SPEECH AT USIU VC INAUGURATION OF PROFESSOR PAUL ZELEZA

USIU CAMPUS, NAIROBI

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Friends of Kenya and Fellow Kenyans

Ladies and Gentlemen

I have known Professor Paul Tiyambe Zeleza since 1979 when I was a law lecturer at the University of Nairobi and he was doing his PhD research there. Later he joined Kenyatta University. Afterwards we used to meet in Canada when I was doing my doctorate at York University in Toronto and he was teaching at Trent University in Peterborough, an hour’s drive away. After he moved to the United States, we would meet whenever he visited Nairobi.

What has always struck me about Professor Zeleza is his passion for Africa, for Pan-Africanism, for Africa’s progressive transformation. He has been a keen commentator and participant in struggles for the construction of democratic developmental states in his native Malawi and across Africa as well as the enduring struggles of African diasporas for civil rights. These passions are reflected in his research and scholarship, which has always been animated by his insatiable compulsion to interrogate what the great Kenyan scholar Ali Mazrui called the African condition.

In short, Professor Zeleza is the quintessential public intellectual. I must also say he is an organic intellectual on the basis of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of the organic intellectual in *Prison Notebooks*, the intellectual who, through his analyses, his visions, becomes an indispensable auxiliary of social movements. His first publication were works of fiction, beginning with a collection of short stories he wrote at 19. This was later followed by a novel, *Smoldering Charcoal*, published in
Heinemann’s esteemed African Writers Series. The novel offers a searing indictment of postcolonial authoritarianism. It was published in 1992 as Malawi was undergoing democratic transition and is now a set textbook in the country’s secondary schools. While we were both in Canada, in 1994 he published *The Joys of Exile*, his fictional foray into the African diasporic condition with its tales of human alienation and agency.

What is fascinating is the way Professor Zeleza’s creative and academic writing are intersected. He began his work as an economic and labor historian of Kenya, which he later expanded to an economic history of the entire African continent. In 1993 he published his acclaimed *A Modern Economic History of Africa, Vol. 1, The Nineteenth Century*, which won the 1994 Noma Award for the best book published in Africa. His most recent work in this genre is the book he published about a year ago, *Africa’s Resurgence: Domestic, Global and Diaspora Transformations*.

Four other thematic areas have been the focus of Professor Zeleza’s scholarship. One is gender studies. In fact, his first book was on *Labour, Unionization and Women’s Participation in Kenya, 1963-1987*. Since then he has published influential articles and chapters on the subject. In 2003 he was appointed by the United Research Institute for Social Development as one of 9 editors (and of two men) to produce the *Policy Report on Gender and Development: 10 Years after Beijing*.

Another field in which Professor Zeleza has become a renowned authority is intellectual history, in terms of the history of ideas and of knowledge producing institutions including universities. He had always been interested in the first, but he embarked on the second when he became an administrator and wanted to better understand the nature of university institutions. This underscores his commitment to praxis, the intersection of theory and practice. In this field he has published numerous books and essays, including *Manufacturing African Studies*.

I played a more direct role in one of Professor Zeleza’s areas of research interest, namely diaspora studies, when I worked at the Ford Foundation. He was inspired to study the diaspora to understand his own sojourns into the diaspora, and that of immediate family. Above all, he wanted to make sense of the history of African descended peoples in the Caribbean, Canada, and the US where he spent 27 years teaching. In 2005, the Ford Foundation office in Nairobi gave him a grant which took him to 16 countries in South and North America, Europe and Asia and resulted in his ground-breaking study, *In Search of African Diaspora: Testimonies and Encounters* published in 2012.

As always, he sought to turn his research into practice. In 2011-2012 he undertook a project on the African academic diaspora for the Carnegie Corporation of New York that led to the establishment of the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program. Since 2013 the program has sponsored nearly 170 African born academics in the U. S. and Canada to work with dozens of universities in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. The program is now housed at USIU. It is being scaled up into the 10/10 program, to bring 1,000 diaspora academics every year for up to ten years from anywhere in the world to work with African universities.
For me, one of the most impressive aspects of Professor Zeleza’s work is on human rights. I recall a conference he organized in 1999 at the University of Illinois that brought dozens of leading legal scholars and activists from across the continent including Kenya (Makau Mutua, Kivutha Kibwana, Alamni Mazrui, and myself). Out of it came the influential book, *Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Development in Africa*, one of his many publications on the subject.

Altogether, Professor Zeleza has published more than 300 articles, chapters, and essays and authored or edited 27 books. He has presented nearly 250 keynote addresses, papers, and public lectures at leading universities and international conferences in 31 countries and served on more than two dozen editorial boards.

He also an accomplished administrator. Prior to joining USIA, he was Vice President of Academic Affairs at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. Previously he was Dean of the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts at Loyola Marymount University in California. He also served as head of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Director of the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In 2006 he was appointed Honorary Professor at the University of Cape Town, and in 2015 he was a fellow at Harvard University. He is a past president of the U.S. African Studies Association. In July 2013, he was recognized in *The New York Times* as one of 43 Great Immigrants in the United States. In May 2015 he was awarded Doctor of Laws by Dalhousie University in Canada.

He has told me how happy he is to be back in Kenya, to contribute to development of higher education on the continent. In a fortuitous turn of fate last year he was commissioned to write the Framing Paper for the 1st *African Higher Education Summit: Revitalizing Higher Education for Africa’s Future*. His dear wife, Professor Cassandra Veney, is equally thrilled to be back on the continent of her ancestors.
My Comrade and brother, Karibu USIU, Karibu Kenya, Karibu nyumbani!

Willy Mutunga
Chief Justice & President, Supreme Court
Republic of Kenya