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OUT OF AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: This article traces the origins of the familiar quotation, 'there is always something new coming out of Africa'. It demonstrates that the phrase was a proverb that originated in Greece no later than the fourth century BC. It charts the transmission of the phrase from Aristotle to the twentieth century, noting that Erasmus is the most important link in the Renaissance and that he may be responsible for the current form in which the phrase is used.

The article also shows that the meaning of the phrase was very different in ancient times from what it is today. Whereas 'something new' to Aristotle meant strange hybrid animals, current writers use the phrase with a sense of admiration.

KEY WORD: Historiography.

'THERE is always something new coming out of Africa', proclaims the narrator of the film, *The Ancient Africans*, a documentary aired in 1985. This sentence, varied one way or another, and in particular shortened to 'out of Africa', in fact occurs repeatedly in the titles of films, scholarly symposia and books of many sorts; it is often encountered as an epigraph or heading for a unit within a book. When so used, the sentence inevitably stands on its own as a general statement about the continent. It regularly signals a particular uniqueness in Africa – the capacity for creating novelties – and conveys some admiration thereof. It also signals the learning of the writer, for the quotation has been variously attributed to Rabelais, Pliny, Aristotle and Herodotus.

The aim of this note is to trace the quotation back through the centuries to its source and reveal what it meant in its original context. It will be seen that its early meaning was very different from the one invariably attributed to it now, and that even those who cite the source correctly are unaware of it. This little tale, with its straight stretches and its crooked jogs, also exemplifies some features of the transmission of ancient learning. But first let us illustrate the breadth and currency of the phrase.

The most popularly recognized use is in the title of the 1985 movie, *Out of Africa*, starring Robert Redford and Meryl Streep, a movie based on the semi-autobiography by Isak Dinesen.[1] Popular too once upon a time were the many books by John Gunther about various continents and countries: the preface to his *Inside Africa* includes our quotation.[2] A somewhat earlier travelogue by a certain H.W. entitled … *Something New Out of Africa*

[1] The author's real name was Karen Blixen. The Danish original was published in 1937 under the title *Den Afrikanske Farm*. The English version came out the following year. The riddle of who was responsible for the change in title might be solved by consulting the Karen Blixen archive at the Royal Library in Copenhagen; information about an inventory of the collection can be obtained at the email address *kb@kb.dk*.

[2] New York, 1955, ix.

features it in Greek, Latin and French, linking it with the names of Aristotle, Pliny and Rabelais, respectively.[3]

The phrase comes readily to those addressing a smaller, scholarly audience. In a textbook of African studies, Eileen Julien heads a chapter on literature, 'Always something new from Africa'.[4] Gail Gerhart weaves it into her narrative: 'Although Africa's ultimate cultural contribution was still unknown, hope for the future was summed up in the ancient Latin dictum: *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* (there's always something new from Africa)'.[5] Despite using the word 'dictum', the author appears to give the phrase an almost messianic meaning. And yet another scholar, Mary Lefkowitz, entitled her attack on Afrocentrists and their misuse of ancient history *Not Out of Africa*.[6] Africanists are generally familiar with the full phrase.

Still in the public sphere, we find that an acclaimed documentary film, produced by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, appeared in 1993 under the title *In and Out of Africa*, and that the Louis S. B. Leakey Symposium held on 7 December 1996 at Stanford University was called 'Out of Africa'.

Finally, let us cite a pair of instances originating in South Africa. In an article published in 1945, Anton M. Lembede, a black South African intellectual and nationalist leader who was a lawyer and the first president of the African National Congress Youth League, identified the contributions to world civilization made by various societies, from the Greeks and Romans to the English and the Russians. He concluded the list with another example: 'the Africans ''*Ex Africa semper quid novi*'' – From Africa always comes something new – said an ancient Latin writer'.[7]

In private correspondence Edward A. Judge, a retired high-ranking civil servant in the Cape Colony, who had worked in several departments concerned with African affairs, wrote to Senator W. E. M. Stanford in 1924: 'Cotton in fact, as a friend wrote to me the other day, is going to be another surprise from South Africa. ''*Ex Africa semper aliquid novum*'', as the old Romans used to say'.[8] Both writers were very well educated.[9] It is probable

[3] London, 1934, v: '*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* – Pliny'. The author evidently did not check the text of Pliny, whose version is slightly different (see below). The Aristotle quotation is similarly inexact. H. W. has been identified as Ernest Hodder-Williams, a commander in the Royal Air Force who was stationed in Africa for three years. He describes his travels and the African people he encountered.

