

## Development in Africa and the Diaspora: Democracy as Performed Activity in the Making of a Post-Modern World

By: Omar Ali

[Ali, Omar](#). "Development in Africa and the Diaspora: Democracy as Performed Activity in the Making of a Post-Modern World," *Partners for Africa* (August 2009).

**Made available courtesy of Partners for Africa:**

[http://www.pfa-partnersforafrica.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=224&Itemid=147](http://www.pfa-partnersforafrica.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=224&Itemid=147)

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from the Partners for Africa. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.\*\*\***

Some twenty years ago I began a journey that has led me to becoming a scholar of Africa and the Diaspora (the histories of men and women of African descent in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds), focusing on issues of democracy and development. I started under the mentorship of the Ghanaian anthropologist Maxwell Owusu at the University of Michigan, continued my studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and completed my doctorate in history at Columbia University.

I had been searching for an understanding of the making of the modern world, one in which Africa was central—economically (in terms of human and material resources), culturally (in the creation, dissemination, and transformation of cultures), and philosophically (with concepts of freedom ultimately resting on the actualities of slavery). As the late Guyanese scholar Walter Rodney described in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, economic development (defined here as maximizing capital accumulation), through increasingly centralized political authority, came to dominate over human development (the creation of environments where our species' creative capacity for emotional, intellectual, and artistic growth is maximized). The results have landed us in a situation where we—as a species—have made extraordinary strides in science and technology, and produced massive amounts of wealth, yet poverty and underdevelopment characterize most of our world's population.

Over the years I have also worked with and supported a number of community-based programs to help make a new (and to my thinking, better) kind of world—a post-modern world, where human development, not material profits, is the driving force of society. For over two decades, two organizations—the All Stars Project ([www.allstarsproject.org](http://www.allstarsproject.org)) and the East Side Institute ([www.eastsideinstitute.org](http://www.eastsideinstitute.org)) have been practicing and training community organizers in an innovative cultural approach to human development based on the activity of performance (whether on a stage or in everyday settings).

Their performance-based approach to development has included tens of thousands of African Americans and is now working with several partners in Africa: Hope for Youth, led by Peter Nsubuga in Uganda, the children's AIDS program Community Focus Group, led by the poet and storyteller Pamela Ateka in Kenya, and Democracy Begins in Conversation, led by Betsi Pendry in South Africa.

Each of these local organizers were trained through the East Side Institute's international program under the direction of Dr. Lois Holzman, a pioneer in the area of human development. Her work and those of Nsubuga, Ateka, and Pendry, among others, forms part of a growing international movement of healthcare professionals, scholars, youth educators, and artists seeking to use performance to reinitiate and advance human development.

Democracy Begins in Conversation is a fine example of the performance-based approach being practiced in Africa. The program brings together young people from different townships (which mean different languages,

cultures, ethnicities, and religions) to “learn about and practice the art of creating constitutional and democratic environments.” They work in partnership with the new Constitutional Court, and have as some of their invited “conversationalists” judges, political leaders, artists, and religious leaders who co-create dialogues with the young people.

Most recently, the program has been investigating democracy as a “cultural process.” It is now extending its work to Zimbabwe youth refugees, and developing a project that will bring together young people from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Rwanda—countries that have struggled with the challenges of political democracies faltering or failing and what can be done to rebuild them.

Democracy as performed activity, I believe, is a critical part of not only rebuilding communities and nations, but the making (and re-making) of a more humane and developmental world. My search for an understanding of the making of the modern world continues, as does my support for efforts to take our collective creativity to make the world anew.

For many in the Diaspora, reconnecting to Africa is about reflecting on one’s roots and strengthening one’s historical identity. I am a historian and relish the richness of “the past.” However, equally important (developmentally) as it is to look to the past, is to move forward by using the past to create new conversations and new ways of being in the world. This is a legacy we can pass on to future generations in Africa and the Diaspora.