

# CELEBRITY HUMANITARIANISM

By Aisha Sambo



15<sup>th</sup> January 2016

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Contemporary celebrity brings into focus the inherent theatricality of humanitarianism as an agreement of separation between those who watch it at a distance and those who act on the spot upon human suffering.

-Lillie Chouliaraki

DISCUSS

## INTRODUCTION

Turner (2004) defines contemporary celebrities as individuals who are highly visible through the media. Celebrities connect to fans more closely compared to a charity board member or politician, offering a window of representation for consumers in humanitarian and political issues (Marshall 2006).

Several celebrity diplomats have become enormously successful in mobilizing, challenging and mediating their causes into international public policies (Cooper and Frechette 2015). However, this view is not shared by all, criticisms have emerged concerning celebrities' effectiveness of the aid policies they promote and the lack of legitimacy in humanitarianism (Chouliaraki 2006; Dieter and Kumar 2008; Mayo 2009; Richely and Ponte 2008). In recent decades' activism and philanthropy by celebrities have grown into the media sphere, there is no doubt that celebrities' call the world to issues on global injustices. However, it is a contested issue that once a celebrities' involvement in humanitarianism is present, change will be instigated. The involvement of celebrities' in communication messages for human rights calls into question the representation and authenticity of the causes they support.

Therefore, this essay will argue the extent to which the role celebrities' play in humanitarianism is not effective in communicating messages of solidarity. The essay will discuss complexities of celebrity humanitarianism focusing on the tropes of motherhood. Firstly, the essay will focus on debates surrounding representation and authenticity, specifically relating to Africa images and stories portrayed in the media.

Secondly this essay will discuss how celebrity humanitarianism legitimizes and promotes neoliberal capitalism and global inequality. There is a need to reflect on images of suffering in Africa because they connect with broader issue of representation. The cognitive, moral and emotional reflexes provoked by images of suffering in Africa are profoundly political, questioning power, identity and history (Harrison 2013).

Finally, to further understand aspects of celebrity humanitarianism, and issues surrounding authenticity, the politics of pity and spectacle of suffering, it is important to also discuss grassroots mobilization involving celebrities leading the public into counterproductive slacktivism.

### THE REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD

Angelina Jolie is remembered as one of the most popular and influential Oscar-winning actresses, but over time she had evolved into a far greater role, symbolic for her devotion to humanitarian work. Her humanitarian work has called to the attention of many, and her aim to empower women contributes to her persona (Cooper and Frechette 2015). For example, her leading roles in the past have embodied strong female personalities.

According to Wheeler (2013), celebrity activist have placed matters of concern on international platforms and agendas. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) decided to host a conference named “Celebrity Advocacy for the New Millennium”. He saw celebrities as tools that could be used to pressurize reluctant governments to take serious pledges during General Assembly (Wheeler 2013). Annan strongly believed that celebrities could influence international public opinions to support the UN reach goals of universalism. The most spectacular success story happened to be Jolie and her links with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Jolie has carried out more than 40 field missions advocating for the people’s protection in different regions (UNHCR 2015). Undoubtedly she demonstrates that her fame and looks can attract attention to the world for the causes she advocates. An essential advantage of celebrity humanitarianism is the scope of attention they bring to a cause, however with the growth of academic theory surrounding celebrity humanitarianism, celebrity engagement with charity work neglects root causes and long-term problems in development (Kapoor 2013).

Although Jolie’s involvement with UNHCR has brought more attention to global causes, celebrities tend to market themselves as humanitarian celebrities, prompting and creating a profitable brand for themselves. Thus improving their value as entertainers (Bell 2013; Kapoor 2013). Additionally, Chouliaraki (2012) highlights

that celebrities tend to draw more attention to themselves than the causes, feeding into our narcissism.

Jolie often links her humanitarian work to her primary humanitarian credentials in the discourse of motherhood. The power relations are visible in the deployment of motherhood, which is a powerful theme in 21<sup>st</sup> century celebrity philanthropy, and Jolie embodies this. Her feature interview with Anderson Cooper introduces her as “the most famous mother in the world” (AndersonCooper360 2006). With the media fixated on fame as a backdrop for issues, the story becomes about the celebrity’s good deeds (Bell 2013; Richey & Ponte 2011). In the interview Jolie is tasked for feeling responsible of speaking on behalf of “distant other” who are unable to consent or input for their representation. Jolie made a bold statement in the interview saying she could pick any child she wanted from the world, essentially “shop the world for children” (Bell 2013, p.16). These types of statements victimize and objectify Africans, depicting them as voiceless and helpless and what we need is a clearer understanding of Western interests in Africa policies (Diawara 2010).

