VOICES

Nunu Kidane

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Photo by Cabral M. Mebratu.

I grew up in Eritrea, in East Africa, and came to the United States in 1980. I arrived as a refugee, fleeing war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. For the first decade or so I focused my energies on my family, on going to school, and on my Eritrean community. My family and I sent support to the struggle for Eritrean independence, and we worked to keep our children grounded in Eritrean culture and identity. I was unengaged and unconnected to what was happening around me in the U.S.

This disengagement is common for many of us in immigrant communities when we first come here. We start out by focusing almost exclusively on issues concerning our own countries of origin. We do so because we're vulnerable and fearful of losing ourselves and our identities in the multicultural politics of this country. Our ethnic and national identities are an important grounding force. Whether Eritrean, Nigerian, Somali, or Ethiopian, we begin by viewing U.S. policy on Africa exclusively as it relates to our respective countries. We don't have much information, or any interest, in other African countries or the continent as a whole. And we rarely connect with the struggle for racial equality in the United States that preceded our arrival.

My children were the entryway through which I began to understand the history of race relations in this country. Raising three young black boys in America opened my eyes to the reality of structural racism. The personal became the political. Much has been said about the parallels between the civil rights movement in the U.S. in the sixties and the movement to end apartheid in South Africa. For me, as an African immigrant, it came as an astounding realization that the struggle for racial justice in the U.S. wasn't "completed" in the sixties. It's ongoing.

Over time my focus expanded beyond my immediate family and community. I no longer saw myself only as the "other," the outsider, but as an Eritrean, a black woman, an African American. And I saw that these identities didn't have to be mutually exclusive. I began to feel connected to struggles that included Eritrea but also went beyond it. At the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1980s, an active student movement was calling for divestment from the apartheid regime in South Africa. I got involved. Gradually I learned how this movement connected to others, both in the United States and internationally.

As we focused our efforts on nation building, Eritreans in this country started making connections with other organizations and individuals that had similar concerns. I read books and talked with people who were active in other African countries. I began to grasp the bigger picture. There were so many connections between what was happening in Eritrea and in other African countries, especially when you looked at the effects of U.S. foreign policy.

In the U.S., Africa is a concept beyond geography; it's embedded in a racial framework. The whole continent is misunderstood or viewed in very limited terms. Because of my heritage, it's important to me that Africa be appreciated in all its historic, political, and cultural complexity. I want to be part of a social justice movement that links the struggles against economic globalization in Africa with related struggles for global justice.

Here in the Bay Area, 26 of us, individuals and organizations, came together in April 2003 and founded the Priority Africa Network (PAN). The U.S. had just invaded Iraq and there was a sense of crisis in activist circles. We saw the Bush administration focusing on the "war against terrorism" but ignoring the real threats—the terror of poverty and HIV/AIDS, discrimination against people of color, and growing global economic inequalities.

Within PAN, diverse African immigrant individuals and groups are taking the lead. Our perspective is that the growing number of African immigrants in the U.S. opens up new opportunities for an Africa-focused movement in the U.S. This is a strategic demographic shift that requires all of us to adjust our outreach strategies.

We also have many members who are seasoned activists with decades of experience in fighting apartheid and other injustices. They brought their credibility gained in local communities and their understanding that work on different issues was connected and ongoing. Achieving political rights was not the end, but just the beginning.

Working for another Africa also means working for another America and another world. We can't afford not to learn from the past; we have to see history as a lens through which we plan for the future. In Africa we have the Sankofa, a mythical bird that flies forward while looking back. Like this bird, we need to look back in order to know where we are going.

Neil Watkins

Neil Watkins
Photo by Monet Cooper.

Two pivotal events in my life drew me into Africa activism. One was a seminar on Africa I took in my sophomore year at Georgetown University, taught by Nii Akuetteh. We studied structural adjustment policies and their impact on Africa. The other was my junior year abroad at the University of Dakar in Senegal. That's where I saw the human impact of structural adjustment, up close.

These experiences set my direction. I've been working on economic justice issues, including structural adjustment and globalization, for more than a decade now. I'm the national coordinator of the Jubilee USA Network, the U.S. arm of the global debt campaign.

I grew up in Elk Grove, Illinois. My family wasn't really political, though my dad went to Vietnam and joined the antiwar movement when he came back. But I had a fascination for international issues, partly because my dad's job at an airline made it possible for our family to travel. My mom is a children's librarian, and she encouraged me to read. My first activist action was as a freshman in high school, opposing the Gulf War. I can't say it was a particularly principled act; it was more of a herd mentality, because people in the group I hung out with were involved.

