Nigeria’s Role in Shaping Pan-African Ideals at the National, Sub-regional, Regional, Continental and Global Levels

By:

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Introduction

In this brief writeup, I contemplate Nigeria’s role in shaping pan-African ideals at the national, sub-regional, regional, continental and global levels. I suggest that Nigeria’s role in shaping pan-Africanism is evident when viewed through the prism of its afro-centric foreign policy agenda as well as its domestic policy of reasonable accommodation of nationals of other African countries. I also suggest that Nigeria’s leadership role in Africa is one that comes naturally to it as the most populous country on the African continent and one of its largest economies. Yet I am not entirely convinced that Nigeria has done enough to leverage its significant strategic value, advantage and importance in deepening pan-Africanism; nor has it always shown leadership when it mattered. To the

extent that Nigeria has failed to show leadership, the resulting vacuum in leadership has been filled by other African nations, some of which are not as strategically positioned and/or advantaged like Nigeria. This calls for reflection on the continuing moral authority of Nigeria to mobilize and inspire other African countries to come together to address some of the serious challenges facing the African continent, many of which are well documented (this conversation is however outside the scope of this paper).

In this paper, I firstly examine the phenomenon of pan-Africanism, a concept that has been rightly characterized by Imanuel Geiss as quite complex and defying of a clear-cut definition and yet remaining a contemporary active political force. Pan-Africanism continues to serve as a lightning rod for the (de)legitimation process that has shaped the trajectory of African regional governance. Mickler and Sturman note that appeals to pan-Africanism "have been used variously to construct and contest the scale, pace and norms constituting continental integration, including its modes of participation." Secondly, I examine the contributions of Nigeria in shaping pan-African ideals at different levels (the national, sub-regional, regional, continental and global levels).

Pan-Africanism as the Spirit of Africa

While it remains quite contested, pan-Africanism continues to animate the ideation of an African identity premised on notions of solidarity, interconnectedness, interdependence, reciprocity, mutuality, and a continuum of relationships. The understanding that only through a united action can Africa rise above her challenges resonates across various perspectives that have emerged about pan-Africanism. Of this, Moyo and Ramsamy write that:

> "There is no doubt that pan-Africanism was seen as a philosophy and ethical system. As a philosophy, pan-Africanism represented the aggregation of the historical, cultural, spiritual, artistic, scientific, and philosophical legacies of Africans from past times to the present. As an ethical system, pan-Africanism promoted values that were the product of African civilization and the struggles against slavery, racism, and colonialism."

Moyo and Ramsamy's philosophical description of pan-Africanism resonates with the most commonly cited way to describe solidarity in Africa. This description is drawn from the Bantu languages, which in Zulu for example says *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, literally meaning "a person is a person because of people or through other people". The spirit of ubuntu encourages "reciprocity and envelopes a communalism of interdependency, sharing, oneness, loving, giving and a sense of a continuum of relationships." By acknowledging the humanity of others, our humanity is also acknowledged. No one captures this more eloquently than Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa when he wrote about *ubuntu* as follows:

> "It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are often open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them." (Tutu 2005, 25-26).

In its ethical dimension, on the other hand, pan-Africanism has been weaponized as an ideology of African emancipation, of economic, technical and social modernization. It has offered "a rallying slogan, a springboard, and an ideological vehicle for cultivating the common efforts of African and African descendant peoples to advance their political efforts globally". It has inspired political action geared towards elevating the position of Africa amongst other more advanced developed continents of the world while seeking to reckon with the troubled history of the continent. The African Union (AU) has deployed pan-Africanist ideas, ideology, and identities as bases for political mobilization – an approach consistent with the AU's self-proclaimed objective to position Africa's

global engagement in promoting its own values in a world rich in disparities. Nonetheless, questions arise about the continued relevance of pan-Africanism in our day, against the backdrop of challenges to its continued utility through conceptual assaults on its fundamental tenets. Although an exploration and/or resolution of this question falls outside the scope of this paper, I agree with Araoye that "the integrity and undiminished salience of pan-Africanism as a philosophy of radical emancipation of black humanity" is made evident by the fact that it is an intellectual tradition that has shaped organizing principles in the struggle for Africa's emancipation from adverse foreign influences.

Nigeria's Role in Shaping Pan-African Ideals

What role, if any, has Nigeria played in shaping pan-African ideals at the national, sub-regional, regional, continental and global levels? Has Nigeria done enough to leverage its strategic position which arguably projects it as a natural leader in many fronts on the continent? It is to these questions I briefly turn my attention in this section of the paper.

