

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN RESEARCHERS IN THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONTINENT

Speech given by Prof. Abdulai at the Gala Dinner of the 1st International Conference on Leadership and Management for Sustainable Development held at Theatre on the Track, Kyalami, South Africa, 7th October 2010.

The programme director, members of the SBL Board here present, members of Unisa management, our honoured guest, my academic colleagues at the Graduate School of Business Leadership and administrative staff, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, all protocols duly and respectfully observed.

When I was asked to give this dinner speech, I asked myself what I had done to the organising committee of this seminal conference to be punished with this Sisyphean task. You see ladies and gentlemen, the problems with dinner speeches are that they are usually given after the Starters when the guests are eagerly waiting for the main course and can't wait to clap politely to get the speaker off the stage so that they can continue with their dinner. These speeches are also sometimes too long and boring and what guest at dinner parties' hate are long and boring dinner speeches. With this counsel in mind, I will try to be brief.

But I must also confess that my job is also made difficult because this distinguished dinner audience is mostly an academic audience with numerous researchers here present.

Hence, I have to try to speak like an academic, sound academic and most important of all, have my facts right or else my reputation is in serious trouble. On a serious note, it is indeed an honour and a privilege to be called upon to give this speech. When I accepted this offer, I asked myself what was the appropriate topic to speak about? A little bird told me that since it is a research conference dinner to speak about research. What about research I pondered? It came to me: **THE ROLE OF AFRICAN RESEARCHERS IN THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONTINENT.**

Honourable guest:

Our continent Africa has come a long way. It has come a long way from the time it was called the “Dark Continent,” a “Hopeless Continent,” and one characterised by some as having no future. Really, Africa has no future? For most of us African academics and leaders in our respective organisations on the continent, the negative depiction of Africa in Western and other media is nothing new. Personally, I often find myself at international fora and the Africa that is usually talked about baffles me. On several occasions when I tell some of these people at these international fora that I am an African, they often look at me in disbelief. To them, an African is what they see depicted in what I call, **“the National Geographic Africa,” “the CNN Africa,” or “the Hollywood Africa.”** A primitive Africa,

an Africa of safaris, starving people, and dictators. An Africa where people are always singing and dancing, an Africa of “happy-go-lucky” people, a make-believe Africa.

Recently, I was in the U.S. visiting an American friend in the Mid-west after attending a programme at Harvard Business School. My friend SMSed his lady friend that, his African friend was visiting. The lady friend replied, **“is he wearing his loin-cloth?”** My friend laughed and showed the SMS to me. I told him to reply by saying that **“I took it off and I am covering my essential commodities with a feather that was adorning my hair.”** But you get the message. Ladies and gentlemen, the perception by some of a primitive Africa still pertain.

Honourable guest

That Africa they depict belongs to the dust-bin of history and it is time they changed their warped perception of Africa. Truth be told, Africa has its share of challenges but equally, a lot has not been said about Africa and indeed we Africans have not told our stories often and forcefully enough. “Our story” has then become “his-story.” Here are some facts less told about Africa:

- **Fact:** Africa achieved 5.4% growth for a decade except for the recent global financial downturn (this means Africans are better managing their economies).

- **Fact:** Growth has surpassed all OECD countries in the last 5 years.
- **Fact:** Returns on investment in Africa surpasses all the regions in the world.
- **Fact:** China's trade with Africa has surpassed the 100 billion mark.
- **Fact:** Increased democratisation of African countries.
- **Fact:** Increased liberalisation of African economies.
- **Fact:** Africa is the last frontier (The new scramble for Africa has begun).
- **Fact:** Africa's middle class is growing.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are the stories that are not told. I believe that the 21st Century belongs to Africa. Our story is a compelling one and we Africans must tell it because it is the reality. Frantz Fanon once said that, **“each generation in its relative nebulosity must discover its mission, and then fulfil, or betray it.”** So what is our mission as African researchers? What should we do to contribute to this new African Renaissance and Africa's development and growth efforts?

Honourable guest

The answer is not far-fetched. They are within our reach and we are actually currently doing some of these things. But here are a few more to ponder:

First, African researchers must develop indigenous knowledge systems and blending it with other good knowledge systems from around the world will go a long way in contributing to sustainable growth and development on the continent.

Second, African researchers must collaborate more with their counterparts within the continent, in different regions, organisations and endeavours to research and come up with durable solutions to some of the critical challenges the continent is faced with. I will like to call this as “**engaging in problem-solving research.**” Most important of all, some of this research must contribute to policy formulation and implementation.

Third, build research links with counterparts in other developing countries to share ideas and experiences and learn from such experiences. Like some of the contacts you will make at this conference.

Finally, African researchers are too meek. I think they have to speak out more in the Global Public Space and use most of the platforms they are given to speak out forcefully about their

work. Chinua Achebe, the late Nigerian novelist once said, that, “nobody however, well-intentioned or informed, can tell our story better than we can.” African researchers must let their research tell the African story.

Honourable guest:

Is this feat going to be easy? Definitely not. We are all aware of the onerous challenge of the lack of funding for research in most African institutions. We are also aware of the minimal collaboration between researchers in Africa and African institutions. Furthermore, the lack of academic resources in most of our academic institutions on the continent is a challenge we are aware of. But we shall never despair, *Nil Desparadum*, because as the old adage goes, “where there is the will, there is the way.” Indeed, that anything we put our minds to do as African researchers, we can achieve because we have the “can-do” spirit.

Hence, we must not subscribe to what I will call the “**Dead Man’s Creek Syndrome**.” Former South African President, Thabo Mbeki once gave a story about a town in Mississippi in the deep south of the United States of America called “Dead Man’s Creek.” According to Mbeki, in “Dead Man’s Creek,” every evening at 9pm, after the inhabitants have watched the many images of wars, starvation, malnutrition, refugees, corruption and other African horrors on their TV screens, the

residents of “Dead Man’s Creek” find it very difficult to reconcile such images with the vision of a renascent Africa. They therefore concluded amid much laughter that Africans like you and I and our leaders who speak of an African renaissance or that the 21st Century is an African century must either be great comedians or have a good sense of humour.

Honourable guest:

The inhabitants of “Dead Man’s Creek,” are still laughing at us today. But it is also true that today we have the power in Africa to change this perception. We Africans and indeed African researchers like you and I are challenged to change this perception of us by these inhabitants of “Dead Man’s Creek” and millions like them around the world. This we can do by undertaking problem-solving research that will inform policy, bring about innovation, growth and development on the continent and above all, challenge the negative perceptions of Africa and Africans out there in the Global Market Place.

When you go back to your respective countries and institutions, this is your challenge. It is a clarion call to stand up for an ideal, to act to improve the lot of others on the continent. I will now like to borrow a leaf from a young Robert F. Kennedy, brother of John F. Kennedy, the 35th American President who in 1966 at the University of Cape Town challenged another generation to stand up for an ideal. He said, **“each time a person stands up**

for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, it sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of and daring, these ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” Ladies and gentlemen, are we ready to head this call? Then the time is now and we must do so with our research and the dissemination of our findings.

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen for attending the 1st International Conference on Leadership and Management for Sustainable Development held by our school. We hope to see you at the next conference in future. As you leave for home this weekend:

May the roads rise to meet you,

May the winds always be at your back,

May the sun shine warm upon your face,

The rains fall soft upon your fields,

And until we meet again (somewhere, sometime, someday),

May God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

Thank You.

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