

Racist African stereotypes are as prevalent as ever on TV

News organisations have moved on from colonial-era language, but entertainment shows are still rooted firmly in the past

5 I have an idea for a British TV series. It involves finding an African society with a history of regarding Europeans as a profoundly inferior race – tricky, admittedly. Then find a small-town family, from County Durham, say, to perform stereotypically “English” culture to entertain them. Describe this as an “exchange” – it sounds more equal – but make sure the African characters are equipped with various gadgets and a familiar value system. We’ll follow their love lives, clothing preferences and
10 personality quirks in minute detail on social media. By contrast, the County Durham people can just be lumped into one collective personality, a series of bland traits that cover not just them, but their entire ethnic group.

Let’s call it “reverse anthropology”, the opposite of the tired old narrative with which you are already familiar. You know, the one we have seen so many times on TV –
15 what anthropologists call the “tits and spear complex”, where Britons gawp at bare-breasted nomadic Africans with spears and marvel at how “traditional” (for which, read primitive) they are.

Channel 4 has announced a series called *The British Tribe Next Door*, which is most definitely reverse anthropology and not dehumanising because – did you spot it? –
20 the word “tribe” is used to apply to the British people. So it’s totally reverse, and actually not racist at all!

There are a few other clever twists in the series, too. The British participants, reality TV star Scarlett Moffatt and her family, are bringing their house – a replica of their actual County Durham, semi-detached house – to the Himba people in Namibia, so
25 that they can show off their hair straighteners and microwave meals. It’s giving the Himba an opportunity to experience stereotypical, traditional English tribal culture. Reverse, reverse, reverse.

I would love to tell you exactly where in Namibia this series is taking place, but apparently the location’s description as “a remote African village” will suffice. Further
30 doubt set in when I tried to find out the names and biographies of the Himba people involved. All Channel 4 seems to have said is that they all have exactly the same personality: “hospitable, curious, friendly” with a “wicked senses of humour”. Their headline identity is in fact, according to one British tabloid, that of a “sex-swapping African tribe”. Moffatt, on the other hand, makes the news when she tweets how she
35 feels about her boyfriend, or even her newest skirt. She is curiously not described in the media as part of a “tribe” at all, Channel 4’s best efforts to transfer the label notwithstanding.

When I heard about this idiotic programme, I had just finished an event with Isha Sesay, a former CNN anchor who has published a powerful book about the schoolgirls
40 kidnapped in 2014 in Chibok, northern Nigeria. Long after the world grew tired of tweeting the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag – even though more than 100 are still in captivity today – Sesay determined not just to tell their story, but to give content to their characters.

I read a lot about current affairs on the African continent, but even I was surprised
45 to find myself offered a glimpse into the inner world of these teenagers; what they

liked to do in their bedrooms, their favourite outfits, the length of their lie-ins, which of their parents spoiled them. It was radical in its humanity and tenderness, and in the extent to which it was a departure from the rest of the news coverage I had seen.

50 As Sesay pointed out, she could describe the minute physical characteristics of a British child involved in a tragic disappearance, such as Madeleine McCann, with far more ease than any of the 276 girls kidnapped at Chibok. The media is both symptom and cause: Africans are not fully human in the western imagination. One study found that in six European countries, Africa accounted for only 4% of foreign news coverage, compared to 76% of the coverage focusing on Europe or North America. The most
55 common terms used in relation to Africa were “social and political instability”, “violence”, “death”, “corruption” and “poverty”.

Journalists such as Sesay have been gradually raising the bar for news standards, and the results are beginning to show. News organisations are now more hesitant in using the language of “tribe”, which is itself a symptom of a colonial discourse that
60 flipped a social category into a stereotype, justifying exploitation and racism. One survey found that only 6% of news articles about the African continent now use it, and that foreign correspondents are increasingly sensitive to what’s described as “representational deficits regarding Africa’s media image”.

Entertainment TV, on the other hand, is flinging this language around like a casually
65 racist grenade. I was struck by a report written by an anthropologist 20 years ago, who also worked on a programme about the Himba people in Namibia, this time for the Discovery Channel.

His damning yet familiar account reports producers moving modern clothing and alcohol out of the way to make sure viewers get to see the “tribe” looking reassuringly
70 primordial, a doctor asked to exchange his blue overall for a “Himba apron”, a woman made to stir an empty pot, men directed to go back and forth on horseback, and cattle brought in – at some risk to their wellbeing – from a completely different area. All to create what viewers expect to see in something authentically, traditionally African. “As a result,” he wrote, “the film does not become a bridge but instead can become a
75 site for perceiving, in this case, the Himba as something very idiosyncratic and today often deeply prejudicial.”

We will have to wait to see the series – perhaps the producers of *The British Tribe Next Door* would never dream of using any of these methods – but it doesn’t change the fact that its very concept plays into a colossal history of othering Africans.
80 Prejudicial ideas about black people run deep in the European subconscious; I cannot count the number of times I’ve seen a script describing a place “unchanged by time or modernity”.

Perhaps the dimmest thing about Channel 4’s press release for the *British Tribe Next Door* is the claim that “for the first time in human history, British suburbia and
85 Himba tribal life will coexist side by side”. I would love to know how the Himba people who have studied, lived and worked in the UK – including at least one Himba paramount chief – feel about that.

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Afua Hirsch
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