

**NIGERIA : HOME FOR AFRICAN-AMERICANS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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**ADDRESS BY
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PRESIDENT OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA
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I would like to begin this address by referring to an apt observation made recently by one of the most outstanding African-Americans of our time, Ambassador Andrew Young, a true friend of Africa, and a brother. Describing Africa's current predicament, and the attitude of African-Americans to that predicament, he said :

Although African-Americans spend billions of dollars on air travel and investments in other continents, Africa continues to wallow in poverty and in dire need of investments because it has not opened its arms to its children in the Diaspora.

This statement encapsulates, exactly, the perennial debate over what should be the appropriate and proper relationship between Africa, the mother continent, and its siblings in the Diaspora. The age long question of the duties and obligations of all Africans, at home in the continent, or abroad in the Diaspora, remains a vexing one. One of the most persistent themes in African-American social, political and intellectual thought has been the varying conceptions of Africa, as a potentially revolutionary force in Black liberation ; as an ancestral home where true dignity, equality and humaneness can be experienced and as a 'wretched land' crying for assistance in the areas of investments and economic development.

Over one hundred years ago, Dr Alexander Crummell, a strong believer in redemption through African-American migration back to Africa, observed that the abject condition of Africa at the time cried out to all sympathetic hearts for rescue and assistance. It was, in addition, a particularly forceful appeal to all civilised men who had Negro blood flowing in their veins. Indeed, this sentiment of a home in Mother Africa has crystallised into a cluster of ideas and activities over the years, and has exploded, at various times, in such well-known historical events as the *Back-to Africa Movement*, the *Garvey Movement*, the *new Black Nationalism*, and the *Black Power Movement*. It has also found expression in such intellectual and creative activities as Negro Spiritualism, the Harlem Renaissance and flowering of Soul and Jazz music. It has also influenced the works of such prominent African-American intellectuals and publicists as Edward Blyden, George Padmore, W. E. B. DuBouis and C. L. R. James, and has even

given birth to a new field of scholarly concentration namely, African Diaspora Studies.

Thus, the search for a meaningful homeland, both in the physical and spiritual sense, for our kith and kin in the Diaspora has been one of the most challenging issues confronting the Black race since the days of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Even before the emergence of modern nation states in Africa, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African-Americans who were disposed to return to Africa physically, often had to confront the dilemma of which country in Africa they should choose as authentic home. At different times, Liberia, Ethiopia, Ghana and even Tanzania have attracted attention, because they offered the greatest opportunity for the people of the Diaspora to help "redeem" and "regenerate" Africa. In other words, the image of a "renascent" Africa and the need for an African country to provide the bridge-head for engineering this new reality has always been present in our psyche. We have always yearned for a home in the sun, where the people of African descent would be free from the common experiences of racialism, oppression, victimisation, dehumanisation, impoverishment and exploitation.

You may recall that Nigeria, after attaining independence in 1960, began to attract the attention of our brothers and sisters in the New World, especially, as a place to invest their money, treasures, their intelligence, their mastery of art, their knowledge of the science, their practical wisdom, and every thing that would render them useful in the effort to build a strong, viable nation. Nigeria held a promise, which was widely advertised by the large number of Nigerians who flocked to the United States to study and distinguish themselves in their endeavours.

Nigeria remains today, by far, the most populous black nation in Africa, with enormous natural resources, an enterprising and talented population, and indeed a demonstrated capacity to respond to changes from without and within. Nigeria appears to be pre-destined to serve as a beach-head for African-American involvement in the regeneration of Africa. Our enormous forest, agricultural and other natural resources, our vast mineral wealth and our huge demographic mass, so fortunately capable of generating high internal demand for self-sustained growth, make Nigeria an attractive market for investors of capital, technologies and talent. I do realise, as so many of you have rightly observed, that the tragedy of my country has been her inability to convert her great potentialities into actualities. But we are prepared, and we shall do our outmost, to make her ultimately rank as one of the most industrialised and developed countries in the 21st century.

Specifically, Nigeria offers and will continue to offer a special attraction to African-Americans who are yearning for a "home" to live in, an attractive economic enclave in which they can invest their talents and capital. Here are my reasons for optimism. Firstly, despite the variations in style and emphasis, the formulation and execution of Nigerian foreign policy since 1960—the year of our independence, has stressed the restoration of black people's dignity through the elimination of colonialism, apartheid and racism around the world. We have always upheld and vigorously pursued a policy that enhances the welfare of Africans and of all people of African descent around the world.

