For Africa to live, the nation must die?

The fluidity of African identity in a changing continent

By **Graça Machel**

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This evening I have been asked to address the implications of a quote from the great Mozambican freedom fighter and president, Samora Machel: "For the nation to live, the tribe must die." If, as a continent, we are to thrive, then we must make the time to explore the multiple questions that challenge our African identities. All of these are moulded by the specific socio-cultural context that we are born into, our common language and history. These can and will expand and change shape – but they are still the seeds of our future selves. Ethnicity is a core framework, and this is how the "tribe" helps form our identities.

Is the argument that, for a national identity to thrive, the tribal identity must die? Or further: for Pan-Africanism to thrive, must national identities die? I would argue that this is not the case. When a seed is planted in the right conditions, it transforms: spreading its roots and growing out of the earth and forming a stem, branches and leaves. I am looking at the tribe, and more widely at the nation, as the seed that is within us all. That seed of our identities is transformed as we grow, as we extend our relationships, our physical, emotional and intellectual contexts. Yet our identities remain

rooted in the original influences and norms within which our social beings developed. The seed does not die. It is rooted, but transformed.

If we look outside of our continent, the people of the United States of America, despite their huge diversity, have one thing in common: they feel American. We have to question what it is that makes people of Japanese, Irish, Latin American or African origin, or even across the huge diversity of class, feel that at the moment of truth, they are Americans. What are the elements of that national identity, the pride of belonging to a nation?

I dare to say that, with the exception of Tanzania, none of our African nations have resolved that question. I do not believe that the tribe must die for the nation to live. I believe that people of ethnic, racial and class diversity must be offered a clear proposition that they will benefit from being part of a nation state and the continent.

NATIONS AND PAN-AFRICANISM

We have this space we call our homeland – in Portuguese, I would say *patria* – where we all feel we belong, yet it's not very clearly defined. Tonight, we should ask: "What does it mean for each one of us to be a South African? What makes us believe that we are South African?"

The racial divide in South Africa is still very clear and deep. We still say, "I'm African, and this one is Indian, and that one is white, and that one is coloured". Yet I suggest that there are elements that bind us all. What are they? How do we cultivate them so that we grow away from that kind of race and class separateness, and feel, all of us, that we are South African?

I believe that we must provide the right conditions for the tribe to root a national identity and a continental identity, to move beyond its initial sensibility and enable a stronger, equally vibrant, but possibly farther-seeing and more connected "being" to emerge.

As social beings, as we grow and absorb the influences of a wider society, so we transform ourselves and gain a broader sense of belonging – beyond the family, beyond the tribe, beyond the nation. In a world where modern transport means that we can travel thousands of miles in less than a day, our ability to move within other geographies and other cultures is multiplied. And yet that broader sense still recognises the initial relationships and intellectual and emotional linkages that root us.

For this transformation to take place positively, we need the appropriate influences to surround our sense of being. We need the right contexts, motivations and visions to move beyond the tribe, beyond the nation, and into a vibrant sense of Pan-Africanism.

> But who were we before Berlin? We existed. We had history. We had culture. We had a way of being.

Let me recall our recent history. At Ghana's independence – the first in sub-Saharan Africa – Kwame Nkrumah reopened his country's borders to welcome all the liberation movements. He was joined by the likes of Haile Selassie (Ethiopia), Modibo Keïta (Mali), Ahmed Ben Bella (Algeria) and Julius Nyerere (Tanganyika). Together with others from the diaspora, like WEB du Bois, they formed a huge movement of Pan-Africanism.

Pan-Africanism is rooted in an understanding that, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and from the Cape to Cairo, we had experienced the same slavery, colonialism and oppression, and we had a common destiny. It was born out of the necessity to achieve freedom and independence for all on this continent.

