THE PAN-AFRICAN IDEAL UNDER A NEW LENS: THABO MBEKI'S CONTRIBUTION

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to assess the important evolution undergone by the pan-African ideology. It argues that from its inception the ideal was marked by moral values and political ambitions that were grounded on the desire to reverse the dominant views of African inferiority. This has not resolved the identity and racial connotations that have provoked the proliferation of views about what pan-Africanism really means. Yet pan-Africanism has become the most powerful magnet for generations, and remains the most solid reference for the construction of an integrated Africa. The last 10 years have witnessed large-scale affirmation of a particular brand of the pan-African ideology. Thabo Mbeki is one of the most significant architects of this development.

1. The beginnings

The appeal of pan-Africanism remains intact in the continent. In fact, since the turn of the century a wave of good news — from fewer wars to higher economic growth — has renewed interest in the ideal that has inspired generations of leaders and activists throughout Africa and its diaspora.

The genesis of pan-Africanism can be found in the struggle for equal rights, after the official end of the slave trade and, later, the banning of slavery in most of the Western world. Although pockets of this practice remained long into the 19th century, and equivalent forms of oppression have survived right up to the present, the shift towards equality

of rights became the most prominent manifestation of the resolve of people of African descent to reverse the notions of African inferiority. The historical underpinnings of a discriminatory attitude towards Africa, and blacks in particular, are quite ancient. It has influenced a distorted view of the human universal construct and is responsible for some of the most abominable behaviour witnessed by humanity.

Groups of intellectuals which emerged with the spread of freed slaves started quite early to mobilise their kin to fight discrimination and enter the race for civil rights. This is the same movement that in most colonies started what one could call proto-nationalism. It was a moment when the political landscape was not yet ready for the articulated proposals that were later transformed into national liberation struggles in most of the colonised world, in Africa, Asia and Latin America. That would become the main form of struggle only after the Second World War.

In the African diaspora, public intellectuals of the early 20th century were the interpreters of a desire for a more developed and structured movement to give all Africans pride and honour. In the absence of a geo-locator of their origins, they constructed an ideal Africa, psychologically and politically. They saw the need for the union of all Africans around a single integrated struggle against all forms of discrimination. There was no immediate political ambition of independence, but the elements of such a purpose and goal were easily identifiable in the statements of these progenitors of a pan-African cause. Africans should remember the debt they have to these precursors, originally from the Caribbean and the United States (US).

Three names from the diaspora are referenced by most: W E B DuBois, Marcus Garvey and Aimé Césaire. Each would be linked to a particular brand of the pan-African ideal. All were active in politics, members of the established political parties of their countries, and all three were involved in the construction of pan-African or writers' and intellectuals' movements and congresses. Their names are behind sometimes more, sometimes less radical views of what African unity and its links to the diaspora meant.

Another interesting element to retain from the genesis of pan-Africanism is the aesthetic concern to identify the role of blackness and define an African identity to counter the discriminatory views of Africa dating from Hegel's famous proclamation that Africans had no history, or the claim found in schoolbooks until quite recently that history starts

with the written word, with the accompanying myth that the written word was absent from Africa.

Without taking the time for a longer incursion into the history of the genesis of pan-Africanism, it is fair to consider its official birth as dating from the Manchester Congress of 1945. Obviously this was an important year. Before the end of the Second World War, most pan-African activities actually took place in Europe and to a lesser extent the US. From the communist influences of the 1930s to the agitation of students' associations in London, Paris and Lisbon, the action was geographically far from the African continent. A remarkable exception was the African National Congress (ANC), founded in South Africa in 1912, the oldest African political party. While the ANC was closely following developments abroad, in its first decades the level of its exposure to outside ideas was minimal, networking then not being easy. The ANC's focus was more on the struggle against the most sophisticated institutional architecture of discrimination: *apartheid*, the ideology that became synonymous with racial separation in the contemporary world.

2. Back home

More than anyone else, Kwame Nkrumah is the symbol of the repatriation of pan-Africanism to mother Africa. His own political career and personal trajectory personifies the shift from affirming rights to seeking independence. Although his home country, Ghana, became independent only in 1957, his leadership was already exercised during the transition to indirect rule. From the time of his studies abroad he was closely involved in the independence movements. It is curious to note that in his quest for the integration of Africans across the board, he would eventually welcome back home in Accra some of the forefathers of pan-Africanism from the diaspora.

Nkrumah was much influenced by a Marxist reading of reality. His vigour and enthusiasm betrayed a less grounded knowledge of socio-economic reality. His classic views of the Marxist class struggle lacked the more comprehensive understanding and sophistication of the likes of Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral. Nevertheless, he designed the most ambitious agenda for pan-Africanism.

