

Telling and Retelling of Each Story: From the Maghreb to Madagascar

a public address by

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John Dramani Mahama is the President of the Republic of Ghana, elected in a December 7, 2012 popular election. He ascended to the Office of President after the untimely death of the late President - His Excellency Professor John Evans Atta Mills on the 24th of July 2012. He attended primary school at the Achimota School in Accra, and on completion moved to the Northern Region to attend the Ghana Secondary School in Tamale, thereafter he attended the University of Ghana, Legon where he received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1981, in 1986 he completed post graduates studies in Communication (University of Ghana), and he holds a post graduate diploma in Social Psychology from the Institute of Social Sciences in Moscow. He is thus, an avid reader, author and historian, and over the course of his career he has written for several newspapers and other publications, and recently published his

first book, a memoir entitled *My First Coup D'etat and Other True Stories from the Lost Decades of Africa*. He considers the combination of the study of history, communications and social psychology as having had a tremendous impact on shaping his views, his thoughts and his understanding.

Mr. Vice Chancellor
His Excellency Dr. Carlos Lopes
Madam Director
Distinguished Scholars and Students
Ladies and Gentlemen
My Brothers and Sisters,

It is a tremendous privilege for me to be here with all of you today. For those of you who have travelled from other places across the globe to join us, on behalf of the people of Ghana, you are welcome to our wonderful country.

I would like to offer my congratulations to the University of Ghana on the celebration of its 65th anniversary. The students who have entered this campus and filled the lecture halls of this university have come from all walks of life and from every corner of this continent. Many of them have gone on to effect change in their communities, some even on a larger scale, and that is a true testament to the commitment of this university to excellence in education.

Vice Chancellor, and my friend Prof. Ernest Aryeetey has visited the Flagstaff House several times this year and we have both agreed that government must redeem our many pledges to the University of Ghana. We have also discussed, sometimes with other Vice Chancellors present, the many challenges that this university faces. But we have also been encouraged by the many opportunities that exist and the remarkable progress that has been made in the first few years. The new focus on research, the innovations in the training of Ph.D. students and the collegiate system that has very recently been adopted are proof that resilience in the face of adversity always pays off.

Congratulations as well to the Institute of African Studies on the celebration of its golden jubilee. The Institute was established in order to reclaim Africa's intellectual and cultural resources, to study the various layers of our lives, and to preserve them for the sake of posterity, and for the sake of our survival. And against every challenge that has presented itself in the course of the last half century, that is precisely what this Institute has done.

For me personally, the institute touched my life in two ways. First, like all my other colleagues in 1st year of university, African Studies was compulsory and each student needed to pass it in order to qualify to be awarded a degree by the university. The few steps of 'adowa' and 'gawu' I can dance, I am proud to say were learnt during my African Studies course in my first year of university education.

Again during my final year of undergraduate study, it was the manuscripts of "Kitab Ghunja" in the library of the Institute of African Studies that aided me to research and complete my final year dissertation on the history of the migration of the Gonja people into what is today modern day Ghana.

My Brothers and Sisters,

I would like to begin with these words, delivered by Ghana's founding father and first president, the great pan-Africanist, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in 1962 at the first International Congress of Africanists:

"The central myth in the mythology surrounding Africa is that of the denial that we are a historical people. It is said that whereas other continents have shaped history and determined its course, Africa has stood still, held down by inertia. Africa, it is said, entered history only as a result of European contact. Its history, therefore, is widely felt to be an extension of European history."

I am a student of history, a historian. It was the subject of my first degree, which I earned at this very university. When I first read those words by Dr. Nkrumah, they gave me pause. They forced me to stop and think. What he describes with those words is the attempted erasure of Africa's history from the world's consciousness.

History is nothing more than a story. That is one of the first things my professors taught me. The word itself, with all its inherent politically incorrect patriarchy, says so: his-story. So history is a story, an anecdote; it is a tale that is told over and over again until it is accepted as truth. What does it mean, then, for a continent to have no stories? What happens when a people are made to believe that the events and emotions of their lives are not worthy of narration?

The first International Congress of Africanists was a call to action. It was a call to study, preserve and promote all things African, from our hairstyles to our handshakes; from our languages that were no longer being written to our fashions and fabrics that were no longer being worn.

When I first travelled to Europe as a young man, I found it a bit perplexing that everything which contained history, everything that inspired the telling of a story was locked away in a museum—even the skeletons and skulls of people from long ago. I couldn't believe it.

As an African, that was unfamiliar to me because here, where I am from, everything we own or use holds at least a trace of the past: beads and wax cloth given in a dowry and then handed down from mother to daughter; tools of a trade left behind--be it a silversmith's or a weaver's--the legacy of a father's life's work passed on to his son or nephew.

Most of the items around us could easily be considered artifacts—items that an outsider, somebody not of our culture would rather collect, polish, catalogue, appraise and lock away to have displayed. We do not lock things away for display; we use them. We are the great recyclers. We believe in utility. We believe in continuity. We believe in legacy.

The first Congress of Africanists was held in 1962. That was four years after the publication of *Things Fall Apart*, the landmark novel by Chinua Achebe, which is widely held as the book that moved modern African literature to international prominence.

Throughout his life, Professor Achebe often stated that he wrote the novel to right the wrongs that were being perpetuated against Africa. In his essay, "Named for Victoria, Queen of England," Professor Achebe wrote that: "At the university, I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Cary's much praised Mister Johnson) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned."

