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Misrepresentations of Africa in Contemporary Slovene School Textbooks

Inspection of contemporary Slovene geography textbooks discloses continuing questionable images of Africa, such as “the favourableness (of the African regions) for the settlement of the Whites” and a discourse of races and tribes. Misrepresentations of Africa of such a kind were to be expected in the late stage of European colonialism. The common denominator behind this is Eurocentrism, which has a strong influence on the occurrence of occasional racial views and the prevailing negative image of Africa. There is a lack of wider socio-political, historical and economic context as well as a great shortage of positive images – both written and visual - in the contents of the textbooks. These problems were identified in a detailed analysis of a selected number of geography textbooks for Slovene primary and secondary schools. The article presents the results of this analysis in a form of a categorization of common misrepresentations of Africa, and explains the basic institutional elements influencing the contents of the textbooks. The author offers examples of concrete solutions to the contents that are criticized here, explains what has already been done to balance the images of Africa, and states what actions should still be taken to attain its quality presentation in Slovene geography textbooks.

Keywords: misrepresentations of Africa, textbooks, geography, Slovenia

Izkrivljene podobe Afrike v sodobnih slovenskih šolskih učbenikih

Ob pregledu sodobnih slovenskih geografskih učbenikov se soočamo s spornimi pogledi na Afriko, kot denimo “ugodnosti [afriških regij] za poselitev belcev” in z diskurzom o rasah in plemenih. Takšne izkrivljene poglede bi bilo pričakovati v pozni fazi evropskega kolonializma. Skupni imenovalca za tem je evrocentrizem, ki vpliva na prisotnost občasnih rasnih optik in na prevladujoče negativne podobe Afrike. V vsebinah učbenikov je prisotno pomanjkanje širšega socio-političnega, zgodovinskega in ekonomskega konteksta, kot tudi pozitivnih podob. Vsi omenjeni problemi so bili zaznani v podrobni analizi izbranih geografskih učbenikov za slovenske osnovne in srednje šole. Članek predstavlja rezultate analize v obliki tipizacije pogostih napačnih razlag Afrike in obrazloži osnovne institucionalne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na vsebino učbenikov. Avtor ponudi primere konkretnih rešitev za kritične vsebine, pojasni, kaj je bilo že storjenega za uravnovešanje podobe Afrike in katerih dejanj bi se bilo še treba poslužiti za doseglo kakovostne upodobitve kontinenta v slovenskih geografskih učbenikih.

Ključne besede: izkrivljene podobe Afrike, učbeniki, geografija, Slovenija

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1. Introduction

“Not to know is bad, not to wish to know is worse.” (Wolof proverb)

What are children taught at school about Africa? Little of importance, say Africans living in Slovenia (Ozmeč 2007, 55; Uršič 2010, 4); and even less that is positive about the continent. Inspection of current Slovene geography textbooks discloses continuing questionable images of Africa, such as the favourableness (of the African regions) for “the settlement of the Whites” (Novak et al. 2004, 11, 16) and a discourse of races and tribes. It is hard to accept such misrepresentations of Africa at the beginning of the 21st century in view of the fact that schoolbooks are among the first more extensive information sources about that continent for students in Slovenia (and generally outside Africa). The immediate question here is what influences a state of affairs in which the contents of geography textbooks can still contain so many outdated, unrealistic, negative and pejorative concepts, information and images.

These problems were identified in a detailed analysis of a selected number of geography textbooks for Slovene primary and secondary schools as part of the project *Izobraževanje za razvoj na trdnih temeljih* (Education for Development on Solid Bases) of the African Centre Association of Slovenia in 2010 (Pirc et al. 2010, 4). This article argues that the images of African social characteristics mentioned above resemble presentations of the continent in the period of the 19th and early 20th century European colonial presence there, and most likely are the products of the continuation of European colonial approaches when discussing Africa. European colonial perceptions of Africans were generally marked by concepts of race (pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies) and tribe (tribal division and social organization of Africans), which have all been scientifically denounced in the last few decades as (mostly) ideological constructs without any real explanative value (Parker and Rathbone 2007, 3, 26, 36; Reader 1998, 606-611; Ki-Zerbo 1977, 396; Muršič 2005; Lowe et al. 1997; Ilc 2006, 84). On the other hand, the different European colonial administrations assessed the value and potential of African regions on the basis of the possibilities of exploiting cheap local labour and natural resources, and of their “suitability” for the settlement of Europeans, while more or less ignoring or limiting the socio-economic needs and political and cultural achievements of Africans (Ki-Zerbo 1977, 402; Južnič 1980, 96-103; Kasule 1998, 82-85; Curtin 1996, 448; O’Toole 2001, 49-50).

Furthermore, some close similarities in the portrayal of the African continent

between the geography school textbooks and Western mass media will also be exposed in the paper. If we paraphrase van Dijk (1987, 46), mass media are one of the main sources of information about social characteristics and processes in Africa for adults, just as textbooks are for students in schools. The reason to also include mass media in this debate are the findings of many analysts with respect to media discourse on Africa (Palmberg 2001b, 8-9; Mezzana 2002; Ivančič 2007, 4, 7, 19; Jeffs 2000; Ilc 2006, 5-6), which have showed a predominantly negative and occasionally sensationalistic approach with decontextualised or one-sided explanations prevailing in their coverage of that continent.

