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**President Obama's African Speech -
Shades of the "Gunga Din" Syndrome
By Dr. Carlos E. Russell, PhD
BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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In the mid nineteen-forties, back in the Republic of Panama, I saw a movie called "Gunga Din" In one of its final scenes, "Gunga Din" a native "water carrier" for the British, is seen perched on the golden dome of a temple in his native land, furiously blowing his bugle attempting to warn the British of the trap set for them by his fellow natives, As he does so, he is being riddled with bullets from their rifles.

I remember, as a boy, applauding the bravery of his death - a simple Bhisti, a water boy- and his unflinching support for the British. I would shed a tear when, in another scene, over his grave, a British soldier read the line from Kipling's poem:

"Tho' I have belted you and flayed you
By the livin' Gawd that made you
You're a better man that I am Gunga Din"

President Obama's speech in Ghana troubled me. It troubled me so much that mid way through it, I turned it off. Although intellectually I understood what he was attempting to do; emotionally and as a political Diasporic African, I had great difficulty with his primary message which, for me, was: "clean up your houses, take responsibility for the state in which you now tread, stop blaming others for the dirt on the floor upon which you are presently walking and America will help you..." Obviously, that is a simplification of his remarks but, I believe, it accurately sums up the essence of his remarks. As I think about it, I was reminded, in part, of Bill Cosby's admonition to Black America. Somehow I can hear, I think it was Cab Calloway, singing "Straighten up and fly right" ringing in my head. That refrain, if we think about it objectively it is one that places the

onus of the recuperation of power over self and - in Obama's case, the African nation - squarely on the existing and undeniable reality of the dysfunctionality of those who were made so - dysfunctional - by those who robbed and raped the African of his/her sense of self and resources as they transformed the world to satisfy their greed and avarice, but who are not taken to task for their actions nor made to compensate for those dastardly deeds. This statement, like it or not, is also irrefutable.

There is no denying what Obama said about the state of affairs in Africa. There is corruption, - social, economic and political and the lack of transparency. There is greed and avarice and, equally odious and odorous, the lingering stench of Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Congo, and yes, Darfur. Here in the U.S.A., Bill Cosby's description of the social behavior and his castigation of many of our Black families and communities is equally painful and undeniable. Still, if one is objective and honest, one is forced to ask how this behavior became operative. Is it part of the cultural DNA of Diasporan Africans? Or is it the result of the inhuman and oppressive treatment imposed by colonization, enslavement, and Jim Crow laws? For the President - an African - to weave a speech primarily around this sordid aspect of contemporary African history and seemingly downplay the historic role the Europeans played and continue to play in the development of the existing reality of our Diaspora is totally, to use one of his favorite phrases, "unacceptable."

As I sat on my sofa listening to the President, I shook my head and said to myself "that speech could have been given by Bill Clinton" The only difference would have been Clinton's hue. Yet, had he made that speech, I am almost certain that he would have been accused by many as being "patronizing and extolling the superiority of European and American values and political perspectives and concepts over those of the Africans.

Two points before I continue:

1. I am not now, nor have I ever been a "Clintonian". His politics, for me, were essentially too centrist and too inclined to accommodate and/or sacrifice/align his "expressed" ideological principles with the non-progressive elements of this nation .Sadly, there are many who are presently accusing President Obama of the same malady.
2. I have been and I still am an "Obamakin" - meaning that, in general, I am supportive of his expressed policies and recognize the almost insurmountable odds that he faces both as an African with the trappings of power - he is no Gunga Din- and as the perceived "point person" in the global struggle for social, political and economic transformation of the planet Earth. However, I retain the right to challenge and question - as now do - those political positions that I deem contrary to the needs of our people in our quest for Dr. King's "Beloved Community" where "Agape" and "Social Justice" are its primary pillars.

Presidents Obama's African speech served to underscore a still unresolved and perhaps irresolvable dilemma that afflicts and affects Africans in the Diaspora, namely "just who are we?" Frenchmen, Americans, British, Russian, Brazilian, Peruvian, Iraqi, Saudi., Panamanian - just who are we? What, in our psychological and emotional make-up takes center stage "nationality or ethnicity/race?" With whom do we intrinsically identify

ourselves? The answer to that question, as I see it, will determine the socio- political and economic strategies we might collectively design. President Obama's speech in Ghana was that of being an American first - nationality trumps race. Yes, it is true that he is the President of the U.S. but he is also an African who was addressing Africans.

