

# Africanism or Continentalism; Unity of People or Geographical Unity

## Introduction

Our attention has been drawn to the fact that during the last three months, some parties have set up a rival process towards an 8<sup>th</sup> Pan-African Congress. This has been done despite the fact that our process started a few years ago. Indeed, we have already had two preparatory committee meetings.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Preparatory Committee Meeting Towards the 8<sup>th</sup> PAC took place at the Garden Court, Sandton, in Johannesburg from the 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> January 2010. Present were; Prof. Dani Wadada Nabudere, Prof. Mammo Muchie, Dr. Simphiwe Sesanti, Dr. Yvonne King, Adv. Siphon Mantula, Mr. Andile Mngxitama, Ms. Alyxandra Gomes Nunes, Adv. Sabelo Sibanda, Mr. Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, Ms. Zandi Radebe, Adv. Bankie Bankie, Dr. Peter Adwok Nyaba, Prof. Kenneth Simmons, Gen. Olasehinde Ishola Williams and Prof. Kwesi Kwaa Prah.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 8<sup>th</sup> Pan African Congress was held at the Sandton Convention Centre and Garden Court, Johannesburg on the 31 August to September 02, 2012. Present were; Prof. Sassongo Silue, Adv. Bankie Bankie, Ms. Alyxandra Gomes Nunes, Prof. Mammo Muchie, Mr Adu Amankwah, Mr. Anthony Kalu, Dr. Jahlani Niaah, Gen. Ishola Williams, Prof. Carol Boyce Davies, Dr. Mcebisi Ndletyana, Dr. Simphiwe Sesanti and Prof. Kwesi Kwaa Prah. Prof. Dani Wadada Nabudere was deceased.

It is from the outset important to explain that in our perception the difference between the two efforts is ideological. They indeed represent two profoundly divergent understandings of the Pan-African agenda and methodological prerequisites for the achievement of a renaissance and effective unity. The contestation is healthy because it brings out into the open issues which have remained unresolved for a half-century and more. If we do not resolve or at least lay bare these disputes we will continue to gyrate in inconsequential philosophical orbits.

In as far as contemporary ideas of Pan-Africanism, or African advancement and unity are concerned it may not be an exaggeration to say that a conflict of fundamental ideas is raging at the heart of the movement about how to move forward from where we are now and what set of ideas will successfully take us forward. What should be the constituent ingredients of our unity? What are the building blocks for unity? Is it in the first instance, a continent we want to unite or people; is it Africa or Africans who wish to be united? In the minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Preparatory Meeting we had noted that; “the key principle underlying the work ahead is *Non-Continentalism*, in other words, Africanism”. Asante has called it Afrocentricity.

## Africanism versus Continentalism

In our concept note (12<sup>th</sup> October 2012) we had pointed out that;

Two contending and contrastive notions of unity are conceptually on offer today. There is the *continentalist* argument which starts with the geographical unity of Africa as the basis of the project. This approach does not contend with the fact that the Arab north of the continent has another aspiration, a Pan-Arab idea sometimes described as *el watan el arabi* (the unity of the Arab nation/homeland) whose current expression is the League of Arab States (The Arab League). The *continentalist* approach implicationally excludes the African diaspora. The other formula, which is historically and culturally more meaningful, views the task not primarily as the unity of the African continent, but rather as the unity of African people; Africans as historically and culturally-derived and related people who regard themselves as Africans. This formulation includes the African diaspora. If Africans unite, most of the continent will unite, but we must democratically coexist with the various non-African minorities who live with us as citizens.

The continentalists treat the maximum architecture of the idea as a regional arrangement or geographical forum; an *entente* of all the states on the African continent; a conceptually facile and intellectually lazy formulation which conceives the idea as an assemblage of all the states that there are today on the African continent; a “united states of Africa” conceptually based on a supposed hammering together of the neocolonial legacy we are mired in. This is the most prevalent version of the idea. Lacking in vision, it conceptually builds with the brickwork of the current neocolonial states of Africa. In other words, it assumes and accepts the post-colonial state as a credible and viable unit for social reconstruction for the near and distant future; it is implicitly unmindful of the inherent anti-unificatory weaknesses of the neocolonial order and cultivates a millenarian fantasy that we are *en route* to development. This is the continentalist approach to African unity. Such definitions leave little space for the African Diaspora, the historical source of our movement. They end up categorizing as Africans a whole range of non-Africans, who do not call themselves Africans and have no wish to be so regarded. Pan-Africanism has always been directly related, indeed, inspired by the African Diaspora. This is why it is a Global African project.

