

THE FUTURE OF BIOS IN AFRICA

[Mike Awua-Asamoia](#)

Secretary General
UNA Ghana
Ghana

The time element underlying the connotation of "millennium" is well understood. However, this paper will try to associate the meaning of "millennium" with the "good life" or a state of perfection to which everybody aspires.

The idea of bios, with its implications of a life-giving force is one that is cherished by every African. The great festivities which attend the birth of a newly born baby - the emergence of new life - among the Kikuyu of Kenya, Yoruba or Ibo of Nigeria, Akan or Ewe of Ghana, and Shona or Zulu of Southern Africa, show the extent of commitment to the ideals of life by Africans. Nor could one fail to appreciate traditional Africa's concerns with life as expressed in the symbolism of the art and culture of our people. With reference to culture and life, I would like to give the example of the Akan where the concept of life, blood and the soul are interwoven. Spilling of blood in any way is seen as tampering with life, which is sacred, and stringent sanctions are instituted against such a practice.

The traditional, proverbial hospitality of the African, especially when it comes to receiving and welcoming the stranger or foreigner is again well documented among the cultures of many African ethnic groups. In Mali, there is a saying "never turn away the stranger, for he is a brother, he is a friend!" Perhaps this openness is an explanation for the willingness of many African ethnic groups in pre-colonial Africa to heartily welcome foreigners and co-exist with them. Indeed, as great African empires in the pre-colonial times mushroomed -- empires such as Egypt in the North; Ghana, Mali and Soughay in the Western Sudan; Ethiopia in the Horn; Ashanti, Benin in West Africa, as well as Zimbabwe in the south-central parts of the continent -- several well known works by Basil Davidson, Anta Diop, and Michael Crowder point to these times as the golden age of a great people! Indeed, several of these authors refer to ancient writings by Leo Africanus, Ibn Batuta Al-Kadr, and other Islamic historical sources to understand an age of a people who perfected culture, religion, morality and the respect for human rights and bios. In fact, as formal and informal education developed, and under the appropriate "Ecological Humanistic" conditions, which in the words of Professor Brennan "could produce a Mozart", the SANKORE University of Timbuctoo in Ancient Mali was established.

As international cooperation expressed itself in cultural and academic exchanges, particularly between the Arab world and the Western Sudan; and as trade and business boomed along the famous Trans-Saharan routes linking Africa with the Eastern world, the West, in ignorance, was contemplating "discovering Africa", a continent they chose to call "dark and uncivilized". Spearheaded by the Portuguese, what then happened to African towns and cities along with the wanton destruction of Bios is common knowledge in African history.

It is vital to stress that this era in African history, i.e. commencing from as early as the 15th century, saw the beginning of a new kind of international relationship between Africa and the new arrivals from the West. A relationship, not of two equal partners who could co-exist in mutual understanding and peace, but a master-servant relationship. This was the relationship which was to lead to one of the greatest affronts to the concept of Bios -- the slave trade in which over 100 million people, particularly young vibrant Africans -- lost their lives. This was the era which heralded colonialism in which further violations of human rights and the exploitation of Africa's resources, without regard to the ecology or environment, were perpetrated.

True, the virtues of Western civilization and their attendant benefits to Africa are well-known, but the harm has already been done. The seeds of several maladies in our poor continent have been sown, to the extent where independence for many African countries has only worsened the plight of the African. The millennium, towards which many Africans struggled for freedom and independence, has indeed become a fleeting mirage.

Apart from the violation of human rights, whether in independent African states or of the variety that is practiced in South Africa, bios, the being and personality of the African, is violated. The irony is that sometimes human rights violations in Africa are done with such crudity that they make apartheid appear refined and humane (consider the records of Idi Amin, Bokassa and Nguema and you will see what I mean). No doubt Bishop Tutu has often bemoaned the fact that the behaviour of our brothers in the North is not helping our cause.

In general, the atrocities of some of the preceding evils and their impact on Africa and on the social consciences of the international community have become an open book. It is within this context that the current initiatives of negotiations for peace in Southern Africa, leading ultimately to the independence of Namibia, should be welcomed. One is tempted to be cautious because of the known record of treachery by the racist South African government, as shown in the case of the Nkomati Agreement with Mozambique.

Regarding the contradictions, conflicts and sufferings of many in independent African states from human rights violations, the current concerns

of the OAU expressed in the establishment of the African Commission on Human Rights and actions of allied bodies are to be commended.

For biopolitical initiatives in Africa this is the opportunity to actively explore possibilities of finding answers to appropriate frameworks of conflict resolution, crisis prevention and management, and to promote the process of confidence-building for peace.

What of development? The World Bank forecasts for Africa indicate that for low-income African countries, Gross Domestic Product per capita in 1990 and 1995 will be lower than in 1973 and 1980. It is also estimated that unemployment in Africa has risen from 10.8% in 1975 up to 20% while the rate of under-employment was estimated to have risen from 37.9% in 1975 to over 58% by mid-1980.

The economic problems of the first half of the 1980s are expected to persist for the rest of the decade and beyond, unless radical measures are taken in the area of debt-fund capital flows, and their issues.

Debts have brought enormous constraints and are preventing African countries from financing much needed economic programmes, as well as diverting resources from such basic needs as food, health and education. For example, infant and child deaths in Africa are increasing yearly and are projected by UNICEF to total fifty million in the period 1985 to 2000.