The article first briefly discusses the social role of geography textbooks and their critical analysis. The next section explains the mechanism of transmission of the planned contents of curricula into textbooks in Slovenia. The following section presents the methodology and framework of the analysis of the textbooks. The core part of the article presents the results of the analysis in a form of a categorization of what are termed common misrepresentations of Africa in the textbooks' contents. Six different types of the misrepresentation were identified: a Eurocentric perspective; a short historical memory (i.e., the use of the colonial period as a benchmark); race- and tribe-based views and other unsuitable, offensive or outdated terms and concepts; negative perceptions of modern Africa; errors and inconsistency in the data; and an unsuitable selection of photographic and illustrative material. Each type is presented with exemplary quotations, with critical commentary, from the textbooks which are then contextualised and accompanied with proposals of concrete solutions wherever possible. Finally, the conclusion presents what has been done recently to improve the image of Africa and to achieve its more balanced presentation, together with suggestions as to which actions still have to be taken to attain a more accurate and positive image of the African continent in Slovene geography textbooks.

2. The Social Role of (Geography) Textbooks and of Their Critical Analyses

Teun van Dijk (1987, 46), one of the leading researchers in the sphere of critical discourse analysis, claims that "where mass media are the primary information source about ethnic groups for adults, textbooks and children's books (including comics) play a similar role for children" (and probably also for some parents). Therefore it is not surprising that the analysis of school textbooks "yields results that are rather similar to those of the media" (van Dijk 1987, 46). Schoolbooks can be seen as reflections of the established view of things and therefore as

“excellent study objects for the mainstream images offered in the public sphere. They contain material which has been sifted at many stages (from the writer to the publishing companies and their editors in consonance with the prescribed curriculum) before they are packaged as standardised prescribed knowledge and sanctioned views” (Palmberg 2001a, 197). A critical analysis of discourse in media and education is especially important because these two factors indirectly construct and control the knowledge and interpretation of the world (Čepič & Vogrinčič 2003, 313-314).

The aim of the analysis discussed here was to point out the misrepresentations of Africa in Slovene geography textbooks and to suggest the possibilities of achieving a more balanced, accurate and positive representation of Africa there. Similar intentions led to other research projects and revisions of textbooks with a long tradition. After the First World War the League of Nations began stimulating work in this sphere in order to combat mutual xenophobia and to avoid stereotypes of war-time adversaries, while UNESCO paid much attention to this subject already at its very inception in 1946 (Pingel 2010, 9, 11). The analysis of geography, history and civic school textbooks is very important in the context of attaining a higher quality of education towards “democracy, human rights and international, as well as intercultural, awareness” (Pingel 2010, 8). Only a few significant and topical projects and publications of the last decade in Slovenia have been achieved in the sphere of these subjects, including media analysis, that have focused specifically on Africa or other non-European parts of the world. These are mostly university diplomas and articles.

There was an informal project of the Initiative Group for the Non-disparaging Presentation of the Cultures of the World in Slovene Textbooks, (henceforth, ‘the Initiative’) carried out in 2007, that had a different approach to the subject of analysing the treatment of Africa in textbooks. It had members from different disciplines and indirectly led to the project and analysis discussed in this paper. The Initiative started within the framework of the African Centre Association (*Društvo Afriški center*) of Slovenia, and was initiated by one of its members¹ who as a parent was shocked by the negative and distorting images of Africa that his children had to learn from their textbooks (Pirc et al. 2010, 4; Ozmeč 2007, 55). Thus the work of the Initiative mostly focused on the analysis of discourse and of images of the social characteristics of Africa in one Slovene geography textbook. The Initiative, which included also the author of this article, consisted of small group of experts on Africa from different disciplines as well as of Africans living in Slovenia. Later on it began cooperation with Kula the Slovene ethnological and anthropological association, and expanded its researches to Asia. The Initiative entered into regular consultations with one of the publishing companies and

produced a detailed critical report for one of its textbooks. Together with Kula it organized a round table “Peoples of the World in the Slovene School System and Modern Professional Vocabulary” where some of the results were discussed (Ozmeč 2007, 55). The speakers there also concluded that it is not only the subject of geography which is questionable when presenting non-European peoples to pupils, but also some others such as history and literature. With the perseverance and persuasion by some of its members, the Initiative achieved a situation whereby some of the most questionable requirements for the African portion of the geography textbooks’ contents in the curriculum were withdrawn or replaced with more appropriate ones.

3. The Influence of Curricula on the Textbooks’ Contents

It is almost impossible to analyse the contents of Slovene geography textbooks without a simultaneous review of the geography curricula for primary and secondary schools. The reason is simple: the curricula contain more or less detailed guidelines, goals and also concrete key terms which students should adopt and learn. They have to be included in the contents of the textbooks or the latter are not approved for the use in schools. Thus, a short excursus to explain the process of renewing the curricula and the transmission of the planned contents of curricula into the textbooks in Slovenia with the focus on the geographical features of Africa is developed in this section.

In 2007 the National Education Institute of Slovenia (NEIS) had been intensively preparing a reform of the curriculum. The NEIS is a public institution authorized by the Ministry of Education and Sport for the implementation of educational reform. Previously the last general reform of curricula for Slovene primary and secondary schools was performed in 1998. The latest reformed curriculum was finally approved only for secondary schools,² while the reform for primary schools has still not been finished (NEIS 2010; Marn 2007, 26-27; Ivelja 2010). The so called Curriculum Development Groups are an integral part of the NEIS. One of them, Humanities and Social Sciences, covers also the Geography Subject Group which is in charge of discussing and approving proposals for the reformed curriculum for geography (NEIS 2010). The final word in the process of approving the curriculum rests with the Council of Experts of Republic of Slovenia for General Education (*Strokovni svet Republike Slovenije za splošno izobraževanje*) at the Ministry of Education and Sport. This Council also approves the textbooks for primary and secondary schools if they follow the directives and

contents of the curriculum (SSSI 2010).

