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The Fashion of Democracy: September 11 and Africa

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2004

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Ajayi-Soyinka. (2004). The Fashion of Democracy: September 11 and Africa. *Signs* 29(2):603-607.

Published version: <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1086/378551>

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September 11 and Its Aftermath: A Roundtable: The Fashion of Democracy: September 11 and Africa

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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Development Cultures: New Environments, New Realities, New Strategies<break></break>Special Issue Editors<break></break>Françoise Lionnet, Obioma Nnaemeka, Susan H. Perry, Celeste Schenck (Winter 2004), pp. 603-607

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/378551>

Accessed: 16/07/2014 13:27

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The Fashion of Democracy: September 11 and Africa

We have to ensure there is no possibility of these attacks creating negative consequences whereby the development issues we have been grappling with for decades are sidelined to the margins of global agenda. The countries of the world must simultaneously deal decisively with terrorism and effectively address and defeat poverty and underdevelopment.

—President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, October 3, 2001¹

The spirit of patriotism and love of democracy among Americans have remained steadfast, waxing even more strongly since the September 11, 2001, attacks. There could not have been a better vindication of the stance taken by President Bush and Congress when they declared soon after the attacks that the American way of life would not change. However, in practical terms, and especially as the Bush administration embarks on the war on terrorism, much has changed. From airport checks to color-coded terror alerts to antiterrorist measures that profile specific ethnic/national groups and organizations, nothing is the same any more; the material aspect of the American way of life and the democratic process have indeed changed. It is precisely this shift in the democratic process that has the most negative impact on Africa.

Immediately following the attacks, African heads of state sent messages of support and sympathy to the United States and the families of the victims, although there was a remarkable silence over the U.S.-led attack to dislodge prime terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden and his Taliban hosts from Afghanistan. South Africa waited more than a day before commenting that it preferred to monitor developments before making a comprehensive statement. When other African nations eventually reacted, it was with many reservations and qualifications. Speaking for his country, Prime Minister Abderrahmane Youssoufi of Morocco said, “If we’ve been understanding about the need for retaliation, we hope this won’t lead to

¹ Quoted in *World Report, 2002: Africa Overview*, Human Rights Watch, 2002, 4. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/africa.html>.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2003, vol. 29, no. 2]

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a spillover which could have bad results.” He was concerned that reprisals do not “extend to regions that don’t deserve to be hit.”² Sudan, already on the U.S. list of terrorist nations, characterized the war as aggression on Muslim peoples. Echoing Thabo Mbeki, quoted above, President Mamadou Tandja of Niger feared that the war on terror would sideline renewed concerns for Africa’s development and war on poverty, stating, “With all that is happening, Africa could be forgotten.”³

The Islamic leaders in West Africa categorically called on the United States to change its foreign policy, stating more bluntly what the African heads of states had been trying to couch in diplomatic-speak. There is no doubt that the Muslim leaders spoke the minds of many Africans. During a trip to Kenya in November 2001, for example, I found Kenyans, from the cosmopolitan Nairobi to the sleepy Eldoret, readily comparing the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States with the one they suffered when the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed just a year earlier. They were particularly bitter that, although only twelve Americans died as compared with the more than two hundred Kenyans lost in that explosion, the U.S. government behaved as if Kenyan (or Tanzanian) lives did not matter. They wondered why the United States was now throwing the whole world into a panic to capture bin Laden when they knew all along he was behind the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Indeed, I wonder how many Americans remember that any African country was bombed and that hundreds of Africans lost their lives because bin Laden wanted to strike against America.

Relations between the United States and many African nations have been on a roller coaster of contradictions. Charges of imperialism and political intrusion are leveled against the United States, while the United States vacillates between condescending attention and diplomatic snobbery. A recent example was when the United States withdrew its delegation from the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance held in South Africa from August 31 to September 8, 2001. By contrast, the Europeans, who were once active slave traders and colonial imperialists, stayed and arrived at some dialogue with African participants and other UN member nations at the conference.

The post-World War II era saw the United States rising as a formidable force in world affairs, just as Africans began seriously agitating for self-rule and an end to colonial imposition. The departure of colonial powers created

² Quoted in *Agence France-Presse*, Abuja, Nigeria (October 8, 2001).

