The Creative Continent: Can Europe Learn from Africa?

Speech by German Federal President Emeritus Professor Horst Köhler

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I.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak at this week's conference "Africa and Europe Moving Forward". I am very glad that interest in the African continent has been rising over the past few years. At the same time, I must be honest and admit that I sometimes flinch when I receive invitations for such talks, particularly when I am approached as a so-called "Africa expert". A few years ago, I gave a speech titled "On the Impossibility of Talking about Africa", in which I argue that I don't believe in such a thing as a know-it-all "Africa expert". The continent is far too large, complex and contradictory for any person to keep track of it. Our reverence for the continent's diversity must teach us to speak with humility about Africa. Another thing that has been increasingly disturbing me about this concept of the Africa expert is that it leaves Africa policy for the specialists, thus suggesting that they are not part of the truly relevant policies. And so I admit that I carry the title of "Africa expert" only with certain reluctance, not because it degrades *me*, but because it makes Africa small, that great, proud, important continent. Reflection on Africa should not be an expert niche; it should take place in wider society, and that is another reason I am grateful for our conversation this evening.

II.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the public discussion, in media and politics, there are still only two stories being told about Africa. The first one is a story of suffering that provokes pity: the Africa of hunger, poverty and war – the story you are no doubt familiar with. The second story is that of a frightening threat: at its roots, this is a centuries-old narrative of fear that the "black man" will overrun Europe, a narrative that is experiencing a comeback during the all-consuming migration debate. Both discourses – of pity and of fear – limit our perspective on the realities of Africa, and they both suggest solutions that are likewise limited and therefore misleading.

And yet there are also other stories. The nominations for this year's Academy Awards, or Oscars, were announced yesterday. The film *Black Panther* was nominated for Best Picture of the year. *Black Panther*, a superhero epic from the universe of Marvel comic books, had the second-best global box-office receipts last year and is already among the ten highest-grossing films in cinema history. This is sensational enough due to the simple fact that the leading actors are all black, which has not previously been seen as a recipe for a successful Hollywood blockbuster. *Black Panther* takes place in the fictional African state of *Wakanda*, a country that was never colonised but that, thanks to its supply of a super-metal called *vibranium*, is the most technologically advanced nation in the world – with flying cars, soundless shoes, and regenerative medicine, to name a few examples. For its own protection, Wakanda hides its progress from the world beneath its disguise as a poor, rural and barely developed African country.

I know it's strongly frowned upon, but I would like to tell you about the last scene of the film. (If you don't want to find know about the ending, please cover your ears *now.* Consider this your spoiler alert, as they say these days.) In the final scene, the king of Wakanda delivers a speech at the United Nations announcing that henceforth, Wakanda will share its knowledge and resources with the other countries of the world. By doing so, he hopes to unite humanity and to help people in need. A representative from another country – a white man – speaks up and asks, in an incredulous and arrogant tone, what a place like Wakanda could possibly have to offer the rest of the world. And the camera slowly zooms in on the face of the king, who simply gives a knowing smile.

What is thrilling about this scene, and about the entire movie, is not just that it takes the deep-rooted cultural hierarchy between Africa and the rest of the world – with Africa as the recipient of any assistance – and flips it upside down. No, what is most revealing is the question by the Western ambassador to the UN, which plainly demonstrates that this role reversal – Africa making a positive contribution to rest of the world – lies beyond his imagination.

And this is the very reason I have titled my talk today "Can Europe learn from Africa?" I did not go straight ahead and ask "*What* can Europe learn from Africa?" because then we would arrive too quickly at a persuasive enough list of things that Europeans find fascinating about Africa, such as its vitality or rhythm or close affinity with nature. And we would find ourselves caught in the same old trap of reducing Africa to the gratification of European fantasies.

No, I am not interested in the question of *what*, but the question of *whether*. I ask "Can Europe learn from Africa?" because it shifts our view on Africa to ourselves, to Europe's ability to learn. Can *we* learn from Africa? The question is whether we Europeans can develop the strength of imagination to view Africa, our continental neighbour, in any role but the one we have been assigning to it for generations.