Starting at Georgetown in 1994, I was in the School of Foreign Service. The first year you take a very prescribed curriculum. By the second year you can take one seminar, and I thought, let me get out of this focus on Europe and Western civilization. That was the overwhelming focus of year one, and I wasn't enjoying it. Once I got into the African seminar, it was by far my favorite class.

The seminar was co-taught by Nii Akuetteh, an activist originally from Ghana, and Herb Howe, an Africanist at Georgetown. Nii worked at TransAfrica in the 1980s, and in 2006 he succeeded Salih Booker as director of Africa Action, one of the partners of Jubilee USA. Back in 1997, though, I didn't know the activist connections. In the seminar we analyzed the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and we did role plays of the negotiations that had led to majority rule in South Africa.

That experience inspired me to do a minor in African studies and eventually to go to the University of Dakar. We took classes at the university, all in French, and also studied Wolof. Georgetown had a house that we lived in, and we spent weekends and holidays with African families.

Soon after classes started that fall, the students went on strike. As I made my way toward the campus, I walked into what felt like a war zone. A line of police were firing tear gas guns into a crowd of my fellow students, who were throwing rocks and running. It turned out that the World Bank had told the Senegalese government it had to spend less on education, and this forced the government to abandon scholarships for students from the rural areas. Of course, many couldn't afford the fees. It was an awakening for me.

During the year in Dakar, I learned more about the role of the IMF and the World Bank in imposing economic policies across the African continent. I returned to the United States determined to do something about it. I knew the U.S. government had the largest say in the international financial institutions. Couldn't U.S. citizens change our government's policy?

Since then, I've worked on campaigns to challenge the IMF, boycott World Bank bonds, and cancel Africa's debt. In my senior year I was involved in a Georgetown group campaigning against sweatshops. A couple of years later I went to Seattle with a Washington-based group called Preamble, helping organize discussion forums about trade and globalization. The next year, as the Washington organizer for a campaign to boycott World Bank bonds, I found myself on the streets of Washington along with 30,000 other demonstrators protesting the IMF and the World Bank. Our group brought 20 activists from Latin America, Africa, and Asia to the United States for that event. We wanted Americans to hear directly from them about the impact of World Bank policies in their countries.

The attacks of 9/11 brought the momentum of global justice work to a standstill. Suddenly the context changed. Talk of terrorism filled the airwaves, and many activists turned their priorities to opposing the war on Iraq. But the structural issues of global inequality have not gone away.

My interest and passion and focus is definitely on Africa. Globalization and trade are affecting Asia and Latin America too, but I think that IMF and World Bank policies hit Africa hardest, because the poverty is greater and it's very difficult for African nations to challenge those policies. So there's a particular need to challenge the role of the global institutions in Africa.

Africa's debt is relatively small compared to the debt of all developing countries, but the impact of that debt is much greater. There are so many resources flowing out in proportion to the size of the African economies and the resources they have. But we've won some victories. More than $100 billion of debt has been cancelled. Some of the most egregious IMF policies have been stopped.

It's only been 10 years, but in my limited experience as an activist, the anti-apartheid movement comes up in every context as an example of successful organizing. Experienced activists all talk about it, and it has always been very inspiring to me. But I've also realized that in some ways it was different, because it was focused on one country with a blatantly terrible political system. Trying to change worldwide economic structures is, if anything, even harder. Even so, when you feel down and you think that things aren't ever going to change, it's good to have an example to turn to and say, "Well, actually, it might take 30 or 40 years, but it can happen!"

Anyango Reggy

My father is Kenyan, and my mother is African American. So I was raised in a Pan-African home. I was born in Washington, DC and I grew up in Kenya, where I finished elementary and high school.

My parents are educators, and they were actively involved in both the civil rights movement in the United States and the independence struggle in Africa. From the time I was very young, they instilled in me a sense of pride in being a woman of African descent. I was surrounded by the music, writing, and film of black artists and intellectuals, including Harry Belafonte, Hugh Masekela, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou.

My heritage embraces the painful legacy of slavery and colonialism as well as the oppression and marginalization of the African diaspora. My parents challenged me to think critically about these complex realities, so my political education began at home. But my parents also believed in formal education; they saw it as a tool for social change. With their encouragement, I returned to the U.S. in 1993 to study. I received a BA in psychology from Eastern University and a master's in international affairs and development from Clark Atlanta University.