The continentalist view of unity is based on a rudimentary geographical logic. It has little or no consideration for the historical, cultural, political or social reasoning. At its basic and most sub-unitary level it assumes or suggests that everybody born on the continent is an African. Being African is crudely equated with citizenship. The fact that citizens of a country can be of different nationalities or nations is overlooked or not appreciated. Thus, the reality of our multicultural world is conceptually obscured and undermined. Multiculturalism is the tolerance of diversity; better still, the celebration of diversity, it is very much an ideal of our times. As a universally emancipatory ideal it also translates as respect for cultural difference in an equalitarian world.

Furthermore, the continentalist argument posits that, Africans are aggregated into socio-political units called nations. These so-called nations are in reality the bits and pieces of Africa’s demography and geography arbitrarily demarcated and chopped up by imperial European powers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and largely maintained or reconstructed in the subsequent six decades. In other words, the continentalist position regards us as mere creatures of the colonial imagination. The partitioning of Africa was done solely in pursuit of the perceived

interests of the colonial powers. These states which are called nations therefore have no autonomous histories as entities beyond a hundred years and even in the exceptional cases of Ethiopia and Liberia their territorial boundaries were not irrevocably fixed with international understanding until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the post-independence era an intellectual industry has arisen which writes *ersatz* histories that justify the existence of these so-called nations. Effectively, these narratives opportunistically attempt to historically root these states to the beginning of time. This sort of calculated intellectual adventurism legitimizes and lends credibility to the inherited neocolonial artifice of Western imperialism and its fragmentation of both people and history.

Under colonial rule and educational practice, the periodization of African history was formulated to acknowledge colonial power and the centrality of colonialism by marking the whole of African history in terms of; precolonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. This periodization underlines the fact that the African's existence as a historical product can be only understood as an extension of Western history. This legitimizes the usurpation of the African's historical independence and autonomy. The precolonial period has little structure and retreats into the vastness of African history; over 90 percent of the history of *Homo sapiens*. In this periodization scheme, by implication, the most important thing that has happened to Africans in our 100,000 years of history is the colonial interlude of less than a hundred years. When we as Africans and historians persist in the use of this periodization scheme, we endorse our subject status as neocolonial creatures and peddle scholarship which facilitates the holding of Africans in thralldom.

Identities have been created on the basis of these neo-colonial states which undermine and deny the overwhelming relevance of our longer and deeper identities. The significance of these latter are minimized and dismissed from important present-day considerations, but in everyday life they continue to criss-cross and affect our everyday lives. The late Chief Lintswe of the Bakgatla in Mochudi, Botswana, in the 1970s, had historically subjects and relatives in South Africa. He incessantly complained about needing a passport to visit them under trying circumstances during some of the most pernicious years of Apartheid rule in South Africa. In Zambia, political opponents of Kenneth Kaunda alleged that his parents were from Malawi and was therefore unsuitable for leadership of the country. Alhassan Ouattarra was considered by some to be a non-Ivorian because although he was born in the Ivory Coast his parents were immigrants who had come to the Ivory Coast at a time when the Ivory Coast was not administered or considered to be separate from the rest of French colonial West Africa. In 1969, the Busia administration in Ghana put out as undesirable aliens 200,000 other West Africans from the country; this included thousands who had been born in Ghana and knew no other home elsewhere. The Nigerian government took a similar route of mass expulsions of other Africans in 1983 and 1985. About 2.5 million people were in total victims of these expulsions. Other expulsions in Africa involving smaller numbers have in our post-colonial history taken place.

