

"THE EVOLUTION OF AFRICA"

LECTURE BY DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM

ON THE OCCASION OF AFRICA WEEK

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Faculty and the Student Community at Lehigh University

Organisers and Sponsors of the Africa Week,

Invited Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great honour for me to be invited to participate at this auspicious and inspiring event at your prestigious University. I wish to thank and pay tribute to the leadership and the entire community of this great institution for organizing such an event and for enabling me to join you this evening. The creative initiative you have taken in devoting a whole week to reflecting on the African predicament, listening to African sounds, and viewing the art and images from our dear continent is, indeed, laudable. I am also informed that you will also be savoring some of the African culinary delights, as a way of fully capturing the African spirit!

I can see no other way of critically engaging with a distinct reality than what you have planned for yourselves during this week. At the end of it all, the activities of the week are only a reaffirmation that Lehigh University, with its multicultural family and a powerful blend of diversity, possesses the hallmark of a global knowledge

centre of excellence. This is a true testimony of your mantra - 'challenging great minds and inspiring great imagination'.

We often refer to our world as an inter-dependent one. Thanks to the rapid advancement of information, communication technology as well as the challenges and vagaries of globalization we refer to our world as a global village. Yet for this global village to live in peace and to realize progress, it is essential that a genuine effort be made to understand the realities including the aspirations and shortcomings of its various constituents. Thus understanding the realities, problems, prospects and challenges facing Africa should be seen not simply in terms of academic interest but in the final analysis as a matter of self interest. Yet the fact remains that quite often there is a tendency to generalize about the continent or even worse to present Africa as a continent of diseases, poverty, endless violence and endemic corruption and where nothing good can be expected to come out.

This type of presentation is partly due to sheer ignorance and partly due to prejudice. It is thus encouraging to see a respected Institution like this providing an opportunity and space for a better understanding of the continent. Africa is not a country. It is a continent of more than 50 independent states. It is a continent of diversity – multiracial, multiethnic, multicolour, multi religious and multicultural. Yes we have our share of problems including civil wars, poverty, natural and man made disasters as well as pandemics such as AIDS. We have our Darfur and Somalia. But **Africa is not all about** conflicts, corruption and pandemics. Indeed the vast majority of African countries are peaceful and

stable and many of which are undergoing significant political, economic and social transformation.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I have been requested to share my views on the **Evolution of Africa**. It is very tempting for someone coming from my part of the Continent, which archeologists and paleoanthropologists have characterized as the 'cradle of humankind' to direct such a discussion towards the millions of years evolution of the entire human race. It has been suggested by some scholars that within the scheme of human evolution, the African dimension is quite profound. Its narrative goes beyond economics, beyond politics and even beyond race. It is actually a story about the entire human race in planet earth.

The whole rationale of going a little bit back in history is to understand the genesis of Africa's current predicament and the challenges that it encounters. I should point out, right at this outset, that in no way am I suggesting that the continent is a prisoner of its history. In fact, the gist of my proposition is that as it enters the new century and new millennium, Africa has endeavoured to harness the strength of its past in overcoming its adversities, and relinquishing the negative historical legacies for building a sustainable future.

Ladies and Gentlemen

When Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator who was sponsored to undertake expeditions to get spices from India, docked his ships in the various ports of West, Southern and the Eastern part, the Africa he encountered was in a very distinct trajectory. He found cities in the coast thriving with trade and commerce, both with the hinterland and with other parts of the world. In fact, when Vasco da Gama's expedition reached Mozambique, some records indicate that he was even given pilots who assisted him in crossing the Indian Ocean to Calcutta, thus confirming the existence in the Mozambique of that time, of expertise on navigating across the Indian Ocean. Prior to him, the continent was trading actively with Arabia, India and even China across the Sahara and the oceans.

Indeed, the period up to the late 16th Century witnessed remarkable advances not only in trade, but also in establishing the foundations for complex political organizations, architecture, industry, scholarship and in overall human development. This was taking place, not only in the Mediterranean parts of the Continent, where Egypt and its pyramids is the most renowned, but equally prominent also in South of the Sahara.

Metropolises like Zanzibar, Mombasa, Benin City, Jenne-jeno in present day Mali, Kumasi in Ghana were flourishing with connections with the world not only in trade but also in having prestigious universities. The Sankore Mosque University in Timbuktu founded in 12th Century was an acclaimed institution of

learning where courses such as theology, logic, astronomy and astrology, grammar, rhetoric, history and geography were taught.

