

## **The Evolution of African Political Thought and African Unity**

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### **Abstract**

During the past two decades, the African continent witnessed a series of political and intellectual changes and calls for greater respect for the rights of individuals and peoples; yielded some effects on the levels of economic and social initiatives in the form of unity and integration.

On the other hand, abrogating the principle of maintaining the borders inherited from colonialism -for the first time – and the approval of the secession of Southern Sudan from the North, pointed the conflict that has long been discussed by analysts between the principle of maintaining borders inherited and the principles of human rights and self-determination. Thus, it consolidated the international double standards in the application of those principles and the adoption of such a right in favor of the interests of the super powers and their vision.

The first intellectual project that was presented to the African scene was the idea of African unity. The idea was originated outside the continent as a tool to confront the other in the Diaspora before to be a tool to cope with the colonizer, the pro-independence, and the unity of the Continent. However, the process was not enhanced because most of African countries decision makers stuck to the rule of the national state since the mid-fifties and early sixties of the twentieth century. Consequently, with the entrenched reality of the national state, national development projects started to emerge, mostly socialist and humanitarian.

This article seeks to shed light on the most important intellectual initiatives raised on the African arena in an effort to get rid of the yoke of colonialism and the achievement of the Renaissance, and the share of each of the success, or failure, and the reasons behind that. It tries to discuss the idea of African unity, and stages of development through renaissance and good governance.

### **The Idea of African Unity, and the Stages of Development**

In spite of its inception outside the continent, the idea of African unity is considered to be the oldest intellectual contribution that played a pivotal role on the African arena. It came out of the contribution of many intellectuals (the Diaspora), who shared with Africans the hopes and pains. The idea of African unity has undergone three stages that can be summarized as follows:

#### **A – Stage of Pan-African Congresses**

It started since the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth, with the first conference held in London, in 1900, in response to an invitation of a lawyer from Trinidad Islands, Sylvester Williams, who focused the attention of Conference on the search for ways to improve the African situation of the blacks and to demand good treatment. Then, the First Pan-African Congress was held in Paris, in 1919, under the chairmanship of De Bois, and the Second in London and Brussels in 1921, and the Third Congress in London and Lisbon, in 1923. The Fourth Congress was held in New York, in 1927; it was the last meeting held under the chairmanship of William de Bois.

What is noticeable is that, these conferences focused their demands on the search for ways to improve the situation of Africans, and did not exceed in the political demands prompting the establishment of local self-

government of national groups.<sup>i</sup>  
 A major shift in the nature of unity and objectives came up with the organization of the Fifth Pan-African Congress which was held in Manchester, Britain, in 1945. The Congress witnessed for the first time the active participation of young people who have gained famous and notorious credibility in their countries, Africa's leaders, led by Kwame Nkrumah, Gold Coast (Ghana,) who later became the first president, and Jumo kinyata who became president of Kenya at independence, etc. The representatives demanded strongly and clearly autonomy and independence of Africa.<sup>ii</sup>

### **B–The Move to Africa**

In 1958, in Accra, Ghana's capital, the independent African states at the time (excluding South Africa) three of them belong to black Africa (namely: Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia ), and five Arab Islamic countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, and Morocco) met to discuss and lay down the basis of unity among the independent African countries and the means to support those struggling for self determination.<sup>iii</sup> .

### **The Manifestation of the Idea of African Unity and its Ends After Independence**

In the post-independence period, the idea of African Unity revealed the obvious gap between the desires of African peoples in the translation of the struggle against colonialism, and the fears of some of the leaders of the newly independent states - at the time. Thus, the idea of African unity was manifested in three distinctive positions:

#### **A – The Idea of Unity on the Official Level**

In spite of the struggle of President Nkrumah in order to obtain the approval of the African countries to form a political union of all African countries like the United States, and his defense of the need for a centralized political organization that includes a senate and house of representatives having the authority to conduct a common external policy and planning continental joint economic and industrial development, and the system of joint defense. The efforts for an African unity resulted in the end in establishing the Organization of African Unity as an umbrella for the work of the Africans to preserve the independence and sovereignty of countries, and respect for the territorial integrity, as well as equality between the countries of the continent.<sup>iv</sup>

### **B – State-based Projects as Alternatives to the Idea of African Unity**

With the failure of efforts to form the United States of Africa, some of the leaders of the continent worked hard to adopt Western and Eastern intellectual systems as a means of progress and development, and others sought to develop national development projects, for example Ujamaa project, which crystallized by former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere, which is based in essence on reviving some African traditions and cooperatives; after expressing his opposition to the Eastern and Western ideologies and methods of development. Nyerere explained his own ideas regarding the process of growth and development in Tanzania; stressing that Africa is no longer in need to socialism, nor for those who teach democracy; for these are to be found since the African deep past societies. He advocated an African socialist model that draws from the traditions inherited the principle of recognition of the community as an extension of the family unit, but it is no longer in a position to proceed in the framework of the tribe, or even the nation.<sup>v</sup>

Eventually, both projects failed due to lack of adapting the adopted systems or promoting national projects of development. Consequently, since the end of the eighties of the twentieth century in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the transitions in Eastern Europe, and the escalation of talk about the increasing marginalization of Africa, the project of a union re-emerged.

### **From Unity to Union, Renaissance and Good Governance**

The most prominent manifestation of the difference between the two phases was that although with the survival of the idea of the state centralized political system in reform, unity, and renaissance; it ceded some of its influence in favor of democratic discourse due to the proliferation of concepts of human rights and good governance enriched by participation, accountability, transparency, and good management .., which represented a response to the pressures of globalization, and the implications of a shift in political thinking on the African arena as detailed below.

