Africa Phone Card: A New Space for Constructing Images of Africa

Andy Ofori-Birikorang

Department of Communication and Media Studies,University of Education, Winneba. P.O. Box 25, Winneba
*Email: andyobk@gmail.com/aobirikorang@uew.edu.gh

Abstract
Discourses on the negative reportage of Africa have been put at the doorstep of the mass media particularly, television, as well as newspapers, magazines, and films, These channels have figured prominently as the major sources of information about the continent. This paper explores another space that has emerged as a new medium for constructing ideas about Africa- *Africa phone cards*. The cards have become new spaces that produce enduring images about the continent and can be considered as new media text that also construct or define Africa. Through a combination of descriptive analysis of the images that appear on several of these sampled phone cards, interviews with some users of these phone cards, and references to existing literature on the portrayal of Africa in the media, the study reveals how the frameworks underlying dominant media constructions and reportage on Africa are transitioning into new realms. The study concludes that the popular visuals adorning the cards communicate tacit narrative assumptions that shape people's general conception and understanding of Africa.
Keywords; Africa, Africa phone card, stereotypes, media, western media, African arts and culture

Introduction
The image of Africa in the international mass media is yet to depart from the sublimated projection as a continent of abnormal events, one in need, of bizarre occurrences, of war and conflict, diseases, natural disasters, jungle, and of people who are foreign-aid dependent, living exotic and uncivilized lives (Ebo, 1992; Hyden et al, 2002; Hawk 1992; Scott 2007). Even when Africa seems somehow to benefit from western produced mass mediated images, they are mostly about wild animals in a game park, safari, and tourism with an alluring call to western indigenes to come and explore and exploit the exotic. Africa's post- independent era has spanned more than half a century and during this period, Africa, as part of colonial legacy, was supposed to have assimilated a culture that was based on western dispositions deeply engraved in neo-colonial tendencies, and idiosyncratic guise-the cultural symbols of development and modernization. For this long haul in the drag towards achieving the prize of modernity, Africa embraced the defining tags and labels and carried itself along the dictates of western tutelage seeking global integration and recognition devoid of the oft-deployed images of trivialization and marginalization. Despite the continent's seeming integration into the global arena of modernity, access to information through diverse and diffused forms of media outlets, socio- cultural progress, and a paradigmatic shift in development agenda, the continent continues to complain against the negative and distorting images that inundate the pages and spaces of the western media. It has been suggested that, media representations about the continent that are mainly projected through news coverage reveal ethnocentric perspectives that unveil a reflection of western attitudes towards Africa (Brookes, 1995; Ogundimu, 1994). Africans, especially the intellectual and academic community both within the continent and in the Diaspora persistently contend that little has changed in terms of the negative reportage of the "hardened images" produced by western media about the continent since the last half century. They argue that the media distort, misinform, and subvert the actual representations about the continent to the extent of sensationalizing and exaggerating real events (Crawford, 1996; Hagos, 2000; Kanneh, 1998; Ogundimu, 1994). The typified images of Africa in the international and western media, as a place of doom, grief, poverty, backwardness, primitivism, are deeply rooted perceptions have been engraved in the minds of audiences in the global media landscape. Indeed the pervasive impact of this kind of coverage has been researched and proven factual in several studies (Alozie; 2007; Biko et al, 2000; Brookes, 1995; Hawk, 1992)

However, for so long discourses on the negative reportage of Africa have been put at the doorsteps of the mass media, especially television and other forms of media such as newspapers, magazines, videos, and films (Abah, 2009; DFID, 2002; Scott, 2007). Television and cinematographic media assume the lead as the major sources of information in the portrayal of images about Africa. First, both television and cinema can within a transient moment transmit to their audiences multiple and diverse representations about reality. Second, as important communication media television and cinema have the capacity to present transcendent narratives through the use of dramatic visual images. In addition to television and the cinema, other forms of media such as video, and photographs through the same display of graphics and visuals, convey tacit narrative assumptions and presuppositions about real events. However, for Africa the appropriation of these dramatic visuals by the western media has so far been very pejorative to its interests.

In the discourse on the coverage of Africa in the international and other local media, television, newspapers and magazines, films, videos, and documentaries, have acted as the dominant spaces through which Africa's negative images have been produced and defined. However, the dawn of globalization, international trans-geographical migratory trends, global deployment of media technology, diffusion of the internet around the globe, and the cumulative impact of the new media on citizens' participation in political, cultural and social activities and discourses is changing the face of mass communication. For Africa, an outcome of the phenomenon of the new media, and its consequential generative spaces, is the lush, fresh and converted attention to new texts and media productions from within and without the continent. The way people interact with each other, and the spaces that are created for the direction of such interpersonal discourses are the subject and product of new cultural and media productions (Williams, 2003).   These new cultural and media productions and their procreant characteristics have led to the emergence of new media spaces for the construction of the image of Africa to the international audiences. One such space that has emerged in the western world as a new medium for constructing ideas about continent is the *Africa phone card* phenomenon.

