



**OPRAH IN AFRICA:
NOT JUST HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS**

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Oprah Winfrey has gone home to Africa and not just for the holidays. She has built a \$40 million state-of-the-art school called the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa and is building a home there. She had gone to Africa, talked with Nelson Mandela, and felt an expansive sense of self and a new rootedness and relevance. As she said, “going to Africa changed me forever.” So Oprah has come home now with the means and mind-set to mother and mentor her and our own children. Indeed, Oprah says, “My cup runneth over when I see in these girls’ faces the light of my own. I know now why I never had children. These are the daughters I’ve been coming to my whole life. I am blessed to be able to feed, clothe, nurture and inspire them and provide teachers and counselors who will do the same.”

But some Whites, who were used to their being the subject of almost every sentence on her show, are alarmed at the focus on Black and the independence exhibited here, and have trotted out and given space to others to raise criticism and questions about the project. It is no doubt whispered in the presence of Whites and said quietly and cautiously in multicultural company, but White people, especially White women, owe Oprah Winfrey a debt they can never fully pay. And groundless criticism and insidious questioning are not the currency of rightful compensation. She has spent so much of her professional life working wonders for White women, saving so many of them from themselves and the Antarctica of underdeveloped emotions and unfulfilled lives they live in spite of their wealth and Whiteness. With consummate skill and enriching effective-

ness, she has made her billions being for them mama and medicine woman, psychologist, counselor and confidant, offering them sisterhood handshakes and maternal hugs, tea, tears and shared stories of tragedy, triumph and treadmill incidents of raisins in the sun and dried-up dreams.

So, when a White woman reporter asked her about White criticism she was getting for her clearly praiseworthy educational project in South Africa, she was shocked at the shamelessness of it and rightfully repelled by the not-so-friendly fire. Answering the irrational with commendable calm, she said something like “I find it interesting that White people are concerned about me educating Black girls.” Then straining not to go street on that electronic highway of artificial faces and manufactured facts, she reaffirmed her faith in the value of her project and summed up saying “I say ‘criticism be damned’.”

Whatever can be said or imagined to be wrong about Oprah’s \$40 million investment in a school for girls in South Africa, it would be mean-spirited and dishonest to deny its goodness and to refuse to give righteous credit where it is due for several reasons. First, it is above all an educational investment in the future of Africa, a good in itself and clearly a path to empowerment for those educated, their families, communities and their people. As Mzee Mandela said at the official opening of the school, “The key to any country’s future is in educating its youth. Oprah is therefore not only investing in a few young individuals, but in the future of our country. (And) we are indebted to her” Certainly, this is Oprah’s hope to develop future capable leaders and committed

servants of South Africa in particular and Africa as a whole. In a declaration of determination and faith, she said "I know this academy will change the trajectory of these girls' lives. They will excel and pass their excellence on to their families, their nation and our world."

Secondly, Oprah has produced a product of the highest quality with a stress on excellence, sustainability and service. It is not simply because of the amount of money spent, but also the forethought and planning that went into sustainable funding, student follow-up, assistance for college, and aid to avoid interruptions and terminations which material deprivation so often produces. Moreover, it is guided by a profound commitment to practice and elicit "high standards of academic excellence and service leadership" from students, staff and teachers.

As an ethical initiative for the vulnerable, Oprah's project also rates high. It is an ancient African teaching that we are morally obligated to care for and empower the vulnerable, i.e., the poor and less powerful, the ill, aged and injured, the disabled and disadvantaged. And so Oprah has reached out to provide relief, reaffirmation and sustained support to disadvantaged girls, girls who in great numbers have lost parents to early deaths and disease (especially, HIV/AIDS) and who are often the most targeted and vulnerable victims of the varied violence that afflicts families, communities and the larger society.

Oprah's project which brings together Continental and Diasporan Africans also fits well within the ongoing pan-Africanist call for Africans in the Diaspora to contribute conscientiously and concretely to the libera-

tion, development and enhanced life of Africans on the continent. Indeed, it is in the tradition of Maria Stewart and Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Kwame Nkrumah who called on the sons and daughters of the world African community to work and struggle together to free the continent, uplift and advance the people, harness, develop and preserve their human and natural resources, and forge a future which mirrors the best of our imagination and efforts as African people.

Finally, Oprah's project is also praiseworthy because it offers a model and inspiration for others similarly situated to do likewise. Indeed, she brought a host of friends and colleagues to share this moment with her and perhaps by example demonstrate the good they can and should do with their wealth. The *Husia* teaches that we are blessed with wealth so that we can do good with it and this requires not simply charity which relieves, but also investment which empowers.

Yes, there are possible problems with the project: the possibility of cultivating elitism and a perverse taste for luxury in the midst of poverty and deprivation; importing degraded forms of individualism in a context where the cooperative creation and sharing of good is indispensable; and modeling and choosing to do personal charity rather than making ongoing and critical investment in the overall development of Africa and its people. Nevertheless, this is an excellent initiative which offers an important example of the possible and promising. Our responsibility, then, is not to sit on the side, signify and second-guess, but to emulate, add to and expand this model and other positive efforts being made.