#### **A - From the African Unity to the African Union: Interaction of Thought and Reality**

The establishment of the African Union represents the translation of the interaction of political thought and the reality on the African arena. Over the following decades to the creation of the Organization of African Unity, the African unity thinkers and politicians had not given up their ambition to establish a more powerful federal entity comprising states of the entire African continent, and take care of their interests.

Several attempts to amend the Charter of the OAU took place. The most prominent one was advocated in the African summit resolutions in 1979 to establish a committee to review the Charter of the OAU. Then, in 1991, and during the twenty-seventh summit, Abuja Agreement to promote the economic integrity among African states was signed. It was followed by the initiative of former Nigerian President Oba Sango, to establish a forum to discuss cooperation, development and stability issues in Africa along the lines of the European Security and Cooperation Forum.

Consequently, the former Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi convened a special session of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of the OAU in Libya, in 1999 to discuss ways to reform and activate the Organization; consistent with current regional and international developments and transformations.

The main resolution of the above mentioned extraordinary session was the creation of the African Union (AU.) In the regular session of the thirty-seventh Conference of Heads of State and Government of the OAU in Lusaka, in July 2001, has been officially announced the establishment of the AU to replace the OAU.<sup>vi</sup>

As can be seen from the principles, objectives and mechanisms of the African Union, they mostly came in response to international, regional and internal challenges. On the other hand, there is an additional feature of the changes in African political thought, reflected in the principles of the AU, and its objectives and mechanisms, which is the acceptance of institutional intervention in the affairs of member states in the event of difficult circumstances, namely war crimes, and genocide. It has been proven that it is a translation of and response to the reality of the African experience in

matter of the effectiveness of this intervention in some cases, and prevented the consequences of foreign intervention.<sup>vii</sup>

## **B - Renaissance and Good Governance in the African Thought**

The concept of African renaissance is the concept that expresses hopes of overcoming the African peoples and the challenges facing the Continent, and to achieve cultural, scientific and economic renaissance.

This concept was popularized in the wake of its use by Thabou Mbeki, the former President of South Africa in the famous speech he gave in May 1996 under the title: "I am an African," and in April 1997 M'beki included the elements that would eventually establish an African renaissance, namely: social cohesion, democracy, economic reconstruction and development, and the emergence of Africa as a key player in the geo-political affairs.

Some analysts have that the African renaissance represent the third wave of thought in a continuing trend to build a strong African continent after the efforts of liberating Africa in the post-colonialism era that represented the first wave. The ideas of democratization since the late eighties and early nineties of the twentieth century represented the second wave. To translate the idea of the renaissance to the practical reality, an international conference was organized; attended by more than 470 intellectuals and scholars to discuss the idea in the presence of Thabo Mbeki who delivered the opening speech, in which he addressed the themes of the conference: culture, education, economic transformation, science, values, technology, transportation issues, energy, moral renewal of Africa, and media and communication. Thus, the African Renaissance Institute (ARI) was established in October 1999 to illustrate interest in the issues stated above. In order to work to develop a critical mass of African scientists, big grants and adequate support were devoted to them as well

as the establishment of adequate infrastructure for communication between scientists, and between them and the decision-makers in their own countries to enable them to solve the important problems. The ideas of the African renaissance has found great resonance among many African writers in Africa. Many of the visions confirmed a lot of theoretical and practical realities; perhaps the most important: detecting bias of many Western scholars, and researchers, when talking about the term development of developing countries, or backwardness on the one hand. On the other hand, the African researchers and intellectuals presented a critical view of the contents of growth and value in the Western perspective, which is based primarily on the material standard, ignoring everything else of value, ethical and humanitarian standards. And on the same level, achieving African unity, and there is no way for that unity only by overcoming internal disputes and conflicts that have ravaged different parts of the continent. However, the entrance to achieve this is to take the principles of good governance and its pillars, which are: dependence on equal opportunity, the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and rationality in decision-making, non-centralization of power, and respect for human rights; with no recognition of the separatist or ethnic voices.

## **Conclusion**

The political thought in Africa, as well as policies, in large part comes as reactions to practices or ideas from outside the Continent. The African unity was the result of the suffering of Africans and black people in general from slavery and alienation, then of the disadvantages of colonialism. Moreover, the idea of the African renaissance, which is a call for a return to African values, is a response to globalization. Similarly, the transition to democracy and good governance can be seen



as a kind of compliance with the conditions of the African Bank for Development in an effort to get more economic support.

In fact, it can in no way break the bonds of the relationship between thought and reality, and it is not inconceivable that ideas - in any African community or non-African – are pure and free from any external influence in relations and interdependency among nations and peoples. Nevertheless, Africa still remains in a position of receiving from western political thought, and the political elite remains a barrier in front of its cultural and political ideas heritage to achieve a renaissance derived from African values and based on African peoples interests.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Kwame Nkrumah. Axioms, Panaf Books, London, 1970, p. 19

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p23.

<sup>iii</sup> Col A.H. Louw, "the concept of the African renaissance as a force multiplier to enhance lasting peace and stability in sub-saharan Africa", at: [http://www.africavenir.org/uploads/media/LouwAfricanRenaissanceForceMultiplier\\_03.pdf](http://www.africavenir.org/uploads/media/LouwAfricanRenaissanceForceMultiplier_03.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Nkrumah, Revolutionary Path, p.222.

<sup>v</sup> Gilbert M. Khadiagala, Allies in Diversity: The Frontline States in Southern African Security, Ohio University Press, 1994, p. xi.

<sup>vi</sup> Zdenek Kernevka, The Unfinished Quest of Unity, Africa and the OAU, Africa Books, London, 1977, pp. 1-11

<sup>vii</sup> Casso .Jose A, Loyola, Africa Renaissance and Globalization: A Conceptual Analysis: A journal of African Studies vol 36 no, 1, 2009. At: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8k7472tg>

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