



# Racist Undertones in the Media’s Reporting of COVID-19’s Origins

By Mordecai Ogada



In pre-colonial Africa, before the Berlin conference that led to the “Scramble for Africa” among European countries and the subsequent creation of arbitrary territorial boundaries we now refer to as countries, “states” were defined by some form of shared heritage, not just in the form of hard tangible artefacts, but in culture - practices and knowledge that are acquired by peoples *in situ*. When populations moved, they carried this heritage with them and adjusted it to fit in with the new realities they encountered in their new homelands.

The current crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic has severely restricted travel for recreation and business and the sharing of experiences and ideas across the world. In a manner of speaking, it has put globalisation on “pause” as countries must look inwards for ways to mitigate its impact on health, social, and economic systems.

The complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic lies in the fact that there is still no universally accepted approach to its mitigation or management. Individual countries have, therefore, been compelled to draw on their own intellectual and material resources to address the impact of the pandemic, with varying levels of success. Some countries have taken a reactionary approach, while others struggle to find direction, illustrating the need for us to retake control of our living heritage and re-imagine ourselves in the light of our own needs and aspirations.

## Double standards

The true origins of this pandemic may never be known, so those of us who are lay people take what the media give us. The spectre of a zoonosis “jumping” from wild animals into humans through the consumption of their meat and the sheer speed of communication (or mis-communication) about this are among the most startling features of this pandemic.

When the pandemic started, the media were instantly awash with (frankly revolting) images of people of Asian descent eating whole bats in soup. Suddenly, newly-used terms like “wet markets” were de rigueur in news bulletins, as were images of Chinese markets with live and dead creatures of all kinds for sale, either whole, live, or in various stages of dismemberment. It was only a matter of time before the racist dog-whistle “bush meat trade” hit the airwaves (nauseatingly familiar to those of us who work in the conservation sector).

I have often spoken about how the portrayal of the consumption of wild animals is one of the most overt and widely accepted expressions of racial prejudice in our times. It has long been an accepted norm that the meat of wild animals must be described in genteel terms when it is consumed by white people, as is the killing of all manner of creatures. The nature of conservation discourse has normalised the use of the different terms “game meat” and “bush meat” even to describe consumption of flesh from the same animal species, based on the ethnicity of the procurer. Slaughter is routinely described as “sport” and dignified as “noble” all over the world when perpetrated by white people, and occasionally elites of colour. After 20 years as a conservation practitioner, I am familiar with the cult-like manner in which we pursue the cause. It is considered above reproach, and all manner of ills can be visited upon human societies as long as they can be demonstrated to be serving some environmental conservation goal.

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It was, therefore, a feeling of *déjà vu* when the tone taken by the Western media portrayed the outbreak almost as some kind of “divine retribution” visited upon the Chinese people for the consumption of meat from wild animals. (This was before the virus spread globally and stopped being regarded as a Chinese problem.) Indeed, scientists were falling over themselves to look for coronaviruses in all manner of trafficked animals, like pangolins. Racial undertones have always been part of global conservation practice, and that is the reason why Europe and the United States have largely escaped the opprobrium that has been visited on China for the ivory trade, despite it being third globally behind the former two in this vice.

When wildlife is used as food in the global South and East, it draws near universal revulsion in the West with regards to the “cruelty” of the activity. Those who have visited the United States, however, are familiar with the seasonal hunting and eating of deer, elk, moose, squirrels, opossum and rabbits, not to mention turkeys, ducks, and other wild birds.

Those who are so irked by “wet markets” would do well to familiarise themselves with the “rattlesnake roundup”, an annual activity in the state of Texas in the United States. The roundup is a display of extraordinary cruelty where thousands of rattlesnakes are collected from the wild, mostly by being flushed out of their dens with petrol. It takes around two weeks to collect the required

number of snakes for the festival, during which time the captive reptiles are kept in the dark without food or water. Come the weekend of the festival, the entertainment of visitors will include the ritual decapitation of snakes and the participants (including children) competing to strip skins off the still writhing snake bodies and flaying them for meat (which is served on site and consumed with a variety of drinks). Children also engage in making murals from hand prints in snake blood, amongst other activities.

A close observation of the reportage on this reveals the degree of effort put into “cleansing” this strange ritual, notably its description as a “celebration of culture” that brings in \$8.4 million into the town of Sweetwater, Texas. The scale of the carnage hit a record high in 2016 when 11 tonnes (24,262 pounds) of rattlesnakes were reportedly harvested. The reporting didn’t specify that this represented around 10,000 snakes (calculation made from the average weight of a rattlesnake).

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How then does the Western media contrive to maintain this critical focus on “unacceptable” animal consumption practices in the global South while maintaining studious silence on the same in their own countries? What then is a “wet market”? Can the Texas rattlesnake roundup be described as such, and if not, why not?

Characterising the consumption of reptiles, rodents, chiroptera (bats), marsupials (opossums) as “Asian” traits is simply racial prejudice. Similarly, the capture, caging and sale of wild animals in Asian markets is described as cruel whereas sport hunting, whaling, and foxhunting by Caucasian peoples are accepted, celebrated, and even defended robustly, when need be.

