



“Africa my Africa: the Grit of the Matter”

Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, SJ

[Fr. Orobator is the provincial of the Jesuit province of East Africa. What follows is the keynote address for the [Ignatian Solidarity Network](#) Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice at Georgetown University on Saturday, November 12, 2011.]

Friends, I bring you greetings from Africa!

When I was in high school and about the same age as many of you, I learnt a poem about Africa written by David Diop:

Africa, my Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
Africa of whom my grandmother sings
On the banks of the distant river
I have never known you
But your blood flows in my veins
Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the
fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your work
The work of your slavery



Like the author of this poem, many of you may never know Africa. I stand here today to announce to you that Africa’s blood flows in your veins, because Africa is the birthplace of humanity. Ten million years ago, the ancestors of modern woman and man set out from Africa and spread across the face of the earth. Ten million years is a long time. Only a handful of fossilized bones and skull fragments remain to tell the story of how humanity – you and I; all of us – originated from mother Africa.

Today, Africa is a *continent* of fifty-five independent countries populated by one billion people – more than half of them your age, but most of them without the opportunities you have to make a difference in the world. Africa is not a simple reality. Africa is full of paradoxes, contradictions, and enigmas – *out of Africa* comes good news and bad news.

Africa is a rich continent – rich in people and cultures; rich in natural and mineral resources. But Africa is a poor continent. Today, as I speak to you, three hundred and seventy-nine million Africans will go to bed hungry – without food, without clean water, and without proper shelter.

The continent of Africa is full of life, vitality, and vigor; our ancestral religions celebrate and value life lived in community, with compassion, cooperation, and solidarity. But Africa is a sick continent,

plagued by diseases of all kinds. Today alone, three thousand African children will die of [malaria](#); twenty-two million Africans [live with HIV/AIDS](#); one out of five African children will never celebrate their fifth birthday – he will either die at birth, or she will be cut down by preventable and treatable diseases.

Africa is a continent of great icons, in all fields of human endeavor; it is the continent that produced Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere, Wangari Maathai, Wole Soyinka, Koffi Annan, Hakeem ‘The Dream’ Olajuwon, Dikembe Mutombo, Akon, Baaba Maal, Angelique Kidjo.... But Africa is home to many corrupt, ruthless, and greedy dictators posing as leaders, presidents, and heads of state.

Africa is a continent of stunning natural beauty – of mighty rivers, lush green forests, and majestic mountains. But Africa is the land of frightening ecological devastation – virgin forests are being stripped bare in DR Congo, Cameroon, Kenya, and Nigeria; global warming is melting the snow cap of Mount Kilimanjaro; lakes are drying up in Chad, Kenya, and Nigeria; drought and famine threaten the lives of ten million Africans in Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

Africa is a continent pulsating with religious effervescence and renewal; our churches are full; our mosques overflow with old and young, women, men and youth. But Africa is full of atrocious religious violence: Muslims turn against Christians; Christians turn against Muslims in endless cycles of brutality that leave thousands of traumatized, wounded, and dead women, men, and children.

In the face of this gritty reality of Africa, David Diop queries in his poem:

Africa, tell me Africa
Is this you, this back that is bent
This back that breaks
Under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun

Friends, yes, this is Africa. But I come not to bury Africa. I come as a witness to the gritty reality of Africa, so that you may think it, feel it, and engage it. You have been told that Africa is a “dark barbaric continent” – the continent of Don Cheadle’s “Hotel Rwanda”, Forest Whitaker’s “The Last King of Scotland”, and Michael Douglas’ “The Ghost and the Darkness”. The images on CNN and Anderson Cooper 360 degrees don’t lie: six hundred thousand children facing death by starvation in Somalia – who cares? Do you? A thousand innocent women, men, and children slaughtered by religious extremists in Nigeria – who cares? Do you? Another two hundred women, men, and children drowned in an overcrowded ferry on the Indian Ocean in Zanzibar – who cares? Do you? Another one hundred slum-dwellers perish when a leaking gas pipe explodes into a fiery ball in Kenya – who cares? Do you? One hundred and forty-three migrants perish on the Mediterranean trying to reach greener pastures in Europe – who cares? Do you? You see, my friends, it is easy to avert your gaze from this grisly, gritty reality. Perhaps, for some of you, Africa is synonymous with catastrophes and calamities – it is a place where life is cheap and life expectancy is the lowest in the world.