Imagining Africa: The emerging space
According to the Terrazas (2009), about 1.4 million Africans immigrants live in the United States. Many of these immigrants who now find themselves at the forefront of economic opportunities in the United States still consider themselves as part of the larger traditional African family structure back home on the continent even though many of these immigrants, for political and economic reasons, have divested themselves of the right to the 'African citizenship' by taking up citizenship in their new host country. The imperative of the African kinship and bondage require the *Diasporic* 'siblings' to play important cultural roles in maintaining and sustaining social relations, and promoting family cohesion for the larger family members in Africa. The phenomena of distance and painful separation from kinsmen are assuaged, on the part of the immigrant, the responsibility of ensuring traditional and cultural committal toward promoting family maintenance, sustenance, and cohesion through diverse communication links with those at home. One such diverse means of keeping up the link with continental kinsmen is by regularly making phone calls through the use of specially designed *phone cards*. These phone cards designated *Africa phone cards* are mostly used by African immigrants in the United States to make long distance and international calls to their friends, loved ones, family and relations in Africa. Most of the phone cards have visuals and graphics on them that are supposed to reflect the African identity and image. First, for the predominant African users of this card, there is a presumptive desire for the card as it acts as a bridge that facilitates regular communication with family members in the continent. Second, for the producers of these cards, the overt presumption is that users are also expected to make some kind of cultural connection to the images on the cards as a way of persuading them to purchase or use them for their international calls. The iconographic effect of the images on the phone cards, on the surface, is supposed to create an identity connection with the continent. However, the Africa phone card stand in isolation from all the other cards sold to other immigrant patrons (Latino, Asian) by the commercial telephony industry in the USA because of the symbolic evocative nature of their images. The phone cards have therefore emerged as new spaces that produce enduring images about the continent, and can be considered as new media text that (re)construct or redefine Africa.

As a researcher of media arts and studies, the subject is of utmost relevance. First as an African, the images that appear in the western media in general are very relevant to my identity and the way I am perceived by others outside of the continent. Second, as an African with a formerly non-immigrant residential status in the USA, I, on many occasions, had used these phone cards and became one of several people for whom the images on the cards had an unfaltering appeal. Therefore, in this study I intend to step beyond the mainstream media texts in which discourses on Africa's image have been situated perennially. I contend that, like any cultural iconography, these popular visuals that appear on the phone cards communicate tacit narrative assumptions that shape people's general conception and understanding about Africa. Therefore, through a combination of descriptive analyses of the images that appear on several of these sampled calling cards; interviews with some users of these calling cards, and references to existing literature on the portrayal of Africa in the media, I intend to show how the findings of this study add to the frameworks on the theory underlying dominant media constructions and reportage on Africa.

 In examining this phenomenon, this qualitative study will focus on these issues: What kind of the images do these phone cards depict? To what extent do the images reinforce African stereotype images? Conversely, how do the images redefine or reconstruct images about Africa? What symbolic meaning do (or can) these images or visuals communicate about the continent? Finally, how do audiences (the African users) perceive or interact with the visuals on the phone cards?

Africa in international media
According to Harding (2003), one of the ways through which information about others gets to us is through the media rather than interpersonal links. When we want to construct in our minds the images of other places to

which we have no direct contact, we rely on any available visuals, especially those produced by the media. In his seminal work on public opinion, Lippman, (1922) postulated that the pictures we carry in our minds shape our perception of the world before us. Some of the ways by which this is done is through photography and motion picture on screens in the form of cinematography. In order to provide meaning and understanding to the unfolding strips of events and make sense of the issues that unfold, the media present the images in forms that allow audiences to invoke the polysemic nature of text in the attempt to decode the contextual meanings of such texts(Gamson and Mogliani, 1987; Harding, 2004).

Ever since Africa was put on the international media map, photography, cinematography, modern videos, and the internet per *you tube i-report* and in-vogue social media applications have become the definitive elements that conjure Africa's image in the minds of external audiences and preceptors. These methods of relaying images about the continent to external audiences have become very powerful because they are the major channel media by which external audiences and preceptors identify and interpret stories and events in relation to the day to day social activities and cultural productions about the continent.

Several other studies have been done on the portrayal of Africa in the international media (Brookes, 1995; Crawford, 1996; Hagos, 2000; Hawk, 1992; Magombe, 2006). These images of Africa in the international media have in their quantitative presentation and qualitative interpretation depicted nothing but bad news and negativity that reify the stereotypical representation of the continent to international audiences (Mengara, 2001; Scott 2007; Quist-Adade, 2005). Sometimes, the kinds of images that are presented are nothing but the details of unimaginable conflict, horror, disease, hunger, and sufferings (Hagos, 2000; Zeleza, 2000). Hafez (2000) asserts that images of Africa in the western media consist of nothing but "stereotypes and non- integrated facts" (p.30). It is sometimes assumed that this kind of image presentation tend to reflect a desire to look away from Africa's tragedies to help facilitate its marginalization (Crawford, 1996; Hawk, 1992). The pervasive impact of this kind of coverage typified in the representation of Africa in the international and western media as a place of doom, grief, poverty, backwardness, primitivism, jungle life, lacking history and culture have become deeply rooted in perceptions of audiences about Africa (Alozie, 2007; Biko et al, 2000; Brookes, 1995; Hawk, 1992).