Nigeria's National Contributions

At the national level, Nigeria has done relatively well in fostering a positive and welcoming environment for nationals of other African countries to participate in its vast economic space (both in the formal and informal sector). In the formal sector, Nigeria has attracted South African brands like MTN, DSTV, Shoprite as well as professionals from across the continent. Equally so, Nigeria has exported professionals like doctors, lawyers, and academics through government programs such as the Technical Aid Corps (TAC) scheme and through individual migration of professionals seeking better opportunities in other African countries. Also, Nigerian companies and entrepreneurs have invested extensively in other African countries, helping to drive the economies of these countries (for example in the financial services sector).

Additionally, in the informal sector, Nigeria has proven to be an attractive destination for low-skilled workers from neighboring countries like Benin, Togo, Ghana, Cameroon etc., while many low-skilled Nigerian workers are also actively participating in the informal economies of these countries (for example in Ghana, South Africa and neighboring countries, traders from Eastern Nigeria are visibly active in the local economy).

Apart from these economic contributions, one can also identify political, social and cultural contributions of Nigeria and Nigerians to fostering pan-Africanism. As an example, Nigeria's considerable soft power in music, films, and fashion has contributed enormously to forging a definable identity for Africa. McCall compellingly argues that Nollywood (Nigeria's film industry) "while not offering a coherent philosophy or world-view that might be called 'pan-African', is a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African."

As an area of concern however, it is notable that Nigeria's leadership in shaping pan-African ideals is very often dependent on who occupies the helm of affairs in the country. For example, in August 2019, the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari took the unprecedented step of closing Nigeria's land borders to trade in goods and services and this lasted for 16 months. Policies such as this, in my view, roll back on Nigeria's leadership role in fostering pan-Africanism.

Nigeria's Sub-regional and Regional Contributions

Nigeria's role in deepening pan-Africanism at the sub-regional and regional level is quite extensive to be adequately documented and/or analyzed in this paper. However, one can point to sub-regional and regional initiatives around security and economic integration as areas where Nigeria has contributed to deepening pan-Africanism. Nigeria has signed a series of trade agreements with countries that are its immediate neighbors; Nigeria has also established multilateral economic and/or functional groupings within its region/sub-region such as the Chad Basin Commission, the Niger Basin Authority and the Economic Community of West African States. Equally worthy of mention is Nigeria's relatively extensive contributions to peace-keeping initiatives in theatres of conflict in the West African region (through ECOMOG) and across the continent (through involvement in Multinational Joint Task Forces).

Nigeria's Continental and Global Contributions

At the continental level, Nigeria's contributions date back to the pioneering work of its nationalists who contributed to the evolution of an Africa-driven episteme of pan-Africanism. As the literature shows, the move towards integration in Africa began with diasporic pan-Africanism during the European

colonial era. "This was pioneered by the African diaspora in the continent of Americas and Europe, spearheaded by the likes of Henry Sylvester-Williams, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B du Bois and Malcolm X." Modern African integration efforts derives from the pan-Africanists philosophical foundations of Kwame Nkrumah (of Ghana), Julius Nyerere (of Tanzania), and Nnamdi Azikiwe (of Nigeria). The efforts of these pan-Africanists culminated in the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 (which then became the African Union in 2001). In addition, it was instrumental to shaping the trajectory of African integration agendas such as the 1979 Monrovia Strategy, the 1980 Lagos Plan of Action, and the Abuja Treaty of 1991 which gave birth to the African Economic Community. More relatively recent is Nigeria's role in fashioning the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The NEPAD initiative was "a pledge by a new crop of African leaders with a deep sense of history and the vision to eradicate poverty and place the continent on the path of sustainable growth and development."

At the global level, Nigeria has tried to project Africa as the centerpiece of its foreign policy; and for a while this was an oft-touted mantra in the ideation of Nigeria's foreign policy by many administrations in the country post-independence (an in-depth exploration of this issue is not possible in this paper). While there has since been a discernable shift in the thematic focus of Nigeria's foreign policy in recent times, it goes without saying that issues affecting the African continent continue to take center stage whenever Nigeria is pushing an agenda before global audiences such as the UN, WTO, WHO and other multilateral bodies of the international order.

Conclusion

Since the concept took root through the efforts of diasporic pan-Africanist, the phenomenon of pan-Africanism has remained a central site of contestations as to its meaning and the basis of its episteme. Yet none of this matters when account is taken of the fact that pan-Africanism now serves as a rallying slogan for invoking the spirit of *ubuntu* which encourages Africans to identify shared values that can inspire collective action towards facing the enormous challenges confronting the African continent (particularly in the face of often hostile foreign interference). Nigeria has contributed much to shaping pan-Africanism across different domains. Yet there is room for more deepened

contributions by Nigeria when account is taken of its significant strategic advantage compared to other African countries. Thus, as a core objective, this paper first acknowledges Nigeria's contributions; and secondly suggests that Nigeria needs to reflect more deeply on ways it can further promote pan-Africanism at home and abroad.

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