

“Diaspora Solidarity and Pan-Africanism: Prospects for the Future”

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Good afternoon to our dear friends in Africa, and good morning from North Carolina. I was certainly looking forward to being with everyone today in the physical in our beloved Motherland, but as it turns out, the ongoing global pandemic has made that a practical impossibility for us. Nonetheless, I believe this very important Diaspora conference is, itself, a tremendous example of what’s possible for us in utilizing “communication” technology to mobilize African solidarity and collaboration around the world, transcending borders, nationalities, localized narratives, and varying resources.

Now my own narrative and story as an African American growing up here in North Carolina inspires and informs much of what I will be sharing with you today. For those who are familiar with the geography of America, you are aware that North Carolina, as a Southern state, has been at ground zero of our struggle for freedom and equality in the United States. My parents and grandparents *endured* the socially and economically suffocating stranglehold of Southern segregation. Like many rural African Americans, my mother’s father was a sharecropper, working tirelessly on land owned by white farmers to support his family, chronically deprived of just compensation for his labor. He eventually moved his family of 14 children to another town to work in a textile factory, where my mother met my father. My father was the son of a preacher and a star athlete in the area. He was also the first black student in his school to integrate the school when segregation was coming to an end in the South. He eventually went to play football at the University of South Carolina, where he was the first black athlete to play a varsity sport there. He later turned down an offer to play professional football and instead decided to follow in his father’s footsteps as a preacher.

My father’s preaching began in a cultural context very similar to most African Americans, in the black church tradition. But this soon changed. He again blazed a trail of racial integration by becoming the only black pastor at a white church, and this was in a time when this was still a rarity in American society. We also moved to an all-white community, where I attended an all-white school. This deeply impacted my life. I found myself increasingly isolated from my culture and community, and I frequently encountered unfettered racism in this isolated environment.

This cultural isolation produced in me a deep desire and passion to connect with my Black African identity, culture, and history. I also had a mother who, like so many black mothers around the world, instilled in me a deep rootedness that “Black is Beautiful” and that my black heritage is a rich blessing to be embraced. I can remember as young as seven years old, I even brought this value-set with me to school, where I would color pictures of what I noticed were always white characters in our coloring sheets, with brown skin and curly hair. This was indeed my way of exhibiting my own young expression of solidarity with my blackness and the need to see it represented in our classroom materials. When I entered high school, I would intentionally turn off my mental engagement when we studied Europe because I noticed in classes where the focus was supposed to be “world” civilizations, world literature, or world geography, 90% of our learning was hyper-focused on a Eurocentric worldview with perhaps only a few pages devoted to anything concerning Africa (and this was typically only Egypt with a focus on Greek

influence). I would ask myself, “How can I take seriously the notion that Europe is 90% of world history, civilization, or world geography?” I was, in fact, very much aware of the gross deficit of attention placed on Africa, or for that matter, the abundance of history in the diverse regions of Asia or Native American civilization. On the other hand, in my own time, I would spend hours and hours sifting through anything I could find that pertained to the Motherland, studying African cultures and mighty civilizations such as Mali, Ghana, Songhai, Benin, Ethiopia, the Kongo kingdom, the Zulu nation, and others. I discovered the richness of culture, history, grandeur, ingenuity, and civilization that was my own as a son of the African Diaspora. Then I recall as an adolescent reading Alex Haley’s novel, *Roots*, and being heartbroken to encounter in such a vivid way how my ancestors were stripped of everything that was African and debased to an identity of superimposed cultural subservience. According to Ghanaian scholar, Dr. John Alembellah Azumah, approximately 80 million Africans were actually taken first in the Arab slave trade, with minimal trace today due to the castration of many of the men and taking of the women as sex slaves, and then another 12.5 million Africans were taken in the European slave trade according to renowned Harvard scholar Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Of these 12.5 million taken in the European slave trade, 388,000 of us were brought to North America.