The Fula, Mandeng and Luo are some of the largest ethno-cultural groups in Africa but are minorities everywhere they are because of the ethno-culturally fragmenting nature of the colonial borders. Fula are to be found in nineteen countries, Mandeng in twelve, and Luo-related

speakers in six. Nguni-speakers and Sotho/Tswana speakers are to be found six countries, in each instance, in Southern Africa. The Bakongo of the Lower Congo are split in three countries. The Somali were thrown in and between five borders, etc, etc. The cutting up to pieces of African ethnic formations diminished the significance of these groups in all countries. The post-colonial state was and is regarded as sacrosanct; defying all expressions of disunity. All manifestations of sub-unitary affiliations and identities are treated as anathema and dismissed as tribalism when in fact these attributes are far older than the so-called unitary state. Instead of giving democratic expression and providing some political space to age-long ethno-cultural affiliations, they are stamped underfoot as decrepit and recessive attributes at the altar of the unitary state. What we notice is that, despite the effort put into sweeping under the carpet expressions of ethno-cultural affinities, ever so often, these affinities reassert their continued vitality in the life of the society and the social psychology of people. Because of the strength and potency of these ethno-cultural solidarities they are easily manipulated by politicians to mobilize constituencies and play off rivals in intra-elitist feuds.

Thus, the African's political and state identity, as is currently understood, created by the colonial powers, has been used to facilitate intolerance, political contestation and fissures between Africans by dominant post-colonial elites. Xenophobic tendencies directed against other African citizens, oftentimes pursued with extraordinary fiendishness and venality, have arisen in different parts of Africa at different points in our post-colonial history. Ironically, inter-territorially Africans moved more easily under colonial rule than in the post-colonial era.

The ethno-cultural character and related historical identities were grievously distorted under colonialism. The African was made to believe that his/her religion and ritual were marks of heathenism and the work of the devil; that our languages were irredeemably barbarous and customs savage. Between the missionary and the colonial administrator this much was achieved. Colonialism violently defiled the place of the African in history. It appropriated the history of the African and attempted to make the African a mere adjunct of Western history and relegated to the margins of global history. This separation of the African from his/her history is strategically ethnocidal.

If the West tore the African nationality apart, Arab denationalizing cultural and political hegemony predates this by a millennium. Arab slavery of Africans; the assimilation or Arabization of Africans which commenced in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. has had in those areas where Arab power and influence has been asserted, equally deleterious effects. Historically, wherever consistent and persistent assimilation takes place, it goes on hand-in-hand with dominance and hegemony over the assimilated peoples. In the Afro-Arab borderlands, Africans have lost or are losing their languages at a rapid pace. African cultures have been treated as inferior and beyond the pale. Sometimes war has been used as an instrument in tandem with Arabization. It is interesting to note that, in KiSwahili the word for civilization is *istaarabu* (becoming Arab - Arabization). *Mwarabu wangu* (my Arab) which like *mzungu wangu* (my European) or the Akan equivalent *mi bronni* (my whiteman) are all references to a superior.

The Arab people have a great and laudable aspiration to be united. This aspiration is longstanding. Arab nationalism finds expression in Pan-Arabism and Ba'athism (Arab Renaissance Party/Movement). They call themselves the Arab nation (*el watan el arabi*). This notion includes what they call 'the homeland' meaning all the territories of the Arab world from the Arabian Gulf to Morocco. The current political expression of this ideal of Arab unity is the League of Arab States or the Arab League. Since 1945, it has stood for collective Arab interests and although it has innumerable weaknesses it continues to function as the existing political vehicle of Arab nationalism. For the Arab states of North Africa the Arab League is more important to them than the African Union. All democrats and freedom-loving peoples round the world can have little or nothing against the wish of Arabs to unite as a people, if this is pursued democratically and without prejudice to other people. Indeed, many would want the Arabs to make progress in their effort to achieve unity, but obviously they would need to clear up the baggage of archaic, feudalistic, backward dynastic regimes and tyrannies which are currently suffocating civic and social life in the Arab world. But equally well we must want the same for us Africans. Again democrats and freedom-loving people across the globe would recognize it as being in the universal interest for Arab and African civilizations to maintain a continuous dialogue, but this can be achieved only through an acknowledgement of the past, equality, mutual respect and anti-hegemonism.