David Diop’s poem continues and paints the image of a new Africa:

But a grave voice answers me
Impetuous child that tree, young and strong

That tree over there
Splendidly alone amidst white and faded flowers
That is your Africa springing up anew
Springing up patiently, obstinately
Whose fruit bit by bit acquires
The bitter taste of liberty

My friends, believe me, I believe: another Africa is possible. If it were not, we would still be living on a continent where our back is bent by slavery, broken by colonialism, and scarred by apartheid. Another Africa is possible; if it were not, Charles Taylor, Hissene Habre, Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and a long list of megalomaniacs and kleptocrats would still be presidents and Commanders-in-Chief in many African countries. Another Africa is possible; if it were not, the people of South Sudan would still be living in political captivity. Another Africa is possible; if it were not, we would not have a woman as the President and Commander-in-Chief in Liberia. Another Africa is possible; if it were not, we would not have three African women honored with the Nobel Prize for Peace.

Africa is “springing up anew ... patiently, obstinately.” But we cannot do it alone; we could use some help. In Africa, we are not poor; we are impoverished by political leaders who place greed and personal interest above the common good and social justice; we are exploited by a global economy that pays peanuts for primary products like cocoa and turns a blind eye on abusive child labor, but sells you Hershey’s Kisses, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and Kit Kat at huge profit (Global Exchange, Green America, International Labor Rights Forum, and Oasis USA: [Still Time to Raise the Bar: The Real Corporate Social Responsibility Report for the Hershey Company](#), 2011 Edition).

In Africa, we are not lazy; we are denied opportunities by governments that underfund education, neglect healthcare, and embezzle money meant for building schools, roads, and hospitals . . . by American, European, and African companies that pay bribes to government officials for lucrative contracts and help them siphon off their stolen wealth to safe havens in America and Europe.

In Africa, we are not primitive; we are underdeveloped by governments that do not invest in their youth and by immigration laws in America and Europe designed to attract the brightest and the best Africans in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM jobs) – highly qualified experts who have been trained with meager resources of African countries where they will never apply their skills.

In Africa, we don’t want freebies; our economic growth is hindered by western governments who continue to subsidize their farmers to out-price African farmers, and by local and multinational mineral prospectors who pollute our waters, our air, and render our lands unusable (“[Ogoniland oil spills: Shell admits Nigeria liability](#)”).

The forces arrayed against Africa are formidable. But we have to time to waste lamenting. My friends, Africa could use some help – but the right kind of help! Let me tell you a true story.

Less than a month ago, on Friday, October 14, 2011, here in Washington, DC, the State Department announced that the government of the United States of America will send a contingent of one hundred U.S. soldiers to Uganda to join in the fight against the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, DR Congo, Central Africa Republic, and South Sudan. For those of you who do not know, the LRA is a rebel group that has killed, mutilated, abducted, and raped thousands of women, men, and children in northern Uganda. But things are different today. And I can tell you, because I know....

On the very spot where the LRA leader, Joseph Kony, and his criminal gang use to barbeque beef of cows that they stole from the people, and on the bush path that the LRA used to mount their deadly attacks, the Jesuits have built a school. It is called Ocer – the local Acholi word for “Christ is risen.” So, where once death and violence decimated the lives of Ugandans, a new dawn is rising and children can learn to build a better future. The children of Ocer and other schools in northern Uganda no longer train for war; they are training for a better, bigger, and brighter future – full of hope, full of promise. And this is where the U. S. government and the rest of the world can help Africa – to train African children, not for war, but for peace, prosperity, and progress! The U.S. government can help African children beat swords and guns into pens and pixels; notebooks and textbooks; I-pads and Touch pads (see Isaiah 2:4).

The biggest threat to life in DR Congo, Uganda, South Sudan, Central Africa, and in so many parts of Africa is not the LRA; what destroys life in Africa are diseases, poverty, illiteracy, corruption, child mortality, maternal death, religious intolerance, lack of political freedoms, and limited economic opportunities. This is where the U.S. government, policy makers, and the international community can help Africa and the children of Africa: by sending teachers, doctors, engineers, experts in agriculture and development – not more soldiers, guns, and ammunition. In Africa we want to forge a new path of reconciliation, justice, and peace – these are the themes of the Second African Synod and of a new book that my colleagues and I recently published (Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, ed., *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, Orbis Books, 2011).

A few months ago, I saw a movie titled “True Grit”. In this movie, a fourteen-year-old girl named Mattie Ross stubbornly pursues her father’s killer into hostile territory; and, nothing would stop or deter her until she had brought the criminal to justice. More than the trash-talking U.S. Marshal Rooster Cogburn, whom she enlisted to help her in her quest for justice, young Mattie Ross showed true grit.

My friends, as you think about these words, I urge you: get involved in the gritty realities of the world; don’t avert your gaze. Join hands with millions of other young people across the world to explore possibilities and create opportunities. Don’t turn the other cheek when injustice, greed, corruption, and diseases threaten the hopes and dreams of young women and men across the world. Like Mattie Ross in “True Grit”, hold on to your *faith* resolutely, pursue *justice* relentlessly, seek *solidarity* compassionately.... And please, my friends, *think* about Africa: *feel* her blood flowing in your veins and *engage* in her struggle to build a future full of hope.

I thank you!