

Vanessa Nakate and the Global Tokenisation of Africa

It is hard to imagine a bigger, more powerful and influential news agency than the Associated Press. The 174-year-old American newswire's reports are published and republished by thousands of newspapers and broadcasters around the world every single day. Its financial resources enable it to hire the best reporters and photographers the journalism field has to offer worldwide. Indeed, this is still an American corporation, owned and governed by American media moguls and titans, and its reporting, like most Western media reporting, can be remarkably insensitive and dismissive when covering the developing world, especially Africa.

Last month, in a blatantly racist act, the AP cropped a 23-year old Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate out of a photo she had appeared in together with the Swedish celebrity climate activist Greta Thunberg and activists Luisa Neubauer, Isabelle Axelsson, and Loukina Tille after they had all attended the [World Economic Forum](#) in [Davos](#). What's the big deal, you might ask yourself? The other four women in the photo are Caucasians, only Nakate is black, that's the deal.

Nakate told the American news website BuzzFeed that she was heartbroken when she saw the photo. "I cried because it was so sad not just that it was racist, I was sad because of the people from Africa." She felt, rightly so, that the African climate change story was being erased from global discussions.

"It was the first time in my life that I understood the definition of the word 'racism.'" She added. Nakate also shared a heartbreaking 10-minute-long video on her social media accounts, recounting her experience at the summit and how it felt being cropped out from the photo.

Following an online backlash, The Associated Press issued a tone-deaf, mea-culpa apology, saying there was no ill intent even though they changed the photo and replaced it with one that included Nakate.

“The photographer was trying to get a picture out fast under tight deadline and cropped it purely on composition grounds because he thought the building in the background was distracting,” said the news agency’s director of photography.

But with the intensifying backlash, AP’s own executive editor issued another statement, apologizing to Nakate, while the agency ran a story on the kerfuffle incredulously titled “Photo cropping mistake leads to AP soul-searching on race.”

His statement however made things worse: The AP’s twitter account quoted her as saying, “It was a mistake that we realize silenced your voice, and we apologize. We will all work hard to learn from this.” He added: “@AP executive editor apologizes to African climate activist for photo crop that removed her from image where she posed with other activists.”

<https://twitter.com/AP/status/1221956076935041024>

Many of Nakate’s supporters rightly noted that even in apologizing, they still didn’t get it. Referring to her as ‘Africa’s climate Activist’ and not by her name, or her nationality (Ugandan) was one of the dismissive racist tropes western media and commentators use when describing African countries or people. In lumping everyone together as ‘African’ and portraying Africa as a monolith, they ignore the continent’s rich geographical and national diversity. Uganda is as different from Togo as Estonia is from Germany.

The media for example never refer to Greta Thunberg as a European activist. Several other news organizations misidentified Nakate altogether, confusing her with another Zambian activist.



The picture that caused controversy

The erasure of Africa from global movements

The Vanessa Nakate incident is part of many incidents in the past and present in which African and Africans are considered inconsequential to the global agenda.

To start with, African activists were fighting climate change and environmental degradation long before it was cool to do so. Let's start with the Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai.

In 1977, Ms. Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, an environmental non-governmental grassroots movement aimed at countering the deforestation that was threatening the means of livelihood of the agricultural population. The campaign encouraged women to plant trees in their local environments and to think ecologically. The Movement spread to other African countries and contributed to the planting of over thirty million trees. For these efforts Maathai was awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace", becoming the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize

Many young people in the developing world have been tackling the climate crisis for years but you've never heard of them. They aren't celebrities, their faces are not plastered on newspaper frontpages. They are doing their work quietly, passionately.

It's not the first time western media paint something as novel and daring just because a white person is behind it. Many European explorers were feted as 'firsts' to 'discover' this and that. It's almost insulting to say that John Hanning Speke for example 'discovered' River Nile, or that the two German missionaries, Johannes Rebmann and Ludwig Krapf, were the first people 'to see' The Kilimanjaro in 1848. I am certain thousands of Tanzanians had seen and been to that mountain before. Before John Speke renamed Lake Victoria after the British monarch, it was called Nalubaale. Where had it got that name from?

The challenges of youth activism

It is undeniable however that youth-led activism globally has birthed incredible policy and political changes. The Occupy Wall street movement was the launchpad to spotlight the greed of America's oligarchy and how it fuels income inequality. The youth vote powered Barack Obama to the U.S presidency. It's the young pupils of Soweto who confronted the racist apartheid regime in 1976 leading to a massacre that shocked the conscience of the world, turning the tide of the black liberation struggle in South Africa. The picture of 12-year-old Hector Pieterse dying in his sister's arms especially galvanised a nation.

The challenges these youth activities face are enormous.

Science of course is irrefutable: climate change is one of the greatest threats to human existence in the present age. But there is also a mass of anti-science deniers of the threat, and these, especially right-wingers, dismiss it (Most people

in Galileo's time also believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe and that the Sun and planets revolved around it, so this is to be expected)

Unfortunately in becoming a prominent activist that challenges the status quo, you have to develop a really thick skin to be able to brush off the meanness, the pettiness and outright hostility of those opposed to your message, especially since one of these young women's tactics is to shame governments for inaction, and deploy the highly emotional innocence of young adults, in pointing out, rightly, that their generation will bear the brunt of climate change effects. Greta herself has been mocked not only by the many invisible trolls on the internet, but also by the president of the United States and his Treasury Secretary who dismiss her work as childish, emotion-based 'scare mongering'.

