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## Carlos Lopes: How does Africa combine its rich resources with the best of its cultural and intellectual heritage, to forge a new humanism? (SPEECH)

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Speech by the executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa in honour of anti-apartheid icon Jakes Gerwel.



*Dr Carlos Lopes, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa. (Photo/UNECA.ORG)*

*On September 1 in Cape Town, Carlos Lopes, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, delivered the second commemorative*

lecture in honour of anti-apartheid icon Jakes Gerwel, who served as Director-General of the presidency when Nelson Mandela was in office. This is the unabridged speech, fully titled: “**How does the African continent combine its abundant resources with the best of its cultural and intellectual heritage, to forge a new humanism that goes beyond race, ethnicity and artificial boundaries?**”

Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege to be asked to deliver this commemorative lecture, honouring the life of Dr. Jakes Gerwel. A principled man, with the courage to match his noble ideals. In no small way, while facing the challenges of his time, he wrote a wonderful chapter in the history of a new South Africa.

Let us remember his assertiveness in wanting to ensure all Africans, regardless of race and ethnicity, would have an opportunity to be educated. He believed it was, not only important to understand the world, but also to change it. It reminds me of similar public intellectuals, such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon or Amílcar Cabral that placed an enormous importance on the contextualization of liberation and freedom struggles, through knowledge, culture and education. Gerwel’s call for ‘clear understanding, and profound understanding’ mirrors the same deep appreciation of the importance of making us better, not just freer.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

I believe, like the mythical Sakofa bird symbol, one needs to look into one’s past in order to construct a promising future. Pan-Africanism brought much celebrated political liberation that saw Africa overcome domination and oppression by ending colonialism and apartheid on the continent. But it is time that we admit that, perhaps, we celebrated too quickly those achievements. The reality is that, despite decades of independence, the daily realities confronting Africa have not dealt a blow to poverty, widening inequalities, unemployment, hunger and human insecurity.

We have no reasons to be ashamed of the good. Some achievements are startling. We tripled GDP in the last 20 years, achieved amazing gains on health and education, improved governance, created the second most attractive region for investment, and saw a reduction of poverty despite a demographic explosion that has created the fastest growing urbanization drive in human history.

It is natural, therefore, that we become more ambitious, bolder, and capable of articulating a long term vision. The point remains, nevertheless: are we going to construct this bright future with or without a new sense of humanism and fraternity? There resides whatever value we can attribute to a pan-African project. I will try to respond to this rhetorical question with frankness.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

The philosophical underpinnings of humanism refer us to “humankind’s desire and increased ability to rely on its own resources, to master the forces of nature and turn it to its own advantage; and its association with the moral sphere of human existence, in answer to the perennial question of how we should best live” (Pierterson 2005). The 20th century has reshaped the meaning of humanism to encompass the broad and rising social movement that promotes humanistic values and counters the impersonal and destructive forces of humankind’s inhumanity against itself (Pierterson, 2005, Edeh, 2015).

Humanism is opposed to war, tyranny, unjust and oppressive political systems, hierarchy, autocracy, inhumane treatment of people and any policy rule or institutions that are detrimental to human dignity, integrity and well-being. Humanists posit the existence of a community that binds every individual to all others.

The concept of an African humanism cannot be any different. In South Africa the idea of humanism is referred to as Ubuntu. It represents a philosophy centered on collective will, the principle that humans cannot live in isolation and don’t even exist without the other. Desmond Tutu, who graced the previous Gerwel lecture, sees Ubuntu as the “essence of being human”.

How does humanism coexist with the pan-African ideal?

Historical examination of pan-Africanism can lead us to three key periods that shaped our understanding of what it means. The first wave starts outside of the continent, where after the abolition of slavery, Africans in the Diaspora were looking for an identity. Who are we? Where did we come from? And most importantly how do we find our roots?

This became the impetus for the Pan-African Congresses, the Harlem Renaissance of culture and arts, or the ‘Blackness’ movement with several newspapers that focused on identity consciousness, such as *Présence Africaine*, launched in Paris by Alioune Diop, *Negro World* by Marcus Garvey, or the *Crisis* by William DuBois. This period became known for the firming up of consciousness, the identity of one’s blackness and the creation of several concepts around the issue of the identity of Blacks. In this mix were also African students who, on scholarship to study in the countries of their colonial masters, easily identified themselves with the same causes. These African students would mostly end up playing a key role in transporting these newborn ideas to the continent.

The institutions of this time were faced with limited mobilization, poor representation and inadequate resources. These institutions were based on passion, a strong belief in the cause of total emancipation and courage. They made the dream of independence become attainable and influenced the ideology of the liberation movements that fought for such an objective.

The second wave of pan-Africanism occurs during the period of euphoria that came with the independences of the 1960s and their aftermath. The leaders of the pan-African movement metamorphosed into political leaders of the newly independent African states, or were advisers to the same. We know DuBois, for example, relocated to Ghana as a special guest of President Kwame Nkrumah and director of Encyclopaedia Africana, a project he couldn’t finish before his death. Others, such as George Padmore and Ras Mekonnen held positions of power in the newly independent states.