Scott (2009) also sought to fill another void in the research on the coverage of Africa. The research agenda, first, was occasioned by the fact that while enough studies, according to him, abound to show that the press in the United Kingdom have always played momentous role in defining and influencing citizens voting behavior, political preferences and differences, political agenda, no such studies exist to show how the same press define and influence UK citizens perception of the wider world, especially Africa. The second research imperative was the need for a regular research update on whether the portrayal of Africa and the developing world in the international press and media continues to be projected in distorted forms to the point of inducing disjointed and stereotypical perceptions in the minds of audiences. This was because Scott (2009) and others (Harrison & Palmer, 1986; Moeller, 1999; Robinson, 1999) share the opinion that the media's role and influence are key determinants in the way in which citizens come to appreciate and understand event in the wider international arena. Using content and framing analyses woven around analysis of linguistic cues in texts of sampled newspapers as the tools of investigation, Scott concluded that UK coverage of Africa was "as marginalized, negative or trivial, as is often accused of being;…" (2009: 534).

Documentaries have had their part in constructing images about Africa in the minds of audiences. In the fall of 1999, Henry Louis Gates Jr., a Harvard African- American professor, premiered on PBS television a six-part documentary titled "*Wonders of the African World*" that provoked a lot of debate and controversy among African intellectuals and African community (Zeleza, 2003). This debate centered on the arguable position held by some critics that the narrative and images that became the product of the documentary, rather than projecting African "wonders" in positive terms, further reinforced the stereotype images that is held about the continent. Two other documentaries about Africa shown on western television networks, *Out of Africa (1999)*, and *Africa unmasked (2000),* whose images were riddled with display of wanton brutality by real African characters rather than helping to initiate an international interventionist mechanism to end such brutalities incensed the perpetuation of negative portrayal about Africa.

Traore, (2003) investigated the negative African image phenomenon as an interventionist method of providing African-American students with a more positive image about Africa and to make them make a more "cognitive connection between Africa and America" (p. 244). During the study, she learned that hostile relationships that existed between African immigrants and their American counterparts was the outcome of misperceptions, misconceptions, and the presentation of negative images about Africa to students by school staff, students' own families, and the media. The result of the study showed that apart from the mass media, western-oriented negative portrayals about the continent can emanate from other realms such school and family levels.

Harding (2003) studied the different ways through which the media produces and presents visual images about Africa arguing that images of Africa on television are highly dependent on the development of technology, access to the technology and the ideology and ethos that inform its usage. According to him, the use of three major different technologies, film, video- movies, and television to present images about Africa can

produce similar or different effects on audiences depending on who has access to it or controls it. He illustrated that some of the modern technology like the popular video-movies depict negative images about Africa because they rely on images of violence and the supernatural as their narrative thread. This position is supported by Okwori, (2003), who asserts that the representation of ritual and violence in the form of human sacrifices in Nigerian video movies present negative images about Africa because the movies sustains the belief that African rituals and violence are a quick and easy means to affluence. However, Harding's study made a departure from the mainstream when he studied the B*ig Brother Africa* program produced in the UK, and concluded that the images it presented idealized Africa and did not stereotype it. The study also concluded that film, video, and television when properly appropriated by the media could help displace the present image of war, poverty and violence that still dominate the screens about Africa.

        Ogundimu (1994) researched on the images of Africa on US television and audiences perspectives on such portrayals. The study revealed that audiences shared the notion that television coverage about Africa in the western media was negative, lack depth in coverage, and was voyeuristic. His research was grounded on the theory that both senders and receivers of messages collaborate in constructing the reality. Thus, any interpretation ascribed to images on television by the audiences could be poles apart from the actual media representation intended by the producers of the images. His conclusion was that because of audience's role in the construction of meaning attached to images, existent images in the minds of the public is consequential to media attempts to position themselves as credible sources of information. Therefore, the way audiences interpret the meaning of the images they see about Africa may not necessarily be based on the meaning a particular media text intended. The interpretation could be a resultant of audiences own "idiosyncratic frameworks for contextualizing Africa" (p.8). Within the discourse direction on Africa' portrayal in the international and global media landscape, new forms of constructing fresh positive images about the continent are evolving.

        Reta (2000) discovered that in the period leading to a new South Africa in 1994, the international media led by the United States displayed a friendlier attitude towards Africa by projecting a favorable image of South Africa. The research found that the frame used in the portrayals favored and encouraged negotiation and reconciliation. The research proved that the international western media may not always be guilty of giving negative coverage about the continent. Scott (2009) also sought to fill another void in the research on the coverage of Africa. The research agenda, first, was occasioned by the assumption that while enough studies, according to him, abound to show that the press in the United Kingdom have always played momentous role in defining and influencing citizens voting behavior, political preferences and differences, and political agenda, no such studies exist to show how the same press define and influence UK citizens perception of the wider world, especially Africa. The second research imperative was the need for a regular research update on whether the portrayal of Africa and the developing world in the international press and media continues to be projected in distorted forms to the point of inducing disjointed and stereotypical perceptions in the minds of audiences. Scott (2009) and others (Harrison and Palmer, 1986; Moeller, 1999; Robinson, 1999) share the opinion that since the media's role and influence are key determinants in the way in which citizens come to appreciate and understand events in the wider international arena, any research imperative that gravitates towards such goal must be of interest to media discourses on representation. Using content and framing analyses woven round a linguistic cues as tools of his investigation, Scott concluded that the UK coverage of Africa was "not as marginalized, negative or trivial, as is often accused of being" (2009: 534).

