

Pan-Africanism: Beyond survival to renaissance

By **Amina Mama**

The author is the director of women and gender studies at the University of California, Davis, founding editor of *Feminist Africa*, and former director of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town. This is her address to the African Union 50th Anniversary Heads of States Summit, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on 25 May 2013. It was published online at www.opendemocracy.net/print/73618

Honourable Presidents, your Excellencies, Madame Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union, Honourable Chair Dr Carlos Lopez, ladies and gentlemen, fellow celebrants:

I salute you with respect for your dedication and commitment as our leaders. As our heads of state, you are the official embodiment of African people's collective aspirations for peace, prosperity and justice for all. The fate of Africa and all her peoples is vested in you and your power to sustain and advance the Pan-African vision through concrete and concerted action.

Deeply humbled by Madame Chairperson's invitation to share a few ideas, I will begin by drawing courage from the very many women whose courage and creativity have provided us with a proud, fearless and doubt-dispelling legacy of commitment to freedom and justice. Their examples locate our contemporary women's movements at the heart of the Pan-African project. I reflect on the unknown and unnamed millions of African women whose lives and struggles paved the path that Africa's women's movements tread today. I resolve to speak my humble truth to your political power.

FREEDOM AND SELF-REALISATION

I appeal to your Excellencies to honour all the hope that we ordinary African citizens have vested in you. Ordinary citizens fought and died to ensure that we would have independent governments of African people, by African people, and for African people. The will to political independence was not just a matter of pride, but also rooted in very clear material and political interests. African people hoped that having our own states would empower us to end the structural underdevelopment of Africa set in place by colonialism, as so clearly outlined by Caribbean scholar Walter Rodney. African people sought – and still seek – freedom and self-realisation, an end to poverty, ignorance, disease, discrimination and injustice.

The fact is that, after 50 years, Africa's millions are not happy. The date tells us our celebrations are due, but the data caution us. I appeal to you to stay alert to the discontents of women, youth, and many millions of

marginalised others, inhabiting mining areas, oil drilling areas, our great savannah lands, forests and deserts, coastlands and highlands. This discontent clearly finds expression across the region in numerous protests, protests in which young people and women dissent and put themselves on the frontlines. Honourable leaders, please do not ignore the African Spring, and so imperil the future we seek.

Our late writer Chinua Achebe, once asked to present a presidential lecture at the World Bank in 1998, spoke like a seer under the title "Development is people". Why would this be necessary, if not for the fact that he spoke in the context of a misguided, externally imposed consensus that privileged markets over governments and profits over people, especially the devalued majorities of poor people, women people and young people who inhabit the African continent?

We all agree that, on this continent of huge land, mineral and resource wealth, our "beautiful people" are our greatest wealth and prospect, and deserve our highest respect. We are women people, men people, old people, young people, able-bodied and disabled people, from a rich variety of cultural, religious, linguistic backgrounds, who deserve economic, cultural, labour productive, sexual freedom and reproductive rights. We are those you are charged to govern and to protect.

About a half century ago, a young Nigerian writer – more assertive than most – encountered the largely French-speaking poets and philosophers of the negritude movement: Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Cheikh Anta Diop and others. Wole Soyinka's riposte was, "Does the tiger need to proclaim his tigritude?" My question to you, decades later, is this: "What if the tiger has been flogged mercilessly, stripped of its stripes, and brutalised to a state of caged confusion so that it bites its tail, attacking its mate and killing its children? What if our proverbial tiger had been through what Africa has been through?" Soyinka's question revisited today, 50 years into political independence, invokes the historic conditions that have us professing that we are African, we will serve Africa, and do our best to use all the vast human and material wealth to recover and protect our stripes.

Looking across the world and comparing the variously



genocidal histories of imperialism, slavery and colonisation, *his* tories that all but destroyed the indigenous civilisations of the Americas and Australasia, provokes a basic question that we might consider as we celebrate the fact of our survival: “How have the people of Africa survived – and in such numbers, with such vibrancy?” It is nothing less than a miracle of human civilisation that we survive, *despite* this history of subjugation and our unfavourable positioning in the global order.

