

# **‘Building a New Africa to lead the World: The New Role of the African Youth’**

Adams Bodomo

Online speech to African Students at Taiyuan University of Technology, Taiyuan, Shanxi, China on Africa Day, May 25, 2020

Dear students of Taiyuan University of Technology, Distinguished listeners,

I am honoured to be asked to be Guest Speaker online on this important day in the annals of the African Union (AU) and of all Africans. In all of my 15 years of living in Hong Kong, China, I have visited most major cities of China, including Shanxi Taiyuan. It was there that I got my first invitation to give a keynote address at the Chinese Association of African Historical Studies in the Twenty Noughties.

Celebrating Africa Day in far away China is not new to me. I believe I was the first to organize it in all of China at the University of Hong Kong as a young Assistant Professor as early as 1998, and later as Director of the University's African Studies programme. Then when I moved to Vienna in Europe, I set up what is called the Global Africa Month (GAM) - a cocktail of activities during all of May each year to commemorate African success stories in the year and to take stock of our failures for managing our further development in the coming year. I am therefore very happy to know that you the young ones, not just only here in Taiyuan, but all over China, have taken over the baton and are enthusiastically organizing Africa Day. I suggest you upgrade it into an Africa Month!

Now, to the theme of your Africa Day Celebration: *Building a New Africa to lead the World: The New Role of the African Youth!* My understanding of it is that you have as a committee come up with a tall order, collectively setting yourselves higher goals towards building a new Africa, i.e. an Africa positively different from what we have now. You have also placed yourselves largely within this process of achieving this ideal by inserting a subtitle about the new role of the youth. So the word 'new' is very much highlighted here as it appears in both your main theme

and its subtitle. But a most important aspect of your theme that I particularly like is about *Africa leading the world*. So in your framing you are not only satisfied with just developing Africa, but developing it in such a way that it can actually be more competitive than other parts of the world, and become a global leader. As someone that relishes in doing research on the theme of Afrofuturism I like this Wakandaish approach to the future of Africa from Africa's youth - and Africa's youth for me can be African people anywhere up to as old as 40 years. This is the group of Africans with more of the enthusiasm, the vibrancy and the longevity of living that we can expect to take Africa to its desired goals in the next 100 years.

In the course of this one hour that you have asked me to provide my thoughts on your theme, I will be guided by the following questions: what is it that is wrong with Africa? What has been done in the past about Africa's current situation, what has worked and what has not worked? What new things can the youth of Africa do differently?

### **Africa - past and present:**

Whenever and wherever two or more Africans from any of the 55 countries that comprise Africa are gathered - and begin to talk about the African condition - there is one question often raised: why is our continent of Africa in such a bad shape? Why are other parts of the world like Europe, the US and China, doing so much better than us economically? With known deposits of some of the most sought after mineral resources – gold, diamond, bauxite, manganese, cobalt, you name them -, with many other natural and human resources in abundance, why are we among the wretched of the earth, as Frantz Fanon will say? In a sign that some may even be losing hope the question has often be raised: can the African or the Black person rule him- or herself at all? How can we get out of this situation of resource curse whereby we are impoverished in the midst of riches?

My answer has always been that we can surely reverse the situation, and I have a motivational theory to explain this: *the civilization curve theory*. Civilizations don't develop and progress in straight upward lines on the graph; they travel in curves. This civilization curve theory claims that the development trajectory of every society is one in which the progression is in *knolls and troughs*. African societies

have grown in knolls and troughs. The European civilizations that we know of have grown in knolls and troughs. China has grown in knolls and troughs. The simple point here is that every civilization as we see it today has had its ups and downs. And we happen to be living in a time that the African civilization is in a trough.

