

THE CREATION OF A NEW AFRICAN IDENTITY: SALVATION FROM WITHIN

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Not so long ago, a meme with the image of a lion caught my eye as I went through my Facebook timeline, it read thus;

“No matter the economy of the jungle, I will never eat grass; it’s not pride, it’s just who I am.”

A few days later, I crossed paths with the same meme on another social media platform. However, this time the meme struck me, not on my ‘humor’ nerve but the meditative one. *‘If indeed a hungry lion will not eat grass, then maybe a poorly paid but honest civil servant will not dip his hands into public coffers, an opposition party leader will steer away from tribalism even when it would sway public opinion in his favor; because he is a patriot and a soldier on a peace keeping mission in another mineral rich African country will shun the temptation to pillage because of the greater Pan-African ideals he swore to uphold and protect,’ I pondered.* As I meditated on this meme, my thoughts brewed up a thesis;

“Most of Africa’s problems stem from a warped sense of identity or possibly from the lack of one and to deliver Africa from her broken state, a new sense of identity would have to be created in her people. That identity would have to be one that she has created for herself. That identity would have to be one that celebrates her beauty and peculiarity. That identity would have to emanate from a value system that glorifies stewardship, servant leadership, integrity and patriotism and loathes selfishness, injustice, discord and inhuman treatment of others.”

For my thesis, I draw inspiration from the Singaporean story. Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, in his book *‘From Third World to First’* published in 2000 by Harper tells the story of Singapore; how she was able to rise from a third world country to a first world country. The former prime minister attributes Singapore’s success partly to the climate of opinion that had been created in Singapore that looked upon corruption in public office as a threat to society. He goes on to explain that in building the empowered Singaporean state it was important that honesty was a national habit and that it was these virtues that enabled Singapore to weather the 1997 financial crisis that hit Eastern Asia.

This is not in any way to suppose that African communities have never had such value systems. On the contrary, they did but these value systems were eroded by the rough course of history Africa had to take. The rigors of slave trade in the 17th century, the scramble and partition of Africa in the 19th century which culminated into colonialism saw many African communities disintegrate; many societies were infused with new crippling ideologies and systems. Even by the 1960s when the Pan African movement was at its peak, the seeds of days past continued to flourish. These seeds came to maturation in post-independence Africa, a time that saw many African countries suffer under the plagues of civil war, famine, apartheid, genocide, abysmal poverty, disease, extra-judicial killings, corruption, nepotism and other forms of oppression. Through the years, Africa has birthed a generation of majorly two extremes. Today we have on one hand a group of ‘enlightened and elitist’ Africans who in spite of their knowledge and considerable wealth are totally detached from their societies and prefer only to advance themselves even at the expense of their nations and on the other hand we have a peasantry who constantly suffer under the hand of oppressive political systems while wallowing in helplessness. It is such a predicament that warrants a new African identity. For so long and in many instances, Africa has been portrayed as a dark land at war and in despair; a sort of cesspool for all the world’s evil but this can and indeed ought to change.

If I were a leader in Africa this would be my first task; working towards systematically changing the value system of the nation. I would start off by reminding my people that Africa is a beautiful continent, richly endowed and not cursed; a continent with a rich history, a great heritage and a warm people. This I believe would stir up a sense of pride in my people; the kind of pride that drives people to serve their nation. I remember once visiting Washington D.C. and everything about that trip made one want to become an American. I was travelling with an American and his passport was filled with all these nationalistic quotations. He took me to the Lincoln Memorial, the Library of Congress, the White House and many other

places that told the story of America and as he spoke, one could not help the feeling of envy. He spoke of his nation not as one that was perfect but as one he was willing to serve. Building a sense of national pride would take simple and yet systematic efforts; firstly, a revisiting of the education curriculum to reflect the glory of Africa. The curriculum I would develop would be one that portrays Africa as the land of hope that it is and also encourages the youth to think of ways of serving their continent better.

I would rally my people to develop a nation creed. A creed that cuts across all divides and yet embraces universal truths of justice, proper stewardship, equality and integrity. This creed would hang on every government office wall, be recited in every school and debated on radio until it was etched on every citizen's heart. Such a creed would embody the national ideology. The power of such a movement cannot be undermined. For example, whereas the Rwandan genocide was largely fueled by a warped ideology, her road to recovery was buttressed in the resolve of the people; they declared as a nation that "NEVER AGAIN" would they allow their country to be plagued by the same atrocities.

To reinforce these national values, I would push for laws that give heavy penal sanctions for all those who defy the national values. The laws I would push for would be intolerant of corruption and bad management. Such laws would make the 'resource curse' a thing of the past as they would make reckless and selfish management of national resources a very costly affair.

As leader of the nation, I would set up a national honor roll which would recognize individuals that have exhibited these national values. In many African countries, many of our national heroes are former warlords turned liberators and indeed this may be a reflection of our history as a continent fighting against oppression both from within and without but the seasons have changed and so must our attitude. I believe we have come to a season where as a continent we should not keep identifying ourselves merely with liberators but with nation builders; people that have 'beaten their spears into ploughs.' It is my assertion that if as a continent we exalted such people as role model citizens, we would breed a generation that would walk in their footsteps and rebuild the broken continent.

In a bid to fight corruption, mismanagement, human rights abuses and other such ills, many African nations have put up several institutions to police the leaders into doing right. These institutions are often armed with diverse powers and mandates; investigative, prosecutorial even punitive. It is my submission however that this policing would not be necessary if we taught our people to be these values we hope to police them into. This policing would not be necessary if we made a culture of these values. In creating this culture, I would start with myself and those immediately answerable to me. In my office, there would be no room for corruption, negligence, self-aggrandizement and mediocrity. Where it would be detected, it would be treated with severe sanctions. My staff and cabinet would undergo continuous training in the national ideology but also in best practices in management and administration. The saying goes a 'fish rots from the head', if it were to heal, I believe it would also start from the head, I believe by exhibiting such leadership, I would be communicating to my people that this is the way, '*walk ye in it*'.