The geographic features of Africa are taught relatively extensively in the 8th year of primary school (children of 13 years of age) and in the 2nd year of secondary school (adolescents of 16 years of age) – together with other non-European parts of the world, except Asia which is already included in the 7th year of primary school together with Europe. Despite the intentions and the positive moves of NEIS for the reform of the primary school curricula, this has not happened yet. There are however possibilities that the new curricula could finally come into effect in 2011 (Pirc 2009). This still remains the main and the basic problem in connection with the contents of geography textbooks for the 8th year of primary schools. The textbooks that include a chapter focused on Africa still contain the same disputed and questionable orientations and contents that were already detected in the smaller-sized analysis by the Initiative in 2007 (Pirc et al. 2007, 2-3). This leaves the impression that geography in primary schools is still taught mainly in the spirit and with the methods that were present in the period of European colonialism on the African continent, especially its final stage.

Still, it has to be mentioned that the activities of the Initiative in 2007 resulted in some important changes in the content orientation of the curricula. On the primary school level this is still evident only in the form of the draft for the reformed curriculum, where for example the discourse about the races (racial groups, racial fragments, “Bantu blacks”, “Sudanese blacks” – in Slovene: *rasne skupine, rasni drobci, Bantu črnici, Sudanski črnici*) and the questionable expression “Black Africa” were omitted at the request of the Initiative (personal correspondence with Igor Lipovšek 2007 and 2010³; MŠŠ & ZRSŠ 2010). On the other hand, some “goals and contents” were added at the suggestions of the Initiative, aiming to reach a more realistic and balanced image of Africa in the reformed curriculum for secondary schools. Thus, through geography lessons the students should also *inter alia* adopt the following “goals and contents” (Polšak et al. 2008, 16) concerning Africa, which were missing in the previous version of the curriculum:

- ♦ they should recognize its cultural and linguistic diversity;
- ♦ they should be aware of the existence of the long and far-reaching history before the arrival of Europeans on the African continent; /.../
- ♦ they should be familiar with the past and current consequences of (neo) colonialism in Africa and with the influence of the great powers on some of the conflicts; /.../
- ♦ they should understand the phenomena of famine and poverty in particular parts of Africa not only as a consequence of natural catastrophes and development assistance but also as a result of unjustifiable world agricultural

policy for produce from the African market (Polšak et al. 2008, 16, 23; personal correspondence with Igor Lipovšek 2007).

Content orientations of this kind, as well as principled goal orientations of geography curricula for primary and secondary schools that among others expect the students to “be able to form opinions and values, such as respect of other nations and cultures” (MŠŠ & ZRSŠ 2010, 16), raise our expectation for positive changes in the sphere of perceiving or learning about the geographic characteristics of modern and former Africa (and also of other non-European parts of the world). Certainly, the contents of the aforementioned curricula still need many improvements and conceptual alternations. At the same time, new elements in the reformed curriculum penetrate only slowly and gradually into new editions of textbooks. One of the reasons for this is also the fact that the old editions of the textbooks still keep their validity in most cases for two more school years after the introduction of the reformed curriculum, and furthermore the latter is also introduced gradually – starting with being limited to the 1st year of secondary school. Moreover, it is obvious that the transfer of the prescribed contents from curricula to the textbooks leaves a lot of scope for different (and mostly negative) interpretations of the contents. As Bešter (2009, 108) also claims, the Slovene school system supports the principle of a multicultural approach in education, though the majority of such contents and orientations remain realised merely on a declarative level.

4. Methodology and Framework of the Geography Textbooks Analysis

The critical analysis focused on those Slovene geography textbooks that contain chapters which directly deal with Africa. The analysis was performed as part of the project *Izobraževanje za razvoj na trdnih temeljih* (Education for Development on Solid Bases) of the African Centre Association, a Slovene association bringing together Africans living in Slovenia and others interested in Africa (Pirc et al. 2010, 4).⁴ The project included four geography textbooks by four different authors/joint authors and from three different publishing companies. Three textbooks for the 8th year of primary school and one for the 2nd year of secondary school were chosen. At the present time there are in Slovenia four different textbooks available for the students of 8th year of primary school and two different ones for the students of the 2nd year of secondary school. Two books – one for primary and the other for secondary school - were not selected for the analysis since they were published by the company whose textbooks were already carefully analysed

by the Initiative Group for the Non-disparaging Presentation of the Cultures of the World in the Slovene Textbooks in 2007.

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The analysis is based on qualitative methods. The content analysis focused mostly on the socio-geographic images of Africa – i.e., the kind of messages that some parts of the text present and the context in which they were written. The aim of the analysis was also to point out any materials omitted from the chapter about Africa, and especially to suggest concretely how the questionable contents could be presented in a more beneficial manner. The research group included seven reviewers from multidisciplinary backgrounds⁵ - among them an ethnologist, an anthropologist, a political scientist and a geographer. The detailed analyses included multiple examinations of each textbook and its corresponding workbook: each was reviewed by four members of the group, who prepared separate reports. These were the bases for a summative report for each textbook, prepared by the coordinator of the group (Pirc et al. 2010, 4). Its final version was ready only after reviews by the team members. The complete report including all the summative reports was presented in public in October 2010.

