

On the impossibility of speaking of Africa

**Speech by the former President of the Federal Republic of Germany,
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I.

I would like, if I may, to clear up one misunderstanding right away: Horst Köhler is not an Africa expert. My first visit to Africa was in 2000, when I was brand new in my post as managing director of the International Monetary Fund. I went armed with files bulging with facts and concepts prepared by my staff. But as I had discussions with heads of state or government and members of national parliaments, with the small business community, farmers and artists, and with ordinary men and women, I gradually had to acknowledge two truths – indeed, I *became able* to acknowledge two truths. First, the reality on the ground in Africa is so much more complex than written accounts suggest. And second, in nine cases out of ten, calling someone an ‘Africa expert’ is either flattery or hubris. Every single person I talked to knew so much more about Africa than I would ever be able to grasp. And the more I learned about Africa, the more I realised how much there was still to learn. I still feel that today – and I am glad I do. I would, therefore, like to use the time available to me today to ... well, to contradict Ludwig Wittgenstein. Almost a century ago, in the conclusion to his seminal work, the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote, ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’ I have entitled my speech today ‘On the impossibility of speaking of Africa’. But 30 minutes of silence would be extremely boring for you, so I would like instead to use the time to address the difficulties I have with our discourse on Africa and our image of Africa.

Our mental images are our starting point for thinking about Africa, and the images that spring most readily to mind represent a litany of negatives: corruption and crisis, conflict and carnage, disaster and disease. Henning Mankell has said, ‘If we take our cue from the images in the mass media, then too often we learn everything about how an African dies, but nothing about how he lives.’ And journalist Veye Tatab laments that ‘The unspectacular, everyday lives of Africans seldom find their way into reporting; the ‘helpful’ West is always the active protagonist, while the Africans are generally the passive recipients of aid.’ The average German Africa correspondent is responsible for covering 33 countries and has to contend with inaccessible regions, a limited travel budget and equally limited language skills. Given these limitations, how much precision, understanding and differentiation can we really expect in media reports?

Movies, too, frequently fall back on the clichés of vast plains and spectacular sunsets, reducing Africa to a backdrop for white heartache in which, to quote the US/Nigerian writer Uzodinma Iweala, Africans are ‘used as props in the West’s fantasy of itself.’ Iweala’s great compatriot, Chinua Achebe, warned against seeing Africa solely as the recipient of European projections, as the ‘setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor.’

It is self-evident that we can – and *must* – break free of these stereotypes of Africa. But are we really able to escape our Eurocentric paradigms? *Our* definition of Africa can only ever be partial, our interpretation of Africa can only ever be distorted, and we have no alternative but to acknowledge that our image of Africa says more about us than it does about Africa itself.

And even those among us who consciously seek to find out about Africa rather than merely perpetuating the old, familiar myths find that we cannot shake off the history that weighs so heavily on our European shoulders. Our white discourse about Africa has long since lost its innocence. That is something we need to become aware of again.

Awareness of history means knowing about the Berlin conference that opened on a snowy day in November 1884 – exactly 130 years ago – here in Berlin’s Wilhelmstraße. Under the chairmanship of Bismarck, it laid the groundwork for the colonial division of Africa. And it ensured that the King of Belgium acquired a vast area of 2.3 million square kilometres – the Congo – as his personal domain where, it is estimated, up to 10 million people subsequently lost their lives in one of the worst crimes against humanity of modern times.

Awareness of history means focusing on the history of Rwanda, where first German and then Belgian colonial powers turned loose social groupings into the hierarchy of Hutus and Tutsis to enable them better to manage their hegemony. In 1994 – exactly 20 years ago – that culminated in the brutal genocide of more than 800,000 men, women and children.

Awareness of history means remembering the genocide against the Herero peoples, unleashed in 1904 – exactly 110 years ago – on the orders of the Prussian officer Lothar von Trotha.

Awareness of history means acknowledging that during the Cold War, Africa was used as a plaything by the super-powers, only to be abruptly and brutally dropped once the Cold War came to an end.

There is no escaping the fact that, from a historical perspective, the defining characteristic of Europe’s relationship with Africa has not been partnership, let alone friendship, but rather *objectification*. Please don’t misunderstand me: I am not calling here for self-flagellation by the West nor, perhaps, for guilt and certainly not for a crude allocation of blame in identifying the root causes of Africa’s current problems. No, what I am calling for is an awareness of our shared, fraught history and awareness of the possibility that many colonial and post-colonial attitudes persist to this day, sometimes latent and unsuspected but sometimes quite overtly. Have we really moved on from perceiving and treating Africa as an object? Have *I* moved on from that?

