



PAN-AFRICANISM: An idea whose time will never come?

By Kalundi Serumaga



First, an “ancient” African fable.

A chicken foraging somewhere in Africa’s bush came across a pawpaw tree that had grown diagonally instead of straight up. A ripe pawpaw was hanging at the end, which the bird could not quite reach, and so decided to walk up the inclined trunk instead.

As it perched on the end of the tree pecking away, a fox entered the small clearing, looked up, and saw what was going on. “Be generous. Share,” said the fox. “Why are you eating all by yourself? Knock it down so we can eat it together.”

I may be just a bird, but I am no fool,” replied the busy hen. “Clearly the meal you intend is me. Since when did foxes eat fruit?”

“I see. You must not have been at the meeting, then,” the fox observed.

“What meeting?” the hen asked. The fox went on to explain to her how a large meeting of the forest’s animals had taken place recently where they had come to an agreement to no longer eat each other. Instead, they would cooperate to gather and eat fruit.

After securing a sufficient number of *haki ya mungus* from the fox, the hen knocked the pawpaw to the ground and fluttered down after it.

In the end, of the African Union's 55 member states, 44 were present and signed up to the removal of trade barriers, 43 signed the launch declaration, and just 27 agreed to lifting barriers to the movement of people.

As the two stood side by side eating, a lion appeared, and began to approach them. The fox screamed, and immediately took to his heels.

"Where are you going?" asked the hen.

"Don't you see the lion?" yelled the fleeing fox. "Run for your life!"

"But what about the agreement?" asked the puzzled hen as the big cat drew up beside her.

"You don't understand," the fox shouted over his shoulder. "That lion was not at the meeting either!"

(Actually, this fable not that old: it was probably made up during the wrangling over delegate credentials at the 1978 Moshi Peace Conference of anti-General Idi Amin forces. The dysfunctional tree was a metaphor for Uganda's condition.)

The just-concluded African Union Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) summit in Kigali once again brought to the fore political Africa's favourite topic: Pan-Africanism and its possibilities. To many, this is the Holy Grail of African liberationism, the ultimate destination and logical conclusion of the exertions of previous decades, but building on centuries before that.

The outcomes of the summit are triumphantly declared to have been to finally take a first concrete step on the long journey to the political and economic integration of the continent. Three things required consensus: to agree in principle that such an initiative was required now; to agree to the removal of nearly all customs barriers to intra-African trade; and to agree to the removal of selective immigration barriers to intra-African travel by Africans.

Beneath the excitement, there remained many difficult details that could potentially become obstacles: not every African country was present in Kigali; of those present, not everyone signed up to all three elements of the treaty; among those that did, each element of the protocols must now be subjected to discussion and ratification in the parliaments and cabinets of the participating countries. Among the "faint-hearted" were the continent's two economic power houses (such as they are): South Africa and Nigeria. South Africa, represented by its new president, Cyril Ramaphosa, said that even initialing the treaty required consultations back home first. As for Nigeria, tales exist of a dramatic literal U-turn as the presidential convoy to the airport had to return to Abuja to hear more concerns from the business community.

Such dictators recognised the strategic value in running their countries like personal fiefdoms with a disorganised, impoverished populace. The last thing they needed was a genuine move towards greater sharing of those resources, and the mutual accountability that this could entail, as could become the case under any Pan-African arrangement.

None of the heads of state of Rwanda's immediate neighbours were present either. In the end, of the

African Union's 55 member states, 44 were present and signed up to the removal of trade barriers, 43 signed the launch declaration, and just 27 agreed to lifting barriers to the movement of people.

"We [Africans] are the kind of horses that are very thirsty. When brought to the well, some of us drink, others have excuses...We should stop enjoying problems. Especially when we have the answers," the summit's host, Rwandan president (and current African Union chairperson) Paul Kagame reportedly said.

So, as a result of the elephant in the room being the issue of the lions not in the room, the renewed path to African unity will be remembered partly for being launched with a snide remark from the host.

But what exactly is Pan-Africanism? And to what extent is any of this actually new, or a departure from previous attempts?

A history of hopes

We need not retrace the path to this moment in detail. The aspiration for one big country, or at least a "United States of Africa" has always been part of Africa's post-colonial political lexicon. Where leaders of the past differed was on the question of the best route to getting there. Famously, Ghana's independence icon Kwame Nkrumah called for it to be implemented straight away. Among his contemporaries were those with another school of thought, calling for a phased process. Neither happened, of course, and, for the Pan-Africanists at least, the continent remained a halfway house of former colonies within inconvenient colonial borders. No longer a girl, not yet a woman (to paraphrase American philosopher-singer Britney Spears).