³ Quoted in *Agence France-Presse*, Paris, France (October 9, 2001).

a vacuum, and, not surprisingly, the United States moved in to fill the vacuum, armed with direct inducements, such as the development aid packages and cultural ambassadorship of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or indirect inducements, through large contributions to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Globalization started much earlier than when it became a buzzword in popular discourse. Ostensibly, political interference and intervention had no part in this fledgling relationship, but in the increasingly chilly atmosphere of the cold war (and nuclear arms race), it was not only deemed inevitable, it was imperative. Like the United States, the former Soviet Union did not colonize any African nation, but the struggle for independence provided an entry point for a promising relationship. To many African freedom fighters, the labor-centered, worker-focused Marxist doctrine of the communist countries proved an attractive alternative to Western colonization, much to the consternation of the Western allies. Divisions were fueled among nationalists and freedom fighters to counter the threat of communism in Africa, with the result that, both during independence struggles and in postindependence times, Africa became the hotbed of the East/West cold war. Invariably, the hard-won self-determination of African nations was lost, or at best compromised, in the tussle between the two world powers of the time. Like their political ideologies, the postindependence economies of these nations were not (and are still not) Africa-centered but beholden to either capitalism or communism.

In the spirit of the cold war, the United States, the champion of democracy, connived actively to maintain and sustain several African despotic rulers in power. Any ruler threatened with criticism and calls for reformation needed only cry “communist agitators” for the United States to rush to that ruler’s aid and crush the opposition. One of the most scandalous cases was Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), who at the peak of his power was reputed to be the fifth richest man in the world. Mobutu presided over the poorest nation and was secure in his power despite numerous formidable oppositions until mounting criticism forced the United States to withdraw its patronage of his regime. He swiftly fell from power and went into exile. Beyond such cold war–driven interventions, whatever dialogue existed between the United States and African nations was in a donor-recipient context, and donor United States laid the ground rules for the humble nation recipient. Although some efforts to improve relationships were made under U.S. presidents such as Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, there was no consistency. Hence, it came as no surprise when President George

W. Bush stated dismissively during his campaign, “while Africa may be important, it doesn’t fit into the national strategic interests as far as I can see them.”⁴

The irrelevance of African nations to the United States underwent a dramatic review after September 11, 2001. As the United States prepared to hit back with all its power and pain, it needed worldwide support. It needed to go beyond its traditional Western allies or world power-broker colleagues in the Group of Eight (G8). Yet the old distrust lingered even though Secretary of State Colin Powell undertook some damage control when he stated that the United States “cannot ignore any place in the world, Africa is a huge continent in great need—so we have to be engaged.”⁵

In the continuing war against terrorism, especially in its ever-expanding preventive measures, the United States has had to reach out to strategic African nations. The troubling question is, at what cost are these cooperations achieved? According to the Human Rights Watch report of 2002, Ethiopia, one of the cooperative African countries, has been “rewarded with generous aid packages” in spite of its poor human rights record, especially its violent repression of minorities.⁶ Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, was quick to point out that the United States would ensure that these alliances distinguished “between legitimate dissent or legitimate movements for the rights of minorities, and the fact that there may be international terrorism in various parts of the world.”⁷ However, past records of U.S. dealings with Africa, coupled with the high stakes of national honor and preservation, justify any skepticism this assurance or any other might raise.

As I observed in the beginning, several antiterrorist measures such as the Terrorist Information and Prevention System (TIPS) and the USA PATRIOT Act gnaw away at the much-cherished American democratic process and concept of freedom. Many critics, from members of Congress (Republicans as well as Democrats) to concerned citizens, have pointed out the dangers embedded in these policies, but supporters of the Bush administration justify them based on national security. Snap! These rationalizations sound too close to the ways in which many African rulers

⁴ Presidential candidate George W. Bush made this statement during his interview on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) program, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, on February 16, 2000. See also CNN, “Democracy in America,” 2000 (available at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2000/democracy/bigger.picture/bush.gore/>).

⁵ Quoted in *World Report, 2002: Africa Overview*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*

legitimized the abuses they inflicted on their people. If the greatest democracy on earth finds it expedient in terms of national security to compromise its fundamental principles of democracy and freedom of speech and movement, what prevents African nations from sacrificing democracy at the altar of much-needed development aids—which ultimately will once again translate as national security?

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