Towards a Civil Society Conception of African Unity/ Integration[1]

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Introduction: Elements of Civil Society

The term civil society enjoys a degree of conceptual elasticity, which is both helpful and unhelpful. Because the term refers to a wide range of social phenomena, which vary in constitution and societal expression, looseness is in this respect advantageous since it permits the accommodation of variation. On the other hand, it's shifting conceptual borders makes the notion sometimes inchoate and terminologically indeterminate. Some may say that it is neither fish nor fowl. Another way of fathoming this problem is to realize that definitions of "civil society" are seriously manifold and the conceptual divergences are ultimately based on contrastive philosophical positions, which cannot be easily unified.

There is also a type of disciplinary compartmentalization, which comes with different usages of the term. The analysis of civil society in the contemporary world depicts two leanings in usage from a disciplinary social science point of view. One is distinctly political in attention and the other more sociological. The political formulation of civil society appears in two strands, one closely associated to the Western-derived tradition of liberal-democratic theory affiliated to the ideas of de Tocqueville and Adam Ferguson; which identifies civic institutions and political activity as essential components of the emergence of a particular type of political society, based on the principles of citizenship, rights, democratic representation and the rule of law. The other strand, which is ideologically to the left, conceives of the notion of civil society, in the language of Marx, as an expression of the institutions of class society; in our times bourgeois society and bourgeois democracy. The sociological conception of civil society also pans out in two philosophical directions. To the right, it is ahistorically constructed

as the intermediate associational realm located between the state on the one side and the basic sociological building blocks of society on the other (individuals, families, lineages and firms), inhabited by social organizations with some degree of autonomy and voluntary participation on the part of their members. To the left of this position, the idea of civil society agrees that it refers to non-state social structures which order the transactions of everyday life, but that, such socio-structural formations are essentially historically defined phenomena and therefore in terms of ideals are of limited time span.

Be that as it may, the concept generally addresses the reality of the plethora of non-state institutions standing in contradistinction to the coercive structures of the state and which allow the accumulation of social capital and the creation of voices independent of *etatiste* narratives. They thus include structures like NGOs, church and other religious groups, the media, academia (at its best), community-based organizations, free trade unions, charities, etc.

Today, there are those who want to suggest that civil society organizations should represent positions, which are necessarily critical of the state. Many would not agree with this, but may suggest that civil society institutions should be able to maintain an independent voice. In other words, civil society organizations must be fearless towards the *diktat* of the ruling political elite without necessarily being confrontational or subversive. Experience, especially in the Third World, has sometimes demonstrated that where they are inspirationally confrontational and/or subversive, they may easily lend themselves to the artifices of interested external parties or regimes, especially in conditions where the wherewithal for existence is totally dependent on externally generated largess. Even in Putin-era Russia and China today, we do not infrequently hear voices of dismay about externally funded NGOs, which tread on the sensitive toes of the guardians of the state.

But we can also say without fear of controversy that in the contemporary world, strong civil society institutions are enabling factors for good and democratic governance. They allow the populace to press their wishes into existence without censorship or the strait-jacket of state approval and supervision. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to formulate the idea of civil society thus: It is ideally a social field located between the state and the household, structured around organized groups or associations of various sorts, which are relatively autonomous and stand outside the ambit of the state, and are volitionally created by members of the society to protect, celebrate or extend their interests, values or identities.

Wherever and whenever social groups undergo integration processes, essentially and ultimately, it involves the development of greater and easier people-to-people relations, which translate existentially as an enhanced face-to-face capacity in the practical workings of the relationship. Integration means freer movement and easier social engagement both at the group and individual levels of social life. It means greater

sharing of resources, ideas and ideals. It also means greater and increasing unity of the conceptualization and implementation of collective purposes.

The Pan-African Axis

How does this idea relate to African unity as a Pan-African Project? Let us also scrutinize the ideal of Pan-Africanism. We know that as a political goal, its roots lie in the late 19th century when Henry Sylvester Williams coined the term and organized the first conference at the turn of the century. At that stage it was not conceived as a project to unify African people. It was rather seen as an attempt to address what was regarded as general injustices to people of African descent in the Western imperial world, specifically in the British imperial world.