I wanted to find ways to use my education and my experience in Africa to focus on the pressing economic, political, and social issues affecting Africa and the world. Eventually I landed my dream job with the American Friends Service Committee. AFSC is a Quaker organization with a long tradition of international peace and justice work on every continent.

Today, after six years with AFSC, I'm coordinator of the Africa Youth Leadership Program. It's part of a broader effort to build a constituency that cares deeply about Africa and will become advocates for change. We work with young people 18 to 30, from the United States and Africa. The participants from the U.S. are mainly, though not exclusively, African Americans. Our vision of Africa promotes peace, African unity, and sustainable development. We're trying to create a cadre of empowered youth—to inspire the next generation of Africa activists.

Anyango Reggy, left, with Jean-Claude Nkundwa, John Bomba Briggs, and Nomsonto Mthimkulu, participants in the 2007 Africa Peace Tour, at Forest Park Community College in St. Louis, Missouri.
Photo by Faheemah Thabit. Courtesy of American Friends Service Committee.

I've worked with young people in training sessions in East, Central, and Southern Africa, and in the United States. In 2005 I helped organize a U.S. speaking tour of youths from six countries in Africa called "Life Over Debt: Africa in the Age of Global Apartheid." I traveled with three of the speakers, who came from Burundi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. It was an intense 28 days on the road—we visited 11 cities and 36 college campuses! The African youths connected with audiences by telling of their firsthand experiences with economic justice and

peace-building struggles in Africa. For example, I remember Nomsonto Mthimkulu of South Africa, talking about how her brother died because the family didn't have enough money to buy the medicines that would have saved his life. People in Africa are dying because pharmaceutical companies and Western governments care more about profits than about saving lives.

Hearing these stories, people were energized to challenge U.S. government and corporate policies that are detrimental to Africa. The tour, I think, made especially strong connections between African youth and African Americans. There are deep historical and social connections—just as there are connections in my own family. That trip renewed my hope in the future of the continent I love so much and have dedicated my life to serving.

This work has been personally transformative for me. I'm now in a doctoral program in African studies at Howard University. My research focuses on the critical role that women have played in transforming post-genocide Rwanda.

Beginning in my home growing up, and now as a young activist, I know the importance of contributions made by seasoned activists. I honor their contributions to struggles for equality and justice for poor and marginalized people. The past informs the present and learning from the past will strengthen and guide the new generation of advocates for Africa as we carry on the work.

Afterword

What can we say now from our vantage point well into the first decade of the new millennium? Much of the news from Africa is not good. Even as old conflicts are resolved, and Africans take initiatives to promote democracy and development, new crises emerge. Leaders heralded as bringing fresh hope turn out to fit the same authoritarian mold as their predecessors. Global trends continue to tip the balance against fundamental change: as with colonialism and apartheid, the internal causes of Africa's current condition are deeply intertwined with outside forces.

On virtually every global issue, with the sole exception of nuclear proliferation, Africa and Africans endure a horrendously disproportionate share of the damage. Poverty, war, the global AIDS pandemic, climate change, and the polarizing effects of economic globalization—in every case, Africa is particularly vulnerable.

Africa stands to gain significantly from efforts to confront these issues that threaten all of us. But that requires both fundamental changes in the international order and particular attention to Africa's concerns.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic illustrates the challenge, and it also shows that movements linking activists in Africa and around the world can have an enormous impact. In the 1990s the increased use of antiretroviral drugs against AIDS in developed countries began saving millions of lives. But in Africa, with some 2 million people a year dying of AIDS, the international medical establishment and even African governments assumed that treating Africans was just not feasible. Africans with AIDS would be left to die.

Activists believed otherwise. Beginning with the AIDS conference in Durban, South Africa, in July 2000, they challenged that assumption. Unprecedented mobilization by South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign and its allies around the world won support for new treatment and prevention programs. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria pioneered an international model for finding resources and allocating funds. It involves not only donor and recipient governments but also civil society and those directly affected by the diseases.

AIDS and other diseases are still taking their deadly toll. Even now, only a fraction of the millions who need AIDS treatment are receiving it. African health services are still starved of resources and personnel. But the belief that nothing can be done has been refuted, and the campaign is continuing. AIDS activists, addressing a summit of African health ministers in South Africa in April 2007, called for the governments to live up to their promises. "We will not be silent," they admonished. "We will hold you accountable."

