Africa in Conflict: Transformation or Recovery?

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I 'm honored to be here, quite honestly, because of the relationship this school has with the African continent and The Gambia in particular. (I'm not sure why I picked the teaching profession, because I'm very intimidated every time I talk in front of more than ten people. It's a very odd career choice, isn't it?)

Turning to the topic for today, I must say that I have a long-standing interest in conflict in general and conflict in Africa in particular, because I came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, when there were cataclysmic changes happening on the African continent. On a basic level, trying to understand what was going on in sub-Saharan Africa became almost an obsession of mine. That's in a large measure what brought me to America, the desire to study conflict, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation, because these subjects were not popular in Europe fifteen or twenty years ago. I have opted to look at the time we'll spend together as a conversation on some issues that have to do with some general realities of Africa and conflict.

I tell my students often enough that I'm sure they remember it by now: History is not the analysis of past human events, history is the study of the relationships between the past, present, and future. It makes quite a bit of difference when you look at the historical sciences in that way. It's an interrogation of the relationships between past, present, and future. In the case of Africa, we have a huge amount of paradox and contradiction between past and present, and certainly reasons to be frustrated about the future. High hopes are often betrayed by important setbacks. So, one may ask, "Does time move backwards in Africa?"

I see also a split between two time periods of interest, the 1990s and the decade that has marked this early twenty-first century. Kofi Annan talked of Africa in the 1990s as a "cocktail of disasters." I don't think that needs any comment. That decade consecrated the notion of "Afro-pessimism." Many analysts went as far as saying that nothing good could come out of this area of the world. They just gave up on Africa. At the time, Eastern Europe offered new excitement with the end of the Cold War. Then, at the turn of the century (and the millennium, for that matter), there was new, refreshing talk of an African Renaissance. People wondered, "Hey, is this our time? Is there reason for new hope for the prospects of the African continent?" Many crises remain intractable, however, and new ones have emerged. In the

Central African Republic, there was a coup last week. There was a coup in Niger in 2010. Other countries have experienced what we could call "dynastic succession." In Togo, dictator-president Gnassingbé Eyadéma died and his son became president. The same thing happened in Gabon with current president Ali Bongo. It was also the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with Kabila father and son. See, we have all these setbacks, and they seem to throw us right back into the crippling doubts we had in the 1990s.

It is a cliché to always bring back the idea of what the colonial experience has represented for African nations. I'd like to remind everybody that the colonial experience was relatively short. Most European empires took hold of their African possessions in the 1890s, and we know that 1960 was the big explosion of African independence. So we're talking about half a century of colonialism on the African continent, roughly.

However, the impact has nothing to do with the duration of the colonial trauma. I want to take us back to Kwame Nkrumah, a very charismatic figure of African independence. He represents the greatest landmark of African nationalism; that is, an attempt to stop, control, and revert the mechanisms of colonial exploitation and colonial brutality visited on the peoples of Africa.

I'm sure most of you have heard of Ghana as the first independent country in sub-Saharan Africa. It's actually not correct: the Sudan is. In 1948, the Sudan got its nominal independence from the British. By 1956, the Sudan was an independent country, and Ghana got its sovereignty the following year. Why do you think Ghana was passed down in history as the flagship of African independence? It's an evident historical inaccuracy, but everyone's happy to go along with it. Why? What symbolic qualities does the Sudan lack for Ghana to steal the show? I'm interested to hear from you why, yet, the Sudan doesn't correspond to the best image of a nationalist Africa?

Audience: Is it because Ghana has elected leaders?

You're talking about Ghana now, today, but in the early years of independence, Ghana really didn't have that quality. I think the Sudan is very symptomatic of what I call lines of fragmentation on the African continent. In the Sudan the elite is made of Arabs. They happen to be of black skin, but they are Arabs, culturally. Obviously, this does not correspond to a symbol that Africans at home and Africans in the diaspora could embrace easily. You see to this very day that the most recent sovereign country in the world we know of is precisely South Sudan. It split from northern Sudan as an aftershock of the protracted conflict generated by what Sudan already represented, this split between the Arabs and the predominantly Bantu and Christian black people of the south.