When, in June 1897 the first Pan-African Association was formed in the Diaspora through the organizational leadership of Williams, its constitutional mandate was to enable Africans and their global descendants, to achieve "their true civil and political rights, to ameliorate the condition of our oppressed brethren in the continents of Africa, America, and other parts of the world, by promoting efforts to secure effective legislation, to encourage our people in educational, industrial and commercial enterprises, to foster friendly relations between the Caucasian and African races, to organize a bureau, a depository, for collections of authorized writings and statistics relating to our people everywhere, and to raise a fund to be used solely for forwarding these purposes."[2]

Right from its emergence, African Nationalism or Pan-Africanism has straddled both sides of the Atlantic. Through all stages of its evolution and development, the Diaspora has been a key reference point. As the saying goes, "you never see Africa whole until you are out of it." The Diaspora connection is therefore vital for the historical understanding of the ideal and its practical implications for the present, and the future.

In the decades that followed Henry Sylvester Williams's pioneering sponsorship under the leadership of W.E.B. Du Bois, the idea slowly evolved into a fully-fledged anti-colonial project. By the time the Manchester Conference of 1945 took place, that is, within half-a-century of its inception, the Pan-African project had become the basis for the struggle for colonial freedom. It is in some senses significant that leaders like Kenyatta, Nkrumah, Banda in cooperation with Du Bois, Padmore, Makonnen, etc. were instrumental in formulating the strategy for colonial freedom from the Manchester meeting. After Manchester, within 10 years, colonial freedom was emerging on the African continent and the 1960s became the decade of African independence when more than 20 African countries gained their independence.

In 1963, under the auspices of Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, the Pan-African ideal was limitedly reached, under the circumstances of the time, in the form of the Organization of African Unity. The Organization of African Unity represented in its protocols all that

could be achieved at that point as a representation of African unity. As it turned out, it was a merely regional, geographical organization, which had nothing to do with the cultural or historical unity of the African world. It was what I have called a *continentalist* organization. The continentalist view of African unity has been the bane of African attempts to achieve unity.

It is an argument which starts with the geographical unity of Africa as the basis for the definition of Africans. Such definitions leave little space for the African Diaspora and end up categorizing as Africans a whole range of non-Africans who live on the continent, albeit rightfully, as citizens of various African countries. I have elsewhere (*Beyond the Colour Line*) suggested that in some cases these include people who, volitionally and with repeatedly-stated conviction, do not want even to be regarded as Africans. The confusion of citizenship with historical and cultural roots is most unfortunate, and remains the prime cause of the confusion regarding "who is an African." It is this confusion, which in part is responsible for the directional and strategic paralysis in the OAU/AU today.

The Afro-Arab National and Cultural Divide

In broad terms, two principal groups occupy the African continent. These are the African and Arab peoples. In the words of Amre Moussa, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, "around three quarters of Arab countries are in Africa, and most Africans who are not black are Arab."[3] This acknowledgement of the composition of peoples on the African continent made by Amre Moussa is interesting and revealing in different ways. On the one hand it implicitly admits that there are people who are not Arab on the continent. He initially desists from calling them Africans; he prefers "black." He does this because he wants to suggest that Arabs are also Africans, who are not black. A few lines down the road he writes that, "Arabs and Africans consider human rights and basic freedoms an indivisible whole."[4] Elsewhere, he writes; "just as the Arab world supported Africa in the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Arab world and Africa are supporting Palestinians in their struggle."[5] Amre Moussa ties himself into a knot. In one breath he denies by implication the existence of a category who are Africans; who are not Arab. At the same time he wants to argue that Arabs are Africans by dint of the fact that some live on the African continent in Arab countries. What about the Arabs who do not live on the African continent? I presume, from his logic, those are Arabs who are not African. In other words, being African is purely a geographical designation. For Amre Moussa, it has nothing to do with nationality, culture, language or history.

In his thinking, being Arab is more profound than being African; the former is cultural, historical, linguistic, ultimately national, while the latter is mere geography. This sort of reasoning denies us, as Africans, history, language, culture as reference points for our identity as Africans. For him we are simply creatures of geography. This crafty logic

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denies also the African connection with the Diaspora outside Africa, because if Africans are, simply and solely, those who live on the continent, Africans outside are excluded from the definition of Africaness. But more important for us to remember is the fact that this reasoning of Amre Moussa makes it possible for the Arab world to claim space amongst us, and quietly and often violently, expand this space at our expense. I have described this elsewhere as the attitude of "what belongs to me belongs to me, but what belongs to you belongs to both of us."

Historically, the Arabs entered Africa in the 7th century AD through Egypt under the leadership of Amr Ibn el Aas. Today, the Arab world includes almost a third of the African continent. My argument here needs little further explanation, except for the important fact that from Mauritania to Somalia and through the Sudan, expansionist war against Africans continues to the present day. Darfur is currently the flashpoint of this.

