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Building Africa: A Bold Blueprint for the 21st Century

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As the Wolof saying goes, "Qu xamul faŋa jëm delul faŋa jugewoon," meaning that when one loses their way forward, they should stand their ground and return home. This sentiment resonates with the current situation in Africa, where entrenched issues continue to hinder regional progress and development. It calls for a reflective step to critically address impending crises. Both courage and imagination are needed to either replace the failed existing systems or accept renewed realities. An overlooked consequence of colonial hegemony in Africa and its diaspora is that victimized communities spend much-needed time and energy dwelling on the injustices of the West rather than focusing on themselves and forging new paths to dignity and prosperity. To align this proposal with addressing critical challenges faced in Africa, we root its logic in this framework of Africa's development:

1. Europe's global freedom agenda is structurally unfree; Africans should opt for the value of human dignity and autonomy.

2. African communities or regions are entitled to dignified self-governance or autonomy, but no African unit is entitled to regional independence.

3. Readers are expected to engage with the ideas presented under the assumption that they would ideally prefer to live anywhere in Africa, irrespective of their birthplace.

Furthermore, we propose these five selective, not comprehensive, solutions born out of reality, not fantasy.

The Imperative to Replace French with English in Francophone Africa

French was imposed on Africans as a colonial administrative language in the late 19th century. Two reasons were advanced to justify this imposition on French Africa: Africans lacked a unifying language due to speaking different dialects, and French was seen as a means of assimilation into European culture and scientific values. Even if we accept these claims for their historical value, they could not have been more accurate. For instance, in most of these countries, over 70-80% of the population can communicate in a common local language/s. This policy, first implemented in Algeria and Indochina, and later introduced to Senegal-Goree, has proven flawed over time. Algeria and Mainland Southeast Asia have moved away from this policy, so why should African countries continue to be tied to this futile and self-depriving logic?

The use of French hampers Africa's desire for local and global integration and restricts Africa's ability to engage with cutting-edge knowledge production. French is the fifth most spoken language in the world because 60% of its daily speakers live in Africa. In terms of online and web continent development and knowledge production, French usage is only 4.3%, while English is over 52.1% (2024).

I suggest using English for two reasons: over half of global knowledge is produced in English, and Senegalese or Malians who can speak English have the opportunity to pursue education in top universities globally, none of which are in a French-speaking region. From China to India, South Africa to Malaysia, quality education is accessible in English. As a student told me recently at Cheick Anta Diop University, "his options for continuing overseas education are limited to France, Belgium, or Quebec." The second reason for embracing English is global integration into the Black Atlantic. Not only are leading economies in Africa predominantly Anglophone, but the leading African diasporas are also within the English-speaking diaspora of the US and its southern borders. One might argue that Brazil is the largest African diaspora outside Africa, and English is not the lingua franca. While that is true and worth considering, those who have traveled in South America and the Caribbean can attest that with English, one can always find friends and communities, which is not always the case with French.

Rwanda stands out as a promising example of this language transition. By switching from French to English as its official administrative language and primary language of education, the country has experienced remarkable economic growth. Rwanda has seamlessly integrated into its region and the global community. Its ability to access global markets successfully has been recognized as a model for other developing nations.

The Imperative for Abolishing the Franc CFA

The Franc CFA can be seen as a form of currency colonialism that requires imagination and courage to abolish it. It is a relic of colonial exploitative policies and should have ended with that era. The 14 African countries in the Franc Zone have entrusted their national treasuries and fiscal policies to France. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni openly acknowledged that France is responsible for the poverty and mass immigration of Africans. She stated that France prints the CFA franc to "exploit the resources of these nations," and that "50% of everything that for instance, Burkina Faso exports ends up in... the French treasury." President Idriss Deby of Chad expressed a desire, four years before Meloni's statement, to have the courage to admit that the CFA franc is the "cord preventing development in Africa that must be severed."

