, no attempt to communicate reached her so far as I could tell. In fact, one could say that this woman's sole method of communication was to present herself naked; presenting one's nude buttocks to others' view is perhaps the ultimate insult in Senegal. The same year, in the same neighborhood, I saw a young woman tied down to a mule-drawn cart, screaming as her family took her to receive mental health care--whether traditional or western in nature I never learned. These are informal anecdotes culled from a year of intensive fieldwork on oral performance, rather than any knowledge of transcultural psychology, so I turned to an academic source to learn more. According to Nosisana Nama and Leslie Swartz, post-partum depression hits poor South African women three times as frequently as it does women in developed countries.<sup>1</sup> A brief scan of psychological bibliographies leaves no doubt that depression and other mental illnesses are widespread in Africa.

How, then, can we explain the cheerful, friendly attitudes that seem so typical of Africans even in the face of tragic, sometimes nightmarish circumstances? Although the arts are no panacea, I believe that the arts do help us to remain sane in a crazy world. I tell my students that literature and art by themselves cannot change the world in recognizable, direct ways; however, literature may spur readers to action, internal or external. And the world is so complicated, we may never be able to tell exactly what difference this or that work of art has made.

Depression has led Kitching to reaffirm the problematic argument of Octave Mannoni, who argued that the psychology of dependency made it impossible for colonized people to take responsibility for their own lives:<sup>2</sup> This fact is, to put it simply, that the most damaging legacy of

colonialism and imperialism in the world has not been the global economic structures and relations it has left behind nor the patterns of modern 'neo-imperialist' economic and cultural relations of which it was the undoubted historical forerunner. Rather its most damaging legacy has been the psychological Siamese twins of endemic guilt on the European side and endemic psychological dependence on the African side, legacies which make truth telling hard and the adult taking of responsibility even harder. Imperialism f\*!#ed up the heads of so many people whom it touched - both colonialists and colonized (Frantz Fanon was absolutely and deeply right about that) and until that— ultimately depressing—legacy of its existence is finally killed, neither Africa nor African studies will be able to make real progress. It was that conclusion which led me—very sadly—to leave both behind (Kitching, paragraph 10).

Kitching seems to have forgotten that Fanon wrote *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) in part as an angry reaction to Mannoni's work. Although it is true that colonialism has damaged the world on a psychological and spiritual level, as well as on a material level, putting aside the work of repairing that damage because it is depressing, frustrating and sometimes punishing is certainly no way of solving the problem.

Arrogance is often its own punishment, and Kitching's story, while heartfelt, proves this. His type of cynicism—the romantic reaction of the disappointed idealist—is a malady that we must heal, rather than a position worthy of its own school of thought. In outlining his reasons for abandoning African Studies, Kitching has chosen to use another term—cynicism—in the popular sense, rather than in a more historically precise way. Kitching and other Afro-pessimists could look to the Cynics of ancient Greece for another model. Diogenes, among others, argued that happiness can be gained only by pursuing virtue; since our desires are unending, all other pursuits or pleasures, according to these ancient philosophers, distract us from the highest goal: happiness. As Africanists, I think we all hope that Africa and Africans' lives will improve, perhaps in part due to our work. However, for our work to have a positive impact, we should try to cultivate the virtues that I have noted as typically African: friendly perseverance in the face of adversity, generosity, hope and a willingness to help others.

#### Notes:

1. Nosisana Nama & Leslie Swartz, "Ethical and Social Dilemmas in Community-based Controlled Trials in Situations of Poverty: A View from a South African Project," Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology 12 (2002): 288.
2. Octave Mannoni, Prospero and Caliban :Psychology of Colonialism. London : Methuen, 1956.

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