

An illusion of exoticism:

The evolution of the perception of Africa in Poland (1945-1989)¹

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to describe the evolution of the perception of Africa, especially the Sub-Saharan part, and its inhabitants in Poland between 1945 and 1989 on the basis of official documents, literary sources, and memoirs. It is possible to assume that the process of conventionalization of the symbols generated the image of the “Dark Continent” and the substantial modification of the language of cognition – from “Afro-Optimistic” in the early 1960s to “Afro-Pessimistic” in the 1980s. This change was caused by various factors: cold-war geopolitics, anticolonial and “fraternal aid” rhetoric, frequency of social interaction, more visible presence of Africans in the cultural landscape of Poland, and liberalization in terms of “passport politics” in the People’s Republic of Poland (in Polish: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL).

Keywords:

Africa; People’s Republic of Poland; perception; exoticism; stereotype; Afro-Pessimism.

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“Racism and colonialism are pathologies of recognition. (...) We look at Africa as we have been taught by Henryk Sienkiewicz – from under the cork helmet of Stas, from the height of the palanquin of Nel. God forbid, from the perspective of Kali! In a country where black people still aren’t called black, because we have better determination, and where people used to say “one hundred years behind blacks,” it’s sometimes worth to echo what Slawomir Mrozek said “black is the same man as white, just black.” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2011, p. 15)

Introduction: Discovery of Africa – toward periodization

In the Polish language, the phrase „discovery of America” means “proving an obvious truth.” “The rediscovery of Africa” – as the title of the book written by Basil Davidson (Davidson 1959) may be travestied – had a different character. After the end of the Second World War, the level of knowledge about Africa in the Polish society was negligible, and *the first studies on the countries of the “Third World” were simplistic, sometimes even clumsy* (Prokopczuk 1983). Initially, books concerned with Sub-Saharan Africa, published or translated in post-war Poland, described it in the language marked by martyrdom, exposition of suffering and oppression of innocents. The experience of colonialism in Africa was compared to the nation’s own cataclysmic periods: the partitions of Poland (1795-1918), or to the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany (1939-1945), and the anticolonial movements were compared to the November Uprising (1830-1831), or to the January Uprising (1863-1864). This kind of parallel was quite easy to recognize and accept for Polish people born before 1918.

In the fifties “hate speech” – against the western oppressor mixed with the “language of compassion” to the oppressed – was supposed to gain the reader’s empathy for Africans and the hatred for the powers of the Western bloc: *we send [British] young men to use a whip, to destruct eardrums, similar to the practice of the Gestapo in Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen* (Kartun, 1955, p. 5). At the same time, writers emphasized the uniqueness of the post-war period for Africa: *we need to know more about the continent* (Kartun, 1955, p. 9). The thirst for knowledge about Africa was a result of a dynamic change of socio-political situation, transformation of thus far a neutral space into a sphere of conflict between two blocks. The language of description was an example of “hate speech” antagonizing worlds and social groups and, what is worth mentioning, predicting the imminent success of the communist ideology in the Third World: *the man who is able to read the instructions on how to circumvent the pneumatic drill can (...) read “The Communist Manifesto”* (Kartun, 1955, p. 8).

After the Second World War there were almost no Africans living in Poland except just a few (Sredzinski, 2010, pp. 173-175). In the capital city there was only one Nigerian, Agbola August – he arrived in Poland in 1922, took part in the Warsaw Uprising, and after 1945 worked as a pianist in several restaurants (Osinski, 2010, pp. 97-99). It was possible to meet the delegates from Africa during congresses conceptualized and approved by the Soviet Union – World Congress of Intellectuals in Defence of Peace (Wroclaw, 1948) with the participation of Aimé Césaire (Knopek, 2013, p. 132). However, the audience of these events



was limited to politicians and activists from the largest cities from Poland (Codogni, 2010, p. 117-120).

It should be noticed that before the death of Stalin (1953), and the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence (1954), and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956), Russian policy focused its main attention on the Asia. The Fifth World Festival of Youth and Students (1955) launched the “thaw” understood in the sense of the birth of joyous and unfettered curiosity of an exotic Third World among Poles. The Festival was organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, an international organization, which described itself as an anti-imperialist and left-wing movement. The motto of the Festival – “For Peace and Friendship – Against the Aggressive Imperialist Pacts” – showed the real ideological background of the event: the concept of the peaceful coexistence introduced by Nikita Khrushchev, and also the legacy of the Bandung Conference. The context of the Festival should be also associated with Cold War politics: incorporation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, establishment of the Warsaw Pact, and – of course – propaganda of success of the communist regimes in Eastern Bloc. Not coincidentally the most important events took place in the “showcases” of the PRL: newly constructed the Palace of Culture and Science, and the July Manifesto 10th-Anniversary Stadium (Krzywicki, 2012, pp. 37-31).

Black Africans were a rarity at the Festival (from among 30,000 participants there were 1000 people from Africa, and only c.a. 100-200 from Sub-Saharan region), yet Varsovians long remembered their “dances” in Agricola Park or strolls around the capital city. Andrzej Krzywicki characterized the whole event as the “Post-Stalinist carnival of joy”. He wrote: *A view of a Black person was unusual and unique* (Krzywicki, 2009, p. 301). *The Festival certainly broadened the horizons of Varsovians, forced them to reflect, and – in some way – changed the perception of reality, which had been confronted with the experience of the Other* (Krzywicki, 2012, p. 40).