[4] In P. Martin and P. O'Meara (eds.), *Africa* (3rd ed., Bloomington, 1995), 295.

[5] *Black Power in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1978), 60, with the same wording as in H. W. (above, n. 3).

[6] New York, 1996.

[7] 'Some basic principles of African nationalism', *Inyaniso* (Feb. 1945), cited in T. Karis and G. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge* (Stanford, 1973), II, 315. The original publication is difficult to track down, because no copies have been located in South Africa. *Inyaniso*, apparently published during the 1940s and 1950s, was 'founded in Johannesburg as a bulletin of the Transvaal branch of the African National Congress Youth League': Les Switzer and Donna Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho* (Boston, 1979), 46.

[8] University of Cape Town Archives, Stanford Papers, B 107.2, 16 Oct. 1924.

[9] Lembede (1914–47) attended one of the best secondary schools in South Africa, Adams College, Durban; at the University of South Africa he earned several degrees, in law and philosophy, and was working on a doctorate at the time of his death; a biographical sketch reports that he was proficient in at least seven languages: Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, IV, 46; *New Dictionary of South African*

that they quoted from memory, for, it will be noted, each has made a small slip in the Latin (*quid* for *aliquid*, *novum* for *novi*) and the slips are of a type that could only be made by one who knows some Latin. The phrase evidently was familiar enough to them not to require checking.

What is the true origin of the phrase? The earliest source that has been cited until now is Aristotle, who uses the phrase twice. In his *Historia Animalium*, when discussing the distribution of animals and their differences from one place to another, claiming in particular that Libya has wild animals in unusually varied forms, he says: 'a certain proverb (*paroimia*) is current, that Libya always produces something new (*aei Libye pherei ti kainon*)' (8.28 *sub fine*). (The term 'Libya' should not mislead; it can refer not only to the central stretch of the north African coast but also to the continent as a whole.[10]) Aristotle attributes the large variety of hybrids in Africa to the different species meeting at watering holes and mating indiscriminately. He refers to the same proverb, giving it the same meaning, in his *Generatio Animalium*: 'there is current the proverb about Libya, that Libya is always nourishing something new' (2.7).[11] He adds here that the different species meet and mate thus because of the lack of water in Africa. For Aristotle the phrase refers specifically to hybrid animals.

It is evident that the phrase does not originate with him, since it is cited both times as proverbial. Though Aristotle's individual works cannot be securely dated, we do know he was active in the late second quarter of the fourth century BC and throughout the third quarter (he died in 322). Not later than the middle of the same century, in fact, we find our phrase referred to by another writer of a very different sort, a poet of Middle Comedy named Anaxilas. Anaxilas, we are informed by Diogenes Laertius (3.28), ridiculed Plato in three of his plays, and Plato died in 347. The poet writes, 'in heaven's name, music, just like Libya, always gives birth (*tiktei*) to some new animal every year'.[12] What phenomenon of musical life Anaxilas had in mind is unknown, but the language of his comparison is consistent with Aristotle's reference to hybrid animals. Since the verses were uttered on the Attic stage, we may assume that the phrase was familiar to the fourth-century audience. The origin of the proverb, then, rests with the Greeks, though no evidence is available to determine its source.

Given Herodotus's deep interest in the cultures of non-Greek peoples, and in particular his attention to peculiarities of local fauna (e.g. 2.68–76, 2.93,

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Biography (Pretoria, 1995), I, 135–7. Judge was the eldest son of Edward C. Judge, an Anglican bishop in South Africa and Professor of Classics at the South African College, the ancestor of the University of Cape Town: *Dictionary of South African Biography* (Pretoria, 1977), III, 458–9.

[10] '*Libya*, Name des heutigen Erdteils Afrika im Altertum': Honigmann, *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, XIII, 1 (1926), 149.

[11] The two references to Aristotle are given in the more convenient form of book and chapter. It has been conventional also to give references according to the page, column, and line numbers of the complete Berlin Academy edition of Aristotle published by I. Bekker in 1831: for the two passages these would be 606b20 and 746b7, respectively.

[12] The quotation is preserved in Athenaeus XVI, p. 623E; it is edited and fully annotated in the standard modern collection of comic fragments, R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin and New York, 1991), II, 292 (frag. 27).