This is not to say there was no *de facto* unity, at least on certain issues. Far from it. The AU's forerunner, the Organisation of African Unity - which, with its early decision to uphold the colonial era borders, emerged as the physical expression of the "phased process" approach - became the forum where a number of key initiatives demonstrating a determination for united action among the continent's leaders could be seen. The better-known among these was the decades-long campaigns against the stubborn colonial stain that held on in Southern and Western Africa, in the Portuguese colonies, as well as in the die-hard white settler "nationalism" isolated in the South. This included everything from diplomatic and political protests to sanctions and material support, including military training for Southern African nationalists.

Regional trade blocs were established in West, East and Southern Africa. Some states went further by actually intervening in regional conflicts. However, many more conflicts simply overran and made farcical any pretence towards mutual African respect. Key cases in point are the 1967-1970 civil war in Nigeria, which still poisons the politics of that country, the still ongoing Saharawi stalemate in Western Sahara against Morocco and Ethiopia's four-sided wars from the early 1960s until 1990.

A key question then, now and in the proposed future is always going to be: What does the ordinary African get out of these arrangements?

"The most striking and frightening characteristic of all African governments is this: that without an exception, all of them are dictatorships, and practice such ruthless discriminations as to make the South African apartheid look tame.....I leave it to political scientists to explore and analyse this strange situation whereby independence means the replacement of foreign rule by native dictatorship," wrote the legendary Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek in a 1968 article that may well have jeopardised his career, but certainly ruined his standing with the powers-that-were.

By way of an excuse, one could argue that these severely hampered aspirations, and the poet's

mockery of them, were the result of three things:

First, Cold War geopolitics overshadowed Africa's entire post-independence period. There were intractable wars like the 1977-1978 Somalia versus Ethiopia conflict over the Ogaden region, which saw the Soviet Union first back Somalia against Emperor Haile Selassie's forces, and then dramatically change sides when the "socialist" dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam deposed the Emperor. In Angola, an even more obvious proxy war was fought for nearly two decades between the superpowers, as Jonas Savimbi's UNITA dueled with the MPLA government. In all these cases, interventions led to a prolongation of conflict, the entrenchment of authoritarian cultures and a sapping and stagnation of social and cultural energies.

Even Tanzania's Julius Nyerere was obliged to remark that "there is no national economy at all!" when recounting the practical difficulties of establishing a fair trade regime after independence.

Second, there was global plunder - perhaps the whole point of the Cold War. This gave rise to opulent kleptocracies, such as Marshal Mobutu's in Congo and Bedel Bokassa's in the Central African Republic, as well as to pseudo-socialist regimes, such as Macius Nguema's in Equatorial Guinea, in which impunity reigned as long as the backing superpower obtained the resources it craved. Such dictators recognised the strategic value in running their countries like personal fiefdoms with a disorganised, impoverished populace. The last thing they needed was a genuine move towards greater sharing of those resources, and the mutual accountability that this could entail, as could become the case under any Pan-African arrangement.

Third was the corpus of local interests, both formal and informal, legitimate and not, that naturally have built up in the interstices of whatever passes for "national" economies in each of our countries. For example, much as General Idi Amin took the historic blame (or at least most of it) for the collapse of the original East African Community, credible stories linger about how the road haulage businesses of local oligarchs in the region were certainly not hurt by the hobbling of the East African Railways system, and may even have encouraged it.

"The elites in each of these states really make money off gatekeeping - levying taxes off imports/exports and granting licences or concessions within defined areas. Belief in free and open markets is only skin deep," tweeted Daudi Mpanga, a distinguished lawyer with extensive experience in corporate and political representation across East and Southern Africa, in a comment on AfCFTA.

But beyond the usual gatekeeping, there are genuine native business interests. For example, corporate interests entering Nigeria have to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of the situation there and enter into accommodative arrangements with the well-established local business class. One corporation alone was able to post of \$750 million in after-tax profits in 2007/8 out of this country-specific process. It is no coincidence that Nigeria was the one country where entrenched queries on AfCFTA have come from her business community.

What then is Pan-Africanism? And to what extent is any of AfCFTA actually new, or a departure from previous attempts at it?

Unity between what and whom, and over what?