5. Common Misrepresentations of Africa in the Textbooks

General approaches to the non-European parts of the world in Slovene geography textbooks are in accordance with Van Dijk's opinions about how school textbooks in the West depict countries of the world. He claims that different studies of these textbooks show that the home countries, or other Western countries and Western civilization in general "are systematically portrayed more extensively, more favourably, and as superior to the colonised, Third World or 'Black' countries of the southern hemisphere" (van Dijk 1987, 46). Similar conclusions were also found in analysis of the aforementioned geography textbooks with respect to Africa, where the common denominator behind them could be generally described as a Eurocentric world view.

As Amin (2009, 78) states, the concept of Eurocentrism is difficult to define precisely. Eurocentrism is a matter of attitude, not content (Davies 1997, 16). Briefly, the Eurocentric approach to history is based on the construct of the well-known "Western" history of Europe and the World, having Ancient Greece, Rome, feudalism and capitalistic Christian Europe as its cornerstones. In this context, it is closely intertwined with the racial dimension of the basis for the supposed European cultural unity on one hand, while distancing itself from

the non-European parts of the world as its opposites in a racial and religious senses (Amin 2009, 6, 66). It regards European civilisation as superior and self-contained, while neglecting the need for taking non-European viewpoints into consideration (Davies 1997, 16). Thus, we can speak of Eurocentrism as a colonial world view, since it strives for the gradual occidentalisation or europeisation of the rest of the world. This phenomenon is characterised by a belief in the superiority and universalism of its European model of human development and serves as a justification for the European conquest of the world (Amin 2009, 79; Mastnak 2009, 183). Its roots are in the Renaissance, and it flourished in the 19th century (Amin 2009, 5).

When, therefore, analysing the images of Africa in geography textbooks, we can speak about many dimensions of Eurocentrism. The first one, simply called a “Eurocentric perspective,” includes the geographic dimension – i.e. dividing the World into the “Old” and “New”, “Discovered” and “Undiscovered” (i.e., by Europeans) – and generally one-sided explanations or decontextualisations of the complexities of Africa. The other variations of Eurocentrism may be identified as the historical dimension: exposing the (positive) role of European colonial rule in Africa while neglecting the rest of African history, the ethnic dimension: discourse on races and tribes and the use of colonial terminology for the peoples and geographical names involved, and negativism towards Africa and Africans (as the opposite to Europe and Europeans).

The following results of the analysis do not show the balanced image about Africa that is mentioned for the reformed (or the draft of the reformed) curricula above. First of all, this is the consequence of the fact that most of the textbooks were published before the curriculum reform. In addition, they offer many similarities with the mass media when portraying Africa, which will be discussed in more detail later. The primary school geography textbooks approach Africa with a regional-geographic perspective. First they discuss it by focusing on the general geographic characteristic of the whole continent; this is followed by the division into three regions (North, Tropical and South Africa). In contrast, the secondary school textbooks discuss Africa on a basis of a problem approach and thus focus only on chosen physical and socio-geographic characteristics. Despite these differences, the following main or common questionable contents (i.e., misrepresentations) are more or less inherent to all the four textbooks analysed. In the form of, e.g., certain expressions, sentences or paragraphs, they may be classified under more than one characteristic of the textbooks’ content.⁶

5.1. Eurocentric Perspective

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In this case we may talk about narrow, one-sided perspectives or monoperspectivity on Africa. The best evidence for this is the continuum of discourse on the “discovery” of Africa by the Europeans: “Beside other geographic discoveries, they [the Europeans] started to discover the West African coast in the 15th century” (Novak et al. 2004, 14). This is an explicitly Eurocentric and indirectly also a colonial perspective of the division of the World into the “Old World” and the undiscovered, unexplored “New World” (Brazier 2007, 61). This is especially fallacious for Africa, since the continent is known as a cradle of humankind. It is time to finally overcome the terminology used in history and geography about the so-called geographic discoveries from the late 15th century on, and to use at the most reference to explorations and expeditions. As O’Toole claims (2001, 44)

It is ironic that people continue to credit European explorers of the nineteenth century with the ‘discovery’ of rivers, waterfalls, and such in Africa when it is obvious that Africans living there already knew these things existed. Obviously, discovery simply meant that a European had verified in writing the existence of something long known to others.

A similar perspective, with even more direct colonial connotations, is valid for the discourse on the “favourableness” of specific African regions for the settlement of Europeans (or “Whites”): “On the north [of Africa], at the Mediterranean, there is the Mediterranean climate, that is favourable for the settlement of the Whites” (Novak et al. 2004, 16). In this context, the textbooks also mention the settlement of Europeans in the African regions where their relative share in relation to the complete number of all inhabitants is very small or insignificant (Novak et al. 2004, 29; Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 24).

One-sided and mostly misleading explanations of the socio-political and economic complexities of modern and past Africa are also closely connected with a Eurocentric perspective. This may also be expressed simply as decontextualisation. The events and conditions on the African continent are thus presented without their critical socio-political and historical context, or exaggeratedly simplified. This method releases Europe or the West from almost all the responsibility for the poor state of affairs in the aforementioned respects in many African countries: “Many new [African] countries agreed on different forms of dependency on the former colonizers or multinational companies, because of the poverty and economic-political problems” (Kürbus et al. 2004, 44). Instead, this could be written: “Many new countries agreed on different forms of dependency on the former colonizers or multinational companies

because of the poverty and economic-political problems, which were *mostly caused simply by European colonial rule*.”⁷

Furthermore, the social image of Africans is often treated in a patronizing manner and at the same time, to a great extent, as a consequence of distance and lack of understanding. On the one hand, the Africans are presented as ill-fated, needing help (e.g., during various humanitarian catastrophes or wars); and on the other hand, they are exoticized as “tribes” who often fight each other for incomprehensible reasons and who are incapable of achieving socio-political stability and economic successes: “The decay of traditional African society is accelerated by numerous dictatorial régimes, disputes between nations and conflicts that are frequently stimulated from abroad” (Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 19).

