The contemporary relevance of Pan-Africanism in the 21st century

Mueni wa Muiu

Pan-Africanism developed in the new world in the face of racial discrimination and dehumanization of people of African descent. The following African American and Afro-Caribbean activists and intellectuals were the key actors in its creation: W.E.B Du Bois, Paul Robeson, C.L.R. James, George Padmore and Marcus Garvey. The first Pan-African congress meetings which were organized by W.E.B Du Bois in London, Paris, Brussels and London as well as in Brussels and Lisbon favored the gradual independence of African countries. Some mothers of Pan-Africanism include Amy Jacques Garvey, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Audley Moore and Dara Abubakan.¹ There are certain common factors that unite people of African descent based on Pan-Africanism which include the common suffering under slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism as well as cultural and political factors. Although the cultures of people of African descent in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America may be different, based on economic class they experience some similar conditions such as poverty and discrimination. Because of poverty, ethnic, racial or religious discrimination and war some people of African descent are forced to live in inhumane conditions. In what ways can the ideology of Pan-Africanism be harnessed as a weapon to better the conditions facing people of African descent? Only radical Pan-Africanism can be relevant in the 21st century. By “radical” we mean a Pan-Africanism that leads to economic empowerment, control of resources within the continent, peace and African Unity. Economic empowerment of the majority of people of African descent will halt the migration to Western countries. It will also provide opportunities for African youth to succeed as they live lives of dignity. This chapter will examine the relevance of Pan-Africanism in the 21st century by focusing on conflict, forced migration and poverty as well as education.

Is Pan-Africanism relevant in the face of conflict, forced migration and poverty?

Africa has an area of 11.7 million square. miles. The continent is so large that the following areas can fit in it and yet there would be more space: Argentina, China, India, New Zealand and USA. Based on 2017 estimates, Africa’s population was 1.2 billion with 94 persons per square mile. Given its size and resources, Africa is underpopulated. With its small population
scattered in 55 countries, some African countries lack the resources to empower their own citizens let alone their neighbors. Furthermore, when conflict breaks out in one country some of these countries can hardly support the refugee population without international support. Pan-Africanism is relevant in this scenario because when used effectively it can provide the solutions for conflict and forced migration. Since African countries are not united, each country makes its own foreign policy. As a result, client states have developed that owe their allegiance to countries/companies that put the leaders in power rather than to the majority of the population. While elections are held to usher in new leaders—the economic roots of conflicts are never addressed, for example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Sudan. In the face of conflict, forced migration and war, electoral politics which are championed by liberal democracy do not offer any long-term solutions. African indigenous forms of governance based on participation and consensus would be effective in solving the issues that lead to conflict. In most of these countries, loyalties are still based on the community, clan or group rather than states. Solutions to problems can only be effective if the people understand and identify with the methods used. Since the present African state system is too fragile to withstand any challenges, viable alternatives to the state must be pursued. Such alternatives include, entities that most of the population understand, are loyal to, based on both indigenous and modern forms of governance. Toward that end, governance will be based on a “participative negotiated consensus.” The new entities will be critical in halting foreign meddling, client states as well as disorganization and violence that is the norm in some of the continent’s regions.

Historically, the African state was created for extraction purposes (labor, markets and raw material) to fulfill the economic needs of the colonizing countries. This trend was further strengthened by the neocolonial relationships that African countries have with these countries. Human rights for the African people were never on the agenda regardless of the colonial powers in control of the countries. This lack of respect for African lives is laid bare whenever conflicts break out. In their present state, African countries do not have a common policy when dealing with issues of conflict, forced migration or xenophobia. Without unity, these countries are vulnerable as each one tries to carve its own foreign policy. At times African countries compete against each other for favor with foreign countries. For example, post-apartheid South Africa and Rwanda compete for international favor against other African countries. Since there is no common African foreign policy which outlines the ideals of the continent, client states can play a lethal role in prolonging conflict. As a result, large populations are internally displaced as different mercenaries fight over their resources. This competition is also extended to some African leaders who compete against each other whether for favor from their former colonizers, new allies or the minorities within their countries. Some of these leaders believe that the countries that they govern belong to them and their allies rather than serving their citizens. These egos act as a break to African unity in the face of conflict because some of these leaders are driven by arrogance and revenge. Since there is so much competition, fear, greed and jealousy between some leaders, conflicts are prolonged resulting in mass death and suffering. Africa’s disunity unites diverse elements, whether companies, countries or mercenaries, to exploit its resources as its people live in terror. Only a united front within a radical brand of Pan-Africanism can give African leaders a common vision for the continent.

