

TIES THAT BIND By Bitrus and Olabisi Gwamna

During an Oscar award ceremony over two decades ago, Ms. Whoopi Goldberg informed her audience that she was not African, but an American. She had been to Africa, seen it, and was unimpressed. Through the lens fashioned by her experiences in the United States, Ms. Goldberg was able to conclude that the continent lacked the socio-cultural indicators that made her whom she was.

Goldberg must have found, among other things, that Africa has a cacophony of languages and dialects, whereas most African/Americans know of no other tongue but English. The continent's socio-political structures do not conform with what the African/American has grown accustomed. While Medicare, Medicaid, and welfare shield the African/American from abject poverty, the African poor must look to their wealthy kinsfolk for succor as their governments can ill-afford to meet their needs. The drive toward economic liberalization characterized in part by the privatization of government services, leaves underprivileged Africans no hope of ever evolving a welfare structure akin to what African/Americans currently enjoy. Again, while African men and women decry the lack of such essential amenities as pipe-borne water and electricity, coupled with the non existence of basic communication infrastructures like the internet, telephone, radio and television, it could be argued that African/Americans have no problems acquiring these facilities. In Africa, only the well-to-do can boast of these amenities. Even then, what exists does not seem to please Ms. Goldberg and others within the African/American community who share her sentiments.

There are of course Africans, perhaps not as world famous as Ms. Goldberg who have declared and continue to claim they cannot live anywhere else but in Africa. Having visited the United States, they return to their homeland disgusted by inner city crime, poor living conditions among African/American, and the limited decision-making powers by blacks in all spheres of American life. They would argue that individualism rules the day in the United States, a dictum to which African/Americans have had to subscribe to belong to the mainstream culture.

For these Africans, it is not advisable for their kinsfolk to leave a continent shunned by the rest of the world, only to arrive in the United States to be numbered among the marginalized. At least on the continent, every one is his/her brother/sister's keeper. According to these individuals marginalization has placed both Africans and African/Americans in a survivalist mode, the tie that binds them, calling them for a united action against this evil.

When we contemplated our arrival in the United States nearly three decades ago, we factored in a warm embrace by any person of color. We was sure too that our response to this embrace would be equally as enthusiastic. Boy! Were we wrong. Our having come from Africa did not trigger curious questions from the generality of African/Americans to whom we were introduced. The information they sought from us was no different from that requested by non African/Americans. Were there telephones, paved roads, electricity, tap water, fast food chains? These were indicators they needed to feel any affinity toward us. If our responses were

satisfactory, they would feel safe traveling to Africa without deviating from daily routine. Needless to say that our answers to most of these questions were in the affirmative. We have forged strong ties with many African/Americans, but must admit that our ties are strongest among those who have spent time in Africa, and have found their experiences with the continent's diverse cultures and politics most rewarding.

We were disappointed that they were disinterested in what were thought was important for them to know about Africa; a continent with much diversity in its people, history, politics and culture. However, after our initial displeasure, we wondered why such issues should matter to the generality of African/Americans. After all, in our initial encounters, we never asked them about the history, politics and culture of the African/American. We did not rush to the library or bookstore to immerse ourselves in such weighty matters. Like them, we inquired from them about places and institutions that stocked African goods. We wanted very badly to identify with those who spoke our language, and media outlets which had daily news about Africa at a price we could afford.

We have witnessed six presidential inaugurations, plenty of time to feel acculturated to the African/American subculture. Yet, our needs do not completely cohere with those of Black America.

We have not cultivated a habit for soul food, so continue to fill our pantry with Egusi, Stockfish, and pouno Yam. Our lives will be incomplete without a constant appetite for African news.

We suspect too that the African/American resident in any part of Africa is engaged in a similar activity, trying to stay connected with what he/she knows best, the American culture with all its trimmings—Easter egg hunts, the Fourth of July fireworks, the seven lights and soul food of Kwanza, Thanksgiving turkey, Christmas lights and presents ,New Year greetings, and of course the ubiquitous fast-food.

But what is wrong with it? Nothing! Our day and age continue to undergo changes in all spheres of human endeavor, taxing our ability to adapt. We hold that we can successfully transition from one change to another, only when we are certain of the need for change.

Unsure of why there is a need for Africans and Africans in the diaspora to be properly informed about each other so as to forge closer ties, we would argue that most Africans and African/Americans will continue to dwell on strategies for coping with daily routine, including changes brought about by dominant cultural and economic forces.

However, there are reasons other than the need to cope with daily life struggles that bind Africans and African/Americans. While colonialism subjected Africans to persistent European demands for physical labor and cash crops, slavery deprived African/Americans human dignity by tailoring their hardwork towards catering to the needs of their white masters/mistresses. With post colonialism, Africans are still to acquire real economic freedoms, just as African/Americans

continue to feel deprived of social and economic progress in God's own country. Consequently, blacks everywhere wage a battle for the survival of their race, a battle that can only be won through mutual trust, respect and cooperation.

The dialogue among Africans from the continent and the diaspora must be encouraged. This is because we must collectively emerge from that survivalist mode, and relying on our resilience, innovativeness and adaptability, we could evolve strategies for resolving our common problems of poverty, inequality, powerlessness and lack luster leadership. A first step towards narrowing the gap between the socio cultural milieux within which Africans and African Americans inhabit, is for Africans especially those who hail from the territory with the largest concentration of black people, to evolve socio political systems which have as their underpinnings justice, fairness and accountability, institutions which their African American counterparts take for granted.