This is an example of the lack of valid explanation for the decay of the so-called African traditional society – whatever this may be. It is understandable that the textbooks need a certain amount of generalization and simplification, though it is very difficult to talk about traditional African society in the singular because of its multitude of peoples, cultures and also religions (Pirc 2009, 3). Wars certainly result in a high intensity of change the social organization in the areas where they take place, though Africa is no exception here. It is also true that many conflicts are stimulated from abroad, though the authors could be at least a bit more specific which “abroad” was meant here – i.e., whether it is one of the ex-colonial metropolises or one of the African neighbours (Iliffe 1997, 257; O’Toole 2001, 52; Braeckman 2004, 14; Brumen 2003, 77, 80-81). We may mention here also some well-known African examples of lasting dictatorial regimes (e.g., in the former Zaire and in Guinea) where the leaders of the states commanded a kind of “growth of cultural awareness” of their nations by “returns to authenticity” (and similar phrases), – thus endeavouring to preserve or achieve a kind of imagined tradition (Ewens 1999, 462-466; Duran 1999, 547). As has been stressed, Africa is no exception to the general rule here, either. This kind of discourse, as cited above, thus also hints that this kind of processes and situations are inherent to Africa.

The example of the way of depicting Africans, as described here, also has parallels in how the African continent is usually presented in the West, other than in textbooks. Palmberg (2001b, 15) writes that the continent is presented as primitive in two variations: “in one sense of ‘primitive’ Africa as original, pure and unspoilt”. As Mezzana (2002) states, it is an area of “breathtakingly beautiful wild habitat, rife with danger,” and is also an “allochronic” land, where “time is believed to flow differently to the diachrony experienced by the rest of humanity”

(Mezzana, 2002). The other sense of “primitive” mentioned by Palmberg (2001b, 15), involves Africa standing for “underdeveloped, not sufficiently sophisticated or learned.”

To a crucial degree, the Eurocentric perspective conditions the remaining common characteristics of the geographic textbooks analysed.

5.2. Short Historical Memory – Colonial Period as a Benchmark

In most of the cases, the historical memory of the analysed textbooks extends only back to the European colonisation of Africa and ignores earlier African history, including any kind of achievements of African state formations and cultures. Indeed the only common exception here is the mentioning of Old Egypt (e.g. Novak et al. 2004, 20; Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 20; Verdev 2010, 25). An example in this context is the following sentence: “The African interior was unknown to the Europeans until the beginning of 19th century”. This statement appears in a subchapter, significantly entitled “The Troubles of the Whites in Tropical Africa,” which is supposed to deal with the physical geography of the continent, but instead presents the problems of 19th century European explorers of Africa and the obstacles for settlement of the Europeans there (Novak et al. 2004, 14). The context of this part of the textbook is clearly colonial in the sense of its almost epic description of the heroism of “our” explorers in Africa and in its view that European settlement in Sub-Saharan Africa was the norm; as such, it should simply be removed.

Another example is when the foundation of Liberia is mentioned with language idealising the role of the USA in this period of history: “The first independent country on the African soil was Liberia. It was founded by the USA in order to return the liberated slaves there” (Verdev 2010, 26). The fact that Ethiopia was the oldest African independent state, in existence from ancient times, is here simply ignored (Mazrui 1999, 108).

As van Dijk (1987, 46-47) states, this kind of approach towards history is true of the majority of textbooks in most ex-colonial countries. In them, colonial history is described “in terms of adventures, explorations, heroic feats, or the diffusion of ‘civilization’, rather than in terms of exploration, slavery or brutalities”. The history of colonised peoples “before and after the colonial period” is neglected (van Dijk 1987, 47). This could also be said for the following sentence, where the “dissemination of the culture” of the colonisers is mentioned in the first

place, although it is followed by reference to atrocities: “[The Englishmen and Frenchmen] disseminated English and French culture, renamed countries and rivers and destroyed the culture of the natives” (Novak et al. 2004, 27).

This kind of statement may be placed also in the context of the relativisation of the criminal extent of the European colonial regime in Africa.⁸ This is the kind of question posed in a section on selected socio-geographic characteristics of Africa: “Explain the idea of neo-colonialism. List and explain some *positive* and negative consequences of neocolonialism of Africa” (Kürbus et al. 2004, 45). As Južnič (1980, 164) writes with reference to neocolonialism, it is a continuum of colonialism in the sense of the continuation of actual dependence of African countries on the great powers. It would be definitely possible to enumerate its advantages at length, i.e., those gained by the multinational companies and governments of numerous Western countries, whereas at the most we might include into this group some corrupted political cliques in Africa.

There has to be added that today’s Europe is still far from being immune even from official calls to recognize the “positive aspects” of colonialism in Africa. The most famous recent case of this is probably a French 2005 proposal for a law which mentioned, inter alia, that school programmes should recognize “the positive role of the French presence /.../ in North Africa” (Pingel 2010, 40; LOI n° 2005-158). After strong protests, this part of the law was finally repealed in 2006 (Raizon 2006).

