



Meeting the Challenge of a Renascent Africa on the World Stage

Africa Day Speech

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Dakar, Senegal

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Honorable Members of Government
Honorable Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be with you today in celebration of one of the most important symbols of African unity. **Africa Day** is like no other day, because it symbolizes in a very practical way our collective spirit and search for unity and dignity. It speaks to the reality that Africa is more than the sum of its parts. It reminds us that the dreams of our founding fathers and mothers—those who died struggling for Africa—are still alive. Above all, it is a day and a celebration that gives us center-stage presence, when we want the rest of the world to stop, and take a look, and listen to what we have to say for ourselves and for humanity in general.

What I have to say today may not sound very palatable or diplomatic to some ears, but we are in a bad shape, and when you are in a bad shape you must speak the truth and do so with passion. I will start from a personal angle. I will soon be 57 years old, so I saw the birth of the Organization of African Unity in 1963. I did not read about it, I saw it being born. I shared in the euphoria it evoked; and I was inspired by the dream and promise it offered of a united and proud Africa. Sadly today, I cannot look my two children in the face and say to them that they will inherit a united Africa in their lifetime. In 1985 when I went to teach at the University of Dar es Salaam, I didn't need a visa to live there; today I need a visa just to visit that African country. In many ways, we seem to be more politically and economically fragmented and disunited today than we were decades ago. For the average citizen, that's the shape we are in, and it's not a pretty shape.

I have chosen to speak of the **Challenge of a Renascent Africa on the World Stage** for the simple reason that that is the only way we can address all the other problems that we face. As Frantz Fanon once said, ***“Every generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission and either fulfill it or betray it.”***

The core mission of this generation, our generation, is to forge a renascent Africa on the world stage. It is a mission that speaks to a trans-historical challenge which we must confront now or never. Let me explain with a brief flashback.

Centuries ago, Africa's encounter with the external world found us practically unprepared to assert our collective interest. The ultimate result was conquest, slavery and colonization. In the middle of the last century, when the Cold War began, we were once again



unprepared to assert our collective interest and therefore allowed ourselves to be used as pawns in that war. Still, today, there are residues of that painful history as well as new forces that seek to reinvent that history. But the uncomfortable truth is that the forces that seek to keep Africa down are not always from the outside. There is an African saying that: ***“The external enemy strikes hardest only when he or she has collaborators in-house.”***

So, what does a renascent Africa on the global stage mean? And, what must be our strategy?

Fundamentally, it means we must put African unity and African integration on a fast track. Literally, we must stop everything we are doing and integrate our continent. We have no choice. The forces that disintegrate Africa have been at work for a very long time, and they are getting stronger by the day. So, we have no choice. And, we must do a number of things now:

1. First, we must open up our borders to each other. Let us get our citizens the basic freedom of free movement. Visa-free Africa. Kenyans shouldn't have to go to the French Embassy in Nairobi for a visa to come visit Senegal, etc. I call on the good government of Senegal and President Wade who has demonstrated his pan-Africanist and visionary credentials to please take action on this.
2. Second, we must create and preserve space for ordinary citizens across the continent to become actively involved in making decisions that affect the continent as a whole. The evidence is clear that State-led integration has severe limits.
3. Third, we must harmonize our trade and customs policies. Let us be more proactive and coordinated in dealing with the major world powers. It does us no good and brings us no respect when tens of our presidents troop to China looking for aid and cooperation, almost like a sack of potatoes, with no coordinated and common agenda.
4. Fourth, we must prioritize support for our creative forces. We know that artistic and cultural productions are one of the easiest ways our people connect to each other across borders. Youssou Ndour's music and Alpha Blondie's music and Mariam Makeba's music carry no visas to cross our borders. We all embrace them. So are Ousmane Sembene's literature and films, Mariama Ba's beautiful narratives, Breytenback's soaring artistic productions, etc. But we are terrible at strengthening our creative forces. Cheikh Anta Diop, Bessie Head, Christopher Okigbo, Mariama Ba, Sony Labou Tansi lived unsupported, died unsung and remain virtually unknown. We must finance African literature and publishing. We must support our musicians and artists. We must respect our traditional knowledge systems. Without these, Africa has no soul and can't be taken seriously on the world stage.
5. Fifth, we must take our Diaspora more seriously than we currently do. The true value of our Diaspora is not in the remittances they bring home on a regular basis,



important as those remittances have become to sustain livelihoods and even whole economies. The transformative value of the African Diaspora lies in the social and cultural healing that a serious engagement with it will produce. As a Ghanaian saying goes: ***“When your family is divided, your back is broken.”*** We must reassemble the African family, for it’s the only basis for forging global alliances for Africa. We must call on all those who have left to come back or reconnect powerfully with the continent. We must embrace all people of African descent. Perhaps this plea is best captured poetically:

Please Come Back Home (For NK)

From the point of no return
Through the clutched hell-gates that birthed
Our memories of spelled glory
Please Come Back Home

From the sixth time
Of circular dance at the tree of forbidden life
Where we said you must go and forget
Please Come Back Home

From the claws of killing time
In gulping passages of wailing waves
Armed with the stubborn sense of struggle
Please Come Back Home

From your silent songs of sorrow
In soul-massaging blues
Naked in all those razz-matazzing jazz
Please Come Back Home

From where the sun’s sudden defeat
In cotton-rains of winter seat
Your undying dreams of life and joy
Please Come Back Home

From where the warm spirit dies
In bloody cold climes of faceless lies
Where dreams of Zion are deferred by dismembered limbs
Please Come Back Home

From the placid pains of Babylon
Where love is short and hatred long



So short and long they forget the fragile name of peace
Please Come Back Home

From where your love dies
In lightless corridors of Triple-K drenched blood
Where no one, but no one, hears your call in grief
Please Come Back Home

From all these and more,
... Our Love ...
Please Come Back Home

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Africa's potential is inestimable and inexhaustible. Our continent has survived the worst any people could suffer but our people have never given up. If, as leaders of Africa, we do what is right, our people's march to a future worthy of all our children would be unstoppable. And, the right thing to do is remove all the obstacles that stand in the way of our people's march to that future.

Thank you.