This evening, to return to *Black Panther* for a moment, we will need to talk about more than just Wakanda. We will need to pay at least as much attention to that white ambassador and his arrogant, ignorant question. We will need to ask whether we are, in the slightest, aware of how much the story we've been telling about Africa for generations is *our own* story; how much more the image we have of Africa teaches us about *ourselves* than it reveals about Africa. We will need to ask whether we have adequately recognised how much our own destiny is intertwined with the future of Africa. And then we will realize what an opportunity it would be if Africans could finally tell their *own* stories, and what promise it would hold if we managed to envision Africa and Europe as mutually learning from each other.

III.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Those who fit the norm can afford to doubt the existence of the norm. And that is why I sometimes doubt whether we white Europeans even realise how narrow our view of Africa is, how weighed down with baggage; whether we realise how much the world is structured

according to our norm, the norm of the white European. No, let me correct myself: how much *we have structured* it according to our norm, in a centuries-long, often brutal process of repression and exploitation.

The riches of the West today, of the US and Europe, rest in no small part on the many years of systematic exploitation of African resources and black human beings, on slavery, colonialism and racial segregation. Some of you surely know that there exists a small village called Lüneburg in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, a village founded 165 years ago, in 1854, by Lutheran missionaries. The fact that a Lüneburg exists in South Africa, but that there is no Lilongwe in Lower Saxony, shows that Afro-European history has a clear directionality, a hierarchy, a top and a bottom, structured from north to south. At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, when the colonial powers divided the African continent amongst themselves, it was an act of structuring the world according to the norms of the White Man, a structuring that paid no heed to the African reality. The consequences endure, not only in the borders on maps, but also in our preconceived notions, and Africans continue to struggle with the gap between non-Africans' stereotype-ridden preconceptions of them and their own diverse realities. The Zero Meridian passes through Greenwich in London, and today we Europeans still perceive the world, and especially Africa, in terms of its relationship to Europe – and, by the way, mostly in terms of its *deficiencies* in comparison to Europe. The fundamental question is: Who actually possesses the power of definition? In other words, who has the authority to define what it means to be human, what it means for a country to develop, what it means to be African?

Allow me to illustrate this with three specific examples from fashion, from development policy and from the world of arts and culture.

Power of definition, example number one: In Africa, there are some countries with growing fashion-design industries, such as Senegal, in West Africa, and Kenya, in East Africa. The designers have been seeing more and more success in the international fashion market, but often face the bizarre accusation that their clothes are not African enough. Often, the global fashion industry looks to the continent for inspiration, but at the same time what it wants is – pay attention now – "authentic African" fashion. Of course authentic African mostly means that they should match the clichéd images we have of African apparel. In an interview, the Kenyan designer Katalungu Mwenda asked: "Why do you want to limit my creativity? Do you think that my fashion always needs to be colourful and patterned, simply because I come from this enormous and incredibly diverse continent?"

Power of definition, example number two: During my term as the Federal President, I launched an initiative called "Partnership with Africa". To this day, I receive questions about it from the press that refer to it as "Partnership *for* Africa". The definition of top and bottom, the distinction between the actor and the acted upon, clearly run deep in our European consciousness. Anyone who closely examines the language of civilising zeal that our colonial ancestors used to justify their repressive campaigns in Africa will quickly observe that it is not far removed from some well-meaning language about Africa today. With what language, what image of Africa, do we pursue development policy? Have a look at the lyrics of the

well-known charity pop song "Do They Know It's Christmas?" from Bob Geldof's 1984 Band Aid benefit:

There's a world outside your window

And it's a world of dread and fear

Where the only water flowing

Is the bitter sting of tears

And the Christmas bells that ring there are the clanging chimes of doom

Well tonight thank God it's them instead of you

And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmastime

[…]

Where nothing ever grows

No rain nor rivers flow

[…]

Underneath that burning sun

Do they know it's Christmastime at all?

It makes you shudder, doesn't it? And no, that is not just a leftover of the eighties. In 2014, the song was re-recorded for its thirtieth anniversary and earned a golden record in the UK. Have we really left behind our paternalism towards Africa? Is it possible that even when we have the best of intentions, or especially then, the clichés of the helpless African and the European rescuer are all the more persistent?

