Africa Summary

Africa’s Peacemakers: Nobel Peace Laureates of African Descent

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INTRODUCTION

The following document contains a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 5 March 2014 for the launch of Africa’s Peacemakers: Nobel Peace Laureates of African Descent, a book edited by Dr Adekeye Adebajo.

The book examines the 13 Nobel peace laureates of African and African-American descent, looking at common themes through their individual histories and bridging the divide between Africa and its diaspora.

The meeting and the questions and answers session were held on the record and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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ADEKEYE ADEBAJO

The speaker began by discussing the idea of pan-African unity and the divide between Africa and its diaspora, something which the book tries to bridge. Since 1960, the continent has also embarked on the quest for what Kenyan intellectual Ali Mazrui described as a Pax Africana – a peace that is created, consolidated and owned by Africans. The 13 Nobel peace laureates examined in the book are products of Pax Africana.

The book seeks to draw lessons from peace-making, civil rights, socio-economic justice, environmental protection, nuclear disarmament and women’s rights based on the experiences of the Nobel peace laureates of African descent between 1950 and 2011. The contributors include a scholar, Ali Mazrui, writing on President Barack Obama, and a practitioner, Boutros-Ghali – a former UN Secretary-General, writing on Anwar Sadat.

The speaker explained that three African-Americans have won the prize; Ralph Bunche, Martin Luther King and Barack Obama; four South Africans; Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk; two Egyptians, Anwar Sadat and Mohamed El Baradei; Ghana’s Kofi Annan; Kenya’s Wangari Maathai, and Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Nigeria. He also explained that India’s political and spiritual leader, Mahatma Ghandi, was nominated for the prize five times and shortlisted three times but was controversially never awarded the prize. Ghandi’s non-violent struggle,
however, would serve to inspire eight of the 13 Nobel laureates studied in the book – Bunche, Luthuli, King, Sadat, Tutu, Mandela, Obama and Gbowee.

The speaker explained that the 15 essays in the book seek to make connections between the struggles for peace, justice and freedom. Some of this includes directly working together on campaigns, the use of charismatic leadership and dramatic speeches, similar involvement in struggles against nuclear disarmament or environmental protection, or the pursuit of women’s rights.

The speaker stated that six of the Nobel laureates studied – Bunche, Sadat, ElBaradei, Johnson Sirleaf and Maathai – were all better recognized in international circles than they were in their own countries. He also noted that five of them – Sadat, Mandela, Johnson Sirleaf and Obama – were heads of state, which meant that some of the actions and decisions they had to take did not always accord to the principles of the struggles they were waging.

The speaker elaborated on some of the achievements and failures of the Nobel laureates in question. Ralph Bunche, a scholar-diplomat, was the first black person to win the prize in 1950 for his mediation in the Middle East and he served the UN for another two decades, contributing to peace-making in the Suez and Congo. Martin Luther King Jr became the youngest winner of the Nobel peace prize in 1964 at the age of 35. The speaker examined the controversy of Obama’s prize, who won it as he was preparing to increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan. While President George W. Bush ordered about 50 drone attacks in eight years, Obama had ordered 375 strikes in four and a half years, killing an estimated 3,500 people by May 2013. The president of South Africa’s African National Congress, Albert Luthuli, was the first African to win the prize in 1960. A priest and a traditional chief, he was able to bridge the divide between the rural and the urban masses, and was awarded the prize for his attempt to highlight the brutalities of apartheid. Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, won the prize in 1984 for his quest for socio-economic justice in apartheid South Africa. The speaker examined Tutu’s role as a public figure, from an activist in South Africa to his involvement with celebrity culture through interactions with people such as Bono.

The book is dedicated to Nelson Mandela and the speaker discussed Mandela’s image as a political saint and founding father of South Africa. His examination of F.W. de Klerk focused on the outrage around his CNN interview in 2012 where he appeared to defend the apartheid system. The speaker suggested that the greater outrage may have been the fact that
people were surprised, because de Klerk had always defended apartheid. However, he argued that de Klerk deserves some credit for his peace-making with Mandela, which was effectively an act of political suicide for de Klerk.

Anwar Sadat went to war in 1973, paradoxically, in order to seek peace, and travelled to Jerusalem in 1977 for peace talks with the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Sadat was eventually martyred for his cause. Mohamed El Baradei pushed for nuclear disarmament and was viewed as a man of great integrity and independence, criticizing the United States’ double standards regarding nuclear weapons. Kofi Annan, the speaker explained, promoted humanitarian intervention at the UN, but was left in a difficult situation as a result of being seen to be put in office by the United States. Wangari Maathai worked as part of the greenbelt movement to plant 30 million trees across Africa. The speaker saw Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s award of the prize as potentially the most controversial, as she was awarded it four days before Liberia’s presidential election. This, he claimed, was not something one could imagine happening to a North American or European politician. He also commented on the gulf between Johnson Sirleaf’s international image and Liberian and West African perceptions of her. Gbowee was a Liberian former social worker who served in peace agreements, leading the women’s movements in the Accra peace talks in 2003. She resigned as part of the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission having earlier supported Johnson Sirleaf, due to nepotism and the widening gap between the poor and the rich.

