

Remarks on receipt of Honorary Doctorate at Addis Ababa University, 24 July 2010.

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I first heard of Addis Ababa University in 1973, the year I got my first teaching job at the University of Dar es Salaam. Addis, like Dar, was a university in ferment during those years. They were times when we were sure of ourselves: we knew what we were up against, and we knew where we were going. We were against monarchy, against dictatorship, against neo-colonialism, against imperialism. And we were for socialism, sometimes for democracy, but always for socialism. Socialism had become a language in which we spoke to one another. For some, it was a badge, for others it was a brand name.

We were the first generation of post-independence African intellectuals. We thought in historical terms. We knew that history was moving, more or less like a train, heading to a known destination, and none of us had any doubt that we were on that train. We were certain that the future would be better than the past, much better. If there would be violence, it would be revolutionary, the violence of the poor against the rich, the oppressor against the oppressed. Good revolutionary violence would do away with bad counter-revolutionary violence.

Two decades later, we found ourselves in a world for which we were least prepared. Not only was it a world drenched in blood, but the battle lines were hardly inspiring. There was little revolutionary about the violence around us: instead of the poor rising up against the rich, we could see poor pitted against poor, and rich against rich. This was hardly the final struggle promised in the International – *la lutte finale*

- beyond which would lie the rosy dawn of socialism. It seemed more like the fires of hell. The most fitting metaphor for that quagmire was the Rwanda genocide of 1994.

A few months after the genocide, I found myself in the town of Arusha in Tanzania, one of over hundred participants in a conference called by CODESRIA to reflect on the Rwanda genocide. During the conference, the discussion focused on the history that had led Rwanda to the genocide. Then someone introduced an element of doubt: he reminded us that precisely when the genocide was engulfing Rwanda, in the latter half of 1994, another seminal event was unfolding in another part of Africa. This was the transition from apartheid in South Africa. I remember asking a question: if someone had told us a decade before, in 1984, a time when the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was at its bloody height, but also a time when President Jovenal Habyarimana was calling for reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, if someone had told us then that a decade hence there would be a genocide in one of these countries and a reconciliation in another, how many of us would have identified the location of the two developments correctly? There was silence in the room.

Later, when I set about writing a book on colonialism and apartheid, and another on the genocide in Rwanda, I had time to reflect on the question. As post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda began writing their histories afresh, we realized that history is not a story with a predestination. Those determined to forge a different future begin by rethinking their history. History is not a train set out on a fixed journey. As our sense of destination changes, so does our perspective on the past, our sense of history. The difference between 1984 and 1994, not just in South Africa and Rwanda but elsewhere too, was not just made by history, but by politics. The possibilities offered by politics were in turn defined by the ability of those in the present to imagine a different future. The difference lay in this: whereas in South Africa, they dared imagine a future beyond apartheid, in Rwanda, they remained locked in the world of Hutu and Tutsi, the world of 1959.

Thus my message to you: today, more than ever, we need the capacity to imagine different futures. In 1973, in Dar and in Addis, we thought of ourselves as being in transition to an already known destination, first it was a transition to socialism; after the fall of Soviet Union, the convention was to think of a transition to democracy; after 9/11, it became a transition to modernity. Common to all three was the conviction that the journey had a fixed destination. It was a road map with a predestined goal. Our role was only to exert effort, for the train was already on course.

I have little doubt that the world into which you are graduating is changing rapidly. Not only is American power declining in a relative sense, the world that we have known since 1492 – when European settlers first stepped into the New World – the world shaped by Western power, is also visibly changing. Experience has taught us that there is no given destination. The destination is negotiable. If I am right, you will need the courage and the creativity to imagine the destination and the skill and tenacity to forge a political consensus around that imagination.

Keep in mind that the journey you will embark on has no fixed destination. Where you go will depend on you and those around you. The better you understand the nature of forces defining your choices, the more you will be able to gather in your own hands possibilities of forging the future. I wish you the best in the journey ahead.