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Ronald Walters

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A Viewpoint

By Ronald Walters

As the title suggests, this essay is about the dialogue and the exchange of thoughts and information that took place during the FESTAC Colloquium, from the vantage point of a few of the major ideas that were developed by the African-American delegation in the areas of history and government.

Equality. The African-American delegation, at an early point in the Colloquium, staged a standing protest in the hall because the Colloquium chairman would not recognize the delegation—despite the fact that hands had been raised for a good while. It appeared as though the chairman, in this case a Nigerian, was ignoring our presence and may not have valued our contribution on the subject being discussed as a significant one.

But this incident served as a lesson that enabled us to break out of the mold of deference which had been the hallmark of so many associations between continental Africans and Africans outside the Continent and assert our right to participate as equals in a dialogue affecting African peoples.

To illustrate, one of the issues which might have appeared to involve only Africans on the Continent was the use of a continental African language. It was suggested by Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer, that Swahili be that language. To the surprise of those in the hall, when we did get the opportunity to speak, it was revealed that half of our delegation in the Colloquium spoke fluent Swahili, and that the leader (Ron Karenga) was a professor of Swahili; that many of the African and Black studies programs in the United States offered courses in Swahili. The effect of this was to say: If Swahili was adopted and seriously pursued by Africans on the Continent, there were some of us who were already "prepared" to enact this resolution in the diaspora.

After we made our point, there was no further difficulty in getting access to the floor or present our views with dignity—just like any other delegation.

Identity. We found out that, without a challenge on our part, many people would eagerly assume that we were representing "America," the whole country—including the white people. We had to correct this assumption by pointing out that our responsibility was to represent only the *African Community* in the United States. (This position was not taken out of some pseudo-revolutionary consciousness that we are not mostly products of America, but to draw the limits of our

Walters: FESTAC Colloquium, A Viewpoint
identity as individuals and as representatives—and to say—that since we could bear no responsibility for the exercise of state power, we could not represent the whole of America. It also contained the view that, on a cultural level, we represented one part of the diversity that is African civilization).

There is a unity in the African culture, but there is also a tremendous diversity within that culture *on the African Continent* among Africans. In fact, the decision to hold FESTAC precipitated a continental African identity crisis due to Nigeria's position that North Africans from Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, be invited to participate—as opposed to the position of Senegal that participation be limited to Black Africans only.

Our case, however, does not rest upon the fact of conflict on the Continent between Black and white "Africans." As descendants from Black African civilization, we have a right, as a variant culture of African civilization, to be recognized as one of many African peoples around the globe. This position, of course, is contested even in America by many individuals who claim that we are simply "Black" Americans. Black, just as white, is nothing but a color. Given the dubiousness of the content of American culture, apart from its ethnic origins in other civilizations, anyone who claims to be

only a "Black American" is proclaiming to be virtually devoid of most of his history and culture.

Politically, it is important that Africans on the Continent understand these limitations because, as individuals who do not exercise state power, African-Americans cannot be seen as accepting responsibility for the sinister and perverse aspects of the official American foreign policy toward Africa.

Return. There is still prevalent in the dialogue between Africans and African-Americans the myth that Pan Africanism means in some sense that those Africans in the diaspora (or in dispersal) will be attempting to return to Africa, or that a return en masse is a part of the Pan African plan. To begin with, it is possible to deny the myth and confirm its implications. The main implication being, if Blacks should return en masse, what would they be expected to do? True, some Blacks are returning to Africa in various ways, with the vast majority being tourists or transient businessmen, scholars and students. But there are also a significant few who are in Africa with the intention of staying.

The myth, however, can be defeated by the fact that in the most Africa-conscious period of Black nationalism in America, there was nothing approaching a mass movement back to Africa. African-Americans just have too much invested

FESTAC COLLOQUIUM

in America to pack and leave. Besides, the struggle for Black Americans is in the United States; it may be for *Africa too*. As Karenga put it: "We are a key people in a key country," which means, since the U.S. has a major influence on world affairs, an active Black population fighting for a just American relationship with Africa could have a tremendous impact on the future of the Continent. Maturity, therefore, has dictated that even the most ardent Pan Africanist realize that there are basic responsibilities to be assumed right in America. Both racism and economic exploitation can be successfully confronted and mastered within the American experience.

