

What Happens To A Pan-African Dream Deferred?

Langston Hughes, an American activist, poet and one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, asks a pertinent question: 'What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet?'

By Kgabo Morifi and Malaika Wa Azania

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On the 8th of May 1996, on the occasion of the passing of the new constitution of South Africa, the then deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, delivered a speech that would alter the collective imagination of African people forever. 'I am an African', undoubtedly one of the most powerful speeches of the twentieth century, remains to this day a reference point for ideological

clarity – the true north from whence we find direction towards an Africa we want to see. Having both been born in the early 1990s, we did not have the privilege of hearing the speech delivered on the day. We were too young to understand it. It would be years later that as teenagers attempting to make sense of the Africa of our imagination, the profundity of president Mbeki's sentiments would

shape our consciousness. Today, as young adults in our mid-20s, we want to revisit 'I am an African', to draw from it renewed hope for our country at a time when the conversation on what it truly means to be an African must take place.

Perhaps as a starting point, we must give context to why there is a need to revisit president Mbeki's greatest speech, twenty-three years after it was delivered. We make our reflections at an appropriate moment in the political life of our country, in this month of June where young people are thinking deeply about their place in the Rainbow Nation that never was. Last month was Africa Month, a month during which we celebrated the milestone of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the African Union (AU), and its quest to develop the continent and its people. In another time and space, it would have been a glorious moment, but in a South Africa that is suffocating in a miasma of ideological incoherence about African unity, Africa Month was a difficult time of cogitation.

On the 25th of May 1963, delegates from thirty-two African countries convened in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa with the sole objective of establishing an organisation that would form the continental base for pan-Africanism. This would be expressed in the unity and solidarity of African states, the eradication of all forms of colonialism from Africa and the intensification of the cooperation and efforts of African countries in the quest for the achievement of a better life for all. The OAU was born as a vehicle through which these objectives would be achieved, and although there were differing ideological commitments and diverging opinions regarding its structuring and the strategies it would employ, there was consensus among African leaders that it was a necessary institution to establish. As such, compromise was reached, particularly on issues that some leaders felt were overreaching and presented the risk of dissolving sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The birth of the OAU at a time when a significant number of African countries were still locked in wars for independence was crucial. Through its aiding of liberation movements that sought to overthrow colonial regimes, the organisation played an important role in the eradication of colonialism and, in the case of South Africa, apartheid. In 1981, at the height of apartheid brutality in our

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country, the OAU and the United Nations hosted the International Conference on Sanctions against South Africa in Paris, France. The OAU, posing the same argument that was being made by the African National Congress (ANC), contended that the continued trade relations with the repressive apartheid regime by the international community was aiding the apartheid machinery and that sanctions would starve the draconian system of the oxygen it needed to stay alive. Thus, the OAU demanded the imposition of comprehensive and mandatory sanctions against the minority government that was hell-bent on denying the native majority and all people of colour their right to be human.

The OAU as an institution and various countries on the continent and globally played an important role in South Africa's fight against apartheid. It was not an accident of history that upon his release from prison, former president Nelson Mandela visited the countries that had helped in the fight against the brutal regime – to extend our collective gratitude and to strengthen ties that would see us into a democratic era. While many African countries aided our struggle, it was the Frontline States in particular that shouldered the burden of maintaining sanctuary, support and funding for our liberation movements and for the people of South Africa in general. Perhaps it is important to touch briefly on some of the direct interventions that were made by African countries in aid of our struggle against apartheid.

The Tanzanian government provided the ANC's military wing, uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) with training camps. The country also offered transit routes to eastern Europe for comrades going for training and schooling. The Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, initially called Mazimbu, was opened for South African children whose parents