        The above diverse research on the images of Africa in the western media shows that even though a large body of the literature on the continent's image perceptions and conceptions in the western media has focused on negative portrayals, much of the research has been on the dominant media spaces including television, film, videos and the print. Furthermore, there is ample evidence to show that other media texts and products have been more positive that traditionally envisaged.

        However, new cultural and media production in Diasporic environments have facilitated a gradual flow of such portrayals to newer locations and diverse media spaces lying beneath the rubble of the mainstream media. The imperative is now to locate these hidden media spaces, unearth them, understand the theoretical constructions that underpin their emergence and sustenance, the discursive practices that have allowed cultural products in the new spaces to blossom , and how media constructions in the new arenas reify or subvert the traditional notions about Africa .

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach for because it supports the interpretive theory that "knowledge of social realities emerge from the interdependence of human actions, motive, and feeling. The interpretive theoretical approach also illuminates how cultural symbols and systems are used to attribute meaning and activity" (Cheney, 2000 as cited by Lindlof & Taylor, 2002: 11). The phenomenon being researched- images on *African phone cards* deals with visuals and symbols whose interpretations depend on human "actions, motive and feeling".

        Data collection was done over a period of 13 weeks between February 10, 2009 and May 15, 2009. The

first part of data collection that dealt with gathering the cards was done in two ways: First, most of the sampled cards were purchased from two different African oriental shops in Columbus, Ohio- the *Medina African Market,* and *Keneshie Market*. Both shops sold almost all the varieties of African phone cards advertised by the telephony industry. These shops were selected for strategic reasons. The *Medina African Market* is highly patronized by Francophone African immigrants because it sells merchandise with French-Africa orientations. The owners of this shop, as I later came to know, are immigrants from Senegal. The African identity-link of the shop was not only symbolized in the ownership and patronage but also in the languages that were spoken within the premises of the shops. I identified Wolof, French and English as the media of communication within the shop. On the other hand the *Keneshie Market* is mostly patronized by immigrants of Anglophone African origin and likewise sells wares of Anglo-Africa orientations. The owners are from Ghana and the multilingual cue that epitomized its African essence is located in the use of Akan (the dominant medium of communication and the language of commerce in Ghana; pidgin English (mostly spoken by Nigerians but used in almost all the West African Anglophone countries); and English. I must state that this Afro-trendy multi-lingua medium of communication within the premises of these oriental shops have become the very pulse upon which their African identity-link is constructed.

Second, some of the cards were collected from what Clark et al (2005) refer to as "researchers' acquaintances and friendship networks" (p. 413) who were aware of my research or whom I had informed to archive their used cards for me. Even though some of the cards could be accessed online, their poor picture quality prevented me from using this medium to collect this portion of the data. All the cards that were selected had the inscription *Africa* on them (See next page for sampled collection of cards)

The collection brought together 86 phone cards. All the cards had the *Africa* inscription on them. These were taken through thematic sorting that brought the number down to a significantly relevant 57. The sorting was based on image duplicity on more

Figure 1: A collection of African phone cards sampled for the study

than a single card, the presence or absence on the cards of any linguistic cue that related to Africa, and descriptive images on the cards. Each card was given a brief description based on the image/visuals that

appeared on them. To ease an analysis of the visuals, a table was constructed to label the cards under categories of *Card name*, and *Description of Graphics/ Portraits*. Based on the images or visuals, the cards were further categorized into themes. Three majors themes emerged: *humanity, jungle, and arts and culture.* These were later analyzed for their real and symbolic meaning in relation to the general pattern or trend on media representation about Africa.

The second part of data collection involved interviews with some informants who were users of the *Africa phone cards*. Using the phenomenological approach for this strategy of data collection, my agenda was to unpack the lived experiences of my informants in their interactions with these phone cards, and procure their narratives on this routine African immigrants' popular cultural practice of purchasing Africa phones to call kinsmen back home. In essence, the research design's incorporation of the individuals' perspective on the cards, and the interpretive positions that they adopt toward the phenomenon allowed me to "toy with different perspective to it, and that one is open to new insights about everyday reality" (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 375).

African students with non-immigrant status from Ohio University identified as huge patrons of the Africa phone cards were interviewed in-depth to solicit their perceptions on the visual cues and images engraved the cards. Each interview lasted between 25 to 35 minutes. I employed open-ended questions to allow informants to tell their own stories and describe in detail their perceptions about the card. Even though most of my informants were acquainted with cards and the accompanying images that enface them, others [the informants] also acknowledged their lack of knowledge and appreciation of the diverse assortment that populate the market. Each informant was shown several of the cards I had collected to allow them to provide informed responses to my questions. This aspect of research approach and data collection was also to inquire whether audiences and patrons of these cards construct their own meaning about the images and representations on the cards. It was also to acknowledge the position that in every culture or routine cultural practice "some of its most significant features are subtle, taken for granted and enacted in everyday routines" (Altheidi, 1996, p. 1). This approach was in support of the assertion that in qualitative study the producer of message and the receivers all collaborate in constructing reality (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Finally, based on the card categories, thematic labels, and the interviews conducted, an in-depth analysis of the data was done. This was conducted by giving interpretations to the visuals on the phone cards and linking them to the data collected from the interviews. The interpretive garb I wore in conducting the analysis was of the subjective material. Like any other textual or document analysis cast in the qualitative mode, "the critical emphasis is on trying to unravel the author's [the producers] assumptions, motives, and intended consequences" (Altheidi, 1996, p. 7). The rationale behind this mechanism is that the problem of interpretations of images is critical to deciphering meaning in their representational forms (O'Barr, 1994). Interpretations were also done with references to existing literature on African images in western media since meanings attached to images do not exist in vacuum but are part of large flow of ideas that have gone before them.