For many decades, celebrities have been attracted to various causes in Africa, and the stories, and images of Jolie on the field in action establishes a moral geography of the world. It portrays rich western culture as a source of civilization intervening in underdeveloped countries (Repo and Yrjola). Stories and images have emotional powers that could be valuable assets but serve more as potential danger. For example, surrounded by darker skinned children have become iconic Facebook profile pictures, mimicking female celebrities who have been found in similar poses (Mostafanezhad 2013).

Historically the ideal image of colonial women was depicted as civilized mothers and keepers of the race, teaching colonized women about childrearing, and this trope still exists in contemporary Western milieu of celebritized parenting. Hence these tropes of motherhood frame humanitarianism as a Western activity, and through them Africa emerges as an unworldly continent incapable to take care of itself, this celebrates rather than opens new ways of understanding Western history in Africa (Fanon 2001).

## NEOCOLONIALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM: THEATRE OF PITY

Even childless Oprah Winfrey invokes motherhood through speaking to the girls who attend her exclusive school in South Africa. Her show in the past has encouraged emotional responses to structural crisis, also participating in the privatizing logic of neoliberalism (Cloud 2014). For example, her show devoted a segment to covering the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Cloud (2014) highlights how rather than critiquing the activities or activism in Haiti, the episodes exposes, documents, and performs reaction to trauma offering individuals to action and passive charitable giving. Like many other billionaire celebrity philanthropist Oprah has donated millions to organizations and charities, as well as establishing her own foundation, inspiring others to follow in her footsteps. Many Americans donated millions to relief Haiti, horrified by the devastation, but still popular culture, political rhetoric and news media failed to encourage consumers to reflect on the disasters historical, political and social context (Cloud 2014).

Celebrities tend to use their experiences and emotions to connect with audiences on a more poignant level, thus evoking increased levels of pity. This shift from being a humanitarian in contrast to being a heartfelt participant in advocacy is, Chouliaraki (2011) argues, an attempt to create a more intimate authenticity within celebrity advocacy. The focus on the authenticity of emotional experience is a key aspect towards celebrities. Brockington (2014) claims that authenticity is the single most contested issue debated about celebrities as goodwill ambassadors and their relationships to NGOs. The authenticity celebrities seem to portray has been scrutinized by media academics that have examined the influences and real benefit to the causes they support (Kapoor 2013; Marshall 2010).

According to Goffman (1990) authenticity is a relational and social endeavor, a question of acting authentic. His theory of social communication as a performance highlights how as individuals we depend on each other for the recognition and acceptance of the impression of reality. Therefore, authenticity is a relational and social endeavor, and the emotions become true only when they are made so by a performer and accepted by an audience (Jersley 2014). Thus Oprah opening a school

in South Africa and using images of suffering to evoke pity on her show makes the message more authentic to the audience.

Billionaire philanthropies that attempt to eradicate debt and diseases still maintain political and economic status quo (Kapoor 2013), he notes that social entrepreneurship becomes an avenue for social justice. However, Brockington (2014) contends that if a celebrity were truly passionate about a cause, they would endeavor to support it, and authenticity is often a complicated area of discussion. Despite the concern surrounding celebrity authenticity, they also exploit the theatre of pity in humanitarians, as Chouliaraki (2012, p.16) suggests, “the circulation of images and stories about suffering propose dispositions of emotion and action to the West”.

Celebrity philanthropists in their own way evoke feelings of pity rather than empathy by being photographed with “distant others” in their surroundings. Photography has made a significant difference in the creation of a human-rights consciousness, although images have always been central in making audiences empathize with the fate of strangers (Musarò 2011).

Pity is a powerfully emotional tool often used to reach individuals as a means of securing a donated income. Boltanski (1993) note that pity is a negative concept bridging distances across the world. Chouliaraki (2011) also critiques the politics of pity in relation to celebrities’ involvement noting that they are demonstrated through commodification and neocolonial approaches. So celebrities who introduce the theatrical dynamics of pity towards Africa in the performance of justice actually engages consumers in philanthropy without justice (Chouliaraki 2012), which proves that social ethics and entrepreneurship cannot be equated.

