

Africa + 1: Stepping Back from a Costly Pragmatism

Written by Adagbo Onoja

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ADAGBO ONOJA, JUL 24 2023

There are no facts or statistics for anyone to argue that Africa has overcome its distressful encounter with modernity. But there is the fact of a spectre taking leave of Africa. It is the spectre of 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy by which the European Union, (EU), US, Britain, China, France, India, Russia, Japan, Turkey, the Gulf states, and other powerful global players related with the continent in the post-Cold War era. 'Africa + 1' had the defining feature of the congregation of 50 or so African leaders in whichever capital city to which the host president or prime minister invited them. President William Ruto of Kenya has now sounded the death knell for this format. He used the 'M O Ibrahim In Conversation' platform at the 2023 M O Ibrahim Governance Weekend in Nairobi in April to announce that he and his colleagues have decided on a new format. Henceforth, a delegation of seven will represent Africa at all such summits. The immediate past, the incumbent and the in-coming chairperson of the African Union and three or four other bureaucrats from the African Union Secretariat will now make up the team.

Echoing his colleagues, most notably prime minister Ahmed Abiy of Ethiopia and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Ruto's argument is that it is neither intelligent nor reciprocal of sovereignty for 54 African leaders, "sometimes loaded into a bus like school kids" to appear before one other world leader for a meeting at which each of the African leaders has no more than two minutes to say whatever they had to say, then a photo session with the host president or prime minister and it is all over. What is clear from the decision of the African leaders is how uncomfortable they too have been about the coordination and even the substance of the 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy.

Beyond that, Ruto's announcement also indicates a season of internal criticism among African leaders against most regimes and practices of the 'liberal world order' in general and the pragmatism of the African response to the 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy in particular, notwithstanding the Africanness of the pragmatism. In what could be called the African world, there is no wisdom in declining an invitation to a meeting, a consultative session or a dialogue. The wise move is to accept such an invitation but to be in the position to say yes or no to what the host brought to the table at the session. Although developed in response to security dilemma in pre-colonial polities, the calculus is the same as the logic in contemporary diplomacy that it is unstrategic to close the line of communication with a conflict party and thus throw away the opportunity to get to hear what the other side is thinking. Collective memory of this piece of pragmatism might explain why popular disapproval of the participation of African leaders in 'Africa + 1' summits since the year 2000 has not been that loud. Ruto and his colleagues have brought to an end what was, except for the established colonial powers, a completely new way of operationalising the relationship with the continent, as clumsy as it was. Certainly, there is something progressive in Africa's stepping back from the pragmatism of not refusing an invitation because of the 'unwisdom' of doing so. But what might this stepping back mean?

Is Ruto the Wailing of the Siren or the Blast of the Trumpet?

The stepping back is an alarm which can be read as either the wailing of the siren or the blast of the trumpet. In post-colonial Africa, this distinction is a crucial one because each of the siren and the trumpet can be read as completely different messages. Across the continent, the siren is one of the most significant signifiers of power. It announces to road users that someone in power in the modern state is in motion and the road users should give way or pay a price. The trumpet is, on the contrary, an invitation to the folks to participate in the unfolding of power and authority. Restricted to the palaces of traditional rulers, the trumpet is sounded to either call the people to witness the departure

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from or return of the monarch to the palace. There must be reckoning with the distinction between the different messages the siren and the trumpet communicate, notwithstanding the vulgarisation of the trumpet as a palace practice today and even as the participatory message of the trumpet does not suggest or absolve the holders of traditional authority from overall elite complicity in the unending disempowerment of the people.

In a globally entangled world, there is no science which can tell at the moment which of the siren or the trumpet African leaders are testing by stepping back from the 'Africa + 1' pragmatism. But there are conditions that favour the stepping back rhetoric turning into a blast of the trumpet. Among these conditions are the hostility of much of the rest of the world, particularly critical academia, to the continuing cultural and structural negation of Africa; the weaponization of popular culture into spaces of counter-hegemonic epistemes and practices by the very ordinary people across Africa and, lastly, the season of self-criticism among African leaders. It can only be the blast of the trumpet when we take these trends into consideration. At a time when global relations is shaking off its obsession with militaristic sense of power politics towards inter-cosmological conversations, a blast of the trumpet, as it were, is readable as Africa turning on itself so that it can then turn on the world. Africa re-reading itself so that it can turn on the world refers not to any hegemonic project of dispossession and domination of others but the inclusive reality that would follow in world politics in the event of the rupturing of the exclusionary foundation of Africa's own 'centuries of humiliation.' How might this be the case?

