

Is the African Renaissance: Fact or Fiction

25 May 2020

Today we are celebrating Africa Day and it is appropriate that we are discussing a theme which is pertinent for today's celebration. It is a great pleasure for me to be asked to address you on the African Renaissance, fact or fiction and I hope the theme will resonate with us as we strive to make our renaissance a reality.

It is a fact that the African Renaissance cannot happen without the people's involvement and our leaders cannot claim it as a private affair as the success or failure is a joint project between the people and our leaders of our continent. It is a partnership which have to address Africa's Renaissance concretely. This theme is full of possibilities, so that if the people of the continent responds positively, then they give the clear message of hope that Africa's dreams will be fulfilled.

In 1941 the President of the African National Congress of South Africa said:

"To be true leaders, we must put the interests and welfare of our people above our own, we must forget any personal or sectional interests or gain and we must put the cause and the interests of the people before any expediency." He again stated in 1955:

"Leadership means service for and not domination over others. True and genuine leaders serve the cause of the people and do not expect the cause to serve them or become a source of profit and honour for them. Africa expects all the sons and daughters to serve the cause of the people loyally, sincerely and honestly".

Today's theme is pertinent for present day Africa which is grappling with many challenges, some of them are new, while others are not so new, when we address this topic, one needs to take a sober and realistic look at what defines Africa's political leadership at the present time.

The concept of an African Renaissance was also popularised by Cheikh Anta Diop in 1946 in a series of essays which he published in his book "Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development 1946-1960".

Anta Diop was a true anti-colonialist, he was critical of the harm and damage colonialism had done in Africa, but he maintained that despite the facts that the continent was plundered, ransacked and abused by colonialism, they weren't able to destroy Africa completely. He believed at the time that there was a powerful reawakening among the Africans and their colour made them unique for renaissance.

Diop advocated a better Africa for all its people, as well as those who'd been removed by force from Africa through the slave trade and human trafficking of the colonial rulers. He promoted the idea that the continent should be home to all those living on the continent as well as those who'd been forcefully removed and were proudly associated with Africa as Africans.

One of the crucial issues Diop identified was the language question, he argued that Africans had lost their identity, dignity and self-determination to the colonial masters who'd changed and had tried to eradicate their languages through which they explicitly communicated with each other. The imposition of the colonial oppressor's languages on the indigenous people was one of the issues that changed the people's worldview and opposition to the colonial masters.

Diop maintained that: "the development of our indigenous languages is the prerequisite for a real African renaissance and in justifying his claim, he was quick to remind Africans of the detrimental effects of using foreign languages as a media of instruction in African schools. He thought that

Africans were forced to make double efforts to assimilate the meaning of the words, and then through a second intellectual effort, to capture the reality expressed by the words”.

When addressing the question of colonialism in Africa, we need to bear in mind that the aim of colonialism was to stamp out and destroy the oppressed nation’s cultural, linguistic and national heritage and characteristics to prevent the growth of national support for the leaders of national liberation movements.

I would argue that when we speak of the African Renaissance, then we are posing the question what defines Africa’s leadership today.

The political aims of the colonial powers were to destroy the well-developed cultures and social structures of the indigenous people, they despised the native people’s culture and imposed their European identities on the people they’d subdued.

The nationalism of colonialism came from an oppressor nation, backed by a highly aggressive militarised state armed with oppressive policies and with the aim of exploiting the resources and labour and to enslave the people and nations.

On the other hand, the nationalism of the oppressed was aimed at throwing off the yoke of exploitation and when the colonial powers lost control and its political power waned over the colonies, they never fully lost control economically and politically.

The colonial powers held and are still holding powerful economic and political influence in such a way that their colonial influence continues through growing alliances with ruling elements, through joint venture enterprises, lender-debtor relationships, or by direct employment, bribery and corruption. In Africa and elsewhere, reliance on outside financial assistance forced most developing countries with a free enterprise orientation to become satellites within the orbits of the major colonial powers.

When we look back into our continent’s history, then we must treasure the memories of the “Freedom Generation”, those great leaders of the past who contributed and made their mark for the freedom of the African continent which stirred the embers of Africa’s Renaissance.