4.191–2), one might have expected to find the proverb recorded during the previous century in the historian's long excursus on Libya (4.168–99), but this proves not to be the case.[13]

Most sources, including many current English-language books of quotation,[14] seemingly unaware of the Greek background, attribute the phrase to Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD). Indeed, it does make the leap from Greek to Latin in his encyclopedic work, *Historia Naturalis* (8.42), where he says: *unde etiam vulgare Graeciae dictum, semper aliquid novi Africam adferre* (that is the origin in fact of the saying common in Greece, that Africa is always producing something new). A little further on (section 43), Pliny acknowledges that he is indebted to Aristotle for much of his information on the subject.

The verb Pliny chooses to translate the quotation (*adferre*) suggests he was remembering Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* (*ferein*) rather than the *Generatio* (*trephein*). It is instructive further to compare, on the philological level, the Latin version with the Greek original. To appreciate the tone of the adjective one should keep in mind that both Greek *kainon* and Latin *novum*, meaning 'new', connote something strange, even undesirable: in each language the phrase meaning literally 'new things' signifies 'revolution'. This connotation certainly squares with the application of the phrase to monsters of nature. And whereas the Greek verb *ferein* can mean both 'bring' in a general sense and 'give birth to', the latter of which fits our context better and is confirmed by Anaxilas (*tiktei* means 'gives birth to'), the verb chosen by Pliny, *adferre*, can have the general meaning 'bring, produce' but not the particular sense 'give birth to'. Instead, the only two of the verb's special senses that at all suit the context are 'bring into use for the first time, introduce' and '(of the soil) to yield, produce'.[15] The verb Pliny chooses, though cognate with Aristotle's, eliminates the notion of birth. Some semantic slippage has thus taken place in the leap between languages.[16]

The next stage in the transmission is the collections of Greek proverbs made in later antiquity by compilers known as paroemiographers. The most important collection has come down to us, in several versions, under the name of Zenobius, a Greek philologist of the time of Hadrian (117–38 AD). From Zenobius's collection are derived two variants of the proverb strikingly different from the Aristotelian original. Some versions alter it to 'Libya is always producing some new (*kainon*) evil (*kakon*)' (Zenobius 2.51). We cannot tell how this variant arose; perhaps the connotation of *kainon* was made explicit in the addition, perhaps some copying error was responsible

[13] The narrator of *The Ancient Africans* is therefore mistaken in associating the phrase with Herodotus.

[14] B. Stevenson, *The Home Book of Quotations* (New York, 1952), 1415; *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (2nd ed., London, 1953), 380; *The Traveller's Dictionary of Quotation* (London, 1983), 2; *The New International Dictionary of Quotations* (New York, 1986), 228; Tony Augarde (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations* (Oxford, 1991), 67; Joseph Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (16th ed., Boston, 1992), 104.

[15] See the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *s. v.*, 11b and 18.

[16] The oddity, indeed uniqueness, of Pliny's usage is readily grasped from the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* 1.1.1192–206, which while registering the quotation (1199.35–6) recognizes none similar.

(observe the small difference between the two Greek words). Certainly we are rather far from Aristotle.

Another version of Zenobius's collection shortens the saying to 'Libya is always producing something evil' (Diogenian 1.68). From this point on, the proverb's history is bifurcated, with the divergent short forms existing separately, sometimes as alternatives;[17] Zenobius's fuller form does not reappear.[18]

When next sighted in western Europe, the original phrase is found again in a collection of proverbs, but a collection of an utterly different character; not a crabbed, dry catalogue, but a witty, informative and altogether charming presentation. The work is the *Adagia* by Erasmus.[19] At 3.7.10 of the fullest version (the previous entry was the other form, with 'evil') Erasmus cites the phrase as from Pliny, repeating his explanation, then traces it back in turn to Aristotle and finally cites the quotation from Anaxilas.

The *Adagia* was an immensely popular book. From the first versions (*Collectanea Adagiorum*, beginning in 1500), to the fuller that followed (*Adagiorum Chiliades*, beginning in 1508) and the various epitomes, selections and translations, over 250 editions are known, mostly published between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth.[20] There can be little doubt that from Erasmus the phrase acquired such renown as it enjoys, both in the Renaissance and in modern times.

