



**For Africa to Live, the Nation Must Die: The fluidity of African Identity in a  
Changing Continent**

**Your Excellencies**

**Distinguished Guests**

**Comrades and friends,**

It is a pleasure to join you this evening to explore a few new, and not so new ideas. I thank MISTRA for challenging me to reflect and share my personal experiences and views.

**My experience in a training camp**

If as a continent we are to thrive, then we must make the time, take the opportunities to explore the multiple questions that challenge our 'African' identities. This evening I have been asked to address the implications of a quote from the great Mozambican freedom fighter and President, Samora Machel. He stated:

**'For the nation to live, the tribe must die'**

So let us speak about identity. We are born into specific socio cultural contexts that mould our initial years. Our initial relationships, familial and other; our positions in our

family, our community, our society... our relationship with authority, with our elders, with our peers.....

All of these are moulded by that specific socio cultural context that we are born into. **Common history and language are key components or elements of cultural identity.** These become the references that build the social being, the human being that we initially are.

So generally speaking, these socio cultural contexts, these resulting relationships can be seen as the 'seeds' of our identities, or our social beings. They can, and will expand, be built upon, change shape... but they are still the seeds of our future selves. We can look at the contexts within which these seeds are planted in a range of ways – socio cultural, economic, socio economic etc... and many of those contexts overlap. In considering the socio cultural contexts, ethnicity is a core framework and it is in this way that 'tribe' helps form the seeds of our identities.

It is clear that the many overlapping contexts of our early years means that sometimes our 'tribes' develop in different ways. Ethnicity provides one set of lenses; economic wealth or financial poverty might provide another; age and gender etc provide yet other lenses. Yet I would argue that some of those lenses are subsumed within the wider socio cultural lens of 'tribe'.

If tribal norms then 'seed' our identities, is the argument that for a national identity to thrive, the tribal identity must die? Or that further, for pan Africanism to thrive, national identities must die?

I would argue that this is not the case. Let's look at the analogy of a seed. When a seed is planted, it does not die. With the right conditions, including soil, water, sun etc, the seed does not die. It is transformed into another living entity.

The seed transforms – at one point spreading its roots, and then growing out of the earth and forming a stem, eventually a trunk, branches and leaves. It all depends on

what type of seed, but I think you will understand my point. Indeed, what is in the seed is what dictates the nature of the transformation that emerges from its sowing.

The very being of the seed maintains its identity in the transformation process. There is an Akan saying – ‘a crab does not give birth to a cow’. Thus the seed from an orange will produce an orange. The seed from an avocado will produce an avocado. The innate influences the transformation, yet does not kill in the transformation. And as human beings we are able to influence the transformation; to use old seeds to breed stronger hybrids; to develop new strains, new strengths.

### **How to make tribes transition and support nationhood**

Tribal values feed into the national identity and the nation feeds into tribal identity

There has to be a value proposition for the tribe to feel embraced by and integrated into the nation , but at the same time the nation has to be able to embrace and integrate the tribe.

By extension we are talking of the tribe as:

- Ethnic diversity
- Racial diversity
- Class diversity

**Example of the United States of America – the sense of being American, regardless of all the diversities**

**The example of Tanzania – history and language plays a big role**

These are complex dimensions of which African nations are struggling to comprehend to manage in the process of forging a nation.

I dare to say that none of our African nations has resolved the question of “**nation building**”.

I am looking at the tribe, and more widely at the nation as at the heart of the identity we form through our ethnic socio cultural contexts 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. So the seed does not die... it is rooted, but transformed.

So our original identities do not die... we are rooted, but as additional influences and contexts are added to our lives, so we transform and our identities are expanded, transformed.

So no, I do not believe that the tribe must die for the nation to live. I believe that ethnic diversity, racial diversity and class diversity must be offered a clear value proposition that makes them feel that they benefit from being part of a nation state.

I do not believe that nations must die for Africa to thrive.

However that we must provide the right conditions for the tribe to root a national identity and a continental identity; to move beyond its initial lenses and enable a stronger, equally vibrant but possibly further seeing and more connected being to emerge – whether in our individual identities or in our national or continental identities.

With a tree, the stronger the roots are, the better able the tree is to resist winds and external shocks... because it is deeply rooted, but also because the transformation has allowed it to protect itself through its branches, its leaves, its fruit or flowers – and through its connectedness with other products of the earth. There is an intrinsic relationship with the initial seed but the final product is more intricate, bigger, stronger and more connected to the external world.

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 hundreds of thousands of miles in less than a day, our ability to move within other geographies, other cultures is multiplied.

So the influences that mould our identities are multiplied and extensive. When that works well, we can gain a broader sense of belonging in a continental or international context.

Yet where we are grounded, that broader sense of belonging still recognises and salutes the initial relationships and intellectual and emotional linkages that root our belonging.

For this transformation to take place in positive contexts, building on the strengths of our socio cultural roots rather than being strangled by them, 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.

