

In Rwanda education, science and technology are the new drivers of pan-Africanism

Written by J. Rwagatare

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Kigali: African politicians and intellectuals used to talk passionately about pan-Africanism. You hardly hear the word now, except among a small group dedicated to keep it alive.

That, of course, does not mean that the idea is dead. Far from it. It is actually alive and well and flourishing in Rwanda. You might even say that Rwanda has become the new centre of pan-Africanism and President Paul Kagame its leading champion.

But even here, you don't hear the word used much or see big conferences organised to discuss it. Some of those involved in it might not even be aware that they are. What you see is the concept in practice, and this is what marks the difference from earlier periods.

The intensity with which the dignity of Africans and the unity of the continent have been talked about coincides with periods of great significance in the history of Africa. These periods can be said to constitute distinct phases of the development of pan-Africanism.

The current phase, with which Rwanda and President Kagame are closely identified, seeks to concretise the concept through greater economic integration, increased intra-African trade and investment, and removal of all kinds of barriers.

The most recent example of this drive was the signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), in Kigali in March this year.

But long before that, Rwanda had removed work permit requirements for citizens of East African Community partner states and eased visa requirements for all Africans travelling to this country. They could now get them on arrival. That has now been extended to all visitors.

Much earlier, during the war of liberation, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) had insisted on the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), handling negotiations between it and the government of Rwanda of the time. The other side had wanted to give this role to a non-African country or organisation. For the RPF the words, 'African solutions to African problems' were not simply a slogan but a matter of principle.

Even long before he became Chairman of the African Union, President Kagame's pronouncements, even when addressing Rwandans, invariably included reference to Africa, to the dignity, unity and development of its people.

There is, however, another aspect that builds a stronger identity and promotes greater unity among Africans that is rarely talked about. It is education.

Rwanda is becoming a Pan-African centre of learning. Universities such as Carnegie Mellon University-Africa, the African Leadership University and other institutions like the African Institute of Mathematical Sciences (AIMS), have set up here, and significantly their teaching is centred on those areas that have the greatest impact on Africa's development: science and technology, and leadership. These institutions of learning attract and admit some of Africa's

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brightest young people.

These students do not only acquire advanced knowledge in their respective fields of study but also gain much more in terms of experience of how things are done differently in various places and how they can be done better across the continent.

These centres of learning are creating a cadre of young people with an African consciousness that speeches by political leaders and scholarly conferences could never achieve. They are the people who will soon be in charge of affairs in their countries. It is reasonable to assume therefore that their leadership will lead to the realisation of the ideals of pan-Africanism.

So, today, in this phase of consolidating African unity, young Africans are coming to Rwanda and will affect their countries in much the same way as others went to other African capitals in earlier phases.

During the decolonisation period and immediately after independence during the push for African unity, Accra in Ghana and Cairo in Egypt were the intellectual and spiritual centres of pan-Africanism and the preferred destinations for African politicians and intellectuals. Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Abdel Nasser were the inspiration behind the movement.

Later the focus of attention and centre of activities shifted to Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania when the liberation of Southern Africa and the former Portuguese colonies became the main item on the agenda. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere became the new driving force.

The continent is now fully liberated and we are seeing a new emphasis and shift the centre of pan-Africanism. Kigali is becoming its new centre and education, science and technology its new drivers. (End)