Our confusion about identity is manifested in other forms, for some, an African is any person, "who is committed to Africa", and African unity is for them the unity of the African continent. The question is what does this commitment amount to? How is it to be measured? Which of the major peoples of this globe defines its national constituency on the basis of "commitment"? Some have unhelpfully suggested that the litmus test for an African is "struggle against domination and exploitation". We even sometimes stretch the nomenclature of African to include people who persistently with conviction insist that they are not Africans, people who are citizens of African countries but who are culturally and nationally non-African. Thus we insist on describing the Arabs of North Africa, as Africans, when in fact they themselves do not accept the designation. All this points to the fact that our sense of identity as Africans is weak. This is why we are in this confusion. We need always to remember that, *if everybody is an African, then nobody is an African.*

### **Disuniting Africans**

The post-colonial state was crafted to inhibit unity. This truth is lost on some of us. Nothing in its character relates to the organic nature of Africans as historical and cultural products. African independence was indeed more handed-down "at his master's pleasure" than won through hard struggle. Obviously, there were cases and areas in which Africans spent a lot of blood and sacrifice to achieve colonial freedom. But by and large, independence on this continent was more self-servingly dispensed by the colonizer than attained through the seizure of freedom on our own terms. Take for example what happened to the French West African empire.

By 1956 France had conceded independence to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, Tunisia and Morocco and by the end of 1960 to all of her West African colonies. However, despite his supervision and retreat from classical colonialism, President de Gaulle's initial strategy was to

preserve and protect the political and economic relationship between France and her colonial empire. This was pursued on two tracks. Firstly, de Gaulle sought a commitment in the treaty forming the EU (then the EEC) for an association of France's colonies to the EU itself. On the other hand, with political deftness de Gaulle offered a new political relationship to the colonies, based on the notion of "association" within the French Community. The creation of the French Community involved a "balkanization" (fragmentation) of the African territories into self-administering areas, but with considerable French power over their state institutions and policy-making. The matter was tested through a vote in 1958 on whether to join or stay out of the French Community. In the event only Guinea, under Sékou Touré, forthrightly voted against French intentions and became independent. Swift and punitive French withdrawal which occurred within three days, included the removal of all personnel, infrastructure and machinery down to light bulbs and telephone sets. Subsequently, in 1960 Mali was granted independence and a continuing relationship with France as an "associate". This opened the way for further independence demands. By the end of 1960, all 13 states of the Community were independent in a fast-tracked transfer of political power. However, while de Gaulle's initial attempt to maintain direct colonial relations had failed, by 1960, the other strategy, that of association to the European Community in 1957 was sustained; a neocolonial order was established with French troops guarding the dispensation. In sum, de Gaulle's strategy chopped up a huge chunk of empire which had previously been treated as one into helpless neocolonial fragments, independent only in name.

The result of the balkanization of Africa and the process which brought it into being also narrowed the depth and scope, both geographically and conceptually, of the African nationalist project and agenda. African nationalism as a manifestation of African assertiveness and political awakening in the era of colonialism ended up being organizationally boxed into the specific colonial territories and borders as determined by the colonial powers in the final years of colonialism. This was the horizon tolerated by the departing colonial powers for contemporary African aspirations. This is unfortunately what has been also been tolerated by both the OAU and AU.

### **The Unity of African Nationalism**

When we make reference to Congolese nationalism, Nigerian nationalism, Kenyan nationalism or Zambian nationalism we are historically referring to the specific exposition of this self-assertiveness for political independence within the context of a given late-colonial state; African nationalism was made to measure. Much of these histories of compartmentalized nationalism have played out as parallel processes on the continent, with the 1960s as the high-watermark. In 1960, 17 African countries, including the Belgian Congo achieved colonial freedom. Obviously, the processes of evolution towards independence inter-relate and inter-penetrate. This becomes clear each time we examine these processes within some of the larger colonial regions, which preceded most of the final colonial states, just before independence. For example, a year before the independence of Ghana the UN organized a plebiscite for British Togoland, to decide whether they wanted to join Ghana or French Togoland. Haroub Othman writes somewhere that at the other end of the continent; "Nyerere, in a statement made in Addis Ababa when Tanganyika's independence was imminent, said that he was prepared to delay his country's

