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Building New Bridges Across The Atlantic: Need for Renewed and Intensified Relations Between Africans and African Americans in Diaspora.

So where you come from?
As long as you are a Blackman
You are an African.
No mind the Nationality
You've got the identity
of an African
But if you come from Clarindon
And if you come from Holland
And if you come from West man land
You are an African.
- Peter Tosh.

A. THE PROBLEM

People of African descent have a history of enormous problems. On the one hand, the millions of able men and women were forcibly removed to the New World during slave trade, denuding Africa of human resources with which it could have launched itself into greatness. Then, African societies were brutally conquered and colonized, hence the current backwardness of African societies plagued by debt crises, inter-ethnic rivalries, and brain drain, resulting in resentment and outright hostility both within and between African states. On the other hand, Diasporan Africans' experiences have been no less excruciating. Despite uprisings in the West Indies that resulted in many former colonies securing emancipation and nation-statehood, the side effects of these anarchic and chaotic conditions are environmental degradation, drug addiction, civil war, economic depression, etc. The Diasporan African in the United States of America, although fairly integrated into the American society, still suffers identity crises. These problems facing diasporan Africans are compounded by their mistrust of Africans in the homeland, whom many in the New World blame for abandoning their forebears to the ordeals of slavery. To define the contemporary problems facing Africans this broadly implies the need to adopt an equally global approach to alleviating them. Hence, this paper calls for a new initiative that could forge new bonds amongst Africans of the homeland and the diaspora and could strengthen the bonds that already exist.

B. CLEARING THE PATH.

The central premise of this initiative is that, broadly speaking, a diasporan African is (a) a person of African descent residing outside Africa but with few or no direct links to the continent, (b) a person of African descent living outside the continent but with regular contacts with it, and (c) a member of an Africanist community.

The first group or category consists of those whose ancestors or forebears left Africa during the slave trade. Their ancestors were the victims of the Atlantic slave trade that flourished for nearly two centuries. In a nutshell, they are descendants of the Africans forcibly moved to the New world to work in the sugar and cotton plantations, most of whom have lost all traces of their ethnic origin in Africa.

The second group are those Africans that migrated to other parts of the world in search of the golden fleece or brighter opportunities, who may have raised families in the host countries and acquired their citizenship. These could be described as contemporary migrants. They maintain regular contact with their relatives in Africa.

Africanist communities comprise the third group.

Africanist communities are clusters of settlements or colonies of people of African descent that live outside Africa yet identify themselves on the basis of their African identity.

C. THE ASSERTION OF AFRICAN PERSONALITY AND IDENTITY.

The extent of the humiliation meted out to African victims during the slave trade should be better imagined than described. From the stage of procurement and embarkation along the coasts of Africa, to the voyage across the Atlantic, to the work conditions in the New World, Africans were exposed to horrendous experiences by the slave merchants and plantation owners that tended to dehumanize and erode their personality. Emancipation could not restore their dignity so, at the dawn of twentieth century, so many began to desire an umbilical relationship with their motherland as the way to discover their roots and restore their dignity. The attempt gave rise to African churches, such as the AME Zion church, hence the development and growth of Ethiopianism as a movement for Africanizing churches and rallying African-Americans. The Ras Tafari Movement emerged as a way of affirming African descent among Afro-Caribbeans. Popularized by Reggae music, the movement garnered tremendous popularity.

Later in the twentieth century, attempts at establishing cultural, religious, and political bonds between Africans and those of the Diaspora were manifest in the ideas of secular pan-Africanism. The idea of Pan-Africanism has been described as "delayed boomerang from the era of slavery."¹ It aroused the "wish to see Africa and people of African descent accepted in the modern world on a status of fully-fledged equality. Pan-Africanism can therefore be understood as the ideology of African emancipation of economic, technical and social modernization."² Immanuel Geiss defines Pan-Africanism as an intellectual or political movement designed to instill self-confidence among Africans or people of African descent by conceiving of Africa and people of African descent as a unit without, necessarily mandating a physical return to Africa.³ The ideals of Pan-Africanism received great support from Africans and people of African descent who brain-stormed on the subject at the several Pan-African conferences

held between 1919 and 1927, during which they published the demand that the habit of democracy must be made to encircle the world; and that in all the world the black folk be treated as man.⁴

