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## Dreaming Africa: Mary Kingsley and Writings on Africa, One Hundred Years Later

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REVIEW

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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about Africa cannot be numbered, and thus, as Blaine Harden points out in *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent*, Westerners "weep for it more out of pity than understanding" (14). And yet there is a literature about Africa which offers understanding through the eyes of contemporary writers from around the globe who, like the Englishwoman Mary Kingsley one hundred years ago, achieved ways of seeing beyond hopelessness and death to the idea of Africa. Admittedly, even for those who deliberately seek understanding, it is no easy assignment. Reputable Africanist that he is, Thomas Pakenham, for example, reflects in *The Scramble for Africa* on the fact that historians still have not been able to explain why the rush to build empires in Africa by the European colonialists ever took place. "Historians," he admits, "are as puzzled now as the politicians were then" (xxi). There are theories, of course: surplus European capital; sub-imperialism in Africa itself; the imperialisms of different colonial powers. Yet no general idea, he states, has been offered to complete our understanding. It was precisely her attempt to understand the "idea" of Africa that captured the Victorian writer-adventurer Mary Kingsley and shaped her into one of the most perceptive interpreters of the Africa that exists beyond the images of death and hopelessness. Always upbeat, she never concealed her euphoria over her own penetration into the dark continent and the purpose she found there. "Stalking the wild West African idea is one of the most charming pursuits in the world," she exclaimed in her first book, *Travels in West Africa* (430). Lest this sound as perilous as afternoon tea, she confessed that the pursuit was "as beset with difficulty and danger as grizzly bear hunting," but she insisted that "the study of this thing" was her "chief motive for going to West Africa" (429, 430). Her vision penetrated beyond horror in part because to her Africa was not nightmare but the dream of her life, perhaps the dream that saved her life. The truth is that her most important discovery in Africa was the "idea" of Mary Kingsley, found serendipitously in the "charming pursuit" of the West African idea. Freed from being the angel in her father's house by the deaths of both parents in winter-spring of 1892, she initially claimed West Africa for her terminal destination. Her dream of Africa had been conceived in her father's library in England, where she read the great African explorers, Burton, Stanley, and Livingstone, even the less well-known Paul Du Chaillu and Pierre de Brazza, explorers of the Ogooué River region. For her youthful imagination, concludes her biographer, Katherine Frank, Africa became "the repository of extravagant dreams" (48). And though as late as her second book, *Wiesi African Studies*, she could yet offer an earthy explanation like collecting fishes as her reason for going to Africa (4), the true motive had been a profound one. Katherine Frank cites an intimate letter to a friend in which Kingsley revealed that "being tired and feeling no one had need of me anymore when my Mother and...

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Jeremy Gavron. *King Leopold's Dream: Travels in the Shadow of the African Elephant*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.

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