That first International Congress of Africanists was a clarion call to tell our stories. There was an understanding then, at least among the organizers and participants, that Africa was changing at a rapid pace, that if we were not careful a great deal could be forever lost to time and technology.

The study of Africa is neither the study of the heart nor of the mind. It is the study of the beat that is formed when the two, heart and mind, meet to create a rhythm of sorrow or joy or pain or laughter. The study of Africa is the story of shosholoza, a traditional southern African mineworker's song; or azonto, the modern mutation of kpanlogo, a traditional song and dance of the Ga fishermen. It is the story of kikoy, kanga and kente cloths, and the story held in the meaning of our indigenous names: Chinualumogo means "May God fight on my behalf"; Kofi means "Friday born male child"; wa means "the son of." It is the story of how we got our Christian names: Albert for Chinua Achebe, George for Kofi Awoonor, and James for Ngugi, son of Thiong'o.

The study of Africa is the telling and retelling of each story from the Maghreb to Madagascar. It is the truth of our beauty as well as the truth of our ugliness: the story of the choice between short sleeve and long sleeve and the subsequent amputee villages; the story of child soldiers and female genital mutilation, of rebels hunting and eating Mbuti, of the butchering of albinos for their body parts.

My Brothers and Sisters,

If you were entrusted to tell a true African story, to project a true African image, what would it be?

I would tell the story of Simpa, the full moon dance that used to take place in many of the villages in the northern region, including my mother's village, Damongo. Back then, every village had an open courtyard or central square and that was where Simpa was held. People used the occasion to flirt and find their sweethearts or spouses. The women would make themselves beautiful in their best beads and prints.

The local music makers, young and old, would bring their instruments. As soon as the sun took its leave and the moon made its entrance, the appointed conductor would give his signal and they would all begin to play. The women would dance seductively and the men would fall into a trance, hypnotized by the side-to-side movement of their hips. Everyone in the village would be gathered there, either dancing or watching. There was no place else to be.

Simpa took place every month for the entire duration of the full moon, be it one night or three—that is until the village was placed on the national grid and people started staying indoors and watching the flirtations and romances of foreigners on television instead. The tradition that I so enjoyed taking part in as a child has since died out. And all it took was the flick of a switch.

It seems almost normal now, the accepted presence of European intimacy on public display, and the accepted absence of African intimacy from the public arena. It seems as though this is how it has always been, but those of us who remember know otherwise. Yet, if nobody tells the story, if nobody makes it a permanent part of our history, then that memory of who and how we once were will die with us.

In his book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Culture*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o discusses his decision to write in Gikuyu, his mother tongue.

“The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures [to write in your own spoken language] is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal. Africa actually enriches Europe: but Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty.”

My Brothers and Sisters,

The work set out at the first Congress of Africanists was to reverse the belief that Africa needs Europe to rescue it. It was to tell our stories and, in so doing, validate our history in order that we might once again value ourselves.

The following year, 1963, the Organization of African Unity was established. Africa seemed to hold the world's attention on every front—in politics, art, culture, literature, music, fashion, and sports. Who didn't know of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta? People all over the world were learning to eat jollof, injera and yassa, listening to Manu Dibango and Osibisa, reading Achebe and Armah, wearing dashikis, and spicing up their speech with a word or two of Kiswahili. Africa's light was shining brightly. We were making noise, demanding to be heard.

Then just as quickly, there was silence. There was darkness. And it lasted for years.

The question that confronts us now is, “What next?” I am sure that at the close of this conference the answers will be many. And those answers are needed now more than ever as we claim a space once again on that world stage. The African film industry, led by Nollywood, is the third highest grossing in the world, behind Hollywood and Bollywood. There are more African writers being published now by major publishing houses than ever before. Africans are making a significant impact in the world of sports; the last World Cup was even held on the continent.

Politically, Africa is stronger now than it has been since that first Congress of Africanists when a number of countries were still struggling for their independence. Free and fair elections are shifting from anomaly to norm. Democracy is forcing out dictatorship. Five of the fastest growing economies are in Africa. Of course, we still have our challenges, but they no longer seem insurmountable. There is hope again. These days, most of the stories we're telling are laced with silver linings.

In a now-famous talk entitled, “The Danger of a Single Story,” the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said: “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

My Brothers and Sisters,

I open this conference knowing that there is unfinished business.

The challenge is to make our stories matter, to use them to empower ourselves, and future generations. Our stories, the ones we study; the ones we tell and retell, must now be the definitive stories about us, and the African continent. That is the challenge.

It is a challenge that calls for the courage to dream, the courage to believe and to dare, the courage to envision and to fight, the courage to work, and the courage to achieve at the highest level of excellence.

This is the challenge that was set forth in the mission statement issued by Dr. Nkrumah in his speech at the formal opening of this Institute in 1963: “One useful function of this Institute must surely be to study the history, culture, and institutions, languages and arts of Ghana and of Africa in new African centered ways.”

This renaissance that is currently unfolding must be worthy of the one that preceded it. It must also be worthy of the future that it promises.

I leave you with the confidence that this conference will make history, that the stories it will generate will help guide future directions for the nations in Africa, which will in turn lead other nations outside of the continent toward the fulfillment of a more balanced and equitable global world.

My Brothers and Sisters,

I now have the pleasure of declaring the International Conference on African Studies duly opened.

Thank you for your kind attention.