Among Africa's conflicts, Darfur, in western Sudan, shows both the potential for activist mobilization and the obstacles to achieving real goals—in this case stopping the killing and building a framework for peace. In 2004 the slaughter in that region moved suddenly onto the media radar screen. Activists across the political spectrum demanded that the world act. In 2005 President George W. Bush and the U.S. Congress applied the term "genocide," evoking the earlier failure of the world to respond to the genocide in Rwanda.

It soon became clear, however, that naming an evil had served not as a commitment to act but as an excuse for inaction. As this is written in mid-2007, the United States and the world are providing only token support for the small African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur. Washington has failed to provide resources or engage in the diplomacy required for effective multilateral action. And neither governments nor international activists have linked the Darfur crisis to the internal Sudanese debate on how to bring democracy and peace to the entire country.

New Africa, New Issues

AIDS and Darfur are only two of the complex issues facing Africa in the new millennium. The details of these issues are beyond the scope of this afterword and this book. But it is important to recognize both that Africa is changing and that many of the patterns of the past persist. Trends that show the potential for

a new Africa are real, and there is vast diversity within the continent. The worn stereotypes of a monolithic continent beset by traditional conflicts and age-old poverty are even more misleading than before. But the impact of the hopeful trends is still limited.

There are persistent economic and political problems, but there are also structural changes under way that create new opportunities for African initiatives to address these problems. The African Union replaced the Organization of African Unity in 2001, strengthened by the participation of the new South Africa. African states have taken the initiative in working for peace in places such as Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and southern Sudan. But Africa's rulers often still opt for ineffective "quiet diplomacy" in response to abuses by their fellow leaders, as in Zimbabwe and Darfur. And international support for diplomacy and peacekeeping is most often too little and too late. Resolving Africa's conflicts, almost everyone agrees, requires both African and international action. But governments will not act unless the pressure to do so grows overwhelming.

In the U.S. debate on foreign policy, the "war on terrorism" and the Iraq war have pushed African interests to the margins, much as the Cold War did in earlier decades. U.S. military attention to Africa is increasing. Rather than providing support for African peacemaking efforts, however, it is dominated by a single-minded focus on anti-terrorism that echoes the earlier preoccupation with anticommunism. As this is written, a disastrous U.S.-backed intervention in Somalia by Ethiopian troops risks repeating the Iraq adventure, but it is barely noticed by the media or by most activists. Few dissenting voices are heard in Washington, either on Somalia or on increased U.S. military involvement on the continent—at least not yet.

The basic structures of African marginalization in the world economy remain in place. Most African countries continue to be producers of commodities, whether agricultural products or oil. The most substantial outside economic interest in Africa is in its oil, a sector notorious for deals between corrupt elites and foreign interests rather than long-term benefits for development. But Africa's economic prospects include more than products like oil and coffee. South Africa is among the middle-income countries taking a more active role in the world economy. South African companies are investing in almost every country in Africa, both competing with and collaborating with investors from other continents. And there are new dynamics touching even the most devastated countries. For example, Africa is the region with the fastest growth in the market for cell phones. More generally, African telecommunications and provision of Internet access are attracting both African and overseas investment.

These technical changes are enabling Africans to take greater advantage of global links. While Africa is still the least-connected continent, business, government, media, civil society, and ordinary citizens are rapidly adopting and adapting the new technologies. Instant communications link groups in different African countries to each other, as well as to the African diaspora, which extends to every continent.

African civil society has continued to gain strength and is demanding to be heard on national, continental, and global issues. Activist groups in Africa are campaigning not only against AIDS but also for women's rights and on many other issues, targeting the African Union as well as their own governments and outside powers. While groups still lack the collective clout to force decision makers to act, they are calling attention to problems, and the impact is continuing to grow.

Africa has attracted new attention from world leaders in recent years. British prime minister Tony Blair declared 2005 the "Year of Africa," and President Bush joined in new promises to increase aid, relieve debt, and accept fairer rules for international trade. A parade of celebrities trekked to Africa, and news magazines declared the continent trendy. Yet modest increases in official aid have fallen far short of the promises. Debt cancellation has made new resources available to some African countries, but it is still embedded in a complex process tightly controlled by the international financial institutions.

Many activist groups, such as those campaigning for debt cancellation and fair trade, do see their engagement as solidarity in a common struggle against systemic global inequality. Still, some of the best-publicized efforts rely on more simplistic appeals to charity, effectively marginalizing Africans in campaigns for Africa.

