

My Recollections
Hassan Gouled Aptidon, President of the Republic of Djibouti
By SGI President Ikeda

Should there ever be a war between men and women, I would join the women's side immediately!" declared President Gouled with a warm laugh that transformed his face into that of a kindly grandfather. In the Republic of Djibouti, where he is the leader, he is lovingly called Uncle by the people.

"As a matter of fact, my wife is now attending the International Women's Conference in Beijing," he said. From that opening, our conversation turned to the rising power of women in the world. We met during President Gouled's visit to Japan in September 1995, when he conferred upon me one of Djibouti's highest honors, the Grande Etoile de Djibouti.

When I later mentioned President Gouled's remark about a war between men and women to Dr. Alexander Yakovlev, one of the founders of perestroika, he smiled at his wife, Nina, sitting beside him, and said: "For my part, I'd send up the white flag and surrender before the fighting even began. Men are no match for women. I have been losing to my wife for the last 50 years!"

The dawn of the age of women signals the end of an age of brute force — the beginning of an age of principle, culture and human rights. It is the dawn of an age when those who have been oppressed will rise up and cast off their shackles. And that, of course, makes me think of Africa.

The most oppressed and exploited continent in all of human history has been Africa. And that is why I hope that Africa will eventually become the happiest continent. The new century will not truly dawn until that happens.

In his greetings at Soka University, President Gouled declared: "Without peace, we cannot guarantee a better life for future generations. We must raise our voices higher in order to draw out the most profound qualities in the human heart — tranquillity, resoluteness of mind and, especially, self-confidence."

President Gouled believes that people are people the world over. It was moving to see him shake hands with the Soka University students who welcomed him, cordially greeting each one.

After visiting Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum, he was deeply sorrowed and said, "I can't eat after seeing this." And in the guest book, he wrote, "This tragedy is the tragedy of all humankind."

Djibouti is a small country, only about 8,900 square miles. But the physical size of a nation is not important. The size of its people's hearts — are they generous or stingy? — that is what counts. How much greater a small, struggling, yet humane nation is than a large, proud, arrogant one.

The same is true of people. Being big and powerful aren't what make people great. What makes a nation great is determined by the goals its people and leaders are pursuing and the efforts they are making to achieve those goals. That is why a nation's spirit is so important.

Djibouti is sandwiched between two much larger nations, Somalia and Ethiopia, which clashed violently in 1977. In September that year, the conflict grew into a full-scale war, which created a tragedy — millions of refugees and devastating famine. President Gouled, who had just secured Djibouti's independence from France in June 1976, flew to Somalia immediately. "Somalia is a great nation with tremendous potential for future development," he cried out. "You should make peace."

Then he flew to Ethiopia. After years of seeking to persuade the leaders of both nations that peace was in their best mutual interest, they finally sat down to talk in Djibouti in

1986. And two years later, in 1988, a peace treaty between the two parties was signed.

But over those years, the number of refugees in Djibouti had grown. (Even today, 20 percent of the country's population consists of refugees from its neighbors.) Of course, this created a heavy financial burden, but the president declared that since the refugees had come to Djibouti seeking to escape war and live in peace, it was the nation's duty to share its resources, no matter how limited, with the newcomers.

Djibouti has been called a generous nation. It is separated from the Arabian peninsula by a mere seven miles of water. From across the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Arab and Indian cultures have come to Djibouti, where they have blended with African culture. To that mix French culture was added, during the colonial period. President Gouled's motto is "Djibouti — a land of cultural exchange, encounter and peace."

When I saw him off at the Tokyo Makiguchi Memorial Hall, President Gouled said: "This is a grand building. Its upkeep must be difficult." It was a simple remark, but I was moved by what it revealed: his concern for working people. It showed that he was no stranger to the pains and trials of hard work. My beloved mentor, Josei Toda, too, often expressed this practical turn of mind.

President Gouled was born in 1916. He is the oldest of all current African leaders. His family members were nomads. At 14, he left home and worked as a street trader. His merits won him a following in several local political groups, and in his mid-30s he became the representative to the French Senate for French Somaliland (as the area was then known).

From that day on, he has devoted himself completely to Djibouti, including to its war of independence. He explained his philosophy of life in his speech at the United Nations (September 1977) commemorating Djibouti's independence. "What is a true democrat?" he asked. "A true democrat cannot be corrupted by money or power, and defends the rights of the poor. To him, democracy is not just a word. It is a desperate struggle to win equality for all. It is a battle against corruption, a battle against the degradation of the poor. It is not empty rhetoric [by those unwilling to fight]."

A battle against degradation. How true this is in Africa, with its history of oppression and exploitation. The entire continent was despoiled. The slave trade in African peoples began in the 16th century. And in the 19th century, Africa was colonized by Europeans. The African people, their wealth and advanced culture, were violated, plundered and torn out by the root.