independence if the four countries of East Africa could come to independence at the same time and form a federation. But with independence each country retreated into its own national shell...”. The fragmentation processes have been remarkable. It is not accidental that *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika*, for most of its history, as an anthem of African freedom, was sung and used regionally; in South Africa, Lesotho, Zambia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, it was the acknowledged anthem of African nationalism, and remains, till today, the national anthem in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Tanzania (with Swahili lyrics) and Zambia (with English lyrics). It is indeed, arguably the greatest candidate for anthem, for a united Africa. Interestingly, most of the political leadership of the independence movement in English-speaking Southern Africa won their spurs under the inspiration of the Congress movement of South Africa. Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe started politics as a member of the ANC (South Africa). Herbert Chitepo (Zimbabwe) and Ntsu Mokgethe (Lesotho) were members of the ANC Youth League. Fort Hare University politics in the 1940s included also Charles Njonjo (Kenya), Robert Sobukwe (South Africa), and Seretse Khama (Botswana). In West Africa, a year after the Manchester meeting, the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA)*, founded in Bamako in 1946, and which was initially led by Felix Houphouët-Boigny, had emerged as a regional political body covering the whole of French West Africa and linked to the French West Indies (Martinique and Guadeloupe). The National Congress of British West Africa created in 1919 was the prime source of nationalist thought and activity, for English-speaking West Africa, throughout the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Wars. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the father figure of modern Nigerian politics started out as a politician and journalist in the Gold Coast. Milton Obote of Uganda, came first into politics in Kenya between 1950 and 1955, and was a founder member of the Kenya African Union. In 1952, when Amílcar Cabral and Agostinho Neto helped establish the *Centre of African Studies* in Lisbon, the object was to provide an intellectual forum for the discussion and development of a nationalist agenda for all the Portuguese colonies in Africa. While Jomo Kenyatta is best known as the first president of Kenya and recognized leader of African opinion and resistance during the period of the Mau Mau insurgency – “the Land and Freedom War”, it is less known that in his earlier, politically formative years in Europe, the focus of his nationalism was Pan-African. Kenyatta was, for some time, caretaker of the *West African Student's Union (WASU)* hostel in London during the inter-war years. Indeed, Kenyatta took an active part in black liberation politics in London in the 1930s, and wrote a historic article “Hands off Abyssinia” as a member of the *International African Friends of Abyssinia* group in London, in the wake of Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia. This group which included a variety of nationalist thinking Africans from all corners of Africa and its Diaspora, counted amongst its members, Jomo Kenyatta, Peter Milliard, Kwame Nkrumah, Makonnen, Wallace Johnson, George Padmore, C.L.R. James and Amy Ashwood Garvey (the ex-wife of Marcus Garvey). Amy Garvey was in the 1920s, a founder member of the *Nigerian Progress Union* (1924), one of the first British-based Pan-African organizations. From Africans thinking in the first instance as Pan-Africans by the time independence came they had become leaders of statelets and were thinking with reference to the little boxes and compartments they had inherited.

The hurriedly retreating colonial powers established these states in order to release and deflate nationalist pressures for emancipation and colonial freedom and lend new leases on life to their established interests; transferring power to “spare part elites”, culturally fashioned as junior

partners in their image and programmed to serve their economic, cultural and geopolitical interests. This in essence is the structural character of neocolonialism. This is where Africans started from during the decade of African independence (the 1960s) and this is where after fifty years of the production and reproduction of these elites we still stand. The project of African unity under the watch of these elites has meant little more than grand meetings in Addis Ababa with great expenditure of finance, verbiage and political theatre. In institutional representation, continentalism, the snarled up view of African unity has come to us through the operations of the Organization of African Unity (OAU-1963) and has in recent years been cosmetically reformed under the rubric of the African Union (AU-2002). In the 50 years of its existence its objectives have been deliberately vague and over-modest, preferring pious and platitudinous declarations of intent and purpose to irrevocable steps towards substantive unity.

