

**“The Collaborative Relationship between Africa and the United States of America and the Role of Women in African Politics”**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to represent Africa in America tonight on this celebration of African culture, and to bring you warm greetings on behalf of our people back home in Africa. May I extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to all of the members of the African Students Organization of Pittsburg State University for inviting me to speak to you on the topic “*The Collaborative Relationship between Africa and the United States of America, and the Role of Women in African Politics.*”

The African Presidential Archives and Research Center (APARC) at Boston University have appointed me the Balfour African President-in-Residence. Since my arrival in the United States in January, I have been actively involved in sharing my views, thoughts and insights regarding contemporary issues, trends and developments in Africa with various audiences throughout the United States. This occasion tonight, therefore, affords me another opportunity to represent Africa in America.

Ladies and Gentleman, this great nation and our continent are inseparably linked by ties deeply rooted in more than 200 years of profound history with blood, sweat and tears. As of today, there are approximately 250 thousand Liberians living in the United States; more over, the contributions of African-Americans at all levels and in all aspects to the building of this country into the strong nation that it is today, are an immortal testimony to the reality of the link between America and Africa, as well as to compelling justification for greater and more concrete American appreciation of Africa. In addition, an effective collaborative relationship between the United States and Africa will come about only as the people of the United States learn to appreciate Africa just as well as the people of Africa appreciate the United States. An excellent beginning in efforts on the part of Americans to appreciate Africa would be to have a better understanding of Africa. A continent with a land area of some twelve million square miles, inhabited by over 600 million human beings divided up into 54 countries, and potentially the richest continent in the world in terms of natural resources, is no continent to ignore or marginalize. The whole of India, Japan, the British Isles, Scandinavia, the rest of Europe and New Zealand could easily fit in Africa with still more room to spare. The United States of America could easily be fitted in the Sahara Desert alone.

The United States of America must play a more proactive role in forging a collaborative relationship between her and Africa. I would very much like to see a continuation of the laudable efforts of former United States President William Clinton to improve the relationship between the United States and Africa. I vividly recall that in June 1994, he convened the White House Conference on Africa, the first ever to be convened by a President of the United States. The conference brought together members of the President's administration and 150 of America's leaders on African affairs. In attendance were congressional members, religious, political, business, and academic leaders. Representatives from human rights, labor and environmental groups were present also at the meeting, which was intended to discuss critical African issues such as the promotion of sustainable development, support for democracy and human rights, responses to internal conflicts and the enhancement of bilateral trade and investment ties. I am also grateful and highly appreciative of the \$520 million dollars recently pledged by the United Nations in early February. However, as the saying goes, little drops of water make a mighty ocean. So Liberians look forward to seeing more ripples of this mighty ocean.

The words of President Clinton in announcing the conference sum up the kind of attitude Africa expects the United States to demonstrate in the cultivation of a collaborative relationship between Africans and Americans. President Clinton said, and I quote: “The challenges facing Africa and American policy towards the continent will draw on the participation and combined efforts of all Americans.” End quote. In order for the United States to have a sustainable collaborative relationship with Africa, the people of America must do two important things:

1. They must care about Africa, not because of the rich natural resources such as gold, diamonds, crude oil, iron ore, timber, rubber, but because Africa contains fellow human beings who are as much a part of the global human family as all other human beings inhabiting the planet.
2. They must unite and fully participate in the efforts to shape a more dynamic and effective American policy towards Africa and the challenges that face the continent. Average Americans must get

involved in American policy towards Africa and persuade the government in the formulation and implementation of policies that will promote peace, development, stability and progress in Africa.

Again, the words of former President William Clinton at the National Summit on Africa on February 17, 2000 say it all. He said, and I quote: “If we wish to deepen peace, prosperity and democracy for our selves, we must wish it also for the people of Africa. Africa is the cradle of humanity, but also a big part of humanity’s future.” End quote.

The next and final issue I would like to address tonight concerns the role of women in African politics. Ladies and Gentlemen, there are many Africans who believe that women should not get involved in politics or government affairs, thus attempts by African women to get involved in politics have almost always been an uphill struggle. Nonetheless, I believe more and more African men and women are beginning to wake up to the reality and the fact that serving one’s country does not have to be an exclusive male function.

Indeed, there are some instances in African societies where the local culture does not exclude women from assuming leadership roles. For example, in my country Liberia, women have served and continue to serve as chiefs of ethnic groups. It is from this background that I became Head of State. Long before the authority of the central government of Liberia was firmly established over the interior parts of the country, the members of the Kpelle ethnic group, the largest ethnic group in Liberia, was governed by a powerful woman chief by the name of Suakoko. She ruled wisely and effectively, uniting her subjects and facilitating their cooperation with the government in establishing its control and presence in the central part of Liberia, where members of the Kpelle tribe predominantly live. In her legacy, the district of Liberia in which she lived has been named after her.

Against this background, you can see why I, a woman, was able to become head of state of Liberia and the first African woman ever to become head of state in modern Africa. In 1996, I was appointed head of a six-member council to move Liberia from civil conflict into stability. My mandate was:

1. To secure an effective and permanent ceasefire
2. Disarm and demobilize the warring factions

3. Institute a mechanism for genuine national reconciliation
4. Repatriate Liberian refugees and the internally displaced population
5. Conduct free and fair democratic elections and ensure a smooth transfer of power to the elected government, by May 1997.

In fulfilling my mandate I mobilized individuals into positive actions for peace. In particular our women organizations provided direct relief assistance to refugees and internally displaced people. We, the women, proactively sought to bring about peace. We went into the country-side and interacted with combatants one-on-one, asking them to turn in their weapons. Women play an integral part in politics, as there are some things that only women can achieve.

Fortunately, it is common to see women in Liberia occupying very important positions in government and the private sector. We serve as ministers, senators, representatives, lawyers, Chief Justices, corporate executives, doctors and educational administrators, just to name a few. As a matter of fact a woman, Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, ran for president in the 1997 presidential elections of Liberia and came second in the race. Another

Liberian, Angie Brooks-Randolph, was the first African woman to be elected as President of the United Nation's General Assembly.

African women are continuing to play a greater part in the development of Africa. African students in the Diaspora also have a part to play in the future of Africa. The talents and skills you are gaining in the United States are tools that can be of value to the development of Africa. I want to thank the University and the African Students Organization for hosting me this evening; I have greatly enjoyed my time here at the University and am honored to have been a part of your celebration of African culture. I thank you.