Power of definition, example number three: As much as 90% of Africa's artistic heritage is located outside of Africa, mostly in French, British and German museums. Almost all of these artworks – jewellery, statues, masks, swords, doors, thrones – were either looted by the colonial masters or bought at ridiculous prices. The plundering of Africa's art has sapped the continent of its cultural identity. This will persist for as long as the engagement with these objects and their history is led by Europeans. A few months ago, a commission appointed by the French president recommended that France return all African artworks in its possession to African countries. Here in Germany, the debate over restitution is also intensifying, not least in regard to the new Humboldt Forum in Berlin. The subject provokes heated reactions from members of the art world and the museum establishment, some of whom are hard-pressed to cede any of their entrenched habit to assert their own interpretations. A few weeks ago, a well-known French art historian explained on television that the precious objects from Africa were not created as art in the first place – they only became art when Europeans labelled them as such and exhibited them in their museums. And certain German columnists expressed the opinion that it would be better not to return African art to Africans because, after all, they

couldn't take proper care of it. The South African satirist Trevor Noah, host of *The Daily Show* in the US, summarised the European argument against restitution in acid terms (and I quote him, as he mimics a European): "You Africans cannot protect your art. We know that because we stole it from you!"

To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not choosing these examples for the sake of some kind of European self-flagellation. Neither is this about assigning blame. It is about us, at least, recognising our blind spot: that we are used to having the authority to interpret things, to structure the discourse from our own perspective. And how wide the gap is between our preconceived notions and the true African reality.

It is all about understanding that the perpetuation of colonial ways of thinking, as subtle as they may be, also perpetuates the problems created by those ways of thinking.

IV.

Let us talk, for a moment, about problems. Yes, there are corrupt presidents and governments in Africa. Far too many. To be perfectly clear, the responsibility for Africa's future is to be shouldered first and foremost by Africans themselves. As for the accusations of endemic corruption in Africa, which in this country seems to be the perfect way to shut down a discussion, they are not factually inaccurate – but I find the tone of these accusations to be unhelpful, sometimes even telltale: because this corruption not only involves African elites, but also external players; because corruption is often just an excuse for one's own helplessness and inaction towards Africa; because the most vociferous and courageous protests against that corruption come from the ranks of African civil society; and because these comments distract from the many undeniable examples of progress that exist in many parts of the continent. For example, on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index, the highest-ranking African country, Mauritius, is four places above Germany; Rwanda beats France and Kenya beats Greece. On the Transparency International Corruption Index, Botswana ranks higher than Poland and Namibia higher than Italy. This is no excuse for corruption in many African countries, but it puts certain sweeping judgements into perspective.

And we must also draw distinctions when it comes to political development. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's comprehensive Index of African Governance has found clear improvements in democratisation and the rule of law over the past ten years – although these have slowed in the past five. As for the future of democracy, don't we have causes for concern at our own doorstep when we observe the global rise in authoritarianism or the manipulation of democratic elections in the age of digitalisation? Perhaps we should approach the discussion on African democracy with a bit less self-righteousness. Instead, we should place it in the larger context of what democracy depends upon and how it can be preserved, in Europe or elsewhere.

Couldn't we conduct the dialogue about Africa's problems, which indisputably exist, with a new awareness of our own shortcomings? That would make our calls for rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and democracy so much more credible. Africans have long known what problems we have in Europe. Kofi Annan always enjoyed teasing me about our inability to

finish the Berlin airport. People in Africa used to ask me all the time about European integration and the creation of a common currency, the euro, because they saw this as a possible model for themselves – but their interest has noticeably waned. And the diesel scandal has raised questions about "Made in Germany" in Africa too. Perhaps this also harbours an opportunity. Perhaps this will help us move away from our subconscious notion that development is a purely linear catch-up process, in which we are the role models and the Africans imitators. Can we imagine an African modernity that instead of taking its bearings from us, is something original, something pluralistic, something unfolding in many directions – imagine it as a coexistence of local and global, tradition and innovation, in short: an African modernity *sui generis*? And then, perhaps, this could result in a concept of development that no longer sorts countries into "developing" and "developed" boxes, but makes clear that we, in the twenty-first century, need development everywhere: we need a Great Transformation of the economy and society, in both North and South, East and West. A transformation in which we all, whether rich or poor, are in a process of searching. A transformation that accounts for our inescapable interdependency on this planet –considering resource scarcity, climate change, terrorism, pandemics, to name just a few keywords.