And when we were brought to the Americas, we were forbidden to speak our African tongues of Twi, Mandingo, Wolof, Yoruba, Igbo, and so many others. We were robbed of our beautiful African names and told that everything African was savage and backwards. We were made to believe that subjugation was somehow a favor extended to us by European overlords, who somehow rescued us from a primitive dark continent. And *in* this stripping of our African identity and raping of the African soul within us, a deep void was carved out of the African American consciousness that I believe is a source of many of the ills that today plague our families and communities, from broken homes and disrespect of our women, to gangs and prison recidivism. In fact, these social crises continue to be *institutionalized* through intentional policies that instigate and perpetuate criminal *in*-justice such as mass incarceration and police brutality, economic disparity, government dependence, fatherlessness, academic under-achievement, health disparities, and we could go on and on. Institutionalized racism indeed remains deeply rooted in American society, both blatant and latent. As a product of this malignancy, many of the woes in our community, I believe, are a manifestation of the Black soul longing, searching, crying out to be reconnected with the stabilizing foundation and roots of our African identity.

By the way, *all was not* lost in our African roots. Indeed, **our strong African souls could not be crushed**. All one has to do is listen to African American music or visit an African American church to hear the deep and powerful rhythms and melodies of Mother Africa bellowing up from the ancient to the present, remixed with the ingenious flavor of Black American creativity that has preserved and lifted us above the most unbearable horrors we have encountered in the Diaspora. Our voices are *powerful*, for when we sing the world sways and rocks, when we speak the world stops, and when we stand up (*or kneel down*) the world holds its breath to watch. And now we have genetic science and technology through companies such as *African Ancestry*, which is unlocking the doors that were closed on our African identities and cultures. We’ve discovered that locked away in the cellular DNA of the sons and daughters of Africa is the story of our peoples from whom we were estranged. I discovered several years ago through *African Ancestry*, that my fathers are of the Akan from Ghana, and my mothers go back to the Tikar people of

Northwestern Cameroon. I have since learned that my genetic profile consists heavily of people from Nigeria and Sierra Leon as well.

In spite of all of this, as I emerged into manhood as a young black man in America, I began to observe that everywhere I looked, my people, African people were suffering and relegated to far beneath our God-given potential, talents, collective capacity and blessings, the world over. I was grieved by the disaster and devastation that also befell our brothers and sisters in the homeland, ravaged by the blight of colonialism and neocolonialism. I studied Diop and others, becoming increasingly educated on how our societies, cultures, and civilizations were torn apart, manipulated, and reconstructed to serve no interest but Western interests. And I began to dream of a new Pan-African reality that would overcome these debilitating vices to see my people rise again with resilience and vigor.

This sense of African solidarity and Pan-Africanism, of course, is not unique to me. As I indicated, Africans in the Diaspora have brilliantly preserved the foundations of our African culture and values; and we really saw a significant boom in this beginning in the 1960s. As Black Americans began to learn more about our history and fight for our rights, a move of Afrocentrism emerged in the community, with Afros, dashikis, clinched black fists, African medallions and red-green-yellow attire in the 80s, and even the creation of holidays such as Kwanzaa with concepts rooted in the Swahili language.

Even prior to this, there were prevalent “Back-to-Africa” and Pan-African movements led by the likes of Marcus Garvey and before him W.E.B. DuBois and Edward Blyden, who were themselves inspired by other diasporic movements such as the Jewish movement to reestablish *its* heritage in *its historic homeland* of Israel. For me personally, as the son and grandson of preachers, *I was* familiar with the enduring Jewish heritage in the Land of Israel dating back to the prophets, and I was familiar with the fact that they also were enslaved, alienated from their homeland by the Romans, demonized, scapegoated, and marginalized in Europe. So I drew inspiration from *their* successful preservation of *their* cultural roots and reconnection to *their* homeland despite efforts by Europeans to *also alienate them from their* heritage. And while some of these deep ties of common diasporic experiences have been drowned out in the polarizing politics of our modern times, an interesting quote by the founder of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, paints a powerful picture of the parallel of the common travails and aspirations of the two Diasporas: “There is still one problem of racial misfortune unresolved. The depths of that problem, in all their horror, only a Jew can fathom ... I mean the [African] problem. Think of the hair-raising horrors of the slave trade. Human beings, because their skins are black, are stolen, carried off, and sold ... Now that I have lived to see the restoration of the Jews, I should like to pave the way for the restoration of the [African].” This is a passage from Herzl’s book *Altneuland*. Now as an aside, I believe it is important that we note this point does not suggest that “African” and “Jewish” are mutually exclusive, as there are hundreds of thousands who are of *African Jewish* heritage around the world.

