

# Conceiving Africans as defective is the real expertise of oppressors

Africa remains a paradox: a land of poverty amidst plenty. On the one hand are the resources, in abundance, that industries in the developed world depend on and the opportunities that they provide for the people there – making Africa an exporter of jobs that sustain a decent standard of living. On the other is the kind of deprivation, despite those resources, that has greatly undermined the dignity of the African people and has contributed to a contemptuous view of Africans by those to whom the resources flow. This paradox has Africans perceived as a problem that ought to be solved by the “kindness” and prescriptions of the benevolent outsiders.

This attitude conceives Africans as a people who are inherently deficient and in need of fixing (i.e., through benevolence) and is shared by potentially well-meaning individuals, NGOs and powerful multilateral institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank.

These organizations are driven by the conviction that solutions to the “African paradox” must emanate from outside Africa in the form of prescriptions; they are convinced that it’s their right to offer prescriptions until the time when Africans have been fixed.

To these “prescribers,” the need to fix Africans means that much of the thinking around the solutions to the paradox involves capacity-building designed to cater for the deficiency of Africans. However, it is the kind of capacity-building where Africans are not expected to graduate due to the inherent nature of their deficiency.

The strategy of problematizing the African way of life in

order to justify the need to continue to dictate to them how they can be fixed has historically been cloaked in the garb of modernity: a civilized culture of enlightenment encounters a backward culture of savages who must be rescued from themselves. The former is worthy of emulation; the latter needs fixing.

This same desire to fix Africans remains. Like capacity-building, it is cloaked in the language of "progress." It seeks to rescue (i.e., fix) Africans from dictatorship and oppression and deliver or gift democracy and human rights to them. If Africans don't want the kind being offered to them, it's because they don't know any better; it's their inherent deficiency at work.

This attitude largely explains Africa's predicament. It explains why Africa remains locked in the paradox. That some Africans support or acquiesce to this thinking that is rooted in self-contempt is precisely what compounds the original problem: it robs Africans of the opportunity to de-problematize their existence, the affirmation that the African way of life is not a problem in need of fixing, that the challenges Africans face are similar to those faced by everyone else around the world: how to make the most from competing priorities amidst finite resources.

Moreover, this kind of thinking that conceives Africans as a pathology usurps the agency of Africans: no one but Africans understand how best to overcome the challenges they face and how to get the most from the opportunities available to them.

Crucially, the viewpoint that Africa needs to be fixed by the West – or anyone else for that matter – undermines the development of the confidence and conviction Africans need to solve the paradox before them.

As a result, Africans are unable to exercise their critical faculties to navigate out of the paradox and deprived of their

sense of ingenuity, they are unable to cultivate solutions from within.

In such conditions, a generalized crisis of confidence engulfs society; mediocrity is normalized, and excellence shunned. The state of this sort of reality invariably leads to a crisis of leadership: leaders accept to be dictated to about the direction their societies should take. Such leaders, naturally, pursue the priorities of those making the dictates at the expense of the aspirations of the people they lead. As a result, misplaced priorities ensue. This is how a leadership deficit becomes "inherent" to Africa. It's how Africans end up conditioning themselves into the original problem: that they are a deficient people in need of fixing, incapable of basic problem-solving.

### **The elusive clarity of purpose**

This degree of conditioning is responsible for the elusive quest, at the individual and collective levels, for clarity of purpose to drive a thought system needed to solve the African paradox. It is another form of poverty that afflicts the top leadership and trickles down to the ordinary person on Africa's streets. At the top, it renders Africa's leadership incapable of engaging the people in the conception of this clarity of purpose – about who we are as a people and what our aspirations are in the community of nations – and to rally them in the pursuit of those collective aspirations. At the bottom level, it reproduces a sense of hopelessness and demobilizes agency.

### **Substantiating independence**

The generation of nationalists that wrestled independence from the colonial monsters in the 1950s-1960s could not galvanise forces to protect the independence they had won and, consequently, independence was never substantiated. They quickly came to learn that rather than grant independence,

colonialism had only conceded a tactical withdraw. It was ready to trounce Africa again, with renewed vigour.

With the direct control of Africans no longer possible, colonial architects understood that they could recruit and empower domestic mercenaries to indirectly perpetuate the colonial project and that these mercenaries could be dictated to about how to run the newly independent African states – it would be cheaper and less confrontational, too.

Internal and external forces conspired against the African people and began to undermine the very meaning of independence. Together, these forces consolidated power in pursuit of the interests of external forces and to counter the aspirations of the African people, including trampling on their dignity.

In such context, perhaps the most unfortunate development was that the few African leaders who possessed the clarity of purpose for directing their people towards dignity were removed and replaced by those ready to acquiesce to foreign dictates, and to sustain the paradox.

### **A conscientious critical mass is essential**

Africa's contemporary lesson is that its gains are subject to reversal. This is so because Africa is yet to develop the critical mass needed to protect any gains towards substantiating independence and securing dignity for its people.

Whether it is the artificial independence or the blatant assassination of those leaders who truly represented the aspirations of Africans, the common denominator was the inability of Africa to create and sustain a conscientious critical mass to protect the things we value: there was no shield to protect the independence and the conscientious leaders.

The only way to ensure that the assassination of the Lumumbas, Nkrumahs and Sankaras does not adversely affect the gains towards the dignity of Africans is to shield the struggle in a critical mass that is fully armed with some approximation of the clarity of purpose and conviction that such leaders (and others like them) possess(ed) and pursue(d).

Only this action would remove the incentive to eliminate such leaders who are perceived as threats to the external interests that feed fat on Africa. In so doing, the adage that one can only kill an individual but not an idea would be realised. In other words, a conscientious critical mass is capable of shielding leaders with a clarity of purpose from being targeted for removal in order to reverse the gains in the pursuit of the dignity of Africans. The point is that you cannot assassinate an idea around which a conscientious critical mass has been developed.

This is Africa's challenge. Africans must develop a critical mass around who they are as a people (and what their aspirations for one another are) and how they wish to project this in their engagement with the community of nations.

This is the only way to assure that Africans, a people with conviction and imbued with cognitive abilities to overcome the challenges they face, enter the dinner table as diners rather than being on the menu because they have outsourced this agency to benevolence.

Otherwise, another century in paradox awaits us.