Ghana also carries another strong symbolic asset. You know that on the West African coast, there are, among many others, three major culturally expressive spots that help us remember the realities of the

Middle Passage and the Atlantic slave trade. You have Gorée Island in Senegal, you have the port of Elmina in Ghana and, much further down, in Angola, you have the port region of Luanda.

So the value of symbols has played a role in betraying whatever the deep hopes of independence were. Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister of Ghana, talked of "seeking the political kingdom," usurping a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew. He said that in the first years of independence, what the budding elite needed was to train themselves in the sophistications of political philosophy. He thought that there was a total absence of deep thought in the matters of how to create ideology, and he saw three centers of competing ideologies, cauldrons of intractable conflicts.

One was the so-called Western thinking left by the former colonizers. Then there was the traditional political system, which he thought was, more often than not, very reactionary and had the tendency to align with the former colonial power. Then he saw this open boulevard of new African leaders who could embrace, for instance, socialism as a possible route to political emancipation.

I think that from the get-go the promises of independence could not be delivered. Some analysts recently looked more closely at Africa and asked, "When will independence end?" in the sense that for a long time, there was a satisfaction with the *acquisition* of independence, rather than a desire to give independence a deep meaning and practical goals.

One of the most problematic situations in the early years of independence was the notion of competition for political space. There was a space created in which the perks of statehood were up for grabs, so to speak. You had weak central governments. The central government was inherited from the colonial powers and during colonial rule, by definition, indigenous people's access to political power was limited to a secondary role. Nobody was initiated in the technicalities of statehood, so once independence was acquired, the central government was weak in the sense of having minimal training in complexities of running the affairs of the state. Then the international corporations were also flexing their muscles at that time, because while they were not necessarily as aggressive as we know them to be today in the era of globalization, they were part and parcel of the new African states and they had very strong input in guiding and sometimes imposing their brutal, conflict-prone choices at any cost. Then you have various rebel groups that hedged their bets because, on the basis of ethnic bonds, regional ties, and historical entitlements, they also wanted a share of this new, weak state.

Africa's wave of independence in the 1960s is an accident in a way. African nationalism was very deliberate, but nobody predicted the speed of change at the end of the Second World War, that independence would come that early, and that it would be that difficult to manage. In 1963, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and other great icons of African independence agreed on the principle of creating a continental organization with the goal of someday forming a united continental state. They created the Organization of African Unity (OAU). But there's a built-in contradiction in the

foundation of the OAU. The most outstanding decision enshrined in the OAU charter is the inviolability of the frontiers inherited from colonization!

See for yourselves. Here's an organization founded in 1963 with the goal of uniting the African continent saying that these frontiers inherited from colonization are not to be violated. They have to be the basis of the framework for stability. At the same time, all these frontiers on the political map of Africa were drawn by European diplomats with purposes and objectives that had nothing to do with the real people's desired patterns of stability on the ground. We are going to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the OAU in May 2013 and up till now, obviously, we are yet to see a solid, credible plan for the unification of the continent.

So, to make a long story short, when you look at the fifty-five "independent" African countries, you are sometimes in the presence of what some analysts have called "states without nations" and "nations without a state," but certainly not nation-states in the sense of solid, integrated institutions that can create, protect, and defend a sense of common destiny. Very few African states could claim to have achieved nationhood in the sense that we like to understand it.

At this point I want to talk about a few other conflict-generating contradictions we've seen in Africa in general. The OAU is the ancestor of the current African Union. It was for a long time called a "club of dictators" because of the known abuses of human rights in individual countries. It was so grotesque and so scandalous that whenever they got together for a summit, really, what we saw was a palette of dictators in their respective countries. These leaders were very, very, good at helping each other across borders, but whenever they were faced with internal state collapse, their success in bringing about stabilization ranged from none to very little.

