



DREAMS OF EMPIRE: Stepping out of America's Fading Lustre

By Mkawasi Mcharo Hall



The first African Diaspora Young Leaders summit was coming to a close in Washington DC. The State Department had sent me an invitation to the closing dinner. RSVP for one, I wrote back. State Department dinners are often a microcosm of the global political structure, and schmoozing around with the diplomatic corps is like listening to the whispers of countries bottled up in one room.

Sometimes you catch the ambitious Washington-based African ambassador gunning for the presidency in his or her country, but I'm yet to catch one with a big idea for a United States of Africa. Most of the African envoys do not want to stay in America once their tour of duty is done. They are not economic refugees and their dreams are made. I want to find out from the room filled with ambitious African youth if they want to stay on and catch the American dream. They are also looking to lead the continent in conquering an uncertain 21st century and the US might just be a launching pad.

I asked as many as I could, and without hesitation they all quipped a version of, "I'm going back home of course!" I qualified my question further and asked, "If you got an offer for a job or graduate studies here, would you stay?" One tall Malian fellow hesitated and shook his head in a circular manner. That was the extent of his commitment to pursuing the American dream. He did not care for pecan pie either. These are not singular-story instances meant to create a bias. America has lost its

lustre even among young Africans.

In a short while, this realisation would be ascertained by none other than the Under Secretary of State for African Affairs. He stood up to speak and asked the young Africans to speak well of America when they got back to their countries; that America is not as bad as they show it on television. I almost keeled right off my playing-diplomat-for-a-night seat. When did the script change so drastically? It's no longer Africa asking America to stop spreading the unsavoury story about a dark continent. Now an American top-ranking diplomat is trying to right the image of a superpower that's suffering an ugly meltdown and the whole world has a front row seat.

In spite of America's fading lustre, there is still a growing African diaspora in the United States, and they will in a few decades be part of the "people-of-color" majority in the United States. For the American-Africans or Continental Africans who have become citizens, this is their home, one that enables them to play out their transnational citizenship as successfully as other diasporas before them have. An understanding of Continental Africans' positioning along the timeline of American empire-making is important. It should help get Africans becoming more proactive in establishing an influential presence in American politics and policy-making, and also in pushing Africans to conquer their own continent for themselves.

A savage inspiration

Empire rises through stages: Conquest of territory; elimination or assimilation of indigenous peoples; and the building of new and more efficient trade routes. Those who lead conquests embody the animus dominandi, a necessary force of evil in the usurpation of power, wealth and security.

The end goal in a humane conquest, if the oxymoron can be believed, is the establishment of peaceful coexistence with those conquered, or the removal of oppressive leadership from the land invaded. In modern history, only one humane conquest comes to mind: Tanzania's invasion of Uganda in 1979 to dislodge the brutal regime of Idi Amin. It lasted all of five months. America's preemptive invasion of Iraq post-9/11 was sold to the people as a remedy that mirrored Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's Uganda invasion: to free the people of Iraq from Saddam Hussein's oppressive rule. But it soon became clear it was a greed-driven opportunity for war profiteering and expansion of the American corporate empire that had become a monstrosity.

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There are many wars that America has fueled to maintain its interests and footprint in foreign soil. It wasn't always like that. America grew out of European immigrants who were running away from persecution, famine, and war in their own lands. They came to America seeking fortune and new beginnings, and they formed a country that rejected monarchy and its extreme powers. America was the biggest and boldest experiment in democracy and freedoms that attracted people from all over the globe. This roaring inspiration was also ruthless as European immigrants who became white Americans held millions of Africans in bondage and massacred millions within indigenous nations, with the survivors confined to reservations. Vicious greed easily becomes a reality in empire-building.

Eventually, a civil war that killed over 600,000 Americans brought an end to slavery. This is a price they had to pay for the dream of a truly free nation whose citizens were all considered as created

equal and endowed with the same inalienable rights. It took bold and selfless political leadership to apply this principle of freedom to enslaved persons. President Abraham Lincoln's emancipation proclamation in 1863 was met with disdain and dismissal from his friends and enemies alike. It ranked poorly as a political move.

Lincoln was driven by his own conscience and the American Constitution, a document that captures the ideals of a people, written with the ink of human kindness. It is also a document that has made America the "home of the free and land of the brave". The irony of it all is that America was also built through the savage inspiration of those who stopped at nothing to succeed; immigrants who never gave up, never made excuses, and never let hunger, disease or the ravages of unpredictable Mother Nature stop them.

