

(Vantage Point) President Obama's "Tough Love" Sermon to Africa

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels
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Barack Obama traveled to Accra Ghana for an historic visit to Africa as America's first African American President. Africa and the Black World were buzzing about his journey to the continent where his father was born. President Obama soon made it clear that he was coming to Africa to deliver a sermon of "tough love" on national responsibility and accountability. In a conversation with African leaders and journalists prior to touching down in Ghana, the President bluntly admonished Africans to stop blaming their problems on colonialism, stressing instead that the future of Africa must be in the hands of Africans.

Welcomed by thousands of adoring Ghanaians as a son of Africa, in his speech before the Parliament, Obama emphasized that bad governance, corrupt officials and fratricidal conflicts are not attributable to the legacy of colonialism. And, as he emerged from an emotional tour of the slave dungeons at Cape Coast Castle, he said Africans should not see themselves simply as "victims" of this horrendous experience.

While I certainly believe there is merit to much of what President Obama had to say, I was disturbed by his approach. It lacked context and therefore devalued the inestimable impact of the holocaust of enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism on current conditions in Africa. Moreover, I would have preferred that the President start with a more uplifting recitation of Africa's extraordinary contribution to civilization and humankind. Using Africa's legacy of achievements as a starting point, I would have preferred the President acknowledge that the European invasion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade "underdeveloped" and devastated Africa, while contributing substantially to the "development" of Europe and America. He might have done well to read *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* where Walter Rodney documents this tragic dynamic.

I would have preferred that the President discuss the systematic carving up of Africa by European powers at the Congress of Berlin in 1884 and the ruthless and sustained exploitation of the continent's treasure trove of resources, further accentuating the development/underdevelopment process. The dissection of Africa was totally executed without regard for existing ethnic/cultural ties and the boundaries of kingdoms and nations of the time. While carving up Africa served the purposes of the colonizers, it sowed the seeds of ethnic strife/tension and dysfunctional states once "independence" was achieved - all of which has played to the advantage of the colonizers.

I would have preferred that the President discuss how the former European colonizers have maintained a stranglehold over the economies of their former colonies thereby continuing to

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disproportionately benefit from the riches/wealth of Africa. Neo-colonialism has been the order of the day as many African nations have been reduced to "flag independence" where they ostensibly control the political process but have only nominal control over their economies. Moreover, I would have preferred that the President address the serious damage done by the pro-western oriented neo-liberal structural adjustment programs imposed on African nations by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. These programs were designed to promote privatization of public enterprises as part of the "free-market, laissez-faire orthodoxy of radical conservatives in the U.S.

While I am no fan of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, someone whom I feel is afflicted by "president-for-life disease," I would have preferred that the President be critical of Britain, and even the U.S., for failing to implement the provisions of the Lancaster Agreement which called for funds to be made available so that land could be purchased from the White settlers. You cannot adequately assess the crisis in Zimbabwe without discussing the fact that Britain, Europe and America reneged on their promise to assist the landless to become landowners in a nation where they were dispossessed by interlopers. Finally, I would have preferred that the President be a bit more humble in pointing fingers at corrupt leaders, agencies and governments in Africa when the greed driven, reckless and irresponsible behavior of the bandits and Barracudas on Wall Street have not only wrecked the U.S economy, but sent the global economy into a terrifying tailspin. And, I am not aware of many Bernie Madoffs on the African continent!

This is the context which could have provided greater credibility and moral authority to President Obama's criticism of corruption, bad governance and fratricidal conflicts on the African continent. My preferences notwithstanding, however, I must admit my utter disgust at much of what I see on the African continent in terms of the failure of African leaders and governments to serve the interest and welfare of the masses of the people. No where is this more evident than in the oil rich nation of Nigeria where millions live in abject poverty in the Delta region, in the shadow of oil rigs and refineries. President Obama is absolutely correct to suggest that it's not colonialism, neo-colonialism or dictates from America or the West that drive Nigerian business interests to line their pockets and become filthy rich while the masses live in wretched poverty. This phenomenon is not confined to Nigeria. Corruption and mismanaged governments abound on the African continent as far too many of its leaders seek to secure and cling to power for self-aggrandizement.

Far be it for the President of the United States to lecture people of African descent on these crucial matters. As African people we have a moral, ethical and political imperative to demand that African leaders not betray the vision and sacrifice of African freedom fighters like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius K. Nyerere, Ahmad Sekou Toure and other leaders of the anti-colonial liberation struggles. Their goal was not only to gain "independence" but to create new societies, totally divorced from the greed-oriented ideologies of Europe and America. Their vision was to achieve total decolonization of their new nations so that the masses could finally benefit from the enormous riches of Africa. This is the largely unrealized vision/mission which progressive African leaders and Pan Africanists must focus on with relentless commitment, effort and passion in the 21st century!

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