Africa is a resource rich continent whether in minerals, land or water. Yet, access to these resources has resulted in major conflicts and war from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central Africa to Libya. Since African countries are not united, it is easy for individual countries to be destroyed. In the midst of the chaos and violence that ensues, different
mercenaries exploit African resources while slavery becomes the norm as is the case in Libya. Countries like Libya are used as “lessons” so that other African countries can obey their neo-colonial masters. Other conflicts are labelled as “ethnic,” “religious,” or “terrorist” such as in Cameroon, Central Africa, Somalia and Sudan. As a result, of the various conflicts, diverse organizations have moved into these areas where they have become sources of constant terror. The common feature about African conflicts is that they are a major source of business whether for Non-governmental Organizations or peace keepers. Another common feature is that no long-term solutions are found for these conflicts in spite of all the large numbers of actors involved.

In order for people to think, create and innovate they need to live in peaceful conditions. The basic idea of Pan-Africanism cannot triumph under conditions of constant terror. These conflicts have forced citizens out of their homes into refugee camps while others have died trying to get into Europe. Some Africans within the continent have been forced to move out of resource rich rural areas into slums because of conflict whether over water, cattle or land. How then can we speak of Pan-Africanism in the face of mass migration? To make Pan-Africanism relevant to the contemporary period it has to be harnessed to solve the problems that cause these wars. The African Union cannot be viable if it is unable to solve the problems that force Africans out of their homes. What kind of organization remains mute and inactive in the face of so much suffering of its people? If the AU is to be effective it must break down its dependency on foreign funding while developing its own vision. A self-sufficient AU will play a critical role in Pan-Africanism because it will marginalize divisive elements on the continent. It will also protect the interests of its citizens’ members rather than those of the elite and its allies.

Only a radical form of Pan-Africanism which empowers rural communities to harness the resources within their borders can be relevant in the face of conflict. Conflict over resources is reduced once local communities are provided with opportunities to participate in creating wealth based on the region’s resources. In some cases, ethnicity is used (whether by some politicians or other entities) as a divisive tool resulting in conflict. Some people say “I am poor because so and so is rich” or “So and so is rich because that ethnic group is made up of corrupt people” etc. If no one breaks this cycle of thinking down, conflict is likely to arise. Once people are encouraged to be creators of opportunities and innovators, they cease blaming others for their failure. Education will be critical in transforming this dependency mind-set. By providing opportunities for all regardless of ethnicity or background-radical, Pan-Africanism will empower people of African descent economically. Without peaceful co-existence among diverse people, pan Africanism is irrelevant. Radical Pan-Africanism must be used as the weapon to dislodge the various actors that have taken over Africa’s resource rich areas. In the political dimension, radical Pan-Africanism will be based on participatory-consensus democracy.

**Transformative education for radical Pan-Africanism in the 21st century**

By “transformative education” we mean curriculums that equip children of African descent with the skills that they need to solve the issues in their communities. These students are transformers of their communities. It also prepares the child to triumph in different conditions and environments. Transformative education acts as a bridge between the child, culture and the environment. It uses all aspects of African culture present and past as well as members of its community. For example, during story time children read books as well as listen
to stories from the older members of the community. Based on transformative education, the university student is equipped to use resources in the community including the knowledge of elders. For example, when new crops are introduced the agricultural student consults the elders to understand which ones do well in the area instead of treating them as irrelevant. For development to be successful, transformative education prepares the student to be equal with members of the community instead of treating them as inferior. The members of the community must trust him/her as one of them. Based on this training, transformative education equips students to be servants of the community rather than alienated and aloof members who think they are superior. As servants of the community, students are active in every aspect of its development. Transformative education is geared towards improving conditions in the community. It improves the cultural, physical and spiritual dimensions of community members. “For real development means the development, the growth, of people.”

