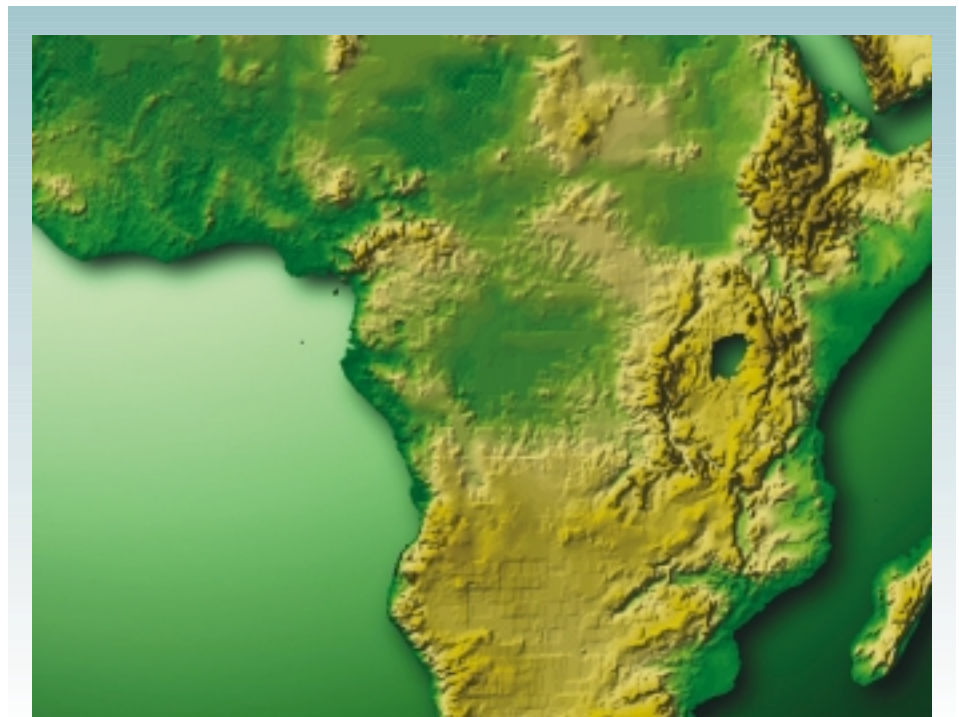


Notes on The Contribution of the African Intellectual of the Diaspora toward the Development of Africa

By Dr. Samba Diop
Harvard University

This topic is obviously a vast one; I will thus put forth some pointers which will hopefully stimulate further debate. At the outset, it is important to stress the fact that at the beginning of the 1960's, a year that saw most African countries obtain their political Independence, it was taken for granted that African intellectuals and cadres residing abroad (primarily in Europe and North America) had to come back home and build the new nations. Some did come back; however, many others decided to stay in the West. More than forty years later, what is termed today as the brain drain, has taken gigantic proportions. What is the root cause of the massive departure to and stay in the West on the part of African intellectuals, cadres, and experts? The reasons are many but I will emphasize only a few: The first culprit is the political situation on the continent; then, the globalization of the world economy; and, finally, the incompetence of the African leadership and government leaders. I am going to elaborate on the three aforementioned points and then



conclude with the contribution of the African intellectual Diaspora toward the development of Africa.

Concerning my first point, one need not look far, for the country of Ivory Coast provides an illustration as to the incompetence of the African leadership and to what is wrong with the African State. Here's a country where

regionalism, ethnicism, and exclusion are the order of the day; one must add to that list the creation of the concept of *ivoirité* (ivorianness) by some intellectuals; this concept of exclusion and narrowness has exacerbated the North (Muslim) and South (Christian/animist) divide. It is sad to see that in fact the Ivorian intellectu-

als who are so bent on dividing the country along the fault lines of ethnicity, religion, and regionalism do not know their history. The Ivory Coast as a country was created only in 1947 by the French; prior to that, it was just a territory left to the hands of French colonial adventurers, exotic hunters, and poachers (ivory), and later on, to French planters who created and developed coffee, rubber, pineapple, and cocoa plantations. Thus, all the present-day members of the Ivorian political leadership who were born before 1947 do not qualify as Ivorians; however, these are the very ones trying to exclude some of their fellow countrymen on the basis of not being a full-blooded Ivorian! What an irony. One must also acknowledge the hand of the former colonial master, France. The French have a hard time realizing that colonialism is dead and over; they still want to intervene in the affairs of the African Francophone countries and dictate to the leaders the way to run their countries. It is about time that the French left Africans alone.