Dust bowls came and threatened famine, and the new Americans started afresh. The Ireland famine they escaped from was far worse as it had killed over a million. Floods came and carried the homes of new Americans carving a home from scrub in the wild West, and they rebuilt. They had far worse memories of homes shelled with bombs and bullets in war-torn Europe. Religious persecution in Europe brought the Anabaptist Amish to America where they found freedom and thrived in exclusive communities of their own defining. Persecuted Mormons trekked west through harsh territory and built their city on the hill out of a mirage of hope. Diseases came and killed families that moved to nowhere-places in the expanding America, and they picked up their shredded hearts and kept on striving. The Chinese suffered calculated segregation through the Exclusion Act but they found a way to remain an important part of building America throughout the 1800s.

Enter the Africans

How could anyone not feel inspired by a country made up of people who came from every corner of the world and found more ways than one to dream and achieve? Is it any wonder that the American Dream phenomenon took root and became the country's biggest thought export that kept drawing in the rest of the world? The land where every dream is possible also became the allure for African immigrants from the mid-twentieth century, their numbers spiking from the early 1980s.

New legislation broke the Europeans-only influx into America and allowed more Africans to become part of America's citizenry. A place of great contradictions: on one extreme, African descendants were enslaved for two-and-a-half centuries, and on the other extreme, free and educated Continental Africans were provided a way in through the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Empire and smart nation-building knows that human capital is key in its expansion and stability. From the Roman Empire that had earlier been the cradle of modern democracy to the United States of America, citizenship held the highest value for the inhabitants. It gave them the power to vote, to gain access to economic opportunities, to hold office, and to move freely.

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Stages to citizenship become goals that an immigrant works very hard to achieve. In a land where the biggest pull factor is the American Dream, achieving that dream becomes a calculated get for African immigrants so that tales of their personal conquest will vindicate their desertion of home. When Europeans set out for the United States on boats and scraps of boot, many died out of pride,

refusing to return to homes that still had their arms open wide for them in case things did not work out. The shame of not achieving that dream would be too much to bear. They would die in the gold rush melee, in the coal mines, in the cowboy ventures, in the farmers' fight against nature, and in the run-in with Native Americans fighting to hold on to their lands.

Africans who come to the United States are no different from those first immigrants. Much as most come with a mind to acquire their education, a slice of the American Dream, and promptly go back to beloved Africa, they discover that the road to achieving what they came for is entangled in legislation and privilege. They are outsiders standing in a long line of immigrants waiting to get in to the gates of a new belonging.

Becoming American for an African is very rarely a personal goal but a necessity acquired to assist with personal conquest. Africans do not carry the pride of nation as Americans do. My neighbours, like many Americans, fly the US flag every public holiday and any other odd day. I have recently purchased a Kenyan and a US flag that I will fly on my front porch to test out the feel of nationalism. In Kenya, I would not be allowed to fly my Kenyan flag. However, in a changing America, pro-Trump neighbours will also look at my Kenyan flag askance as it will indicate an unwelcome immigrant presence.

As the latecomers in the game of American belonging, there isn't much out there on African immigration statistics. Shaw-Taylor and Tuch (2007) surmise that about a million Africans immigrated to the United States between 1965 and 2007. These records are usually far below the real numbers as many who come and stay do not participate in the census. Second generation Continental Africans have also increased significantly. The Nigerian diaspora has become one of the fastest growing, both in numbers and in economic success. A Bloomberg research bursts the myth that Asians are the only ones at the top of the intellectual wealth pyramid.

The Kenyan diaspora, meanwhile, continues to astonish as its remittances to Kenya grow to a whopping Sh197 billion (nearly US\$2 billion) this year, up from Sh174 billion (about US\$ 1.8 billion) last year. The tragedy of the Kenyan diaspora, at least those in the US, remains their insistence on staying cocooned in cliques and tribal mindsets while abroad, an attitude that makes them ineffective pawns in America. A long straw extends from the mouths of family and community in Kenya and dips into diaspora pockets, and each year, the gulp gets bigger, thanks to the powerless generosity of a splintered diaspora. With all their smarts, Kenyans in the US have refused to invest in the strategy of building a united front as a power bloc, and so their remittances remain untapped influence. Eight years after the constitutional enshrining of their right to vote, the Kenyan diaspora in the US still cannot vote back home.

