

Chapitre 4

Boosting Cultural Readiness for a Pan-African Momentum

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How can African young people express and make their aspiration to pan-Africanity a reality? What goals do they share and what challenges do they face in attempting to renew this narrative? How would the renewal of this ideology effectively serve the uplifting of the people of the continent? How can it be ensured that the pan-African identity conversation includes all African citizens, and is not confined to the African intelligentsia? From a broad overview of contemporary pan-Africanism in action, this paper responds to several questions, to provide input into the ongoing conversation on the renewal of pan-Africanism and the possibility of a cultural pan-African momentum.

There has never been a better time to call ourselves pan-African, or has there?

In international conferences, in the C-suites of global corporates or startups, Africa seems to become the ultimate destination, offering frontiers to be explored and emerging markets to be conquered. It is an exciting prospect for purpose-seeking individuals. Africa is sometimes the playground of inspiring ‘leap-frogging’ technologies, a term now so overused it’s become a commodity belonging to a global narrative. African youth is trending worldwide, offering inspiring stories as an alternative to existing, painful, and harmful stereotypes of victimhood, violence, chaos, and corruption.

The West consumes these inspiring stories. And Africans once again are at risk of being defined as Africans and pan-Africans by a foreign gaze.

In her essay “Eulogy for Pan-Africanism: Long live Man-Africanism”, Kenyan author Nanjala Nyabola writes: “Everyone can tell you what Pan-Africanism stands for... when it is juxtaposed with the West. But no one seems to know what Pan-Africanism means when it is self-referential. And the solidarity consciousness is dying, leaving behind a network that exists solely to protect rich, powerful men.”²⁰²

Despite this bitter criticism eloquently raised, I realized in my travels to many African countries that young people express in a variety of ways their attachment to concepts of pan-Africanity. The pan-African Africa they dream of is often a place for their legitimate aspirations of

202. Nanjala Nyabola, Eulogy For Pan-Africanism: Long Live Man-Africanism, *The New Inquiry*, May 2016 - <https://thenewinquiry.com/eulogy-for-pan-africanism-long-live-man-africanism/>

a brighter future, of freedom and democracy, good governance, social and economic blossoming, rather than development. They have a sense that the rules of development drawn up in the post-colonial era are only a skewed power struggle. From Morocco to Ethiopia, Senegal to Rwanda, Tunisia to Ghana, t-shirt slogans and song mottos, depictions of a borderless continent stand for a pan-African attitude, if not an awareness of shared struggles and common realities. It is worth better understanding, appreciating, and supporting these.

The few sources of literature we find on African youth narratives corroborate these observations. In a literature review published in September 2020 “African youth and the impact of narrative, the Africa No Filter collective highlighted the following: “regarding their sense of identity, most youth firstly identified according to their nation state, followed by being African, and then by ethnicity or religion. However, Nigerians, Kenyans and Ethiopians were more likely to identify by their ethnicity, and Southern Africans, especially South Africans, were less likely to identify with being African. Nevertheless, youth overwhelmingly agreed that a shared African identity exists, based on a similar history and similar economic trajectories.”²⁰³

From a broad outlook at contemporary pan-Africanism in action, this paper will cover several questions, aiming at fueling the ongoing conversation on the renewal of pan-Africanism and the possibility of a cultural pan-African momentum.

How are African young people expressing and making their inclination to pan-Africanity a reality? How are they attempting to renew this narrative? What are the aspirations they share and the challenges they face in doing so? How would the renewal of this ideology effectively serve the uplifting of the people of the continent? How do we make sure the pan-African identity conversation is inclusive of all African citizens, and not confined to the African intelligentsia?

203. Literature review on African Youth and the impact of narrative, led by researcher Rebecca Pointer, Africa No Filter, September 2020

I. The contours of pan-Africanism and limits of the ideology

Pan-Africanism stemmed from an idealized version of Africa developed by Africans from the diaspora, and built and nurtured by members of an intellectual elite who received Western educations and were able to translate what they grasped as shared aspirations into demands to the West. This pan-Africanism still fuels the political pan-Africanism in institutions.

