The new missionaries of the 21st century unveil their “tribal” Africa. Professor Zeleza takes a closer look at the project of saving Africa from itself. It is not what Ms. Jolie said or even the manner she said it that I found troubling, but its very banal familiarity, its brazen simplicity, its matter-of-factness. Asked by a fawning Anderson Cooper, who made his fame for his emotional coverage of Hurricane Katrina, to explain why Africa had so many refugees – the interview was to mark world refugee day – why so many conflicts, problems, the great actress opined: ‘They are a tribal people, you know’, and added for good measure that they had just recently emerged from our’ colonial rule, but they were trying, really trying, there were pockets of good news in Africa.

By Paul Zeleza

Last night after spending a long day visiting a couple of towns several hours drive from Caracas, Venezuela, I settled into a common traveler’s routine: switched on the TV to catch up on the day’s news. I would have loved to watch the local channels but my Spanish is virtually non-existent, so I opted for the venerable BBC and its pronouncements on the day’s events always delivered with the self-assured authority of a country on whose flag the sun once never set. It was the usual litany of the latest carnage in Iraq: the American victims, as always, were named – this time two soldiers – the Iraq ones remained faceless numbers of mindless violence by the terrorists sometimes grudgingly called insurgents, but never dignified as nationalists fighting against foreign occupation. Also depressingly familiar was the story of an Israeli missile that apparently missed its intended targets and killed Palestinian children playing on a street in Gaza, one more incitement in the endless conflagration in that unfortunate land of competing nationalisms and victimhood and international cynicism. Only the story about Charles Taylor, the notorious former Liberian president, arriving in Holland, his face downcast with humiliation, represented a fresh script; well, almost, for the commentary soon reverted to style about Africa’s proverbial genius for producing dictators. The original triumph of Taylor’s arrest several months ago was, in my view, now tarnished by Africa’s inability to try one of its most murderous dictators somewhere on the continent where his heinous crimes were committed in the first place. But this is to digress. It was Angelina Jolie who really caught my attention.

It’s not that I am enamored by Ms. Jolie as such, whose beauty and acting talents that the American star-gazing media love to rave about I cannot vouch for having a different persuasion of female beauty as defined by my wife of course and having only seen one of her movies in which she acted with the inimitable Denzel Washington. But she graces so many gossip magazines that litter the checkout counters of American supermarkets that she is hard to ignore. So I knew she had snatched Brad Pitt, who is adored by those who worship Hollywood’s version of white masculinity, from another reportedly beautiful and talented but less vivacious actress, Jennifer Aniston. I also knew Ms. Jolie had given birth to her daughter with Mr. Pitt in Namibia, or rather Africa as the geographically challenged media kept repeating as if there are no individual countries on this vast continent. Individuality, the naming of countries and people, in a country that believes it invented or at least perfected individuality seems strangely absent when it comes to Africa. Individual nationhood is apparently an attribute reserved for those living in the blessed parts of the world, sometimes referred to, in bigoted company, as the ‘civilized’ countries, or less offensively as ‘western’, or as the ‘global North’ in the polite bureaucratic language beloved by the United Nations and politically correct cosmopolitans. It is certainly not for the benighted masses of the ‘Third World’, a word that has seen better days, or the ‘global South’, or let’s just say Africa, the sorriest places of them all. This is also to digress. It was what Angelina Jolie said that got me riled up.

Predictably, she said it on CNN to which I had switched after the BBC for a little comparative sampling of the day’s news coverage. I gave up on CNN for its unabashed jingoism during the first Gulf war fifteen years ago and hardly watch it unless I am traveling and there are no alternatives or I want to catch some ‘breaking news’. Interestingly, in the United States itself where the CNN that people see is different from CNN International beamed to foreigners abroad – the corporate media’s version of global product differentiation – some see it as ‘liberal’; it might be in comparison to the proudly rightwing Fox News, but that only confirms how narrow the political space occupied by the mainstream American media is. But this is another digression.