The “growth” of people means that they live lives of dignity: access to education, food, health care, shelter and security. Towards that end, transformative education provides opportunities for community members to get out of poverty. Students who have undergone a transformative curriculum share their knowledge and skills with the rest of the community (currently only Egypt requires students to share their knowledge with ten other people). This experience allows students to learn from other members of the community while sharing their book knowledge. It also creates a bond between the students and the community. It creates visionaries who have a moral responsibility to improve the conditions facing the majority of the members of their communities. For example, on the continent students can be critical in informing members of their communities not to sell their land since it is the source of their food and livelihood. Once some people sell their land, they become homeless whether in rural towns or in city slums. Out of desperation, these people and their children become criminals, alcoholics or murderers. Without healthy people of African descent, Pan-Africanism is irrelevant in the 21st century.

Whether Pan-Africanism is relevant in the 21st century will depend on the kind of education that African children are taught. While on the African continent most Africans do not encounter daily humiliations based on white supremacy, they still have to live under conditions determined by most of its international organizations. The loan conditions set out by the international Monetary Bank and the World Bank determine the nature of education that African children are exposed to. The neo-colonial conditions that African countries face also determine the pedagogy that is used to teach African children. To a large extent people of African descent in Europe and North America cannot decide on the education that is taught to their children unless they home-school these children. People of African descent face the instruments of white supremacy daily which shape their outlook. These observations do not mean that Africans and people of African descent have no options. They do.

Transformative education breaks down barriers whether between Western educated people/traditional ones, or Africa/diaspora, rural/urban, Africa/South Africa. It results in a graduate who is aware of self and others. While colonial education alienated the student from his/her parents, transformative education strengthens this bond by allowing children to be taught in African languages too. Language and culture shape how members of society interact with each other. It also shapes their culture and thought process. The use of language remains the greatest obstacle in an education that transforms the community. In some areas, parents are proud when their child cannot speak a word of their language. Transformative education cannot succeed without a uniform language policy that privileges African languages. By educating African children about other parts of Africa and the Diaspora,
transformative education builds a sense of empathy in these students. As a result, it breaks down Xenophobia in South Africa where fellow Africans kill “Ngweregwere” (Africans from other parts of the continent) based on the belief that they are “taking” their economic opportunities away from them. Apartheid education taught South Africans that they were better than Africans from the rest of the continent.

Transformative education aims at empowering the emotional, physical and spiritual aspects of the African child. Similar to indigenous systems, where children learned through experience, transformative education privileges experiential learning. Children learn by doing something. It balances book knowledge with physical labor without privileging the former. It is a cross between the ideals of Frantz Fanon, W.E.B Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Julius Nyerere and Steve Biko. Transformative education equips the African child as a member of the community, country and continent rather than as an individual. It takes into account community preservation, environment, as well as spiritual development as indigenous forms of education did. In transformative education, the child learns about new ideas by applying them to real issues. No community can develop without innovators and philosophers who help curve its future development. Transformative education is based on humility and sacrifice. According to transformative education each member of the community must contribute based on their ability because there are no hand-outs. Based on transformative education, there will be no food desserts because each member of the community will contribute in creating a community garden. It creates a responsible citizen who is morally obliged to give back to the community. Transformative education does not privilege book knowledge over physical labor or office work over farming. Based on transformative education, we are what we eat. The student is taught through experience how to make healthy food choices not only from buying the food but by planting it. By using transformative education many diseases that plague people of African descent such as diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity can be eliminated.

What kind of education can result in radical Pan-Africanism? By “radical” we mean a Pan-Africanism that not only aims at uniting all people of African descent but one that empowers them economically, culturally and politically. Such a brand of Pan-Africanism requires people of African descent who have the material means to contribute to the empowerment of Africans whether in the diaspora or on the continent. Without Africans who are willing to give back to their communities, radical Pan-Africanism cannot triumph. In such a scenario, education is critical because it is the key factor in shaping one’s outlook to life. Any form of education that encourages dependency whether on leaders, family or country does not lead to liberation. The type of education that African children are exposed to still worships cultural and environmental alienation. It marginalizes Africa’s contributions to world civilization and culture. A graduate of this form of education yearns for material wealth without having the intellectual curiosity to create it. As a result, intellectual ability and innovation are marginalized. This present form of education also alienates the African child from poor and rural areas. Without empathy with the poor and communities in rural areas, the African adult cannot give back. This African sees her/his role as critical only as a consumer of material goods but never as an innovator who can transform the conditions facing the majority of the people. This person of African descent has nothing to offer their community except criticism. As noted by Frantz Fanon, in a neo-colonial condition the bourgeoisie of the developing country plays an intermediary role. All its efforts are directed from the former colonial country which “will have taken all precautions when setting up neo-colonialist trade conventions.”