There is ample data to support Meloni's claim that without these countries, France's global ranking would be 15th economically instead of the 5th as it currently claims. Various European studies estimate that this French "colonial tax" has brought at least $500 billion to the French national treasury. In simple terms, any economic activity undertaken by any member of these 14 countries yields financial interest for the French treasury. Since member countries are required to deposit 50% of their foreign exchange reserves in the French Treasury, along with 20% for financial liabilities, only 30% of their accounts remain within their national borders. African citizens in these countries effectively contribute to France's coffers through their daily economic transactions. It is no wonder that France has consistently thwarted any regional effort to establish a common currency, most recently disrupting the ECOWAS agreement to launch the eco currency in 2021. If the suggested eco currency is not feasible right now due to France's ingrained Francophone reluctance towards Nigeria, then a new currency should be adopted through the rising bloc of Sahel countries led by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This bloc should become the unifying pillar for much-needed economic independence.

The Imperative for Formalizing the Current Divisions of Sudan and Libya

This point requires courage, not imagination. Both countries are currently divided across military and militia juntas, with locals suffering while international arms dealers prosper. Sudan has been de facto divided since the start of the current civil war between the two sectarian generals—Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). There is nothing to lose in a divided Sudan since nothing was gained in a unified Sudan except a litany of disastrous outcomes: the longest civil war, most military coups d'état in Africa, the home of Bin Laden, and the genocide of Darfur, among others. The current exodus of people echoes people's hearts and minds in times of anxiety. Egypt, which has been administrating a large part of Sudan—the Hala'ib Triangle, should incorporate the northern part to solidify the unity of the Nubian people and lessen tension over the Nile.

Likewise, Ethiopia should extend its rule over the Al-Fashaga area. This new arrangement will incentivize Egypt and Ethiopia to resolve tensions over the Renaissance Dam. Darfur is the flatline where negotiations would determine a new borderline running eastward and which groups should be attached to Chad. In times of war, people respond to their instincts, which reflect the natural flows of things. Most Sudanese now move to Egypt, Ethiopia, and Chad, while few have moved to South Sudan. Libya has been in chaos since the assassination of its leader, Muammar Gaddafi, by NATO in 2011. The country is divided between the West (controlled by rival armed factions in Tripoli, alongside the powerless Government of National Unity) and the East (led by General Khalifa Haftar with tribal support, under the so-called Government of National Stability). To unite North African and 'Sub-Saharan' Africa and end this artificial divide, the eastern part of Libya should be combined with Chad and part of Darfur. This would be economically viable and promote regional integration and mobility. Muammar Gaddafi recognized this socio-political reality, as shown by his failed attempts to annex his southern neighbor in the 1970s and the 1980s. Nationalists in both countries may be skeptical of this proposal, but its promises outweigh the current calamities, and its benefits for future Africans cannot be underestimated.

The Imperative for Guarantying Port Access for Ethiopia

A country with nearly 130 million people (2024), hosting the African Union with its glorious past, needs access to the sea, which is pivotal for reducing transportation and transaction costs. Ethiopia becoming a landlocked country is one of the inventions of European colonialism. All countries around Ethiopia — Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland, or the greater Somalia — were part of the land of *Al-Habasha*. Outside the invented contemporary sense of nationhood, each country would benefit from robust economic development in Ethiopia. If 12% of Eritrea's population is immigrants, and most of them in Europe are in Germany (82,000 in 2023), they would have been better off if a strong economy were next door in Ethiopia, where most Eritrean immigrants globally tend to go. Opposing Ethiopia's access to the sea, as arranged with the semi-independent Somaliland state, was mainly projected in the context of both emotionalism and national pride. A clear socio-economic argument beyond narrow identity politics is needed to settle this debate. The problem of landlocked Ethiopia is not going away but will linger in peace or war. It must be addressed.

The Imperative to Revitalize Trans-Saharan Community Connections and Trade

Historically, the Trans-Saharan trade routes were crucial for connecting communities and facilitating trade across the Sahara Desert. One should admit that slavery was central to this trade, unfortunately. But beyond slavery, these routes brought cultural exchange to the regions involved. However, in recent times, these connections have dwindled due to regional tensions around specific hotspots.