These commitments have remained consistent elements in all our international pursuits. Indeed, the coincidence of colonialism, imperialism and racialism has integrated into the Nigerian vision of a new Africa, a pressing need to develop and strengthen meaningful linkages with the African Diaspora in America, Asia, Australia, Europe and the Middle East. We believe, also, that this commonality of interests and destiny should facilitate and promote the emergence of Nigeria as the focus and the home for African-Americans.

Secondly, the historical and cultural linkages between Nigeria and the African Diaspora in the Americas have always been very strong. As you are aware, a large number of the African slaves who were transported to the Americas, were from Nigeria. The Africans who were forcefully transported away through the Bights of Benin and Biafra, were mainly from the Yoruba, Nupe, Ibibio, Ijaw, Igbo and Hausa ethnic groups of my country. Yet, in spite of their cultural heterogeneity, and the cruelties of slavery and the slave trade, they were able to retain, establish and sustain enclaves of Nigerian Cultures in the Americas, which have survived up till this day.

I do not need to remind this distinguished audience of the vibrant Yoruba culture in Brazil and Cuba, which from there has spread to Argentina and Uruguay. Nor are you unaware of the fact that Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Efik, Igbo, have impacted on Black English in such areas as word systems and the tonal use of pitch to differentiate meaning ; and in such communicative processes as the African-American manner of self-expression. The point is that we do have in place a vibrant cultural base for erecting and broadening the understanding between Nigeria and African-Americans. This should now be extended to the area of economic co-operation.

The common educational experiences of many Nigerians and African-Americans do provide a major base for mutual co-operation. After all, early in this century, the United States of America was the place where many Nigerians

went to satisfy their insatiable appetite for education. As a land of opportunity, colleges and universities in this country provided and still provide much succour for Nigerians. It is not, therefore, surprising to find that many Nigerian intellectuals and professionals have had their academic grounding and political nurture in the American setting. They have also acquired many dynamic values in education, business and the professions.

It should therefore not surprise you that when Nigerians discuss politics, political systems and democracy, their views, attitudes and orientations are influenced by American norms. This is a major resource and a plank upon which to build the bridges of understanding and co-operation, in our mutual effort to rejuvenate and engineer a "renascent Africa".

Fourthly, in our search for props on which to anchor our new collaboration, we should not ignore, and neither should we forget the antecedents of collaborative efforts between our two worlds. You may wish to recall that many projects have been undertaken by such organisations as the *Africa House Project*, the *Council on African Affairs*, *The Garvey Movement*, the *Congressional Black Caucus* and *Trans-Africa*. You may also recall the presence in the Americas, especially in U.S.A., of a vigorous, articulate, purposeful, highly motivated and successful Nigerian community in virtually all areas of the American economy. This is a rare asset that is easily available for establishing collaborative and joint venture activities in Nigeria. Indeed, we are encouraged to find practical evidence of such co-operation in the upsurge of trade missions that have been visiting Nigeria to explore investment opportunities since the inception of the present administration. We however, need more than platitudes. We require physical presence and meaningful businesses that can quickly transform the lives of our people. This is a big challenge for all African-Americans.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the new democratic dispensation in Nigeria has created great hopes and a concrete basis for the establishment of a climate of freedom, security, equity, justice and political stability. These are values which you are fully familiar with in America, and which are equally essential for the sustained development of our country. I am aware that, for some time now, foreign investors, including African-Americans, have turned away from Nigeria, because of the insecurity, instability, and pervasive corruption, which were the inevitable consequences of long misrule of our country. Our recent experience of being a pariah within the comity of democratic nations—itsself a veritable source of anguish and agony for many African-Americans who looked to us for leadership of the Black world, has robbed us of investment opportunities. But I am happy to stand here today

and declare that this most unfortunate and traumatic chapter of our national history is closed for good. We have entered a new era in our national development effort, and we invite you to join us in a meaningful partnership for progress.

In the five months of this Administration, we have demonstrated an unflinching commitment to the sustenance of a democratic environment in Nigeria, with renewed emphasis on accountability, transparency, constitutionalism, the rule of law, equity, and justice. The anti-corruption crusade of our Administration is designed to create a transparently open and free society, which we consider essential for sustainable and enduring economic growth. The programme of privatization embarked upon by our Administration, along with the guarantees being put in place for security and protection of life and investment, should serve as an invitation to well-meaning American investors to become active participants in the exploitation of the enormous natural resources of our country. I would like to inform this distinguished audience that in Nigeria today, there exist great and profitable investment opportunities in such significant areas as Telecommunications, Information Technology, Tourism, Power Generation and Distribution, Agriculture and Food Preservation, Small and Medium Scale Industries, Iron and Steel, Transportation, Education and Environmental Protection. There is plenty of room for the discerning and enterprising investor.

On our part, we shall continue to ensure equity of access and opportunity for all Nigerians and this, we hope, will in the shortest possible time, end the agonies of such communities as may have suffered for too long from official neglect.