A new notion of development along these lines would also give rise to a new vision of Europe's relationship with Africa. A relationship that, despite all existing asymmetries, would allow us to interact on equal terms, without any pity or fear, but simply curiosity and a little humility, because we saw ourselves as a community of learning. Then, at long last, the question would not simply be "What can Africa learn from Europe?" but also "What can Europe learn from Africa?"

V.

With this question in mind, we could listen to Africans finally telling their own stories. Their own stories – because Africa's transformation can only arise from within, not from our sense of mission and not from our teachings.

I prefer to hear Africa's story as told to me by young Africans. If any one sweeping statement about the gigantically diverse African continent holds true, it's that it is a continent of young people. Africa's population is so young and so rapidly growing that this has become an economic and social factor for the globe that nobody can ignore any longer. By the year 2050, the population will double to 2.5 billion people. At that point, around 25% of the world's population will be African and only around 5% European. The aging European society will be next door to the largest population of young people in human history. Today, half of the people on our neighbouring continent are already younger than 18. In Germany, the median age is approximately 47. I am sure of one thing: creating opportunities for the young people of Africa will be one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century. A power is coming of age there, a power to be reckoned with – for better or worse. I use the word "power" deliberately because I believe that this is exactly the political and strategic view we should take of this global challenge; just as we perceive the rise of China or of digitalisation as new factors in the geopolitical balance of power.

But the statistics alone do not tell the story. We have to listen to them, the young people. And the same holds, first and foremost, for African leaders themselves. Nowhere in the world is the gap between the average age of the population and the political leadership wider than in Africa. The young people are the majority! And this is why the question of youth participation in Africa is one of the most important issues for African democracy altogether. It is the core question that will determine not only Africa's future, but also our own: Can we succeed in turning the readiness, creativity and firmness of African youth into a transformative force on their continent?

Whenever I have the opportunity, be it in Africa or in Germany, I meet with groups of young Africans and ask them about their stories. There was the young man I met in Côte d'Ivoire who told me about his frantic attempts to persuade his friend to open a hair salon with him in Abidjan instead of emigrating to France. There was a young Nigerian woman whom I met a few months ago here in Berlin. She had founded a FinTech company, a financial startup, to create an app that would help people with little money to put aside small amounts in savings. And there was the rapper Thiat from Senegal. He and his band led the "Y'en a marre" protest movement (the name is French for "we're fed up"), which contributed to the process of democratically voting the last president out of office. When he told me about the situation in his country, full of fury and love, hope and impatience, I got another inkling of the enormous power of African youth.

Time and again, I am impressed by the unbelievable energy and creativity of that generation. There is a resourcefulness, a thirst for learning, that – I am sorry to say, my dear Leuphana students – one seldom encounters in satiated Germany. Millions of African children walk to school, often for kilometres, in raging heat and pouring rain, on small paths and along dusty, busy streets. I can imagine that this nurtures resilience, perseverance that some European children lack – I'm sorry to tell you, my dear helicopter parents. And the tension between personal ambitions and the many problems of daily life, small and large, spawns an entrepreneurial spirit, a sense of reorienting and problem-solving, which can certainly be called African.

Where real needs and creativity meet, innovation happens. That is palpable in many corners of the continent. Nowhere in the world is digitalisation progressing faster. Côte d'Ivoire has better 4G coverage than Germany. In Rwanda, stored blood is transported by drones. Kenya is a global pioneer in cashless payments. When we think about the future of the global economy, we should perhaps look to Africa more often. In any case, I sometimes get the feeling that around here, we have resorted to awakening and inventing brand-new consumer needs rather than pondering real solutions to real problems.

VI.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Those who listen and watch closely will witness an ongoing transformation of historical proportions. Contemporary Africa is a continent of tireless movement, of constant change. It is therefore a transformation full of uncertainties and crossroads. Not everything is so clear-cut right away because Africa is changing much more quickly than our image of it. Just one

thing is clear: this continent will shape the history of the twenty-first century. And this shaping process has long been under way, even if we are slow in realising what that will mean for us.