### **Conservation, tourism and dietary tastes**

Personally, as an individual with very conservative (some might say pedestrian) tastes in food, travelling is full of challenges in terms of foods that I encounter around the world. I remember particularly an incident of a Maasai colleague being perturbed by a dinner offering of “venison” at a lodge in rural Quebec in Canada. I had to clarify to him that venison is deer meat.

The Maasai are traditionally livestock producers and are known to frown upon the consumption of meat from wild animals. But this was a relatively mild challenge for him, compared to various raw meats, raw fish, marine crustaceans, and snails that he and I have encountered on our travels to different continents.

The variety of dietary tastes and preferences around the world are one of the most prominent indicators of human diversity, and have long been celebrated and studied by travelers and scholars. This pandemic, however, has upset the genteel veneer with which we present our differences and has left our class, racial, and cultural prejudices ruthlessly exposed. If indeed the slaughter of wildlife is a vile aspect of human nature, then why is Theodore Roosevelt’s 1909 hunting safari in Kenya so celebrated by a conservation body (The Smithsonian Institution) over a century later? This expedition was a bloodbath, where the hunters killed and trapped more than 11,000 animals, including multiple specimens of the “big game” species that Roosevelt took particular pleasure in killing.

Conservation and tourism have long been an arena that struggles with racism and classism, and my

country Kenya has for the last 100 years been the poster child for what is good and wrong about the nexus of conservation and tourism in Africa. Due to travel bans and lockdowns, tourism in the country has largely collapsed. The obsession with foreign tourists (referred to lovingly as “arrivals”) has left established facilities struggling to appeal to indigenous and local clients for whom they had very little time under normal circumstances.

The real tragedy, however, is in the wildlife conservancies, where conservation NGOs had been going out of their way to convince and coerce previously resilient pastoralist communities to spurn their livelihoods and identities (that were based upon livestock production) and to share landscapes with wildlife. The narrative was that livestock was bad and their numbers had to be suppressed. The landscape didn't belong to the people, but to the wildlife, and the wildlife had no intrinsic cultural value. It was for tourists, and pastoralists' livelihoods would reside in service to the tourists.

To be a “good” (read: compliant) community worthy of handouts, the community needed to move to the periphery of their lands, leaving the best parts for tourism. They had to reduce their herds (or move them away to go and overgraze someone else's turf), and learn to serve (be a waiter, ranger, cook, or beadwork maker) at the altar of tourism.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, reports from community conservancies invariably feature penury - communities struggling to make a living and depending on food handouts, all due to the collapse of tourism. For those who understand the livestock economy, pastoralist communities depending on food handouts is unthinkable in a year that has seen such abundance of rainfall and pasture growth. The conservation cult had succeeded in compromising the resilience of entire communities.

### **The language of environmentalism and assistance**

Students of political history will experience *déjà vu*; 200 years after its initial foray, Western neoliberalism is once again bringing rural Africa to its knees by destroying resilience and creating dependency. The only difference is that this time it is hidden in the language of environmentalism and assistance.

The world today needs to wake up to the threat to social stability posed by the global environmental movement fashioned in the West. The pursuit of its goals is relentless, and has the hallmarks of a cult. Nonagenarian Westerners like Sir David Attenborough routinely prescribe future goals to young populations in the global South (backed by environmental cinema that deliberately excludes human populations from the frame). As our youth struggle with the visions of old Westerners, our leaders are confronted with advice and “guidance” from a European teenage girl, delivered with the glib assurance of someone who doesn't have anywhere near the amount of knowledge required to confer a modicum of self-doubt.

As African students of environmental sciences strive to make their voices heard in academia, they get confronted by ludicrous theories like the half-earth theory, proposed by E. O. Wilson, a pioneer of ecology from Harvard University, one of the pinnacles of academia. This theory proposes that half the earth should be “protected” for the survival of biodiversity.

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However, what proponents of this theory don't state is that this biodiversity will be protected mostly in the tropics, because the temperate lands do not have biodiversity worth protecting in such a

drastic manner. Any attempt to actualise such a move would amount to genocide, but the world routinely accepts such fascism when environmental reasons are used to support it.

Indeed, the United Nations and other global bodies like the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD) have taken up the cause, proposing to raise the recommended percentage of land under protection, from the current 14 per cent to 30 per cent. The voices pushing this movement are varied, but two uniformities persist – the voices are of white people and they say nothing about the difference in consumption patterns between themselves and the global South.

So-called “global” environmental targets must be tailored to meet the needs and aspirations of individual nations, or we run the risk of imperialism. Yellowstone National Park was created by violence and disenfranchisement, but it is still used as a template for fortress conservation over a century later, and celebrated as a world heritage site.

For generations, our consumption patterns have never been spoken about globally, because to do so would be to acknowledge that we in the global South have always been sustainable societies. Logic dictates that our consumption patterns shouldn't now be used to vilify us as the source of a scourge, which strangely appears not to have affected us in the way the global North expected.

The term “new normal” has been bandied about *ad nauseam* to describe the post-COVID19 world. In reality, the manner in which the people and the environment of the global South have been exploited by the Occident over generations has been abnormal. The coronavirus crisis may have just set a few things right.

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