Although some North African countries were already independent at the time of Ghana's independence, and Egypt's Nasser and Tunisia's Bourguiba, together with Morocco's Mohamed V, were at the forefront

of a new definition of nationalism, it was Nkrumah who launched the most serious political and diplomatic effort for the establishment of a continent-wide organisation.

Soon independent African countries became divided into groups, each with a different reading of what should have been the nature of the relationship with the external Powers. The best-known groupings of the time were obviously the more radical Casablanca group and the softer Monrovia Group. In fact, there were many others such as the Lagos Chart, the Conakry Declaration, the Brazzaville group and other loose configurations, all fighting for visibility. Here the role of Emperor Haile Selassie and Ethiopia, the only land not colonised in the entire continent, deserves to be fully recognised. It was the skill of the Emperor that allowed for a conciliatory process that brought African leaders under one tent. The establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 had many fathers — and mothers — and indeed many intermediate midwives. The declaration that was eventually adopted was a compromise, far from the original proposal made by the Emperor. But the significance of that 25th May is to be found rather in the agreement reached about the key objectives for total political liberation of the continent, solidarity and integration, all of which came straight from the common body of pan-African ideology.

3. OAU's record

Despite the OAU's mixed record, the organisation did deliver on its most important objective with remarkable efficiency. It was to no small degree thanks to the Liberation Committee — the OAU's most important body — that the continent kept its focus on the desire for total liberation from colonialism and racism, including getting rid of the *apartheid* regime.

Many forms of solidarity can be traced to the OAU's record, including some which are less fashionable because they were proposed by African strongmen. They offer testimony of the appeal of pan-African ideology at the national, subregional and regional levels. Pan-Africanism remained a critical factor of identity for political figures across the continent.

Integration was also attempted in many forms, including of course Nkrumah's own push for Ghana to combine with Guinea and Mali, Nyerere's successful integration of Tanganyika with Zanzibar, and Amílcar

Cabral's movement for the simultaneous liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (Lopes 2013). In the area of integration one can mention the successful economic model of Côte d'Ivoire, based on demographic integration, or Nasser's Arab nationalist ideology. A curious historical point though, in this regard, is the Western Sahara controversy going back to the birth of the OAU.

Most acknowledge that the OAU's democratic credentials were questionable, and its clear stance in international politics did not extend to a meaningful development agenda. Here lies the difference between Africa and, say, Asia. In turn this difference serves to suggest that perhaps the pan-African ideology did not necessarily work for the betterment of Africa, from a development point of view, given its overemphasis on the lowest common denominators, which did not enhance Africa's voice internationally. It may have been too focused on talking of imperialist threats and neocolonialism to do justice to the intricacies of development. The issues of true African identity became synonymous with whether one was or was not a neocolonialist lackey. The identity issue ended up on the wrong side of the spectrum: proclamations of pan-African commitment were used for external consumption and the benefit of the elites, which in some cases brutally suppressed diversity and blocked regional mobility.

4. Ready for the turnaround

The process that led to the establishment of the African Union (AU), the successor of the OAU, represents a very important step in the history of pan-Africanism. Many of the victories being celebrated today in Africa, gathered under the umbrella title of a Renaissance, are a true realisation of the reflections, political process and renewed ambition embodied by the AU's birth 11 years ago.

Many factors contributed to create a new moment for Africa. None was more important than the end of the *apartheid* regime and the historic accession of Nelson Mandela to the presidency of South Africa. It coincided with a new moment in international relations: the end of the Cold War, the time of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the fourth big wave of independence (with the dismantling of the USSR and Yugoslavia), the failure of a prescribed universal approach to development ideology, the ascendance of new emerging engines of growth in the South and the erosion of traditional forms of multilateralism.

In the African context the last two decades of the 20th century, the so-called lost decades, were marked by some of the worst forms of interference since the independence era, made possible by colossal debt, the proliferation of conflicts and civil wars and the rapid decline in the political legitimacy of authoritarian states, which were struggling with a social pressure cooker and external calls for democratisation. Structural adjustment programmes ruled the day in the 1980s and 1990s. Africans, lacking their own interpretation of priorities and development objectives, found themselves defenceless.

It is important to remember that the key discussion in the 1990s was about 'good governance', with strong insistence that aid should go only to deserving countries with a proven record of good performance. This discussion, led by World Bank's Paul Collier, and David Dollar influenced the nature of the compact suggested at the first International Conference on Finance for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002, two years after the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit. The compact eventually approved called for developing countries to commit to good governance against an increase in aid for the attainment of internationally agreed development goals.