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No immigrant community has ever achieved influence without the strategic politics of mobilisation and organisation in their adopted country. Kenyans are adept at splitting their power by dismissing each other's efforts. They duplicate, triplicate and quadruplicate initiatives instead of supporting what is on the ground. The new entrants to a cause will dismiss others as failures and with great humility argue that they are the ones who will make it happen. The community politics of the Kenyan diaspora is not only a microcosm of Kenyan society in Kenya but a far darker version of it.

Lessons from how other immigrant communities in the United States conquered in spite of their political or ethnic diversity are yet to sink in for the Kenyans. Collective intelligence is a switch that an initiative-taker turns on, but the bulb will not light up until the people with their hands around it stop the sabotage. (I have played significant roles in the Kenyan community in America long enough to observe its ways, which gives me a measure of authority on the subject.) Perhaps the growing second-generation Kenyan-Americans will shape its power.

Conquest, China and African superpowerdom

If the American republic has risen to superpowerdom through conquering occupied lands, eliminating indigenous peoples, and building infrastructure through the wilderness, all while using stolen labour and the legitimisation of a cruel injustice, why hasn't the African continent achieved as much in its own continent where its nations are free? Dreams of a Pan-African state have flared up with the staunchest Africanists and died like a kerosene flame, leaving only a smoky trace of it that still lingers.

To build empire, Africa would not need to engage in the cruelty of displacing or enslaving anyone. The Morgenthauian animus dominandi or necessary evil-nature approach to raising empire has to be redefined if Africa is to use it to achieve superpowerdom. By superpowerdom I do not mean a hunger for domination over others, but a reaching towards the highest levels of self-realisation as Africans. Such realisation comes with technological advancement, an end to poverty, the inalienable right to freely acquire knowledge for its own sake, and definitely the restructuring of political systems and inculcation of integrity in the continent's democratic processes.

But is Africa interested? The current trend has African countries firmly serving nationalistic self-interest at best, and more of individual strongman interests. A continental trading bloc covering at least fifty African countries has been in the works, but its success is yet to unfold. The assumption that an African economic bloc could set the giant continent off to the 21st century superpowerdom is unlikely; at least not without independent institutions powerful enough to ensure economic accountability and social justice.

The success of America's rise, savage inspiration that it was, also came from the independent institutions that checked its rogue politics, demanded a righting of wrongs, and allowed for people power. If African is not ready to hold its rogue leaders to account as South Korea recently did by throwing its corrupt president in jail, an economic bloc will only create a deeper chasm between those who can manipulate trade and those too far from the decision-making table.

Africa is a willing victim in the unfolding conquest by the rising Chinese global power, which is carrying out open surgery on the continent. As they open up the innards of Africa and plant Confucius centres in colleges, popularise Mandarin classes, establish television stations to transmit Chinese propaganda, and build breathtaking infrastructure, Africa seems content with the drip of modernisation-on-loan feeding its arteries. There is nothing the Chinese are doing that global powers of the past - Malian, Roman, British, American and others - did not do.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that seeks to etch the most ambitious trade routes across several continents is reminiscent of the Trans-Sahara trade routes that gave superpower status to the kingdom of Mali for a span of seven hundred years - until the Europeans made more efficient trade routes through the Atlantic. It wasn't until America built the Transcontinental railway that connected it from sea to shining sea that the country actually started its rise to superpower status. Throughout history, control of new and more efficient trade routes have led to the rise of new empires. How is it that free African nations and their rich diasporas cannot build an engineering marvel from Cape to Cairo all by themselves?

The unfolding conquest of Africa is a willing victim eyes-wide-open surgery on the continent by the Chinese rising global power. As they open up the innards of Africa and plant Confucius centres in colleges, popularise Mandarin classes, establish television stations to transmit Chinese propaganda, and build breathtaking infrastructure, Africa seems content with the Chinese drip of modernisation-on-loan feeding its arteries.