1. Political pan-Africanism is not enough

Pan-Africanism from above is underway with strong traction: the continental free trade agreement (AfCFTA) was set to start in January 2021, progress on the digital strategy for the continent is spearheaded with innovative models such as the Smart Africa Alliance, bringing together countries and private sector members, the progress of the Agenda 2063 framework is pushed by the African Union, ultimately boosting intra-African trade on and offline, promoting industrialization, creating jobs, and improving the global competitiveness of African economies.

These commitments are important and this institutional progress is indispensable. As Secretary-general of the AfCFTA Secretariat Mr Wamkele Mene put it on the AfCFTA agreement, “This is not just a trade agreement, this is our hope for Africa to be lifted from poverty”²⁰⁴.

Sharing this message while starting a conversation at scale, with the support of tech startups and opinion relays (i.e. influencers, artists, leaders of communities in addition to the online and offline media) from the continent, on topics like the AfCFTA, would make the benefits of building a single African network tangible for the vast majority of its economic agents.

Understanding the value of institutional progress is key, while acknowledging the efforts pan-African institutions do in engaging better with young people on agenda-setting, notably through

204. Africa’s free trade area opens for business, Franck Kuwonu, Africa Renewal online magazine, January 7, 2021 <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2021/afcfta-africa-now-open-business>

the valuable work of relays including the pan-African activist and Tunisian diplomat Aya Chebbi, appointed as the first African Union Special Envoy on Youth by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat. During her two-year mandate starting in November 2018, she served as a representative and advocate for the voices and interests of African youth.

We need strong institutions that work better with civil society agents, artists, community builders, the latter being capable of addressing topics of identity and belonging, and by doing so, acting as powerful levers for a pan-African momentum. Such actors of change can do so in an organic and sustainable manner because these deeper social, cultural and identity issues are sensitive and require the necessary trust built over time by these actors.

2. The end of man-africanism²⁰⁵ and the call for a self-improved pan-Africanism

Many authors and thought leaders are preparing the ground for a renewed forward-looking definition of pan-Africanism that would better serve its goals.

In fact, pan-Africanism as a political strategy has mostly served patriarchal structures since the 1950s, overriding female and youth voices. For instance, a British Council (2018) study²⁰⁶ found that young people “felt excluded from political decision-making because of their elders’ lack of respect” while they would like to be more involved.

The ‘big man syndrome’ still prevails on the continent²⁰⁷. If we’re seeking a consistency with respectable ideals, the overall aspirations of dignity, freedom and equality pushed by the founding fathers of pan-Africanism, then we’re bound to reexplore with a demanding critical lens political and apolitical pan-Africanism.

205. Term coined by Nduko o’Matigere.

206. British Council. (2018b). Listening to the voices of young people: Kenya (No. H198; Next Generation). British Council in the Literature Review on African youth and the impact of narrative, Africa No Filter, September 2020

207. Camilla Houeland and Sean Jacobs, The ‘Big Man’ Syndrome in Africa,

Dr Ama Biney put it in a powerful letter to ‘man-Africanists’ published on International Women’s Day 2017: “The Pan-Africanist movement harbors some African men who conceal patriarchal attitudes. These ‘Man-Africanists’ are cancerous to the advancement of the movement that needs to engage in developing new men who are genuinely anti-sexist, anti-heterosexist, empathetic, connected to a radical political concept of self-awareness, and guided by an ethical sense of equality, justice and freedom for all”²⁰⁸.

Nanjala Nyabola in her Eulogy for Pan-Africanism: “Man-Africanism is the broken and unfulfilled promise of Lumumba, Cabral, Mboya and Sankara, who never lived to see the limits and material opportunities that their ideas or theories would engender.”