A transformative education can empower the child of African descent as an innovator and entrepreneur who harnesses technology to compete at
the domestic level as well as in the global sector. As a creator of wealth and opportunity, a child who has undergone a transformative education looks beyond self-interest as he/she protects the resources of the continent. This child is a visionary.

How then can education become a transforming agent to empower people of African descent? Such an education will be critical in the following areas: at home, in the classroom, community and in the political sphere. This is not to assume that there are no major challenges when dealing with aspects of education. But in spite of such challenges as alcoholism, broken families, aspects of modernity that demean elders of the community and poverty, education can still be transformed. When we speak of education at home—it begins with the knowledge that the child of African descent is not “less than” others. This child accepts his/her African features. The growing movement of Africans accepting their natural hair is encouraging. It is this self-esteem that will empower the child of African descent to compete and succeed at all levels not only in modeling or sports but also in African languages and civilization, history, literature, innovation, as well as in math and science.

The greatest disservice done to the child of African descent is in the classroom. Most education curriculums whether on the continent or in the diaspora do not teach the African child about African civilization and contribution to the world. A complete curriculum should take into account the triple heritage based on the three elites: African indigenous systems, Muslim and Christian. In some cases, only the elite educated based on Western values are privileged. Furthermore, some schools on the continent are operated by Non-Governmental Organizations which have competing agendas. The African state whether because of war, poverty, or neglect is unable to develop viable educational curriculums for the empowerment of its citizens. The state is also facing major challenges in the face of globalization and liberal democracy which undermine most of its previous responsibilities. For example, with more privatization, schools that were operated by states have been privatized. Some of these schools are run like companies where the people in charge are not qualified to be educators. Furthermore, they do not have a common goal as far as the culture, history and environment of the countries involved are concerned. The emphasis on individualism has also undermined the role of the community in running their schools. In these curriculums, Western civilization is privileged as the genesis of all knowledge.

A transformative education must also change the curriculum. Once the African child starts life from a position of confidence and self-esteem, any challenge can be tackled. Such brand of education results in a child of African descent who can empathize with the conditions of less fortunate members of the community. It produces a graduate who is not alienated from the community. Such a graduate has a moral duty to give back to the community in material goods, opportunity and service. The graduate of a transformative education also empathizes with members of the community who are less fortunate. Without a firm grounding in technology, and a curriculum that focuses on innovation rather than memorization, education cannot be transformative to play the critical role that is needed for the 21st century. Such an education will equip children of African descent with the skills needed to manage the resources within their borders. It is interesting to note that schools of mines are not visible on the continent which is rich in coltan, diamonds, gold, oil and platinum to name a few. Transformative education is more critical in the 21st century in the face of globalization, neocolonialism and individualism. Whether by acting through community gatherings, churches, mosques or social media, transformative education can inculcate a sense of shame in members of the community who have accepted dehumanization as a fact of life. It is this sense of community that can also radicalize Pan-Africanism.
What role can transformative education play at the community level? Let us take the example of gentrification which is occurring in most American cities. A member of the community who has undergone transformative education can carry out projects in the community that empower its members. For example, some entrepreneurs are engaging in gentrification projects without over pricing the properties out of reach of local residents. They are also providing job opportunities to members of the community while preserving its cultural and historical make-up. Instead of working against members of the community, such projects work with the support of the community, therefore, empowering them. In rural areas of Kenya, some members of the community are also engaging in similar projects whereby they renovate old buildings using local talent to empower the community. There is enough brain power within members of the African diaspora and those on the continent to engage in similar projects. Members of the African diaspora have a critical role to play in transformative education. One of the major crises facing the continent is brain drain of African born expertise whether to Asia, Europe, or North America. These Africans can contribute either through innovative projects back home, monetary transfers (which is already happening), or creating schools on the continent where they share their expertise (already happening) as they teach younger generations using transformative education.

