The seat of the African Union, Addis Ababa, is a bee hive of activity this week. Preparations are in high gear for the hosting of the bi-annual Summit of African Heads of State and Government.

This year, two Summits one in January and the other in May will be a little unusual and perhaps more pompous. The AU will focus on the theme “Pan Africanism and African Renaissance”, in order to enhance the rise and awareness of a new generation of Africans about the ideals of Pan-Africanism. Equally significant, 2013 marks the Golden Jubilee of the Organisation of African Unity/African Union on May 25th.

The journey of the African Union, which metamorphosed from the Organisation for Africa Unity (OAU), upon the adoption of its Constitutive Act at the Lome Summit (Togo) in 2000, has been quite eventful. It has been a journey of highs and lows, triumphs and failures, successes and missed opportunities. Nonetheless, the dreams and vision of Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Leopold Senghor as well as other leading Pan-African architects, heroes and heroines for a united continent remains a work in progress. The OAU/AU has served as a common platform and melting pot of ideas and the conveyor of a single voice in the liberation of African countries from the clutches of colonial rule.

Pan-African leaders have made conscious efforts to unite African people, in order to collectively deal with the multiple economic, social and political challenges on the regional, national and global fronts facing the continent. Widespread poverty, devastating conflicts with attendant socio-economic ramifications, and numerous health issues, such as HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, malaria, high rate of infant mortality, and tuberculosis are to mention but a few some of the pressing contemporary challenges.

The collective responses to these challenges have repeatedly affirmed the logic of continental unity and integration as formulated in the Charter of the OAU (1963); the Lagos Plan of Action and the Final Act of Lagos, (1980); the Abuja Treaty, (1991); the Sirte Declaration, (1999), and the Constitutive Act of the AU, (2000). These instruments stand as galvanising tools for integration in the face of Africa’s political and economic challenges.

The theme for the 2013 summit ‘Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance’, therefore brings to the fore a need to revisit the ideology of integration and unity of the African people, so as to identify critical success factors that should be strengthened as we launch into the next half of the OAU/AU centenary.

The realities of the African society in the pre-colonial days gave birth to a form of Pan-Africanism, which focused more on attaining political independence and self-governance for its people, by demonstrating that we as a people were capable of self-rule. This form of Pan-Africanism or as I prefer to call it; *Self-actualisation*, was
strongly pushed forward by various African leaders from Kwame Nkrumah to Leopold Senghor with the common aim of gaining an acknowledgement of self-worth and respect from our colonial masters.

We were eager to prove ourselves. However, it would seem that we were only concerned with gaining political independence, hoping that all other dividends would naturally fall into place afterwards. Unfortunately, our scorecard over the last fifty years on human development indices has not been encouraging.

Today, African countries despite gaining political independence still grapple with stuttering economies, increasing disparity between the elites and the governed, corruption and above all value atrophy. It appears as if our founding fathers merely mouthed and parroted Pan-Africanism without contextually understanding its workability. In some cases, it was more of ego-tripping and black supremacy than putting superior ideas into action. In some unfavourable instances, it ended being peddled as an elitist agenda; a pet project of individual leaders who had personal motivations and agendas that is oft reduced to a perception of the OAU being merely a club of dictators and golf buddies.

Today, as was the case 50 years ago, the dream of African Unity, which is the integration of its people that ought to have been at the heart of Pan-Africanism, remains a pipedream. The current debate on the future of the AU is as divergent as it was when the OAU was established in 1963. The debate about a Union Government peaked in 2007, when it was strongly advocated for by the late Brother Leader Ghadaffi, but it lost momentum for lack of a clear direction and strategy. Like the earlier Pan-African movements, many of the advocates of the United States of Africa truly didn’t believe in it. Arguments for and against were merely reduced to the ambition or otherwise of its advocates and opponents.

My thesis is this; that the renewed efforts of African leaders to seek ways of enhancing the understanding of the new generation of African leaders on Pan-Africanism must be premised, on appreciating the collective lived realities of our people. It must be one that is rooted in finding solutions to our common challenges and trials as a people. I strongly believe that whatever definitions of Pan-Africanism that does not appreciate, accentuate and take into considerations the current challenges of African people is an exercise in futility. Indeed, the talk about Pan-Africanism today should be centered on generating indigenous and locally realistic solutions to our problems. The new wave of Pan-Africanism should be about being grounded in local realities and thinking globally.

