

**Ghana Association of the Capital District of New York, Inc.**  
**60<sup>th</sup> Independence Dance and Dinner**

The Albany Ramada Plaza

3 Watervliet Avenue Extension

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017

***AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?***

Keynote by

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Some time ago, when I was working in Washington, DC, I had a conversation with an African Bishop. He said that, while attending an event at the Vatican in recent past, he saw an African Bishop dancing. He thought, it is not every day that you see a Bishop dancing. Then, he approached him. It was a Bishop from Angola. He was dancing to celebrate the anniversary of the independence of Angola. That Bishop believed that we don't celebrate our victories enough. That was why he was dancing.

I am glad you are doing just that, right here, right now, celebrating the victory of the people of Ghana, achieved on March 6, 1957. I am happy and honored to take part in this celebration.

In 1901, the Tuskegee Institute, an institution founded by Booker T. Washington, sent an expedition to Togoland (now Togo), then a German colony in West Africa. The purpose of the expedition was to transform the region into a cotton economy like that of the post-Reconstruction American South.

Andrew Zimmerman, in documenting that event in his book, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire & the Globalization of the New South* (2010), shows how the people of Togo, instead of being passive recipients of American and German ideologies, helped shape the region's place in the global south. The book describes the resistance of African American freed people, Polish migrant laborers and African cotton cultivators, all refusing to be passive victims of the growing colonial economy. The social science of the global south that emerged from experience such as that was articulated by, among other thinkers, W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the co-founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. To fast forward, in early 1963, the United States refused to renew Du Bois'

passport. Then, he took the citizenship of Ghana. His health declined during the two years he was in Ghana, and he died in Accra on August 27, 1963 at the age of 95.

In terms of resistance to oppression, the 1901 Tuskegee experience is only one of the many cases of the symbiosis between people of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic. The Harlem Renaissance coincided with the emergence of African intelligentsia between the two World Wars. Furthermore, because of the inability to pursue higher education in colonial Africa, many of the founding fathers of African nations were educated in the US. Notable cases are Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first President of Nigeria. Eduardo Mondlane, the Founding President of the FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*) in 1962, credited as the founding father of the independence of Mozambique (1975), was History and Sociology Professor at Syracuse University after his education in the US. He was assassinated by the Portuguese secret services in 1969.

It is not surprising, then, that while the struggle for independence was going on one side of the Atlantic (Africa), the Civil Rights movement was raging on the other side of the Atlantic (the US).

However, there are some nuances we need to point out in our collective experience of oppression and resistance. While the African American Community living under Jim Crow Laws (in force from the Reconstruction until 1965) was forbidden access to public facilities, the Francophone African elites could serve in the French government. For example, Sékou Touré served in France's National Assembly before becoming the first President of Guinea. Houphoet-Boigny was elected to serve in the French Parliament and held several ministerial positions in France before becoming the first President of Cote d'Ivoire after independence in 1960. He implemented

a reform of the health care system in France, without questions asked or debates held about his national origin or the color of his skin.

Now we live in a different world. Where do we go from here? What does a quick look at the evolving geopolitics tell us?

- Brexit last year (2016); "America First" this year (2017) and the prospect of trade deal and stronger ties between the US and UK maybe in a couple of years. By bringing into this new relationship the British Commonwealth, an *Anglosphere* will emerge.
- The French will continue to maintain the Francophone community (or *Francophonie*) and consolidate the *de facto* Franco-African State or *Françafrique*. Are we going to witness the resurgence of enclave economies as was the case during the colonial era? The right question is not how China will react but what Africans will do to protect the interest of their peoples.
- Since the breakout of the Arab Spring in 2011, the West and the European powers have lost control over their immediate periphery, the Mideast. The vacuum created allows room for regional ambitions with Iran trying to establish a regional hegemony, Turkey attempting to regain some of the influence of the former Ottoman empire and ISIS, for the first time in 100 years, challenging the borders established by the Sykes-Picot accords in 1916.
- Meanwhile, Putin's Russia is nostalgic about the Soviet Union as global power.
- And, with no active wars in Latin America, the US has created permanent military structures in Africa and, in so doing, has been militarizing both the continent and its relationships with the continent.

These moves cannot be seen solely as manifestations of nationalisms. Globalization comes with bifurcation in the sense of a multiplicity of centers of decision-making and of what can be called *region-based globalization*. That is, major powers must ensure a regional zone of influence to be major players in global politics.

What is or will be the fate of people of African descent in this emerging geopolitical reconfiguration? A player at the core of the international arena or a pawn at its periphery like the fate of border ethnic groups we can observe around the world?

