

Message to the Participants
of the Culture and Identity Committee of the
Pan-African Youth Conference 2022

hosted by the African Students' Association of the University of Notre Dame, and the Pan-African Students' Union of Northwestern University, United States of America.

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Conversations about culture and identity within the African experience are perhaps the most multiplicitous enquiries of their kind. They require a conception of the self and the community that must simultaneously cross time, physical expanse, and even consciousness. For the historian Teshale Tibebu, the word and experience we call “African” is the unique creation of the first Great Dislocation of the modern African experience, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade of the 15th to the 19th centuries. It was this event that stapled together people, once disparate, into this new thing called “African”. This assumption, some may say *hostile*, of the oneness of the African experience was likewise stapled onto continental Africans in the second Great Dislocation, the colonisation of the continent in the 19th and 20th centuries. But perhaps the Pan-African movements of the twentieth century went furthest in their appropriation, re-definition, and use of a singular identity to promote the doctrines of modernity, self-government, and civil rights across the Pan-African world. Thus, it is fitting that any conference that tags itself with the moniker “Pan-African”, particularly one that hopes to harness the zeal of the youngest members of the intelligentsia, must seriously dedicate itself to the exploration of culture and identity.

As we arrive at the second instalment of the Pan-African Youth Conference organised by the African Students' Association of the University of Notre Dame and the Pan-African Students' Union of Northwestern University, we turn again to explore what it means to be an African. More importantly, we want to explore how getting to an understanding about this will help deliver the aim of the next generation of intellectuals emerging from the academy to improve the global condition of the African.

There has long been an ideological and experiential division between what may be called “academic” Pan-Africanism and “grassroots” Pan-Africanism. If one can accuse the latter of over-emphasising identity, perhaps the former does not engage with the matter nearly enough. Maybe it is more accurate to say that the

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former does not bring to its conversations on identity enough *generative* enquiry, meaning in its grappling with identity, it negates as much as it posits. That the terms “pan-African”, “Black Atlantic”, “Black”, “African”, and “global Africa” to cite a few, have in equal (and violent) measure their proponents and their detractors within the academy is an example of just what is meant by a lack of *generative* work. A further failing levelled at the academy is the dearth of Afro-positivism or Afro-optimism in conversations on culture and identity. This is a principal cause of the chasm between the intelligentsia and grassroots activism. The activists are in no doubt about the value of Africa and do not speak of emergence, potential, or rising; they see abundance by the country-ful. For them, it is the rest of the world that needs to emerge and rise to its potential by ridding itself of its erroneous view of the African, his knowledge, and his cultural productions.

In taking up the Chairmanship of the Culture and Identity Committee of this year’s Conference, I intend to address these two issues, the dearth of generation and positivity. Beforehand I would like to offer my reflections on why the academy is what I accuse it of being.

Firstly, the discourse on African “development” within the academy has been inherited from predecessor departments which were either colonial in origin, designed to train colonial administrators, or instituted at a time of deep difficulty in African political society post-independence. Such departments in the diaspora were staffed with African intellectual (and sometimes political) exiles who lamented their stays in the breeder states of the hegemony and so were interested primarily not in what was *right* about Africa or being African, but what was *wrong*. They saw Africa as a problem to be fixed because the continent had forced them out under threats of intellectual and physical harm. Thus, their task was to come up with a way to fix it, get the buy-in of the west, and wait for the time when they could return to their native lands. Things on the continent were not much better as ministries transformed from colonial to national but inherited all the reductivism of the former. As a result, not much Afro-positivism was in sight there either. As such, Afro-pessimism has become the dominant ideology of area studies programmes, extending its tentacles of non-generative scepticism, i.e. pessimism, to any discussions on culture and identity.

Secondly, the squeezing out of African history proper as an academic discipline within the western academy, particularly within area studies curricula, is directly linked to the disintegration of meaningful conversations about culture and identity. The declining regard for history in curricula on the continent, due in no small part to the problems inherent in reconciling tribal, religious, and global identities within the national identities on which the whole nation-state experiment hinges, is a tragedy. However, we cannot deny the central place of history education in the various African pedagogies of liberation proposed in the 19th and 20th centuries. From the African Personality to Black Consciousness, all championed

history as a cultural and academic phenomenon integral to any talk of emancipation. However, we have a situation where students in Africa and Africanist scholars in the diaspora cannot claim to have engaged deeply with the topic of culture and identity when they are wielding less and less the tools of historical enquiry.

Thirdly, we cannot discount the role of diasporic national patriotism, most notably Black American patriotism and the patriotism of Black French Antilleans, in usurping the bulk of the post-colonial intellectual capital dedicated to issues of culture and identity. They use this capital to define their communities as functions of their national cultures in place of defining them as iterations of Pan-African expression. This is linked in no small part to the place of countries such as Haiti and Liberia in the African imagination, the former being a cautionary tale for all independence-seeking Caribbean nations and the latter a testament perhaps to the fallacy of the benefits of repatriation and the claim of “one Africa”. The average man is not cognizant of all this, but the intelligentsia feels less able to advocate for self-government and a single culture in the face of the economic challenges and social dislocations of the political societies cited above. The indictment by Dr Hilary Beckles of contemporary Pan-Africanism and his call for the diaspora to free itself from its intoxication with “mother Africa” in the face of international relations policies contrary to, in his opinion, any sense of Pan-African unity, seems a deeper plunging of the knife into any notion of a unifying African identity. Gone are the efforts of the Carmichaels and Césaires of the world who worked to flesh out the concept of the “diasporan” as an iteration of the “African” and yet an iteration of the “American” or the “Frenchmen” in equal measure. In the loss of the zeal of the diasporic intelligentsia, the African academy has lost the attention of its most important modern sites of excavation in matters of culture and identity.