5.3. Racist and Tribalist Viewpoints and Other Unsuitable, Offensive or Outdated Terms and Concepts

Probably the most obvious sign of the portrayal of African (and other non-European) socio-geographic characteristics in Slovene geographic textbooks is the usage of discourse on races and tribes. The Slovene anthropologist Rajko Muršič (2005) has already been writing about this problem, while stressing the role of ethnology and anthropology in this context. The textbooks for primary schools still divide the people of Africa into races and racial types, though as it was already mentioned above that the parts of curriculum stressing racial classification (and mentioning tribes) will be omitted when the reformed curriculum finally appears. As Muršič stresses (2005), the concept of race cannot explain human variation and thus has no explanative role at all. “The human ways of life have no connection with the physical basis of the peoples. There are more differences between people within populations than between populations, and this is true both for physical appearance and for the genetic bases. The use of racial

categories is not only incorrect but also very dangerous” (Muršič cited in Uršič 2010, 4). This can quickly lead to racist thinking, where, as Palmberg (2001b, 7) claims, “some are hopeless cases by birth due to ‘races’ they are born into”. In the paternalistic approach, they talk about the “less advanced” peoples instead, who “must be guided by “enlightened peoples” into the light of civilisation” (ibid.).

A clear example of mentioning race as the basic characteristic of the African population is the following: “The most numerous among the races are blacks, followed by the whites, while there are also some members of the yellow race, half-breeds and racial fragments” (Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 19). If we turn the mirror on our own continent, Europe, we have not seen any such description for its population in modern textbooks (such as dividing Europe’s population into Dinaric, Nordic and other racial subgroups). Instead of racial viewpoints, the authors should write about the ethno-linguistic and cultural diversity in Africa.

“In ‘Black’ Africa, the most numerous peoples are the Bantu, followed by even slightly darker Sudan Blacks. Both live in tribes” (Novak et al. 2004, 21). This is another excerpt from textbooks where beside race the authors also mention the concept of tribe that is so common when speaking about African ethnic groups. As Lowe et al. (1997) and Ilc (2006, 84) write, the idea of tribal organization of Africans was one of the primary ideas or myths on which were established representations of Africa and Africans in the era of European imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “European travellers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and ethnographers in the past have tended to collapse multiple identities into single concept of ‘tribe’. This was an outsiders’ model of who Africans were and how they lived” (Parker and Rathbone 2007, 43). The idea of “tribe” reflects the once widespread but now outdated 19th century social theory where social organizations and forms of government that are “said to precede civilization among pastoralists and simple agriculturalists, were called tribal” (Lowe et al. 1997). “Tribal” and “African” are still virtually synonyms (Lowe et al. 1997; Reader 1998, 609). Again, the geographic textbooks do not mention, for example, that there are any tribes living in modern-day Europe.

Thus, we can agree with Mezzana (2002), when she writes about the abuse of the term tribe (and its derivatives) for the use of modern descriptions of Africans and Africa. The expression promotes misleading stereotypes and has no consistent meaning. “At best, any interpretation of African events that relies on the idea of ‘tribe’ contributes no understanding of specific issues in specific countries” (Lowe et al. 1997). This term should be avoided and replaced by, e.g., peoples, ethnic groups or nations, depending on the socio-political context.

All the textbooks analysed¹⁰ also contain terms for different African peoples that are offensive, obsolete, Eurocentric or politically incorrect. Resnik Planinc et al. (2007, 19) and Novak et al. (2004, 21) refer to “Pygmies, Hottentots and Bushmen” (in Slovene: *Pigmejci, Hotentoti* and *Bušmani* or, literally, *Grmičarji*) in the context of giving examples of “racial fragments”. Basically, this is still the continuum of the racial discourse mentioned above, except that here we are dealing with terms for certain peoples constructed by Europeans on the basis of their supposed physical or phonetic characteristics. These ethnic groups naturally have their own expressions for themselves which they prefer, while the pejorative Euro-colonial terms should be withdrawn. For the “Pygmies” the most common and correct expressions used today are the Baka (or M’Baka) and Mbuti people, while for the other two peoples are usually named together as Khoisan (Kasule 1998, 96; Furlong 2001, 373; O’Toole 2001, 26). The example of referring to Tuaregs or Berbers (Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 18-19; Novak et al. 2004, 22; Verdev 2010, 24) are slightly less questionable, because these expressions do not relate to their physical appearance. Still, in the majority of cases, the members of these two peoples prefer the use of their own names: Kel Tamashek for Tuaregs and Amazigh for Berbers (Brumen 2001, 142; Willis 2008, 240).

Closely connected with presenting only a very limited number of ethnic groups in Africa and usually focusing only on the those mentioned above and most likely on the Zulu, Maasai and Arabs as well, without any specific explanation for their selection, introduces another two important characteristics of the depictions of Africans in the textbooks. There is a clear exoticism in the descriptions and visual images, together with the common phenomenon of synecdoche. As Mezzana (2002) explains for the latter, this is for example “when populations such as the Maasai are used to represent the entire African continent”. It is understandable that textbooks cannot even list one main ethnic group for each African country, but the impression from the textbooks for primary schools is that only a handful of peoples live in Africa, possibly merely those just mentioned. For example, we can only guess why, of all important ethnic groups in East Africa, only the Maasai are mentioned (or portrayed on pictures) in almost all textbooks (Kürbus et al. 2004, 38, 49; Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 18, 25; Novak et al. 2004, 28) - as if they were the only or one of the most numerous and influential peoples in this part of Africa. The same goes for example for the Zulu in Southern African region or the “Pygmies” in Central Africa.

