

From Mount Accra, Obama chastises Nigeria

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By Okey Ndibe

President Barack Hussein Obama, a man who embodies hope and a can-do spirit, went to Accra, Ghana last week to deliver a clear message: Africa's future lies in African hands.

It was Obama's sermon from Mount Accra. As speeches go, this one had two parts to it. Obama used part of his speech to deliver a rousing, and well-earned, praise of Ghanaians - a people who have beaten a path out of forlorn despair into hope, an energetic present and a promising future. He professed pride that "this is my first visit to sub-Saharan Africa as President of the United States." And then, in a line that must have made every Ghanaian heart swell with pride, he added: "I have come here, to Ghana, for a simple reason: the 21st century will be shaped by what happens not just in Rome or Moscow or Washington, but by what happens in Accra as well."

Obama's speech was also a thinly veiled rebuke to those African countries that still murk around, fiddling away opportunities to achieve their promise. Among those countries, Kenya (Obama's patrimonial homeland) and Nigeria (home to the vast majority of the world's Black people) stand out.

In 1998, novelist Chinua Achebe gave a lecture at the World Bank and gave his audience the simple, but not always understood, message that "Africa is people." In Accra, Obama echoed that sentiment when he asserted: "the boundaries between people are overwhelmed by our connections...I see Africa as a fundamental part of our interconnected world - as partners with America on behalf of the future that we want for all our children."

Obama's speech was part rallying cry, part deep cry from the heart of one who confessed, "I have the blood of Africa within me," testifying that "my family's own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story."

Today, Ghana represents the renascent spirit of Africa's triumphs as surely as Nigeria emblemizes the continent's abiding tragedies. And Obama's sermon was attentive to the contrasting narratives of success and failure, hope and grimness, Ghana (as well as Botswana, South Africa, Senegal, Namibia etc) and Nigeria (as well as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Niger, Somalia etc).

With his host country in mind, the American president credited “considerable progress in parts of Africa” but also noted, with Kenya and, likely, Nigeria in mind, that much of the continent’s promise “has yet to be fulfilled.”

Obama’s speech was not always historically honest. He seemed in a haste to play down the West’s culpability for Africa’s travails, in the past as now. He acknowledged that the cavalier colonial map “made little sense” and “bred conflict,” and also that “the West has often approached Africa as a patron, rather than a partner.” Yet, instead of recognizing that those foreign interventions and meddlesomeness incubated much of Africa’s malaise, he sought to exonerate the West for “the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants.”

A more nuanced posture would admit that the West, in failing to follow through on its pledge to help Zimbabwe redress decades of racial inequity in land ownership, helped foster violence and precipitate an economic free-fall in that country. Besides, the West’s inordinate appetite for diamonds and gold has fueled many of the calamitous wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Congo in which children have become villains and victims.

Despite this historical short circuit, Obama’s message was on target. The European and North American media are often fixated on the image of Africa as a dysfunctional, misaligned location. In

Ghana, Obama detected something different, “a face of Africa that is too often overlooked by a world that sees only tragedy or the need for charity.” He pointed to Ghanaians’ effort to “put democracy on a firmer footing”. He lauded them for nurturing “improved governance and an emerging civil society” that have, in turn, produced “impressive rates of [economic] growth.”

Obama could have been looking Nigerian leaders in the face when he uttered the “fundamental truth” that “development depends upon good governance.” He might as well be chiding the “stake holder thieftains” in Abuja who stake out their country’s resources when he described good governance as “the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long.” When he declared, “governments that respect the will of their own people are more prosperous, more stable and more successful than governments that do not,” he doubtless wanted Nigerians to take note.

Obama made a wise choice not to grace a disappointing Nigeria with his presence. But he also made sure that his message, taken from Accra, resonated with Nigerians. In condemning repression and the plague of man-made problems “that condemn...people to poverty”; in warning that “No country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves, or police can be bought off by drug traffickers,” in portraying a state where “the government skims 20 percent off the top, or the head of the port authority is

corrupt," Obama wanted his voice to resound in Nigeria.

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14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
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Okey Ndibe is a Nigerian novelist, poet, and political commentator. He is the author of the critically praised novel, *Arrows of Rain*. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988 to be the founding editor of the *African Commentary*, an award-winning and widely acclaimed magazine published by the novelist Chinua Achebe. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is finishing work on a novel titled *foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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