Erasmus is also likely to be responsible, though accidentally, for the rewording of Pliny's Latin version that has taken hold and become standard, namely: *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*. This is a curious tale. The body of the text as printed in a famous Froben edition of Erasmus's complete works (published four years after his death)[21] cites Pliny with slight changes: *Libyam semper aliquid novi adferre*, where Pliny had used the word *Africam* and placed it before *adferre*. For the heading of his own entry, Erasmus writes *Semper Africa novi aliquid apportat*. Out in the right margin and beginning on a level with the entry's first line of text, there appears a guide notation: *Africa semper aliquid n. a.* Now on the same line as the heading, flush with the margin but not in it, and thus immediately above the first line of text appears the letter X, the Roman numeral for ten, indicating that this

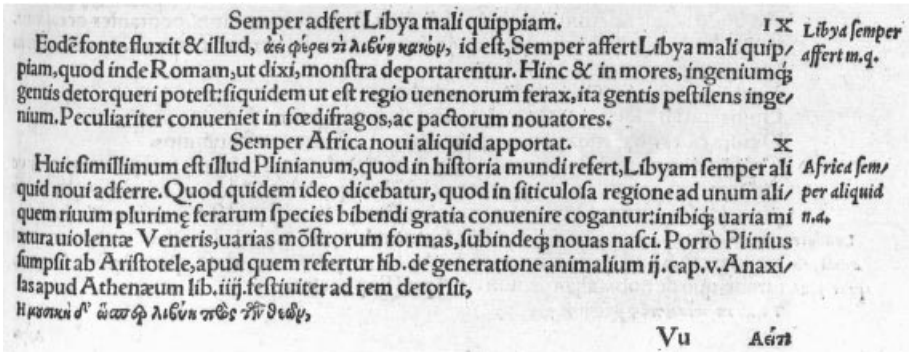
[17] See, for example, *The Home Book of Quotations* (above, n. 14) and the volume by H. W. (above, n. 3), whose epigraph attributes to Aristotle the version with 'evil' – this is both incorrect and curious, since his accompanying quotations from Pliny and Rabelais have 'new'. See also below, about Erasmus.

[18] See the edition by E. L. von Leutsch and F. G. Schneidewin, *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* (2 vols.) (Göttingen, 1839–51); also A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890) no. 35.

[19] A good introduction to the work is Margaret Mann Phillips, *The 'Adages' of Erasmus: A Study with Translations* (Cambridge, 1964). R. R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries from the Carolingian Age to the End of the Renaissance* (London and New York, 1954), 297–300, offers a fine characterization. Those wishing to read the work in English will certainly want to avail themselves of the annotated translations of all Erasmus's works being published by the University of Toronto; the *Adages* are found in volumes 33 and following. We are deeply grateful to Professor John N. Grant of that university for letting us see, in advance of publication, the translation and notes prepared for volume 35 by Professor R. A. B. Mynors.

[20] Ferdinand van der Haegen (ed.), *Bibliotheca Erasmiana*, 1: Adagia (Gand, 1897).

[21] *Erasmi Opera Omnia*, *Secundus Tomus* (Basle, 1540).



Semper adfert Líbya mali quíppiam. IX *Líbya ſemper affert m.q.*

Eodẽ fonte fluxit & illud, ἀεὶ φέρει τὴ λιβύη κακόν, id eſt, Semper affert Líbya mali quíppiam, quod inde Romam, ut dixi, monſtra deportarentur. Hinc & in mores, ingeníumq; gentis detorqueri poteſt: ſiquidem ut eſt regio uenenorum ferax, ita gentis peſtilens ingenium. Peculiariter conueníet in fœdifragos, ac pactorum nouatores.

Semper Africa noui aliquid apportat. X *Africa ſemper aliquid n.a.*

Huíc ſimíllimum eſt illud Plínianum, quod in hiſtoría mundi refert, Líbyam ſemper aliquid noui adferre. Quod quidem ideo dícebatur, quod in ſiticuloſa regione ad unum aliquem riuum plurimę ferarum ſpecies bíbendi gratía conuenire cogantur: ínibíq; uaría mixtura uiolentæ Veneris, uarias mõſtrorum formas, ſubindeq; nouas naſci. Porrò Plíníus ſumpſit ab Ariſtotele, apud quem refertur líb. de generatione animalíum íj. cap. v. Anaxílas apud Athenæum lib. iiij. feſtiuiter ad rem detorſit,

Ἡ μανικὴ δ' ὥσπερ λιβύη πρὸς τὴν θεόν,

Vu Aeſch

Fig. 1. From *Erasmi Opera Omnia*, *Secundus Tomus* (Basle, 1540). Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Liberty, Yale University.

is the tenth entry in the seventh century of the third chiliad of adages (Fig. 1.) We suggest that a hurried reading of the numeral together with the adjoining marginal notation in this edition led someone to rephrase the proverb as *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* and that this version eventually became so widespread as to take the place of the original. We do not know who this person was, but we believe this to be the most plausible explanation of the change in the phrase's form.