I share this to stress that while there *are* real challenges to Pan-Africanism, which *we must* acknowledge, there *are also* examples that demonstrate it is a vision we *can indeed* realize, albeit distinct and unique to us as Africans. The *challenges* of African unity did not deter African Americans historically who stood in solidarity with Africans on the continent to overcome

colonialism and apartheid. It didn't deter the fathers of Pan-Africanism, such as Kwame Nkrumah and others, who were educated at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States, and went on to fight for the dream of a free and united Africa.

So I then ask from our perch today, "What *is* the major impetus for this need to move forward with African Diaspora solidarity and Pan-Africanism?" I believe the answer is rooted in a fundamental understanding of the international system, particularly from a legal but also a political and cultural standpoint. The primary lesson we have learned from our history plagued with injustice in the international system is that: **Domestic and international legal regimes require full participation by those who are under their jurisdiction, both in formulation and in administration, in order to fully self-actualize.**

Here are some examples:

African Americans, particularly, had no representation in matters that affected us, and there was no sovereign foreign power willing to assert or protect our rights at the founding of the nation in 1787. An elite group of *wealthy white male landowners* gathered in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution of the United States. And when the slave issue was addressed, it was only agreed that African slaves would be treated as three-fifths of a person in order to maintain the political balance of power between the North and South in the House of Representatives. The controversy of the *legality* of slavery was in essence circumvented, but by implication, it was affirmed.

Finally, after slavery was abolished in America by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, Congress passed the 14th amendment requiring states to provide all persons with "equal protection under the law." In the notorious 1896 Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the court consisting of *all white male* jurists, determined that segregated rail cars in Louisiana satisfied the equal protection requirement so as long as they were equal in quality. This decision essentially entrenched Jim Crow segregation laws in the South for nearly a century. Consequently, African Americans were denied representation in government, voting, juries, and other important political positions setting the stage for unjust convictions and extrajudicial killings with no legal recourse. Unfortunately, we have not escaped this appalling reality to this day. Historically speaking, these horrors *materialized* in the absence of any African American connection to a sovereign African continent to defend its progeny in the Diaspora. Now fast forward and interestingly, civil rights for African Americans *finally came about* when newly sovereign African (and Asian) nations held levers of pressure and influence in the West's struggle against Soviet expansionism.

This experience of the African *Diaspora*, *in fact*, corresponded to what was happening globally in the *African* struggle for freedom and independence. In the same period, in 1884, European powers convened in Germany at the infamous Berlin Conference to plot how they would partition and rule the African continent. And the absence of African sovereign representation in Berlin and other subsequent international conferences such as the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944 produced an international system that pillaged the continent of Africa, crushing it in Western indebtedness and neocolonial policies. I like to use the analogy of someone coming into a family's home and stealing most of their possessions. When the family is later in need of the things stolen such as a refrigerator, furniture, television, or a laptop, the thief who has become

enriched from the items stolen, then offers to loan the victimized family money, at exorbitant rates, to buy the items back from the thief. *Well* Western powers who convened at Bretton Woods to set up institutions such as the World Bank and IMF *now* consider the forgiving of this debt an act of “philanthropy for Africans.” So what should appropriately be a negotiation around *reparations* has been spun as a discussion of Western aid, charity, and “debt forgiveness.” As Africans, I really believe if we work together in solidarity, we can re-shape the terms and outcome of this negotiation for the benefit of our people.

Another example, in 1945, when states gathered to create the United Nations, few African countries were sovereign to be represented and assure that *an African country* had permanent presence and veto power on the Security Council. We have seen the ramifications of this within the past decade with the Security Council, against the wishes of African countries, sanctioning the invasion by NATO of a sovereign African nation and the assassination of an African head of state who happened to be a continental leader of Pan-Africanism (whether we agree or disagree with other policies under that regime). Similarly, Africans have limited representation on other agencies of international law, such as the International Criminal Court. Consequently, there’s been a disproportionate and inequitable focus by the ICC on African countries, a pattern that eerily resembles the mass prosecutions of Blacks in the American criminal justice system.