The speaker suggested that Obama was in a unique position among his fellow laureates, as he was the sole winner in a powerful enough position to leave an indelible mark on global peace and security, UN and regional peacekeeping, Middle East peace, nuclear disarmament, women’s rights and the fight against racism.

DR KNOX CHITIYO

The speaker said he saw the book as one that confounds expectations, but mainly in a positive way. Its contributors are a world class panel of essayists who are very familiar with the subject of their respective chapters. The speaker noted that, while this is not the first book on the Nobel peace prize, this is the first that looks specifically at African and African-American Nobel prize laureates. As such, the speaker thought it important that the book offers a fresh perspective on the peace prize. The speaker pointed out how all the female African Nobel peace prize laureates have been in the 21st century,
something he thought spoke to issues of gender in peace, conflict and security. He regarded the three female peace prize laureates as history-makers in that they have brought women into the mainstream peace and security agenda.

The speaker looked at the context of the Nobel peace prize, one of five prizes which is awarded annually by the Nobel committee, and discussed the nominating committee and the secretive nature of the nomination process. The speaker examined some of the more controversial winners as well as the controversial nature of the peace prize itself, which he suggested to be simultaneously the most prestigious and the most controversial of the Nobel prizes. However, although critics have alleged that the structure and process are opaque, and that it is a politicized award, he expressed his belief that the issue of politics goes with the territory: war and peace and security are political issues.

The speaker went on to look at the controversies within the African and African-American context specifically. He referred to a tension within the African and African-American communities over whether the importance lies in the symbolism of having a black person receiving the award, or in that person deserving the award on merit. The speaker said the book skilfully juxtaposes many of these issues with the characters and times of the Nobel laureates – it is both a celebration of African laureate-ness and a critique of the laureates themselves.

The speaker went on to discuss some of the themes in the book. He appreciated the use of the acceptance speeches of each laureate as a framing device, helping to provide insights into their beliefs and personalities. The book also makes explicit the historic and contemporary linkages and dissonances between African-Americans and Africans. The speaker stated that the book does not shy away from controversies; rather, this is a key strength of the book. The writers show the differences between the aspirational acceptance speeches given by the laureates and their behaviours before and after receiving the prize.

The speaker highlighted a number of things that could have been different in the book. He stated that the treatment received by F.W. de Klerk was somewhat rough. Although he was a flawed character, de Klerk came a long way from his Afrikaner background, overcoming the cultural biases of his own people to partner with Mandela in transforming South Africa. The speaker said that some of the chapters are also slightly perfunctory. He would have liked more analysis, for instance, on El Baradei, who is an important
character, as well as expressing a desire to know more about Gbowee and Wangari. He also suggested including more on the wider context of the Nobel Prize.

The speaker stated that the book enhances understanding of the African struggles for dignity and recognition in the 20th and 21st century, and of the complex dynamics between the prize and its recipients. He suggested how the Nobel prize, while a reward for endeavours, can feel like a punishment for the road left untrodden. Nevertheless, the prize is important. This is especially true for people of African heritage, who, the speaker noted, were seen as non-persons less than a century ago. The speaker thought the book to be a worthy tribute to the Nobel laureates, who either pointed to or were the pivots of change.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Questions

There is representation from North Africa, West Africa, South and Central Africa among the laureates, but an absence of anyone from East Africa. Why do you think East Africa has fallen short on the peace and security agenda?

Does the speaker think these awards have made any impact on peace in Africa, or does he think it has had a negligible affect on the continent?

Is the Nobel Prize meant to challenge the international order?

How can it be claimed, in maybe two or three generations’ time, that European-born and -raised Africans have a linkage with Africa, just because of their colour?

Comment

It sounds like a really interesting book, but some of the criticisms of Archbishop Tutu are misplaced – he did not hobnob with anybody, and frankly Mandela hobnobbed with precisely the same people. It is a rather trite point that the speaker has made.

Adekeye Adebajo

The speaker stated that Wangari, who is from Kenya, must be claimed as East African. He expressed his belief that the people who should be
disappointed are those who are from the francophone and lusophone countries, which have not produced any laureates. Four of those sub-Saharan prizes went to the anti-apartheid cause specifically. Kofi Annan did not get it because he was from Ghana, but because he happened to be head of the UN at a very particular time and had a very good public relations machine. El Baradei got the prize for nuclear disarmament, not because he happened to be Egyptian or because he happened to be head of a UN agency for about 12 years. Annan and ElBaradei shared it effectively with their institutions. Sadat won the prize for an extra-African cause; namely peace in the Middle East.

