

24 May 1963

SPEECH PRONOUNCED BY H. E. LEON MBA,  
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GABON,  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE ADDIS ABABA  
CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF AFRICAN STATE

23 MAY 1963

Heads of State and Government, Honourable delegates,

I, too, should like to thank from the bottom of my heart His Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I and the Ethiopian people for the welcome they have given us - a welcome which has rendered tangible the fraternity of African nations.

For the first time all the independent States of Africa are here met together and I for my part think it right and proper that it is precisely in Addis Ababa, capital of the old Ethiopian Empire, that we are seeking to build a united and fraternal Africa.

The speech which His Majesty the Emperor pronounced at the opening to our work gives expression to the deep unanimity of African nations and specifies the aims to which we all aspire. For the first time there is an attempt to trace the broad outlines of effective co-operation between all African States, in a work, of the building of a united Africa.

To be sure, although we are all agreed on the aims, we may have different ideas about the methods of attaining them. As His Imperial Majesty has said: "On these and other questions there is no agreement, and if we wait for agreed answers, generations hence matters will be little advanced, while the debate will still range".

We have two fundamental objectives:

1. to accelerate the total liberation of the African continent; and
2. to proceed to the building of African unity.

I shall take these two points in succession

We in Africa are all agreed that the present situation, particularly with respect to the liberation of our oppressed brethren in Angola,

Mozambique, Sao-Thome, and Principe, in Rio Muni, known as Spanish Guinea, in Portuguese Guinea, and those most shamefully enslaved in South Africa, calls for a revolutionary attitude.

This is the time for me to say once more what we said at Ouagadougou "Colonies are made to be lost, they are born with the cross of death on their brows."

In Gabon the oppressed peoples of Africa always find, as they have found in all your countries, support, both moral and material, and the people of Gabon will afford their asylum and protection, as indeed it already does in some cases.

In former times the Ethiopian Empire suffered the most cruel invasion; and yet today, as His Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I said: "We must live in peace with our former colonizers, shunning recrimination and bitterness and forswearing the luxury of vengeance and retaliation."

From the time when Gabon's destiny was placed in the hands of its people, we have done everything to avoid hatred and paralyzing complexes, to transcend the past and worthily prepare our place in a community of varied but united brotherly people.

Revolutionary, therefore, Africa must be to achieve its total liberation. The problem today, however, is to know whether African Unity will be built in patience and continuous effort or rather by a sudden change.

We are inclined to think, with His Imperial Majesty, that "the union which we seek can only come gradually" and we share his feelings when he says "a period of transition is inevitable. Old relations and arrangements may, for a time linger. Regional organizations may fulfil legitimate functions and needs which cannot yet be otherwise satisfied."

It is in this spirit that we must approach the study of a Charter at African continental level, so that each one of us rediscovers, together with his personality the need for co-operation which inspires us all, the need that is to say, to co-ordinate our political positions, reconcile our economic, social and cultural actions and find the means to ensure the integrity of all our States.

From these fundamental choices must, in our opinion, flow the methods of putting into effect the various projects submitted to us and



designed to promote African Unity in economic, cultural and defence matters.

I should like to lay special emphasis on the importance of economic co-operation as an approach to African Unity.

At this juncture realism and efficiency must prevail over passion and precipitance.

Nothing is gained by denying that, in the case of some of us, we are placed in definite, very different situations and that we are included in economic and monetary systems which, for the time being, have no real junction point. These facts enter into the objective understanding of the development we want to stamp on inter-African economic relations.

A shole trade system inherited from cobnization remains to be rethought. We do not consider that complete free trade is the postulate Africans should adopt at the present stage of their development. Often, indeed, the theorists of free trade are rabid protectionists.

In our opinion, the present solution lies in setting up, at African continental level, an economic community within which trade will be so organized that each State gains a fair return for the advantages it affords the whole. This economic community must not, moreover, evade the principle of protecting African industries vis -a-vis products of similar industries from without the Continent.

For all these reasons, I think it would be in our interest not to insist too much, in the present state of affairs, on the establishment of a free trade area, which might be a two-edged sword liable to impede the harmonious development of our economies, may even place us in a completely artificial economic context.

This being so, Honourable Heads of State and Delegates, Gabon has not come to this conference with the intention of blocking any proposal but rather with the intention of sifting the contents of each one of them so as to make, at any time, a positive contribution, so that the progress towards African Unity maybe the progress of us all together, seeking, at each encounter, what unites and brings together rather than what divides.