I find no fault with the mentioning of our existing problems. This could have been a "sub-text," one that indicated an understanding of the existing destructive elements within those societies. What I found unacceptable and politically disturbing was the absence of any call for self sufficiency, reduction of dependency on the so-called west, the need for economic, political and cultural African solidarity for the purpose of acquiring parity with the "west". Further, as I recall, there was no mention, in his speech of Africa's glorious past, prior to the advent of the European. And, in the same manner that in Cairo he saw fit to rightfully remind the world of the role of the U.S. in Iran and the overthrow of Mossadegh he could have mentioned the Berlin Conference of 1994-85 that resulted in the "balkanization" of Africa, which is a prime contributor to the "genocide" he and we deplore. In short, for me, in Ghana Obama displayed that other side of his "self," that which the media so often highlights - his being bi-racial. Honestly, given what I have read about his mother, I am not certain that had she given that speech, her emphasis would have been that of her son. Why do I say that? Think about it! She married an African in a time when it was unthinkable. That could serve to give us a clue as to her make up and perhaps the nature of her speech.

As I listened to him speak I wondered, what would Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey and yes, Simon Bolivar have said to a gathering of their brothers and sisters in today's world? I do not know. I would guess that Nkrumah would still argue for a United States of Africa and Garvey would do likewise - one nation, one race, one destiny. Simon Bolivar would also continue his arguments for the creation of a United States of Latin America in the same manner that Hugo Chavez is attempting today to do. Bolivar excluded the U.S. from his paradigm of power for Latin American...

I am reminded that Dr. John H. Clarke once told a conference at City College in New York City - and I paraphrase- that the role of the African academician/intellectual is to see that the African remains on the planet How can we accomplish that task if we are reluctant or afraid to be Africans and place primacy on "nationality." Are we now living in a "post racial" world? I think not!

Some may argue that I am among a very small cadre of political dinosaurs who have not accepted the facts that the world has changed and who are still functioning on yesterday's rules of engagement. There may be some truth to that. While I accept that there have been some changes in the world in which we live, I am not convinced that it has changed in such a way that we should forget who we are and deny the reality that there has been no significant change in the governing rules between the powerful and powerless and neither has the nature of the struggle of the prevailing values system.

It is my considered judgment that the Obama generation - the generation of my children - have been duped by the incremental gains offered and promoted by the society - all won through the blood and tears of previous generations - that although all is not well with the world, it is much better by far than, as a "Bajan" friend jokingly would often say, "better than what it use to was."

The existing changes, I would argue, are all part of what is being done to forestall, if not prevent, social disruption. Change is inevitable. As Sam Cooke sang, "Change is gonna' come" Hopefully and desirably it will come without too much unrest, upheaval or disruption.

From my perspective, the generation of my children, believing that "change" has already come, is more apt to embrace "nationality" over "race" and is unwilling to wage a continued struggle for retention of their African identity. Africa is, at best, their ancestral home. However, they are no longer connected emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, or existentially to our "motherland." Thus, it is possible to suggest that we should stop "casting blame" and "move on," meaning, I believe, that we should become like the "West" who, for them, represents the direction the contemporary developing societies should take.

I would further argue that they fail to see the continued existence of the "Gunga Din" syndrome: **"An unrealistic self-deprecating fixation and identification with values, strength might, values, modus operandi, world vision of the colonialist - historical and contemporary - at the expense of our African self."**

The soldier in the film, in eulogizing "Gunga Din," said that, Gunga was a better man than he. The question remains, at least for me, does being a "better man" connote the willingness to sacrifice oneself in pursuit of the "superiority" of the values of those who colonized and enslaved us to the extent that we now refrain from "calling them out?" I would hope not! The concept of a better man should never be on the table.

Finally, **I emphatically and vehemently take issue with the focus of President Barack Hussein Obama's African speech. It fueled the tank of those who suggested that he was not "Black enough." - whatever that means. While I disagree with that perception, for me, he is part of the generation duped into believing that the struggle is over. I am hopeful, that with his great intellectual acumen he will rethink his remarks in Ghana and perhaps, at a future date, place Africa in its greater historical and political contextual reality.**

In a just world, there is no "Gunga Din."

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, Carlos E. Russell, PhD is Professor Emeritus C.U.N.Y. - Brooklyn College. In the sixties, he served as an Associate Editor of the Liberator magazine. As such, he was one of the first to interview Malcolm X after he left the Nation. He is best remembered as the founder of Black Solidarity Day in New York in 1969 and as the Chair of the Black Caucus of the Conference on New Politics in 1967. In addition, he was a consultant to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the planning for the [Poor Peoples March](#). Excerpts of his participation can be seen in [Citizen King](#) and [Eyes on the Prize \(PBS Mini Series Boxed Set\)](#). Born in the Republic of Panama he has served as that country's representative to the U.N and the O.A.S. with the rank of Ambassador. He has also served as the nightly host of "Thinking it Through" a talk show that was aired on WLIB in New York. He is a playwright and poet

as well. Click [here](#) to contact Dr. Russell.

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