

On Leadership and Development

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Written on the Occasion of Investiture of Dr. Benedict O. Oramah
As President of the African Export-Import Bank

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"I am working with a timeline that begins in the future in 3000AD and travels backwards 200,000 years to the estimated emergence of the very first Homo sapiens sapiens in Africa. I am imagining the African continent's life, somewhere in the future, flashing before its eyes.

In 3000 AD to be human is to be African. Robotic humanoids make up most the Earth's beings. They have the utmost reverence for human DNA, a helix that links to the beginnings of life on the African continent.

2500 AD: There are no borders in the world. There is no distance between races, genders, nations, Gods, and languages. Africa is the heart of the planet. Our resources feed the world. They always have. Our people, a kaleidoscope of colour and ancestry, move freely. We are revered for holding the history of humanity. We are respected for what we have endured and contributed to the world. Ours is a story of transcendence: how to dive into the heart of pain to get to the bottom of the truth. How to walk with fear without being consumed by it. How to co-exist with difference through self-respect and respect of the other. Who we are is embedded in all that we do and in everything that originates from us. The world eats the flesh of our land, adorns itself with our magical art, learns through our sciences, and prospers through our understanding of humanity.

2100 AD: There is no more hunger in Africa except for a hunger for memories. Our leaders are teachers, artists and historians. They are alchemists who transform legacies of pain into dignity by helping people hold up mirrors to themselves. Every story is important. The farmer whose son is now a wealthy entrepreneur. The descendant of slaves who learned how to write. The child bride who became a doctor. Our leaders are midwives of an ancient people being born again.

2050 AD: The last slave is freed in Mauritania. Child soldiers are now old men who weave fantastic tales of unfathomable suffering to wide-eyed children who sleep in warm homes and wake up to go to schools that teach them the truth. The children learn about sculptures made of bullets, guns, shackles and machetes that decorate every town from Addis Ababa to Accra. For every battle fought a poet writes a poem. Our leaders are engineers, architects, farmers, builders who work side by side with the people. Our leaders listen more than they speak. Our leaders do much more than they promise.

2020 AD: The women of the African continent create a tidal wave that carries the world to a new understanding of what it means to respect life. The peasant, the politician, the worker, the student, and the professional see that their lives are linked. Our leaders think like mothers, the very first leaders any human ever knows. Africa asks itself, "What is best for the mother and the child?", because that is what is best for everyone.

2015 AD: The first female president of Egypt starts her first day of school. She is half Nubian, half Arab and Muslim. She counts stars with her father, and she prays for the children washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Small bodies like hers that perish with fresh dreams inside them. She will lead her people to illustrate their dreams like God paints new skies in the heavens each day. She will enrage those who cannot accept that she is capable of leading. She will lead with the compassion of one who knows that the bottom of the seas were once littered with dreamers.

1987 AD: The idea for African Export Import Bank is born. Thomas Isidore Noel Sankara is killed. Burkina Faso means "Land of the Upright Man". Sankara inspires peasants to walk upright on their own land by standing upright in the face of imperialism. Women stand upright in government, and in schools, with pregnant bellies. He said, "While revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas."

1888 AD: Slavery ends in Brazil. 15 million Africans have made the treacherous journey, called "Maafa" or "great disaster" in Swahili, across the Atlantic to build the manufacturing sectors, banking sectors, insurance sectors of the Americas and Europe. Millions more on the continent have been destabilized. Communities and ways of living have been destroyed. The New World is built on black bodies. The ones who have survived are the ones who are led by unfathomable faith, who channel their suffering into creativity, who learn to distill pain into hopes that one day their children will live free.

1791 AD: The only successful slave revolution in history is led by Toussaint Louverture in Haiti. He says, "We have known how to face dangers to obtain our liberty. We will know how to brave death to maintain it." The ideals of the French Revolution "equality, liberty, fraternity" traverse the oceans to land in the docks of Haiti where slaves fight for the same rights. They quickly learn that they are not the same as Frenchmen. They can never be the same. For the sin of wanting freedom, Haiti is forced to pay reparations to France.

1652 AD: The Dutch East India Company, one of the world's largest multinational companies sends Jan Van Riebeeck far from his native land of Holland to the Cape of Good Hope, to set up a refreshment station for ships en route to India. This land will one day be known as South Africa. Van Riebeeck makes contact with the oldest people known to man, the Khoi and the San. To this day we do not know what the kings and queens of Khoi and the San named the land of their birth.

1528 AD: Askia al-Hajj Muhammed, patron of scholars during the golden era of Timbuktu, passes away during the kingdom's political and intellectual peak. He is a pious and learned man who listens to the advice of scholars. Timbuktu is the world centre for the trade of books. Public and personal libraries abound. Subsequent military invasions destroy libraries. Those who thrive on the power of blood can never love the power of books.

1325 AD: Mansa Musa, the wealthiest individual ever known throughout human history and king of the Malian Empire, sets out to Mecca to make Hajj. Mansa Musa is richer than the present day Catholic Church. He is richer than the Sultan of Brunei and the Queen of England. He is richer than Bill Gates and Warren Buffet combined will ever be. He leaves for Mecca accompanied by 60,000 porters, 80 camels each carrying 140kg of gold, and 500 slaves clad in Persian silk. His lavish spending in the markets of Cairo devalued the price of gold for 12 years. He returned from Hajj with an architect who designed the great city of Timbuktu. He returned from Hajj so broke he had to borrow money from the very same traders in Cairo.

1200 AD: Mapungubwe, the ancestors of the Shona people, is the centre of trade in Southern Africa. Women adorn themselves with beads from India, fabrics from Persia, and the homes of nobles are decorated with Chinese porcelain. This wealth is built on gold, cattle and ivory. Who could we have become had we not be taught to forget who we are?

1180 AD: Benin City is established in present day Edo State, Nigeria. Successive Obas of Benin will one day oversee the building of an 8000km network of earthen walls, the largest network of military earthworks in the world. Leaders' deeds far outlast their names. Centuries later, they will trade ivory, pepper and palm oil for guns. British guns will loot and burn the city, hiding its majestic labyrinth, hiding the genius of history.

1000 AD: The Sacred House of Stone, Great Zimbabwe, the fabled home of the Queen of Sheba, is a centre of trade and spirituality in Southern Africa. A leader with vision can bring the world to their people and can bring the best fruits of their people to the world. They trade ivory, gold, and philosophies for goods from Persia, China, Syria and West Africa. When European eyes first meet the stone ruins, they insist that such amazing structures could not have been crafted without European assistance.

48 BC - 332 BC: The destruction of the libraries at Alexandria in Egypt, kills the greatest living archive of astrology, astronomy, mathematics, economics, history and religion on the planet. Poor leaders build monuments to themselves. Great leaders make monuments out of the minds of their people. When these are destroyed, the soul of a people dies, and their memories are scattered to be owned by those who have destroyed them.

3000 BC: The founding of Memphis and the age of the ancient pyramid builders. Pharoan is the living embodiment of Ra. The ancient Egyptians invent hieroglyphics to inscribe their philosophies. Pyramids are physical channels between mortality and immortality. The mathematics of the heavens are cemented into their formation. Great leaders are channels between the highest aspirations of their people and their reality.

200,000 BC: The first Homo sapiens sapiens emerge on African soil. Their desires are not much different to our own. They need love, food, and shelter. They need protection from harm. They need community to fully thrive.

Great leaders are servants. They submit to the deepest desires of the inner world to make the outer world better. Great leaders admit to their own fallibilities, or history holds them hostage to their weaknesses. The dark age that has engulfed our continent is not our end, nor is it our beginning. We have been, and always will be much more."