

Abstract

In the Shadow of the European Fortress. Image of the West among Africans in Guinea-Bissau

The book, based on anthropological fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, explores the perception of the West by Africans. The West, or Europe, plays a dominant role in the collective imagination of Guineans. It is a crucial point of reference. Migration to Europe is a common dream as its image is idealized. In contrast to much of the recent optimistic literature on globalisation, the author draws attention to cultural domination, a symbolic power of the image of the West. Europe – which is remote and at the same time present in daily conversations of Guineans, fascinating, enticing and yet largely inaccessible – resembles a powerful fortress, towering above peoples' lives. The sources of such a perception lie not only in material inequalities of the world, but also in the specific conditions of present globalisation (especially the global media and the paradoxical status of the African migrant), in colonial legacy and the ideology of development.

While the West in general is idealized, the attitude of Guineans towards Western cultural norms and values is more ambivalent. Some of them (like the ideal of romantic love) are approved of, others (like the Europeans' relationship with God, spirits and witches) spark curiosity, yet others (individualism, gender equality, monogamy) induce criticism.

Belying the widely celebrated geographical mobility of the era of globalisation, the migration strategies taken up by Africans are tedious, lengthy and often lethally dangerous. They include – as illustrated with individual life stories – awaiting help from emigrants in the family, relationships with white women (a route “via the beach”), and the most risky clandestine migration – an ocean journey in wooden boats. In the face of the inaccessibility of the “fortress”, beliefs in magical amulets provide a meaningful commentary.

The projected “route to Europe” turns out to be closely related to the impact of Western ideas of development and modernity. They form the basis for constructing social identities: of the “modern” city dwellers versus the “backward” villagers. Emblematically, this familiar dichotomy has been complemented in Guinea-Bissau by a third category: the emigrant, living in the “real” site of progress – the West. On a global scale, the idea

of development entails for Guineans the unavoidable sense of marginalisation, inspiring the widespread desire to migrate.

The perception of the West analysed in the book is vital for understanding the intensive migrations from West Africa to Europe today.

Key words

migrations, West Africa, Europe, the West, Guinea-Bissau, cultural domination, globalisation, postcolonial, development, polygamy

Słowa kluczowe

migracje, Afryka Zachodnia, Europa, Zachód, Gwinea Bissau, dominacja kulturowa, globalizacja, postkolonialny, rozwój, poligamia