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Chinua Achebe

Africa Is People

IT IS GENERALLY NOT A GOOD SIGN when someone begins to quote himself, but the title I have chosen for this event may sound peculiar to some of you, and the best way I can explain what it's all about is to quote myself.

An Invitation Arrives

I believe it was in the first weeks of 1989 that I received an invitation to an anniversary meeting—the twenty-fifth year, or something like that—of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris. I accepted without quite figuring out what I could possibly contribute to such a meeting/celebration. My initial puzzlement continued right into the meeting itself. In fact it grew as the proceedings got under way. Here was I, an African novelist among predominantly European and American bankers and economists; a guest, as it were, from the world's poverty-stricken provinces to a gathering of the rich and powerful in the metropolis. As I listened to them—Europeans, Americans, Canadians, Australians—I was left in no doubt by the assurance they displayed, that these were the masters of our world savoring the benefits of their success. They read and discussed papers on economic and development matters in different regions of the world. They talked in particular about the magic bullet of the 1980s, structural adjustment, specially designed for those parts of the world where economies had gone completely haywire. The matter was really simple, the experts seemed to be saying; the only reason for failure to develop was indiscipline of all kinds, and the remedy was a quick, sharp administration of shock treatment that would yank the sufferer out of the swamp of improvidence back onto the high and firm road of free market economy. The most recurrent prescriptions for this condition were the removal of subsidies on

This was the second lecture delivered in the Presidential Fellows Program to the World Bank on June 17, 1998.

food and fuel and the devaluation of the national currency. Yes, the experts conceded, some pain would inevitably accompany these measures, but such pain was negligible in comparison to the disaster that would surely take place if nothing was done now.

Then the governor of the Bank of Kenya made his presentation. As I recall the events, he was probably the only other African at that session. He asked the experts to consider the case of Zambia, which according to him had accepted, and had been practicing, a structural adjustment regime for something like 10 years, and whose economic condition was now worse than it had been when they began their treatment. An American expert who seemed to command great attention and was accorded high deference in the room, spoke again. He repeated what had already been said many times before: "Be patient, it will work in time, trust me," or words to that effect.

Insight Dawns

At that point I received something like a stab of insight. It suddenly became clear to me why I had been invited, what I was doing there in that strange assembly. I signaled my desire to speak and was given the floor. I told them what I had just recognized. I said that what was going on before me was a fiction workshop, no more and no less! "Here you are, spinning your fine theories to be tried out in your imaginary laboratories. You are developing new drugs and feeding them to a bunch of laboratory guinea pigs and hoping for the best. I have news for you. Africa is not fiction. Africa is people, real people. Have you thought of that? You are brilliant people, world experts. You may even have the very best intentions. But have you thought, really thought, of Africa as people? I will tell you the experience of my own country, Nigeria, with structural adjustment. After two years of this remedy we saw the country's minimum wage fall in value from the equivalent of 15 British pounds to 5 pounds a month. This is not a lab report; it is not a mathematical exercise. We are talking about someone whose income, which is already miserable enough, is now reduced to one-third of what it was two years ago. And this flesh-and-blood man has a wife and children. You say he should simply go home and tell them to be patient. Now let me ask you this question. Would

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you recommend a similar remedy to your own government? How do you sell it to an elected president? You are asking him to commit political suicide, or perhaps to get rid of elections altogether until he has fixed the economy. Do you realize that's what you are doing?"

I thought I could read astonishment on some of the faces on the opposite side of the huge circular table of the conference room, or perhaps it was just my optimistic imagination. But one thing I do know for certain. The director-general (or whatever he was called) of the OECD beside whom I was sitting, a Dutchman and quite a giant, had muttered to me, under his breath, at least twice: "Give it to them!"

I came away from that strange conference with enhanced optimism for the human condition. For who could have imagined that in the very heart of the enemy's citadel a friend and ally might be lurking, like that irreverent Dutchman happy enough to set my cat among his own pigeons!

I therefore came to this Presidential Fellows Lecture of the World Bank with expectations rather than puzzlement. And I thank President Wolfensohn for his vigorous engagement with Africa's problems and for giving me the privilege of addressing this very distinguished and strategic forum, Tariq Husain for arranging the details with such care and consideration, and my young friends Tijan Salla and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala for persistently encouraging me to come.

Examining the Reality of Africa

Africa Is People may seem too simple and too obvious a statement for such a reflective opportunity as this, but I have found that the most simple things can still give us a lot of trouble, even the brightest among us, especially in matters concerning Africa. One of the greatest men of the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer—philosopher, theologian, musician, medical missionary—failed completely to see the most obvious fact about Africa, and so went ahead to say: "The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother." Now, did we or did anyone we know take Dr. Schweitzer up on that blasphemy? Oh no. On the contrary. He was admired to the point of adulation and Lamberene, the very site on African soil where he uttered his outrage, was turned into a place of pilgrimage.