However, a proper local “discovery” of Africa, the emergence of the continent in the perceptual horizon of the Poles, followed the Year of Africa (1960). From this caesura, calls for international cooperation were made, social and research institutions – different friendship societies, committees for solidarity – were established (the structure of them resembled their Soviet prototypes). In the sixties the icon of Africa became Patrice Lumumba – “the martyr of the whole continent” (Anculewicz, 2010, p. 117). Poles celebrated the *Day of Lumumba* (the anniversary of his execution). Several avenues in Warsaw, Olsztyn, Lodz and Szczecin were named “Lumumba Street”. A district of Lodz, where Student Houses were situated, was called “Lumumbowo”. Also “Polityka” magazine established a special scholarship for Africans: the “Lumumba Fund” (Rakowski, 1998, pp. 273, 294).

The utopian gestures of Polish diplomacy towards Africa revealed the weakness and narrow manoeuvring space on the part of the Foreign Ministry. The level of sovereign decision making capacity in foreign policy was limited by Moscow, but there were some

exceptions – Poles sometimes became middlemen between Soviet Union and African countries which were quite sceptical of communism (for example: Ivory Coast [Knopek, 2013, pp. 182-183]). Certainly, Sub-Saharan Africa could not play any important role in the international trade of the PRL. The importance of the continent for the economy of the communist regime, despite far-reaching plans, turned out to be poor in the seventies.

The perception of the process of “discovering” Africa in Poland coincided with the undermining of the confidence in European models and theories of development – both socialist and capitalist. The Year of Africa (1960) preceded a watershed in culture (1968). This date can be seen as the symbolic end of “grand narratives,” demythologization of megalomaniacal post-Enlightenment discourse about the “burdens of the white man,” the duty of *mission civilisatrice* which “should” be carried to the Third World. *We understood that the research instruments in the classical disciplines are not sufficient for the recognition of reality of non-European territories; these instruments, formed in the circle of European civilization, are not able to show all the interdependencies that occur in a highly diverse “Third World.” This was especially true for mindsets, systems of values, socio-economic relationships* (Prokopczuk, 1983, p. 12). Step by step, researches questioned the existence of European based global civilization, the idea of a hierarchy of cultures. The onset of more relative interpretations was connected with the development of postcolonial studies, defining the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized not in the form of binary opposition, but in the form of a hybrid identity. In a dialogue with Africa a new vision of Europe had developed.

These ideas were slowly transferred to the PRL. In the late sixties and seventies the social perception of Africa was, however, still profoundly influenced by Polonocentric and Eurocentric depiction of the world. Europeans created an image of Africa that was the perverse opposite of Europe’s – its mirror image. This kind of perception was caused by: limited opportunity to travel to Africa, negligible presence of Africans in Poland, as well as the relatively homogeneous structure of the Polish society. Auto-stereotypes of Poles played an important role in shaping the image of Africa there. The most significant symbolic correlates of the collective identity of the nation were: the appreciation of such values as patriotism, tradition, Catholicism, national megalomania, or – created in the late Middle Ages, and supported in a modified form to this day – the myth of *antemurale christianitatis*, a boundary that separates the western civilization from “barbarians” (Tazbir, 1987). Such an auto-stereotype of Poles is saturated with non-multicultural, but ethnocentric content, which has a significant impact on the perception of other cultures.

It seems that another factor highly influencing the perception of Africans in Poland was – conceptualized by the Russian sociologist Alexander Zinoviev, and popularized in Poland by Fr. Jozef Tischner – the model of *homo sovieticus* – *a client of communism enslaved by the communist system, feeding on goods that communism has to offer. (...) It was possible to recognize him by a specific type of irresponsibility that was not a simple lack of responsibility, but presence of positive irresponsible – irresponsible with pretensions. (...) [He was] always*



full of demands, always ready to blame others rather than himself, insanely suspicious, infiltrated by a consciousness of misfortune, incapable of self-sacrifice. (...) Communism diffused in the country sui generis hermeneutics of human behaviour, which is rightly called the "hermeneutics of suspicion." (...) [This model of hermeneutics] *has left a trail of universal suspicion* (Tischner, 2005, pp. 141, 189-191). Tischner draws attention to the lack of empathy, instrumental treatment of social relationships by *homo sovieticus*. These features influenced the perception of "strangers." This conclusion was confirmed by representatives of the African diaspora, suggesting that the suspicion, intolerance and hypocrisy of Poles were immanent elements of the daily life in the Eastern Bloc (Krupinska, 2002, p. 39).

Opinions of Poles, who had contact with Africans, were testimonies of a cultural clash. Africa was usually imagined, reconstructed and designed on the basis of a discourse marked by Manichaean oppositions (according to evolutionist discourse: civilized – uncivilized, developed – backward, progressive – primitive; according to Marxian philosophy: progressive, revolutionary, national liberation – backward, imperialist, neo-colonial). One of the Polish journalists justified his excursion to Africa by saying: *We are from Poland, which is also a socialist state. We try to get to know the countries following the same path, to understand the people living there, their lives and problems* (Pol, 1987, p. 220).

Edward Said, in his groundbreaking work "Orientalism," assumed that the way of describing the Orient (the category may include the territory of Africa) is not only a way of thinking, but also a method of domination. Referring to the work of Michel Foucault, Said believed that the present image of the "Other" carries a hidden function of legitimizing the special epistemological status of the Europeans. By explaining, domesticating and organizing reality, the process reveals a Eurocentric, counter-dialogical and unquestionable vision of the world. Images of Africa are subordinate to – as a social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai wrote – essentialization (idealization of qualities which are attributed to them), exotization (highlighting the contrasts between the knowing subject and the instrumentally treated "others") and totalization (representation of African societies as an undifferentiated unity) (Appadurai, 1996).