However, from the Manchester conference of 1945, the leading participants were no longer Africans of the New World but those of the homeland. Consequently, emphasis shifted from the ideals of uniting the diaspora and the homeland to addressing the challenges of colonialism and independence in Africa. This emphasis gave birth to the organization of Africa unity in 1963. Ever since, African countries and their leaders have been more concerned with consolidating the gains of independence and grappling with the problem of nation building; and the relations between Africans of the New world and those of the homeland have focused chiefly on cultural contacts and Jamborees. One such grandiose and wasteful carnival was the FESTAC 77 held in Lagos, Nigeria.

D. THE PROBLEMS THAT CONFRONT THE AFRICAN.

Diasporan Africans face the negative and infantilizing assumptions of early European writers and even some contemporary euro-centric scholars who offer very fanciful theories to explain the state of development in African. One theory tends to associate the Negroes or Africans to the biblical Ham's descendents, incapable of achieving advanced forms of development. Related to this also is the Hamitic hypothesis which states "that Negro culture, left to itself, was never able more than a very low level of political organization. State ideology and organization, like every thing else considered valuable by Europeans, was brought into African by non-Negro invaders." It was against this background that the Europeans conceived of their early contacts with Africans as civilizing missions. Again the Trans Atlantic slave trade, slavery and colonialism bred the assumption that African are livestock to be bought, owned, sold off , subjugated, and exploited without qualms of conscience.

Such assumptions have become so engrained in Europeans and Americans that even the brilliance and major achievements of Africans in many different fields of human endeavor cannot erase it. The concomitant racial prejudice is still so strong that no African-American has ever won nomination under the platform of any political party to run as a presidential candidate in the USA.

Within and between African countries, debt crises, malnutrition, extreme poverty, environmental degradation, the AID/HIV pandemic, malaria, inter-ethnic rivalries, brain drain, drug abuse, and corruption in government are commonplace.

Debt crises: Africa countries are indebted to international financial institutions to such an extent that the debt burden will be borne by their grandchildren. There is no hope in sight that some of these loans, having found their way into private purses could ever be repaid. These countries so far are only attempting to service the debts, not paying the capital. Again, the recourse to World Bank and IMF for escape has further deepened the crisis. The IMF and World Bank economic models and prescriptions appear to further entangle these countries.

Hunger and poverty: Hunger and poverty are rife in African countries. Natural forces and lack of coordinated food programmes have brought about shortage in basic food supply. Famine, drought and over-flooding have brought about poor food yield and crop

destruction in some parts of Africa, weakening the purchasing power of Africans and exposing them to poor nutrition and health care delivery, hence the high mortality rate prevalent in Africa.

Environmental degradation: Poverty and hunger are cousins to environmental degradations the proliferation of industries and the activities of mineral exploration and exploitation firms have tended to degrade the environment of the host communities without corresponding attempt towards ameliorating its impact the activities of these companies have degraded the environment and disrupted balance in the Ecosystem.

The scourge of AID/HIV and Malaria: The duo of HIV/AIDs and malaria account for more than seventy-five percent of mortality cases recorded in tropical Africa. Ignorance and illiteracy make the spread of these health conditions possible.

Political instability and inter -ethnic rivalries: Rivalries amongst African nations hampered the attainment of national greatness and nation building in African states. Political instability by the desire of leaders to perpetuate themselves in office even against the wishes of the citizenry creates fear of loss of investment on intending foreign investors. Inter-ethnic rivalries have led to prolonged and internecine wars in Africa with the result that Africa has almost become synonymous with wars, crises, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Brain drain: The best crop of Africa professionals and academic in the recent past emigrate to other parts of the world in search of opportunities. It is estimated that 23,600 qualified academic professionals from Africa emigrate each years in search of better working conditions, depriving African nations of their most skilled and experienced work force.