## “BRING BACK OUR GIRLS”: SLACKTIVISM OR ACTIVISM

The role celebrities' play in the case of being able to mobilize the public to engage with issues has been negative. Members of the public who follow celebrity culture are less likely to be involved in volunteer work, and in terms of engagement it is nearly impossible to measure the impact of celebrities (Couldry and Markham 2007). Although it is important to note since the collation of Couldry and Markham's data, social media has rapidly developed since then. Arguably trends in social media campaigning lead by NGO's collaborating with celebrities have helped activism to an extent. It seems unclear how a hashtag on Twitter can make an impact on social injustices, but there is a clear relationship between activism and slacktivism that is shaping how NGOs communicate their message, especially local ones.

The “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign (#BBOG) attracted international communities' leading to street demonstrations of all kinds in Nigeria and across the globe. In March 2014, terrorist group Boko Haram abducted more than 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria, and due to the outrage the campaign was launched to raise awareness of challenging the Nigerian government to ensure the girls return safely. However, #BBOG only became a campaign slogan when former vice President of the World Bank for Africa Oby Ezekwesli, mentioned it in a speech. What was unique and different about the campaign is the efforts of how the campaign grew organically from within Nigeria. Nigeria is known to have issues due to incompetent leaders and corruption, there had been other worse cases in the country prior to the abduction of the girls, but the tragedy seemed to have touched Nigerians leading them to protest in ways they have not in the past. Could it have been the pressure from Michelle Obama's tweet and other celebrities that put more pressure on Nigerians to continue to pursue the campaign goal?

In actual terms, helping others in Africa has always been a simple part of ones responsibility in the community. Africa's culture is aliened to NGOs and the manner they operate in, however there is a lack of information about them (Cagney and Ross 2013). #BBOG is an example where the public might not have started to mobilize on the behest of a celebrity, and might have continued on for so long due to the large attention it received on social media. Fenton and Barassi (2011) argue that the

Internet is not empowering for engagement on social issues, similarly Morozov (2009) argues that slacktivism creates an illusion of making a difference. A fan's relationship with humanitarianism via slacktivist activities such as hashtags and retweets, he explains is an end, rather than the beginning of an engagement with a cause.

Chouliaraki suggests that the voice of the sufferer in communicating humanitarian messages need to be reintroduced in order for the industry to change to rein back but even then the solutions that will sustainable. In Africa there are millions of community-based organizations (Cagney and Ross 2013) and Harrison (2013, p.103) suggests "the interface between Africa and celebrity campaigning goes beyond the ability of famous people to lead their image to the campaigns and appeals". It is important to consider the growth of Africa particularly in it philanthropic endeavors and the growth of NGOs in Africa is influenced by local traditions of giving (Cagney and Ross 2013). Africans are becoming more capable of handling their affairs including fundraising and building awareness on issues related to social injustice.

With the growth of African NGOs, philanthropist will play an increasingly important role in supporting social development in the country, in turn making Western support less reliable. Other than that, international NGOs are also increasing registering local independent offices in Africa; they include Action Aid, Care International, and Plan International (Cagney and Ross 2013). Ogundipe-Leslie (2001) highlights how few representations by Western celebrities depict the educated, urban or middle class in African countries. When it comes to philanthropy Africa is the least understood continent (Cagney and Ross 2013), and foreign funding often tends to distort the picture of African philanthropy. So although Africa needs more aid and debt solutions, it also needs to be set free of unfair burdens of policies imposed by rich countries (Nandita 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The debates surrounding celebrity humanitarians are too vast a discussion to explore all its frameworks given the restrictions for this essay. Nevertheless, this essay focused on debates surrounding representation and authenticity, specifically relating to Africa images and stories portrayed in the media.

Western celebrities often depict Africa as voiceless, hopeless and incapable of handling social injustices but surely Africans are essential contributors to the society. It is challenging to critique celebrities' actions due to the material benefits of philanthropy in Africa, however when celebrities' deploy their roles as mothers they create a strong brand of cultural authority that has strong links to colonial past (Bell 2001). The need for reflection on this representation is important because no representation is going to do justice to others, partly because every representation is an act of power (Chouliaraki 2006), as seen through the disclosure of motherhood.

Celebrities exploit means of drawing audiences to causes using elements of pity, making it an ineffective communication strategy, hence the importance to further explore the views of Africa philanthropy. This essay concludes that whilst celebrity humanitarianism, often under scrutiny regarding authenticity and representation of distant others, can help mobilize the public towards a cause through slacktivist activities. The political role celebrities' play in humanitarianism is not effective but perhaps with targeted groups, mobilizing and fundraising they can harness their symbolic power to good causes.

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