No, I am not an Africa expert, nor could I be. Our European, our *Eurocentric* discourse about Africa is, therefore, always one of imperfect memory, of distortion, of constraint – and that is the first reason why it is impossible to speak of Africa.

II.

The second reason, ladies and gentlemen, has been identified by the legendary Polish Africa correspondent, Ryszard Kapuściński. He said, ‘The continent is too large to describe. It is a veritable ocean, a separate planet, a varied, immensely rich cosmos. Only with the greatest simplification, for the sake of convenience, can we say ‘Africa’. In reality, except as a geographical appellation, Africa does not exist.’ Indeed, even as a geographical appellation, the concept of ‘Africa’ is unclear – do we mean the entire continent, including North Africa? Or do we mean sub-Saharan Africa? Can we really expect a single word – Africa – to encompass the contrasts between such vast countries as the Democratic Republic of Congo and such tiny ones as Burundi, between resource-rich coastal states and resource-poor landlocked nations, between desert states and ocean islands? Beyond mere geography, can our concept of ‘Africa’ really embrace the complex social reality of this continent? Every single one of the world’s 20 most ethnically diverse nations is in Africa. No continent has more religions than Africa – and no continent has more languages than Africa.

Our awe at its sheer diversity must prompt us to show humility when we speak of Africa.

Without that humility, any attempt at sweeping statements and generalised judgements about Africa will end up in a hopelessly incoherent version of a selective truth. Africa simply does not lend itself to the clear-cut divisions and absolute judgements that we crave, particularly in politics and the media. Those who prize clarity and unambiguity above all else will not find it in Africa.

This becomes clear when we listen to the current clashing narratives about Africa.

In recent years, for example, there is a discourse that has shifted away from portraying Africa negatively as a ‘continent of crisis’ and towards a more positive image, as a ‘continent of opportunity’. And yes, there is some truth in images of Africa as a new global growth region and in narratives of the continent of opportunity, the new “lions”, and the African economic miracle. Between 2000 and 2010, six of the ten most rapidly growing economies in the world were in Africa; many had growth rates of 7% or more, the kind of economic growth of which Europe can only dream. Africa’s foreign debt fell from 63% of GDP in 2000 to 25% in 2010, an indicator of macro-economic stability that would long since have consigned the Eurozone crisis to history. Yet these statistics tell only part of the story: many African countries are not, of course, booming economically but stagnating. And even in countries with rapid economic growth, the fruits of that growth rarely trickle down to the people. Despite a growing middle class, it is estimated that just 4% of Africans earn more than USD 10 a day. What *is* growing, by comparison, is extreme inequality. What, then, is ‘Africa’?

Yes, those who claim that modern-day Africa is more urban than it has ever been are right. Its urban population is growing at more than twice the rate of the rural population. The list of the world’s large metropolises – those with a population of more than a million – includes 32

cities in Europe but 46 in Africa. Just take the Nigerian capital, Lagos: over the past 60 years, its population has grown 40-fold. Official estimates put its population at up to 21 million, making it one of the largest mega-metropolises on the planet. Yet it is also the case that 70% of Africans still live on the land and that the rural population accounts for an even higher percentage of the poorest people in Africa. So, it is also true to say that rural areas still pose the greatest challenges in terms of education, health care, energy and so on. What, then, is 'Africa'?

Of course those who stress that Africa is still home to most of the world's fragile states, and that many African countries are chronically over-burdened, unstable and fragmented, are right too. Of course Africa has its share of war criminals, of despots, of the terminally greedy who have no interest in putting an end to poverty and every interest in the state of their offshore bank accounts. And of course marginalisation, repression and recent abhorrent legislation against sexual minorities exist, plucking at our heartstrings and causing us to despair of the humanity of this human race. But the courageous exist too, champions for human rights, anti-corruption campaigners, a civil society growing in strength and self-confidence – women campaigning for peace, people with disabilities becoming increasingly vocal on the issue of inclusion, and small groups of farmers defending their rights. All these people are Africa, and they are not all chasing after a crude Western model of prosperity but fighting for their vision – an African vision – of a dignified life. And there are African politicians, too, in the mould of Nelson Mandela, whose far-sightedness and capacity for reconciliation were an example not just to Africa but to the entire world. What, then, is 'Africa'?