The fact that Nakate said the AP incident was the 'worst thing to ever have happened to her' means that these young people obviously have yet to gain more experience and expand their worldview to be able to take on the criticism, skepticism and outright hate and even racism (as was in Nakate's case). To do this they need the support and guidance of more experienced experts and advisers. This is no ground to dismiss their efforts of course.



Most climate activists shown in the global media are western, mostly European young people

Africa's invisibility in the climate movement

Nakate's experience shows the need to question Africa's positioning in the global climate movement. Like she said in her tearful recollection of the racist incident against her, Africa is nowhere near the world's big polluters but bears the biggest brunt of the effects of carbon emissions. The continent only has 17% of the world's population but accounts for only 2–3 per cent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions from energy and industrial sources. According to the World Resources Institute, Africa's per capita emissions of carbon dioxide in the year 2000 were 0.8 metric tons per person, compared with a global figure of 3.9 tons per person. *Africa is therefore not a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions.*

Least Developed Countries, Small Island Developing States and Sub-Saharan Africa however are particularly most vulnerable to climate change:

- The estimated 75% of the cost of the climate crisis is in Global South, despite the fact that the poorest half of the world's population, mainly residing in these countries, are responsible for just 10% of historical carbon emissions
- Climate change poses potential threats to democracy, rule of law, political and civil rights (this is what happens when millions are migrating and nations panic)
- At 2° C of global warming, there are very significant changes in the occurrence and intensity of temperature extremes in all sub-Saharan regions.
- Extended droughts, shrinking land and water resources, intensified food insecurity, and heightened conflicts in nascent democracies all pose life-threatening challenges. .
- Increasing temperatures, particularly around the equator, affect the distribution of ecologically determined diseases, moving into currently more temperate areas, with already fragile and inadequate health systems.

Is there room therefore, for nuanced, context-specific arguments in the largely western-centric climate movement?

Many African countries for example as well others in the Global South are still in economic transition, many are still very poor and need energy to fuel industrialization and manufacturing. The sources of this energy can't be as 'clean' as the activists may want it to be. Few African countries, if any, can afford the cost of 'clean energy' that the movement is advocating for. We can't have enough solar-powered industries or trains. Hydroelectricity coverage is still very low and many households still live in the dark. So it seems inconsiderate to ask that we totally ignore fossil fuels. They are cheaper (albeit dirtier) sources of energy, attract foreign direct investment easily, and increase jobs.

Assuming a poor African country discovers large oil deposits

in a national park, deposits so large that were they to be exploited, they would double that country's GDP. Should this poor country not exploit this resource for the sake of a few elephants and trees?

For Africa, therefore, it would seem to me that climate change adaptation (coping with the effects of climate change) rather than mitigation (prevention) should be the focus right now. This means policy focus should be on minimizing as much as we can the impact of climate change on our lives, but we cannot be burdened with the same responsibility, as the west, to 'stop' climate change. Number one, mitigation, especially technology-led one, is very expensive and we really aren't the ones responsible for the warming planet. Yet only one fifth of climate financing go to adaptation, a recent OECD study found,

So, if you are building a global consensus on this issue, via the United Nations and other global bodies, shouldn't Africa be able to articulate these context-based nuances, and be heard? Only Africa-based activists like Nakate who understand this context are in the best position to make this case. Unfortunately, these are the same activists whose voices are being erased from the global conversations as the cropping of Nakate from the picture demonstrated.

Many young, privileged, European climate activists aren't in position to imagine these kinds of scenarios as articulately as Africans who live these realities daily.

Climate financing leaves Africa in the cold

The 2015 Paris Climate Agreement laid out a \$100 billion commitment to be focused on efforts by developed countries to mobilize funding for developing countries and is a key part of the grand bargain that underpins the Agreement. Five years down the road however developed countries are not taking their commitment to generate these funds seriously, a recent study revealed. For example,

- Of the US\$18.3 billion in total bilateral climate finance (mitigation and adaptation) in 2017, only 30% (US\$5.4 billion) was directed to Africa.
- France, Germany, Japan and the EU account for 66% of total climate finance relating to the \$100 billion commitment, meaning the rest of the developed world aren't paying their fair share.
- UNEP, the UN environmental agency estimates that US\$140 to US\$300 billion is required for climate adaptation alone by 2030
- Less than a third (27%) of total finance is dedicated to adaption to the most vulnerable countries.
- Loans, not grants, are a major modality for climate finance, particularly for mitigation, thereby increasing debt burdens for the poor and middle-income countries.

So as the figures above show, not only is Africa being erased from the conversation by ignoring voices of our young activists, but even in the most important part of the debate, that is, where the money should go, Africa is getting a raw deal.

This fits a pattern of rich, powerful countries paying lip service to concerns of weaker and poorer ones. From the UN Security composition (only 5 countries are 'permanent members, with sometimes life-and-death veto powers) to invading African countries with no recourse to its views (such is in Libya in 2011), Western powers continue to patronize Africa. Good on Nakate for standing up against this injustice.