But Africa was not always like this, as history tells us. History indeed tells us that when we were building the pyramids of Egypt, many Europeans were living in caves. History tells us that when higher education was flourishing in Timbuktu, and when we were setting up the first university in the world, the University of Karueen in Fez, present-day Morocco in 859 AD, other parts of the world were in a civilizational trough. History also tells us that we built viable nations and empires from Songhay to Mali to Ghana and beyond. And I could go on and on, but suffice is to say that the African society was on a civilizational knoll, but as with all societies we made mistakes and found ourselves in a trough. We made mistakes on contact with other civilizations that defeated us and enslaved and colonized us. We made mistakes when we began to build or rebuild nation states after colonialism. We fought internecine wars on the continent, corruption and misrule festered in our midst, and we allowed some of our leaders to develop into kleptocrats. We allowed other nations to continue to exploit us through bad deals with the Bretton Woods institutions and many other lenders. We must now find a way to climb out of the trough and on to a knoll, onto a civilizational high. We know exactly what went wrong and we must now find a way out of the trough.

### **What has been done - what worked and what didn't work:**

It would be unfair to many of our past heroes to say that nothing was done in an attempt to get Africa back to its past glory. Great leaders in Africa and its diaspora like Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois helped us to fight for the end of slavery and reclaim our dignity. Great African statesmen like Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Patrice Lumumba, Haile Selassie, Tafawa Balewa, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyata, Sekou Toure, Kenneth Kaunda, Robert Mugabe, etc fought for African independence and dignity. Leaders like Nelson Mandela and Archbishop

Tutu fought in South Africa for the end of apartheid. Forward looking African leaders like Thomas Sankara and Muamar Gaddafi showed us how to turn our moribund economies into viable economies. These efforts by our heroes and many more not mentioned here have led to some progress and Africa now has some well-functioning economies like Botswana and Mauritius and some fast growing economies like Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, and Ethiopia.

So, yes, something has been done by our heroes as mentioned above. But the fact that we are where we are demands clamoring for a new Africa.

### **Comes in the youth of Africa - towards a new Africa:**

The African youth has since time immemorial been at the vanguard of defending, protecting, and promoting Africa, militarily and culturally! The Mau Mau fighters of East Africa were at the core of armed military conflict against European colonizers. The Asafo companies - warrior youth groups among the Akan of Ghana - were often at the vanguard of defending the country against European invaders. Most of the independence struggles could not have succeeded without our young men and women in the vanguard of campaigns against invaders.

In the arena of sports and other cultural matters young people in Africa and its diaspora have continued to raise high the image of Africa and people of African descent, and I can mention Jesse Owens, Muhammed Ali, Edson Arantes do Nascimento (Pele), Husain Bolt, Serena Williams, Tiger Woods, Lewis Hamilton, Gebre Selassie, Eliud Kipchoge, and the list continues unendingly.

So what more can the youth do to uplift Africa? What new roles do you the youth have for building a new Africa? Obviously you will know better than me, but based on my research I just want to suggest ways you might contribute to the new Africa you want.

*Business innovations:*

As part of my research on the African diaspora in China, I have been observing and doing discourse analysis of about 500 people on the ADiC Net Wechat platform. ADiC Net stands for African Diaspora in China Network – a group that the African Union helped Africans in China to form and run by themselves in November 2019 – I am proud to have been asked by the AU to assist on this task.

From my observation, the vast majority of these people – mostly young African students or people who have newly completed their courses of study - working for someone is not their first choice. Rather they would like to get into innovative business start-ups. And some of them it seems are already successful businessmen plying between Africa and China. Now, this is a good approach, for if Africa is to lead the world we must rapidly transform the business environment, put more money into people's pockets and grow our middle class!

Well, though I am not a businessman myself, my advice would be to adopt what is now called a Disruptive Business Model – a business that would use various strategies to create new business markets by improving upon existing business models. Examples include the Uber and AirB&B services that many of us use. Technology is key here and our youth can use technology to create many other types of disruptive business models in Africa to eliminate the legendary inefficiencies that hamper progress towards a modernization of the African economy. Africa cannot successfully compete with and even lead the world if our economies are not modernized.

*Political participation:*

At the socio-political level, the African youth, both at home and in the African diaspora, must show interest in and take part in active politics. We cannot lead the world with gerontocracies. Our governments must look like the rest of the population in terms of age, gender and other important social variables. More and more young people around the world -from Austria to France to New Zealand - are leading governments in their countries and Africa cannot be an exception.