The speaker argued that he did not actually go far enough in his critique of Archbishop Tutu. He pointed to the cult of celebrity that Tutu has encouraged, and the fact that he hired a US speaker’s agency to give speeches for financial gain. The speaker acknowledged that, while he admired Tutu greatly, in particular his work in championing the anti-apartheid cause in the 1980s, he noted how the contributors did not want to write hagiography.

The speaker thought that awarding a Nobel for a cause allowed people like Albert Luthuli and Desmond Tutu to travel around the world and raise awareness of their cause. He saw this as having been particularly important in building anti-Apartheid constituencies amongst mainstream European audiences, even while Britain and the United States supported apartheid under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Some of the laureates also try to keep alive the spirit of some of their struggles through their various foundations.

The speaker pointed to the importance of the Jewish diaspora in America, claiming that it is able to influence US policy and to persuade the it sometimes to act against its own interest. There is also a big African diaspora that still has very strong links to the continent and provides more money in remittances to Africa than it receives in international aid. The speaker pointed to the people whom Ali Mazrui calls American-African, as opposed to African-Americans – children of Africans who may have been born and educated in the United States but retain very strong links to their homeland.

**Comment**

The speaker was somewhat hard on Kofi Annan. Although it is true that the Americans put him in his position at the UN, Kofi Annan ended up taking a very principled stand on the Iraq war, a stand which cost him a lot. However, what is most fascinating, which the speaker has alluded to when he refers to the opaque process of the Nobel committee, is the mind-set of the people
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who award this prize, and why exactly they make some of the bizarre decisions that they do.

Questions
Can the speaker comment on the evolution of pan-Africanism, from taking a back seat to sovereignty to including concepts such as human security and collective security, and whether he thinks any of these Nobel laureates contributed to that evolution?

Why is it that no French-speaking countries in Africa get the peace prize?

Why were there no African women laureates in the 20th century?

Adekeye Adebajo
The speaker argued that Kofi Annan got off too lightly for his role as the UN head of peacekeeping during the Rwandan crisis; he could have put pressure on the powerful members of the Security Council to act. The speaker also noted how Annan got into office. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright opposed a second term for Boutros Boutros-Ghali because she felt that he had acted in an arrogant way towards her, and Kofi Annan worked with officials from the US mission to the UN, whom later became part of the UN secretariat under Annan. The speaker stated that it was wrong of Annan to betray and get rid of his boss in such a manner, and saw the Americans turning against Annan as the curse of the ancestors for his past actions towards Boutros-Ghali. The speaker said it was important to note the subjectivity involved in picking Nobel laureates; with the prize being determined by a panel of five Norwegians.

The speaker saw Mandela as the laureate that represented the evolution of pan-Africanism. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) insisted on sovereignty and non-interference in sovereign affairs and ignored a lot of human rights abuses between 1960 and 1990. After the Cold War, there was a greater push for intervention and Mandela was quite instrumental in that. In 1998, at an OAU summit in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, he gave a speech that came to be known as the Mandela doctrine, where he talked about the duty and responsibility of Africans to intervene where human rights are being abused. This was built on by others, and came to form Article 4(h) of the African Union (AU) Constitutive Act of 2000, which stated that countries may legitimately intervene in cases of massive human rights abuses.
The speaker noted his uncertainty as to why no francophone have received the Nobel peace prize, and queried whether this could be due to subservience to France. France still maintains military bases in many of these countries, and there are calls for French intervention in Francophone Africa. There have been some French winners, and also French-linked or Swiss-linked institutions, but even these are few. The speaker suggested an existence of an Anglo-centrism or an Arab-centrism in the awarding of the prizes.

When Wangari won in 2004 there had only been 11 female prize winners out of a total of over 200; the speaker saw this as discrimination against women worldwide, not just in Africa.

**Knox Chitiyo**

The speaker returned to the question about the impact of the awards on Africa and whether they have had an impact on peace. He saw this as a very important point due to a tension or dichotomy – the symbolism is massive, but beyond that, what actual impact has there been? The speaker also pointed to a corresponding tension between how Africa values people who receive the global recognition of the Nobel Prize, and African mediatory diplomacy – the non-Nobel prize winners working for peace in Africa, particularly the African elders, who are seen as receiving recognition from the continent itself. Even Mandela’s traction in terms of the region and diplomacy was not as great as expected for someone with his credentials. Africa has tended to look more at people like Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo, who are not laureates but who have that kind of clout within the continent.