Conclusion

The founding fathers and mothers of Pan-Africanism opened avenues for political freedoms. Present and future generations must blast open the avenues for economic empowerment which are major barrier to economic development. Globalization has heightened economic exploitation leaving the majority of the people on the continent in desperate conditions. Even in South Africa where liberal democracy was promoted as the best example of preserving rights in the “rainbow nation,” it has been a dismal failure. Economic rights for the majority of Africans are still a distant dream. Most of these Africans are still born and they die in deplorable conditions in townships. Instead of the end of apartheid resulting in economic empowerment for Africans, it freed foreign owned capital in South Africa to exploit the rest of the continent. Under the guise of globalization, these firms have displaced local businesses. A radical Pan-Africanism would be critical in providing opportunities for local businesses to triumph based on their products. It would provide opportunities for more innovation like Mpesa (Kenya) money transfer systems to be developed throughout the continent. Children of African descent whether they live in the slums of Cairo (Egypt), Kibera (Kenya), Crossroads (South Africa) or Detroit (USA) would benefit from transformative education as everyone gives back and is economically empowered. Toward that end, poverty, dehumanization and violence cease to be the destiny of the child of African descent because each one of us becomes ashamed of these conditions and does something. For democracy to be viable, it must also entail economic freedom and rights. The majority of the population must also enjoy the benefits of political freedom as they live lives of dignity. Liberal democracy privileges political freedom over economic rights. Yet, it is economic rights within a radical Pan-Africanism framework which will lead to the solutions of the problems faced by people of African descent.

If Pan-Africanism is to be used as a tool to unite people of African descent, while empowering them economically three developments are essential. The first one is to eliminate colonial borders, allow freedom of movement and to fund the African Union. The clause that was inherited by the African Union (AU) from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) that respects colonial borders must be eliminated. To break the stronghold of
neocolonialism on the continent, Frantz Fanon’s observations are relevant in the contemporary period as they were then:

Get Africa moving, collaborate in its organization, its regroupment, on revolutionary principles. Participating in the coordinated movement of a continent; that, definitely, is the task I had chosen…having taken Algeria to the four corners of Africa, we now have to go back with the whole of Africa to African Algeria, towards the north, towards the continental city of Algiers. That is what I want: great channels of communication across the desert. To wear out the desert, to deny it, to bring together Africa and to create the continent…Take the absurd and the impossible, rub it up the wrong way and hurl a continent into the assault on the rampart of colonial power.5

It is easier to travel throughout the continent with a foreign passport than an African country’s passport. All Africans and people of African descent must be allowed free movement within the continent. Without free movement, people cannot learn from each other, empathize and contribute fully to the development of the continent. Freedom of movement will only be mutually beneficial once transformative education becomes the norm both on the continent and in the diaspora. Free movement is also critical to break down the barriers of ignorance as well as ethnic strife. Towards that end, it allows an African identity to triumph over all other forms. It should be noted in this respect that the AU’s addition of the sixth zone which represents the African diaspora has opened avenues for development. Other countries should follow the example of Ghana by allowing people of African descent to settle without commercializing its history of suffering as “tourism.” Countries like Kenya have also allowed fellow Africans to settle as long as they obey its laws. These developments allow people of African descent to share skills, to learn from each other and to know more about the continent. Free movement will also increase revenue as visas are eliminated while boosting tourism. As long as people of African descent obey the laws of the particular country, they should be allowed to live in peace. Without peace, there is no life. “Peace” does not mean the absence of war. It is the ability of people of African descent to live lives of dignity.

Since no group of people can develop another group or people, if the African Union has to be viable it has to be funded by African countries. It is naïve to imagine that an organization that is funded from foreign sources without any radical programs to empower the majority of the people can be effective as a Pan-Africanist tool. Finally, African countries must unite. The more the majority of the population of the people become aware of the conditions facing them, the causes of those problems, as well as the means of changing these conditions, the more prepared they are in transforming their lives for the better. Once the people are conscious of their condition, no charismatic figure, religion or amount of ubuntu will stop them from eliminating the conditions that enslave them. Afterall, if Pan-Africanism is to be relevant it has to be radical as well as any government on the continent:

…ought to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts. No leader, however valuable he may be, can substitute himself for the popular will; and the national government, before concerning itself with international prestige, ought first to give back their dignity to all citizens, fill their minds and feast their eyes with human things, and create a prospect that is human because conscious and sovereign men dwell therein.6

524
Notes


3 Nyerere:1974, 8.


Bibliography