The names of the “Freedom Generation”, will forever remain on our roll of honour, and without a doubt, the former colonial powers did not like the radical thoughts and actions of the “Freedom Generation” leadership and they acted decisively to perpetuate their economic and political strangleholds on the former colonies. Bob Marley through his music asked, why do they kill our prophets, these words resonate with us in this context and it is incumbent on us to remind Africa’s leadership of the central role that effective leadership plays in changing the fortunes of the continent and they should never forget their obligations to the people.

The individual and collective legacy of the “Freedom Generation” shows us that Africa is capable of producing effective, reliable and world-class leaders. The truth is that the “Freedom Generation” were “people centred” who fought for the interests of the people and they faced the challenges of the time head on. The many successes and victories recorded by this generation were strongly driven and underpinned by the aspirations of the masses of the people and their commitment to the freedom of the people.

The “Freedom Generation” had vision, a deep sense of mission, profound commitment, selflessness and readiness to make extreme sacrifices and many paid with their lives. Africa’s resounding successes in the struggle against the very powerful and well organised racist and apartheid regimes bear testimony to this fact.

In the 1970s some friends of the racist regimes in western countries spoke openly about the “invincibility of the white regimes in Southern Africa. They perpetuated the myth that the colonial and racist regimes in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe and South West Africa, now Namibia, Angola,

Mozambique as well as South Africa would remain unaltered and couldn't be defeated. Today these so-called friends are gone, dead, buried and almost forgotten.

However, we must move with seriousness and speed in addressing the problems of the people, and most importantly we have to improve governance. All national leaders must be held accountable and act in a manner, which makes them truly servants of the people. Experience has shown that where there is a responsible, accountable and incorruptible leadership abiding by the principles of good governance, their countries make enormous progress in sociological and economic development.

Some of the current African leaders have characterised the 21st Century as Africa's century which should be the clarion call to the new generation of young people, who unlike in the past have more privileges and global inter connectivity and advance communication technology to use for fulfilling its generational mission.

The environment in which present day African leaders find themselves are filled with enormous challenges. The African leadership of past decades in the 1960s established the Organisation of African Unity in an attempt to reverse the oppressive colonial legacies and to restore human dignity and bring freedom to the people of the African continent.

Their rallying call was unity, liberation and freedom, which worried the former colonial masters. It is now over 20 years since the Organisation of African Unity was replaced by the African Union. This initiative signified the achievements of the liberated African continent, the collective assertion of freedom and equality with a Pan-African identity. Africa's political changes reflect the move away from the colonial past and define the future direction for the individual countries and the continent as a whole.

Africa cannot linger in the past but at the same time, it shouldn't forget it's historical experiences, the continent has to build something different to that which the colonial masters intended to impose on the people. The continent has to remember where it came from and where it is going, and it has to honour the countless lives lost during the struggle for freedom. Africa has to remember those whose contributions shall forever inspire the people to realise a peaceful, democratic, progressive and prosperous United Africa.

At the heart of today's discussion we look at what is the way forward for the African Renaissance leadership means. We must be frank and truthful in our assessments now that most of Africa is free, it is pertinent to ask ourselves whether the aims and objectives articulated by the leaders of our independence movements have been achieved, or are we anywhere near their fulfilment. I'm afraid, at a certain juncture of the past few decades, some countries have lost direction with all its attendant implications and some countries have moved backwards rather than fast forward.

When we fought for freedom, we didn't just fight for the purpose of replacing the white colonial regimes with black faces. The objective was to improve the lives of the people and we intended to ensure larger freedoms, including the right to decide how we are governed and by whom. It was to remove injustices and ensure that the country's resources were utilised for the betterment of all the people. It was to fight disease, ignorance and abject poverty, it was to change the lives of all the people and not just that of a few individuals, and it was to transform the continent from what it used to be when the colonisers called it the "Dark Continent".

As we mark over 60 years of African Unity and plan for the future, there are some soul searching questions we need to ask ourselves:

Firstly, why is it that a continent, which is one of the richest, if not the richest in terms of resources, both human and material, continues to have the poorest people?

Secondly, how can we rationally explain the continued, and in some cases escalating internal conflicts in many parts of our continent with the loss of millions of lives, with people living in

inhuman misery, abject poverty and destruction as well as forcing millions to seek refuge in countries of Europe.