I am convinced that Nigeria offers the best opportunities and promise as a beach-head for the renewed project of African renaissance and rejuvenation in the next century and beyond. To play this role meaningfully, however, important policy issues must be tackled with the same vigour with which we are pursuing our transition to democracy project.

You may recall that in 1977, Nigeria hosted the First World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). The Festival clearly demonstrated the global dimensions of the African experience, and its crucial role in the resolution of the cultural identity crisis, which has trapped the African world. Since then, there has been little sustained, systematic and determined efforts to address these concerns with concrete educational and cultural programmes, despite the commendable efforts of the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation, which was set up in Lagos, among other things, to be a custodian of the artefacts that came from FESTAC.

This is clearly a situation that must be reversed. We need to do more to enlarge our pool of knowledge, and to reduce the rather high level of mutual ignorance between our peoples. To do so, I propose the establishment in one or two Nigerian universities, at the earliest opportunity, of Centres for African Diaspora Studies, to develop and promote systematic research into, and documentation and dissemination of relevant information on the global dimensions of the African cultural heritage. I firmly believe that African rejuvenation on the scale we are contemplating requires knowledge, which we must create, control and use to the mutual advantage of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora.

As I indicated earlier, one of the stated aims of Nigerian foreign policy is the enhancement of the dignity, and promotion of the welfare of peoples of African descent around the world. In order to give renewed impetus to this objective, we shall pay greater attention to countries like the United States, with vibrant and visible populations of African descent. We shall complement this with an active engagement and involvement of the host African-American communities in the activities of Nigerian diplomatic missions abroad. We urge you—our kith and kin—to serve as important pressure groups, to help in influencing the host nations to support Nigerian positions, and Nigeria-friendly economic policies in international forums.

It is now known, and we accept the fact that two of the greatest impediments to rapid economic and technological advancement of Nigeria and indeed of Africa, are shortages of relevant technical expertise and investment capital. It is also widely known that America possesses some of the most advanced intermediate technologies of production, which are appropriate to our present circumstances. What is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated is that African-Americans, as well as recent African immigrants, notably Nigerians in the United States, equally possess enormous technological capacities and capital that can be profitably invested in the development of our country and continent. My plea and offer is that you, the African stock in the Diaspora, can act as catalysts for economic, technological, cultural, social and political development of your "home" countries. You should accept and pursue this responsibility to its fullest in the 21st century.

As we grapple with the problems of economic and technological backwardness, we shall deliberately seek to involve the expertise and capital within the African-American communities. I know that many of you are sympathetic to our condition in Africa, and are ready to participate, given the requisite stable political and economic environment, as well as appropriate incentives. In Nigeria,

we now have these in place. I invite you to join us in our project of national rejuvenation and re-birth.

Distinguished Brothers and Sisters, the social conditions in Africa today, particularly the poverty of our people, are and should be a matter of concern to all of us, particularly so, between Africans on the continent and those in the Diaspora. Our kith and kin relationship is and should be an indispensable tool for our common project of African rejuvenation and regeneration, a matter which has been a major concern of African-Americans since the nineteenth century. Nigeria, today, is at the centre of this project for renascent Africa. Given her enormous human and natural resources, her enterprising, talented and highly educated population, given, indeed, our history of proven commitment to Pan-African causes, Nigeria, is now well-placed to play a vanguard and beach-head role in this new crusade for African economic and political emancipation.

Our faith in this project is further strengthened by the experience of similar groups who have successfully utilized the Diaspora concept in propelling the development of their nations. Let me therefore end this address with the apt observation by Edward Blyden, in his famous Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America .

"Behold, then, the Lord our God has sent the land before us, with its burning climate, with its privations, with its moral, intellectual and political needs, and by his Providence he bids us to go and possess it without fear or discouragement. Shall we go up at his bidding? If the black men of this country (America), through unbelief or indolence, or for any cause, fail to lay hold of the blessing, which God is proffering to them and neglect to accomplish the work which devolves upon them, the work will be done, but others will be brought in to do it."

African rejuvenation and regeneration through rapid economic, industrial, social, cultural and political development is a historic responsibility which Africans at home, and those in the Diaspora cannot shrink from. Its is a task that is fully worthy of our noblest exertions and our highest ambition. If carefully handled, it is an assignment that evokes the best hopes, and destiny of millions of people. It deserves your full support and co-operation. As we enter the 21st Century, we must move this project of renascent Africa from the intellectual and emotional plane, to the realm of moral, social and economic action. Nigeria is fully prepared to assume her responsibility in this project. I invite you to join us in the grand endeavour to awaken Africa.

Thank you. God bless.

