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**Obama on African Responsibility
African American Leadership
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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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I was happy to see President Barack Obama travel to Africa in the first year of his Administration and his praise for the progress of Ghana seemed to be a vehicle to elevate the position of Africa in his foreign policy. But listening to his speech to the Ghanaian Assembly, in his analysis of the route to progress, I was also struck by the re-emergence of the theme of responsibility, similar to his speeches before African American audiences. It seems to be a theme that paralyzes black criticism and plays well with whites who believe that the irresponsibility of blacks - and their African kin - is the major reason for their failure to achieve equality with other nations.

He proposed African corruption as the other theme that also plays well as a reason for the lack of African progress. But corruption is not confined to Africa, so if that were the major factor few countries anywhere would have experienced sufficient progress. Acknowledging that corruption is a problem in Africa, especially in places such as Nigeria which as vast oil wealth, for most states in Africa the human resources taken through the "door of no return" and the financial pillage since then has led to it's persistent poverty as the major factor. Such drastic poverty carries with the accompanying problems of disease, low education, lack of country infrastructure, malnutrition and etc.

At one point, Obama compared the progress of Korea to that of Kenya, but Korea did not have Africa's history and so it was able to benefit from foreign investment with which it instituted a system of mass general education that built a skilled work force. International firms have been slow to invest in Africa - and not just because of the existence of corruption; they have always found creative ways to deal with corruption if the prospect of substantial profits were worth it. Global racism is, no doubt, one of the major factors why Africa has been excluded from robust foreign investment, but there is also the residual control that European countries still exercise over many African countries, their currencies and raw materials. Then, the cost of investment - building not only businesses but the accompanying infrastructure - is higher in Africa than in

many places due to the lack of business and physical infrastructure.

So, to preach responsibility to African countries suggests that they could build their economies by just changing their attitudes. It is far more difficult than that. They must begin to build on the fruits of Continental trade at home, but African countries have similar baskets of goods which reduces the incentive for trade where the financial returns would be low.

Fundamentally, individual African countries cannot face the international system by themselves where globalization is re-shaping economics by the emergence of regional economic structures. The European Union is such an emerging formidable institution, the United States has NAFTA and CAFTA, and Asian trade is greater among Asian countries than between them and the rest of the globe – with the sole exception of China. With this structure, how can small – or even larger African countries - hope to compete and bring in the kinds of revenue that can help support a nation.

At the end of July, the Africa Union, together with the Government of Senegal is sponsoring a conference on how to continue to construct the United States of Africa. The Unity of the African continent is the only hope for economic development in a world of regional economic dominance. If this is what people mean by “exercising responsibility” then we are on the same page, but somehow, I don’t think so. I think they are fine with African countries continuing to accept international financial assistance and laying their markets at the feet of American, European or Chinese interests through trade deals like the African Growth and Opportunity Act. You can tell by the howls that go up when African governments attempt to take over control of their natural resources and market them for the good of their own peoples.

Rather than being “responsible” I prefer the concept of African self determination, because it means that Africa destiny is the responsibility of African people, but only in a context where the playing field is level and where African people control the means of their destiny. I agree with Obama that such African governments must exercise democratic leadership, but much of the internal conflict with which they contend comes as a result of the lack of resources – food, jobs, education to which they do not have the sufficient keys. Adequate resources is the fuel needed to make the engine of responsibility move nations.


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