By the 16th Century complex political processes were evolving throughout the continent, transforming small scale polities into larger kingdoms, some of which had sophisticated political organizations. Renowned empires such as ancient Ghana, Mali, Songay, Luba and Lunda, Mwene Mutapa, Axum, Buganda had brought the Continent to a high level of political development. All these exhibited the foundations for the evolution of modern state systems. For example, the political structure of the Buganda kingdom had a coherent consultative and decentralized structure, with checks and balances. While the *Kabaka* (the king) was, in principle, supreme, he presided over the kingdom in conjunction with a prime minister (*katikkiro*) and a parliament (*lukiiko*). Members of parliament were made up of the chiefs of outlying districts that comprised the kingdom. Similar examples of checks and balances were found in several other kingdoms in various regions.

Oral history as well as anthropological and archeological studies has also confirmed advanced developments at that time in the fields of education, art and music, industry, architecture and medicine. It can be asserted that by the 17th Century, Africa was in a path of self-sustaining development which was endogenously driven. It had all the ingredients for building strong societies which would have advanced in the same tempo with the rest of the world.

Obviously, one should not overly romanticize this early period. It did have its own internal tensions, inequities and setbacks. However, the overall momentum for progress was generated and a trajectory for transformation and development was evident.

The next 300 years of African history until the 1960s unleashed a totally different dynamic in the destiny of the African continent. International slave trade followed by colonialism and apartheid completely devastated the Continent by arresting the earlier momentum, disarticulating productive forces and severely emasculating the endogenous inertia.

One cannot overstate the human horrors of slavery and slave trade. It disrupted peace and security in the region, deprived the continent of its most productive assets, fostered hostilities among communities and planted the seeds for exogenously oriented economies. More everlasting also was the severe damage it inflicted on the people's psyche and confidence. A negative complex was implanted at a time when the western world was going through an industrial revolution.

When colonial powers gathered in Berlin in 1884 and partitioned Africa, they did so, to suit their imperial convenience. Kingdoms of Africa were divided arbitrarily. Colonial systems of government were imposed while those traditional and relevant to Africa were supplanted and discarded. Colonial violence held those artificial creations in check and subservient to Empire.

The aftermaths of the almost 100 years of colonial rule in Africa were far-reaching. Ethnic identities were reinforced, communities were divided by the artificial boundaries, and structures of production were distorted. Some economists described the situation during this period as the continent 'producing what it did not consume and consuming what it did not produce! Structures of underdevelopment were fully entrenched.

In terms of political organization, the overall systems of governance were deprived of any organic linkage with the people. The colonial state was designed in the image of the liberal state of the mother country. The forceful manner in which it was imposed on the colonial subjects projected it simply as an instrument of alienation and oppression.

This is the Africa that was inherited at the dawn of independence in the 1960s. It was a Continent faced with multiple challenges of regaining a lost identity and collective assertiveness, and also the challenge of building new nation-states which have been carved out of the European scramble for Africa. Essentially the people of Africa had to confront the aftermaths of 300 years of arrested development.

It is therefore not surprising that the first major undertaking made in the post-independence period was the creation, in May 1963, after consultations of several years earlier, of a Pan-African body at that time called the Organisation of African Unity.

The significance of that event of 25th May 1963 lay not simply in creating a Pan-African Organization, which was in itself an important achievement. More profound, however, was the crystallization of a collective vision and aspirations of the African People. On that historic day, African leaders articulated through the Charter of the OAU not only a vision of the Africa that the people of this Continent desire to see evolving, but also the means by which that objective can be realized.

That moment was indeed a point of reckoning for our Continent. It demonstrated the resilience of our people - in that after centuries of subjugation, humiliation and of being divided through the twin historical evils of slavery and colonialism - they could still remain adamant in their quest for carving a destiny of unity and solidarity.

In 1963, Africa had only 32 countries that were politically independent. The rest were still under the tutelage of colonialism and apartheid, some of which was the most vicious that modern history has witnessed. It was under the framework of the OAU that independent Africa was mobilized to obliterate the last vestiges of colonialism and apartheid and to usher-in a new independent Africa.