The observations of socio-economic and political processes in the Global South have undermined the Marxist paradigm, claimant to the right to universal explanations. Finding the "leading role of the proletariat" in non-urbanized and unindustrialized countries, finding elements of socialism in eclectic and polysemantic declarations of African politicians, showing the impact of "base" on "superstructure" were perhaps an intellectually idle venture (Bobrowski, 1985, p. 284). For some researchers to study Afro-Socialism or Afro-Communism was a way of learning about "true" socialism, or "socialism with a human face" for others it was just an attempt to rescue the ideology of socialism itself (Solarz, 2009, p. 126).

The "discovery" of Africa made by Polish intellectuals has resulted in the creation of original and innovative works – e.g.: studies conducted by Marian Malowist on the World-

System (Malowist, 1964; 1969), the work of Michal Kalecki on mixed regimes (Kalecki, 1985). Analyses of such an exotic topic as “Africa” forced Polish researchers to intensify interdisciplinary collaboration (seminars of doctors, geographers, historians, economists, linguists), and between different nations (Paris very quickly became the most important place for exchanging relevant scientific ideas [Kula, 2010]). Some researchers chose Africa as the main target of their work because they wanted to “escape” from ideological plots and find an area partly free of censorship (Poplawski, 2012d). Roman Stopa – one of the “fathers” of the studies of African languages in Poland – wrote in his memories: *In my research practice I often met with questions, or even with the allegations: “And for what, and to whom it is useful?” I think that my work – quiet, devoid of any advertising – has its own justification and its own scientific usefulness* (Stopa, 1995, p. 103). About his students Stopa wrote: *they have demonstrated youthful enthusiasm, diligence, abilities, but also a feature of a researcher which is very rare in today's commercialized time – they showed “passion for science”* (Stopa, 1995, p. 175).

Another Afro-Enthusiast, Jan Giedwidz – a member of the economic delegation which was sent by the Polish authorities to Africa in 1960 – wrote in his memoirs: *There is a wide audience for everyday information, people hungry of knowledge about everything new and unknown, “ordinary readers” of newspapers and books who actually know nothing about current revolution in Africa. (...) Unfortunately, popularization of knowledge of the Dark Continent among Poles (...) did not keep up with the dynamics of global changes. Polish interests in Africa (...) are very much alive. It is quite understandable if we take into account that Poles used to sympathize with those who fight for national liberation* (Giedwidz, 1962, pp. 21, 218).

Polish authorities understood the necessity of creating specialized think tanks, and interdisciplinary institutions, concerned with multidimensional promotion of knowledge about Africa. Surely, it would not be possible without the involvement of prominent scientists – economist Michal Kalecki, linguist Stefan Strelcyn, sociologist Jozef Chalasinski, archaeologist Wladyslaw Filipowiak, and historian Marian Malowist (Poplawski, 2014). Thanks to their efforts, interdisciplinary research teams were created in the sixties, such as: Centre of African Studies (University of Warsaw), Laboratory of Social and Cultural Issues (Polish Academy of Sciences), Department of Intercollegiate Division of Least Developed Countries' Economical Problems (University of Warsaw – Main School of Planning and Statistics, currently – Warsaw School of Economics), Department of the History and Culture of the People of West Africa (National Museum in Szczecin) (Slojewska, 1965). The most important institution which undertook the effort to promote awareness about African cultures was the Polish-African Friendship Society (established in 1962; in the early seventies it consisted of more than 3000 members). Unfortunately, this organization quickly transformed into a think-tank, concentrating on scientific research and neglecting the purpose of popularization of Africa in Polish society. Another organization, the Polish Committee for Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (established in



1965) focused on political and ideological purposes and the cooperation with Latin America and Asia (Poplawski, 2012c).

Public opinion research initiatives

During the PRL period there were only a few public opinion research initiatives dedicated to Africans. Of particular note are: two monographs written by Paulo de Carvalho, an Angolan who graduated from the University of Warsaw, and a brief study by Antonina Kloskowska (Kloskowska, 1962). In an academic article published just after the Year of Africa, the Polish sociologist examines the image of Africans among high school students in Lodz and Opole (probably it is possible to generalize the results of the survey to other Polish cities). The major conclusion of the study – apart from the appreciation of “national liberation”, “anticolonial” and “socialist” threads among Polish youth – can be summarized as follows: reduction of prejudice is a function of age. The youngest did not see the diversity of Africans and were quite afraid of them. Some of them believed in the image of Africa as a one country inhabited by fantastical beasts and cannibals who speak one “African” language. Their perception focused on the physical differences between races. Older students willingly agreed to a more intensive contact with their peers from Africa. Fear gave way to curiosity and sympathy. On the margin of the report, Kloskowska mentions the stereotyping image of Africa, enumerating the institutions with the strongest influence in this matter: family, school, literature, and mass media. *Kloskowska suggests that Poles were not aware of the fact that they know little about Africa.*

On the other hand, Carvalho in “The attitudes of Varsovians towards ethnical and racial groups” (Carvalho, 1987) shows the results of the survey he had conducted together with his wife among foreigners who studied in Poland and among Poles who had most frequent contact with foreigners. The second group consisted of employees of: Student Houses, LOT Polish Airlines, various cultural institutions, shops, hotels and academics. The study is the proof of culture shock between Africans and Poles (Pleskot, 2012, p. 24).