were training in the camp. Zambia provided similar assistance and in 1969, when the ANC was banned, became the organisation's headquarters. Radio Freedom, the ANC'S underground radio station that played a pivotal role in the recruitment of members to the organisation and the general political conscientisation of ordinary people, was broadcast from Zambia. Mozambique, despite being ravaged by its own socio-economic challenges arising from the devastation that had been wrought by the Portuguese colonisers who practically collapsed the economy, provided the ANC with safe houses and operational MK bases in Maputo. Lesotho and Swaziland were instrumental in assisting the ANC with facilitating meetings amongst its comrades. ANC leaders would cross the borders under the cover of night to attend meetings and return to the country the following day to return to other operations. Following the youth and student uprisings of 1976, many student activists fled into Lesotho where the government made provision for them to receive an education. In fact, a quarter of state scholarships in Lesotho were reserved for South African exiles. Zimbabwe aided MK recruits to cross the border to reach the camps in Tanzania and Zambia. So significant were relations between the ANC and the liberation movement in Zimbabwe that a joint High Command was established. It would wage campaigns of armed confrontation against the Rhodesian and apartheid forces, including the Wankie and Sipolilo offensives. Nigeria, one of South Africa's biggest allies in the struggle against apartheid, also played a huge role in provision of material support towards South Africa's struggle. Nigeria supported both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania with an annual subvention amounting to millions of dollars. Under the leadership of president General Olusegun Obasanjo, Nigeria established a programme to

cater specifically for the educational needs and welfare of South Africans. The Southern Africa Relief Fund received a significant portion of its donations from the Nigerian government itself, with president Obasanjo and his cabinet making personal donations and civil servants donating about two percent of their own income to the fund.

The important thing to note about these countries is that they were facing their own structural challenges at the time when they extended a helping hand to South Africa. Countries such as Zimbabwe were in the throes of their own struggle for liberation while Nigeria was reeling from the devastation wrought by the Biafran War. More than this, these countries all paid heavily for their support of the liberation struggle in South Africa. Many of these countries had to make the difficult choice of supporting South Africa's struggle at the expense of strengthening their own fragile economies. Zambia and Mozambique suffered severe damage to infrastructure and loss of human life when the South African Defence Force and its allies constantly raided and bombed communities suspected of providing sanctuary to MK soldiers. The cost that these countries paid for supporting us in our struggle is incalculable.

The selfless support that was offered to South Africa during the darkest hours of our struggle is demonstrative of the commitment that the OAU had to the eradication of colonialism and apartheid on the continent. It is a testament to the depths of the resolve that African countries have shown in fashioning a higher civilisation – one anchored on meaningful and genuine pan-African unity. This vision had always been a guiding principle as to how South Africa positioned itself in relation to the continent. Under the leadership of presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, the vision of an Africa rooted in continental unity and cooperation was imagined. There was never any doubt that the policy direction of our country was one geared towards an African developmental agenda. This agenda was seen in more than just our economic and political direction – it was also in our commitment to the preservation of African history and cultures, and to an insistence on being a people who understood that they were born of warrior men and women.

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cultural project of the New Partnership for Africa's Development. This particular project - the preservation of the priceless collection of thousands of documents once held in the ancient libraries and universities of Timbuktu - was more than simply a preservation of history. It was, in the true sense of the word, a reclaiming of an African identity that gave concrete expression to the sentiment of an African Renaissance - the rebirth of the kind of Africa that the founders of the OAU had in mind when they met in Addis Ababa all those many years ago to chart the path for pan-African unity.

But over the past decade, the image of this Africa has been fading from the collective memory of the South African people - and, perhaps more tragically, the South African government itself. We have witnessed a calamitous retreat from the belief we once held that, however improbable it may sound to sceptics, Africa would rise with its people committed to the ideal of unity. Lest we are accused of historical revisionism, we must point out that even under the administrations of presidents Mandela and Mbeki there were sentiments held by some South African people that were divergent from this pan-African ideal of unity. The brutal murder of Mozambican national Ernesto Nhamuave, who was burnt alive at the Ramaphosa informal settlement on the East Rand in 2008, will live in our collective memory for as long as we are alive.

We also cannot forget the Afrophobic violence of that same year when the spate of attacks on fellow African brothers and sisters from other parts of the continent claimed the lives of sixty-two people and left thousands seeking refuge. And while this was the most gruesome expression of violence we had seen, with seven of the nine provinces bloodied by such atrocities, the reality is that those from other parts of the continent have always been subjected to discrimination and dehumanisation in South Africa. There have always been low-key Afrophobic attacks on non-South Africans, particularly in townships across the country. But what had always been different was that the government had been firmly against these acts. It had always promoted itself as a defender of the human rights of the millions of people who are in South Africa seeking refuge - documented or not. The language of solidarity and empathy had always defined the

government's posture. Even when response to the attacks was questionable, such as the deployment of the South African National Defence Force, it always seemingly came from a framework of wanting to protect fellow Africans against the violence of those who sought to render them less human. This kind of response was reflective of the government's orientation to the ideological and policy direction of our country.