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Or let us take another much-admired 20th-century figure, the first writer, as it happens, to grace the cover of the newly founded *Time* magazine. I am talking, of course, about that extraordinary Polish-born, French-speaking, English sea captain and novelist, Joseph Conrad. He recorded in his memoir his first experience of seeing a black man in these remarkable words:

A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards.

My attention was first drawn to these observations of Conrad's in a scholarly work, not very widely known, by Jonah Raskin. Its title was the *Mythology of Imperialism*, and it was published in 1971 by Random House. I mention this because Mr. Raskin's title defines the cultural source out of which Conrad derived his words and ideas. Conrad's fixation, admitted so openly by him in his memoir and conspicuously present in his fiction, has gone largely unremarked in literary and scholarly evaluations of his work. Why? Because it is grounded quite firmly in that mythology of imperialism which has so effectively conditioned contemporary civilization and its modes of education. Imperial domination required a new language to describe the world it had created and the people it had subjugated. Not surprisingly, this new language did not celebrate these subject peoples nor toast them as heroes. Rather it painted them in the most lurid colors. Africa, being European imperialism's prime target, with hardly a square foot escaping the fate of imperial occupation, naturally received the full measure of this adverse definition. Add to that the massive derogatory endeavor of the previous three centuries of the Atlantic slave trade to label black people, and we can begin to get some idea of the magnitude of the problem we may have today with the simple concept: Africa Is People.

James Baldwin made an analogous point about black people in America, descendants of Africa. In his essay "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" he wrote:

Negroes want to be treated like men: a perfectly straight forward statement containing seven words. People who have mastered

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Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx, Freud and the Bible find this statement impenetrable.

The point of all this is to alert policymakers in such institutions as the World Bank to the image burden that Africa bears into the 21st century and make them recognize how that image had molded contemporary attitudes, including perhaps their own, to that continent.

Do I hear in my mind's ear someone sighing wearily: there we go again; another session of whining and complaining! Let me assure you that I personally abhor and detest whiners. Those who know me will already know this. To those who don't, I recommend a little pamphlet I wrote at a critical point in Nigeria's troubles. I called it *The Trouble with Nigeria*, and it is arguably the harshest statement ever made about that unhappy country. It is so harsh that whenever I see one of the many foreign critics of Nigeria quoting from it I want to strangle them! No, I am not an apologist for Africa's many failings. And I am hard-headed enough to realize that we must not be soft on them, must never go out to justify them. But I am also rational enough to realize that we should strive to understand our failings objectively and not simply swallow the mystifications and mythologies cooked up by those whose goodwill we have every reason to suspect.

Now, I understand and accept the logic that if a country mismanages its resources it should be prepared to face the music of hard times. Long ago I wrote a novel about a young African man, well-educated, full of promise and good intentions, who nevertheless got his affairs (fiscal and otherwise) in a big mess. And did he pay dearly for it!

I did not blame the banks for his plight. What I did do, or try to do, was offer leads to my readers for exploring the roots of the hero's predicament by separating those factors for which an individual may justly be held accountable from others that are systemic and beyond the individual's control. That critical, analytical adventure to which the book invites its readers would not have helped the doomed hero a whole lot, but the reader can at least go away with the satisfaction of having tried to be fair and just, and with the reward, hopefully, of a little enlightenment on the human condition.

The countries of Africa (especially Sub-Saharan Africa) on which I am focusing my attention are not the only ones who suffer the plight of poverty in the world today. All the so-called Third World peoples are, more or less, in the same net, as indeed are all the poor everywhere, even in the midst of plenty in the First and Second worlds.

Like the unfortunate young man in my novel, the poor of the world may be guilty of this and that act of foolishness, but nothing they have done or left undone quite explains all the odds that seem to be stacked up against them. We are sometimes tempted to look at them as so many ne'er-do-wells we can simply ignore. But they are not our fiction; they are greater than their badge of suffering, because they are human.

Last week there was news on television about fighting in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia and Eritrea. As I had come to expect, the news was very short indeed. The only background material the newscaster gave to flesh out the bald announcement of the fight was that Ethiopia and Eritrea were among the world's poorest nations. And he was off, to other news and other places. How much additional enlightenment did that piece of information about poverty give the viewer about the fighting or the fighters? What about telling the viewer, in the same number of words, that Eritrea was a province of Ethiopia until recently? But no. The poverty synecdoche is more attractive and less trouble; you simply reach for it from the handy storehouse of mythology about Africa. No taxing research required.

Appealing to Donors and Lenders: Do the Right Thing

And since poverty seems so important to us when we think about Africa, how much do we really know about it?

In 1960 a bloody civil war broke out in Congo soon after its colonizer, Belgium, beat a hasty retreat from the territory. Within months its young, radical, and idealistic prime minister was brutally murdered by his rivals. It is now widely accepted that the CIA played the leading role in taking him out and installing a corrupt demagogue called Mobutu, whose main attraction was presumably his claim to be an anticommunist. Mobutu set about plundering the wealth of this vast country, as large as the whole of Western Europe, and also fomenting trouble in Congo's neighboring countries, aiding and abetting the de-

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stabilization of Angola and openly cooperating with the apartheid white-minority regime in South Africa. Mobutu's legacy was truly horrendous. He stole and stashed away billions in foreign banks. He even stole his country's name and baptized it as Zaire. Today Congo, strategically positioned in the heart of Africa, vast in size and mineral wealth, has become one of the poorest nations on earth. Who are we to hold responsible for this: the Congolese people, Mobutu, or his sponsors the CIA? Who will pay the penalty of structural adjustment? Of course that question is already irrelevant. The people are already adjusted to grinding poverty and long-range instability.