The moving novel *The Underground Railroad* by the African American author Colson Whitehead, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, contains a key moment that wonderfully illustrates our global relationships today. The character of Cora, having escaped her enslavement in the southern United States, takes refuge in the North, where she works as an actor at a human zoo. She has to spend hours with other black people behind a glass wall, enacting presumptive everyday life in an African village. The white museum-goers gawk and stare, make obscene gestures, and knock on the glass. And Cora begins staring back, defiant and courageous: staring straight into the eyes of her onlookers, who always break her gaze in shock. Cora suddenly transforms from an object into a subject. To quote the novel: "It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too."

Can it be that the reason we are currently experiencing such turbulent times is because objects are transforming into subjects before our eyes? Was the refugee crisis the moment when the world stared back at a Europe that was accustomed to its relationships to the world only ever pointing southwards? Do we, perhaps, recognise our own shock and uncertainty upon realising that all that separates us from the fragile fellow humans in the nearby continent is a strait of seawater a few kilometres wide, just as there was suddenly no more than a pane of glass separating Cora from her gawkers from the moment she lifted her eyes?

If so, we can also learn a new bidirectional gaze between Africa and Europe, something we urgently need to do, and thus come to terms with a world for which our European-Western perspective is no longer the only decisive measuring stick. A world in which our creativity is no longer the only driving force. I believe that today's upheavals are the birth pangs of a new era in which the world we have structured loses importance, but in which our prosperity has become the global standard towards which the ambitions of a gigantic youth population are striving. This prosperity entails such tremendous resource consumption that it physically cannot be practised everywhere in view of our planet's limits. As we contemplate the geopolitical, cultural, and economic transformation process that this paradox will necessarily spark, we could lament it; we could go into denial; we could respond with fear; we could say "Make America Great Again" and wish ourselves back to a time when white men were still given free rein; we could also mumble the magic words "Let's take back control" and secede from the European Union – but we cannot halt this process, because 1.3 billion Chinese, 1.3 billion Indians and soon 2.5 billion Africans will not permanently abide by a world where they see no prospects for themselves. The great irony, of course, is that those in the Western world who would go into splendid isolation and deny this reality are in fact, by doing so, hastening their own self-destruction. We can observe this right now with our American and British friends.

The alternative is not to just give in to this new world. It is not about passivity or self-abnegation. On the contrary, the alternative is to regain the motivation to help shape and structure the world in a way that permits a diversity of perspectives. A world in which all

people can live a life of dignity without destroying the planet in the process. In 2015, this alternative was articulated in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We should take this agenda seriously and recount it – audaciously – as a hopeful story in an era short on audacity.

Perhaps this process will also allow us to get to know ourselves better. Perhaps we can confront these yearnings for identity and for belonging, which are so present on the minds of our societies these days, and quell them through embracing instead of exclusion. Perhaps we can benefit from the African view of ourselves, and perhaps it will allow us to start a new chapter in the history of what it means to be European, one that is based not on supremacy, but on empathy and curiosity. Supremacy looks back to yesterday. Empathy and curiosity look forward to tomorrow. Which way do we want to be looking?

Ladies and gentlemen,

You only have one last quotation to listen to this evening! In the fantastic novel *Americanah* by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, her male protagonist Obinze says:

> When I started in real estate, I considered renovating old houses instead of tearing them down, but it didn't make sense. Nigerians don't buy houses because they are old. A renovated two-hundred-year-old mill granary, you know, the kind of thing Europeans like. It doesn't work here at all. But of course it makes sense because we are Third Worlders and Third Worlders are forward-looking, we like things to be new, because our best is still ahead, while in the West their best is already past and so they have to make a fetish of that past.

Could it really be that we in the West have lost faith in a better future? Do we truly lack the strength of imagination now? Are we, like the white UN ambassador in *Black Panther*, missing the imaginative ability, the utopian capacity, to see ourselves as part of a better tomorrow, a tomorrow where everyone on earth is thriving? In that case, we could indeed learn something from Africa. Then we could build that future together, even without the help of a super-metal like vibranium. Not because we feel bad for Africa, not because we're afraid of Africa, but because we, the ageing societies of the North, urgently need that young partner in the South. If Africa and Europe are able to write a common story for the future, I have no doubts that the best is yet to come.

Thank you very much.