It is estimated that some 60 million men and women were carried away by the slave trade. Innocent people suddenly found themselves hunted down, sold, branded with hot irons, shackled at the ankles and wrists, and loaded onto slave ships. They were treated worse than domestic animals. Packed into the ships so tightly they couldn't move, they were forced to endure appalling sanitary conditions. There were no toilets, the decks were filthy, and disease was rampant. So foul was the stench from the ships that people on other vessels several miles distant could smell it.

Some of the captives threw themselves overboard, hoping at least in death to be reunited with their beloved families. Some went insane. Some starved themselves to death. But slaves were no use dead, so the slave traders forced them to eat, resorting to torture if necessary. Those who still refused to eat were fitted with a device that forced their mouths open and force-fed.

This living hell killed many Africans before they reached America, after an average of five weeks at sea. But a new hell was waiting for the survivors. Those who arrogantly called their fellow human beings savages, unscrupulously hunting and rounding them up, were in fact themselves savages. Those who insultingly labeled Africa the Dark Continent in fact *brought* a cloud of darkness to Africa.

The slave traders perpetrated yet another evil. They encouraged rival ethnic groups to capture slaves, exchanging new captives for guns. Thus they set the stage for deadly, escalating hostilities where, unless a group captured more people than a rival group, their rivals would grow ever stronger and be rewarded for their captures with more guns.

We must never forget that the development of the modern European nations was based on these terrible crimes against humanity. The European cities that flourished due to the slave trade used African blood.

Then, devastated Africa fell under the heavy yoke of European colonization. The Berlin West Africa Conference (1884–85), a series of negotiations among the major European nations, was called by some the Conference on the Division of Africa. The great powers divided the continent along arbitrary lines, never giving the slightest thought to the people who lived there.

As a result, peoples with shared cultures and customs suddenly found themselves in separate countries. And at the same time, peoples of completely different cultures and traditions were thrown together into new nations. This has been the source of much of the internal strife that has wracked Africa until today. In a further tragic irony, it is the great powers who supplied weapons to both sides in these conflicts, further enriching themselves, based on the African people's suffering.

First the Africans were enslaved, then their land was stolen, then their culture was destroyed, and finally they were forced to grow crops for the consumption of their colonizers. The Europeans established certain cash crops with which the African colonies were forced to pay their taxes: palm oil, cocoa, coffee, rubber, peanuts.

A forced monoculture — cultivation of a single crop in a given area — left the Africans unable to grow sufficient amounts of their own crops, since they were punished if they didn't meet the quotas set by the colonial regimes. In some countries, that punishment was having your hands and feet cut off.

The farming villages were overworked and depleted. Tired to the core of their beings, the people lost all hope. And after bringing the Africans to this pass, the colonial powers told them if they were poor, it was because they were lazy.

Africa, O Africa! You are not a poor continent — you were impoverished! You are not an underdeveloped continent — your independent development was thwarted and disrupted! You once had the richest potential of all continents; it is as if your hands and feet have been cut off. But you were reduced to the poorest station of all.

This pattern continues today. Once we know the true history of Africa, it becomes the duty of all to aid this great continent. Until a new dawn of hope and prosperity rises over Africa, humanity's conscience will lie wounded and bleeding.

In October 1960, at the U.N. Headquarters in New York, I listened to committee and general assembly meetings from the visitors gallery. That year was the Year of Africa, 17 nations having declared their independence. The lively faces of the new African representatives to the United Nations made a deep impression on me. "It's time to build our countries!" their bright eyes seemed to say, reflecting a joy at finally being free of the chains that had bound them so many years.

At the time, I had just become the third president of the Soka Gakkai and begun my long journey toward the dawn of universal human rights. I expressed my overflowing emotions by declaring that the 21st century would be the Century of Africa, by saying that the world must nurture the young sapling of African independence and freedom.

By the Century of Africa I mean a century in which those who have suffered the most will be the happiest, a century in which those who have suffered the greatest humiliation and indignity will walk proud and tall, with their heads held high. There will be new

leading actors in the drama of human history. Those whom the world has oppressed the most will carry the world into the future. Those who have experienced the extremes of human cruelty have a mission to change humanity.

The Century of Africa will be a century of life in which all living beings are together in peace and harmony. The time has come for the entire world to learn from the energy, strength and wisdom of Africa, which never lost its pulse of joy in spite of all that was taken from it.

I am not talking about the patronizing attitude of helping countries that are backward. That is a colonial way of thinking — the idea of bringing civilization to savages. I am talking about living together as members of the same human family. As long as the African people continue to struggle with daunting challenges, then as fellow human beings and global citizens we should share their sufferings.

When President Gouled heard the news of the Kobe Earthquake (January 1995), he immediately made a personal donation of \$10,000 to the relief effort. That is three months' worth of his salary. He could not ignore the suffering of the disaster victims, since Djibouti is also subject to earthquakes. This is the true spirit of the 21st century, in which we share the hardships and the joys of all our fellow human beings.

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