Findings and Discussion

In the representations of images or visuals that appear on the *Africa phone cards*, many audiences will recognize the images of wild animals, particular cultural arrays (arts and culture), flags, hunters, and forests scenes that are vigorously associated with the African continent. Therefore to a reader or anyone trying to put an interpretive garb on them, the images must be seen as visual signifiers that could be assigned particular contextualization because images, in reality and symbolically, have social referents. Flowing from this, I argue that the images that appear on the phone cards can also be seen as artistic forms and like any iconographic phenomenon a distinction could be made between the primary and natural meaning conveyed by that image or artistic form and the secondary or appropriated meaning carried by the visual signifiers (Galaty, 2002; Panofsky, 1955). Therefore the analyses that follow will proceed on the basis that while these images may have their natural meanings and connotations to which any piece of interpretations could be assigned, other secondary meanings that have developed as a result of symbolic, cultural or historical associations, discursive practices and intercultural communication could also appropriated for epistemological and ontological understanding of the subject.

As stated earlier, the three core thematic categories that recur on the cards include: *Humanizing Africa*; *Jungle Africa*; and, *Arts and Culture Africa*.

Jungle Africa: *African jungle, African Safari*

The depiction of animals takes greater space on a large number of the cards that were studied. 27 out of the 57 cards representing about 47% of cumulative spaces of the cards sampled for the study had images of animals on them. Animal images that appear include; elephants: depicted variously as grazing in their natural habitat, resting under the evening sunset, or grazing together with other animals in the wild; lions: shown in close-up shots, sometime with head haloed by portrait of Africa, always alone or, overlooking Africa as if being protective of the continent; leopard: depicted like that of lions, alone and resting, or as depicted in one visual, sprinting in the

typical preying manner. There are also giraffes: always depicted with their long head and bodies; buffaloes: shown in shadowy form and at the background with portraits of primitive looking African men at the foreground of the card (probably hunters); and zebras: whose portraits are normally shown in the form of their black and white stripes or with other animals.

Whilst a lot of the animal portraits stand alone, in others there is a coupling of these with human portraits. The presence of animals on the cards conjures the traditional images engraved in the minds of western audience about the continent. From thses images one can visualize Africa as the jungle, where wild animals roam and prey on their victims (Brookes, 1995; Crawford, 1996; Hagos, 2000; Hawk1992; Magombe, 2006; Scott, 2009). In several discourses that deal with the western media's portrayal of Africa in stereotype etched and enacted (Galaty, 2002; Mengara, 2001; Ogundimu, 1994; Traore, 2003; Quist-Adade 2005). Thus, anyone familiar with this pattern of portrayal will agree that the category of animal graphics that endorse the cards is in consonance with what they [audiences] see, know, and read about Africa. This to them, is therefore, the reality. Some of the informants interviewed agreed that the images of the animals stereotyped Africa. One informant had this to say about the cards:

> I find it very, very appalling. The phone cards have tourist kind of animals such as lions, the leopards, and the elephants and a lot of people know that Africa is all about animals, Africa is a tourist place, Africa is a playground, Africa is a place where you can just go and see the animals and everything and therefore it doesn't have any significance to the west.

Thus, to this informant the representation of animals was a call to visit Africa's jungle because it stereotyped it as playground that was on no "significance to the west". Her view finds support in the statement of a second informant, who said,

> Even if those who produced the images of animals on the cards think about a different thing, the fact is that everybody sees Africa as a continent where lions and elephants and zebras roam. To me, the picture of animals on the card stereotyped Africa.

The perceptions about the cards reinforced by informants in other forms, flows into the conventional view captured in many media discourse that stereotype Africa. From the perspective of this group of informants who I classify as critics of this pattern of image depiction, three- perspectives emerged. First, that that the visuals seem to glorify, reify and celebrate the cementation of the continent's subjectivity to stereotype by the dominant mainstream media; Second, that the continent is populated with wild animals that cavort with the African personhood on ritually regular basis; and third, that the regency of this category of cards reinforce existent idea that through these visual images positioned strategically manipulatively, Africa can be visualized and conceptualized adequately by external audiences. The issue of the jungle-like depiction of the continent was interpreted in differently by another group of informants. One of such interviewee presented her perspective contrastively,

> The animals that are found may be symbolizing the wild life of Africa and may be advertising the tourism aspect of Africa. The important thing that comes into my mind is even if they have animals on it, it is a fact that I make some cultural connections, which I'm proud of because it shows that Africa's wild life is till intact and we can call others to come and see.