Then, at the moment the continent became politically free, we had a second generation of visionary Pan-African leaders, such as Thabo Mbeki (South Africa), Olusegun Obasanjo (Nigeria), Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Algeria) and Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique). They established the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism, through which we would be able to build prosperity for all Africans. Theirs was a leadership that understood that no nation can survive alone.

Pan-Africanism has to be based on a clear set of principles, values and goals if we are to work together. Africans must feel that there is value and benefit in belonging to a broad African entity, beyond birthright. Let us use the example of the European Union. Many countries are queuing to join it because they perceive that there is something concrete that will uplift their nation.

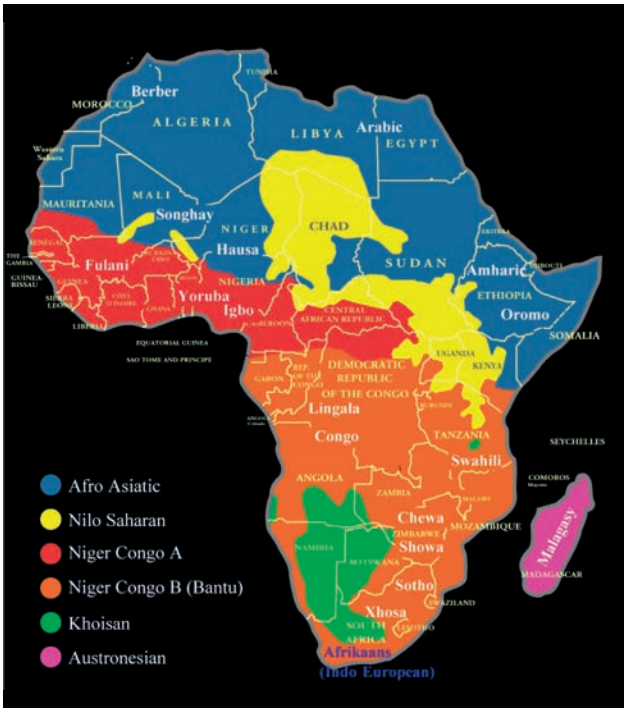
What is our African Union (AU) offering to our nations? Why do we join? Why do we need to be part of this organisation? Is it about political statements? Do we have clarity as the founders of Pan-Africanism had? They sent a clear message to every African: freedom and fairness. Today, do we have a very clear message, a very clear goal, when we say we are Africans?

PRE-COLONIAL IDENTITY

I would like to suggest that Pan-Africanism has to claim Africa's pre-colonial identity. The Berlin Conference (1884–85) carved up the continent into more than 50 states. But who were we before

Berlin? We existed. We had history. We had culture. We had a way of being.

The Mandela Institute for Development Studies has an African heritage research programme, in which we are questioning who we are as Africans. The first study we are undertaking is to trace languages. This map indicates linguistic regions. The four largest are Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Niger-Congo-Bantu. It shows that people migrated from mid-western Africa down to central Africa and on to southern Africa. These peoples have very much in common in terms of language, social institutions, practices, and traditions. South Africans have more in common with Ghanaians and Nigerians than we may think.



We are in the process of identifying certain words that mean exactly the same thing, although they may be pronounced a bit differently, and finding shared practices, traditions and institutions. Of course there are differences, but there is much more commonality. We are much more than English-speaking or French-speaking or Portuguese-speaking countries. We have our own languages. Pan-Africanism has to have this emotional element attached to it.

Through a Pan-Africanist lens, it is the village where you are born and the family where you are raised that moulds your value system and defines your identity. These are the fundamentals – not whether one speaks French, English or Portuguese. Language-based fights for position at the AU fly in the face of these principles. Even when it is the turn of West Africa to take a position, the first

thing they discuss is, "Is he French-speaking? Is he English-speaking?" They try to establish the difference between someone from Côte d'Ivoire and someone from Ghana, irrespective of their qualifications for that position.