This is our time to rethink Pan-Africanism on a new basis of legitimacy. We must address our development challenges within the prisms of our local realities and proffer solutions accordingly. The move towards a new wave of Pan-Africanism must seek ways to address the socio-political and economic challenges facing the continent.

I believe it is in the advancement of this home-grown solutions and the need to put the African people first in the quest to unite the continent, that the African Union (AU) declared 2012, the Year of Shared Values, an initiative aimed at promoting dialogue
among all the continent’s citizens on individual and national commitment to common values such as equity, equality, solidarity, communalism, and reconciliation.

Equally pertinent which I argue for as a major step in the right direction, is employing the African shared values conversation to achieve Pan-Africanism. We are a continent of varied history and realities. We are an Africa of hard work, honesty, good neighbourliness, with respect for diversity.

Pan-Africanism must and should be viewed within the lining of this thin thread that links the various African cultures. It is the shared values that we all hold dear to our hearts and cherish as the basis of our existence as first and foremost humans, with respect for other people’s beliefs and cultures.

I believe Pan-Africanism is about realizing and accepting our diversities and also realizing that whatever principles and theories we are adopting in Africa must be properly nuanced in the socio-economic dynamics of our continent. Pan-Africanism should not only be about theories but should be a way of life. It must be about staying true to our cultures, values, principles, and ethos. We must understand that we had a way of life, style of governance, markets, lifestyles and a system that was working inspite of the imperfections before colonization. These rich history and realities must not be given away in the wake of foreign theories and policies that are not rooted in our local dynamics.

The shared values that we all subscribe to as a people should be the basis of our Pan-Africanism. It is only when we begin to see ourselves within the prism of these values, that we begin to appreciate our diversities and lived realities. It is then that we can begin to have the kind of confidence and pride in our African-ness. It is when these values are truly shared and it becomes a yardstick for self-assessment of African countries that we will begin to see the practicability of Pan-Africanism.

At the individual level, such values as basic right to life, freedom of expression and worship, tolerance, participation in governance, solidarity with each other in times of joy and adversity, dignity and respect, justice, sense of fairness, equality of persons (Gender, race, sex etc.), respect for age, integrity, community spiritedness and self-determination are values that are ingrained in our diverse cultures across the continent. These values must translate at the state and regional level into respect for sovereignty and the inter-dependence of states, adherence to the rule of law, democracy and representation of the popular will, care for the weak, self-reliance (economic and social), justice, law and order, equity and equality, national determination, solidarity of states (brother’s keeper), stability of environment and security.

The African Union Shared Values project, anchored by the Department of Political Affairs of the AU Commission as part of its governance initiative, also shows the realisation at the continental level that using these shared values as leverage towards closer unity amongst African countries will go a long way in addressing the governance challenges of the continent. As posited in the report of a study on an African Union Government towards the United States of Africa, it was highlighted that through a skilful combination of indigenous and modern knowledge systems, African
countries could devise well thought-out and creative strategies for the transformation of their social structures, political systems, and economic organizations to the present world environment, so that the continent as a whole would successfully “claim the 21st century”.

This literally means that Africans must see themselves first as Africans and the only ones who can genuinely proffer solutions to their own challenges. To do this, we must possess an interpretative understanding of our realities so as to engage other continents in a more mutually beneficial way than we have done over the last 50 years. We must engage the rest of the world on a new basis of legitimacy. This must start with a renewed commitment by African leaders to address the current challenges of the continent. The new wave of Pan-Africanism must be about finding locally grounded solutions with a global approach to our problems. It should be about ensuring that whatever we are adopting from foreign nations are culturally innovated in our countries.

We must therefore consciously build our collective capability and capacity by educating and preparing our people to engage the world in a more strategic manner and encourage the appreciation of the very many things that unite us as Africans most especially, the values and ethos that we all hold dear. It is when this has been done that we have taken the most important step in encouraging Pan-Africanism and also ensuring that every African is proud of its root and voluntarily willing to contribute its own quota to its emergence as the next big thing in the world.

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