This informant plays into the reality aspect of interpretation and believes that the voyeuristic aspect of the card and the call to visit Africa's safari is very positive for the continent. When asked whether the presence of the animal images did not stereotype Africa, he responded,

> I think these images are very representative about Africa, unlike many of the   images we see on TV and movie that talk about famine, diseases and other things, these images are portraying the positive part, for example the zebraadvertises our game reserves

This informant, like others, views the animal as a call for tourist to gaze into some of the most spectacular game parks and the unusual herd of wild animals in the continent. This perception shows that people's construction of the meaning of animal images on the cards is very diverse. One thing came out clear. Nobody doubted the inadequacy of the images to evoke conceptions about Africa, because to the informants, the images, whether as realities or stereotypes, represent the fullness of what they chose to represent.

There are also symbolic construction that can be made about the animal images by examining the types of animals that are depicted on the cards and their cultural significance to several African communities. This cultural consideration cannot be fully explored by this study but its relevance to meaning making is very significant to the subject.

First, some of animals that are depicted, at least five of them, are known all over Africa as the 'Big Five'. The big five include the elephant, the lion, the leopard, the buffalo, and the rhinoceros. Construction of meaning based on their legendary symbolic roles evokes images of strength, power, protectiveness, resilience, and pride to the continent. Africans are also proud of their culture and one can argue that these animals are part of the cultural heritage of Africa. Loon (2006) of *Kruger Park Times* constructs this symbolic and cultural significance of the lion and the leopard,

> For example *ingonyama*, the Zulu word for lion means 'the master of all flesh'. This name consists of two words, *ngo*, meaning very high, and *nyama*, which means 'flesh' or power. Another Zulu term for lion is *ibubesi*, which comes from the verb *bhubeza* meaning 'to make the final decision', supporting the belief that the lion is king of the beasts. In Tsonga, '*ku va nghala'*, 'to be a lion' refers   to being brave and '*ku lwa xinghala'* translates 'to fight like a lion'.

The linguistic connotation underlines the discursive and polysemic nature of texts, and the social constructivist perspective of meaning making. The cultural significance of these animals to several African ethnic groups is also seen in Loon's statement about the leopard,

> All African tribes [ethnic groups] regard the leopard as an animal that symbolizes all that is noble, courageous and honorable. It is called *ingwe* by the Zulus and *nkwe* by the Basutos. These words originally meant 'pure sovereignty' or 'pure kingship'. In very ancient times, a king who supposedly ruled over other kings   among the Botswana tribes was called *nkwetona*- 'the sovereign leopard'.

Therefore, to interpret the images as symbolic of Africa's royalty, bravery, power and strength will be justifiably appropriate. However, it must be noted that the same animals could also signify danger, killers, aggressors and subjects ready to prey on their victims.

Humanizing Africa
The second group of thematic category has been grouped under people and human beings. However, only about 15 representing 26% the cumulative spaces of the sampled cards have either stand-alone image of people on them or, are put in collocation with animals. Leading the display of humanism is the *Nelson Mandela Children's Fund Africa* which has the portrait of Mandela with a child oh his lap. At the background of the Mandela's silhouette, are a line of children with hands held together. The other cards that humanize Africa have the following images: a Massai girl from Kenya in traditional costume; a man in traditional dress; the face of a child in close-sup shot; human shadows wielding spears; and a choreography of African dancers. One card that can be regarded as humanizing, displays an image behind a soccer ball evoking recollections of the game of passion that arguable unites the continent.

The ambivalence of meaning that can be inferred from the images of people on the cards is revealed from two different informant perspectives. The first informant, who had never imagined that these cards could, in their diverse nature, capture the derogatory historical slavery narratives on them, actually got livid when a card with the image of a man on one of the phone card was displayed. It had the inscription *Kunta Kinte.* My informant was astonished that such a name could be used for the card. She stated,

> Researcher (R): What I found very appalling is the use of the name Kunta Kinte on one of the
> cards and you know what Kunta Kinte means, right?
> Informant (I): What does Kunta Kinte mean?
> R: Kunta Kinte is the slave from the movie *Roots*. I don't understand the significance of a slave name on a phone card but I thought it is interesting. And I pick this one because when Kunta Kinte was shown as movie a lot of black people in America, especially those from Africa were called Kunta Kinte which is a history, that embodies oppression and I find it quite intriguing that symbols of oppression, racism can be to marketed to us African through the form of phone cards the cards. For me, Kunta Kinte symbolizes slavery and colonialism. I never imagine I will see it on a phone card. It's so appalling.

It is quite obvious that this informant's view of the image of *Kunta Kinte* on the card resonates with the mainstream critique leveled against several media texts on their n their negative portrayal of Africa. But she brings into context how issues of slavery and colonialism can be used in subtler forms to portray Africa.

The issue of race, class, and representation in mainstream media especially, television, film, documentary, print and online spaces have been copiously researched (Ahmed, 1999; Gabriel, 1998; Gates, 2004; Fuller, 2010; Stadier, 2011; Kanneh, 1998; Mbembe, 20012; Stam, 1983; Quist-Adade, 2005). The possibility of according visuals with African connotation some of kind of racial subjectification has always remained a plausible outcome in media representation on Africa. Such discourses about Africa, whether appearing in the minds of western media practitioners and audiences as conscious effort derived from discursively reinforced perspective about the continent, or whether constructed reflexively to hold in abeyance the pejorative binary canker of the black/white, superior/inferior, Caucasian/Other   dichotomies, ancillary interpretations that underline meaning making have always ensured that the issue of color, class, slavery, and colonialism, always emerge, flow, or gravitate toward the unintended location- *it is all about race*. Many African intellectuals in the Diaspora and other conscientized consumers of media products on Africa will agree with Staedler (2011) that, in the same vein that "the mechanisms of cinematic identification amount to political tool that can subtly articulate colonial discourse about race and colonialism" (p. 162) so can such hidden media spaces, once explored, facilitate similar discoursed interpretations on "race and colonialism."

