



Address of the Patron of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation,
Thabo Mbeki (pictured above) in Commemoration of the 121st Anniversary of the
Battle of Adwa at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia
March 4, 2017

Program Director,
Distinguished participants,
Friends, comrades, ladies and gentlemen

I would like to thank the organizers of the important Commemoration of the 121st Anniversary of the historic Battle of Adwa for inviting me to join you here today, as I did at the memorable celebration at Adwa two days ago, where the important announcement was made that the Pan-African University will be established in Adwa.

Our presence here today once more serves as confirmation of the truth our Continent has known for over a century that the great victory of Ethiopia in 1896 at the Battle of Adwa was indeed both an Ethiopian and an African victory.

Accordingly our presence here today gives us a renewed opportunity to pay tribute to the heroic African army led by Emperor Menelik II, Empress Taitu, Ras Alula, Ras Makonnen and other eminent Ethiopians, which, by defeating the invading Italian forces, gave all Africa the powerful message that our Continent's struggles for liberation from imperialism and colonialism would emerge victorious.

That victory also confirmed the high esteem in which Africans across our Continent and in the African Diaspora held Ethiopia, as well as the inspiration they drew from the existence of this sovereign African State which had existed for millennia.

It was for this reason that for many Africans the two names Africa and Ethiopia were seen as synonymous.

In this regard I am certain that many of us present here today are very familiar with “*The Ethiopian Manifesto: Issued in Defense of the Black Man’s Rights in the Scale of Universal Freedom*”, written by one Robert Alexander Young, described as a slave preacher, and published in New York in 1829.

This moving Manifesto was a passionate appeal for the liberation of the African slaves in the United States as well as all Africans everywhere.

Robert Young named it “*The Ethiopian Manifesto*” for two reasons.

One of these was that it described all Africans, including those in the Diaspora, as Ethiopians. The other was that he associated the African aspirations for freedom and justice with Ethiopia.

Accordingly, Robert Young began “*The Ethiopian Manifesto*”, which was addressed first of all to the African slaves in the United States, with these words:

“Ethiopians! the power of Divinity having within us, as man, implanted a sense of the due and prerogatives belonging to you, a people...”

He continued:

“We do, therefore, to the accomplishment of our purpose, issue this...grand manifesto, here from requiring the attention towards us of every native, or those proceeding in descent from the Ethiopian or African people; a regard to your welfare being the great and inspiring motive which leads us to this our undertaking.”

And further he wrote:

“Ethiopians! open your minds to reason...Know, then, in your present state or standing, in your sphere of government in any nation within which you reside, we hold and contend you enjoy but few of your rights of government within them. We here speak of the whole of the Ethiopian people...”

“Fallen, sadly, sadly low indeed, hath become our race, when we behold it reduced but to an enslaved state, to raise it from its degenerate sphere, and instill into it the rights of men, are the ends intended of these our words...

“These words, which carry to the view of others the dictates of my mind, I borrow not from the sense of white men or of black: learn, my brother and fellow-Ethiopian, it is but the invigorating power of Deity instils them to my discernment. Of him do I know I derive my right; of him was I on the conception of a mother’s womb created free; who then in the shape of man shall dare to rob me of my birthright as bestowed to me in my existence from God?...

“No, I am in myself a man, and as a man will live, or as a man will die; for as I was born free (with) the will allotted me, of the freedom of God, so do I claim and purport to establish an alike universal freedom to every son and daughter descending from the black...

“Man, white man, black man or, more properly, ye monsters incarnate, in human shape, who claim the horrid right to hold nature’s untutored son, the Ethiopian, in bondage, to you I do here from speak.

“Mark me, and regard well these words; be assured, they convey the voice of reason, dictated to you through a prophetic sense of truth. The time is at hand when many signs shall appear to you, to denote that Almighty God regards the affairs of afflicted men: for now, the cries of bitter servitude, from those unhappy sons of men, whom ye have so long unjustly oppressed with the goading shafts of an accursed slavery, hath ascended to Deity.”