Many contemporary pan-African agents of change are doing this work of birthing a new pan-Africanism, an approach safe from archaic thoughts based on inequalities, and capable of embracing the last decade big ideas of Afropolitanism and African Feminism and LGBTQA+ advocacy.

II. Looking at contemporary pan-Africanism in action

From civil society to media and social media, creatives and innovators are creating valuable spaces, within and outside of formal politics, allowing for a much-needed grassroots conversation on our pan-African commonalities.

Online media and social media, embracing the complexity of Africa

As outlined previously, young people who feel ignored and systemically outsmarted mobilize via social media around specific issues, such as gender-based violence and patriarchy. In Kenya, feminists have launched Twitter campaigns to protest against oppressive practices with regard to women’s clothing and gender-based violence, with hashtags including #MydressMychoice and #strippingshame, while in Botswana the #IWearWhatIWant campaign emerged.

In her book Digital Democracy, Analogue

208. <https://www.pambazuka.org/pan-africanism/letter-%E2%80%9Cman-africanists%E2%80%9D-international-women%E2%80%99s-day>

Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya, author Nanjala Nyabola gave compelling examples of this phenomenon: “perhaps no other group has capitalized as much on the new spaces that social media has created in Kenyan society than young, radical feminists. Online spaces have amplified women’s voices and lived experiences in a way that traditional media still struggles with, allowing them to create communities of safety and of action. Particularly by providing young women a space to publicly articulate their radical politics to a large audience, social media has reinvigorated feminist discourse in Kenya”²⁰⁹.

Across the continent, social movements are rising up and taking to the streets and online spaces. Activists organize their movements online, against police brutality (i.e. with the recent slogan #EndSARS calling for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad) and militarism, expressing the thirst of young people for democracy, human rights, and liberation, and demanding change. The renewed pan-Africanism roots itself in this dynamic.

In addition to bringing to the surface the challenges they face, young people also want to create a dialogue online around pan-Africanism. A quick Google search shows 2+ million results for the term ‘pan-Africanism’ and 320+ million for the term ‘pan-African’. There is also a growing membership of pan-Africanist groups on social media platforms, i.e. Facebook groups like Pan-African Renaissance, pan-African music, pan-African stories, Africa is a country, etc.

This desire to create online spaces and share relevant information and thoughts on the continent has been captured and responded to by innovative media i.e. the Upfront Africa Radio Program (Voice of America), an interactive show that engages young Africans on the continent and in the diaspora.

III. Exploring the artistic borders of pan-Africanism

Contemporary pan-Africanism is made of rap, hip hop, Afrobeat and jazz

209. Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*, Chapter 7.

Contemporary pan-Africanism is pop culture! As exciting as it is, this phenomena intertwines with the stark reality highlighted by the Africa No Filter collective in its literature review: the “youth were not confident about telling their own stories, with many of them using tropes from the U.S. or UK narratives rather than telling their own stories”. Hence the relevance of music in articulating the identity of young people. If pop culture becomes this safer and playful place to express their belonging, so be it.

Msia Kibona Clark, associate professor at Howard University and author of *Hip Hop in Africa: Prophets of the City and Dustyfoot Philosophers* pinpoints the role of hip hop as a “powerful vehicle for spreading and shaping pan-Africanism”²¹⁰.

Take the case of Zenji Boy, a song-writer and rapper from Zanzibar. In February 2021, at the Busara Music Festival in Zanzibar where I joined his band to perform as a vocalist, we chose to start the show with his most politically engaged song, *Mazabe*²¹¹, meaning ‘incorrect’. Strong messages reflected his perception of the systemic inadequacies of the continent, “homoya kuna” meaning “we are not united”, “ji kongoya tuna”, meaning “we are struggling to move on” or “hua kou skiza hakuna”, meaning “there’s no one to listen to”. This song expressed rejection of political leaders who misuse their powers for political gain.