Class and Race. Surprisingly, some of us in the delegation who had been at odds with respect to the degree of application of the class analysis in the United States (which assumes economic exploitation as major social problem) have seen signs of it even in Africa—regardless of the ideological line of the country. What I am suggesting is that the residue of colonialism left behind a structure and a set of behaviors which do not rest on the integrity of African civilization, but which continue subordination to Western civilization. This manifests itself in the deference given to whites and their culture in social practices as well as in military and political structure in many parts of the Continent.

Neo-colonialism has reinforced that structure by its development of economic and intellectual elites whose relationships are basically what the Nigerian Head of State called "trading post agents" in his Colloquium opening speech. The function of these elites is, to preserve outposts of Western culture and civilization in Africa as a cluster of superior values and behavior patterns; to serve as the social transmission belt for contact between the West and the masses of Africa; to function as figureheads and mid-level technicians in systems of economic exploitation, and to develop an indigenous and a wealthy Black elite class amidst the vast poverty of the masses. This is not the whole picture, but the model, as it functions in one sector, works practically the same in other important sectors of society—except where in recent years some countries have succeeded in nationalizing talents of the elite by nationalizing the institutions which they traditionally serve. Behind all this, of course, is the pervasive racism to which FESTAC was convened to counteract.

ferences in national ideologies which, for example, engulfed FESTAC as represented by Senegal and Guinea. The Negritude of Senegal and the Scientific Socialism of Guinea are the main basis of ideological conflict which exist in the African community in America today among the ideologically active. But the main deficiency of both debates is that in neither case has either line of ideology—within the context of their utilization in Africa or America—been applied successfully against the ills of capitalism or European civilization.

Reciprocity. Again, the traditional view of the relationships between Africans on the Continent and those in the diaspora is that those in the diaspora have an implicit kinship to work for the liberation of Africa. But the question arose: What of the continental African responsibility to work for the liberation of those in the diaspora—in places like Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Brazil and the United States. Perhaps Nigeria itself precipitated the arrival of such a question by its newly-found prominence in world affairs.

Without attempting the rather presumptive task of spelling out what such obligations are, or must be, the question itself is sufficient to ponder for the present—until material resources allow many African countries to seriously contemplate it. However, there are many symbolic things that can be done now to raise (in international forums) the question of the treatment of Africans outside the Continent.

Recent events have made possible a degree of reciprocity between Africans and African-Americans. In many localities now, African-Americans are in charge of (sometimes nominally) the political machinery, and therefore—without directly interfering with the national foreign policy—are in a position to promote interaction and dialogue with Africans on the Continent.

Institutionalization. The final Colloquium report which was read on the last day was not the work of the delegates but that of the *rappporteur*. In the closing remarks of the few individuals who were designated to speak on behalf of all Colloquium delegates in response to the final report, it was requested—and the chairman agreed—that all of the Colloquium division reports be included in the final official report.

Despite its veiled differences, the report contained the idea that a Pan African university be created. This idea was originally presented by the African-American delegation and its inclusion reflected to some extent the view that such a Pan

African institution would not only serve the interests of the Africans outside the Continent but also those on the Continent as well.

Finally, as I consider the totality of this brief composition from the many views of individuals who, in principle, think quite differently, I should say that no firm consensus on them developed and none has been suggested here. This essay merely is an attempt to reproduce and comment upon the main elements which surfaced in the public dialogue at the Colloquium. The tone may appear somewhat strident, perhaps a bit arrogant. But it reflects the fact that the struggle to "integrate" the African community in the United States to the rest of African civilization—both practically and intellectually—is not an easy task.

Ronald Walters, Ph.D., is associate professor and director of the Social Science Research Center, Institute for Urban Affairs and Research, Howard University. He participated in FESTAC as a member of the North American Zone delegation, and as a representative of the African Heritage Studies Association.