5. Mbeki's moment

It is critical to assess what factors made the African moment possible, and how Africa responded to a dramatic change in the international context at the turn of the century. Many authors have reflected on the remarkable life of South Africa's second black President (most notably Gevisser 2009). Son of a stalwart of the liberation struggle, Thabo Mbeki was educated to follow the example of his father Govan from an early age. He was prepared by the ANC to be more than a prodigal son. His was a life dedicated to the movement. This journey is exemplary, and deserves a proper place in the description of Thabo Mbeki's contribution to pan-Africanism. This essay will concentrate, however, on the aspects that helped shape the AU and the reinterpretation of pan-Africanism under the umbrella of an African Renaissance.

Biographers and analysts do not seem to agree on the exact origin of the African Renaissance idea. Some attribute it to President Mandela in a speech made during his visit to Tunis after he became President in 1994, whereas others believe it was first really articulated in the US when Thabo Mbeki addressed the Corporate Council on

Africa in Chantilly in April 1997. This is not an important point, but the content given to the African Renaissance is.

It is true that Thabo Mbeki was not the inventor of the desire for a reversal in the way Africa was treated and dealt with the rest of the world. It is a demonstration of humility to attribute this to an ANC policy, as many do. However, that is neither here nor there. The real content given to the African Renaissance idea was the result of a number of initiatives and concrete processes that took place during Thabo Mbeki's presidency. In fact, if one accepts that the Renaissance principles were a collective articulation of the ANC's ideas, one can say the same for most of the progressive ideas emanating from other corners of Africa. In other words, what is embedded in the idea of an African renaissance is pan-Africanism in its purest formulation.

After the Chantilly address Mbeki met a diverse audience on 28 and 29 September 1998 in Johannesburg, at the occasion of launching an African Renaissance Institute. It was then that he elaborated on what was meant by an African Renaissance. "The main objectives of the meeting in Johannesburg [were] to define 'who we are and where we are going in the global community, and to formulate practical strategies and solutions for future action that would benefit the African masses'" (Cossa 2009: 1).

Mbeki's forceful definition of the African Renaissance marked the South African's Africa policy. In turn the South African influence on the continent grew in a significant way. Indeed, it was Thabo Mbeki who led the effort to reinterpret Africa's place in the world at the turn of the century. Other important figures included Presidents Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Abdoulaye Wade and Muammar Gaddafi. Between their different blueprints for the new Africa, one is reminded of the divide between the Monrovia and Casablanca groups, one group wanting a pragmatic approach for a better continental institutional structure more devoted to development, while the other promoted full integration with a radical blueprint. The former was led by Bouteflika and Wade, and the latter by Gaddafi, who wanted a United States of Africa.

Thabo Mbeki ended up playing the same role as Emperor Haile Selassie in 1963: combining reconciliation and sometimes stealth to push for the final configuration of the AU and its various subsidiary organs, such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the Africa Peer Review Mechanism. This is probably not the way Thabo Mbeki sees his role. His closest advisers of the time prefer to

compare his role to Nkrumah's ambitions for the continent. This is interesting, given the fact that the two men ended up having very similar careers and that both put their mark on the birth of the most important continental organisations through their leadership and drive. But one should not be carried away by these comparisons. Not only did they operate in different historical moments, with Nkrumah leading the first sub-Saharan country to be liberated from colonial rule while Mbeki was in the opposite situation, leading the last, but they also had to deal with very different international contexts. Mbeki's times were marked by a turnaround in African fortunes that he actually helped to reinforce.

The debates that led to the elaborate design of the AU were mostly carried out around Mbeki, with most other leaders left to react. The early alliance with President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia was fundamental in enabling Mbeki to influence the process. Many other allies joined later. Unexpectedly, some of the leaders who were most vocal in other circumstances did not play as significant a role in the shaping of the AU structures as might have been expected, probably because they underestimated the scope of the change to come, or were not equipped for such a level of detail.

Mbeki's team was very eager to learn from existing institutions that were then associated with success, such as the European Union (EU). Many of the characteristics of the AU mimic those of the EU. The strong emphasis on economic development has given content to the African Renaissance, contrasting it with previous shortcomings of the OAU. The creation of the African Peer Review Mechanism responds directly to the demand made at Monterrey, reinforcing the decisions taken at the G8 summit in Okinawa in 2000, for good governance to be delivered by recipients in exchange for more aid. The mechanism imitates the principles applied by the OECD Development Assistance Committee in peer-reviewing the use of official development assistance, even though it expands the concept considerably. Okinawa was a big diplomatic victory for Mbeki, since it was as a result of his negotiations that Africa had an official strategy and representation in the meeting for the first time.