It was exactly this same sentiment expressed by a slave preacher in New York in “*The Ethiopian Manifesto*” 188 years ago which informed the pan-Africanism and the African nationalism which later guided the struggles of all Africans, including those in the Diaspora, as they fought for our emancipation during the 19th and 20th centuries.

And indeed this African nationalism itself was first of all known as *Ethiopianism!*

For instance as late as 1906, the Governor of the British colonial Province of Natal in South Africa described John Dube, who became the first President of the African National Congress (ANC), as “a pronounced Ethiopian who ought to be watched.”

Indeed during the same year, a predecessor organization of the ANC, the South African Native Congress, had resolved as follows: “Congress believes that Ethiopianism is a symptom of progress, brought about by the contact of the natives of Africa with European civilization, making it felt in all departments of the social, religious and economic structure.”

This use of the characterization *Ethiopianism* was first introduced into South Africa by African Christians who broke away from the Missionary Churches established in our country by European missionaries, thus to assert their independence from domination by these missionaries by establishing their own churches.

In this context an early leader of the religious Ethiopian Movement in South Africa, Rev J.G. Xaba, said in 1897, a year after the Battle of Adwa: “The aim of the Ethiopian Church is to promote Christianity and unity in the whole continent of Africa.”

In this regard the South African Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana has said:

“The Ethiopian Movement was a nationalist religious movement that declared that there was no need to seek to reach out to God via the path of European colonialism – citing the verse in the Psalms that ‘Ethiopia shall extend her hand to God’. The history of Ethiopian Christianity which had no reference to European colonialism was, I believe, the foundation upon which the Ethiopian repulsion of colonial invasion (at Adwa) was to be based.

“In the same spirit, as the first effort at forging a united national movement in South Africa, the Ethiopian Movement became the bridge between the era where Africans in South Africa fought colonial forces as disparate regional and ethnic formations, and the modern era of national unity. Thus Ethiopia gave us the nationalist commitment to propagate and defend the values of the dignity and welfare of all and the value of national unity behind these human rights.”

It is therefore obvious that with the Africans at home and abroad having already identified themselves with Ethiopia, including in the context of their quest for liberation, the victory at Adwa would have confirmed the impending triumph of *Ethiopianism* throughout the African world.

This conviction was strengthened by the fact that this victory in Adwa was achieved a mere 11 years after the signing by the imperialist powers of the infamous Treaty of Berlin on February 26, 1885, at the Berlin Conference, with its arrogant entrenchment of the system of colonialism in Africa.

The victory at Adwa therefore confirmed to all Africans that their continuing resistance and liberation struggles, despite their defeat during the colonial wars, would sooner or later bring the purposes of the Treaty of Berlin to naught.

Through the victory at Adwa Ethiopia taught all Africans the critical importance of national unity in the struggle to defeat the common colonial enemy, given the example that had been set as the Ethiopians throughout the Empire united as one people to defend their independence, thus to shed their blood to assert their right to determine their destiny.

That victory also underlined the absolute imperative for the Africans to repudiate the demeaning image of themselves propagated by the imperialist powers that they were inferior and barbaric, and therefore the need to assert their human dignity and their equality with all nations.

Here I would like to speak of the need to mobilize the people to be ready to make the necessary sacrifices such as were made by the Ethiopian peasantry as it contributed the necessary logistics to support the war effort, as well as those made by the infantry, the foot soldiers who confronted the modern Italian weapons inspired by the view – victory or death!

The victory at Adwa also underlined the vital importance of a skilled and patriotic leadership capable of outsmarting the enemy not only on the deadly military field of battle, but also in the challenging areas of politics and diplomacy.

In the end the victory at Adwa told all Africans that they were indeed right to call themselves Ethiopians because as such they had demonstrated practically that the claimed invincibility of the European powers was false, and that united Africa and Africans would win!

It also made an important statement about the emancipation of women and gender equality, illustrated both by the role played by Empress Taytu before and during the Battle of Adwa and the contribution of the women battalions during the Battle.

The victory at Adwa was also important for the Africans because it helped to undermine or weaken the arrogant feeling of superiority of the colonial powers and nations and therefore strengthened the resolve and confidence of the African oppressed.