### **The Way Forward**

If the road to unity can ultimately not be served by continentalism, where do we start? We start from the states we have, but with time extirpate their neocolonial character; do everything necessary to eliminate neocolonialism and deepen democracy. Secularist democracy must wear African cultural attributes in the same way British, French or Dutch democracy are married to their historical and cultural specificities. Democracy must open up our ability to have adequate decentralized government where people determine their life circumstances and related issues; where people in villages and localities have decisive voice in all circumstances directly affecting them. We should be able to celebrate ethno-cultural diversity in a democratic fashion and respect rights both individually and collectively.

Ethnic characteristics are ubiquitous to humanity. They exist all over the world, in Asia, Europe and the Americas. They have *a priori* no negative connotations. They are positive or negative depending on the way we use them. They can be sources of strength and confidence, resources for education and development. But they can also be utilized for narrow and xenophobic purposes, exploited by rival elites to corner resources, benefits and political power. It is more judicious to accommodate and provide scope for the democratic expression of ethnic affinities and the celebration of diversity in an open ethos of equalitarian multiculturalism, than to drive such sentiments underground and face intermittent or spasmodic outbursts of tribalism.

The importance of local languages must not be underestimated. Language stands at the heart of culture and if we have to build democracy and create a knowledge-based society on the basis of African cultures, then we need to intellectualize and empower African people with their languages. It is in these languages that mass society in Africa is most creative. It is in these languages that the overwhelming majority of Africans innovate and learn easily. It is in these languages that their collective, historical memories are encoded. The moment we start treating languages and cultures with any degree of seriousness, we realize that the existing borders of the neocolonial states are unhelpful. But since we cannot wish them away or dismiss their relevance, we must be able to adapt them slowly and bend them in directions of unity which recognize the historical and cultural belongings of their citizens. People-to-people institutions of all types have got to be encouraged and enlisted to forge unity. If institutions of cultural nature are facilitated, they will transcend borders; if economic institutions are established which cross-borders they will

enhance unity. If people and capital are allowed to move freely, they will enhance unity. We need to remember that without unity there is no future for Africa.

Unity will make us strong to resist imperialist pressures. Unity will make us more effective in global competition. Unity will make it difficult for Africans to be bullied. Unity will give us back our historical identities and memory. Unity will create a better basis for the use of our resources. Unity will give us a better sense of our enlightened self-interests. Unity will give pride and confidence to the Diaspora. Unity will place us on an equal level to the rest of the human community. It is worth noting that, Nyerere's advice in 1997 was that Africans should seek unity and cooperation on a sub-Saharan basis.

One may ask that, what is presently the most crucial task facing Pan-Africanists? It is the need to launch a movement for cultural affirmation which will give confidence to our people about their cultures and histories; a cultural resurgence which would give them pride to use their languages; celebrate their traditions and develop their age-long habits; revising and reforming or even eliminating cultural traits which are unhelpful and moving forward with those that can be used in the quest for modernity and development.

The road forward offers, in principle, both evolutionary and revolutionary options. Which of these options is eventually adopted will depend on the extent to which, going forward, the process opens up to democratic transformation without undue hindrance and impediment. If the road forward is hampered by obstacles and reactionary resistance, both local and international, then it stands to reason that revolutionary options will come up to the top of the agenda. If we are however able to make emancipatory and secularist progress without blockages to the process, then evolutionary options will be adequate to enhance democratic consolidation and the unity of Africans.

Another point that can be borne in mind is that activists and intellectuals should induce and pressurize African political parties or work with these parties to take on board minimum and maximum Pan-Africanist agendas. If this can be done, it will help with the mobilization of Africans towards the idea of unity in a quicker way.

The continentalist argument needs to be buried for good. It is not a continent that needs to unite; it is a people. It is Africans who need to unite, not geography; united Africans more than a united states of Africa. If Africans unite, most of the continent will be united.

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