In the 1970s, because of the global oil crisis and its consequences on the African continent, you had a situation that almost demanded the creation of regional blocs as a possible way of alleviating mass poverty and political chaos. Regional organizations started out focusing almost exclusively on economic matters, so there was an inversion of priority of sorts in these states. Now, I don't know if I think of this as a question or more a remark on which I want some reaction. For all the untold ills that African people have had to deal with at the hands of their entrenched authoritarian leaders, would you not agree with me that other areas of the world, when they were at levels of political evolution roughly similar to ours, did not necessarily deal with those conflicts in a better way?

Let's take the case of the nation in which we are right now. You began your hard-won independence from the British in 1776, did you not? Then, in the 1860s, you had to fight a protracted, long, nasty civil war to decide what country you wanted to be. Reconstruction followed and then Jim Crow, and today you have some sort of partisan political gridlock with no clear end in sight, right?

Let's also consider Latin America. Most Latin American countries got their independence in the early 1800s. Today, in the entire Latin American region, there is not a single government that is not democratically elected. So they've now done the job of cleaning up their act after the eras of civil wars and dictatorships. But how long did it take until they did so? It is important to note that Africa is not necessarily unique in battling for a sense of national and regional stability for decades after decades before recovery becomes possible.

In this context, there are a few countries on the African continent that stand out for having achieved the feat of never having experienced a military coup. I can think of Senegal, Tanzania, and Malawi. Kenya is another, although it is not necessarily the most stable country as we speak. In 2007, around 2,000 people died over the disputed presidential election in Kenya. The conflicting parties reconciled over the bodies of those 2,000 people by creating a coalition government which invited everybody to the table. Zimbabwe copied that model a few years later. These are countries that have managed by and large to have alternations of leadership teams at the top without brutal military coups.

I also want to stress three examples of conflicts that are really complex and hard to grasp, even for the finest specialists, let alone for the general public. First, Sudan. It was resolved with the creation of a new nation, and that was a very unpredictable scenario only five or ten years ago. Very few people could give credit to the possibility of the independence of South Sudan. The regime of Omar al-Bashir felt secure because it was backed by China, a support which is vital in the United Nations Security Council. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. more or less lost interest in supporting Christians in the south, and there was just this sense of resignation, that freeing southern Sudanese from "Arab persecution" was going to be a lost cause. Surprisingly enough, it ended up taking a different route.

Second, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. From the times of Joseph Conrad, when it was labeled "the heart of darkness," very little has changed in the country to make it deserving of that infamous label. These "national" conflicts have so many layers of complexity that you wonder where you would want to start addressing them. They are obviously resource-related conflicts. We know that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is only one of a handful of coltan-rich countries on the planet. Coltan is a very precious mineral, indispensable to the continued development of the new technologies of information and communication, and about 80% of the world's resources of coltan are in the Congo! (The rest is found in Australia, about 10%; Brazil, about 5%; and Thailand, about 5%). The Congo also suffered tremendously from the overspills from the Rwandan genocide. "Africa's First World War" is the term that captured what had been going on in the Congo (formerly Zaire) between 1995 and 2008-2009, and the term is very apt.

Third, Mali. What happened in Mali is a direct overflow of the downfall of Gaddafi in Libya. It is no surprise that the French felt compelled to intervene in Mali. It is a former French colony, for one

thing. The Tuareg, who are a notable supra-national ethnic group, are found in northern Mali. They are also present in Niger, where they initiated a separatist movement, and in northern Burkina Faso to a much smaller degree. Many of them were mercenaries against the Libyan people and they were on the payroll of Muammar Gaddafi. When Gaddafi was gone, they found themselves at the mercy of the people that they were paid to brutalize and torture under Gaddafi. So they went back to their base in northern Mali, but they went back with the heavy weapons that were in their hands in Libya. So, as possible scenarios and solutions are being envisioned for resolving the dangerous conflict in Mali right now as the French troops begin drawing down, the regional organizations that would usually have some agency find themselves tied by incompetency. They are almost irrelevant because they can't demonstrate neutrality.