It is not what Ms. Jolie said or even the manner she said it that I found troubling, but its very banal familiarity, its brazen simplicity, its matter-of-factness. Asked by a fawning Anderson Cooper, who made his fame for his emotional coverage of Hurricane Katrina, to explain why Africa had so many refugees – the interview was to mark world refugee day – why so many conflicts, problems, the great actress opined: ‘They are a tribal people, you know’, and added for good measure that they had just recently emerged from our’ colonial rule, but they were trying, really trying, there were pockets of good news in Africa.

Tribes, tribalism: harsh, contemptuous, condemnatory words that evoke nothing but primitivity, savagery, backwardness, primeval communities and conflicts. Words that are reserved for Africans and those ‘indigenous’ peoples in Asia and South America that are periodically discovered in some remote jungle by National Geographic or featured on Discovery Channel. But it is modern Africa that has still tribes everywhere, a whole continent that is held to ransom by the primordial pathologies of ancient tribal life. Africans are stamped with tribal marks from birth to death. Tribes are beyond history, they have always existed in Africa, they explain everything: the poverty, the civil conflicts, the corruption, the dictatorships. European colonialism failed to stamp out the tribe, postcolonial modernization withers in its glare, contemporary democratization has no chance in its suffocating shadows.
Whereas in other parts of the world issues and conflicts may be named as political, economic, social, environmental, class, gender, religious, or cultural, in Africa they are almost invariably about tribes and tribalism. Nobody of course talks of tribes in Europe, except in reference to the remote past, of contemporary tribal conflicts in the Balkans, in Northern Ireland, in Spain. European groupings are defined as ‘nations’ and their conflicts deemed national or nationalist conflicts and accorded specific characteristics, combatants, causes, closures, and consequences. In Asia people are often divided into ethnic or communal groups and their conflicts termed ethnic or communal. Nations for Europe, ethnicities for Asia, tribes for Africa, a sliding scale of civilizational status and possibilities.

Ms. Jolie was obviously in good company despite her limited education and obvious ignorance of African histories, cultures, societies, politics, and economies. She was merely repeating received western wisdom on Africa. Tribes may have long been banished from the academic vocabulary in Africanist discourse, but they are alive and well in the mass media. But even in the academy the term sneaks in from time to time as I discovered at a party when I first arrived at Penn State when a head of a certain otherwise progressive department who had done a little comparative research in Africa asked me: What tribe are from? My shocked gasp said it all, but just to make sure that she got the message, I sent her an e-mail explaining the politics of the term ‘tribe’ to which she responded with a groveling apology. But many a western journalist assigned to the hardship African beat defend the use of the term ‘tribe’ on account that Africans themselves use it. One student of mine returned from a four week study abroad in Kenya feeling empowered to use the term and challenged my allegedly western liberal antipathy to it. There was a time when African ‘groupings’ were called ‘nations’ before the rise of colonial racism and academic anthropology, and in my language the term used for African and European groupings is the same, ‘mtundo’. ‘Tribe’ is an acquired term of colonial self-denigration, not self-definition, let alone self-empowerment.

Western reporting on Africa rests on four well-tested mantras: selectivity, sensationalism, stereotyping and special vocabulary. All media has to select the stories deemed worth reporting from the innumerable events that occur across the world every day. This is particularly so for television where in between advertising there is not much time for in-depth coverage of news. It is even more imperative when covering foreign lands. The more sensational a story is the more likely it is to be selected – the man bites dog syndrome; bad stories make good news. To hold the attention span of the notoriously fickle audience it is important to present foreign news in an easily digestible form. That is where stereotypes come in, they aid consumption of the news, they become the news. They obviate the need for context, for complexity, for thinking. When it comes to Africa everyone knows that it is very hot there, and the animals are great but the people are poor and always dying from endless wars, incurable diseases, biblical famines, and bad governments. In short, they are a tribal people, you know. Tribe is the magical, special word that captures everything that happens in Africa and American audiences need to know about Africa.

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(Rasta) Rasta Livewire is a leading blog that provides in-depth viewpoints from Rastas in Africa and African Diaspora.

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