*Interdisciplinary studies:*

In terms of higher education, I would also like to recommend to the African youth wherever they are to pursue interdisciplinary studies to the highest levels. The best form of interdisciplinary studies are not just STEM – science, technology, engineering and mathematics - but STEAM – science, technology, engineering, ARTS and mathematics! The Arts here stand for arts, humanities and social science subjects. Scientists would work in societies and health experts will work on and with human beings. This is especially true during periods of infectious disease outbreaks like the current COVID-19 where community participation is crucial for health experts to be able to contain pandemic outbreaks so that they will not become endemic. So the future African specialist must be a STEAM educated specialist if we are to lead the world. Every African scientist must specialize or take interest in one of the humanities subjects and every humanities scholar must specialize or take interest in one of the science subjects.

*A strong dose of pan-Africanism:*

Finally, for the youth of Africa, both at home and in the diaspora, to champion an Africa that leads the world, there must be a very strong dose of pan-Africanism. One of the stumbling blocks preventing the creation of pan-African organizations and institutions like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and common monetary unions is what I term *petty nationalism*, or what some pan-African colleagues of mine term mini-state mentality. Many leaders of the various countries have in the past refused to champion African unity whole-heartedly because they still harbour petty nationalist ideals that make them want to protect their borders and so-called sovereignty from other Africans. But petty nationalism or mini-state mentalities cannot take Africa far. The youth of Africa need to decolonize their minds, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it, before they can lead Africa to the top of the world. Africa cannot lead the world if each mini-state or huge but dysfunctional African state has to negotiate with the powers of the world. It is only when Africa negotiates as an entity with powers like China, Europe, and the US that we can leverage our collective might.

In the diaspora, especially among you African students, I entreat you to organize yourselves with pan-Africanist mindsets. Every major committee or leadership

group should include Africans from all the six major development zones of the AU – Central Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, and the Diaspora. Though the AU has not always lived up to its ideals – and Africans have the right to be critical of the AU - I entreat all of you to regularly take interest in and keep abreast with developments at the AU in Addis Ababa. In particular the African youth must familiarize themselves with the AU's most important document, Agenda 2063, which is a major policy and implementation blueprint. Any African that criticizes the AU without knowing what this document is all about is committing a huge intellectual error – critiquing something you have not read or of which you know nothing.

In the same vein I entreat you the youth of Africa – Africans students – listening to this speech to keep yourselves abreast with Africa – China policy frameworks, especially the Forum for Africa – China Corporation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative. By being here you are agents that can build bridges for successful Africa – China win-win relations. For Africa to be a major player in the world it needs to build bridges with other competing entities and ensure that its interests are not undermined.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, let me reiterate that you have settled on a very good theme for celebrating Africa Day: *Building a New Africa to lead the World: The New Role of the African Youth!* It is an ambitious theme; a lofty goal you have set for yourselves. Let me remind you again that according to the conceptual framework of civilization curve that I have mentioned here, Africa was once on a civilization knoll. It however now finds itself in a civilization trough. The task of all Africans and especially the African youth is to pull Africa out of this civilizational trough and onto a civilizational knoll!

Once again thank you, African students in Taiyuan and other parts of China, thank you distinguished participants, for listening to me.

Congratulations for your initiative in holding an Africa Day for the first time here in Taiyuan!

Keep safe from the COVID-19 virus by obeying your local health professionals!  
Wear a mask and practice social distancing!

Barka! Medaase! Akpe! Nagode! Asante!

Thank you!

Merci!

Xiexie!

Happy Africa Day to you and to all Africans in Africa and around the world!

Speaker bio:

Adams Bodomo is Director of the Global African Diaspora Studies (GADS) Research Centre at the University of Vienna, Austria where he is Chair Professor of African Studies (Languages and Literatures). Professor Bodomo has done pioneering work on twenty- first century Africa– Asia studies, with a particular focus on the African Diaspora in China, African diaspora remittances, Africa's experiences with globalization, and on the linguistic and cultural relations between Africa and Asia. He is the author of well-cited works on African diaspora in China, on African diaspora remittances, and on Chinese investment in Africa

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