

Big Men on the Land

Blaine Harden reports on a culture broken by change.

Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent

By Blaine Harden G'76
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In 1984, the *Washington Post* sent Blaine Harden to cover the Ethiopian famine. He was unprepared for the agony he witnessed, having grown up in a small town in Washington state, "where nobody's fingertips had ever fallen off. Leprosy was a curiosity from the Bible. I grew up squeamish at the prospect of using someone else's toothbrush. The sickness in the famine camps scared me, and I was not alone in being scared."

Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent arose from Harden's four-year assignment as the *Post's* African correspondent. Western media take notice of Africa's chronic dilemmas—AIDS, worsening poverty, overpopulation, massive foreign debt—"only when the catastrophe meter soars way up." This is due, Harden suggests, to a racist media judgment that suffering Africans are less newsworthy than suffering white people.

Harden, a 1976 graduate of the Newhouse School's newspaper program, illustrates the continent's problems through stories of Africans in seven nations. Among them are the NBA's Manute Bol, who emerged from a Sudanese swamp to play professional basketball; various vicious dictators; and Harden's fellow passengers on an astonishing 1,000-mile boat trip on the Zaire River.

Africa is slipping out of the Third World "into its own bleak category: the Nth World," Harden writes. The phenomenon is hastened by "Big Men" disease: ruinous leadership by men of varying degrees of venality who are usually corrupt and often megalomaniacal plunderers. Often the richest individual

in his country, the Big Man "bans all political parties except the one he controls. He rigs elections. He emasculates the courts. He cows the press. He stifles academia. He goes to church." Only three sub-Saharan countries allow multi-party elections, and no African ruler has ever been removed by voters.

As the century draws to a close, Harden writes, "Hundreds of millions of Africans are lurching between an unworkable Western present and a collapsing African past. Their loyalties are stretched between predatory governments and disintegrating tribes, between arbitrary demands of dictators and incessant pleadings of relatives, between commandments of the Bible and obligations to the ancestors."

Because African nations are post-colonial entities, nationalism is not a significant political factor, but tribal and family loyalties are. Western education and urban migration have

placed the African family under stress. Harden tells the story of Kwasi Oduro, a Ghanaian university professor, long gone from his village but still beholden to his family. Harden accompanied Oduro on one of his increasingly rare visits to his home village.

Harden reports that throngs of reproachful relatives fell on Oduro with demands for money, advice on family disputes, and an explanation for his long absence from the village. He was obliged to hand over all his money, call on relatives distant and close, and beat a hasty retreat.

Tribal ties come to the fore in a fight over the body of a Kenyan lawyer who had renounced his tribal affiliation. It became a comic soap opera played out in the Nairobi newspapers, as his widow and his tribe fought for custody of the corpse, provoking a national debate about the role of ancient customs in the modern world.

Harden devotes the last chapter to Nigeria, "infamous, even among Nigerians, for being loud, dirty, violent, and corrupt," a place "horrible, ugly, boastful, coup-crazed, self-destructive, too-goddamn-hot," which he deems Africa's brightest hope. "I believe that Nigeria's mix of talent, resources, and gall will one day pull the country up out of Africa's Nth World," Harden writes.

With more than 100 million people, enormous oil and natural gas reserves, and a professional elite two million strong, Nigeria is the richest, most populous country in Africa. Big Men are routinely deposed. Attempts at civilian self-rule and eventual democracy have been made.

Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent is a sad, engrossing, often entertaining book—a journey into the unknown accompanied by an expert guide.

—GEORGE LOWERY