In its edition of March 5, 1896, a few days after the victory at Adwa, the Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, wrote that:

“The utter and crushing defeat...represents the most disastrous check which any European power has received at the hands of the natives for years past...It cannot but be deplored by white men in all parts of Africa...It is far from impossible that this great defeat may have even larger consequences than a temporary check to civilization in Africa.”

On the same day, the South African *Cape Argus* newspaper editorial said:

“Italy is bound to carry out to the bitter end her policy in Abyssinia...Menelik must be crushed at any cost...Meanwhile Italy will have the keenest sympathy in her latest trouble.”

Both these newspapers represented the opinions of the white settler population and the colonial administration in South Africa.

Obviously as the black oppressed read the comments I have quoted, they would have celebrated the fact that the victory at Adwa would indeed “have even larger consequences than a temporary check to (the colonization of) Africa” and that ‘Menelik would never be crushed’.

Reflecting the same sentiments as the white South African press, a correspondent of *The Times* of London reported from Paris:

“No one here...wishes for the success of the Abyssinians at the price of the discomfiture of a civilized nation, from which it is quite possible to differ in aims and opinions without being supposed to cherish any ill-will when that nation is face to face with a brave but barbarous foe.” However the editor of the same newspaper, *The Times*, conveyed a more rational view and wrote:

“The defeat of the Italians by Menelik would be remembered in history forever. This victory will arouse the spirit of the Africans who until today have been treated with contempt as pagans...(Menelik’s) victory is the victory of all Africa. This kind of commentary is going to be strongly evident in the future. Since it travels fast with the wing of air across the desert, the news is known now from end to end in those (African) countries. In the future too, since it is known that Africa defeated Europe, it will create a sense of defence and raise the level of consciousness of millions of Africans...It is not comfortable to be happy with the defeat of the Italians. This defeat is ours and that of others...It is a defeat of colonial Europe, and tomorrow’s Europe too.” During his lecture delivered on March 4, 1896, a ‘distinguished’ French historian said:

“The defeat of the Italians by the King Menelik is an event which you should keep in your memories. It is the waking up of Africa to meet what has been hitherto the disdainful seizure by Europeans of these countries which we call barbarous. It must not be forgotten that in many of these countries now reverted to barbarism, there formerly existed an extremely advanced civilization and that Ethiopia in particular enjoyed throughout Africa great renowned for its refinement and wealth.”

As these various opinions were reproduced in the European press, there was also an important development in Italy in the aftermath of its defeat at Adwa – the development of a popular movement against the imperialist invasion of Africa.

Some of this was reported in a book published in 1910. This is Vol II of the “*Memoirs of (Baroness) Bertha Von Suttner: The Records of an Eventful Life.*”

Among others she reported:

“In Italy the protest of the people against the continuation of the war continues to grow louder. But since it is Republicans and Socialists who vote for the discontinuance of the campaign, their demonstrations are suppressed by the government. On February 29 a great...banquet (in opposition to the war against Africa) was planned in Milan, but forbidden by the prefecture. And on the next day comes the terrible news of the defeat in Adowa – eight thousand men fallen – the rest put to flight – two generals killed – in short, a catastrophe; wild agony in Italy and sympathy throughout Europe...

“The...movement (in opposition to the war against Africa) is assuming great dimensions. In Rome, Turin, Milan, Bologna, and Padua, committees of ladies are active in getting signatures for a peace petition to Parliament. This has been signed by many thousand persons.

“So acted the ladies; the women of the people were still more energetic. They threw themselves down on the rails before the cars that were about to carry away their husbands and sons to the place of embarkation, and thus actually prevented the departure of the trains.

“Likewise in the barracks, a protest is made against sending more men to the African shambles, and large numbers of deserters are escaping over the border.

“What is beginning to take place in the whole country is a battle between the idea of war and that of peace...

“(The King) would be glad to retain Crispi (as Prime Minister), but a storm is arising against him throughout the land and – Crispi falls.

“A new ministry is formed. Rudini...becomes Prime Minister...

“The Crispi journals and the papers representing the war party are fierce against any idea of peace: “Revenge for Adowa!”, “Guerra a fondo”! (“War to the bitter end!”) And had it been a [little] earlier, this cry alone would have come to the surface.