Another informant described the presence of Mandela on the card as very informative as he is an icon of Africa's leadership in the international arena and therefore Africa's pride:

You think of Mandela and may be they are thinking about his world standing.
We can be proud of him and his giant leadership posture in the world which other are called upon to emulate.

It is apparent that different perspectives greet the humanist aspect of the phone cards. For example, whilst the image of Kunta Kinte has been contextually captured by one of my informants in term of its very derogatory signification linking it to slavery, the image of Mandela and the child is meant to seek fund for Africa children, many of whom have been orphaned by poverty and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This conveys Africa's image as a beggarly continent that is in need. It also reinforces the notion that Africa's salvation must always come from philanthropic sympathetic western donors. The irony is that purchasers of this card, mostly of African origin are being urged to be part of this philanthropic gesture. Yet while acknowledging the symbolic philanthropic nature of this identified image, there is an interpretive converse -*come let's fleece* Africa. 'Come lets fleece Africa' connotes that oft-held notion that some western apparatchiks under the guise of 'save Africa' cloak solicit funds from diverse sources to shore or fill-up their own private monetary reserves or utilize such funds for other purposes rather than 'helping' Africa. It is a new form of extortion disguised as philanthropic gesture.

Another issue that comes up is the manner some of the humanist images are collocated with animals. Of course, if the coupling of these images had been with domestic friendly and supportive pet animals like cats, dogs, birds and others one would have found it quite acceptable. Rather what we have is a collocation people with animals that are known to be wild and dangerous to humankind. By creating a kind of romantic stitching between the two images, a sublime seam of association is sewn between African people as herders of wildlife, and animals as the predators they have to kill. This is illustrated on one the cards that depicts human shadows bearing spears as if ready to hunt down the predators. This kind of coupling, in the words of Traore (2003), still evince Africa in 'the pejorative characteristics as jungle, bunny, and heathen" (p.244).

Arts and culture Africa: Symbols of freedom, cultural pride
The last category of images has been grouped under flags, arts and culture. The various images include a choreography of dancers; African wood masks; graphics that allude to the cartoon movie" Lion King" seen on the *Hakuna Matata card*; and, flags of some African countries.

If there is any image that covertly projects some sense of positivity about the continent, it is these visuals. First, several Africans take pride in the recognition of their national flags as symbol of freedom, and independence. Therefore, the presence of these images can be construed as selling Africa as a continent of freedom, a land of free people. Again, audiences or users of these cards can identify easily with the flags as a product that gives them some sense of positive national and cultural connections. The use of African wood mask is also quite symbolic as it conjures the pride, the potential, and beauty of African art. In the United States Africans have under several promotional packages and forums tried to market their culture and arts through the sale and exhibition of these kinds of art work. Furthermore, the dance performances as an art form are also very much in vogue in the United States. Thus, rather than stereotyping Africa, the arts and culture visuals showcase aspects of the history and culture of Africa, promote the positive side of continent and subvert the existing negative images that have always characterized the continent. The arts and culture images can be very effective in promoting collaborative business and academic links between Africa and the western world. Again, this can signify a solid foundation for African immigrants to appropriate for the promotion of Afrocentric views about the continent.

Significantly none of the informants interviewed made any reference to these positive evocative images. I infer that the regular and constant sight of the negative images in the mainstream western media has blurred perceptions on the few positive images that linger on a few isolated spaces. This can be supported with Walter Lippman's (1922) postulation that the pictures we carry in our minds shape our perception of the world before us.

A significantly remarkable discovery about the study is that despite their awareness of the dominant negative images on these phone cards, African immigrants in the United States heavily continue to patronize the 'perjuring' *Africa Phone Card*. One of my informants remarked "it's all about economics and value for money."

Conclusion
This study set out to investigate the emergence of the phenomenon of *African Phone Card* as new spaces for the construction of images about the African continent. The outcome of the study, synthesized out of the data collected shows, first, that most of the images that appear on the cards, in their real and symbolic terms, portray Africa in negative forms. Secondly, that the African immigrant patrons of the cards in the United States are not oblivious of the images and visuals of the new space that defines and constructs Africa. The analysis of the data showed, however, that despite the recognition of the prevalence of the mostly diverse but stereotypical visuals that seemingly continue to reinforce the stereotype conceptions about the continent, several African immigrants' patronage of the cards has continued unabated. Thirdly, that some patrons appropriating the interpretive

approach towards meaning making have adopted an oppositional reading perspective to decoding these visuals as creative channels to challenge and transform the conventional and objectionable yet enduring symbolic connotations of the visuals. From such transformative perspective, some of the images and visuals including those that depict symbols of resistance and freedom, flags, various art works and artifacts, and cultural icons that are emerging in this new space are being explored to subvert and deconstruct the negative frames that mostly have characterized the portrayal of the African continent in mainstream media.

References

Ahmed, S. (1999). She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a Nigger: Passing through Hybridity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2):87–106.