Thirdly, how do we erase the image of a continent where corruption is considered endemic?

Fourthly, how do we sustain and utilise the current decade old achievements of economic growth into a shared prosperity for all?

Good governance, democracy, accountability and transparency has to be nurtured and sustained and must be an essential component of our society's lives and culture. Africa, which has suffered so much indignity and inhumanity due to massive violations of people's rights, should have a determined leadership who are in the forefront of the protection and respect of human and people's rights throughout the continent. To achieve this, it is imperative that we build democratic institutions, improve our educational system and strengthen civil society.

The declaration issued by the Organisation of African Unity Heads of State and Government in February 1990, committed themselves to democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good governance, as fundamental prerequisites for sustainable socio-economic development on the continent.

The establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD, by the African Unity Heads of State and Government in July 2001, in Lusaka, Zambia, was meant to provide the overarching vision and policy framework to accelerate economic cooperation and integration among African countries.

It is a tragedy that most of the "Freedom Generation" leadership were undermined and eliminated during the first few decades of Africa's Independence which happened at the height of Cold War tensions, as competing powers sought to extend their respective spheres of influence on the African continent.

Africa's promise and hope for a meaningful UHURU disappeared as post-independence Africa became characterised by wars, instability and undemocratic regimes, thereby losing the transformative and development vision that had characterised and energised the nationalist and Africanist struggles of our "Freedom Generation" leaders.

Many of the present leaders have altered and extended their stay in power through the manipulation of constitutional changes and have imposed their will to satisfy their hunger to amass wealth and power. The continent has seen many political changes, some good, but many have set the continent back many generations.

In the Southern African Region, the leadership of the Front Line States and the liberation movements sustained the vanguard of the African revolution and the continent through the Non-Aligned Movement and their closeness to the progressive international community. One of the early Pan-Africanist acts of President Mandela's administration, after 1994, was to resuscitate the cause of Africa's Renaissance.

This measure was further strengthened by the African Peer Review Mechanism adopted in 2003 by the African Union which focussed on the importance of good governance in pursuing the new African dream for its renaissance.

In this context a number of factors needed to be considered:

Africa has strong economic potential attributed to the comparative advantage with abundant natural resources and demands which are fuelled by the strong growth in the largest emerging economies. However, this growth has not been translated into the reduction of poverty. We must urgently and firmly eliminate the contradiction of a very rich continent inhabited by the poorest people on the globe.

The single most important factor determining the level of development of any country is the degree to which it is able to control its own political, economic and social space, and therefore its policies.

The most important non-African players determining African policies today are:

- Firstly, foreign multinational corporations, especially the oil companies who own massive extractive industries in Africa with almost no links to the local economies in which they operate, apart from a trickle of royalties they pay for imports to fuel corruption and repression;
- Secondly, multilateral financial institutions which impose various forms of conditions and dictate the economic and social policies of African states;
- Thirdly, foreign state and non-state players who are donors or creditors which have extensive leverage and influence over the social and economic policies of African states, and imposes extraordinary high tariffs which increases the debt burden of the impoverished countries.

A large part of sub-Saharan Africa's surplus money leaves the continent as debt repayment, expatriation of profits and capital flight. Most analysts of post-colonial Africa assume that at independence African nationalists inherited a state, that assumption is wrong, what they inherited is a government with limited or no financial resources, they were empty shells with the trappings of self-government, these states were created by the colonial powers, and they were in reality states dependent on former colonial powers.

It is important to bear in mind that at the 1884 Berlin Conference, the European countries created the borders of Africa for their own economic benefit, the powerful European nations determined how they would see Africa, while the native peoples in the regions were left out and never consulted as they became the subjects and possessions of their new colonial masters.

Africa's abundance of natural resources has become more of a curse than a blessing, some people blame the selfishness of our leaders and their greed for the resources. The major discovery of natural reserves in many countries in Africa should heed the lessons of the last oil boom which saw resources being squandered by local and multinational greed.

Africa's immense natural resources must be mobilised and utilised for its development so that it benefit the people.

Africa must adopt inclusive socio-economic development strategies and objectives to survive the challenges of development and ensure opportunities for sustainable development for the people as a whole.