So we see these chronic and systematic injustices against Africans can only be countered when we strengthen our own systems and institutions that promote our collective and individual interests, while leveraging these collective efforts to assert a more advantageous position in the larger international system. Our potential as Africans to fully self-actualize and optimally contribute to the progress of our world will be through greater solidarity and unity. *This* is the premise of modern Pan-Africanism.

Now while I believe Pan-Africanism holds great promise for Africans worldwide and for the world at large, I soberly recognize that there *are* real challenges to this vision. I will share these challenges, and then I will explore corresponding solutions or proposals:

- 1) Institutionalized racism, neocolonialism, and racial disparity are a reality that still undermine the progress of Africans around the world at many levels.
- 2) The legacy of colonialism has bred xenophobia and neocolonial cleavages (such as Anglophone versus Francophone) and other divisions that are not organic to African identity.
- 3) Colonial borders, instability, and corruption continue to stifle the potential, progress, and development of the continent.
- 4) Regional economic communities such as SADC, EAC, IGAD, ECCAS, ECOWAS, CEN-SAD, and AMU are inefficiently organized and overlapping, in a way that impedes effective integration of the continent.
- 5) The African Union has not gained legitimacy and effectiveness on the ground, often subject to political regimes that instead serve personal and/or neocolonial interests.

These are real and sometimes daunting challenges, but I believe there are some possible solutions that can help to remedy these challenges as Africans move forward:

- 1) In a reversal of history, we need new Trans-Atlantic enterprise and collaboration that converges the strategic position of the African Diaspora with partners in Africa. According to a 2018 Nielsen Report, the African American purchasing power alone is at least \$1.2 trillion. To put that in context, this is over 20% of the GDP Purchasing Power Parity of the entire continent of Africa and greater than Africa's strongest economy of Nigeria, which is five times more populous than the African American population. Now although the African American community is positioned as such in the world's strongest economy, we lack the sovereign infrastructure, resources, and socio-political foundation of our African family on the continent. So the *potential* here of our *partnership* in business, culture, and policy cannot be overstated - it is *immense*!
- 2) We need educational initiatives and cultural exchanges that encourage the "African" identity and a shared Pan-African language such as Swahili. We even have African script and letters in the Ethiopic languages. A good example of the power of language in forging solidarity is the ability of people from all over the world to come and build a United States around the common language of English. This is also seen in Israel with Hebrew, which is also a rallying feature of cultural cohesion within the broader Diaspora. In contrast, the European project is struggling with 24 official languages and the lack of a cohesive European identity. Now with that being said, the rich complexity and plurality of all of Africa's languages should be encouraged and celebrated while we also promote a common African language of communication in lieu of perpetuating colonial identities and divisions. Asian nations, as an example, have gained leverage in the global space by bringing their *own* strength and heritage to the table, not by assimilating into Western identity and language.
- 3) We also need an active and empowered Pan-African judiciary to protect the rights of citizens and businesses engaging in the continental space, most notably that created by the African Continental Free Trade Area. The African integration project will, in my view, be *ineffective* without the corresponding legal framework and institutions to secure stability and the rule of law continentally.
- 4) We need the effective harmonization and efficient organization of regional bodies. This is especially true in light of the recent pandemic and previous outbursts of xenophobia that have challenged the concept of continental free movement of people and goods. These problems are better abated at the regional level than trying to manage them in the continental space, where culture and the capacity for governance is much more divergent. The reality is that regional economic communities still stand as the core building blocks of the Pan-African project; *but* a coordinated effort is needed to create an efficient geopolitical arrangement of the communities. There are presently seven primary regional entities, and countries should *choose one*: SADC, EAC, IGAD, ECCAS, ECOWAS, CEN-SAD, or AMU.

- 5) We need a Pan-African entity - perhaps a revamped African Union Council, Assembly, or Parliament - that is *elected by the people* and also representing regional communities which transcend colonial divisions of the continent. I believe, in conclusion, this will help to build the local and regional legitimacy of the African Union, the *primary vehicle of the Pan-African vision*.