If the idea is to unite African states, does this not really mean just amalgamating the interests of the various elites that run these states? If so, given the generally adversarial relationship such elites tend to have with their general populations (Exhibit A: virtually any general election on the

continent), would this not result in a continent-wide elite conspiracy against the ordinary African?

As for the idea of bringing African economies together (of which veteran journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo cited the statistics approvingly: “African Continental Free Trade Area signed in Kigali will consolidate a market of 1.2 billion people & GDP of \$2.5 trillion. Still 8 times smaller than USA’s GDP of \$19.3 trillion [China’s \$14.2 trillion), but it’s just what the doctor ordered!”), the question must be asked: Whose economies exactly are these?

A key pillar of the post-Cold War economic arrangements on countries with commend economies (typically, most of sub-Saharan Africa) was the World Bank conditionality that governments should surrender control over their central banks, which would be responsible for directing monetary policy. In practice, this means that on matters of “macro-economic stability” (a treasured goal), issues like currency pricing and supply are not determinable by the native government.

Long before that, there were already huge hurdles in place.

Many of the states created by France in West Africa serve as a particular case in point. Despite five decades of formal independence, they remain - by law, policy and sometimes armed force - wedded to the French economy and banking system through their regional currency zone know as African Financial Community (CFA) that was created in 1945.

A hugely under-reported detail of Uganda’s economic “Africanisation” policy under General Amin (better known as the mass expulsion of non-citizen Asians) was the reaction of the (mainly foreign) banks. Their agents crisscrossed the cities and towns, slapping foreclosure notices on many Asian-owned buildings to the effect that, as default was inevitable, the buildings became the property of the banks.

The idea of substantial “independent” Asian capital itself turned out to be partly a myth. Apart from debt to local banks, much of the loan capital coming from India, for example, was from banks themselves in quiet debt to Western banks.

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Then there is the issue of nativity, or origin. What will be defined as an “African” trading company, eligible to take advantage of the new free trade area? These are matters all trading blocs get concerned with. Companies in the United States domestic airline industry must be majority-owned by Americans, for example.

It was the “opening up” rules imposed by the European Union that enabled some European companies and China to domesticate themselves in places like Senegal and proceed to decimate the local fishing industry. If AfCFTA is to be fully implemented, the implication is that such a disaster would no longer be confined to the borders of the country concerned.

But taken as a whole, one can already see the armies of youthful hawkers flooding the traffic jams of the average African city who are part of a vast cheap distribution system for goods sent from China and elsewhere.

With better intra-continental communications (road, rail, air and electronic) no doubt some of our people will be able to use their celebrated “resilience” and “ingenuity” to see opportunities in these

changes and make a new living from them. However, there is no guarantee that the larger free trade area will not simply become a bigger playground for the usual predatory economic forces from outside the continent.

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Options

These are not new questions. And they all come down to what one understands Pan-Africanism to be. There are four basic options.

Cultural Pan-Africanism

It is not a widely acknowledged fact that most of Africa's best and most audacious thinkers have come from the enforced diaspora. Marcus Garvey remained the most effective and far-reaching organiser of people of African descent globally, despite never having set foot in Africa. His thinking and work remain the kernel of all Pan-Africanist thought. There have been and remain many others: John Clarke, Marimba Ani (Dona Richards), Jacob Carruthers and John G. Jackson, to name a few.

In his fifteen years of research, the Afro-Caribbean writer Chancellor Williams concluded that the Africa of the 18th and 19th centuries was a product of a preceding collapse of a unified African civilisation centered on a Greater Egypt taking in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and the Sudans, which left its people scattered, and somewhat disoriented, for nearly two thousand years before the rise of the then emerging European colonial project for which they became easy prey. He argues for the reconstitution of a Pan-Africanism premised on the reconstruction of those scattered cultures and a recognition of their underlying cultural unity. This basically means first doing away with the organisational logic of the current states, whether amalgamated or not.

Statist Pan-Africanism

This could also be termed Nkrumahist after its best-known active advocate. It was the vision of that cadre of nationalists of the late colonial period whose brand of nationalism took control of the colonial units at independence. It is completely premised on the notion of using these states as a primary building block of uniting the Africans into a new, modern identity and then propel them rapidly towards industrialisation and "development".

To try and unite Africa while being hosted by a regime installed by Western interests will only lead to complicated intellectual gymnastics, such as presenting Uganda's invasion and occupation of eastern DRC as an act of Pan-African solidarity.