The move from consciousness to affirmation was driven by African intellectuals who were in leadership positions in the continent. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), established on 25th May 1963, in Addis Ababa, with 32 signatories, symbolizes the appeal of the pan-African ideal. Though the creation of this body was originally fraught with conflict it never flinched on its focus for the total liberation of the continent.

The third and most recent wave is epitomized by the transformation of the OAU into the African Union. What is significantly different between the two is a new focus on development and a shift, more recently articulated, towards transformation.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Pan-Africanism as an intellectual concept is at best misunderstood, and at worse confusing. Several competing but similar meanings were given to the concept of pan-Africanism throughout its history. Nowadays most see pan-Africanism as encompassing the processes that make a constellation of African states an economically viable integrated entity. It is remarkable how the concept remains alive when it is so ill defined. It is attractive to academics, policy makers and activists alike, so much so that as he AU celebrated 50 years of African institutional history, in 2013, the theme chosen was obviously “pan Africanism and the African Renaissance”.

To understand this continuous attraction, may be it would help to take a detour and revisit the concept of orientalism. In his 1978 ground breaking book, “Orientalism”, Palestinian author, Edward Said, postulated that the term “orientalism” as a classification was a fabrication of the Western intellectuals in their quest to define the myriad of groups, religions and nations in the Middle East. This classification sets out to mark the people of the Middle East in a stereotypical way. This classification, nevertheless, took hold to the point the classified started using and owning it, given their own need for alterity.

In an ironic twist the term pan-Africanism was created by blacks and Africans in the Diaspora as a means of self-classification and alterity as well. It was an indirect response to Hegel, the German philosopher, depiction of Africans as people without history. In a way Orientalism and pan-Africanism correspond to similar needs and provoked similar identity calls.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

To this day the process of correcting the wrong and harmful prejudices against Africans is not over, and may well be responsible for the appeal of the pan-African ideology. No matter how it is defined, until Africans are persuaded their negative stereotyping is over, pan-Africanism is likely to be a great mutant to build self-confidence.

Yet, Africa’s narrative is changing. There is no doubt that the continent has stepped into a new and higher growth trajectory. However, who is currently writing the Africa story? To a large extent, it continues to be driven externally. It is also, often, not a consensual story, as it emanates from either business eagerness or stereotypical perceptions of afro-stigmatism that continue to persist despite the economic strides made. These views are increasingly patronizing and out of touch, posing a deterrent to new interest and opportunity and irritating Africans to the core.

American “best seller” writer Paul Theroux’s recent offering about Africa “The Last Train to Zona Verde: Overland from Cape Town to Angola” is an attempt to assess just what the 21st century has done to Africa. The book is an example of afro-pessimism at its best, laced with poor “stereotypical” descriptions and contradictions in a bid to live an African fantasy. For example, describing a group of Kung people of northeast Namibia Theroux indulges in describing them as “mostly naked men and women... an infant with a head like a fuzzy fruit bobbing in one woman’s sling, men in leather clouts clutching spears and bows”. Someone familiar with the place actually knows these are staged scenes to show folkloric Africa. His description is so daunting, archaic and cliché, that the readers may think they are reading the works of an early twentieth century author, may be Joseph Conrad or indeed some speech from King Leopold I of Belgium, the then personal owner of the Congo. Perhaps the pathetic undertones are not surprising given that the author’s own mortality is a recurring theme.

Paul Theroux concludes “I had nothing to complain about – but the misery of Africa, the awful, poisoned, populous Africa; the Africa of cheated, despised, unaccommodated people, of seemingly unfixable blight: so hideous, really, it is unrecognizable as Africa at all. But it is of course – the new Africa.” “The Last Train to Zone Verde” is no doubt an uncompromising, unsettling work. But it is a best seller, even in *Exclusive* and other bookstores in South Africa.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Bad stories about Africa by outsiders are dismissed as normal. What should count is the narrative constructed by the Africans. I defend that. But I also defend it should not be about hiding facts, particularly the bad examples we set for ourselves. The xenophobic episodes that occurred in South Africa caught the public opinion across the continent. Many were quick to remind South Africans about the sacrifices of the continent for their liberation from apartheid in light of such utter dismissal of other Africans dignity. It was unacceptable that the pan-African ideal, many said, could be trashed in such a way.

Few remembered, however, that similar expulsions or beatings of fellow Africans occurred with declared government support in at least 15 other African countries before. Arguably, the largest mass expulsion took place in Nigeria in 1983 and 1985 when 3 million West Africans were beaten all the way to the border. So the expulsion of Africans by fellow Africans is not just a South African issue. It is a recurrent African problem. Fellow Africans have been mass expelled from Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Gabon and more recently Libya.