As a result, many industries have closed and capacity utilization of industries has also drastically fallen to about 30% in many countries. The story in the agricultural sector is no different - recession. The resultant effect of all this includes growing starvation and malnutrition, as well as the need for huge food imports.

Indeed, the UN Conference of Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that by the year 2010 the Latin American debt will be, on present trends, about 83 percent of its total export income while Africa's debt will be over 280 percent! The UN Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar described Africa's debt burden, "...as one of the most important factors constraining recovery and development in the continent." The region's total external debt had risen to \$218 billion by the end of 1987 according to the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

To a great extent African governments have fulfilled their side of the bargain which included devaluation of various African currencies, and cuts in public spending. Thus, African exchange rates, which were higher than those of any other developing country in the early 1980s, are now the lowest in the world, having fallen by an average of 55% in the last 3 years, while budgetary deficits by African governments have been cut by nearly a third.

The sober assessment of Africa's economic progress, or lack thereof, calls into question the reciprocity, on which the UN Programme, Action for African Economic Recovery and Development was launched. This program was a mechanism under which African Governments committed themselves to wide-ranging economic reforms while the international community pledged to provide additional financial support.

Another area in which this paper will advocate biopolitical concentration of action for the future, is the question of the dumping of nuclear and toxic wastes in Africa. This spectre is a new danger which threatens the very lives and survival of many Africans. Of late, there has been a spate of dumping hazardous wastes in various parts of the continent to worsen the already known maladies of our people. Approximately 15 African countries are now known to have definitely accepted dump sites as against 12 previously known. The reasons for such dumpings are purely financial - i.e. the erring African states agree to their countries being used as dump sites for very minor financial outlays!

The current situation is so dangerous it confirms predictions that "apart from the effects of nuclear and other toxic wastes on vegetation and other things, an explosion of continental dimensions may occur as a result of the heat produced from the continuing radiation of such wastes in unspecified areas on the African continent." Besides this, the fact that African countries, by dabbling in matters relating to nuclear and toxic wastes, are ill-equipped to be able to deal scientifically with such matters, makes the situation even more pathetic.

UNEP sadly confirms a number of cases where wastes, which may be hazardous to the environment and human health, upon arrival at an importing African country, receive no proper treatment or careful handling due to lack of both institutional and technical capacity of the receiving country. Luckily, eyebrows in Africa have been raised regarding this current 'toxic terrorism'. In the words of the Nigerian Head of State, President Babangida, "no government, no matter the financial inducement, has the right to mortgage the destiny of future generations of African children." Since then it is gratifying to note the following actions which have been taken by articulate individuals and organizations in Africa to correct this latest dangerous trend; and for which Biopolitics, in their future programs and activities in Africa, could take into consideration and support:

- a) The Republics of Gambia and Togo are reported to have passed laws making it an offence for anyone to dump nuclear or toxic wastes on their soil;
- b) Recently, the South West Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) threatened to take legal action against West Germany for having dumped nuclear waste on the west coast of the Namibian desert;
- c) A law is soon to be passed in Nigeria to "deal drastically with any person or group of persons" attempting to make Nigeria a dumping ground for waste emanating from outside the country;
- d) Ghana has formed an Anti-Toxic Waste National Committee with the aim of checking the contents of containers arriving at the nation's ports of Tema and Takoradi;

- e) At the recent meeting of the West African Economic Community in Lome, Togo, the Heads of State discussed at length the theme of our discussion and came out strongly against African countries becoming recipients of toxic wastes from "Western industrialized states";
- f) When leaders of the Non-aligned Movement met at the beginning of September 1988 in Nicosia, Cyprus, the African group, led by Nigeria, managed to put on the agenda, the question of waste dumping on the African continent and the need for corrective action;
- g) Finally there are current endeavors by African delegations to the UN to place the question of the dumping of hazardous wastes in Africa on the agenda of the UN General Assembly.

With the preceding as background, what could Biopolitics do in this regard? Perhaps for the future and the next millennium, Biopolitics could consider the following as a basis for effective action against nuclear and toxic waste dumping in Africa:

1. Since the foregoing problem is not only peculiar to Africa but is also a worldwide phenomenon, Biopolitics actions could be to supplement the efforts of international organizations such as UNEP in trying to come out with a convention providing binding rules to govern the transboundary movements of hazardous wastes even in the absence of other agreements on the subject.
2. Explore the possibilities of creating the conditions for consensus-building including providing structured and theoretical inputs into attempts at framing what should constitute an acceptable definition of hazardous wastes, as well as that of disposal and the need for adequate notification procedures for the importing as well as the transit countries.
3. Having referred to the lack of technical know-how by African countries in handling incoming toxic wastes, recommendations that if it should become necessary to entertain such wastes, either as an importing or transit country, within the context of rights of such countries, then the problem should be examined on the basis of the right:
 - i) to receive proper information;
 - ii) to make sure that the relevant countries have the technical capacity and knowledge to assess the information they receive properly; and,
 - iii) to sample the substances making transit through or being imported into their territories with the view to making certain that the content of shipment, for example, corresponds to the notification.

Mike Awua-Asamoia, Secretary-General of the UN Association of Ghana is currently with the School of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, England, researching into questions of "Peace Perspectives in Africa", a work to be published. Since early 1990, he has been directing the African Peace Research Institute in Lagos, Nigeria, and was selected by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament and Research (UNDIR) as researcher and participant in the Conference of African Peace Researchers and Institutes on African Position on Disarmament, held in Algiers in March, 1990.