

Reflections on German-African Relations

Dinner Speech of Former Federal President Horst Köhler

African Rhapsody

Berlin, 9 June 2015

I am happy to be with you this evening, to be part of this impressive African-German family that is assembled here. And I am glad that I got the chance to speak *after the first* and *before the second* course, because I have reason to assume you are neither *too hungry* nor *too full* to be able to follow my speech. But I promise to be brief, anyway – I am looking forward to continue eating just like you, so we are in this together.

Before I start, let me congratulate Dr. Liebing on his re-election as chairman of the Afrika-Verein. Also, I would like to congratulate Prof. Große on his election as chairman of the Sub-Saharan Africa Initiative of German Business. I am confident that your expertise and your commitment bring a breath of fresh air to SAFRI, and I wish you success and perseverance for your important work.

I have been asked to share some reflections on German-African relations. Rather than giving you an analysis, I would like to propose a reflection on a quality that I believe is needed much more in our relations: truthfulness.

As we all know from human relations, truthfulness is the basis without which neither trust nor cooperation can develop. Truthfulness sometimes hurts, but it is keeping a relationship from becoming superficial, or in other words: truthfulness helps a relationship grow.

With regards to German-African relations, I think we all agree that truthfulness starts with revisiting the cliché-ridden images and projections we have of each other. Yet in this process, we have to be careful that by escaping one cliché, we are not just running towards another. Isn't there a danger, for example, that the whole „Africa rising“ discourse is just replacing one over-simplifying narrative about Africa with another one? Are positive stereotypes really better than negative ones? I don't think they are, because they, too, blur reality. And the reality is that in too many African countries, too many people have not had the chance to rise by even an inch. The reality is that for some in global business, Africa has become the last frontier, where huge profit margins can be expected, with often little profit for the local people, and all that rises are the account balances of a few. I am glad, by the way, that this does not seem to be the approach that most German businesses are taking.

But it is not only clichés about Africa that are to be revisited. Looking the other way round, aren't there many African elites also oscillating between stereotypes they have of Europe, between seeing Europe as a selfish post-colonial power and Europe as a bottomless coffer of money? And, well, I hesitate to say it, but even the rather positive stereotype of us punctual and efficient Germans is a cliché that does not do away with the necessity of having a good

look at the German you are specifically dealing with, as he might actually be a rather unpunctual and inefficient fellow.

The image we have of each other says more about ourselves than about the other. This is why escaping the clichés we have of each other, also helps us to be more truthful about ourselves.

Truthfulness doesn't stop at overcoming stereotypes. I believe truthfulness is also about asking the tough questions. I believe we should ask each other more tough questions.

Tough question that Germans or Europeans could ask African leaders, are for example:

Why is it that we hear so little from you about the horrific refugee crisis in the Mediterranean sea? Why is it that you seem oblivious to the fact that so many young people are risking their lives to flee their, *your* countries? What is your big idea, your big effort, your new deal for offering perspectives for your youth?

And then there are tough questions that Africans could ask us Germans or Europeans: Have you really understood the legacy of your colonial past? (It went almost completely unnoticed in the German media, by the way, that the Berlin Conference ended 130 years ago this year). Or, looking at the future, one could ask the Europeans: When you negotiate the new Transatlantic Partnership (TTIP), what about a better trade regime for Africans – haven't you promised a fair and development friendly global trade regime already in 2001 in Doha? And given the current refugee crisis, what is *your* big idea, *your* big effort, *your* new deal for offering perspectives for the huge population of African youth? Until 2040, half of the world's young people will live in Africa. Shouldn't we all be a bit more truthful with each other about the gigantic effort that is needed to deal with this challenge?

Now, some of you might think right now “this is quite a somber speech on such a nice occasion”. So please don't get me wrong: when I am calling for more truthfulness in the relations of our two continents, I am not calling for focusing on the ugly side of things or for viewing only the negative. Quite to the contrary, I believe that our quest for truthfulness also has to include a new willingness to discover the beauties that are often hidden in our problem-focused public discourse on Africa.

I believe that we need to pay much more attention to the intellectual discourse and literature in Africa, to postcolonial writers and thinkers such as Achille Mbembe or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, but also to the thrilling new generation of cosmopolitan African novelists such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. We need to open our eyes to African filmmakers, African performance artists, African painters – because so many of them are deconstructing and redefining what we consider as being African. Right here in Berlin, for example, there is an exciting art laboratory, a group called Savvy Contemporary, which is trying to foster the dialogue between “western art” and “non-western art”, to blur the lines so that at the end, we are able to see it just as “art”.

I am insisting on this point because I myself have had to learn that sometimes my perspective on Africa is too rapidly limited on the economic or the political, when indeed it is first and foremost in the field of culture where we can reach for a relationship that is truthful. In order

to be truthful we need to recognize our beauty as well as our brokenness, our problems as well as our chances, and I believe that culture can show us a way forward of achieving this without fear.

Ladies and gentlemen,

when I told my wife that today I would be speaking to a room full of diplomats and businessmen about truthfulness, she started to laugh. Well, I guess she has a point – if you want to sell something to somebody, or if you want to keep peace with another country, sometimes it's better not to say everything that's in your head.

But I also know that truthfulness is a sign that a friendship has moved to a higher level. I believe that German-African relations have made great progress, compared to where we stood 10 or 20 years ago. We are ready now to move to a higher level. We are ready to ask each other the tough questions. We should be ready to be much more curious about the beauties of our cultures.

Also, we are more than ready to continue this dinner.

Bon appetit!