

The Discourse of 'Africa's Turn'?

In the spring of 2012, two prominent figures spoke at the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston/Chicago: the eminent pan-African crusader and public intellectual, Horace Campbell, and Samia Nkrumah. Nkrumah is a daughter to Ghana's founding president, the late Dr. Kwame Nkrumah while Campbell is professor of Afro-American studies and political science at Syracuse University, USA. Samia Nkrumah is a Member of Parliament representing Jomoro District (Kwame Nkrumah's home district) and heads the Convention People's Party, a political organization founded by her late father.

Both Campbell and Nkrumah spoke about 'Africa's turn', albeit with varying perspectives and at different occasions. The latter was visiting Chicago to participate in a three-day 12th World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates. The Program of African Studies at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago took advantage of this visit to invite her to give a lecture on 'Democracy and Development in Ghana'. Campbell was at Northwestern, at the invitation of the Program of African Studies, to deliver a keynote address in commemoration of sixty years of *Toward Freedom*, the anti-colonial, justice, and freedom advocacy newsletter founded in the United States by William Bross Lloyd Jr.

Campbell's was a somewhat lofty and grandiose portrayal, reminiscent of old Marxist hyperbole. He spoke of 'revolution and transformation in Africa', and the fact that a 'quantum leap' in politics and economics was underway. It had all started with Taheria Square, he averred. I challenged Campbell about what was revolutionary with events in Egypt, considering his own definition of a revolution as 'an overthrow of the existing socio-economic and political order'. Well, he had a simple and straightforward answer: a revolution is not an event, it's a process. I pressed on: but until the revolutionary forces and processes have finally overthrown the old order, how can we plausibly proclaim, *a priori*, that a revolution is underway? 'We wait and see', he said.

Nkrumah had a more cautious perspective, shedding light on the challenges

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political leaders face in a poor and economically backward society like Ghana. A member of parliament, she noted, is not just a legislator; s/he is also a philanthropist, a developmentalist, and contends with the needs of the people s/he represents. Nkrumah took occasion to underline her father's dream for the continent: 'From slavery to colonialism, to post-independence global economic marginalization, the vision of Dr. Nkrumah was one of restoring the human dignity and uniting the African peoples'.

Samia Nkrumah spoke with a mix of candor, optimism and passion. Yet, her speech was evidently laced with trepidation. Her remarks were greatly measured and highly nuanced. She spoke of Africa's potential but did not sound oblivious of the difficulties at hand, especially in the global scheme of things. For one, she bemoaned Africa's poor representation at major trade negotiations and resultant 'bad deals' for the continent as a whole.

Both Samia Nkrumah and Horace Campbell's remarks bespoke of the growing discourse on 'Africa's turn' – the turn to turn the corner, to exorcise the twin evils of social deprivation and economic backwardness. In a word: the turn to muster socioeconomic transformation. The discourse trumpeting 'Africa's turn' is unmistakably palpable. It echoes debates during the so-called 'decade of hope' – the 1990s – predicated on structural adjustment programs and reignited mobilization of aid for Africa, championed by world celebrities. From the policy circles in Western capitals to leading research universities in the Euro-American academe; from the corridors of prominent international financial institutions to the boardrooms of leading multinational corporations; among the elite sections across the African continent and those in the diaspora, talk of a new era for Africa is ripe and ubiquitous.

But what's new that should lead anyone to talk of 'Africa's turn'? Apparently fundamental changes have been taking place on the continent, both economically and politically. We have some economic figures, to which I return below. The figures underline substantive developments, we are told. The rich but poor (and cursed?) continent continues to remain the source of much sought after natural resources and new discoveries are made, principally oil and gas. The latest, in a long list of oil producers and potential producers, are two East African nations – Kenya and Uganda. Then, there is the issue of new markets (Marx must be restless wherever he is!), new opportunities for investment, etc.

Economic reforms – to wit – privatization of state-owned corporations, market liberalization and financial deregulation have, to use the old cliché, 'unlocked the potentials' of free private enterprise, innovation and investment. Politically, electoral politics and the subordination of public power and authority to popular will and citizen accountability, the widening of respect for civil rights and political freedoms, have converged to reconfigure the African political scene in a fundamental way. 'These policy alterations', writes Anne Pitcher in the May 2012 issue of *Current History*, 'have provided the foundations for increased investor interest in the continent.'

Satellite cities have sprung up. Business is booming in downtown Kampala and Accra. Several African economies are among the top fastest growing economies in the world. Consequently, trade and investment have slowly overtaken paternalistic foreign aid. 'Whereas aid from donors such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the Scandinavian countries has financed large infrastructure projects such as hydroelectric dams and major road corridors, or provided budget support to cash-strapped African governments for education and health care,' concludes Pitcher, 'private investment has surpassed overseas development assistance (ODA) in importance'.¹ She further notes that, despite the current economic downturn,

inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) were \$60 billion in 2009 and about \$50 billion in 2010.