### **Pan Africanism**

Nkrumah, Nyerere, Haile Selassie, Keita, Ben Bella

Freedom and independence

### **Second generation of Pan Africanists**

Mbeki, Obasanjo, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Chissano, NEPAD and African Peer Review Mechanism

They must feel the value and the benefits of belonging to a broad African family

**Example of the European Union**

The notion of 'Africa' and of Pan Africanism sometimes presents as a vexed concept. I am sure we have all argued at some point in our lives against the generalisations that are made about 'Africa' –

so very often negative and ignorant generalisations that prompt us to point out that our continent consists of 54 states, making generalisations virtually irrelevant and often insulting.

Yet, many of us that have made those arguments are also strong believers in some kind of African identity; in some kind of Pan Africanism that goes beyond the borders of our 54 nations; that builds on commonalities that can be found in what at first seem to be completely different and diverse corners of our continent.

### **The Berlin Conference / Agreement**

The dominance of the Berlin agreement and the consequent acceptance of its political boundaries both by colonial conquistadors and later by our own liberation movements has set up paradoxes that we continue to struggle with as individuals and as nations. And we need to fight the ramifications of those paradoxes if we are to grow in collective strength and collective identity. Recent research conducted by the Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS), explores the spread of what they describe as four language communities that existed and traversed the geographic continent of Africa for generations before colonialism divided the continent into the Berlin drafted physical spaces. These language communities spread throughout the continent in different patterns and mean that even today there are some communities in West Africa with close linguistic and other social cultural ties with communities in Southern or Eastern Africa.

So our personal and national identities and the similarities between them do not have to be dominated by the current political disposition on the continent.

These were the beliefs held by our Pan African forebears. The Nkrumahs, the Nyerere's and others looked beyond the Berlin boundaries to an Africa where we could build on

our commonalities and our similarities 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 and protect our continent's peoples from further generations of colonialism and imperialism. They highlighted our shared experiences of slavery, of colonialism but also our shared cultural heritages that had protected our communities through the ravages of imperialism and other oppressions.

They emphasised the importance not only of nation states (after all, these were the people who led the fights against colonialism in their various countries) but also of how those nations could work together to protect our continent from further manifestations of imperialism. That was why solidarity with national liberation movements was crucial to their beliefs and actions. They saw an Africa with strong political and economic nations, yes... but they saw an Africa where those nations worked together to give us a continental advantage through various types of economic, social and political integrations. Those Pan African activists provided the conditions, the thinking and the contexts that have helped our 'seed' of nations to begin to transform into a stronger entity that is Pan African.

I fear however, that we might allow that transformation to wither under the lack of rain (new and collective thinking, integrated institutions), poor soil (the paucity of joint initiatives, the rarity of future planning together not separately and for decades not months and years) and a proliferation of weeds (unhelpful nationalistic competition, short sighted conflicts of all types, narrow mindedness and social injustice and oppression).

To provide good conditions for the transformation to a vibrant, healthy Africa that revives our fading traditions of challenging the world, bringing new thought, new art, new economics, new science and new cultures to our global contexts – we need the rain of a clear and positive vision of OUR Africa; we need the fertiliser of new generations of thought and youthful energy that looks beyond narrow interests and shallow dying ideas; we need the soil that pulls through our positive traditions and links

them with new ways of being, new ways of interacting with our peers, with our comrades across this continent and with the new trends across the globe.

Yes, African identities are fluid – but so many of our continental proverbs point to the strength of fluidity... when there is a core holding that fluidity true. I stand here before you with many identities – a woman, a Mozambican, an African... and many more.

My children and those of you in younger generations have a multitude of other identities that you claim, identities that have been influenced by our technological age, in which social media allows people across the globes in starkly different geographical, cultural, economic and social settings to exchange ideas, share their lives and influence each other in ways my generation barely dreamed of. It is exciting, it is motivating... and it feeds the fluidity of identity that can generate new concepts of 'African' and Africanism'.

Yet, I would argue that when my generation and my children's generation sleep; when we dream, we dream rooted in our early experiences; our early lessons. We dream in ways that are deeply African.

Being African is not something that happens simply because of the air you breathe. So many of our young people now living in the diaspora describe themselves as 'African'. When they return to the continent that their parents left, sometimes they return to the nation that gave birth to their parents, but increasingly we are seeing their return to the continent... not to a specific country. They are coming home – to Africa, not to SA, not to Ghana, not to Rwanda. Many think of themselves as global citizens but identify still as African.

I want to end by telling you a story that I think illustrates my point. I worked with a former Sudanese Ambassador at one point in my history. I remember him telling me how he had worked and visited in many parts of Africa and the thing that struck him most was that in so many countries, when he asked people who they were, they would reply that they were Kikuyu, or Tutsi or Mende etc. But in three countries, the replies were always consistent 'I am Ghanaian; I am Tanzanian; I am Mozambican'. It is not coincidence that those are the countries of our Pan African forebears. And it is no coincidence that

Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyrere are remembered not only as a great Ghanaian and a great Tanzanian respectively, but as the towering leaders of Pan Africanism.

Thank you.