On the question of why regional organizations are inefficient in helping deal with African conflict, I think the missing part is usually the ability to show their potential for being neutral within the conflict. Cases in point: Ethiopia is the hegemon in East Africa. It intervened in Somalia and obviously there was the perception that it took sides against Al-Shabaab for more than just ideological reasons. Nigeria is the big hegemon in West Africa. It intervened in Sierra Leone, again with quite a bit of suspicion, although it did it efficiently to stop one of the most horrendous African civil wars in recent memory. South Africa is the hegemon in the southern region of the continent. Because of the history of its relations with Zimbabwe, there was always a reluctance to push dictator Robert Mugabe around. He had fought against the ruling white minority in Zimbabwe.

We no longer have the Organization of African Unity. Now we have the African Union. It was largely Muammar Gaddafi's brainchild. He saw himself as the new King of Kings and President of Africa, because he had lost all ambitions of achieving that goal in the Arab world, the dream of becoming the new Gamal Abdel Nasser. The Arab world had become much too complicated. When he couldn't become the "new governor of the Maghreb," he turned his renewed attention to sub-Saharan Africa. There, with all of the soft spots and easy pressure points, he thought he could implement his megalomaniac dream of global leadership.

Let all this serve as a reminder, then, that this is an easy truth to agree on: African nations are baby nations. They are infant nations. They are really in the very first stages of defining, understanding, and welcoming statehood.

There are 192 nations in the U.N. system. There are 200 sovereign territories in the world, and fifty-five of them are on the African continent, a good quarter. Sometimes, I think we are quick to look at the African continent and have expectations that are not reasonable for such a new experiment. It is a lovely phrase to talk of this country's political evolution as the "American Experiment." Well, the African Experiment is really in its infant stages. We have very ancient lands, but the nations which we talk about are relatively new.

There is no African exception. In the last year alone, we've had many reasons to think that whoever came up with the phrase "the African Renaissance" was really, totally delusional. (It was Thabo Mbeki, originally, who tried to popularize the notion *and* reality of it.) We could believe in it until perhaps two years ago. But now, with the dreadful conflicts in Mali and the Central African Republic and the electoral tensions in Kenya, the African Renaissance may not be so believable after all.

What are the ingredients that made the amazing success of Western nations? Three things, roughly speaking: secular nationalism, open markets, and democracy. These three ingredients created political spaces where we find a reasonable amount of expectation that the rule of law will prevail above and beyond all the tensions. Just remember the 2000 election and what happened when the Supreme Court in this country decided five to four that the election would go to George W. Bush. I know of very few countries, namely in the area of the world where I come from, where a decision like that would have gone down so easily. But once the Supreme Court decided, the American people went along with it because the principles of upholding the rule of law and managing conflict without violent or deadly outbursts are so ingrained.

I believe that Africa will have to reckon with these ideas. In Venezuela, for instance, there was an experiment with socialism for the twenty-first century, which I for one, have some respect for. There are many people looking at China and India as interesting experiments with a more scripted form of capitalism, where the state doesn't want to give up all the power of directing economic policy to corporations. It is state capitalism, if you will. We've also experimented with many models and there is a whole brand of literature on African socialism. But we should stop seeing ourselves as an exception, an exceptional part of the world. The students who have lived in The Gambia know what I am talking about when I say there is no African exception, *there should not be any African exception*, because the current Gambian leadership definitely claims implicitly the right to an African exception in the problematic, to say the least, ways in which it conducts the business of ruling the country.

Finally, let us return to the relationship between past, present, and future. We are witnessing an attempt to try to re-inject ancient and precolonial traditions and principles in modern African politics. One initiative in particular is the African Peer Review Mechanism, and it is an integral part of the African Union's strategic framework. They are trying to do that, to re-inject authentic African conflict resolution practices in the continental political process. It is very imperfect, for sure, but there is at least the desire and the aspiration to try, concretely, to recover the overlooked genius of the African people. A better future is at that price. This is a positive note, and as such, probably a good one to end on.