However, arguably, the most vaunted factor at the center of the debate is the aggressive entry of a rising global power – China, which has heightened the stakes and caused anxiety among the traditional Western patrons. China is the biggest player in the astronomical economic figures that many commentators cite. As of 2011, total China-Africa trade had reached an unprecedented \$166 billion while Chinese Foreign Direct Investment to the continent stood at a record \$15 billion.

With China's conspicuous presence on the continent, the rhetoric from the Western capitals appears to have changed. 'We want a relationship of partnership, not patronage', declared US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, speaking in the Tanzanian commercial capital, Dar es Salaam last year.² Ms. Clinton was on a continent-wide tour of Africa to strengthen American presence on the continent, considering the stakes in the 'war on terror'. 'We don't want to see a new colonialism in Africa', she concluded, undoubtedly making a veiled reference to perceived exploitative Chinese penetration of markets and control over sources of raw material across the continent.

The alarmist reaction to Chinese presence in Africa betrays an ahistorical mindset, for China's involvement with the continent dates back many decades. China's first post-war presence in Africa can be traced to Premier Zhou Enlai's tour of the continent in 1963-4. Later, China

took an active role in the 1960s and 1970s, supporting liberation movements in several African countries. As Alex Thomson notes, China gave aid to socialist-leaning nations to build stadiums, hospitals, railroads and other infrastructure.³ This early engagement also included significant aid in the form of infrastructure, scholarships for African elites to study in Chinese universities and the deployment of teams of doctors.

But the current industrial needs of the world's producer, China, have necessitated a more aggressive penetration of Africa. That said, while China's economic needs, ranging from oil and other raw materials to new markets for its manufactured goods, are at the heart of its engagement with Africa, China is also providing much needed foreign investment and access to cheap consumer goods, thus making China a preferred economic partner than Western countries and their transnational corporations. The ubiquity of Chinese aid, trade and investment entities in Africa is striking – mining in Zambia, DR Congo and Angola; oil exploration and refining in Angola, Sudan and Uganda; road constructions in Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda; power generation in Angola and Uganda; developing the tourism industry in Sierra Leone; mobile phone networks services in Kenya and Nigeria, etc. The list goes on.

The turn might be here, but the transformation is by no means foregone. Africa has been there before and has stumbled. For the pessimist, stumbling again is not far-fetched. The enthusiasm of the imme-

diated post-independence decade soon gave way to a cold-blooded and callous politics that held Africa back for long. The hype of the 1990s delivered little substance.

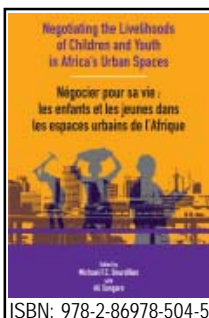
Samia Nkrumah, perhaps with dreams from the father, appears to have a better grasp of the task at hand for African leaders – to craft a national agenda borne of a consensus politics, and to engage the outside world, especially China, on Africa's terms. As matters stand now, there is little to show that African governments are engaging the rest of the world with a coherent and sustainable agenda geared at long-term socioeconomic transformation. Without setting its own terms and agenda, Africa will continue serving as no more than a conveyor belt. That many African economies remain largely dominated by foreign investors and multinational corporations, who may have little interest in long-term socioeconomic transformation, points to the need for caution.

Notes

1. Anne Pitcher, "Lions, Tigers, and Emerging Markets: African's Development Dilemmas," *Current Issue*, Vol. 111, No. 745, May 2012, pp. 163-8.
2. "Hilary Clinton Warns Africa of 'New Colonialism,'" *The Huffington Post*, June 11, 2011.
3. Alex Thomson, *An Introduction to African Politics*, Third Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). See also Drew Thompson, 'China's Soft Power in Africa: from the "Beijing Consensus" to Health Diplomacy,' *China Brief*. 5, 21 (2005).

Negotiating the Livelihoods of Children and Youth in Africa's Urban Spaces Négocier sa vie : les enfants et les jeunes dans les espaces urbains d'Afrique

Michael Bourdillon with with Ali Sangare



This book deals with problems facing children and youth in African cities today. African populations have high growth rates and, consequently, relatively high proportions of young people. Population growth in rural areas has stretched resources leading to urban migration and a rapid growth of cities. Economies have not grown apace with the population; and in some countries, economies have even shrunk. The result is a severe lack of resources in cities to meet the needs of the growing populations, shown in high unemployment, inadequate housing, poor services, and often extreme poverty. All the essays in this book draw attention to such urban environments, in which children and youth have to live and survive. The title of this book speaks of negotiating livelihoods. The concept of 'livelihood' has been adopted to incorporate the social and physical environment together with people's responses to it. It considers not only material, but also human and social resources, including local knowledge and understanding. It, thus, considers the material means for living in a broader context of social and cultural interpretation. It, therefore, does not deal only with material and economic existence, but also with leisure activities, entertainments and other social forms of life developed by young people in response to the dictates of the environment.