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Learned Ignorance about Africa among college students

American college students have very limited knowledge about the history of Africa, but it is not their fault. There is a long tradition of what is called “learned ignorance” in the West about Africa. I have explored this ignorance with several college students of varying backgrounds, and have some of their personal stories to share. I then seek to trace the phenomenon of “learned ignorance” to its root causes. Earlier in Western history there was more intellectual curiosity about Africa and Africans were seen as a people worthy of study. The origins of today’s “learned ignorance” are firmly rooted in the remarkable shift that occurred in Western thought during the early nineteenth century. It was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that racism and slavery became most prevalent, and Africans were seen by many to be less than human savages worthy of domination. Their history was seen as irrelevant because it was said that they had not developed or evolved. They were thought to be in the most primitive state of human development. This sentiment continued into the twentieth century and to some degree affects the world today. Public education in the United States has been slow to add any sort of African history to the modern curriculum. Because Americans don’t know the truth about Africa and its history, they are left with popular myths and imaginary images such as Tarzan, which are not productive and bear little resemblance to the reality that is Africa. The only way to combat these myths is through education and through filling what is unknown about Africa with true facts instead of false stories. Trying to understand in detail the causes of “learned ignorance” about the history of Africa among modern college students may help to better educate them in the future.