On both sides of the Atlantic where we have the largest concentration of people of African descent (be reminded that African Diaspora is a global phenomenon), there is need to promote what Kwame Nkrumah called *conscientism*. On the African side, economic development will give more weight and voice to people of African descent in world affairs. On the other side of the Atlantic, as long-distance citizens, we should emulate the generations that preceded us: not so much by the might of armed forces but the virtue of unarmed forces by:

- Having a strong presence in the geopolitics of the creation of innovative ideas
- Transforming brain-drain into brain circulation (what some scholars call social remittance) in a true spirit of *Sankofa*
- And ensuring a unity of purpose

After four decades of political instability, economic stagnation and erratic climate, the accumulated experiences of successive development plans, combined with better management by African leaders, may have recently begun to yield positive results. The overall growth rate for the 48 sub-Saharan African countries between 2003 and 2008 was roughly 5 percent. A longer view—over the first decade of the twenty-first century—reinforces an optimistic take on the

prospects of economic development in sub-Saharan Africa. The African middle class is growing. In the World Bank's estimate, around 60 million households currently earn over \$3,000 a year, and it is estimated that number will reach 100 million by 2015.<sup>i</sup> Meanwhile, about 300 million Africans earn more than \$700 a year.

Furthermore, the vertical trade pattern, that is a legacy of the colonial economy, is giving way to more south-south trading partnerships such as those with Brazil, India, China, Malaysia, and post-apartheid South Africa. Still, to achieve true regional economic integration, Africa needs to do more, much more. Currently, horizontal (i.e. intra-regional) trade is about 13% compared to vertical (extra regional) trade.

Yet, with such an apparent success story, one might wonder why a wave of food-related riots plagued more than a dozen countries in sub-Saharan Africa in 2008-2011, with recurrence in countries such as Cameroon, Gabon and Mozambique in 2010–2011. Possible answers are the following:

- Institutional gap (failure to provide adequate social services)
- Social inequality: in Africa, basically, either you rich or you are poor. There is barely a middle class. Even though the middle class is growing, recent studies estimate its size as being between 4.4% and 6.2% between 2004 and 2014.<sup>ii</sup> Given that the middle class is the engine of innovation and economic progress, its being small constitutes a limitation to socio-economic development.
- The 2008-2011 food riots are symptomatic of income gap: when people spend 70% to 80% of their income on food, they are food insecure with even a small increase in food prices. Given that three crops (wheat, corn and rice) constitute 50% of the world food

trade, one should understand the simultaneous food riots in 36 countries around the world, with more than a third of them in Africa.

- Weaknesses of the political structures: horizontal political structures (checks-and-balances) and vertical political structures (electoral systems). That is not conducive to a well-functioning deliberative democracy.
- This in turn causes a problem of legitimacy: the state in Africa does not enjoy the same level of legitimacy throughout the "governed" space and over the entire population.
- Thus, often, the state itself is a source of instability.
- Last but not the least is the issue of "securitization" of Africa and the African Diaspora: on one side of the Atlantic, in the US (and Brazil for that matter), it is done through law enforcement, excessive policing, with increasing militarization. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Africa, securitization of the African space and of a large proportion of its population (the Muslim population) is based on the perception and perspective of the West and of the US with little account of the legacies of local conflicts and the challenges facing local governments. Thus, by militarizing relationships and focusing on states, themselves potential sources of instability, a culture of violence prevails at the expense of traditional means of resolving differences with the risk of making local conflicts more complex and intractable.<sup>iii</sup>

If these conditions can be mitigated, Africa will build on solid socio-economic ground and will be in the position to speak for or on behalf of the African Diaspora, officially recognized by the African Union as its sixth region. In turn, space can be created for the African Diaspora to use its ideas, skills and experiences to the benefit of the continent. It is our turn now and the next

generation to find, as the generation before us did, ways to resist domination by forging a unity of purpose focusing on an Afrocentricity that can be a force in the global power play.

So, let us meditate on the advice of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: “*The age of nations is past. It remains for us now, if we do not wish to perish, to set aside the ancient prejudices and rebuild the earth.*”<sup>iv</sup> Yes, we can! Why not? To paraphrase another visionary, “To do the impossible, one has to see the invisible.”

Thank you!

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<sup>i</sup> The *Economist*, December 3–9, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> The *Economist*, December 3–9, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Metelits C. 2016. *Security in Africa: A Critical Approach to Western Indicators of Threat*. London: Rowman & Littlefield

<sup>iv</sup> A quotation from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin above the stairs of the auditorium of Bunn Intercultural Center, Georgetown University.