Poles did not know about the cultures of Africa almost at all. What they thought they knew about was mainly stereotypes, frequently loaded with a certain patronizing tonality. The cultures of Africans remained on a lower stage of development for them. None of Carvalho’s respondents were able to identify a single writer or politician of African origin. Of the whole cultural area, the strongest associations came about such elements of folk culture as Masai tribe dances or playing drums. The most generally known facts from African political history were slavery, colonialism, and the national liberation movement. Africa evoked several associative areas: beautiful, wild nature, underdevelopment, backwardness, savagery. “Negros” were described by Poles as: lazy, shy, loud and smooth, rich, spending time in discos and libraries – due to “questionable intellectual potential.” Polish students also envied Africans’ preferential ‘treatment’ by Polish lecturers and the effortless manner of them getting the permission to move abroad (especially to Berlin and Vienna, where it was

possible to get scarce goods and sell them after a return trip to Poland). *The most positive opinions were presented by women between 16 and 20, the worst judgements – by blue collar workers between 21 and 35.*

Carvalho, in addition to the quantitative survey, conducted a series of unstructured interviews. Parts of responses were cited in the work, e.g.: *we have witnessed the accident, when an old gentleman shouted with smile – “Oh! His teeth are not black!” [...]. Together with our friends we visited the zoological garden in Wloclawek. Suddenly, we realised that we were greater attraction for visitors than animals in cages. Some people smiled looking at us – others, not only children, pointed their fingers at us with amusement.* Africans pleasantly remembered the contacts with ministerial authorities, lecturers, teachers, workers of Polish airlines. However, their recollection of taxi drivers was the most negative.

A few years later, in a comprehensive monograph “Foreign students in Poland” (Carvalho, 1990) the Angolan scientist partly confirmed his results from the previous research. The next survey was made on a representative sample. According to the results, Poles perceived Africans in a more critical and political way, as a peculiar “heart of darkness” with permanent civil wars, economic ruin, and governmental mismanagement. Perception of African students was based on the belief that they were “parasites”, because their scholarships were funded by Polish authorities. The list of prejudices comprises new stereotypes: *Poles believe that we brought AIDS to Poland; Girls who walk in a company of dark-skinned, are often considered to be prostitutes”* (Carvalho, 1990, pp. 87-88). Africa evoked several associative areas: bad living conditions, poverty, illnesses, refugees, humanitarian aid, and intertribal conflicts. The image became more pessimistic in comparison with the former research. It should be noticed that Africa was still portrayed as the “continent of extremes” – the image of phoenix-like “Africa Rising” from the sixties was replaced by the old stereotype of the Heart of Darkness, with Africans suffering from epidemics, poverty, famine and war.

Direct intercultural contact: Africans in Poland

An important factor in creating the image of Africans in Poland was connected with the student exchange programs. It is not possible to bring up the exact figure of the population of African students because of non-complementarity and inadequacy of historical sources.

According to Polish journalist Ewa Winnicka, *the Resolution of the Council of Ministers, which was in force until 1988, treated education of foreigners as charity motivated by the political and ideological way. It was like an internationalist duty to support the progressive forces of the world by a country with a socialist system in order to “dissolve the problem of the shortage of highly qualified staff, and the formation of a new intelligence”* (Winnicka, 2000, p. 94). The scholarship policy performed a duty of a kind of “derivative” of foreign policy. Polish authorities invited students from socialist countries as part of the strategy of



“fraternal aid”. There were many – definitely too many – institutions responsible for student exchange programs: Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Cooperation Committee on Economic and Scientific-Technical, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, Ministry of Culture and the Arts, Main Committee for Physical Culture and Tourism, The Central Council of Trade Unions, Polish Committee for Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America, Polish-African Friendship Society (Gasztold-Sen, 2012, p. 46). Their activities were not sufficiently coordinated. They also did not cooperate with the institutions established by foreigners: Polish Nationwide Committee of Foreign Students or minor organizations like African Students’ Association.

The first students from the Global South arrived in Poland in the early fifties. According to UNESCO statistics 183 foreigners studied in Poland in the year 1950 (Chilczuk, 2001). After the Khrushchev Thaw, the population of them gradually increased to the level of 700-1000 (Pleskot, 2012, p. 16). More than a half of them came from North Korea. Only a small part of them were from Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the sixties the number of foreigners studying in Poland rose gradually to more than 2500, representing almost 40 different countries of origin – the largest group – almost 30 percent – came from Vietnam. More significant numbers of African students came from Ethiopia and Ghana (more than 50 students), Nigeria and Sudan (more than 100 students), as well as from Kenya, Mozambique, and Zaire.

During the seventies the number of foreigners studying in Poland rose to almost 3000. More than one third of them came from the eastern part of the European continent, another one third – from Asia (people from Vietnam still constituted one third of all foreigners studying in Poland). The population of Africans doubled – the number of citizens of Sudan and Ethiopia decreased, the number of students from Nigeria and Kenya increased (Kierska, 1974).

Because of the imposition of martial law (1981-1983) the number of countries from which students came to Poland fell by more than half. However, the representation of the developing countries became – proportionally – more visible. The major groups of students from Africa were from Nigeria (90-180), Ethiopia (40-90), Sudan (10-70), Tunisia (40-60), and Algeria (40-60). The largest population of foreigners were born in Iraq, and Syria.

It is worth to add, that according to the overall number of diplomas granted to foreigners, the Asian countries occupied the first place (43 percent), led by Vietnam, Iraq, and Syria; European countries occupied second place (32 percent), and African countries occupied second place, led by Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Tunisia (18 percent).