The Primacy of the African Gaze on the World

Understanding the self-criticism among African leaders as a blast of the trumpet rather than the wailing of the siren implies the coming to an end of the gap between the postcolonial power elite in Africa and the African people. That is the wide gap as existed between a Mobutu Sese Seko in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), an Emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa in the Central African Republic (CAR) and a Kamuzu Banda in Malawi, to cite the three who best typify the extraordinarily exclusionary leaders and the resultant gap we are talking about throughout the Cold War era. A certain outcome of the closing of the gap under reference will be the unleashing of the assemblage of epistemes, regimes and practices that colonialism could not undo on the continent. Here, we are most interested in the subsequent infusion of unaffected cosmologies into Africa's diplomatic orientation and, therefore, the materialisation of the African gaze on the world in the event of the closing of the gap. Hitherto, the intimidation, exclusion and misrecognition of the indigenous composers, performers, seers and poets who control the category of game changing metaphors and wise sayings impoverished Africa's politics of meaning. As such, the African gaze on the world remains the missing link in terms of the mediation of the unequal power relations between the continent or its leaders and the rest of the world.

It bears stressing that this argument flows directly from the notion that nothing makes sense in and of itself outside of the mediation of it because there is no unmediated access to truth. In relation to Africa, it means that the objective fact of Africa and Africans are not the guarantors of a seat for Africa on the global table of power. It is the representation and articulation of those objective facts that would count far more in the acquisition and consolidation of power in global politics. That contention is what Africa, more than any other civilisation, should appreciate better for the simple reason that, in spite of its near non-stop sunshine across the continent, it has, historically, been known and related to as the 'heart of darkness.' That single metaphor has done more damage to Africa and Africans than whatever material costs of imperial geopolitics on the continent.

We must add at this point though that it was not the mere uttering of the 'heart of darkness' that kept Africa down. It was the articulatory practice of the British Empire involving bringing together the colonial state, religion, the school system, the colonial military and the colonial judiciary to enforce the regimes and practices of power delineated by the metaphor of 'heart of darkness.' That is the sense in which it is argued that language or, more appropriately, discourse, is constitutive of power. Norms, culture and ideas can also be productive of power but to frame norms or culture into a 'regime of truth' requires the use of language. It means that language use is, in the last instance, our access to truth. Since what people see as the truth is what guides the way they act, it implies that those who push their own position to the universal acceptance of their audience are the powerful in a hegemonic sense. And that is the nexus between language and power that informs the wisdom that words in use determine truth or meaning of any subject, issue or situation. Critics of the articulatory lens on politics wonder how mere words can constitute reality.

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They forget that it is one thing for a reality to exist but another thing how the reality is understood. Or that an earthquake in one society can become the 'wrath of the gods' in another society, to cite the classic exemplification of this claim in constructivist analysis.

However, hegemony as a form of power comes with a major weakness in that it cannot be secured with law or (military) force. That fact explains why a degraded actor in world politics such as Africa can enact and re-insert itself into primacy in global power politics. This is the tragedy in Africa's failure to have articulated a cultural self-understanding to shatter any other contending narratives or visual images of it in world politics. Doing so should have been at the heart of African diplomacy in a world which works by regimes of truth rather than by objective reality. Professor Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian academic at the University of Witwatersrand has emphasised this point about the frame game in African politics. He has repeatedly called it the imperative of the ability to turn facts into signs or turn facts into symbols.

