African renaissance and pan-Africanism for a better Africa

Cheikh Anta Diop, the pioneer of the concept of African renaissance, would have us understand the concept as a call to and a programme of action for the renewal of the African continent. Pan-Africanism, as espoused by its originators such as Ras Makonnen, has to do with the mobilisation of Africans and people of African descent towards the complete liberation of the African continent. As motif force, pan-Africanism and African renaissance should anchor the further advancement of the African continent. However, both pan-Africanism and African renaissance need to be redefined for the practical development challenges facing Africa today. As we celebrate yet another Africa Day, we should reflect on the state of our continent and consider what should be done to further ameliorate the African condition.

The debate about Africa’s development continues unabated. There are many who argue that Africa suffers from weak or lack of institutions. Some contend that the continent is constrained by weak or poor leadership. Some argue that policy is the binding constraint to Africa’s development – I have, for instance, argued that there is a clear case of policy failures and policy paralysis, hence the development impasse the world is experiencing, not just Africa alone. A critical aspect of the renewal of the African continent is African unity, which appears to continue eluding Africa. We are celebrating the 51st Africa Day amidst chaos and pandemonium in many parts of the continent.

There are many other issues that literature and public discourse emphasise as factors constraining Africa’s development. In my recent inaugural professorial lecture, I argued for thought leadership, thought liberation and critical consciousness in order to further advance Africa’s development (and to bring about a just world). Thought leadership, thought liberation and critical consciousness should ensure that we robustly address whatever constraints that limit Africa’s progress. The three ‘instruments’ should be pursued concurrently. Thought leadership without critical consciousness is useless. Thought leadership without a liberated mind is futile. Higher levels of consciousness, based on comprehensive understanding of phenomena, make for a better thought leader.
Thought leadership, thought liberation and critical consciousness are the necessary ingredients to take the African continent forward because, as I have argued and many have argued, the fundamental African development challenge has to do with the historical experience of colonialism as well as the skewed global socio-political and economic order. Thought leaders are individuals who can decipher phenomena needing attention and have the capability to think through possible solutions to advance the human condition. Thought leaders must be mentally liberated and psychosocially free if they are to make the needed change, hence thought liberation.

Realistically, however, it is going to take time to restructure global power relations. In the meantime, in the context of communalism as a philosophical approach to socio-economic development in Africa, we should pursue a different socio-economic development paradigm/model. I have proposed that the following should be the main aspects of a new model: robust social policies, effective industrial policies, entrepreneurship, state ownership and (lastly) intra-African trade.

Among the key issues regarding Africa's development is the need to go beyond the restructuring of the African economy, but ensure that there is a vision for the economy that Africa and Africans want. For instance, it could be better that we create an economy that can use the skills that we have instead of lamenting that the economy wants different skills than the skills that our unemployed graduates have. The fundamental and practical starting point should be to reconfigure the state-market relations to be in favour of Africa's development. Communalism – as distinct from communism and or socialism – should be the guiding principle. In communalism, as Walter Rodney explained, “property [is] collectively owned, work done in common and goods shared equally.”

Also, in recognition that Africa might have already missed the 21st century – for the 21st century would be, socioeconomically, remembered as one that firmly established the ascent of the Asian subcontinent and economies like the People’s Republic of China, Republic of Korea, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and also, secondarily, the rise of South American and Latin nations (e.g. Federative Republic of Brazil, Republic of Chile and United Mexican States) – some of us argue that we should be putting in place a firm
foundation to ensure that Africa indeed captures the 22nd century. There are three pillars that should ascertain that Africa captures the 22nd century as the African century.

First, Africa needs strong institutions of higher learning – we have a history of strong and effective higher education institutions in the continent but we have allowed such institutions to diminish. As we rebuild and strengthen Africa’s education sector, we should be guided by those who did extensive work on this issue – say, Paulo Freire, Es’kia Mphahlele, Isaac Bangani Tabata and others. The second pillar of what should constitute the 22nd century African agenda is resuscitating African agency – this moves the discussion on socio-economic development on the continent away from relying on its resources and firmly challenges us as citizens to actively engage in the policy process or advance one where such a processes don’t exist. The third pillar that should characterise Africa’s push towards claiming the forthcoming century is regional integration, especially economic and educational where possible.

Indeed, to achieve what I am proposing, there is a particular African that our continent requires. An African I am talking about is an African who, fundamentally, understands the history of our continent; an African who is fully aware of factors that have shaped the history and developments on our continent, an African who is conscious that the historical experience of colonialism and other forms enslavement inform his or her point of departure. For lack of a better formulation, I am imagining an African who can shape the destiny of the continent and contribute, however little, in the attainment of that destiny. Therefore, an African I dream of is a proactive agent for change (and not just an intellectual in the academy).

At the core of the development of our continent, leadership is make or break. Leadership – in its various forms – is critical in all sectors of our societies and the world at large. As indicated above, critically conscious and mentally free thought leaders are necessary if we are to further advance Africa’s development. As we celebrate another Africa Day, a conference on African Unity for African Renaissance is taking place – people of African descent are converging in Pretoria to discuss African Solutions to African Problems. Also, the 2014 Annual Thabo Mbeki Africa Day Lecture, by the esteemed former OAU Secretary General, Dr Salim Ahmed Salim, takes place at the
University of South Africa at the eve of the inauguration of yet another democratic South Africa's president – leadership would again be on our tongues and hearts as we wrestle with development challenges confronting our troubled African continent. Pan-Africanism and African renaissance should be guiding paradigms as we debate African solutions to African problems.

As Frantz Fanon put it, “we must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent, and resolute...”