White nationalism and the Age of Trump

Trump's America is a surrender of empire in exchange for white nationalism. Stoking trade wars and supporting white extremism is a calculated recipe for white nationalism. The president has been on an anti-globalisation rampage. He has attacked regional and inter-governmental trade treaties, environmental agreements and military alliances that have kept America at the helm of the current global political structure. The president is in the throes of a ferocious tariff war against China, Canada and European countries, all trading allies of the United States. It has become common to wake up to news about American industries now making significant losses and some shutting down because the targeted countries are no longer buying American products. Farmers and fishermen whose products are exported to China now need a government bailout to survive.

Anti-immigrant policies have restricted temporary work visas that usually bring in seasonal workers from Mexico to work on farms and in the crab industry. As a result, massive fields of unpicked crop have gone to waste and the crab industry has suffered. The same policies have created the parent-child separation debacle in Texas, a racket that turns out to be, no surprise at all, a profiteering racket. While the world reels in shock at how low America has sunk, the detention business continues to thrive as it nets in new clients in immigrants seeking asylum. The GEO Group that runs private prisons also happens to be the biggest contractor for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The company is also accused of sponsoring politicians in Texas, the same state where unconscionable detention of children is happening.

In all this, good old American activism stays fired up and keeps agitating its way to justice. A company as powerful as the GEO Group now feels threatened by the Dream Defenders Action who have exposed them. A strategic and sustained fist pumped in the air has proven a formidable weapon against massive corruption in a country as powerful as America.

As the Mexican border immigration wars rage, some African immigrants who never thought themselves unsafe now find themselves targets of the government's ransacking of those who supposedly cheated in their citizenship interviews. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is on record explaining the task to de-naturalise "errant" Americans who took up citizenship since 1990. That is the decade the numbers of Africans in America started rising significantly.

It is well-known that Trump has an issue with Nigerians, an identifier he uses to mean Africans. And he's not alone in calling all Africans Nigerians. Perhaps it is the rising power of Nigerians in America that feels too threatening. The whitening of America in the Trump era is real. The immigration witch-hunts conjure up histories that led to some of the worst human atrocities in places like Nazi Germany where unwanted groups of people who had started thriving were exterminated.

While this remains an interesting time in America, perhaps the incredulous nature of it drives one to the conclusion that it is all in futility. The numbers will sort it all out. Unless white people increase their population at an astronomical rate in the next few decades, America is destined to become a country of majority "people of colour", for lack of a better term. It is a scary thought that stoked the flames of white nationalism in Britain, leading to Brexit, and now in the United States. Human civility is superficial. Once threatened with the possibility of extinction, conquest or minority status,

the human becomes the brute in a jungle where all civility disappears.

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Only communities that have lived in close connection to the earth will tend to have a greater sense of civility and welcome for the stranger, conquering only to ensure their own survival, but not to fuel uncontrollable greed. America is a corporate empire built upon unexpiated savagery, and like all empires, it will come to its end.

An ode to indigenous peoples

Sitting Bull. Crazy Horse. Little Wolf. Spotted Tail. Red Cloud...the list is long. These Native American warriors who defended the usurpation of their land with fierce skill and legendary valour will inspire for ages. Their defeat will also depress the human spirit that cheers on the emancipation of the conquered. Victories of Native American nations against American expansion are filled with breathtaking courage. The Lakota, the Nez Perce, Cherokee, Navajo, Sioux, and many of the almost 600 indigenous nations held their ground against an army with numbers, resources and technology they could not match. As with most peoples who get conquered, the lack of a united front plays into their defeat.

A story is told in the annals of history that Sitting Bull once had a dream that his Lakota people of Standing Rock would vanquish the approaching American army led by the feared General Custer who had never lost a battle. On this day, Sitting Bull and his vastly outnumbered Lakota warriors prepared to fight yet again. His dream came true, and to America's shock, the unconquerable Custer was killed and his army decimated at the famed battle of Little Bighorn.

But it wasn't the dreams of one who prayed to the Great Spirit that won the battle; it was the ferocious zeal to survive when faced with extinction. It was the same zeal that led Shaka Zulu to victory against a British army with superior weaponry at the battle of Isandlwana; the same Ethiopian dare that trounced the invading Italians at the battle of Adoa; the same fire that led to the Mau Mau uprising against Empire in Kenya.

It is the same fire of indigenous African peoples that need instruction to rise and conquer a continent they already occupy, lands that already belong to them, resources that are theirs to exploit. The unfolding development in Africa is the footprint of another encroaching superpower. Africa should not surrender to a second colonisation so soon.

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