“Yet louder and more impetuously now arise the voices in protestation against the continuance of the unrighteous war. The movement of protest was organized; hence it was effective. Through Teodoro Moneta I learned all that was going on in this direction. It was a victory; for the new minister, Rudini, did not demand the continuance of the war...

“The defeat of the Italians in Africa pains me; but it is a wholesome lesson. If I were Crispin’s successor, I should have no scruple in openly declaring, ‘Italy has been deservedly punished for a great offense; let us not make the offense worse; we have something better to do’, and Italy would give jubilant ratification to [peace].”

Thus did the victory at Adwa communicate the strategic message to the Africans that it was possible for them to enter into an alliance of solidarity with the ordinary people of the imperialist and colonial countries, against the policies and programs of the ruling elites of these powers.

It was exactly because of the understanding of this possibility, to which the historic African victory at Adwa made an important contribution, that it became possible, many decades after 1896, to give birth to the very powerful International Anti-Apartheid Movement and the International Movement of Solidarity with Vietnam, both of which enjoyed mass support in the Western countries, as did the Ethiopian people with regard to the Italians, when Ethiopia sought to defend and preserve the historic results of the victory at Adwa.

Because of its historical position among all Africans, including and especially the victory at Adwa, Ethiopia was accepted as a participant at the very first and momentous 1900 Pan African Conference at which the outstanding Pan-Africanist, W.E.B. du Bois, made the indelible and prescient statement – the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line!

Significantly, as all of us know, Menelik authorized a fellow African, but from the African Diaspora, Benito Sylvain, originally from Haiti, to represent Ethiopia at the Conference.

The respect which Emperor Menelik bestowed on Benito Sylvain derived in good measure from his celebration of the importance for all Africans of the establishment of the First Black Republic in the world in 1804 in Haiti, put in place as a result of the victory of the risen African slaves of Haiti over the Spanish, British and French imperial forces after a protracted military struggle.

It was also in the context of the universal African recognition of the place of Ethiopia in the African liberation consciousness and the vital importance of the victory during the Battle at Adwa that Menelik II was admitted among the ranks of the African fighters for liberation as an Honorary President of the Pan-African Association.

Following the celebrations at Adwa two days ago, we have gathered here today to commemorate the victory secured by disciplined Ethiopian and therefore African forces against a predatory and arrogant European power.

Many of our esteemed and historic African leaders have spoken very highly of the place of the Ethiopians who fought at Adwa in terms of their African revolutionary consciousness, and therefore their actions as African liberators.

In this regard, the outstanding African patriot, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, then resident in London, England, said that in the context of the context of the invasion of Ethiopia by fascist Italy in 1936:

“At that moment it was almost as if the whole of London had declared war on me personally. For the next few minutes I could do nothing but glare at each impassive face, wondering if these people could realize the wickedness of colonialism, and praying that the day might come when I could play my part in bringing about the downfall of such a system. My nationalism surged to the fore; I was ready to go to hell itself, if need be, in order to achieve my object.”

Much later, Nelson Mandela said:

“I was seventeen when Mussolini attacked Ethiopia, an invasion that spurred not only my hatred of that despot but of fascism in general...Ethiopia has always held a special place in my own imagination and the prospect of visiting Ethiopia attracted me more strongly than a trip to France, England, and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me an African. Meeting the Emperor (Haile Selassie) himself would be like shaking hands with history.”

Thus do we arrive at the moment of our shared and common point as Africans when we must ask ourselves the vitally important question – over what issues will we now shake hands as Africans, signifying our solemn agreement about what we will do together further to build on the historic Victory at Adwa 121 years ago?

In this context I would like to believe that all of us are agreed that through the African Union we have agreed that as Africans we continue to face the two strategic tasks of achieving African unity and realizing Africa’s renaissance.

I think that it is in this context that we should reflect on the matter of the important lessons we should draw from the historic victory at Adwa.

In as much as the victory in Adwa was achieved through the united action of the Ethiopian people, one of these lessons is the critical importance of national unity behind a progressive vision as a fundamental condition for the realization of our strategic goals. Given the fact that these strategic goals also relate to our Continent as a whole, this surely means that we must mobilize all our countries to act together in unity to achieve these strategic goals.

