

CELEBRATING AFRICA: THE TIME FOR AFRICA IS NOW

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THIS IS THE TIME FOR AFRICA

The history of Africa is one of numerous struggles. Indeed, evidence reveals that the Continent has borne the brunt of man's inhumanity to man in an unprecedented manner.

Africans were dehumanized through slavery, humiliated through colonization, and are now frustrated through neo-colonization.

While in the recent past Africa has been known for wars, famine, underdevelopment and other socio-economic and political maladies, it had its golden age before the advent of modern 'civilization' *ala* Western World.

Historical romanticists will say that the early Greeks gained their celebrated knowledge from Africa. The spiritually inclined will say that Abraham, Christ and even Prophet Mohammed sought refuge in Africa in their hours of trials and tribulations. Indeed, there is no debate that Africa is the cradle of mankind.

While history has its place, the question to be posed is whether today Africa has something to celebrate.

In 1958, Ghana (then Gold Coast) became the first African country to regain political independence. In those days Kwame Nkrumah's statements; **'seek ye first the political kingdom and the rest will come later'** set the liberation tone.

After Ghana, many countries regained their independence particularly in the 1960's, these included Togo, Nigeria, Senegal, Cameroon, Gabon, Cote de' Ivoire, Congo (Kinshasa), Congo (Brazzaville), Tanganyika (Now Tanzania), Kenya, Uganda, Malawi and others. This trend continued through to the 1970s and 1980s culminating in the death of Apartheid in South Africa in 1990.

While independence was celebrated, the subsequent struggle for power among the post-independence leaders led and continues to lead to poverty, corruption, hunger and ultimate death among other ills. Many Africans now wonder whether the "salvific" decolonization was a myth.

As I speak to you, Africa is bleeding in its horn with Somalia defying all attempts at its pacification. Africa bleeds in its heart with Darfur and Chad unstable. Africa is restless at the Cape of Good Hope with the race tension still simmering in the subterranean. Africa is still unsettled in the Saharawi whose status remains in limbo.

Our beloved Continent remains the object of concern as famine abounds, infant and maternal mortality are high, insecurity remains rampant, life expectancy is down. All the key development indices are worrying. Yet amidst the gloom, Africa cannot afford the luxury of wallowing in sorrow and lamentation. The time has come for Africa to stop agonizing and to start organizing, that is why today we choose to celebrate Africa, a land with rich history and great prospects.

Writing recently about Africa, Komla Dumor, presenter of BBC's Africa Business Report after traveling the length and breadth of Africa, describes it as "the Last Frontier". Although speaking from the prism of business, his sentiments capture the essence of what Africa needs. He says after his peregrinations: -

For the past six (6) months, I have been racking up the miles. Making new friends and hearing fascinating stories. These experiences have been remarkable. From observing a fish auction in the 40° in the heat of Dar-Es-Salaam fish market to landing on the oil rig of the coast of Ghana, I felt the energy and passion of many an African city. For every city, I visit I make it a point to find my way to the top of a sky scraper, just so I can observe a city in motion. I know, it is a bit clichéd to say it, but it is true, the vibe is different in Africa. The minute I touch down – Dar-Es-Salaam, Nairobi, Lusaka, Lagos, (especially Lagos), Gaborone, Johannesburg – there is a different energy, a different flow, I love it.

As we approach the Second decade of the 21st Century, Africa must strive to take its pride of place among the comity of Nations.

Africa must address the issues that have held her down particularly the issue of leadership in respect of which Nigeria's Chinua Achebe spoke regarding Nigeria but germane to Africa in the following terms: -

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian (African) character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian (African) land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian (African) problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

The Achebeist diagnosis must be taken seriously if Africa is to pull itself out of the muck and mire of underdevelopment.

Leadership must no longer be understood in its narrow sense to mean political leadership. Africa must have its leaders in politics, economics, arts, science, and business; indeed in all sectors. It is true to say that such leadership is beginning to emerge but unfortunately as the exception rather than the rule.

The happenings in Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, Ghana and South Africa must be replicated in other parts of Africa.