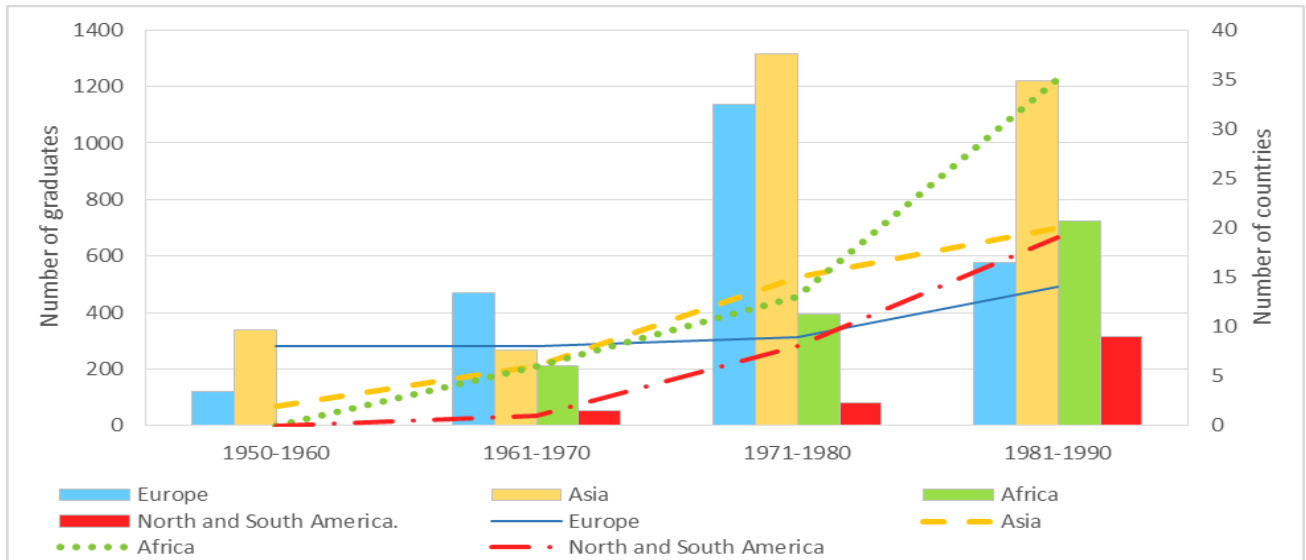


Figure 1. Numbers of foreign graduates of Polish institutions of higher education between the years 1950-2000. Classified according to number of countries per continent of origin and by decade. (Source – own study based on data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland)

One would assume the physical presence of Africans in the public sphere might break some stereotypes about Africa, even despite the fact that the foreign students were “barracked” in a few centres functioning like ghettos. The possibility of interaction with Poles was limited to the area of several institutions. First of them was the Institute of Polish Language for Foreigners established in Lodz in 1952. Foreigners usually stayed there for one year. Next phase of the *rite de passage* took place in the universities (particularly – the University of Warsaw and the Jagiellonian University, which diplomas were recognized abroad without any complicated procedure of nostrification), polytechnics, medical academies (majority of students used to choose technical and medical disciplines [Gastold-Sen, 2012, pp. 48-49]). Foreigners spent their leisure time in Student Houses and special clubs founded for them (“The Three Continents” was the most popular place in Warsaw for dancing as well as for debating; the club was closed in 1974 after seven years of activity because of complaints of neighbours [Wieliczko, 1974]). Foreign students also had the possibility to participate in different kinds of trips generally organized by the Union of Polish Youth (1948-1957) or its successors – Union of Socialist Youth (1957-1976), Polish Socialist Youth Union (established in 1976). The perception of Poland from these journeys was limited to “Potemkin village” – showcases which were chosen to justify the success of the development of the PRL.

The process of acculturation and cultural exchange was thwarted. According to the opinions of many Africans, this policy of ghettoization and bureaucratic chaos were the most important reasons why they did not settle in Eastern Europe. A high number of Africans left Poland after finishing academic courses and broke the relations with Poles (Zagorski, 1971).



One should agree with Michal Chilczuk who wrote: *Unfortunately Polish institutions of higher education do not have the tradition of maintaining contact with their foreign alumni* (Chilczuk, 2001). For example, among Africans who studied in Poland were: Alpha Oumar Konare (President of Mali for two five-year terms, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, a member of the Club de Madrid); Fernando dos Reis Ganhão (Dean of the University of Lourenço Marques in Maputo, President of the National Olympic Committee, Vice President of the National Commission for UNESCO, President of the Council of Deans of Mozambique); João Têta (Dean of the Universidade Agostinho Neto, State Secretary for Science and Technology), Nassaro Wamchilowa Malocho (Minister of State and Vice Chairman Planning Commission of Tanzania).

Direct intercultural contact – Poles in Africa

The journeys of Poles to Africa – especially before the decision to liberalize “passport politics” in the late seventies – played an important role in shaping the image of Africa in Poland in more nuanced, contextualised and balanced way. Motivations and expectations of people who managed to go abroad were complicated: *in my mind lots of questions are intermingling – what will this continent become for me? A Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, or a ground with thorns and thistles?* (Filipiec, 1998, p. 76). After returning home, they constituted an important, opinion-making group, which shaped the image of Africa in the Polish society. Their stories triggered curiosity, longing for adventure, and sometimes also anxiety and fear: *What can happen to the missionary from Africa, especially to a man, who had spent lots of time in the interior, when he comes back to Poland? (...) Firstly, people will perceive him as a freak, who escaped from the hell, or at least from purgatory. Then, they will think: why isn't he tanned or charred? Why doesn't he have animal hair?* (Kozłowiecki, 1998, p. 135).