EMERGENT WOMEN

I respectfully submit that the secret of African resilience is something we take so much for granted that we too easily overlook it, and fail to value and cherish those who have thus far sustained us – at our peril. I speak of the quiet power of African women, manifest in extensive subaltern farming, trading and provisioning networks through which African women sustain our families, communities and societies, no matter what.

This has been African women’s invisible work for centuries – and it still largely is. Today, 60–80 percent of our food is produced by women and these low-level networks still sustain the people inhabiting the worst of our conflict-ridden man-made disaster zones.

Today, let us be alert to the implications of the fact that African women, like our lands before us, have now been “discovered”. Our silence will no longer protect us. Women’s labour is no longer shielded by the gender blindness of the colonisers or exploited by the gender blindness of developing nation-states. Let us be alert to the challenges posed by this hard-won visibility, situated as it is in a world economy that has been premised on the exploitation of gender divisions since the very dawn of modern capitalism. The European-style social contract is premised on a sexual contract: a gendered division of labour that we should discard, for our own good.

What does it mean to describe women as “the world’s third-largest emerging market”, when Africa’s location in the global terms of trade remains unfavourable? Will African women becoming an “emerging market”, like China or India, allow us to realise our potential, free ourselves and our dependents from abjection?

The terms of African women’s integration into development have been based on a flawed premise – that we sit around as a vast underused reserve army of labour. Inclusionary “women in development” strategies have thus added work to the already overworked women doing double shifts between their homes and farms. Economic reforms have simultaneously sapped (or SAP’ed) state efforts to address poverty, ignorance and disease through the public health, welfare and educational services that are necessary to sustain and reproduce labour in a wage-based economy.

African women are no longer ignored, and we celebrate a new level of hard-won recognition and global consensus on the importance of gender equality and women’s

empowerment. This takes nothing away from men whatsoever, while adding great value to our understanding of ourselves as women and as men.

Recognition demands redistribution of resources. The new recognition of poor African women’s productive and reproductive labour may be celebrated as a positive development, but we must be alert to the fact that it also means that Africa’s care economy – including its productive aspect – is up for a new round of global grabbing.

Economic reforms have been based on an unsustainable assumption of the infinite elasticity of women’s work. Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) stretched the hidden fabric of Africa’s resilience to breaking point. This is what is reflected in the seemingly intransigent problem of maternal and infant mortality. Women are in crisis. Globalisation has created conditions under which it is simply too dangerous to keep our heads down and our noses to the grindstones.

Perhaps this explains the proliferation of feminism, of increasingly radical women’s movements in so many of the world’s poorest and most exploited regions. Growth without development has been a reality for most of Africa’s long-suffering people, particularly for women who experience the brunt of poverty, violence and the general precariousness that characterises their lives. GDP goes up without trickling down unless governments take concerted action to resist the uncounted, gendered human costs of superficial and unsustainable models of growth.

Fifty years ago, Kwame Nkrumah – Pan-African visionary extraordinaire – called for a political kingdom and promised an economic one. Sadly, he has been proved wrong. We now have 54 political kingdoms and our union is now 50 years old, but our economies are still as deeply unequal as they are falling short of the Pan-African vision. We need to recover our economic sovereignty: the freedom to organise our economies to suit ourselves, to organise labour, production and consumption however we choose.

FACE OF POVERTY

“In Africa, poverty has a female face,” declared the World Bank in 2009.

Africa’s rising gross domestic product is good news, but how should we react when crisis leads rich countries to turn once again to the Africa they had only a decade ago condemned as “lost”? I think we should give them a tough time when they once again look to the region. At least we should make them beg a bit and define our terms more assertively at the age of 50.

We must turn this renewed interest around, make sure that we work this new interest – in including poor women in the global economy – to our advantage, so that we do not simply find African women split open for a new and even deeper round of predation and exploitation. For example, while we can recognise that micro-credit



may help some women to do what they already do, it also marks a minimalist strategy for inclusion in the global economy at the bottom of the informal sector. But why should it be *micro*-credit for women? More serious support would enable women to scale up and become captains of industry and run transnational corporations.

Unless we negotiate better terms of engagement for Africa, including for African women, our people – especially women and the next generation – will continue to be as exploited, poor and vulnerable to abuse as we have been. The global construction of African women as “poor, pregnant and beaten” contains a germ of truth. Women work harder than ever but remain poorer than ever. But we also continue to struggle for more just economies, which can support women beyond mere survival – to build on the way women continuously improvise and innovate, invent and create new ways of doing things.