Freedom has been the single most important achievement for Africa. The success of our struggles against colonialism means today that apart from the unfinished business of ending apartheid, Africa is basically free. This did not come easily. Political agitation, mass action and in several cases bitter wars of liberation which cost lives, were the prices we had to pay for our political

independence. We had to pay the exacting price because we realized that without freedom we could not apply ourselves fully to the tasks of our own development. For a people in bondage and whose freedom is chained or circumscribed can not maximize their potential. We fought for independence because it was the only means to our freedom and liberty, to our ability to take our destiny into our own hands.

With the accomplishment of that historic mission, the OAU, working with other Regional Organizations such as the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank embarked on a reorientation of the Continental agenda towards the socio-economic development of the people of this Continent. The laying down of the principles of cooperation in the social and economic field, and specifically the creation of Regional Economic Communities and the recent establishment of the African Union signify the continent's endeavour to surmounting the new challenges and to accelerate the attainment of integration and unity.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is at the national level where the most arduous challenges confronted the people of Africa. Profound changes were needed in the political, economic and social fronts. Most urgent and critical, was the need to forge a sense of nationhood among the desperate ethnic and regional entities. This task was accomplished relatively faster in countries, like mine, Tanzania; but it became very difficult in others. Alongside the process of nation building, was an attempt

made to indigenize the inherited political system with a view to making it more capable to handle the obtaining challenge.

It is this later aspect which tends to be more conspicuous externally because the experience has not been that smooth, and in many instances the consequences have been catastrophic. The adoption of single-party regimes, usurpation of power by military dictators and even the embracing of some distorted versions of political pluralism did not establish the necessary tranquility the continent needed for rapid development. In many cases it led to civil insurgency and unrest. For almost two decades the Continent was gripped with incessant civil wars with devastating consequences.

A heavy burden bequeathed to the newly independent states was the scourge of poverty, ignorance and disease. By the early 1960s, there was no single African country that had more than a handful of indigenous experts in any given field, be it medicine, agriculture, or engineering. Schools, hospitals, roads, and other basic amenities were located in few towns and in those places where they could provide for an export oriented economy.

The challenge of post-independence development was to rectify the structural distortions and to trigger a momentum for self-sustaining development. As was the case with political systems, the approach adopted in economic transformation also varied. There were those who put the commanding heights of the economy under state control and made the public sector to be the

main driver. There were others who left the economy to market forces and to the private sector.

In the social front, the Continent had to grapple with the challenge of fostering inclusiveness, promoting national and African identity and nurturing norms and values that are in line with rapid development. There has been an imperative need to harness the rich diversity obtaining in the Continent and to transform it into a basis of strength. An urgent need was seen for deploying the positive African cultural heritage with a view to fostering an African identity that would enhance unity and solidarity.

It has been only 50 years since Africa entered a third phase of its history of the past five centuries. In fact, the Republic of Ghana, the first Sub-Saharan African country to gain her independence in 1957 celebrated 50 years only last year. The challenge of transformation has been formidable. Nevertheless, the achievements have not been discouraging. To say the least, Africa has re-embarked on the path it lost centuries ago, and is now in a new trajectory of self-transformation.

Obviously, the continent is not homogenous so it does not make to generalize. However, there is an all-encompassing momentum which seems to pull even those which are fairing badly at a given point in time. In this respect, the process of integration has fairly gained thrust, with the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union, and more operationally with the remarkable progress made in the workings of the more than a dozen Regional Economic Communities.

Africa leadership has taken full responsibility and is playing a leading role in promoting peace and security in the Continent. Almost all the major conflicts that have beleaguered the continent; including the most recent in (Darfur, Kenya, Chad) are being or have been mediated through the leadership of Africans, with international support. It was a moment of pride a few weeks ago to watch Mr. Koffi Annan distinguished son of Ghana and former Secretary General of the United Nations, as chief mediator under the auspices of the African Union, standing with the current chairman of the Africa Union, President Kikwete of Tanzania and members of the Eminent African Personalities Group witnessing the signing agreement for a peaceful end of an election-triggered conflict in Kenya.