Africans have been moving around quite a bit. In pre-colonial times, it was often driven by the need to find land for settlement and fertile for farming. Colonial regimes altered those motivations to reflect migratory patterns that reflected political and economic structures imposed by the colonial regimes. The impact of this remains. Thus, one can argue that the more recent events reinforce the daily struggles that Africans are confronted with, due to the absence of the economic and political changes that should have followed the liberation struggles or political transitions. The failure of Africa to provide a reality that complements the aspirations of its citizens reinforces Amílcar Cabral’s premonition, that the reality for which people exist, indeed the reason why people are willing to fight, is to obtain practical things, like peace and better living conditions.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

In fact if we assess the trajectory of the contemporary African state we recognize more Westphalian than pan-African traits. At the genesis of the Westphalia state, are the treaties celebrated in that city in 1648. They marked the recognition of sovereignty based on principles quite different from previous forms of political legitimacy. The Westphalia state is premised on the notion of sovereignty and the exclusion of all external powers in the domestic affairs of the state. Indeed this premise assumed the presence of a functioning government. There is no need to revisit the full spectrum of developments that ensued to realize that the principle of sovereignty was controversial, provoked many wars, including two across the globe, but ended up imposing itself in the form of what we now call international community, with its myriad of international organizations.

The emergence of current global governance mechanisms, the body of existing international law, and indeed regional institutions, have their foundations on the Westphalian state. All entities that, as latecomers, integrated the established order imposed on the aftermath of two World Wars

found the landscape of international relations defined. All they wanted was to be part of it and claim their share through the recognition of their sovereignty.

This was the case with post-colonial Africa who, it has been argued embraced the Westphalian state in all its totality. This is still the case, but centripetal forces are not helping. The erosion of sovereignty is the new normal with international treaties and agreements calling for transnational and global types of intervention. Perhaps one of the most remarkable developments of the last two decades has been the proclivity of the “international community” to intervene in different countries with social and political rights justifications that go way beyond the humanitarian concepts of the 1950s (Rao, 2010).

Every conflict in Africa that relates to the definition of territory, or is trying to address the issue of legitimacy, or lack of it, by a central authority is in fact revisiting the checkered history of the sovereignty principle. A current case in point would be the Burundian government challenging interference from others on what it considers its internal affairs; or religiously motivated or justified movements fighting for geographical space and independence from central authority in Nigeria, Mali or Libya.

Responses from African institutions have been short term in nature, with scarce analysis of the deep rooted causes motivating the conflicts. This is partly explained by the desire for Africa to be perceived as compliant with international order, so it can move fast into the catching up mode that characterizes the current stage of its international relations. Being Westphalian explains why expulsions are possible and a common African passport is not, despite the pan-African rhetoric. It is not a South African problem alone, it is the very essence of defining what the true meaning of pan-Africanism is today.

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is against this background that we hear in Africa, as elsewhere, the call for a cosmopolitan view of the world. Cosmopolitanism is a strengthened western formulation of secularism. The origin of the word alone -from the Greek cosmos and polis, signifying the wide and the particular forms of interaction and knowledge- tell us how sophisticated a concept it is. Cosmopolitanism presupposes a desire to construct alliances and amplify community relationships by embracing diversity and expanding at a global scale. It is an

ambiguous attempt to reconcile universal values with the unique realities that subjects construct in specific historical and cultural contexts (Ribeiro, 2003).

The ambiguity extends to the way it has to translate secularism in an environment where international institutions format rules around individual rights, lessening the community and larger group interpretation of rights (Ribeiro, 2003). Without us necessarily linking it with the reality of conflicts or, to our disappointment, with a hypothetical diminishing political agency of Africans in the world stage, the truth is that cosmopolitanism is a source of Globalization is based on interpretations of the cosmopolitanism foundations.

According to Pryker (2009) we are dealing with the tension between general and particular, the former being expressed through globalization and the latter through resurgent nationalism. I would refine by adding religiously motivated contestation as well. “Try as we might, binaries, oppositions, perceive contradictions, call them what you will, are difficult things to escape from as they organize our thoughts and allow us to think through problems. The real problem with globalization versus national dichotomy is that it can too easily be used by those who are skeptical about globalization. That is because it is easy enough to show that globalization has little significant impact on the resilience of nationalism” (Pryker, 2009).

The pan-African ideology, constructed first by the African Diaspora, has remained a strong anchor for the continent’s common vision. It is a concept that has travelled well, with its ambiguities not disturbing a common ambition and a common reference to the recent past. It has been reinterpreted many times, if not re-energized. But we all know its limitations when it comes to dealing with the complexity of cosmopolitanism. The shyness that African leaders show, when migration is a theme, including for other fellow Africans, is disturbing, but not surprising. Still it does not give us the full story. The adjustment required by Africans to integrate the mainstream international relations exercise a pull factor that has proven more solid than the desire to defend a joint, common African agency in all that.

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

Current attacks and intolerances call for an African Humanism. Africa cannot forget its rich cultural heritage and struggle for freedom. There is a need for a revival that recovers African identities, distorted by colonialism, as well as appreciation for the problems of the 21st century. These challenges demand the construction of a common African future based on a bold transformative agenda, that goes beyond just economic results. Africa has all the necessary and abundant natural and human resources, combined with a strong cultural and intellectual heritage, to renew a fight for the appropriation of its future. Africa’s transformation and its contribution to forging a new humanism will be elusive in the absence of shared freedoms, shared prosperity and a common citizenship within and across borders.

Fighting for such ideals would have certainly mobilized Jakes Gerwel.

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