There is a methodological way of revitalizing trade and social connections, starting with ending the 'frozen zones of conflict' in the Western Sahara, the Sahel, and the Sahara Desert. These three areas have generated much suffering in the region since the year of African independence in 1960. These three hotspots and conflict regions should be distinct from one another. However, beyond academic theorizing and for the sake of combined courage and imagination, they are similar and could be easily resolved. The problem of Morocco and the Western Sahara is about something other than Moroccan colonialism or the Arab-African divide, as some might claim. The conflict is a product of the region's French-Spanish colonial divide-and-conquer legacy, which lingers into the post-colonial era. The inability of the leading countries of the greater Maghreb — Morocco and Algeria — to mend their divides further intensifies this tension. I tend to accept the Moroccan solution to the conflict that offers autonomy to the Western Sahara region. This solution is more conducive to African unity and regional prosperity, as it would connect this North African region to Sudanic Africa, revitalizing economic and cultural ties to Mauritania, Mali, and the Senegambia region. I have visited Senegambian communities in Morocco's major cities of Fez, Marrakesh, Casablanca and Rabat and learned how direct shipping lines to the three countries are transforming many immigrant and trading communities. The central countries of the Sahel — Mali, Burkina, and Niger — would also benefit from this opening and the expanded cross-Saharan network. I have seen how local ingenuity in Niger attempts to rewire the ruptured transport systems within the region. Settling the Western Saharan conflict will bring much-needed stability and capital to these regional efforts beyond the Sahara Desert.

In essence, this proposed roadmap is premised on actionable policies that advance Africa's development goals. While one might question each proposal's practical implications or feasibility, considering current political, economic, and social realities, we advance this proposal on the promise that courage is the only difference between imagination and reality. Investigative evidence has shown that a failure of imagination is a deficit in competence. Collective action and regional leadership are paramount in realizing these aspirations.

However, our drive to offer a way out should not overlook the virtue of two counterarguments: what about the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the other pertinent problem in Africa, and the fact that Southern Africa has not been included in our prescription. Both are valid and warrant attention. The DRC's problem is different from those discussed in our vision. The DRC is a victim of external forces, and resolving its problem would require its neighbors — namely Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola — to 'sit under the baobab tree', meaning to have a gentleman's agreement. As for Southern Africa, it has not been a source of noticeable turmoil for Africa since the demise of the project of the Republic of Rhodesia and the end of Apartheid. South Africa's leadership of the bloc has made it the most economically viable region on the continent. I am aware of the African Union (AU) policy of accepting colonial boundaries as they were when Africans gained independence. However, this policy has also acknowledged the lived realities of divisions created by conflict, as seen in cases such as Eritrea and South Sudan.

Clearly, our blueprint incentivizes capital investments from leading 'developing' countries such as China, India, Malaysia, Turkey, Brazil, etc. China and India have experiences and development prospects closer to Africa's, making them well-suited to contribute significantly to its progress. The presence of Chinese communities involved in developmental projects across Africa is noticeable, as they work closely with local communities. Furthermore, China's concessional loans for infrastructure building have been more favorable than standard Euro-American commercial loans. From 2000 to 2022, Chinese lenders provided over $170.08 billion in loans to various African governments and institutions. President Museveni's prioritization of industrial development when attracting foreign investment is the right move. To enable integrated trade, a robust consumer market, and self-reliance, the continent needs to industrialize at a micro level, which requires improved infrastructure and communication networks.

Finally, some regional blocs and countries have to lead this movement. It is worth mentioning that, since the inception of international law, countries have only been equal in their rights but never in their weight and influence. Larger countries must lead, while smaller countries either become vassals or auxiliary powers. This dynamic is evident in the European Union and the US. Africans have no choice but to dismantle the current orders and its post-colonial manifestations and create bigger and stronger polities. The establishment of the European Westphalian order and its post-colonial manifestations cannot be mended but overhauled from the ground up. It is past time for Africans to toil indefinitely in the post-colonial malaise. Imagination and courage are only legible when we think in terms of regions, not states, and for the African continent and its prospects. Imagining an alternative arrangement beyond the current Euro-centric model is not only plausible but also necessary.

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