So, it is interesting that African leaders would no longer be partaking in 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy in the manner it started. As interesting as that is, African leaders would still need to do more. They need to fill a gap. The gap is the African discourse of the world and, by implication of the African self and the articulation of that image-schema into the framework for the negotiation of all unequal power relations involving it. Such a framework is missing except if we can take Africa's memories of degradation as one. But as the Kenyan president also argued at the April ending 'M O In Conversation' platform, Africa and its leaders no longer want to go to negotiations as victims anymore. Complaining about having been colonised has been over-invested. The leaders must be right because even if that awareness is pervasive enough among African leaders of diverse educational, cultural, ideological and generational make-up, it has no negotiating advantage anymore. Not with the diplomatic populism of geopolitical actors and interests, particularly Emmanuel Macron of France, who is popping up here and there with his decolonial justice narrative.

Interestingly, something noteworthy is happening along the line of Africa writing itself into global power. It is the complementarity of African leaders turning on themselves and jettisoning a costly pragmatism on the one hand and the release of new texts on the strategy of writing the continent in global space on the other hand. The new texts in question are *To Write the Africa World* and *The Politics of Time: Imagining African Becomings*, both of which are about "the Africanisation of the global question," the overarching phrase from the introductory chapter of the first of the two books, all of them edited by Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr of the University of Witwatersrand and Duke University, respectively. The books are products of the coterie of African intellectuals involved in the annual intellectual festival in Senegal called 'Workshops of Thought.' These two developments cannot be understood as coincidence but the intertextual processes marking the possibility of developing and articulating an African gaze beyond its historical adversity.

Hitherto, this task has been undertaken on behalf of Africa by explorers, cartographers and, recently, journalists. Africans did not like their narratives because the narratives have been largely guilty of what American media scholar, Robert Terrell, calls 'phantasmagoria of ethnography'. It was on that basis that African leaders, particularly Thabo Mbeki, concluded that Africa has lost ownership of its story. Chinua Achebe, the late Nigerian writer, has this argument about writing one's own story if one did not think that someone else authored a good enough story. Achebe's position is Africa's challenge today: crafting that narrative that can persuade the world to make this the African moment, depending on how Africa articulates such a script. The point is that it is actors such as Africa that what some scholars call 'the power of words in International Relations' provides a starting point in world politics.

The successful framing of the Africans as a cultural negation of modernity, more than the resources looted over the centuries, remains the unmaking of Africa. Re-making Africa will not be possible without a continental self-understanding which overwrites that historical negation. From what we can see in the activities of perceptive think tanks, media houses, academia/universities, popular culture and similar other domains definitive of the global discursive space, it is safe to say that progressive humanity has taken up this challenge of reframing Africa. African intellectuals are taking leadership of that process too, particularly with the two texts referenced above. Still, African leaders should be seen to understand and appreciate being the champions. There can be no better time to start this campaigning than now, a month to the 60th anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity/African Union and in the

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light of Africa's Agenda 2063.

Delay Can Be Dangerous

The dangers of further delay will find no better illumination than what the African leaders are just stepping back from – 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy. That clustering of interests of global powers on mainly the continent's extractive industries has been the definitive feature of Africa's participation in world affairs since the end of the Cold War. Yet, African leaders never articulated any categorical frame game on it. In the absence of that, the debate on what the clustering could mean did not become the space for geopolitical action it should have been even as geopolitically entangling as the two dominant positions on it were. The contending positions were whether the convergence was best understood as a strategic opportunity or imperial return.

After over two decades of the clustering, the outcome has conformed to the framing of it as "The 21st Century Scramble for Africa" the title of US academic, Margaret Lee's 2006 essay. It is not surprising that the outcome of the clustering has simply not been as profound or transformative for Africa if measured in terms of what is observable on the ground. This is not to deny or belittle the efforts of some noticeable actors or country or regional grouping in Africa in that clustering but to recognise that Africa has, in the end, been left holding the short end of the stick again as far as holistic social change is concerned. This should not have been the case for a continent which has been aptly called a scar on the conscience of the world. That outcome is not necessarily and entirely the eternal return of imperial geopolitics. It is also the crisis of the pragmatic rather than an articulatory response of Africa, particularly the leaders. It is another way of saying that the outcome of the clustering could have been different if Africa played the frame game in its politics there. It is the game that was required.