Ultimately, anything we say about the Africa of today must reflect the fact that the Africa of tomorrow will be different: Africa's population is growing more rapidly than that of any country in the world. If I allow myself one general statement, it is that Africa is the continent of the youth. It is already the youngest continent in demographic terms, with half of all Africans aged 18 or below (its 'median age' – ours here in Germany is 45.7). And Africa's population is set to double by 2050, to more than two billion. Africa will then once more account for one fifth of the world's population as it did until 1500, after which the slave trade, imported pandemics and, later, colonialism, drastically reduced its population. Having called Wittgenstein into question, I would like here also to contradict Hegel. He once wrote that Africa is 'no historical part of the world' and 'has no movement or development to exhibit'. This ludicrous sentiment was wrong – utterly wrong – even then, and it could hardly be more wrong now. Africa today is a continent of perpetual motion and permanent change. Take a closer look and you will see transformation on a historic scale: it will be this part of the world that determines the history of the twenty-first century. But this transformation is full of ambivalence. Speaking of Africa means confronting contradictions and paradoxes. Speaking of Africa means acknowledging that Africa is changing much more rapidly than our image of it.

This is why we need to break free from understanding development as a cultural yardstick – a hangover from colonialism, when the criterion for judging the extent of development in an African culture was how similar it was to European culture. Has much actually changed? The more familiar the patterns of development in Africa are to us and the more of ourselves we recognise in Africa, the readier we are to have confidence in its future. But development is not

linear and it does not function like a photocopier. Nor can development serve as a moral judgement. Can we really imagine an African modernity that is defined not as the culmination of a linear development towards technology-based prosperity measured by GDP – the way in which we in the West understand prosperity – but as something pluralistic, evolving in multiple directions, a juxtaposition of the local and the global, of tradition and innovation – in short, an African modernity *sui generis*? And then, to go further still, could that perhaps give rise to a concept of development that no longer divides the world into ‘developing countries’ and ‘developed countries’ but that shows clearly that all societies need to develop and be transformed, regardless of whether they are in the North or the South, the East or the West? A new concept of development of this kind, oriented to the huge transformation that resource scarcity and climate change are imposing on us all, could then also transform our view of Europe’s relationship with Africa. We could have a relationship that, for all the existing asymmetries, would facilitate a partnership of equals, free of paternalism and condescension. The question would no longer be just ‘What can Africa learn from the Europeans?’ but also ‘What can Europe learn from the Africans?’

And so we move from the impossibilities to the possibilities: if it is impossible to speak of Africa – because our view of the continent is invariably confined by being Eurocentric and because Africa does not exist beyond a mere geographical unit – then what can we do? What we can do is to speak not of Africa but of ourselves and of our side of the partnership with Africa. And we can speak not *of Africa* but *with the Africans* – something I shall return to shortly.

III.

But let me turn first to us and the task in hand. I am not the only speaker here today, so I will limit myself to just a few examples.

First, I believe that our policy on Africa must also be seen in the context of positively forming globalisation. It must form an integral part of a values-oriented foreign policy of Germany. Nations and peoples have never been as interdependent as they are today. Anything that hurts the world and anything that hurts Africa will, in the long term, hurt us in Germany and in Europe – and vice versa. We must, therefore, finally regain control over the structural factors that are hampering positive development in Africa: our current system of production and consumption frequently relies on outsourcing our social and environmental costs to Asia and Africa. Africa is bearing the brunt of our contribution to climate change. Our agricultural policy is making it difficult for Africa to ensure its own food security. Our energy policy needs a global perspective. And we need to invest much more political capital in finally achieving a fair and development-friendly international trading system. Many of these issues are also being discussed as part of the debate about the future of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals – the Post-2015 Agenda, as it is known. I am delighted that Germany’s Chancellor Merkel and also all ministries involved in this process are giving it a high priority. I really hope for a profiled and coordinated position of the Federal Government in this decisive question for our common future.

Second, we should be stepping up partnership between Germany and Africa specifically in those areas where we can contribute with positive experiences. I am, of course, thinking primarily of education and training, the most vital of the vital issues for Africa's future. I congratulate you, Professor Wanka, for getting so involved here, along with your Ministry. We need to refocus on the quality of primary education but also on secondary and tertiary education and, in particular, of vocational education and training. I am very much looking forward to the initiatives of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The massive growth in Africa's youth population is placing huge demands on its education and training system, yet not even the best training in the world is much use if there are no jobs. The private sector is playing an unprecedented part in driving Africa's development. I would like to see Germany's private sector taking more risks and getting more involved, especially small and medium-sized businesses; they enjoy an outstanding reputation in Africa, but their locally-rooted and socially responsible model of entrepreneurship could also generate vital momentum for creating an inclusive economic system for Africa. I am often amazed to see what can be achieved through a combination of German expertise and African entrepreneurialism, for example in the area of decentralised energy supply.

