

The Illustrated Atlas of Africa

When I was growing up, I was fortunate enough to have access to amazing local libraries full of beautifully illustrated, educational books. I would pour over science texts, anatomy books, cartoons and encyclopedias. Indeed, it seemed I would decide on a different career path every week, depending on my latest literary adventure. By the time I got to high school, I had settled on history as my primary course of study, and started illustrating my own history books. At the time, I felt that I had a pretty general understanding of world history. The Greeks led to the Romans who led to the Byzantine, and etc. The slave trade, I thought I knew, brought Africans from their homeland to America, until slavery was outlawed. At the time, to me, that was the end of it. World history was a web of connections between peoples over time, and it seemed to include Africa only in passing. My impression was that Africa was inconsequential. The world continually took what it wanted, and Africa seemed powerless to me. Europe, I thought, was the epicenter, and the colonized world just revolved around it- or at least, that's what all of the history books had told me.

My senior year of high school, I'm embarrassed to say, is the first time I encountered the atrocities of the Belgian Congo. I couldn't believe that people had been enslaved in Africa, by some of our greatest allies, well into the twentieth century. I was confused- why did I know about the relatively inconsequential events in Europe, Asia and the Americas, but not major events in Africa? It became my goal when I came to BGSU to find out more, and I took African history and geography my first semester. I couldn't believe what I learned. African nations had the same brilliant leaders, the same immense tragedies, and the same sense of national pride as every other country. Empires that rivaled the greatest in Europe have marked the continent for millenia, and I discovered a whole new set of heroes to look up to.

What was most revealing about my new interest in African history is that no one else seemed to know anything about it. I decided to create a small drawing about the nation of Algeria, one of my favorites, and showed it to a few friends. They loved it, showing their friends, until it reached an Algerian

man at my friend's work. He sat down at my table one day, and told me how thankful he was to meet an American who knew even a little about his homeland. We talked about the Civil War that caused him to flee with his sister, and I listened eagerly, with open ears and an open heart. He said he hadn't met anyone in America who even knew the word "Berber," and expressed his relief. I realized that my art could connect to people in a very human way, make people feel recognized, and give people the information they needed to understand peoples they had never imagined encountering.

It seemed to me that in the current political climate, and an ever-globalizing world, that an understanding of diversity is absolutely essential. Africa is not, as some believe, a land of wilderness. It is a land of scholarship, infrastructure, progress, success and beauty. Namibia is as different from Senegal as Spain is from Russia. If my drawings can interest people enough to examine the information I present, then they will hopefully gain a greater understanding of Africa's diversity and its people's humanity.

My illustrated Atlas of Africa contains five drawings per country, intended to give a broad perspective of the nation. There is one example of an animal, one landmark, one citizen in traditional dress, one person in daily life, and a historical or contemporary issue. Of course, it is impossible to fully convey the spirit of a nation in just five drawings. I do, however, think that my work can inspire others to learn more, just as the books from my childhood did. If I had grown up with a book like this, I believe that I would have a much more well-rounded perspective of the world. It would serve to dispel the notion that European history is the root of world affairs. In the end, it is my sincerest hope that a child will pick up my book and walk away with an interest in a nation they have never heard of, and a new respect for humanity worldwide.