The pioneer of Afrofusion, and Grammy award winner for Best Global Music Album, Burna Boy has been crusading against mis-governance and the failings of leaders in Nigeria and the continent. On receiving the 2021 Grammy Award, he declared: “Africa is in the house, men! Africa, we are in the house! You get me? This is a big win for Africans of my generation all over the world and this should be a lesson for every African out there. No matter where you are, no matter what you plan to do, you can achieve it. No matter where you are from because you are a king. Look at me: Grammy award-winning Burna Boy”²¹².

210. Msia Kibona Clark, *Contemporary hip hop embodies a dynamic Pan-Africanism*

<https://qz.com/africa/1967848/what-hip-hop-can-tell-us-about-pan-africanism/>.

211. <https://stonetownrecords.bandcamp.com/track/mazabe-ft-g-nako>.

212. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/nigerian->

Doing so, Burna Boy imprinted on the mind, heart, and soul of the million young people listening to him a correlation of success with African youth identity. This is worth celebrating as this form of success stems not only from the combination of his talent and work, but also the courage he has in calling out public figures in what he underlines are ethical inconsistencies and a proof of their lack of capacity to lead the change (i.e. the song “Dangote”, named after the Nigerian billionaire Aliko Dangote, criticizes the endless seeking for wealth or money from the richest man in Africa).

1. Pan-Africanism is entrepreneurial

While young people overwhelmingly confirm their inclination towards a pan-African identity, 63% feel that African countries should set their differences aside and “come together to reach common solutions”²¹³. Pan-Africanism is definitely a programmatic solution-oriented mindset, similar to an entrepreneurial mindset.

Africa’s entrepreneurs, innovators, and creatives can be considered among the best advocates of continental solidarity, working to build these common solutions. Capitalizing on digital possibilities, various collectives are developing innovative ways of co-building the continent’s future narrative. AfriLabs for instance, the largest pan-African network of 240 technology and innovation hubs in 48 countries, was founded in 2011 to build a community and push for a vision of thriving tech on the continent. By supporting innovation hubs to increase the potential of entrepreneurs, they make pan-Africanism concrete with capacity building, financing, networking, policy advocacy, and the production of insights on innovative ecosystems. They act as indispensable actors creating real spaces of intra-African entrepreneurial dialogue and best-practices sharing. i4policy, a movement of hubs now supported by the Innovation for Policy Foundation, focuses on creating participatory processes that invite entrepreneurs, innovators,

music-sensation-burna-boy-wins-grammy.

213. Literature review on African Youth and the impact of narrative, led by researcher Rebecca Pointer, Africa No Filter, September 2020

and creatives to engage in public policies for innovation.

IV. Rooting a common identity in practical steps, within and outside of formal politics

With this general overview of the pan-Africanists in action, let us outline some ideas that would take further their vision of renewing the pan-African narrative.

Choosing the rallying values

Choosing our values means letting go of beliefs that can act as internal resistance to realizing pan-Africanity: we can mention, for example, the internalized misperceptions of our cultural defects, and the development stigmas with the idea of Africans relentlessly trying to catch up with the first world. Development is a narrative and a post-colonial construct, maintaining a power play between the Global North and the Global South, and should only be treated as such.

While it’s tempting to join the celebration of the happy resilient Africans, facing ridiculous obstacles and standing strong in celebration of the very popularized Zulu term ‘Ubuntu’ (“ I am because we are”) spirit²¹⁴, this construct might not acknowledge the complexity of emerging identities. To be true to pan-Africanism, we ought to give ourselves the leeway to renew our rapport with ‘Ubuntu’, bring this spiritual aspiration to be the primary value for public and corporate decision-making and governance at all levels, make it an alternative route for progress on our terms against neo-colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism in their new configurations in the twenty-first century.