However that may be, we see Erasmus as the probable propagator of the phrase throughout Renaissance literature. Two years before Erasmus's death, which occurred in 1536, Rabelais already employed the phrase in *Gargantua* (1.16): *comme assez sçavez que Africque aporte toujours quelque chose de nouveau* (you know well that Africa always brings something new).[22] And the citation recurs in the fifth book (5.3): *Aphricque*, *dist Pantagruel*, *est coustumiere de produire choses nouvelles et monstrueuses* (Africa, said Pantagruel, is accustomed to produce new and monstrous things).[23] Early in the next century, as the Renaissance reaches England, we encounter an echo of the notion, though not the phrase, in John Donne's 'Satyre IV' (22–3): 'Stranger … /Than Africks Monsters'. And another century later this is in turn re-cast by Pope as 'A verier monster, than on Afric's shore'.

Jumping ahead in time, we come to the nineteenth century, during which we have not come across references to the phrase outside books of quotations.[24] We have not, to be sure, conducted any kind of systematic search. Yet

[22] The annotated edition by Jean Céard, Gérard Defaux and Michel Simonin (Paris, 1994) refers to the *Adagia* and adds 'On sait que cette petite phrase nourrira encore l'imagination de G. Flaubert'. Not finding the phrase in the various concordances to Flaubert's work, we agree with our colleague, Professor Françoise Ehrmann, that the editors intend no more than a general reference to *Salammbô*.

[23] Though the fifth book, published in 1564, about ten years after Rabelais's death, is not certainly authentic, the first 15 chapters, published separately in 1562, are generally regarded as genuine.

[24] E. Cobham Brewer, *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (25th ed., London and Philadelphia, 1894; facsimile reproduction, New York, 1978), 20: '*Africa semper aliquid novi affert* [Pliny's words, with *Africa* replacing *Libya*, turned from indirect to direct discourse]. ''Africa is always producing some novelty''. A Greek proverb quoted (in Latin) by Pliny, in allusion to the ancient belief that Africa abounded in strange monsters'.

the paucity of examples may not be entirely accidental. We might link this with the observation that the image of Africa and Africans declined during the nineteenth century because of the growth of pseudo-scientific racism. Whereas Africans, especially those living in organized kingdoms, were respected and even admired by a small number of European visitors during the two previous centuries, nineteenth-century explorers, missionaries and government officials began to emphasize the differences between Europeans and Africans. Books, newspaper articles and missionary letters called attention to behavior that Europeans considered immoral or savage. This emphasis was fueled in part by the racist writings of Robert Knox, J. C. Pritchard and Arthur, Comte de Gobineau.[25] Imperialism and colonial rule, from the end of the nineteenth century, would not have led Europeans to search out or employ the phrase.

We cannot account for the interest of H.W. and Karen Blixen (or her American publisher) in the 1930s. The decline of colonialism during the 1950s and the creation of independent countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, however – stirring events all – led to renewed interest in the continent.[26] African history became a new field of study, and the first generation of African historians searched the ancient texts for early views of the continent, with the result that our phrase has recovered something of the familiarity it had in fourth-century Athens.

Yet it is important to observe also the alterations that have taken place. In its wording the proverb has changed much as it passed from Aristotle to Pliny to Erasmus (and, perhaps, to an editor of Erasmus). And its meaning has shifted as well. Whereas to the ancient Greeks 'something new' referred specifically to strange hybrid animals and carried a negative connotation, the phrase is now used in a general and invariably positive sense.

[25] Robert Knox, *Races of Man : A Fragment* (2nd ed., London, 1862); J. C. Pritchard, *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (5 vols.) (4th ed., London, 1851); Arthur, Comte de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (2 vols.) (2nd ed., Paris, 1884). See also P. Curtin, *The Image of Africa : British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison, 1964).

[26] It is noteworthy that the quotation was not present in the thirteenth edition of Bartlett (1955), but did appear in the fourteenth (1968). John Gunther (above, n. 2) was, so far as we know, the first writer to use the phrase after the Second World War; this was in 1955, when anti-colonialism was beginning to move African lands towards independence.