While peace has not been fully entrenched in the continent, with the prevailing conflicts in the Western Sudan region of Darfur and Somalia as the most terrible examples, it is nonetheless satisfying to note a significant reduction in the incidence of civil or inter-state strife in the past five years. It is also encouraging to see the gradual solidification of peace and stability in the Great Lakes region including in Burundi. Obviously, instability and conflict is not a unique characteristic of Africa. Societies in other regions do encounter such adverse developments. However, we in Africa cannot simply afford such adversities.

Even the isolated incidences of instability can easily reverse the remarkable achievements the continent has made in the economic front. During the last decade impressive rates of growth have been

registered in a majority of countries, in some cases with a double digit. At the continental level, there has been a sustainable process of economic reforms which have attracted significant amounts of foreign investments. Focused and result-oriented national and regional programmes have been put in place to trigger rapid growth. However, recent assessments have indicated that the continent will not be able to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by the targeted timeframe of 2015. Efforts are now being made to put in place the necessary levers for accelerated implementation of the necessary programmes.

The HIV-AIDS pandemic continues to wreck havoc in our societies. However, programmes for awareness and prevention are now more widespread and status determination through testing is gaining more acceptability. Access to anti-retroviral treatment is now provided to more people and stigmatization is gradually decreasing.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to reiterate that Africa's developmental failings are neither unique nor acceptable. The people of the continent are committed to taking full responsibility in overcoming the prevailing challenges and shaping their destiny. Measures taken in the last decade and a half – in the areas of peace, democratic and economic reforms, and in the search for integration -provide a testimony to a new path the continent has embarked upon. The people of the Continent strive to assume their rightful place in the global arena. In a world which is increasingly globalizing and almost becoming like a

village, the international community should not afford not to support Africa as it seeks its destiny. The challenges of climate change, threats to our collective security including international terrorism, hazards of global pandemics, and the recent experience of international migration confirm that we need to work together in this planet earth.

Let me conclude with some personal reflections:

For the last several decades, I have been in one way or another involved in the process of change in our continent. As a young student and militant I was involved in the independence movement. At the age of 22 I had the rare privilege and distinct honour of serving as my country's Ambassador to Cairo. Thereafter I served in a number of high profile diplomatic posts including New Delhi and Beijing as well as a ten year period at the United Nations in New York where among other things I was privileged to serve as chairman of the UN committee decolonization, President of the United Nations Security Council and President of the UN General Assembly. During all this period I was intimately involved together with other African colleagues concerning developments in the continent.

Perhaps more relevant to the topic of my lecture today is that I also served an unprecedented three terms covering 12 years as Secretary General of the Africa's premier Institution – the Organization of Africa Unity (now the African Union). During this period I had visited, in some cases, several times, almost all Africa countries. During these visits and indifferent forums I interacted

with leaders of our countries as well as with different segments of the population including the civil society.

✓ I have experienced memories of glory and gratification like the swearing in May 1994 of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected President of South Africa. I have also witnessed moments of agony, shame and indescribable cruelty when I visited Rwanda in the immediate aftermath of the genocide. I have been a witness to successes as well as distresses and disappointments. I have met with African leaders who were and are genuinely committed to serve their people. I have also met some who were more interested in self glorification and personal aggrandizement.

As OAU Secretary General I was very much involved in at least four major decisions of our continental organization which had considerable impact for the future of our continent and people. These are: the 1990 Addis Ababa decision to embark on further democratization of Africa Societies and greater respect for human rights; the 1991 Abuja decision to establish the Africa Economic Community with the Regional Economic Communities as its building blocks; the 1993 Cairo decision to establish the Mechanism for prevention, management and resolution of conflict and finally the 1999 Sirte declaration which ushered in the establishment of the African Union.

✓ Clearly therefore I have seen many ups and downs. But one thing has been consistent. The resilience and determination of the African people for a better tomorrow through good governance,

transparency, proper and fair utilization of the continent's immense resources. In this context, one need hardly over emphasize the urgent need to eliminate or at least drastically minimize the glaring anomaly and contradiction of a continent richly endowed in resources but inhabited by some of the poorest people in the world.

It is my conviction that notwithstanding the many problems and shortcomings that we face, Africa is on the right path. This is not only the continent of the future but the African people with boundless energy are resolved to make it the continent of the present. The resources both human and material are there. The challenge is to the leadership. With good governance and genuine international cooperation Africa and its people, will rise to the great heights that they are entitled to.

I thank you for your attention.