This approach has pitfalls, as was exemplified by the 1990s Uganda-based Pan-African initiative under the management of the late Tajudeen Abdulraheem. To try and unite Africa while being hosted by a regime installed by Western interests will only lead to complicated intellectual gymnastics, such as presenting Uganda's invasion and occupation of eastern DRC as an act of Pan-African solidarity.

Corporate Pan-Africanism

The 19th century European powers had already brought together vast areas of the continent into spaces ultimately answerable to one political and one economic authority. Between them, France and Britain created most of the countries that now wish to be part of AfCFTA. Many of the countries they founded started life as trading companies, and corporate profit-making has remained the essence of their utility to the West.

Ironically, there is little essential organisational difference between that model and the Nkrumahists: bring the Africans together under a new culture. In fact, the absence of the imperial overlord has worked to make these states more effective in cutting Africans off from one another, as the AfCFTA acknowledges in aspiration.

Even Tanzania's one-language policy, so beloved of post-colonial state Pan-Africanists, started life with the then German colonisers, who thought that communicating in a multitude of languages was inefficient but did not believe that the African mind could master the supposed complexities of the German language.

The above-mentioned CFA zone, which brings together the economies of fourteen states in West and Central Africa that are answerable to France, is the living example of how "unity" does not necessarily mean being "united" and of why political independence does not necessarily lead to economic independence.

Peoples' Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism from below. This, of course, means rejecting the colonial model and its offspring. It requires the development of linkages between peoples through their own knowledge, institutions and methods - linkages that are not mediated by the former colonial states. It is centred on the idea of bringing native knowledge (which is available free in the community) into the question of enhancing people's lives through sustainable production, healthcare and teaching. It envisages interaction on a largely horizontal, community-to-community basis. For example, a fishing co-op in Nyanza should be able to carry out trade in dried fish in as far as Botswana without having it mediated through various ministries of health, trade and immigration because it holds the knowledge on how to preserve fish in ways perhaps not recognisable to the modern state.

Unfettered movement may end up meaning that citizens of poor African states simply decamp to those few states and cities where life is simply better.

As did Chancellor Williams, the late Professor Nabudere saw these modern states as a liability. Being heavily indebted, culturally Eurocentric, and having their key areas of policy dictated from abroad, he believed that these states were at best an irrelevance to this vision of Pan-Africanism and at worst a real obstacle, whether they manage to continue existing or not.

The need to do something

Africa's challenges are stark, and real: water, food, security, conflict. Writing in the *East African*, Moses Gahigi provides details on the critical issues: youth unemployment and poverty, which are only set to grow: "According to the African Development Bank, about 13 million young people enter the labour market every year — the number is expected to reach 30 million annually by 2030 — yet only three million (about 33 per cent) are in salaried employment. The rest are either underemployed or in vulnerable employment — a situation some analysts have called 'a ticking time

bomb' that is likely to go off if the situation is not reversed."

Which brings us to the last point: goals and strategy.

Cue Osibisa

That excellent Ghanaian band of the 1970s once sang: "...*Heaven knows where are going, we know we are; but we'll get there, heaven knows how we'll get there, we know we will.*"

Is the purpose of Pan-Africanism to further integrate Africa into the global system or to make a break from it? There will have to be a lot more explaining about what a physically united Africa will or should do. Will it strive to leverage public debt, cheap labour and natural resources, as China has done, to become a global purveyor of loans and cheap goods? If so, does this not in fact mean merging the various foreign economies that the African states are merely hosting on behalf of (and under orders from) the Western-led global economic system? If that is the case, how does it improve Africa's situation beyond being a mere appendage or extension of the global system?

Does this not also mean that we simply give the Africans the right to migrate to go and be poor somewhere else? Unfettered movement may end up meaning that citizens of poor African states simply decamp to those few states and cities where life is simply better. This is a reason why countries like Cuba and China have strict controls on the internal movement of their populations. Migrant workers in China are expected to return to their villages of origin once the contract is done. This seems to be a concern among those member states whose economies are doing somewhat better than the rest. They featured heavily among those countries less keen on signing the protocol on the free movement of people.

However, should our economic position indeed consolidate and improve, will it not ramp up our consumption, and add to the physical burden of the planet? For example, China's prosperity has created a daily demand for fish from thirty million Chinese. This has contributed heavily to the ruin of fishing waters - and fishing communities - off the West African coast.

My own paranoid (my friends would say) suspicion is this simply allows for the creation of megacities into which the poor can be herded so as to free up the countryside for huge mechanised agribusiness transformations.

But, as the chicken's fate showed, when you are being told there was a big meeting where all your concerns were answered, be sure to get each and every detail.

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