NEPAD is a successful attempt to redefine the famous Lagos Plan of Action, Africa's own internal blueprint, designed with strong intellectual leadership from the Economic Commission for Africa's former Executive Secretary, Adebayo Adedeji. NEPAD benefited immensely

from Thabo Mbeki's negotiating skills. This was important in order to respond to the quest for ownership in the partnerships emerging after the Monterrey Consensus. Africa had its new blueprint endorsed by the UN, the G8 and other international bodies.

The most important innovation arising from the AU was an effective role in conflict prevention, mediation and resolution and the redefinition of Africa's involvement in security issues. South Africa and its allies on the continent managed to completely change the interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity in dealing with conflicts. Today, despite remaining weaknesses, it is inconceivable to envisage dealing with an African conflict without taking into account the views and decisions of Africa's own Peace and Security Council. This does not mean such views prevail, but Africa's voice has become more strident. Thabo Mbeki himself has devoted most of his time since leaving the presidency to helping Africa resolve its remaining conflicts. This keen interest in African solutions for African problems began during his presidency, when he claimed an African if not South African role in resolving situations such as those in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

The establishment of the Pan-African Parliament, and the wish to create an African Court of Justice, an African Monetary Fund and a Pan-African University, as well as other such structures, point in the direction of dotting the continent with an institutional architecture based on a continental, rather than federalist, model, rightly envisaged by Mbeki.

6. Is it an African Renaissance?

The term Renaissance is normally associated with a European historical period marked by one of the most profound reconfigurations of world power. Choosing the symbolism of this term to justify renewed African agency is quite interesting. Although the European Renaissance is the subject of controversy among historians, the myth has become quite entrenched.

To ascertain what may have been in Mbeki's mind, one can go back to the Harlem Renaissance movement that influenced black agency in the US, and included some of the founders of pan-Africanism. One might also mention Cheikh Anta Diop's article "When will we be able to speak of an African Renaissance?", originally published in 1948

(Diop 2000).

It is difficult to know Thabo Mbeki's exact motivations. Analysts of his work are split between deeper personal reasons and adherence to a political collective ideology. Probably both played a role. What seems clear is that the impetus for using the term did not come from a wish to claim an African role in the European Renaissance. A recent exhibition organised by the Curator of Renaissance and Baroque Art at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Joaneath Spicer, claims that Renaissance artists and writers were fascinated by Africa, and that Africa influenced them a great deal. The exhibition, subsequently shown at the Princeton University Art Museum, has for its finale a gigantic portrait of Saint Benedict, a son of Ethiopian slaves, venerated in all Italy and also the patron saint of African-American Catholics (The Economist 2013). He is not the only marker of African influence in Europe, which was felt by politicians, traders and writers. One remembers the influence of Alexandre Dumas in France, Alexander Pushkin in Russia or the like in the formation of those countries' literary traditions. These examples show the importance of not overlooking terminology in its association with particular historiographic traditions. It would have been possible to link Africa and renaissance in a completely different way.

Mbeki's Renaissance is very political and militant. It is about asserting Africa's role in the world, about social constructs as much as institutions that should be strong enough to be tested by time. It is quite pragmatic in a sense. For that purpose, lessons from past endeavours with similar objectives had to be thoroughly assessed.

Mbeki's Renaissance views are categorised by Maloka (2000) as globalist. The political and economic renewal of Africa and the transformation of the global order are the centrepiece. Maloka identifies two additional perspectives, less important in his opinion, to characterise Mbeki's views. The pan-African perspective, which he attributes to an interpretation by Chris Landsberg and Francis Kornegay, could be described as a Pax Pretoriana thinly disguising a Pax Africana (African solutions for African problems, but in fact led by South Africa). The final perspective is reminiscent of the "return to roots" movement experienced over decades by different layers of pan-African leaders. This debate is very much South African, almost like a journey of discovery and positioning in relation to the rest of the continent (Maloka 2000).

Mbeki's globalist views were forged during a long period of exile, when his inquisitive nature had ample time to relate to the pan-African

debates outside South Africa. In his May 1996 "I am an African" speech, on the occasion of the adoption of South Africa's new Constitution, a speech amply quoted because of its significance, his references range across the entire continent (Mbeki 1996).

Mbeki is convinced there are new forms of imperialism that continue to deny Africa's rightful place in world affairs. In order to respond to this challenge, he believes that inertia and what he calls "cold war Africa" have to be overcome. On the occasion of the celebration marking 50 years of continent-wide organisations, the OAU and the AU, Mbeki circulated a text entitled "Africa my beginning, Africa my ending" (Mbeki 2013). It is a confirmation that this unique persona intends to pursue what he helped shape, the African Renaissance.

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