On Tuesday, the 24th of October 2006, in the wake of his expulsion from the Sudan by the National Islamic Front government, the incumbent overall UN representative in the Sudan, Jan Pronk, in an interview on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), expressed the view that with 200,000 Africans slaughtered and 2 million displaced effectively, "Darfur has been cleansed."[6] The reason for Pronk's expulsion was that he had noted on his website that Sudanese soldiers had been humiliated and demoralized by two major defeats on the battlefield by Fur insurgents. Adwok Nyaba writes that, "fourteen centuries of perpetual conflict and war with the Arabs have weakened and broken the backbone of African resistance. Southward migration, especially after the fall of the Christian Kingdom of Alwa at Soba in the 15th century, was meant to succeed in escaping the Arab onslaught. However, some submitted to Islam and acquiesced to Arab dominance in return for keeping body and soul together under conditions of bondage and slavery. Those who refused either retreated deep into the jungle and swamps (South Sudanese) or into the hills in central Sudan (Nuba). Those who submitted lost their African heritage – their language and culture – and became 'black Arabs' (Berti, Zaghawa, Burgo, among others) in Dar Fur."[7] The Fur are up in arms, fighting for their freedom from Arab thraldom. Freedom lives and so in the end they will triumph, but at what cost?

The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s seriously affected the stability of large communities in Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Burkina. The economic degradation which followed stimulated the emergence of armed conflicts which have been called the "Tuareg rebellions." Salam Diakite writes that,

> Urban centers in the north were quite often attacked by 'armed bandits', and tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people were killed or forced to migrate to neighbouring countries. Inter-community tension rapidly grew among the different ethnic groups. In its handling of the consequence of these long years of

drought on the one hand, and of the rebellions of the 1980s and the 1990s on the other, the government of Mali, with the assistance of its bilateral and multilateral partners, tended to favour the communities of white origin, mainly the Arabs and the Tuaregs, to the detriment of sedentary black communities. These groups had initially suffered from the drought and the incessant attacks o the combatants of the different Azawad liberation movements, and of the 'armed bandits' later on. This favouring of the white communities was – at least – the impression that the layman had of all the food distributions organized by local government authorities with the assistance of non-governmental organizations.[8]

If the Sudan has been the flashpoint of Afro-Arab confrontation in the East, Mauritania on the Atlantic coast, has been the flashpoint in the West. The legacy of Arab slavery of Africans to the present is not fully grasped by many. The depth of the crisis in Mauritania and the weaknesses of civil society in its inability to confront the authorities is well captured in the work of Garba Diallo;

> Racism in the vast desert nation is first of all based on the ideology of the denial of denial. As such, government policies are based on persistent denial of the very existence of the black African community in the country. From this position successive regimes have routinely denied their discrimination against the persecution of black citizens. Accordingly, people who do not exist cannot be discriminated against, persecuted or banished. Nor can they have any claim to human, cultural, civil or political rights. The tens of thousands of Mauritanian refugees who were deported to Senegal in 1989-91 at the height of the racist government pogroms against the black African community do not exist either. Thus Mauritania continues to deny them the right of organized return to their homes under international auspices as has been the case with other refugees.[9]

In the past, African understanding of these problems has been confused. Most of the Pan-Africanists of the 20th century laboured under *continentalist* misconceptions. Du Bois, Padmore, Nkrumah, Toure, and many others, could not unravel the Afro-Arab conundrum, and see it for what it is. Its reality can be best understood as a historical process. Colonel Khaddafi could without worry about the global African audience, stand in Amman, at a meeting of the Arab League in March 2001, and voice the plea that "the third of the Arab community living outside Africa should move in with the two-thirds

on the continent and join the African Union 'which is the only space we have'."[10] This is a cry for *lebensraum*, a prospect about which Africans cannot be indifferent.

The Zanzibar Manifesto

I shall end my address with a summary of the final chapter of my book, *The African Nation*. At the close of the penultimate month of the 20th century, a group of concerned people of African descent, met in Zanzibar to consider the prospects and the route to African advancement in the 21st century. The findings of this meeting captured the scope of the challenges, which lie ahead of us.[11] The group noted that, despite the considerable progress Africans have made on the road to emancipation and development, Africa and her peoples both on the continent and the Diaspora, have yet a longer and more perilous road to travel towards these objectives. The difficulties and tribulations that lie ahead will possibly eclipse the trials of the past fifty years. Democratic institutions and processes were identified as key elements for the achievement of these objectives.