I am concerned rather than excited by the global call to entrepreneurialism as *the* answer to poverty, underdevelopment, and even violence. After all, women in Africa have always been entrepreneurs, in the sense that I have argued: creatively fending for themselves and their dependents through farming and trading before, during, and since colonialism, *despite* colonialism, and with minimal government support. The feminisation of poverty has occurred *despite* our long traditions of entrepreneurialism.

SYSTEMIC INJUSTICE

“Women are the third largest ‘emerging market’, after China and India,” declared *Forbes* magazine.

Given what the market has so far meted out to Africa, and to African women in particular, this statement should place us on alert. What happens to the African economy – buttressed as it has always been by the feminised survival economy – when women are “discovered” and redefined as an “emerging market”? Who and what will be brought and sold, and for whose profit? We will need to be fully conscious of what we are buying and selling, lest we find ourselves further incorporated into a global market that has not favoured our collective interests, or those of our continent. For all the talk about poverty alleviation, poverty remains endemic, a scourge that is here to stay until we stop being fooled by global-village talk and tackle the structural transformations that are now on the table.

Structural violence – poverty, absence of social protection infrastructure, chronic insecurity and precariousness of livelihoods – manifests at interpersonal levels: in our homes and on our streets. Male frustration and stress taken out on the tender bodies of women marks the worst dispossession of all – our dehumanisation, the loss of our selves and our capacity to care for and support one another.

I appeal to all of you to *end this now*.

Let us make it clear to the world that violence and tolerance of violence are *not* endemic, *not* an “African

tradition”, nor simply what black men do to women. Rather they are the results of systemic injustices. Focusing, for example, on “rape in war time” without understanding this as intrinsic to the practice of war is bad enough. It is not enough to address the disturbing abuse of women without understanding this as a function of our location within a global, racialised, gender regime that has never been kind to Africa, or to Africa’s women.

It is a regime that is premised on gender divisions and relies on the continued devaluation of women and their work. The systematic rape and abduction of women in the colonial Congo was a deliberate “management tool” during King Leopold’s time, used to force men to labour on rubber plantations. It was the unjust, imperialist and racist gender regime that laid down the historic and material conditions of pain and dispossession. This is the source that lies behind the scandalous data on rape, harassment, abuse, femicide, sex trafficking, child marriage and other harmful practices.

Let us not leave this intimate but systemic problem and its unseemly display of self-hatred to “external forces” to appropriate for their own agendas, while the systemic causes persist. Ensure the implementation of the declarations and resolutions you have already signed on to. Provide the legal, medical and social facilities to protect and attend to women’s basic human rights. And above all, address the systemic inequalities that render us vulnerable to abuse. These systemic injustices and gender inequalities intensify as societies move into fully fledged conflict, but the conflict in our homes persists long after peace has been officially declared.

QUESTION MILITARISM

Land. Homes. Decent work. Security for women. Human security for all. “The real security need for Africans is security from poverty, ignorance and disease,” wrote our brilliant social analyst, Claude Ake.

Africa’s independent states arrived at independence fully militarised by their significant involvement in the two world wars. With the colonial and militarist history of our continent, we urgently need to place the good of our people first, and above the acquisition of guns. The horrors of postcolonial conflicts leave no one untouched. These now feature 90 percent civilian casualties – up from 10 percent in the wars of the early 20th century – and 20–40 percent involvement of women as fighters, not to mention their prominence as victims and casualties of war. The realities of resource inequalities, gender injustices, and sexual and identity politics in Africa’s wars need to be kept at the centre of Africa’s future security architecture. This will require more than adding women to security forces. It requires changing the militarist paradigm of statecraft we have inherited and which has afflicted us through the Cold War era, during which Africans continued to die in vast numbers. Since 9/11 and the US declaration of the global war on terror, the US has pursued significant war efforts that affect us deeply.



Despite our human development failures, Africa is still increasing its military expenditure, long after much wealthier nations have started to reduce theirs. Why? Why continue to serve as an out-dated weapons dump, when we all know that the largest portion of the debt we carry was accumulated by discredited military regimes? Spending on weapons that kill other Africans has been allowed to displace our development agendas, retarding long-term investment in human security.