Africa must ensure that all the people can meet the basic needs of their families and that all the continent's diverse social, political and economic groups should feel equally part of their societies and that all individuals who strive for a better tomorrow can be given equal opportunities to improve their livelihoods. Without such inclusive development, our societies will remain plagued by political marginalisation with socio-economic inequalities which form the basis for the conditions that inflame violence, xenophobia and ultimately threatens our collective peace, security and development.

However, the African collective cannot be ignored any longer and in this context, we should learn from the European partners. Most of them are strong politically and bear no comparison to any individual African country, they have recognised their individual disadvantages and the merits of cooperation and integration to cope with the present and future challenges and opportunities facing them.

African regional cooperation and integration is not a matter of choice but an urgency to survive. African leaders have taken a number of key decisions towards making regional integration a reality. Lots of decisions and resolutions have been taken, but in many cases, there has been very little implementation. One of the main challenges is how they address infrastructural development nationally and give practical meaning to the commitment to facilitate the free flow of goods and people.

Apart from the intra-regional and infrastructural development and strengthening of Africa's regional economic schemes, the leaders must popularise the concept of a United Africa amongst the people and work together to make it a reality as the United Africa Dream can become a reality in our lifetime.

The leaders need to use both continental, inter-governmental and non-governmental institutions to protect, promote and nurture the vision of a United Africa for the generations in the future. Africa must deal with the scourge of conflict, which has done so much damage to the people and societies. At the OAU Summit held in Cairo in 1993, it was agreed that with the Cold War out of the way, Africa was capable of resolving its own conflicts.

But it doesn't help Africa's leaders when powerful countries possessing weapons of mass destruction interfere in their political and economic development. This neo-colonial mentality based on greed for the oil, gas and other resources have caused massive destabilisation in Africa. Their ill thought out military campaigns have killed thousands, countless numbers have been made homeless which has caused mass exodus of people to Europe which is evidence of their miscalculations, and their actions have inadvertently given birth to terrorist groups operating on the African continent.

In view of the ongoing transformative shifts, we must acknowledge that the inherent social contract within our societies, the relationship between the people, governments and businesses as it exists today is out of sync with the directions in which many societies are headed. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small elite is no longer sustainable, and as we witness developments occurring both within and beyond the continent, there is a new future where the individual is more empowered than ever before to shape his or her own destiny. This will be more so as the spread of genuine democracy on the continent begins to unleash the creative potential of our people as they face the challenges and exploit the opportunities that come with freedom and liberty.

When one reflects on a new paradigm of African Renaissance leadership, I quote the late Pan-Africanist, Dr Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, who wrote in 2005:

“Instead of constantly enumerating what this leader or that leader is doing wrong, why don't you ask yourself what are you doing as an individual, a member of an organisation, part of a community, and in whatever station you are, to advance the cause of Africa and the dignity of the African people. We can do something or nothing”.

It is here where vast opportunities present themselves before the next generation of Africans. It will be our generation's responsibility to usher our continent into a brand new world. A world where the new “African Rising and the African Renaissance” phenomenon is truly achieved and secured. It is in this light that I would like to enumerate three principles for a new paradigm of leadership in transforming Africa:

Firstly, they must have vision, just like the founding fathers, the “freedom generation” and the leaders that preceded them.

Secondly, they must be able to appreciate in order to understand where Africa is headed, Africa's current and future leaders must forge a deep appreciation of where the journeys have taken the people and continent so far and how we arrived where we are today. Africa stands proudly upon

the legacies of millions of individuals who contributed their lives to ensuring that future generations would have greater opportunities.

Thirdly, they must be able to globalise, localise and connect in this increasingly interconnected world, Africa's new generation of leaders must empower themselves both from the perspective of the global as well as the local.

Transformation starts here and we are beginning to see the evolution of a new leadership on the continent, and if they can act with speed, sincerity and determination, then one can be truly optimistic about our shared futures and the direction in which Africa is heading.

Future generations of leaders must continue to build on the legacies of those who came before them and forge a path for those to continue towards realising a peaceful, democratic and a united Africa. If we can achieve this, then Africa will once again play a leadership role for human dignity and make the world a better place than what it was before.