The reasons for choosing to present this limited number of ethnic groups from Africa, in particular, may be traced back to the age of European imperialism on the African continent of the 19th century and Europe’s obsession with the “wild and primitive savages”, conditioned also with a poor knowledge of African

societies in general (Lindfors 2001, 55, 66; Taylor 2000, 116). The impression is that the appearance of the peoples mentioned above in textbooks is a direct consequence of this kind of vision of Africa. These peoples are still seen as “wild tribes”, untouched by modern (Western) life – talking about their habits and their visual appearance – i.e., as exotic. As Palmberg (2001a, 199) argues, this kind of representation of Africa also suits the European constructed image of Africans as a peasant and non-urbanised population – where, simply, “one African is all Africans”.

The last integral part in the framework of unsuitable terms and concepts is some of geographical names in Africa. Some of them still bear the old colonial designations, named after different European monarchs and explorers (e.g. Brazzaville), while on the other hand, many of them changed their names in accordance with the new socio-political climate and local African languages in the post-colonial period (e.g. Maputo – former Lourenço Marques). Then there is also the third group, where both the former colonial and the present-day local African name are officially or non-officially in use. In such cases, the analysed textbooks seem to take into account only the old colonial names – e.g. for Victoria Falls (Resnik Planinc 2007, 10; Verdev 2010, 11). The textbooks should also include the official local African names together with the European, colonial terms. In this example, that is Mosi-oa-Tunya (in translation the smoke that thunders) (UNESCO, 2010).

5.4. Negative Perceptions of Modern Africa

In this context, the basic characteristic of all the geographical textbooks analysed is the primary orientation on mentioning and listing different aspects of problems and catastrophes in Africa. Wars, diseases, famines, desertification, demographic growth and poverty – which is vaguely defined and equated with economic (non) development – are the synonyms for the modern Africa in the textbooks (e.g. Kürbus et al. 2004, 44-45, 52, 56-59; Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 16-17, 19; Novak et al. 2004, 14, 21, 28; Verdev 2010, 16-17, 20-21). As Palmberg (2001a, 204) writes, the space given to Africa in the schoolbooks “seems to be fully occupied by the all-dominant theme of ‘development problems’”. This is also similar to the mass media coverage of Africa, where “Africa is problems” (ibid.; Ivančič 2007, 4, 19).

The key words of the section “Lower Equatorial Africa” (Resnik Planinc et al. 2007, 24) are representative of this kind of image: “diamonds, Tsetse fly, tropical wood, clearing of tropic rainforest, military conflicts”. Even where these key words are not negative per se (diamonds, tropical wood), they are presented in

a (neo)colonialistic perspective of the exploitation of natural wealth, instead of mentioning, for example, biotic diversity. Besides, the problems in Africa are usually presented as problems inherent for this continent only, or as problems for which the Africans are exclusively responsible. Such is the case of the optional section in the secondary school textbook which is entirely devoted to the most common diseases in Africa (Kürbus et al. 2004, 58-59). Africa is presented there as a very sick continent. This can be the only explanation of the fact that even this additional section concerning this continent is again full of descriptions of diseases. If there is a need for such contents in a textbook, they could be placed at its end where problems of all continents would be presented, as the majority of these diseases also appear in other parts of the world.

As we can see, there is a critical lack of positive images which would present African achievements. These would have a motivation role for the students and would de-exoticise and bring this part of the world closer to them. Some of the very rare exceptions here are the mentions of Ethiopian runner Haile Gebrselassie and South African cardiac surgeon Christian Barnard in one of the textbooks (Verdev 2010, 27, 22).

5.5. Errors and Inconsistency of Data

These characteristics are also important but not as critical as the problems mentioned above. The reason is that they do not necessarily result in a negative image of Africa and Africans, though they can still contribute to misconceptions. As examples of errors or inconsistency, the different number of African states may be mentioned within and between textbooks – instead of 54 we read about 53 (Verdev 2010, 8) and 55 states (Novak et al. 2004, 9). Another example would be the claim that Namibia achieved independence in 1989 (Novak et al. 2004, 35) instead in 1990.

Beside erroneous statements there is also the problem of the out-of-date statistical information that is occasionally cited in the textbooks. Social processes are generally very dynamic, and consequently statistical data are obsolete as soon as they are published. However, minimal deviation from the current data is one thing, but when the textbooks contain data that are in great extent different from the latest statistics it is another — as, for example, the citation of much too low a number for the total population in Africa, i.e., with 760 million (Novak et al. 2004, 9) instead of a little more than one billion (UNFP 2009, 91). This kind of problem could have been easily solved in the reprints of textbooks by their publishing companies by incorporating regular reviews and statistical updates;

after all, corrections like this do not even demand a new technical formatting of the textbooks' pages.

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5.6. Unsuitable Selection of Photographic and Illustrative Material

This last category is only briefly discussed, since it would require much more space for graphic appendices to illustrate examples of the photographic and illustrative material in the textbooks analysed. We may simply summarize that the majority of the themes of the photographs and illustrations are similar to the characteristics mentioned above: materials showing primitivism, the exoticism of Africans and their general differences from "us"; depictions of stereotypical images of the African wilderness and destroyed forests, people living in dire conditions of hunger, war and slums, and other problems, stereotypical and negative images.¹¹ Nevertheless, there are exceptions to this generalised impression – the textbook by Verdev (2010) presents for the most part pictures of very good quality and a balanced selection of themes on the one hand, whereas on the other, the textbook by Kürbus et al. (2004) presents a catalogue of stereotypes and crime news of Africa. This visual part of the textbooks is a specific sphere, which on a meaning-content level has a similar importance to the texts. The curricula do not contain a single word about this aspect of the problem, though we believe that there should be included at least some basic guidelines about the criteria for the thematic content of the photographs and illustrations.