Drug Abuse and trafficking: The use of drugs has infiltrated African societies, and this is quickly destroying the youths. That would form the future leaders of African societies. Again, the lust for flamboyance and love of affluent life style coupled with unemployment have compelled the youth to engage in drug trafficking as an avenue sustenance and quick access to wealth.

Corruption: African leaders lack probity and accountability in the use of public fund. Aids and given granted by international donors have been diverted to private hands and because the governments have proved to be poor custodians of this money, the donor and development agencies now prefer to collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), universities, and other private business and institutions.

E. THE NEED FOR A FOCUSED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFRICANS AND THOSE OF THE DIASPORA.

There is need for Africans of the homeland and the Diaspora to form collaborative initiatives to tackle these problems, and there is evidence of progress in that direction. The efforts of some African/American artistes in the USA to organize funds raising

concerts to aid the famine ridden areas of Africa in the 1980s, under the USA for Africa Project, is quite commendable. It implies empathy for the African Diaspora for the homeland. One can commend the Nigerian press for giving wide media coverage to the Democratic party's nomination of Reverend Jesse Jackson as presidential candidate in the 1980s. South African President Mbeki's call to bring the Caribbean Diaspora into the African fold is also a step in the right direction. For him, this initiative attempts to recover relationships that slavery and colonial rules rent asunder. Also, at the level of the African Union there has also been a realization of the need to "enlist the support of Africans in Diaspora in the effective mobilization of resources for Africa by way of investment. " The New partnership for African development has worked out an initiative to achieve this. The program's architects see the Diaspora as an essential partner. According to NEPAD policy Document " NEPAD will put in place adequate incentives for regular and substantial transfers by the Diaspora, especially as a means of boosting the volume of private investment in Africa⁶. These portend a bright future of the Africa - Diaspora relationship. Nevertheless, more progress is imperative. "The Diaspora can and should be encouraged to play a significant role in terms of advocacy for their countries and the continent at large"⁷ Primarily, this, involves marketing to counter the continents ubiquitously dark image in the North. Also Landmark achievements recorded by Diasporan Africans should be jointly celebrated, and African governments and media should refuse to countenance unsubstantiated and misleading Western propaganda against black nations and leaders, and Africans in Diaspora should a play comparable advocacy role in their countries.

RECIPE FOR THE FUTURE AFRICA/ DIASPORA RELATIONSHIPS.

There is no simple or quick solution to complex resentments that have built up centuries of momentum. The enormous US economy that continues to pillage and brain drain Africa was built on the backs of African-American slaves. Hence, some contemporary African-Americans resent that the descendents of some recent immigrants, whose ancestors may have abetted the slave trade, are coming to America and taking jobs that they covet. This trend kills the vitality, dynamism, vigor, and vibrancy possible in this relationship. Ambassador Howard F. Jettters observes that relationship between African of the soil and the diaspora should not be seen exclusively from the spectacle of past experience is apposite and commendable. According to him, we must study and discuss slavery, colonialism, racism and all other major currents of that collective history and our collective present. To do otherwise would render us ignorant and unworthy of our past. But too many of us rest at that, and venture no further. ⁸ This admonitory remark provides the gateway for the basis of new Africa Diaspora relationships, a bridge across the Atlantic, with which to confront the past, challenge the present, and build a better future. Therefore, there is the need to begin to shape "discussion of the Diaspora in the future tense." ⁹ To this end Africa / Diaspora relationships "must emphasize organized and institutional cooperation [they] must be forward leaning with eyes set on the future".

SUMMARY

To identify the need to refocus relationships between indigenous and diasporic Africans is to raise to the key question: what forms should these new relationship assume? Pan-African conferences and Jamborees appear inadequate to address the present needs of the people of African descent. Perhaps only a collaborative strategic vision and strenuous, unrelenting effort can yield more mutually beneficial interactions between Africans and their offspring in the Western Hemisphere.

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