Nelson Mandela, at the funeral of his friend, Oliver Tambo, comrade and leader said:

“As you instructed, we will bring peace to our tormented land. As you directed, we will bring freedom to the oppressed and liberation to the oppressor. As you strived, we will restore the dignity of the dehumanised. As you commanded, we will defend the option of a peaceful resolution of our problems. As you prayed, we will respond to the wretched of the earth. As you loved them, we, will always stretch out a hand of endearment to those who are your flesh and blood. In all this, we will not fail you”

South Africa's freedom was in many ways very unique, Nelson Mandela and the liberation movement had focussed their energies and minds on building peace and harmony for the future, and it wasn't by accident that deep-rooted political and spiritual solutions emerged from the soul of Africa. Social harmony became for us the “summum bonum” – the greatest good and anything that subverted or undermined this value had to be avoided like the plague. The African “weltanschauung” (world view), what we know as Ubuntu in the Nguni group of languages, or “Batho” in the Sotho languages became Ubuntu, which is difficult to render into a western language, it speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “Yu, u nobunto”, which means “Hey, he or she has Ubuntu”. This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate and they share what they have. It also means my humanity is caught up and is completely bound up in theirs. We belong to a bundle of life and we say, “a person is a person through other people”. It is not “I think therefore I am”. It says: “I am human because I belong, I participate and I share”.

Before I finish my talk, let us remember some of the names of the “Freedom Generation” who cherished and championed Africa's Renaissance:

As we recall the names of the “Freedom Generation”, let us remind ourselves that after the death of Christ, most of the Apostles died violent deaths and we recall those of the “Freedom Generation” who fared no better:

Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was overthrown by the military and died in exile in Egypt;
 Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt died of a suspected heart attack;
 Julius Nyerere of Tanzania died of natural causes;
 Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria was overthrown by the military;
 Emperor Haile Sellasie of Ethiopia was overthrown by the military;
 Patrice Lumumba of the Congo was brutally murdered by Colonel Mobutu who became the leader of Zaire and it is generally believed that he was assisted by foreign forces;
 Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau was assassinated by foreign special forces;
 Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique was assassinated;
 Agostino Neto of Angola died on the way to Moscow for medical treatment;

Samora Machel of Mozambique was assassinated, it is believed that the South African apartheid military caused his plane to crash on South Africa territory;
 Joshua Nkomo fled Zimbabwe and died in exile;
 Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe died a few years ago;
 Sam Nujoma, former President of Namibia; is still alive;
 Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC died after suffering a number of strokes;
 Robert Sobukwe, leader of the Pan Africanist Congress was imprisoned on Robben Island for 24 years and died of cancer;
 Nelson Mandela; was imprisoned for 27 years on Robben Island, he died in 2013.

In conclusion, when I look back at Africa's legacy and contribution, then:

I speak of the African continent, the Cradle of Humanity;

I speak of the African continent where Jesus and his disciples once walked;

I speak of the African continent where the biblical rivers still flow;

I speak of the African continent where the Pharaohs once ruled;

I speak of the African continent where science, technology, astronomy, philosophy and mathematics flourished;

I speak of the African continent where the planets and stars were observed and studied;

I speak of the African continent where the Great Pyramids still stand;

I speak of the African continent where enlightenment and development flourished.

I speak of the African continent whose natural resources have been and are still being plundered and shipped abroad.

I speak of an African continent whose people were sold as slaves at auctions abroad.

I speak of an African continent, poor and dependent people in the former colonial states are still dependent on handouts and development aid.

I speak of the 1884 Berlin Conference where the leaders of Europe stood around a blank map of the continent of Africa which was carved up in what became known as "The Scramble for Africa".

In closing the theme of today's discussion, I dream of a brave, forward looking and progressive African leadership who will stand over the colonial map of Africa as they erase the artificial borders of the colonisers who caused so much suffering and human hardships for the people of the continent.

Let's not forget what made the changes possible:

Firstly, the resilience, determination and sacrifices of the people and the liberation movements.

Secondly, the unity and cohesion of the African States in supporting the struggles of the various countries for freedom.

Thirdly, the invaluable support and solidarity of the international community in various forms and manifestations.

I believe that the African Renaissance can be realised and will not remain a myth dreamt about by dreamers who think like some colonisers that the African renaissance cannot be achieved.

I thank you.

Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika
Mungo Ibaraki Afrika
Asante-sana
God Bless Africa.