The meeting agreed that the larger picture on the continent today is of an Africa at war. Almost three-quarters of the continent are engaged in either civil or inter-state war, or both. The proliferation of wars in Africa is threatening the future of Africans as a whole. The conditions of increasingly generalized war is opening Africa up for subterfuge and exploitation by narrow local and international, exploitative interests, in ways which have been unseen and unheard of since the end of the 19th century, and the early part of the 20th century. In some parts of Africa, warlordism and brigandage have overtaken the political process. Prolonged conflicts and wars are destroying the weak and scanty infrastructure that exists in most of Africa.

Noticeably, African economies are cruelly debt-ridden. Poverty, hunger and disease, have blanketed the social landscape of African life. Many of the gains, in education and health, won in the early stages of the post-colonial era, are being steadily reversed, as economic stagnation and graft blight the productive potential of African societies. Political dictatorship, by inept elites, has for decades as one-party, no-party, and military-bureaucratic states, trampled underfoot the human rights of the citizenry. In collusion with economically rapacious, international interests and institutions, African elites have betrayed the trust of the masses who supported the struggles for colonial freedom.

At the level of culture, indiscriminate affectations of Western habits and usages threaten to usurp the status of the cultures and languages we have inherited from our fathers and mothers. This is undermining pride in our cultures, damaging their fundamental role in African development and systematically misleading the youth, the inheritors of tomorrow.

Africa's development will have to be reflected on all areas of social, economic, political and cultural life. With regards to culture, for example, African art and musical expression needs to engage with the challenges of our times, and reflect the feelings and

perceptions which characterize the lives of the larger majorities of Africans. In other words, art and music must emotionally touch the teeming masses, without this being taken to mean a sterile neo-realism, which succeeds only to imitate nature. Art must speak and answer to the culture of Africans. Discussions about African music tend to treat the subject as if the only music we have is the contemporary bar, nightclub and largely urban street music. While the vitality of this genre cannot be denied, it cannot be celebrated to the exclusion of the traditional classical forms of African music. If literacy in the area of reading and writing is to be cultivated, democratized and developed, the same must be said for education in the writing and composition of African classical music, geared towards development into orchestral forms, in which the whole range of universal musical instruments, including African traditional instrument are used for the performance of such music and written compositions.

It was observed that in the long run, Africa will survive and flourish, as it has, indeed, done in the millennia of the history of *homo sapiens sapiens*. Africa, the cradle of humanity, and the bearer of human culture for most of this history, is not about to lie down and die. Africa will stand up, and for this, Africans will need, with resolution, to put their shoulders to the wheel and push forward. We need always to remember that we are the sole architects of our emancipation and development.

The Zanzibar meeting identified the need for people of African historical, and cultural origins to work towards the creation of an organization to serve the distinct interests of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora. It was the consensual opinion of the cohort that while the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), should be supported for whatever progressive and peace-promoting work it engages, since it is a regional body and not an organization defining the interests of Africans (the way the Arab League defines the interests of Arabs, or the European Union defines the interests of Europeans), it is unable to sufficiently bring to the fore, the championing of African interests as a single-minded objective. There is urgency about the need to canvass support and advocacy for this.

The need to advance the use of African languages and cultures as the only realistic basis for African development was recognized. It was the finding of the meeting that if Africans are to advance in a way, which lifts society from the mass level, and empowers mass society with knowledge, such advancement would need to be premised on the languages and cultural usages of mass society. It is therefore imperative that African languages are made to assume centrality, in all areas of social life, including education (at all levels), judicial practice and the media. Indeed, our indigenous languages are the key, and only viable instruments for opening up African cultures to development.

Inter-African economic efforts, at both macro and micro levels, are identified as areas of activity, which should be actively encouraged. Such people-to-people relations are crucial for the economic and social advancement of Africans. Labour and capital need to be able to move freely, if we are to make economic headway. Advocacy for this

idea needs to be urgently and diligently pursued.

Trade and politics should be conducted on a Pan-Africanist basis. Hitherto, the segmented nature of trade relations and international politics of African states have opened Africa up for the application of the policy of divide and rule, between African states, by the imperial powers of the world. The meeting was of the view that concerted activity should be initiated to unify and create linkages for co-operation among African states, in the areas of trade and politics, with respect to the relationship between Africa and the metropolitan powers of the contemporary world.