All this means that we should together act to honor the injunction coming out of Adwa, that – let each of our countries as well as our Continent as a whole act in unity to achieve our strategic goals!

The second lesson we must draw from the victory at Adwa is the absolute imperative we face properly to carry out the necessary preparations to enable us to achieve the strategic victories we seek. I am certain that in this regard we are familiar with the diplomatic, political, logistic and military preparations which were essential to secure the victory at Adwa.

I think the third lesson we must draw from Adwa is that since it is only through struggle that we will achieve our strategic goals, we must therefore be ready to make the necessary sacrifices as we strive to overcome the resistance of those who will oppose us.

In this context, once again, I would like to mention the enormous sacrifices which were made by the Ethiopian peasantry as it supplied the needs of a 100 000-strong national army, over a period of many months! This goes together with the sacrifices the Ethiopian soldiers were ready to make as they went to battle, knowing that they were confronting a European army, supported by African levies, and armed with the most modern weapons!

I am certain that the fourth lesson we must draw from the victory at Adwa is the need for us to develop the necessary principled, courageous and determined leadership which must stand at the helm of the African masses as they engage in sustained struggle to achieve the strategic victories our countries and Continent need.

In this regard I have no doubt that it is not difficult for any of us here to imagine the courage and determination which drove the leaders of the Ethiopian national army, led by Emperor Menelik II, Empress Taitu and others, as they led the successful struggle to defeat the encroachment of Italian colonialism and therefore defend the independence of Ethiopia.

During the last half-hour I have had the privilege to address the distinguished participants at this gathering, I have been fully aware of the fact that I am essentially talking to Ethiopian sisters and brothers to salute them for the enormous contribution Ethiopia has made, over many centuries, as she has served as an exemplar of what Africa must do to realize her aspirations.

During those centuries Ethiopia has stood out as a sovereign and authentically African State which, among others, could and did enter into formal relations with other States, such as those of Italy, Great Britain, France, Russia and the United States of America.

She inscribed on the global historical record an indelible account of heroic resistance to defend her independence as an independent African State, as exemplified by the successive wars of resistance before Adwa, fought under the leadership of Emperors Tewodoros II and Yohannes IV for instance against Britain, Egypt and Italy.

As I have said, because Ethiopia came to represent exactly what all Africans dreamed of in terms of their future, including those in the African Diaspora, these Africans were proud to describe themselves as Ethiopians, given the sentiment of common struggle and the aspiration they shared, characterized as Ethiopianism.

As all of us know, the creed shared by the independent anti-colonial African churches, which emerged during the 19th century and described themselves as Ethiopian, though separated by many centuries from the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church, was based on the well-known text in the 68th Biblical Psalm which reads, in part:

²⁹ Because of thy temple at Jerusalem shall kings bring presents unto thee.

³⁰ Rebuke the company of spearmen, the multitude of the bulls, with the calves of the people, till every one submit himself with pieces of silver: scatter thou the people that delight in war.

³¹ Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.

I would like to suggest that everything I have said relating to Ethiopia, including this Biblical text, has imposed on today's Ethiopians a particular obligation.

This is that you, my fellow Ethiopian and therefore African sisters and brothers, have an especial and noble obligation to conduct yourselves in a manner which confirms your eminent role, acclaimed through all known history, as true representatives of the aspirations of all Africans both on our Continent and in the African Diaspora.

To conclude, I would like to assert that it is indeed important that both Ethiopia and the whole of our Continent should continuously celebrate the historic victory at Adwa as this serves to give inspiration to all of us to pursue our progressive strategic goals, confident of success.

At the same time I would like to suggest that the victorious pursuit of those progressive strategic goals requires that first we break them down into specific and concrete tasks, and second, that we use the vitally important lessons handed down to us by the victory at Adwa successfully to accomplish those tasks.

Thus will the historic victory at Adwa, 121 years ago, continue practically to serve as the source of inspiration it was from the very beginning, for the all-round emancipation of the peoples of Africa, and therefore the Renaissance of Africa!

Thank you.