And third, there is an African proverb: 'Beware of the naked man who offers you clothes.' And my goodness, we Europeans are naked, with our double standards and our comfortable hypocrisy vis-à-vis our past and present contribution to Africa's problems. It is high time we regained our credibility.

Take corruption: combatting corruption is not a one-way street. Corruption in Africa also comes in the guise of representatives of Western corporations and European bank accounts, so we cannot ignore the global kleptocratic model of capitalism that is sucking obscene amounts of capital out of Africa in particular – and certainly more than is being invested in the continent as development assistance. Chief among the beneficiaries of this flight of capital are the European banks where African despots and tax-evading corporations stash their billions. If we finally brought order to the international financial system and allowed the tax havens to wither away, that would be credible!

Or take environmental pollution: for all the discourse surrounding green growth in Africa, the waste is also coming from foreign companies. To cite just one example, take the disaster in the Niger Delta, where leaking oil has polluted entire areas, but at the same time huge oil firms are taking the giant share of their profits out of the continent. If we finally took environmental standards seriously and created sustainable and transparent supply chains, that would be credible!

Our dealings with Africa are a prime example of double standards in international policy-making. And Africa is an excellent place to dismantle those double standards. Africa has long been aware that the emperor has no clothes. And it has long been building a new sense of self-confidence – economic, political and cultural – rather than merely accepting being politically stultified. This new Africa is in search of credible, honest and serious interlocutors. Is Europe ready for that? Is Germany ready for that?

IV.

And this brings me to the second possibility, the possibility of speaking not *of* Africa but *with* Africa. We must stop lecturing and making judgements and must learn to listen and develop a culture of equal discussion and debate. After a past of European *acquisitiveness*, Africa now needs a future of European *inquisitiveness* – it needs not so much our answers as our questions, also questions to ourselves. And that means being much more pro-active in bringing African voices into our debates here in Germany - that is why I am so pleased that this is happening today in terms of cooperation in educational and research policies with such high-level participants from Africa like Commissioner Ikounga and Minister Broohm. I would urge us all, that we in Germany get to know more about African literature, art and culture; that we talk not only with politicians but also with artists, activists, rural women and those on the margins; and that we travel to Africa – hopefully also on high-level political visits – so that we can experience this contradictory, pluralistic and, ultimately, indescribable African renaissance where it is actually happening.

We might then be in a position to witness the birth of an entirely new concept of partnership. Terms like ‘helping people to help themselves’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘ownership’ must not be allowed to be mere empty rhetoric, even less a pretext for indifference towards Africa. No, they must be the starting point for dialogue and a yardstick for *our own* actions. Autonomy for Africa is, first and foremost, a *commitment on our part*, a commitment not to ride roughshod over our partners’ priorities in the way we organise cooperation and support, and a commitment to take African solutions seriously and to support Africa’s own strengths. We simply don’t have all the answers. And that applies to development cooperation as much as to security policy.

A culture of dialogue does not mean that we have no expectations. Listening does not mean that we have to remain silent. Of course African governments must themselves make greater efforts to protect the rule of law, combat corruption and achieve social justice; of course the West must defend itself when people attempt to scapegoat it for Africa’s own shortcomings; of course it is true that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’ Yet only when we underpin these expectations with our own credibility and only when respect and equality are more than hollow phrases will our partners convincingly be able to claim self-determination. Precisely because Europe does not take partnership with Africa seriously enough and because, out of arrogance or ignorance, it often under-estimates its partners, we make it far too easy for some governments in Africa to assume the stance of passive victim and to use condemnation of our hypocrisy as a smokescreen for their own hypocrisy.

What I would like, therefore, is for us to acknowledge the distortion in the way the West sees things. To be shaken in our prejudices. Not to apply our own yardstick as universal measurement. To learn to understand Africa in its own context. To turn the irritation and friction that entails into a constructive force. To listen, and to listen over and over again. And: to put some clothes on.

If we take this message to heart, then we will engender respect – respect for each other and respect for the past. And we will engender trust – trust in each other and trust in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You may recall that I set out to contradict Wittgenstein. ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’? No. The impossibility of speaking of Africa cannot be allowed to silence our voices but must produce the will to find new ways to engage in dialogue and to cooperate. What German-African relations need is a new humility in our attitudes and a new passion in our actions. We need nothing short of a cultural shift in our Africa policy, a shift that reflects the historic transformations that Africa is currently undergoing and that gives a long-overdue acknowledgement to the continent’s global significance. A cultural shift of this kind requires effort from us: self-criticism, differentiation, patience, a little courage – and the political will to translate attitudinal change into action.

Wittgenstein wrote in his diary that one cannot wish without acting.

I think he was absolutely right.