Africa was the destiny of escapes – from political repression, or just from “the dullness” of real socialism. For many people, a journey to the south was a promise to satisfy the hunger of “otherness”. In the Dark Continent a lot of Poles felt *free as a bird* (Froch, 1997, p. 88). For many of them this was the dreamed continent, “Eldorado”: *Africa, where the parents [Krzysztof and Helena Goldfarb] arrived after the war, is a land of great opportunities – at least for the whites (...) [Father] rejoiced at the idea of a land where everything is new and devoid of history, where everything is like a tabula rasa, which – thanks to the energy and skills of Europeans – will be fulfilled (...) In his opinion, Africa is a cure for the European disease of bloody massacres and destruction. (...). It is a place where you can clear the memory of the painful recollections and start everything ab ovo. Africa is the last step on his way to a new identity* (Godwin, 2008, p. 190-192).

Lots of Polish journalists and filmmakers travelled to Africa. Their journeys have resulted in a series of essays, nonfiction writings printed in magazines, books and documentary films, which were often shown by Polish Television (Poplawski, 2012a). Another group of Poles

who decided to travel to Africa consisted of workers employed by local firms, in accordance with the “PolSERVICE” rules. Africa became the continent with the highest concentration of Polish scientific and technical personnel working abroad (from the sixties, Africa – mostly Maghreb and Nigeria – was the destination of 70-80 percent of this group [Knopek, 2013, p. 328]). After coming back to Poland they became highly influential experts in African matters, partly responsible for creation of the two – seemingly contradictory – images of Africa: the wealthy “King Solomon’s Mines” (Haggard, 1885) and an area in need of European humanitarian aid.

For many urban planners and architects, Africa presented a chance to realize ideologically unfettered projects, free of socialist-realist limitations. The situation of missionaries was quite similar – for them the decision to participate in a mission became the opportunity to leave the secularized and anti-Catholic regime. The unknown world appeared as the unstructured area, waiting for the architects (physical or moral).

Many Polish people travelled to Africa because of political reasons – employed by the Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs Ministries. The reports, which were prepared by them, played an important role in official perception of Africa, as well as political and economic strategies for the Third World. Symptomatically, in the long and comprehensive memoirs of Jozef Winiewicz, Africa appears only once and in a very anecdotal way, indicating a total lack of interest in the continent: *Two stops in Maiduguri and Kano allowed me to see the local estate. I was not really interested in it, but I had nothing to do when I was waiting for the plane* (Winiewicz, 1985, p. 231).

It is not possible to rule out that many Poles travelled to Africa for ideological purposes: “fight” against imperialism or even against communism – e.g. mercenaries from Congo (Gan-Ganowicz, 1989), Biafra (Zumbach, 2000). These groups had some impact on the stereotype of Africa as the continent of Thucydidesian / Hobbesian “bellum omnia contra omnes” and Conrad’s “heart of darkness”, the area of permanent, bloody struggle between the “insurgents” and the “dogs of war.” For many Poles, Africa also played a role of “springboard” for further migration (it was especially noticeable during the period of martial law in Poland, when thousands of Poles migrated from Africa to Canada and the US).

It should be emphasized that the perspective of people arriving to Africa was *a priori* ordered and structured. It resembles a medical gaze, vividly described by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1969). It is a form of collecting experiences, consuming senses, searching for authenticity in social performances. The dramaturgical approach, conceptualized in sociology by Ervin Goffman (Goffman, 1959), allows the interpretation of time spent in Africa in terms of a subjective ritual of re-presentations. This kind of social behaviour is strictly connected with the reinforcement of the identity at the expense of classified space and people. European gaze is strongly determined by eyesight. Staying in Africa is a process of producing images, building essentialistic and sometimes preposterous portraits and mental maps. Europeans intuitively searched for a kind of exotic authenticity and instability in



Africa. According to Dean MacCannell, if a visitor is just a collector of experiences of diversity (different people, different places etc.), he starts to perceive the visited area as a miniature clone of the old subject of Western philosophy – consistent, universal, located in the centre, controlling the strangeness (McCannell, 1976). MacCannell divides the perception process into several stages. He defines the sacralisation phase of perception as searching for authenticity, giving name and delimitation of boundaries. Image – after cultural treatment – gets to the level of universality in a single representation of the place with the certain taxonomy of structural elements. This mechanism is called by Anna Wieczorkiewicz “cannibalistic.” She noticed that during this process scientific, anatomical, and etiological knowledge is substituted by the desire to absorb the difference (Wieczorkiewicz, 2008, p. 352).

According to John Urry, a person – especially a tourist – travelling to the countries of the Global South, resembles a romantic traveller, who is concentrated on searching for diversity, increasing the power of experiences, the intensity of sensations (Urry, 1990). Finding and admiring the view is a source of personal pleasure for travelers (increasing of our knowledge about the world plays only an auxiliary role). Urry also mentions the role of fascination with less developed countries in Europe – fascination, which dates back to the Enlightenment. According to him, people who come to the Third World do not admire the views, but only create idealized representations. His reflections can be used to interpret not only the behaviour of Poles migrating to Africa, but also the imaginarium of majority of Poles who have not ever decided to visit Africa.