We resist military re-occupation, to the extent that the AFRICOM idea has been pushed back from George Bush's original poorly conceived idea of a fully fledged base on this continent. Instead, under the Obama government, it has evolved into a series of new "partnership agreements", complete with regular training exercises all over the region and numerous operations with grandiose names. What would a future-oriented regional security strategy that was grounded in prioritising African interests and concern look like? If we open our internal frontiers to facilitate the mobility of people as well as resources, will we still need so many national armies?

Do we need the many armies that we have, given the weakness of some and the threat that others have posed for democratic governance? Let us at least have the sense to question the direction of the last fifty years – in which the cost of war has significantly retarded development and exacted huge costs, leaving collective traumas that are yet to be healed – as we move towards the idea of sustainable peace and the human security that we can then address instead of purchasing the next rounds of weaponry.

FIFTY YEARS FROM NOW

Imagine a continent in which no child has been raised in fear, subjected to abuse, poverty, hunger and the physical and emotional scarring that drains creativity. In which all the mothers survive pregnancy and we no longer know what it is to bury a child. Imagine a world in which Africa's billions are freed from the burden of survivalism, freed to lift themselves up and pursue the immeasurable creative potential that freedom from overwork and over-exploitation would unleash for us.

Africa in 2063 will have undergone the paradigm shift we seek. We will have used our maturity at 50 to radically alter the terms of our integration into the world order. Africa in 2063 will be a place where Africa's wealth enriches all of Africa's people. It will be a place that has pushed back the land-grabbing of the early 21st century to reclaim the 30 billion hectares appropriated by foreign and private interests in the last five years. We will have transformed land use, access and ownership, so that our vast wealthy lands are used in sustainable, collectively intelligent and environmentally sound ways, enabling women and men to move beyond indebtedness and pursue much higher goals and dreams.

The global regime of trade and tariffs will have been

overturned. Our elites will have stopped lining their pockets and ensured that Africa's people benefit from Africa's wealth. The inhabitants of our oil zones will no longer have to plead to "leave the oil in the soil" Instead, our rich bio-diverse ecosystem and the livelihoods of local peoples will be protected for the common good.

What will inspire the radical systemic change that will lift us – liberate us – to think beyond survival? *Renaissance* is recognition, redistribution and cultural freedom, backed up by structural change that allows people to benefit from a more judicious and accountable use of our resources.

ARTS OF LOVE

Ama Ata Aidoo, the Ghanaian feminist novelist, once said, "For us Africans, literature must serve a purpose: to expose, embarrass and fight corruption and authoritarianism. It is understandable why the African artist is utilitarian." As a young woman, the freedom fighter Ama Ata Aidoo vowed never to write love stories. Let's delight in the fact that, over the years, she has changed her mind about the value of writing about love, as her edited anthology of highly original and diverse *African Love Stories* demonstrates. She has travelled her path and had the courage to grow and change while retaining her deep commitment to Pan-Africanism. Love flourishes, after all is said and done.

By 2063, our creative writers will still inspire and rally us all and call governments to account. But they will never doubt the need to stay in love with Africa, to be renewed daily in our love for Africa – for all Africa's "beautiful ones" (Ayi Kwei Armah), born and unborn, and our descendants will have more love and more joy to share every single day.

What is abundantly evident is that we women and men of Africa are not lacking in vision, creativity or imagination, although at times we've lost touch with Africa's genius or suppressed and denied the talent that resides among women, the poor and the oppressed. Amilcar Cabral saw this potential, and so should we.

In 2063, strong and well-resourced research, cultural and educational institutions will be there to inspire and challenge us, enabling us to develop the intellectual and emotional capacities to dream of an even better future. We look forward to a future in which our talents and creativity are no longer wasted and frustrated by the exigencies of survival and hampered by the lack of access to resources.

I humbly appeal for our African Union to be a people's union that will support the establishment of strong and inclusive Pan-African culture, media and research institutions, and strengthen those that have already been established in response to the challenges of our times. I appeal for us to facilitate the redistribution of our material wealth among our people for our collective liberation, for democracy, for equality, and for justice. 🌍