1. Activating the cultural enablers for a pan-African momentum

As the founder of the Washington-based Pan-African collective, Dr. Jonathan Weaver stated, “The only dark part of Africa is our lack of

214. Thembi Mutch, “Are you an African artist”, Africa is a country - <https://africasacountry.com/2016/06/are-you-an-african-artist>.

knowledge about it.”²¹⁵ This is true in America, and is also true within the continent itself, where educational systems have a tendency to teach the history of Europeans in Africa, with much less of a focus on African history itself, according to acclaimed journalist and thought leader Zeineb Badawi²¹⁶.

Unless we popularize the reading of books by other Africans, then our education is warped and any pan-African call is doomed to fail. We need our literature teachers to include a solid corpus of anglophone and francophone African novels, keeping pace with the current African literary boom. As Ainehi Egoro, founder of the Brittle Paper online platform pointed out: “The likes of BooksandRhymes, Cheeky Natives, Brittle Paper, The Republic, Tsehai Publishers and authors such as Akwaeke Emezi, Safia Elhillo, Molar Wood, Ijeoma Umebinyuo, and Bernardine Evaristo are making space for African literature on social media, alongside tens of thousands of readers who share their experiences as readers of African literature”²¹⁷.

Teaching African art is also key, and now easier through technology. A growing number of African artists are realizing the importance and potency of technology—social media, apps, websites, and online platforms focused on the promotion and archiving of African contemporary art. Smartphones, tablets, and even satellite television have also played a role, showing artists that despite the lack of artistic infrastructure across the continent—including few strong commercial and noncommercial art galleries, museums not focused on promoting and exhibiting contemporary art, and a general lack of curatorial practice, artist residencies, and recognized art schools—there are

still ways to reach out and get the attention of art managers, critics, collectors, and gallerists across the continent and the world.

Nowadays, African creatives are making the most of digital tools to make their art alive and accessible. From the 3-D Fashion week of the Democratic Republic of Congo designer Hanifa²¹⁸ to the Moroccan tapes or Marocopedia, the first platform dedicated to the digitization of Moroccan heritage in all its diversity, midway between digital museum and Web TV documentary, or the online pan-African galleries such as Arts Design Africa, African creatives are proving the digital revolution offers an array of venues for them to achieve their esthetic and societal vision of a renewed pan-Africanism.

Renewing pan-Africanism, declaring ourselves as one people united in our diversity, is a worthwhile vision and challenge. It needs an enormous amount of individual and collective work, uncovering what’s left from our ancestors, outlining the genealogy of our alterity, questioning the accessible archives and everything that we cannot find written or left tangible, untangling the promises and hopes that were told in stories. And most importantly, choosing what we transmit, what we keep alive in sharing. That is certainly universal, but it’s also time for Africa to embrace its capacity to bring forth this universality. In practical terms, that means strengthening the aforementioned agents of change, facilitating conversations beyond the political level, and digging deeper into culture, human ecology, national identities, history, colonialism, intergenerational trauma healing, and the collective social wisdom of nations. It means creating safe spaces to encourage the intellectual thinking and debate about the structure of our continent, rooted in deep listening, reciprocal research relationships, and thoughtful writing. The pan-African narrative renewal that we invoke has to be, and can only be, an open and inclusive conversation, between Africans themselves to start with, the diaspora and the world. It should open or catalyze the process of healing from centuries of brutality, and more recent decades of misunderstandings, from owning back again our lands, our colors. With lucidity. And optimism.

215. Elsa Wiehe, Teaching African History and Cultures Across the Curriculum, Edutopia, July 23, 2020 - <https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-african-history-and-cultures-across-curriculum>

216. Zeineb Badawi, Using African history as a tool for Change, TEDxEuston, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsdwybV07e8>
https://www.ted.com/talks/zeinab_badawi_using_african_history_as_a_tool_for_change

217. Ainehi Egoro, The Measure of Africa’s Time: A Decade of Our Collective Literary Pursuits, October 2020 - <https://brittlepaper.com/2020/10/the-measure-of-african-a-decade-of-our-collective-literary-pursuits/>.

218. <https://hanifa.co/>