6. Conclusions

Throughout the six points made in the last section it has become clear, that – as was stressed at the very beginning of this article - the images of African social characteristics resemble presentations of the continent in the era of European colonialism and that there are also similarities of these images with the portrayal of Africa by the Western mass media. The parallels with the mass media can be found especially in the spheres of decontextualised explanations of the socio-political and economic complexities of Africa, in negative perceptions of modern Africa and in the unsuitable selection of photographic material. Correspondence to colonial perspectives on Africa is at its most obvious in the Eurocentric and negative approach to African reality, in the short historical memory and in racial or tribal viewpoints with which ethno-cultural structure and processes on the continent are discussed. It may be rather surprising that Slovene geographic textbooks have adopted some perspectives on Africa which could be expected

in some ex-colonial countries rather than in a country which emerged from the Socialist and Non-Aligned block and thus on principle traditionally expressed more solidarity and understanding to this part of the world.

The answer for this phenomenon can probably be found partly in an eager reorientation towards the West generally in all social spheres including the school system and the writing of textbooks while, on the other hand, Slovenia drastically lost its touch with almost everything African: from economic and political relations to migration flows and media presence in Africa, especially in the first decade after independence. This can probably also explain the basic resemblance between the negative image of the African continent in the mass media and textbooks. Some additional reasons for such an image of Africa in geography textbooks are to be found in the lack of modern critical literature from Slovene researchers, especially in geography, and thus in reference to books that are 30 or even more years old with many out-of-date concepts and data.¹²

We are aware of what Pingel (2010, 41) claims, that no textbooks can be strictly impartial, when taking account of the different regions of the world. What the analysis of these four geography textbooks aimed was to offer alternatives to build a more balanced and updated image of modern and historical Africa, rather than to artificially embellish its image. As the Slovene geographer Kunaver (2005, 41) wrote, “the most frequent results of non-objectivity and ignorance are stereotypes and one-sided explanations”, and this analysis aims to encourage the processes of improving a situation of this kind. One of the visitors who attended the public presentation of the results of this analysis¹³ commented that the main victims of this kind of representation of Africa is not really Africa itself but the students in the schools. They live in a global society, and not being prepared for its challenges is the greatest victim of misrepresentations of contemporary and past Africa.

These critical analyses of Slovene geography textbooks and curricula has shown that such work is necessary and possible if we want to improve the quality of education – in this case about the geography of Africa. As these and some other analyses and opinions have shown, initiatives of this kind may be necessary also in other subject-fields. This is especially true if we presume knowledge to be a public good, where we can feel entitled to contribute our own share in order to improve the situation, particularly for the sphere of primary school since this is mandatory. We may adopt the few following steps if we want to legitimize and activate a critical analysis of the textbooks and curricula of the subjects concerned:

- ♦ we should argue our own role (as an individual or a group – within or outside the official working frame) in relation to the responsible institutions (in the

Slovene case: the Ministry for Education and Sport and NEIS), to explain why exactly we have an interest in participating with suggestions or opinions to improve a certain subject;

- ♦ we have to stress what were the precise problems that we detected in content or methodology, and scientifically argue the reasons for them;
- ♦ we should suggest concrete possibilities for improvements, corrections or alternatives (with scientific references).

Given the pervasive re-occurrence of questionable contents, it is obvious that there is a great lack of regular critical multidisciplinary reviews of the geography textbooks and curriculum in Slovenia. This is, surely, not simply a problem concerning learning about Africa but also about other non-European parts of the world. The optimal solution may be to use a multidisciplinary approach at an early stage, when curricula are being prepared or reformed and when textbooks are being written (e.g., collaboration between geographers and historians and cultural anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists).

Further research on the image of Africa in Slovene geography textbooks should also include the analysis of other textbooks which only indirectly speak about Africa or Africans (e.g., when mentioning emigrants or African diaspora around the world), and analyses of older Slovene geography schoolbooks of the last few decades (e.g., during the last decade before the intensive decolonization in Africa started); these analyses may establish how many or which images of Africa used in modern schoolbooks have been non-critically transmitted until our own times.

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¹ Samo Košnik.

² Its implementation began gradually in the school year 2008/2009.

³ Igor Lipovšek is the director of Geography Subject Group.

⁴ The project was put into effect in 2010 and was co-financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and the European Commission. It also included a critical analysis of two history textbooks.

⁵ The group was coordinated by the author of this article.

⁶ The complete detailed analysis of the four textbooks is available in the report of the project *Afrika v slovenskem šolskem sistemu* (Pirc et al., 2010).

⁷ Emphasis by the author.

⁸ By “criminal extent of European colonial regime” we refer to “destroying the culture” of Africans – the direct or indirect consequence of forced evictions of natives from their territories, of slave or forced labour, of oppression of their human, political and economic rights, etc..

⁹ Emphasis by the author.

¹⁰ One exception is the secondary school textbook (Kürbus et al. 2004), which does not include any mention of African peoples, except in the context of certain catastrophes.

¹¹ Radinja (2009, 61-87) extensively analysed the role of photographs in Slovene geography textbooks about Africa.

¹² For example one of the textbooks refers to the collection of books about the peoples of the world, *Ljudstva sveta*, that was published in the years 1979 and 1980.

¹³ The event took place in Ljubljana in October 2010.

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