The Ivory Coast case serves as a conduit for further inquiries, the chief one being the following: An engineer, or a lawyer, or a doctor, or a professor from the Ivory Coast, originally from the North, say Korhogo, and who resides abroad, if that person were to return now to the country, where would he go? To the South or to the North? Unfortunately, the Ivorian situation can happen in any African country. No one is immune

Thus, all the present-day members of the Ivorian political leadership who were born before 1947 do not qualify as Ivorians; however, these are the very ones trying to exclude some of their fellow countrymen on the basis of not being a full-blooded Ivorian!

from this syndrome. All the questions asked above about the Ivory Coast can also be asked about countries such as Togo, Senegal, Mali, Gabon, Nigeria, and Ghana, just to name a few. Thus, it is an understatement to say that the African leadership as a whole must put its house in order; it will do so by creating durable conditions that are conducive to peace and development.

My next point relates to the global world situation. The end of the 20th century has witnessed a formidable development of information technologies, a rapid exchange of goods and services, a faster pace for transportation and the movements of peoples. Africa is part of the world economy system and is therefore affected by the global phenomenon. It is not only goods and services that are borderless: expertise, know-how, and competence have also become global transnational commodities. Thus, developed countries are competing for this expertise and the person being courted goes to whoever makes the best financial offer and provides good working conditions. Therefore, this means that African governments must create the conditions that will allow diasporic Africans with expertise to either return if and when they want to do so or to contribute from abroad. Africans are not the only people to have a Diaspora: Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, Koreans (just to name a few) have an important number of their nationals residing and working abroad; however, these countries are putting in place structures which

enable them to capture the expertise and money of their expatriate nationals. Africans can learn a lesson from the Asian experience.

The next point pertains to the leadership. One component Africans who govern their countries do lack is a modern vision; modernity implies some flexibility and adaptation to the realities of the world today (not as to what it was 40 years ago). Thus, the members of the African intellectual Diaspora should not only be encouraged to return but, once they are back, they should not be considered as competitors (for political spoils and positions of power). This led many to pack up and leave again in spite of their original intention to stay. A friend of mine, with whom I was discussing this matter over the summer of 2002 surmised that why these “been to’s” do not stay and fight since it is also their country, instead of letting themselves be frustrated and consequently leave? My friend had a good point; however, when talking to those who are chiefly concerned, you will be told that, instead of putting one’s energy, talent, effort, and time in fighting a worthless battle, one is better off returning to Europe or North America where one’s talent and expertise are more respected and appreciated than they are in Africa. Furthermore, in the West, one has the possibility to grow and improve instead of being caught in a daily grind of frustration, corruption, incompetence, nepotism, and all the many ills that afflict present-day

Africa. This may sound depressing but it is the reality.

My last point I would like to discuss is that of education. This area needs a major overhaul. Again, some lessons can be learned from the Japanese experience and to a lesser extent from countries like Korea and Singapore. Japan is an interesting case to the effect that this country had sent a generation to Europe and North America where they learned technology, science, and acquired a solid knowledge. Upon their return to Japan, this knowledge was translated into Japanese; better yet, schools, universities, technical schools were created (along with strong work values) so that the following generations did not have to leave the country: the conditions for economic development were created on the spot. This is the road Africans must trek, that is to create excellent learning, scientific, and technical conditions so that the youth do not have to leave the continent. As of now, we witness the contrary for after more than 40 years of independence, Africans still feel the need to go to other countries (not just Europe and North America but to places as far afield as Russia, India, and Australia). In order to study and acquire knowledge, we Africans must understand once and for all that the only fight worth fighting for is that of knowledge, of the mastery of science and technology. Everything else is secondary.

Another thing that African political decision-makers must do is to create

viable structures that strengthen the private sector. In that enterprise, the African members of the Diaspora have a great role to play in the sense that not only the private sector must be encouraged but, furthermore, many of these expatriates have the know-how, the rigor, the professionalism, and the expertise that they acquired in the developed world. The other advantage is that by encouraging the African expatriates to go into the private sector, this alleviates the public sector and, by the same token, stimulates innovation, risk, and a pioneering spirit. The latter is at the opposite end of waiting for the government to find a job for a cadre, in short a dependency mentality and a passive attitude.

I will conclude by stressing that the areas of education and the private sector in Africa are the ones in which the African intellectuals and cadres of the Diaspora can make the biggest impact; of course, they can also contribute to many other areas. But in order for this to happen, the decision makers and the elite in general must have a vision; in turn, this vision must be predicated on the worship and implementation of merit, of competence, of transparency, of democracy, of tolerance and of an open mind. It is only in this way that Africans will occupy their right place among the nations of the world and cease being marginalized.