Indirect contact with Africa – cultural and social messages

In the PRL Africa was fashionable in some way, which did not always mean the Poles were trying to understand the “strangeness.” The exotic image of the continent and its inhabitants was still widely spread in popular culture, e.g. a summer hit composed by Zbigniew Wodecki in 1985 – “Chalupy welcome to”: *You can meet a nude person like on the beach in Mombasa. (...) Africa wild – long ago discovered. (...) They treated all the people like bamboos.*

Currently, television is the main source of knowledge about Africa – in the PRL this role was played by repeatedly republished nonfiction writings (foreign – Karen Blixen [Blixen, 1937] and Ernest Hemingway [Hemingway 1935]; Polish – Ryszard Kapuscinski [Kapuscinski 1963, 1969, 1976, 1978], Arkady Fiedler [Fiedler, 1946, 1957, 1962, 1969, 1976, 1983, 1985, 1987], Olgierd Budrewicz [Budrewicz, 1965, 1977, 1979, 1987, 1989] and radio. Majority of texts and broadcasts solidified stereotypes: Afro-Optimistic image of untouched nature and predicted development (c.a. 1960-1970), and Afro-Pessimistic image of extreme poverty and permanent war (c.a. 1971-1989) (Poplawski, 2012b). Cognitive dissonance in perception of Africa among authors was caused by different reasons: geopolitical context, personal views, religious beliefs, profession, as well as the obvious factor of belonging to a certain generation (older writers, e.g. Arkady Fiedler, still heavily embedded in the evolutionistic

discourse). These complaints explain the co-existence of incoherent speech, oscillating between archetypes of the Rousseauian “bon sauvage”, the Kiplingian “white man’s burden”, or pioneer from the Maritime and Colonial League (fragment of the history of Polish-African relations which was completely absent in the official discourse in the PRL). Even in the memoirs of Janusz Makarczyk – a pre-war traveller, writer and diplomat – published in 1957, there were no references to his work in West Africa. Due to the censorship of the PRL, he consistently appeared as an opponent of colonial policy two decades after his journey to Liberia. He wrote: *I always thought that the possession of the colony is unrealistic. Not only that: it is immoral* (Makarczyk, 1957, pp. 73-74).

During the whole PRL period the amount of published studies which were concentrated on Africa systematically increased – the average number of publication per year increased from 10-15 (1950s) to 100 (1960s), and after that decreased from 90 (1970s) to 45 (1980s). There were more than 135 publications per year between 1964 and 1969. However, the amount of foreign literature on Africa translated into Polish (mostly from English; and French) was smaller than the number of translations of Latin American literature. This phenomenon can be explained by cultural distance between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, ineptitude of translators, editors’ lack of openness. Unfortunately, the most valuable – from the literature-specialist point of view – texts were translated only partly, and published in specialized journals (e.g. “Przegląd Orientalistyczny”), which significantly limited their social impact. As Maciej Zabek wrote: *Africans as the creators of a higher literary culture were and are completely absent in the imagination of the Polish intelligentsia* (Zabek, 2007, p. 80).

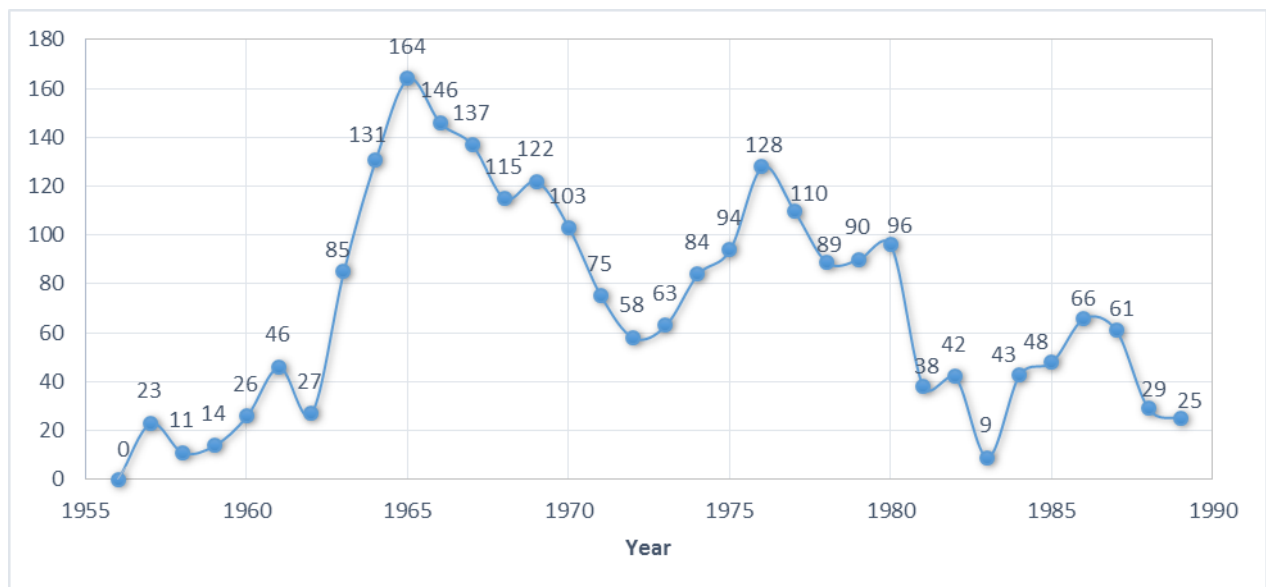


Figure 2. *The number of publications connected with Africa in Polish scientific journals and popular magazines.* (Source – own study based on: Knopek, J., *Stosunki polsko-zachodnioafrykańskie* (Torun: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek) 2013, pp. 414-415.)