All other powers participating in 'Africa + 1' summit diplomacy arrived with a clear discourse of the self in the world. The EU sees itself as basically a normative power. As norms are what we make of them, that self-understanding gives the EU leaders and bureaucrats large room for manoeuvres. When we move over to the United States, it frames itself as the indispensable nation, a frame that we can see at work in about everything it does in the world. China arrived at global reckoning with a frame of itself as well as its astonishing scale of social transformation as a case of 'peaceful rise', with the 'win-win' rider. In essence, none of the powers involved in the summit diplomacy was operating without a solid self-understanding of the world.

But it is not only sovereign states that have been playing the frame game. In 1998, *Time* pushed out the 'Africa rising' narrative which subsequently ruptured the historical dominance of 'heart of darkness' in the representation of Africa. The narrative was firmly established by 2011 when *The Economist* joined the 'Africa rising' bandwagon. In 2001, Tony Blair needed just the phrase 'a scar on the conscience of the world' to make the point that the world has a problem with the condition in which Africa finds itself. We cannot forget Bob Geldof and his "do they know it is Christmas" narrative and before Geldof, the musicians who sang 'We are the World.' To the extent that the meaning of any of these phrases, metaphors or image-schemas depend entirely on how they are re-inscribed, they are each a watershed. If, for whatever reasons, these texts were not reinscribed to promote a more radical and transformative outcome for Africa, that has absolutely nothing to do with those who spoke or wrote them. If a single expression – 'heart of darkness' – could so disfigure Africa to a point of near-irreparability, so also can any other metaphor be used to set an irresistible agenda for any set of actors on the continent.

As soon as Africa can produce an overarching self-understanding through a more reflexivist rather than rationalist reading of her history, the conversation between it and the powers clustering on the continent will assume a strategic opportunity, an opportunity the continent will not have again until the unfolding global order unravels. If it took 46 years from 1945 to 1991 for the post World War 2 order to unravel, then missing this opportunity can be nothing less than the mother of all tragedies.

It has to be so because Africa just has to wriggle out of the serious crisis of underdevelopment peculiar to it. As is commonly said, the level of underdevelopment across Africa is of no use to anybody anymore. It is destructive of the Africans in whichever direction they turn. It does capitalists no good as the level of development is such that majority lack the purchasing power to patronise manufactured goods and services. So, nobody is gaining anything from the

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crisis of modernisation in Africa. Meanwhile, it is now clear that the idea of the United States of America and China escaping unproductive peer competition through a game changing joint commitment of the two to the rapid social transformation of the African continent has evaporated as fast as it came to all who shared that rare optimism. Instead of binding themselves together in the challenge of re-making Africa, the two are part of the assemblage of prize fighters in the battleground called Africa. And with the death of that, Africa has been nothing more than the echoes of a war foretold: “international competition to secure Africa’s critical and strategic minerals and energy products intensified in 2022”. This is what Alex Vines tells us in a recent Chatham House piece, Africa in 2023: Continuing political and economic volatility in which he flashed a picture of Africa’s wealth profile as one of “large deposits of critical ‘transition minerals’ such as copper, cobalt, graphite, lithium or nickel”.

Instead of the prosperity that should flow from this degree of endowment, Africa remains classic of the paradox of over-abundance of endowment in natural resources. The figures of deaths from malaria, maternal mortality, crisis of clean water, balanced diet and from lack of opportunity for informed choice might have been declining over the years but they are still unacceptable figures. Tragically, international development players still insist on explaining the figures of misery on the continent in terms of fairy tales of corrupt leadership or over bloated public service. The only way to rupture and overwrite this hegemonic scripts is an African narrativisation of what the Pope has called “the poison of greed” defining the old ways of accessing the raw materials. Such a narrative will stress the point that those ways are no longer viable because the world has reached a radically different appreciation of the dangers of poverty in Africa to both its direct victims, manufacturers and to managers of international peace and security.

African leaders are right to be stepping back from a costly pragmatism in their ‘Africa + 1’ summit diplomacy. But while ending the clumsy practice of all African leaders assembling in one capital city for a summit with one world leader or the other is what observers will find psychologically fulfilling, there is the next step to take. That step is if only Africa can also make this blast of the trumpet its own ‘articulatory turn’ in global politics as well.

About the author:

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