

The Growth of Modern Africa:

What Role for the African Americans?

By Femi Olawole
Journalist and Author



There would have been no Dutch settlers and neither would there have been an apartheid era in South Africa had there been no diamond and other solid mineral deposits in the land.

In the same vein, descendants of the English and the Portuguese colonial “masters” would have, by the middle of the 1950s, taken the last trains out of Zimbabwe and Mozambique respectively if the lands had been mere barren deserts.

This had been the sad historical pattern all over Sub-Saharan Africa. Paradoxically, some of the greatest sources of wealth in the African conti-

nent such as oil, natural gas, diamond, gold, tin ore, arable land and an abundant array of other natural resources are also the single most horrible catalyst in the many conflicts on the continent.

The brutal five-year civil war in Congo has now been reduced to an ethnic conflict between the Lendu and the Hima. Yet, the difference here is that unlike the millions of people who were either killed or permanently displaced from their homes while the war raged, “only” thousands of innocent lives now die in the current skirmishes.

The war itself started in 1998 when Uganda and Rwanda dispatched troops with the objective of toppling the then Congolese president, Laurent Kabila. Unfortunately, there was more to the Ugandan and Rwandan “salvation efforts” than met the eye.

Since the discovery of most of the African mineral resources in the late 20th century, there has been a second scramble for, and the partitioning of the continent, though this time by various international business cartels. Like a dreadful octopus, these cartels have such powerful tentacles at the global level that bear influence on political, economic and even intelligence policies of many nations, including those of the West.

For an effective manipulation of their African agents, the favorite “carrot” often dangled by these cartels is the set-up of secret bank accounts in some European cities, notably, Zurich. There are two objectives of these accounts. One, they serve as depositories of “working capital” by potential secessionists or anarchists. Two, these are the accounts where certain percentages from the cheap exploration of a nation by the cartels are lodged for the benefits of the agents which, in this case, include the president and his top officials.

These same cartels are powers behind the political thrones in Uganda, Rwanda and some other mineral-rich African nations. The leader of such an African nation either continues to “play ball” or gets toppled through a coup plot. Where this effort fails, ethnic conflicts are engineered. Incidentally, almost every African nation is populated by various, mutually distrusting ethnic nationalities.

In the midst of all these human-invented calamities and grueling travails in the Sub-Saharan Africa, the African policy of each successive American government remains nothing to write home about. So far, it’s all about AIDS and the African debt.

There is however another side to the coin. Hordes of African politicians, activists and scholars have made a habit of thronging various international summits and conferences to campaign solely for the enthronement of democracy in their continent. In the process, they build up the struggle for democracy into such an infinitely large project that has no extra room for other equally important developmental issues.

Yet, after all energies have been dissipated on the attainment of democracy, to the detriment of growth strategies, a new civilian government has to grapple, for most of its term, with the constant harassments of these same “democracy activists”. It’s often worse for such a government if it fails to “butter the bread” of every activist out there. Usually, the weapon of these activists is the perpetual whining over the “slow” pace of social and econom-

ic growths in the land! And the cartels are waiting in the corner.

The reality on the ground is stark. Whether anyone, group or nation likes it, the United States is the greatest nation on the surface of the earth. Incidentally, this great nation has some noble roles to play in the growth of the Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, the African Americans, with their ancestral rights to this most powerful nation, represent a massive, untapped human gold mine that should have been at the disposal of the African continent.

That these human gold mines remain untapped for so long stems from the culpability and gross negligence on the part of the various African governments, industry leaders, scholars, activists and other sundry individuals who have always put their eggs in one basket. They have failed to realize and appreciate the importance of international lobbying not only in the resolution of political conflicts but also in harnessing developmental and growth potentials of a nation nay, continent.

The role of the Jewish Lobby in influencing the American Middle East policy has already become legendary. The American support for the creation of a Palestinian State is part of the efforts of the Arab League Lobby. The economy of Mexico presently hinges on the capital flight from the many Mexican immigrants in the United States. A little over two years ago, and thanks to the Mexican Lobby, President Bush would have offered a blanket amnesty to all illegal

Mexican immigrants but for the sad incident of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

No group of people in the United States is as overzealously dedicated to protecting the interests of their ancestral homeland as the Jewish Americans. Conversely, no group is as nonchalant to its ancestral homeland as the African Americans.

The African Americans have a very strong presence in the White House, the Congress, Industry, Media, Academia, Sports and the Entertainment industry. In existence are highly influential Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Black media outlets such as Robert Johnson’s BET, Oprah Winfrey’s Harpo Productions, John H. Johnson’s Ebony and numerous others.

These African Americans have been trying to reach out to the Sub-Saharan Africa. Oprah Winfrey, for instance, has several charitable ventures in South Africa. And many Nigerians can never forget the heroic role played by Walter Carrington (as American Ambassador) in their democratic struggles under the despotic reign of General Sani Abacha.

Sadly however, many of us, Africans, by act of omission or commission, have been too timid to accept these hands of fellowship and goodwill. How many of us, on American soil for instance, demonstrate a kinship with the African Americans or parley with them on the rich heritage, politics, economy and the social

machineries of Sub-Saharan Africa? The only visible and positive relationship has been restricted to matrimony. The rest consists of a dichotomy, apathy and hidden enmity between the two groups.