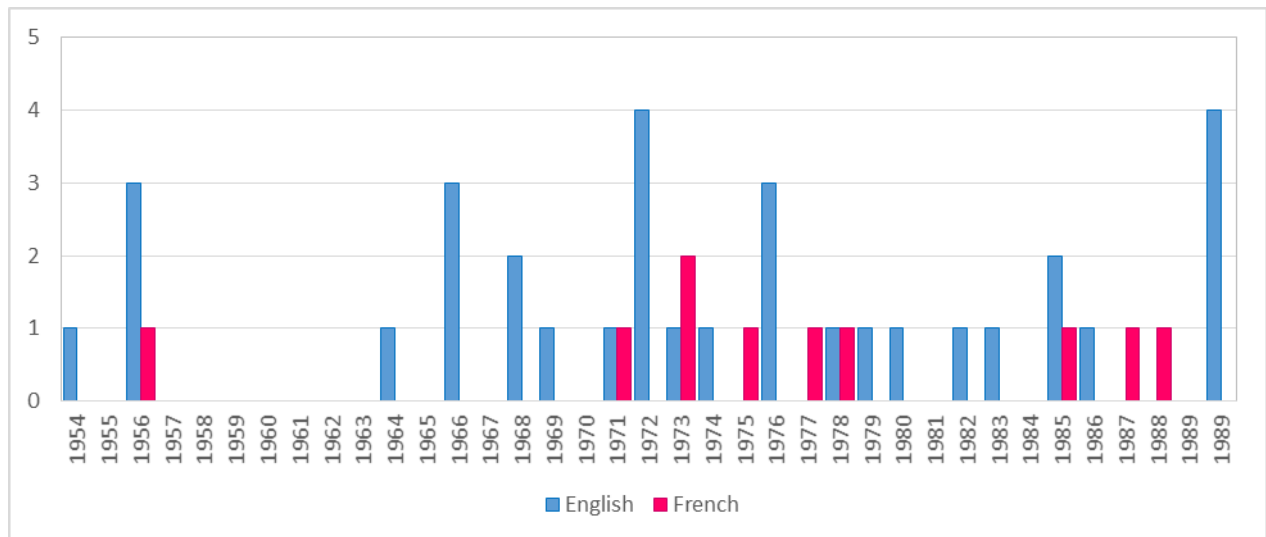


Figure 3. The number of African novels translated from English and French into Polish

(Source – own study based on:

- 2002-2007 Krzywicki, J., *Wprowadzenie do imaginarium literatury afrykańskiej*, t. 1-2 (Warszawa: Dialog);
 2000 Szymanska, J., *Polscy wydawcy przekladow z literatur orientalnych w XX wieku*, (Warszawa: Dialog);
 1988 *Stosunki literackie Polski z krajami Azji i Afryki*, ed. J. Danecki (Warszawa: Zarząd Główny ZLP, Interpress).

The Polish perspective on Africa was mediated by the works of Ryszard Kapuscinski, Arkady Fiedler, the “Around the World” publishing series, which crushed the dullness of communist reality. It is not possible to unambiguously evaluate the effect of daily newspapers, focusing on extraordinary issues (wars, coups d'état, revolutions) on the perception of Africa among Poles. In the “Trybuna Ludu”, “Zolnierz Wolnosci”, the Manichean vision of the Cold War era was promoted. Sub-Saharan Africa was treated only as the arena of the struggle between world powers. African partisans were presented as liberators, freedom fighters.

The list of required readings, geographical and historical atlases, and textbooks for pupils could hardly be called satisfactory in any way. As Maciej Zabek wrote: *Description of African countries is limited to narrowly conceived geography (descriptions of rivers, lakes and mountains). It usually does not present African cultures. The authors of textbooks used to name just some of the tribes, Pygmies and Bantu. They emphasize the richness of flora and fauna, and difficult living and working conditions in Africa* (Zabek, 2007, p. 86).

Many Poles associate Africans with Small Negro Bambo (the main character of the poem written by Julian Tuwim [1954]) or Kali (one of the heroes of the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz [1911]) even today. The readers very often do not realize the power of the hidden stereotypes from the era of colonialism: attitudes of paternalism, self-indulgence, conviction of immaturity of Africans. Halina Witek, a literary scholar, commented on the prose of Sienkiewicz: *travellers do not only want to get to the truth, but they are tempted by self-creation and literary creation. They demonstrate a desire to take part in the rich history of the creation of images of the Black Continent, which are marked by subjectivism, and dominated by the stigma of the narrator* (Witek, 2009, p. 76). Therefore, it is not an entirely

positive idea to condemn those vestiges of traditional literary images of Africa, because they could at instances really awaken Polish interest in Africa, among people with otherwise low level of exposure to Africa and Africans. Sociologist Zygmunt Komorowski – proving the sustainability of the image of Africa taken from school readings – wrote: *a young man who made friends with little elephant from the Limpopo River, would not remain indifferent to the affairs of a true and real Africa* (Komorowski, 1974, p. 166).

Summary

The results of the analysis support the validity of the arguments made by sociologists. Poles under state socialism consumed meanings and punctured stereotypes of Africa. They were in some ways *gullible customers of great travel agency, who believed in the “truth” contained in folders showing beauties in bikinis on the seesaws, or Zulu dance groups dressed in pseudo-folkloristic costumes* (Ledochowski, 1988, p. 5). Breaking this Eurocentric vision was not possible during the PRL period.

The above discourse analysis conducted on the basis of official documents and testimonies from the Polish diaspora suggests that the perception of Africa has changed over time. Emblems of that continent were conventionalized and transformed – from “Afro-Optimism”, curiosity of the exoticism, to “Afro-Pessimism”, scepticism and doubt. The image of Africa over time became less and less ambivalent, and more and more negative. During the PRL period – despite the institutional shortcomings (financial problems, lack of coordination of different organizations, dependency on the Soviet Union and its foreign policy line) and discursive inadequacy (the superficiality of narratives about Africa, the fascination with exoticism, the lack of reliable literature, even descriptive) – a significant number of materials relating to Sub-Saharan Africa was produced. Some of these sources became a part of what we can call “strangeness training,” the process of better understanding of the problems of the Global South in Eastern Europe and different political strategies toward Africa (Besenyő, 2020).

Conflict of interest

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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