Congo is by no means the only country in Africa to have foreign powers choose or sustain its leader. It is merely the most scandalous in scale and effrontery.

President Clinton was right on target when he apologized to Africa for the unprincipled conduct of American foreign policy during the Cold War, a policy that scorched the young hope of Africa's independence struggle like seedlings in a drought.

I have not gone into all this unpleasant matter to prompt any new apologies, but to make all of us wary of those easy, facile comments about Africa's incurable poverty or the endemic incapacity of Africans to get their act together and move ahead like everybody else.

I cannot presume to tell world bankers anything about public finance or economics and the rest. I have told you stories. Now let me make a couple of suggestions.

From an organization in Britain called Jubilee 2000 I have received communication lately about their noble campaign to persuade leaders of the world's rich nations (G8 countries) to cancel the debts owed them by the world's 50 poorest nations. I was made to understand that the British government was half persuaded that it should be done, and that the Canadians were possibly of the same view. But, on the negative side, I learned that Japan and Germany were adamantly opposed to the proposal. About the most important factor, America, my informant had this to say: "When asked about cancellation their tongues speak sweetly, like some of Homer's Greeks, but their hearts are closed. It needs another poet to go to them and lay siege to those hearts . . . will you be that poet?" On our flight here yesterday my wife, noticing perhaps my anxiety, showed me a passage in a book she was reading. "The fact that a message may not be

received is no reason not to send it. I immediately recognized the affinity between this thought and another I knew, wearing its proverbial Igbo dress: "Let us perform the sacrifice and leave the blame on the doorstep of the spirits." That's what I have now done.

Regarding Japan and Germany, beneficiaries both of postwar reconstruction assistance, I would appeal not to their hearts, but to their memories and to their sense of irony. And for good measure I shall tell them the parable of Jesus about the servant who was forgiven a huge debt by his master, on leaving whose audience he chanced upon a fellow servant who owed him a very small sum of money, seized him by the throat, and had him tortured and thrown into jail.

A Plea for Good Governance

My second request to the World Bank goes to the very root of the problem: the looting of the wealth of poor nations by corrupt leaders and their cronies. This crime is compounded by the expatriation of these funds into foreign banks where they are put into the service of foreign economies. Consequently the victim country is defrauded twice if my economics is correct: it is defrauded of the wealth that is stolen from its treasury, and also of the development potential of that wealth.

In asking the World Bank to take a lead in the recovery of the stolen resources of poor countries, I am fully aware that such criminal transactions are not made through the World Bank. I am also aware that banks are not set up to act as a police force. But we live in terrible times when an individual tyrant or a small clique of looters in power can destroy the lives and the future of whole countries and whole populations by their greed. The consequences of these actions can be of genocidal proportions.

Herein lies the root of the horrifying statistic to which President Wolfensohn recently drew attention: "You will be staggered to know, as I was, that 37 percent of African private wealth is held outside Africa, whereas for Asia the share is 3 percent and for Latin America it is 17 percent (James D. Wolfensohn: *Africa's Moment*, Washington, D.C., World Bank, 1998). It would be a great pity if the world were to sit back in the face of this tragedy and do nothing, merely to preserve codes of bank-

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ing etiquette and confidentiality formulated for quite other times. The world woke up too late to the inadequacy of these codes in the matter of the Nazi Holocaust gold. We have now been warned. The cooperation of the world's banks led by the World Bank Group in eliminating this great scourge will give so many poor countries the first real opportunity to begin afresh and take responsibility for their development and progress, and it will discourage future marauders of nations. It will also clear the banks of the charge of receiving stolen property and even more severe indictments.

For too long the world has been content to judge peoples and nations in distress largely on the basis of received stereotypes drawn from mythologies of oppression. In 1910, at the height of British imperial dominion, John Buchan, a popular novelist who was also a distinguished imperial civil servant, published a colonialist classic entitled *Prester John* in which we find the following pronouncement: "That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility."

I do not believe such a difference exists, except in the mythology of domination. Let's put this to the test by giving these poor, black nations the first sporting chance of their lives. The cost is low and the rewards will blow our minds, white and black alike. Trust me!

Let me round this up with a nice little coda. *Africa Is People* has another dimension. Africa believes in people, in cooperation with people. If the philosophical dictum of Descartes—I think, therefore I am—represents a European individualist ideal, the Bantu declaration—*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human is human because of other humans)—represents an African communal aspiration.

Our humanity is contingent on the humanity of our fellows. No person or group can be human alone. We rise above the animal together, or not at all. If we learned that lesson even this late in the day we would have taken a millennial step forward.