Participants at the meeting agreed that, given the difficult and troubled history of Africa and the Western world, enacted over centuries, good reason alone would suggest that it is in the interest of Africans to forge strong links with the Far East, in order to benefit from the imminent advancement which countries in the Far East have registered over the past few decades. Many are countries with a Western colonial experience, not altogether dissimilar to the African case. Africans need to find alternative international linkages, which would be in their strategic interest, instead of relying on the old imperial world, which had for so long kept her under thralldom. However, we need to exercise caution and wisdom in how these linkages are cultivated. We would need to ensure that, as the saying goes, we do not let the leopard out through the front door to welcome the lion in through the back door. These new trade linkages and relations should not be allowed to entrench our status as purely raw material producers. We also want the scientific know-how and technology to produce and add value to our products.

It was recognized that, one of the effects of colonialism in Africa has been that it has succeeded in creating an elite, conscious and attached to the post-colonial state as a basis of its material and social interests. This consciousness cannot be defined as national, in the sense that it does not represent an awareness of African nationalism, in a wide historical and cultural sense of the term, transcending the colonially created borders. Rather its focus is directed towards the articulation of the post-colonial state as an instrument of collective, "national" feeling. Thus the post-colonial state which is, itself, a structure created primarily to protect metropolitan interests in partnership with African elites, has usurped the aspirations of mass society in Africa for emancipation and development, which recognize African culture and history as bases for development. Democratic groups and social elements should support, as a primary objective, the emergence of a "united African nation", achieved through democratic processes in and out of the political arena. The requisite, national consciousness for this needs to be assiduously cultivated. What this means (as earlier stated in this text), is that we should not be less Gambian, Kenyan, Tanzanian or Zambian etc., but be more African.

Linkages should be actively forged between Pan-Africanist civil society organizations, outside statist structures, working in their specific countries, but linked through organizational structures working for the shared objective of African unity. An

organizational structure would need to be established for this purpose.

The meeting took the view that, in order to strengthen the bases of the linkage with the Diaspora and halt the erosion of this linkage, it was necessary to help the consolidation of the cultural, historical and social features of the Diaspora, which assert and affirm its African roots. It was agreed that pressure would need to be put on African governments to recognize the fact that Diaspora Africans should be given the right to African citizenship, on demand.

We agreed that in order to move beyond speculation, theorization and conjecture to practical and organizational tasks in pursuit of African unity, democracy and development, positively inclined African minds need to organize. The initial direction of this organization should be towards the development of a political and cultural movement, which is all-African, which shares commonly articulated ideals, which provides scope for adherents in separate states, to pursue the shared objectives according to the specific conditionalities of the states in which they live. In other words, an approach, which strategically converges but tactically allows individual, state manoeuvrability. The whole approach needs to be managed along supremely democratic lines, in which transparency, openness, consultation and probity govern practice. But there is a need for us to make a commitment, to use all means possible, to defend democracy and advance the freedom, development and the unity of Africans.

Notes

1. This paper was originally a Keynote Address presented to the *Nordic Africa Institute's Research Network on NGO and Civil Society Roles in African Development*, at the Inaugural Workshop on the topic *Civil Society and African Integration*. University of Aalborg, Denmark. 6-7 November 2006.
2. See, J.R. Hooker. *Henry Sylvester Williams: Imperial Pan-Africanist*. Rex Collings. London. 1975. P.23.
3. Amre Moussa. Why Africa Matters to the Arab World. In, *AFAN. African Analyst Quarterly*. Issue 1, 3rd Quarter. 2006. P.10.
4. Ibid. P.11.
5. Ibid.
6. BBC World News. 24 October 2004.
7. Peter Adwok Nyaba. Arab Racism in the Sudan. Its Historical Source and Modern Manifestation. In, Kwesi Kwaa Prah (ed.). *Racism in the Global African Experience*. CASAS Book Series No. 23. Cape Town. 2006. Pp.178-179.
8. Salam Diakite. Racial Prejudices and Inter-Ethnic Conflicts. The Case of the Afro-Arab Borderlands in Western Sahel. In, Kwesi Kwaa Prah (ed.). Ibid. P.201.

9. Garba Diallo. The Triple Crisis of Slavery, Racism and Dictatorship. Mauritania and the Afro-Arab Borderlands. In, Kwesi Kwaa Prah (ed.). Ibid. P.205.

10. Khadafi Invites Arabs to Join the African Union. *Panafrican News Agency*. Dakar. 28 March 2001.

11. See, The New Manifesto: Towards the African Century. Africa and the Challenge of the 21st Century. 11 November 1999. *African Opinion Series*. Cape Town. No.11, 2000.