Alasuutari, P. (1996).Theorizing in qualitative research: A cultural studies perspective. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*, 371-384.

Alozie, E. (2007). "What Did They Say? African Media Coverage of the First 100 Days of the Rwanda Crisis" pp. 211–31 in A. Thompson (ed.) *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto Press.

Apraku, K. K. (1991). *African Émigrés in the United States*, New York: Praeger Publishers.

Biko, H., Gore, K., and Watson, H. (2000). *Press Coverage of Africa*. Washington: TransAfrica Forum.

Brookes, H. (1995). Suit, Tie and a Touch of Juju – The Ideological Construction of Africa: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News on Africa in the British Press.*Discourse & Society, 6(4), p.* 461–94.

Clark, L. S., Demont-Henrich, C., and Weber, S. (2005). Parents ICTs, and Children's prospects for success: interviews along the digital "Access Rainbow". *Critical studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 22. No5, December, pp.409-426.

Crawford N. (1996). *Imag(in)ing Africa*. Sage Social science collections

DFID (2000). *Viewing the World: A Study of British Television Coverage of Developing Countries*. London: DFID.

Ebo, B. (1992). American Media and African Culture, pp. 15–25. In B. Hawk (ed.) *Africa's Media Image*. New York: Praeger.

Harrison, P. and Palmer, R. (1986). *News Out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid*. London: Hillary Shipman.

Hafez, K. (ed). (2000). *Islam and the West in the Mass Media: the fragmented images in globalizing world.* Cresskill: Hampton Press Inc.

Galaty, J.G. (2002). How visual figures speak: narrative inventions of "The pastoralist" in East Africa. *Visual Anthropolog*y, *Vol.15*, pp. 347-367.

Gamson, W. A., and Modigliani, A. (1987). The changing culture of affirmative action. In R.G. Baungart & M. M. Barungart (eds), *Research in political sociology, Vol.3* pp. 137-177. Greenwich, Ct: JAI Press.

Gates, P. (2004). Always a Partner in Crime: Black Masculinity in the Hollywood Detective Film. *Journal of Popular Film and Television, 32(1),* 20–30.

Hagos, A. (2000) *Hardened images: the western media and marginalization of Africa*. New Jersey; Africa's World Press, Inc.

Harding, F. (2003). Africa and the moving image; television, film and video. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 69-84.

Hawk, B. (ed). (1992). *Africa's media image*. New York: Praeger.

Hawk, B. (2002). "African politics and American reporting" In *Media and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Hyden et al., New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Hyden G., Leslie M., and Ogundinmu F.F., (ed). (2002). *Media and democracy in Africa*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Kanneh, K. (1998). *African identities: Race, nation, and culture in ethnography, Pan-Africanism, and Black Literatures*. London: Routledge

Loon, R. (2006). King of the beast; the noble leopard. *Kruger Park Times*. Retrieved March 10, 2006 from: http://www.kruger2canyons.com/what's_in_an_animals_name.htm

Lindlof, T. R, and Taylor, B.C. (2002). *Qualitative research methods.* Sage Publications, Inc.

Lippman , W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York Press.

Magombe, V. (2006). 'Africa Lives on the BBC-watershed or blip? *Global Journal of Communication, 2*, 119.

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. Los Angeles: University of California Press

Mengara, D. M. (Ed), (2001). *Images of Africa: stereotypes and realities.* Africa World Press, Inc.

O' Barr, W. M. (1994). *Culture and the ad: exploring otherness in the world of advertising*. West view Press, Inc.

Ogundimu, F. (1994). Images of Africa on US television; do you have problems with that? *Journal of Opinion,* Vol. 22, No. 1, pp.7-11.

Okwori, J. Z. (2003). A dramatized society: representing rituals of human sacrifice as efficacious action in Nigerian home video movies. *Journal of African and Cultural studies*, Vol. 16 (1), pp. 7-23.

Panofsky, E. (1955). *Meaning in the visual arts*. Harmodsworth: Penguin Books.

Pauly, J. (1991). *Journalism Monographs*. February Issue.

Quist-Adade, C. (2005). From paternalism to ethnocentrism: images of Africa in Gorbachev's Russia. *Race & Class, 46*, (4).

Reta, C. M. (2000). The US media coverage of the 1994 elections in South Africa. *Gazzette Vol. 62 (6).* London: Sage publications.

Robinson, P. (1999). The CNN Effect: Can the News Media Drive Foreign Policy?. *Review of International Studies 25 (2),* 301–9.

Scott, M. (2009). Marginalized, negative or trivial? Coverage of Africa in the UK Press. *Media Culture, & Society, 31*, (4).

Staedler, J. (2011). Hybrid identities and global media flows. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 14,* 153.

Terazzas, A. (2009). African immigrants in the United States. Retrieved May 16, 2012 from: http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=719

Traore, R. L. (2003). African students in America: reconstructing new meanings of "African America" in urban education. *Intercultural Communication,* Vol. 14, No. 3.

Williams, K. (2003*). Understanding media theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Zeleza, T. (2003). *Rethinking Africa's 'globalization': volume 1, the intellectual challenges*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:
http://www.iiste.org

CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page: http://www.iiste.org/journals/   All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: http://www.iiste.org/book/

Academic conference: http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digtial Library , NewJour, Google Scholar