Preface

Chinua Achebe, in his essay, 'An Image of Africa', discusses the Western desire (and need) to depict Africa as the antithesis of Europe. He illustrates it in a withering critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a book that projects an entirely European image of Africa, one that fails to see or engage with Africa, but merely confirms existing notions of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality' (*An Image of Africa*, 1983: 3).

The way in which images of Africa are put to such uses has a long pedigree, as V. Y. Mudimbe has discussed in his influential book, *The Invention of Africa*, and it continues for many in the West to dominate depictions of the continent as corrupt, malnourished, full of diseased children, conflict and crime, from internet scams to piracy. In such an analysis, it seems that outsiders – once travellers, missionaries, anthropologists and colonial officials; now development agencies, well-meaning pop stars and foreign journalists – are the chief shapers of African image, while African agents are passive or impotent.

One way to challenge this idea would be to write about Africans' images of themselves and their countries and continent – as Daniel Mengara does in his book *Images of Africa*. Such a project would involve replacing 'artificial', imposed images of the continent with 'authentic', home-grown ones.

This book, however, takes a different path, exploring the ways that image is created through relationships between Africans and the wider world. It challenges the idea that Africans are powerless in the creation of self-image. It explores the ways in which image creation is a process of negotiation entered into by a wide range of actors within and beyond the continent. And it examines the extent to which images, once created, take on a life of their own, coming to shape realities underneath. In doing this, the book is an attempt to challenge the ideas behind either a purely Western or a purely African invention of image.

The book began life as a collection of papers for the European Conference of African Studies in 2011. The ambition was very loose: it was simply to bring together scholars from different disciplines around a concept and see what happened. It worked. We had contributions on politics, media, art and literature, exploring between them images of the continent, of regions and countries, and of individuals, from African and European scholars. Alongside various theoretical and disciplinary approaches, we found fascinating themes in common, largely relating to the ways in which images are created within the tensions of relationships, between elites and grassroots in Africa and beyond. It was evident that the theme of image was propelling a wide range of rich work on Africa. We decided to continue to pool ideas, and this book is the outcome of two years of discussion, writing and reflection.

It has been a tremendously enjoyable process, thanks largely to the energy and creativity of the contributors. The first chapter – which outlines the theoretical framework for the book – developed out of those early discussions and subsequent ‘conversations’ between a range of fascinating research projects. It is a response to many ideas, and has been strengthened by the juxtaposition of rich work in many different African contexts, and from different disciplinary perspectives. One of the great delights of seeing a project grow in this way is the unpredictability of it. It has been organic, a creation achieved between ten people, all engaged in different research projects, rather than the outcome of an original conception.

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