I am thus proposing that, in our journey to define the roots and values of pan-Africanism, we have to claim this map. Without changing the borders which were imposed on us by Berlin, we can expand our sense of identity by returning to the source, who we were, to discover who we want to be, so that our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be proud of being African, and not simply proud to be speaking Portuguese or English.

"Africa" can be a vexed concept. I am sure we have all argued against the negative and ignorant generalisations about "Africa" that so very often prompt us to point out that our continent consists of 54 states. Yet many of us are also strong believers in some kind of African identity that goes beyond the borders of our states, that builds on the commonalities that can be found in diverse corners of our continent.

These were the beliefs held by our Pan-African forebears. The Nkrumahs, Nyereres and others looked beyond the Berlin boundaries to an Africa where we could build on our commonalities to form cohesive and collaborative African institutions, African cultures, African economic systems, African ways of thinking and being that would help our

continent to thrive. They emphasised not only the importance of nation states (after all, they fought against colonialism in their own countries), but also how those nations could work together to protect our continent from further manifestations of imperialism. Solidarity with national liberation movements was crucial to them. Those activists provided the conditions to help our national "seeds" transform into a stronger entity that is Pan-African.

I fear, however, that we might allow that Pan-African transformation to wither from the lack of rain (new and collective thinking, integrated institutions), poor soil (the paucity of joint initiatives and the rarity of future planning, together and long-term) and a proliferation of weeds (unhelpful nationalistic competition, short-sighted conflicts, narrow mindedness, social injustice and oppression).

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We must ask: what is dividing people in South Sudan, in the Congo, the DRC? What is dividing Africans who engage in wars against brothers and sisters, who, in the past, fought together? What is it?

In order to provide conditions for the transformation to a vibrant, healthy Africa that revives our fading traditions and challenges the world with new thought, new art, new economics and new science, we need the rain of a clear and positive vision of our Africa. We need the fertiliser of new generations of youthful energy that looks beyond narrow interests and shallow, dying ideas. We need the soil which holds our positive traditions and joins them with new ways of being, new ways of interacting with our comrades across this continent and trends across the globe.

Yes, African identities are fluid, but many of our proverbs point to the strength of fluidity. I stand here before you with many identities: I am a woman, a Mozambican, an African, and much more. Our children and grandchildren have a multitude of identities that have been influenced by people around the world through social media in ways my generation barely dreamed of. Their identity as African is no longer grounded in the tribe. Sometimes they do not even speak the language, but they are nonetheless Africans. Even those who return from the diaspora choose to come to the continent, not necessarily to the countries of their parents. They can come to Ghana, to Ethiopia, to Rwanda, and they are "coming home". They are coming to Africa.

We do have a new African identity emerging, but still we miss a strong, clear message about where we come from, who we are today, where we have to go together, and a sense of solidarity. What we miss today is clear leadership. Being African is not something which just happens simply because we were born here and because of the air we breathe.

DREAMING IN AFRICAN

I repeat my question: what does it mean to be South African? What does it mean for you to be African? I do not have the answers. I do not think there is a blueprint.

The Mapungubwe Institute is challenging us to think through the issues, and to question ourselves about our identity, our many identities, and how their overlap makes us stronger – not weaker, as we often seem to believe. How to go beyond the small community and embrace the nation, and how, as a nation, to embrace the rest of the continent? Our different identities should be understood to be elements making up a greater vision for the continent.

When my generation and my children's generation dream, our dreams are rooted in our early experiences, in our early lessons. We dream in ways that are deeply African.

I'd like to tell a story that I think illustrates my point. A former Sudanese ambassador told me how he had visited many parts of Africa. He was struck that, when he asked people who they were, they would reply that they were Kikuyu or Tutsi or Mende. But in three countries, the replies were always consistent: "I am Ghanaian", "I am Tanzanian", "I am Mozambican". It is no coincidence that those are the countries of our Pan-African forebears. And it is no coincidence that Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere are remembered not only as a great Ghanaian and a great Tanzanian, but as the towering leaders of Pan-Africanism.