Fortunately, there is a way forward. Considerable input of the African Americans is not only desirable but also crucial in the African continent's quest for political stability, attraction of foreign investments, revamp of the educational sector, an improved health care delivery, telecommunications and information technology.

The African Union must endeavor to rally the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and other regional bodies to liaise with, and begin better working relationships with relevant African American groups. Diplomats of respective African nations in the United States can also assist their citizens to reach out to their African American counterparts in all the identified strategic fields of endeavor.

With these concerted efforts, Sub-Saharan Africa should have a new lease of life. The strong interest and active participation of our African American kith and kin on issues affecting the fortunes of the continent will definitely go a long way in checkmating the horrendous activities of the cartels. And the multiplying effect of the ensuing stability in the polity will certainly pave the way for a more fertile and conducive environment where seeds of the continent's afore-

“No group of people in the United States is as overzealously dedicated to protecting the interests of their ancestral homeland as the Jewish Americans. Conversely, no group is as nonchalant to its ancestral homeland as the African Americans.”

mentioned growth potentials can effectively germinate.

As fellow stakeholders, the African Americans and their business concerns will be on the much overdue priority list in the march towards the economic re-engineering of African industries such as oil, natural gas, tourism, banking, solid minerals and others.

In the meantime, some mundane but critical rough edges in the relationship between the Africans and their African American kin have to be ironed out. These are a different form of conflict and the most formidable of them are neither political nor economic. Rather, they are cultural conflicts that constantly fan the embers of mutual distrust, suspicion and scorn among members of the same racial family.

Firstly, on the Discovery, CNN and other American cable channels, the African continent is projected as a jungle where man and wild animals swing on trees. It does not matter that the only place where a man swings on trees is on the television and the man is White. Even when they exhibit a little change of attitude, these same channels will only show the war-ravaged Rwanda or Somalia along with AIDS victims.

These are the disgusting and depressing impressions that many African Americans have of their ancestral homeland. Unfortunately, some Africans on American soil have been at loggerheads with many of their African American hosts who look down on them on the basis of

these degrading television images. To these Africans, nothing can be as terrible as being stereotyped by members of their racial family.

The total fault however is not that of the African Americans. They are never shown an Africa with skyscrapers, airports, seaports, stadium and other modern facilities in cities such as Lagos, Johannesburg, Nairobi and Accra, among several others.

Unfortunately, Americans generally, are not taught enough geography to know what goes on in Canada, their closest neighbor, how much more of a far-flung Africa.

This is one of the major areas where African writers have to complement the roles of the African diplomats, media outlets and other participants in the resolution of the cultural conflicts. The literature, novels and other publications we write are supposed to be a window on our continent. And if we love it as much as we always claim, it is then a disservice to that continent if our projections of it to the outside world are premised on the evil, ignorant and superstitious backgrounds of the pre-20th century.

Self-desecrations as contained in many of such "popular" publications will only generate an idle, negative curiosity in the Western world. Worse still, they will do more to harm the feelings and psyche of our brothers and sisters in the Diaspora. These are hapless descendants of our race who are still struggling to shake off the stigma and nonsensical stereotype attached to their color.

If we, as writers, must delve into the glorious areas of our ancient past, we must endeavor to marry such a past with the present dispensation in such a harmonious manner as to showcase the evolution of modern African civilization.

Secondly, it is wonderful to behold the eagerness of many African Americans to identify with their African heritage. However, the misconceptions that attend such efforts can be very embarrassing to Africans. An example is where some of these brethren give their children African-sounding names that are however absolutely meaningless. We as Africans therefore owe it a moral duty to inform those who are interested that knowing the meaning and the reasons behind a name often boost the net worth and the self-esteem of the bearer. That is the African view of a name.

And thirdly, the most embarrassing of these cultural conflicts has to do with the charade of hair braiding among African American men. I once had the unenviable task of addressing a racially diverse audience on this issue. Nigeria is the most populous Black nation on earth. It is therefore an appropriate statistical reference point on this subject. I told my audience that it would be a spiritual sacrilege for a Nigerian man to braid his hair unless he is a priest of Sango (believed to be the god of thunder). As scornful as it would appear, even neighborhood dogs would bark in protest at a man in braids.

The task of resolving conflicts and the building of the modern Sub-Saharan Africa is enormous and painstaking. With all hands on deck however, the achievement of success is not only possible but also cannot be farfetched. Moreover, the expected bountiful harvest is worth all the efforts put in place by all the stakeholders.

Femi Olawole is a professional accountant with over fifteen years working experience in the Nigerian banking industry. Also gifted as a writer, between 1990 and 1995, he decided to sharpen his skill in writing by working as a freelance journalist. In 1993, he became the first non-professional journalist to receive the prestigious Nigerian Media Merit Award (N.M.M.A.) in the Business Reporting category. He is now resident in the United States as a writer and presently working on a contracted book titled The Price of A Reckless Past.