Even sympathetic journalists covering African crises, or activists themselves, often reinforce stereotypes of "tribal" conflicts and helpless victims.

Activist Responses

The outside world cannot and will not solve Africa's problems. The progress of Africa still depends, as before, on changes within the continent and on initiatives by the continent's people. But it will also be affected by the extent to which activists on other continents pay attention to new African realities and work to challenge indifference, cynical self-interest, and paternalism in the arenas of global power.

The obstacles are enormous. Nonetheless, activist groups and networks have been at work behind the scenes, much as they were in the formative decades before the anti-apartheid convergence of the 1980s.

Organizations from that period continue their work, although there have been some changes. The American Committee on Africa/The Africa Fund merged in 2001 with the Washington-based Africa Policy Information Center to form Africa Action, under the leadership of Salih Booker. Led by Nii Akuetteh since 2006, the organization currently focuses on global health, debt cancellation, and Darfur. The Washington Office on Africa, headed by Mhizha Edmund Chifamba, works to sustain cooperation among church groups and others concerned with Africa in the Washington policy debate. TransAfrica Forum, under the leadership of Bill Fletcher and now Nicole Lee, continues to speak out on African issues while also working on Haiti and on other issues concerning the African diaspora in the Americas. The American Friends Service Committee's Africa program, led by Imani Countess, has widened the campaign to cancel Africa's debts and also works to build connections with a new generation of young American and African activists.

The long-established groups, however, are only part of the picture. They have been joined by a host of others working on African issues. These include small groups focused on the continent or on a specific African region or country, as well as issue-oriented groups that are finding Africa to be increasingly central to their missions. Groups and networks working on human rights, debt cancellation, trade, the environment, conflict resolution, landmines, small arms, and many other issues are increasingly linking to counterparts in Africa.

In contrast to the 1980s, when activist influence on African issues was at its height, there are presently no strong institutional allies in the U.S. Congress. Only a handful of individual representatives consistently focus on Africa. This lack of reinforcement from Congress significantly reduces the scope for activist influence on policy. Paradoxically, the proliferation of groups on Africa has resulted in many different messages, with no clear consensus on priority demands.

There are, in short, no easy victories in sight.

Taking a Long View

Yet it would be a mistake to judge the current activism solely by its public visibility and immediate impact. Africa continues to draw in new activists and groups. In sheer numbers, there are probably more Americans becoming involved with African issues than ever before. A core of American AIDS activists has taken the lead in demanding attention to the pandemic in Africa. This issue has also engaged students, including many medical students, as well as many others with direct experience of AIDS in Africa, such as African immigrants and religious workers across the spectrum of theological views. The mobilization around Darfur has also energized large coalitions of religious groups and human rights activists. Like the AIDS activist networks, they span the traditional divisions between right and left.

Mass media coverage remains sporadic, even on high-profile crises such as these. But detailed information on African issues is increasingly available over the Internet. Equally important, a steadily increasing number of Americans have personal knowledge of and ties to the continent. They include a small but growing number of second-generation immigrants with roots on both sides of the Atlantic. A literature of Africa and African immigration is growing, providing readers with deeper understandings of African realities and

American connections. Examples include works by Dinaw Mengestu, Uzodinma Iweala, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ishmael Beah, and the collaboration between Valentino Achak Deng and Dave Eggers.

It is impossible to predict how, when, or even whether these forces might converge to make an impact comparable to that achieved by the anti-apartheid movement. The lessons of the past cannot be applied mechanically to address the grotesque global inequality that penalizes Africa disproportionately and that some of us have called "global apartheid."

Nevertheless, there are continuities. As before, outcomes will depend not only on formal organizations but also on small local groups of activists and on personal networks that link them to national campaigns, to each other, and to specific African countries. Likewise, sustained engagement will require activists to challenge injustice inside the United States as well as in Africa and the global arena.

The systematic inequality of today's world order, which condemns millions of people to grinding poverty and untimely death, is as unacceptable as slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. In their time, these earlier systems appeared to be unshakeable. Yet they eventually fell, overcome by generations of resistance that crossed national and continental boundaries. Today we envision another world, one in which Africa and Africans enjoy full and equal rights. Such an outcome seems neither imminent nor predictable. We are convinced, nevertheless, that a more just and peaceful future will come in part from human connections of solidarity being built today, connecting activists across continents. *A luta continua.*

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