It is difficult to say that such patriotism is to blame for how this issue manifests on the continent. Esteemed revolutionary Dr Barney Pityana speaks of a crisis of intellectual leadership on the continent such that the current intelligentsia and activists alike are reaching back to the Black Consciousness of *back then* to tell them who they are *today*. It is difficult not to blame the critical theorists of the post-colonial age for both the continental and the diasporic apathy. They read the emergence of cultural and political fault lines in the Pan-African movement as proof that there was no such thing as an “African” culture to begin with. At the very least, they felt that enquiries into such things were so tricky as to be distractions from the post-colonial obsessions, being the economic development of the continent on the one hand and the removal of all barriers to political participation and social mobility in the diaspora on the other hand. Dr Frantz Fanon led the charge in this direction by venerating contemporary political action as the only creator of culture within the African experience, thus devaluing the offerings of the Personalists, Négritudinalists and the New Negroes of the 19th and early 20th centuries who all saw Pan-Africanism as principally an intense discourse on culture and identity. We live now in the Fanonian age and, while I

have too much affinity for his thought to suggest that we live now in the *shadow* of his ideas, I do believe there is a need to transition into the post-Fanonian intellectual age where culture and identity are no longer discussed only as problematics *vis-a-vis* grander schemes of material decolonisation.

The early New African Intelligentsia envisioned an ongoing conversation on culture and identity that each new generation should reconstitute in its image. The constant evolution of definitions of culture and identity and the part they are to play in liberation was in this way baked into the definition of Pan-Africanism from the beginning. While the nationalists of the first half of the 20th century perhaps over-politicised these discourses, stretching them beyond sensibleness, Fanon was maybe too hasty in reading the fault lines they opened up as existential failures in the Pan-African project. Afro-positivist conversations on culture and identity are not superficial or radical distractions from some core, more theoretical and intellectually “clean”, Pan-African discourse, they are the substrate within which all Pan-African expression was supposed to take place. And while there is no intention here to venerate the antiquarian, we can say confidently that the academy is far from leading the way in proposing contemporary trans-national trans-cultural African identities that inspire.

Those who imagine that conversations like those we intend to have in the Culture and Identity Committee of this year’s Conference intend to arrive at a constitution-like definition of “Blackness” or “Africanness” misunderstand that Pan-Africanism is an epistemology and a pedagogy. It is an approach to knowledge and knowledge acquisition that aims not to produce a fixed body of knowledge but to nurture a critical Afro-positivist mindset. Such a mindset sees the African self, as currently existing, as an already developed site to which others in need of development should pilgrimage, not as a space in perpetual need of reformation.

What then should be the aim of the Culture and Identity Committee of the Pan-African Youth Conference 2022? It should *not* be the definition of *an* African identity but rather the inculcation of a pedagogy for the continuing critical and Afro-positivist exploration of questions of culture and identity within the African experience. The Committee thus charges itself with teaching the emerging generation how to engage in the types of personal and collective reflection envisioned by the early Pan-Africans. Such reflection requires a consideration of all domains of present consciousness - individual, community, national and Pan-African - as well as all domains of non-present consciousness - past historical, ancestral, the sub-conscious, and the future.

It is also important to note that the Négritudoalists and New Negroes from whom we take some of the greatest direction in these matters, steeped their discussions firmly in literary, musical, and visual cultures. They saw these, as opposed to the blind theorising of philosophers, as holding the most potent expressions of culture and encompassing the most significant campaigns in identity

formation. The Committee will thus, in its 2022 iteration, re-position a consideration of the creative arts back at the centre of critical academic explorations of Pan-African culture and identity. As such, our conversations will move fluidly between explorations of historical and contemporary essays, poetry, art, novel, and music. In this way, the synthesis between the intellectual and the creative can more naturally occur as the visionaries of Pan-Africanism intended it.

The partnership between the African History Project and the Conference should also encourage more participation from outside the academy. The African History Project occupies a unique position as a public history institution. The hope is that, in appointing me, the Project's Director, as Committee Chair, the Culture and Identity Committee will in 2022 be able to welcome more people from outside the academy, young and old, without whose participation any conversation on culture or identity is little more than moot.

Thus, though the 2022 Committee may seem very different on the surface, it claims to constitute a resurrection of the ideals that underpinned Pan-African explorations in previous generations. Such a re-validation of the African personality is needed now more than ever as opportunities daily multiply to prove the superiority of African knowledge in providing answers to some of the world's biggest problems.

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