The last ten years have shown us how the South African government has evolved into something unrecognisable in so far as the pursuit of pan-African unity is concerned. It is this Damascene conversion that has inspired us to reflect deeply on the words of president Mbeki, to internalise how to be both at home and a foreigner in a state to which no person should be condemned. The road to the recent national general elections in particular was littered with the worst expressions of contempt for pan-African unity that the ANC-led government has demonstrated. The ANC, both as a political and governing party, entered the immigrant issue with the kind of right-wing approach we expect only from the most reactionary elements of our society. In fact, it was the first time since the dawn of the democratic dispensation that the immigrant question had entered the electoral terrain. But as far back as 2017, the then Deputy Minister of Police Bongani Mkhongi had come out guns blazing in his attack on migrants, claiming that they were responsible for eighty percent of crime in South Africa. In his own words:

You will not find South Africans in other countries dominating a city into 80% because if we do not debate that, that necessarily means the whole South Africa could be 80% dominated by foreign nationals and the future president of South Africa could be a foreign national [...] We are surrendering our land and it is not xenophobia to talk [the] truth. We fought for this land from a white minority. We cannot surrender it to the foreign nationals. That is a matter of principle. We fought for this country, not only for us, for the generations of South Africans. (in Lekabe, 2017)

These sentiments, expressed at a press conference, were never condemned by the government. In fact, the opposite is true. Since Mkhongi's problematic utterances, several government officials and leaders of the ANC have made similar statements. Former MEC

of Community Safety in Gauteng Sizakele Nkosi-Malobane has repeatedly quoted these unsubstantiated statistics. The Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, repeatedly used migrants as a scape goat for his failures in the health ministry, going as far as to suggest that the collapse of public healthcare can be attributed to the spreading of the thin resources available between South Africans and migrants (Mbhele, 2018). Gauteng premier David Makhura also raised the immigrant issue, arguing for stricter border controls (Sibanyoni, 2019). On the surface, this sounds like a reasonable argument about calling for law and order in a country battling with its own socio-economic challenges. But when you scratch beneath the surface, you begin to see this anti-immigrant sentiment is a systematic construct that goes beyond rhetoric to the very heart of our ideological stance on how we engage with the African continent. It is not an accident that the leaders who are invested in making these inflammatory statements were appointed during the administration of the former president, Jacob Zuma. This is, after all, the man who, in 2011, rationalised our country's vote on UN Resolution 1973. This was at a time when a panel of African nations had been put together by the AU to resolve the Libyan crisis. In voting in favour of a no-fly zone, our country effectively scuppered the efforts of the AU and, perhaps worse than this, it set parameters for the devastation that now defines the Libyan reality. A year later in 2012, the South African government expelled over a hundred Nigerian citizens said not to have valid Yellow Fever certificates – a move that resulted in the expulsion of nearly sixty South African businesspeople by the Nigerian government. This sort of malicious engagement with other African countries has been a feature of South African pan-African interaction over the past ten years. The dream for pan-African unity as eloquently expressed in Mbeki's famous 'I am an African' speech has been turned into a nightmare.

As we enter what is called a 'new dawn', we hope for a different imagination. We hope that those who lead us will go back to that deeply meaningful speech by Thabo Mbeki, to draw from it as a source of ideological inspiration in terms of what South Africa and the entire African continent could become - a place without oppression and without

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the dehumanisation of any African people. As a young generation of South Africans, born at the dawn of democracy, we are inspired to be part of the architecting of a better civilisation. Fashioning this dream into a reality will demand that we delve into the collective memory of our people, and extract from there reminders of African history that show us how great this continent can be when it articulates itself in one voice. The liberation struggles of Africa were never won by countries who fought on their own – they were won through the collective efforts of countries that understood that unity is a necessary condition for Africa's liberation.

As we sought to demonstrate in this article, the South Africa that today wants to tear asunder the ideal of a united continent was once at the receiving end of its generosity and community. It was once a South Africa of leaders who believed, and demonstrated in their deeds, that they are pan-Africans. It is this South Africa that we must rescue from the throes of a dangerous, right-wing populism as expressed in the anti-immigrant discourse on the road to the 2019 South African elections. It is a South Africa of men and women who refuse to be cynical and lose faith in the capacity of African people that we must rescue from this nightmare. If we cannot do this, the answer to what happens to a pan-African dream deferred is, as Hughes said, explosive. ■

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