Education which is the mother's milk of sustainable development must receive renewed focus. In the early 60s' *Rene Dumont* observed sadly that, "the African children eagerly walked many miles to go to school where they were taught to turn their backs to Africa". This trend that continued in post-colonial Africa has generated young men and women, whose greatest desire is to flee Africa to Europe and America. Africa's education system from the Cape Town to Cairo; from Addis Ababa to Dakar, must now be revamped to be attuned to the ethical economic, social, political and technological needs of Africa. This is the only way through which African Countries will become newly industrialized with middle level incomes. In a nutshell, we must arrest 'brain drain' and guarantee 'brain gain'.

Innovation must also be pursued by African Countries. Africa can no longer afford to produce that which it does not consume and to consume that which it does not produce. The Coffee produced in Ethiopia and Kenya must have value added to it as must iron ore from Ghana; oil from Angola, Nigeria, Ghana and Uganda; and Rubber from Liberia.

Africa accounts for no more than 2% world trade. This sorry situation must stop. Africa must not only trade with the world but also with itself. It is to be celebrated that Regional blocs are already embracing this need. ECOWAS is doing its bit in West Africa as are COMESA in East, Central and Northern Africa, SADCC in Southern Africa and EAC in Eastern Africa.

Free movement of goods and services is at the heart of socio economic and political development. Africa must work on its Railways and Road network to ensure the opening of its market. Tariff and non-tariff barriers must also be brought down. The passport should no longer be necessary for Africans moving within Africa. Multiple currencies whose value is questionable must slowly begin to give way to a continental currency. Labour must be allowed to move without let and hindrance.

Africa must also package itself. For too long now, Africa has allowed itself to be defined through skewed news analysis by foreign agencies. The time has come for the Pan-African news agency to be revived.

Africa must celebrate its art - it is no longer a right for the African staple in film to be defined by Hollywood, Mexico, Philippines and Bollywood. It must be celebrated that Nollywood is beginning to emerge and now stands second to Bollywood in terms of volumes of movies produced every year. The focus should now be quality. It is also soothing to know that the annual film festival in Burkina Faso has become a permanent feature as a forum for celebrating African art.

Insecurity has also been the bane of African development. The skirmishes in DRC Congo, Chad, Central African Republic, Niger, Saharawi, Darfur, Southern Sudan; The Casamance (Senegal) must be eliminated to liberate Africa from fear and to allow trade to thrive.

African diversity and the ethnic question has also been a major problem. As Carol Lancaster has observed, the process of democratization has heightened ethnic tensions and ultimately threatens National Unity. She says that the volcano of ethnicity remains dormant throughout much of sub Saharan Africa; but it could erupt as it has in recent years in Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, DRC Congo, Chad, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone. However, this pessimistic view must be proved wrong by making our diversity a resource to be harnessed.

So today fellow Africans, we are assembled here not to engage in petrifying lamentation that has long held Africa back; but to dramatize our desire to open a new chapter in the life of Africa and Africans.

Today we must give meaning to some of the immortal words of the founding fathers of Africa. We must say with *Julius K. Nyerere* of Tanzania “it can be done”; we must also say with Ghana’s *Kwame Nkrumah* “that we neither look East nor West, we look forward”.

Lastly, for the sake of Africa, without being suicidal, we must embrace the spirit of Martyrdom of *Patrice Emery Lumumba* of Congo when he said,

I prefer to die with my head high above, with in-distractible faith and profound belief in the destiny of my country, than to live in humility and renounce the principles which I consider sacred to me.

This is the time for change and we must fight for it. We must refuse to be known as the Continent that never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity- let us seize this opportunity and make our mark as a people in this 21st Century. But we must remember that real change must take place in the minds and hearts of Africa as the great Mahatma Gandhi said;

**Keep your thoughts positive, because thoughts become your words.
Keep your words positive, because they become your behaviour, keep your
behaviour positive, because they become your habits, keep your habits
positive, because they become your value, and keep your values
positive, because they become your destiny.**

Thank you, God Bless You.

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