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## Africans, Americans mutually stereotyped

By Doreen Charles

Americans still receive distorted images of Africa created by outdated books and stereotypes presented in the media, according to David Anthony, African Studies Program assistant. Anthony was part of a two-day workshop in which communication problems between Africans and black Americans were discussed.

"We have been conditioned to fear each other," Anthony said. "We should try to improve relations with our African brothers and sisters."

The stereotype of Africa as a place of wild animals and exotic jungle people still exists in the minds of most Americans, he said. The African Studies Program representatives travel to different areas of the country to educate people about the true nature of Africa.

At grade school level, students are given a negative view of Africa as a jungle or desert land where people live in grass huts and few of the comforts of western civilization, Anthony said. Little attempt is made to emphasize its cultural diversity or political and economic structures, he said.

### Both ways

Africans have stereotypes about Americans, too, according to ASP Curriculum Consultant Kofi Mensah. "It is believed that all Americans are rich," he said.

Mensah, a Ghana native, has been in the United States for four years and is completing a doctorate degree in literature.

Films of African life and customs depicting Africa's diverse lifestyles were shown and literature on Africa was distributed.

During a discussion on African-American relations it was noted that the conscious level of American blacks was a major problem.

Blacks, many of whom still hold distorted views of Africa, cannot see the tie between black Americans and Black Africans, Anthony said.

Historically, he said, there is a definite similarity in the situation of blacks in South Africa and that of the Native America. Both were invaded by explorers and later colonized.

### Liberation movements

The liberation movement of the sixties affected blacks on both continents, Anthony said. While blacks were fighting for civil rights in America, nations were becoming independent in Africa. This had an effect on American blacks, who began reverting to traditional lifestyles (Afro hairstyles, etc.)

Western investments in South Africa also were discussed. It was noted that though the United States might not directly influence South African oppression, economically it still is a factor in perpetuating that oppression.

Blacks must be aware that they are aiding the oppression of South Africans by supporting companies such as General Motors who have South Africa investments, Anthony said.

### Sense of superiority

The role of religion in Africa is seldom understood by Westerners, he noted. The common conception is that whites helped to "civilize" Africans by their invasions of Africa.

In reference to Africa, the terms "becoming modern" or "making progress" suggest a sense of superiority and even racism in American thinking, Anthony said, adding that there is little attempt to understand the Africans' concept of modern society, their form of government or social relationships.

"The word 'tribe' has a negative connotation in the minds of most Americans," Anthony said.

"There is usually an oversimplification of Africa." The ancient history of Africa is seldom taught, only the view of Africa as seen by European explorers.

"People in the media have never really taken the time to understand the culture," he said.

### Distorted views

Europeans tend to look at things differently from Africans, Mensah noted.

"They take statues and carvings out of Africa and put them in museums to look at. They were meant to be used in ceremonies and to be enjoyed by all the people," he said.

Americans could get a distorted view from basing their ideas of Africans solely on the ones they come into contact with, Mensah said.

"They make assumptions that all Africans are alike," he said. "Each of us is different, each has a different background. It is important to see people as individuals."

Because of recent attempts to educate American people, there has been an improvement in understanding of African culture, Mensah said.

### Receptive audiences

Audiences have been very receptive, though black audiences have been even more so, he said, probably because they have closer ties with Africa. Still, whites need to learn more about Africa, because most still believe the common stereotypes, he added.

"There are some whites who have done reading, but most are totally ignorant," he said. "They say, 'We were expecting Tarzan and we didn't find him.' Afterwards, they had a deeper appreciation for Africa."

The African Studies Program plans to continue its purpose of educating others about Africa. The group has spoken to prison audiences and will travel to various college campuses around the country.

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