

[Awino Okech](#) [1]

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Three years ago when Tajudeen Abdul Raheem died in Nairobi, I met one of his many Nairobi-based friends a week later. In jest, he said to me: "Awino, before you die be sure to leave a list of your friends' names so that we call on them after you die". It was a tongue in cheek statement but one that epitomized the reality of Taju's life. He 'belonged' to many and even though most of us did not know him very well, his larger than life personality, a connection to his own struggles and an interest in his contributions to the Pan African movement made it seem as though you were comrades from another life time. He had a way of making you feel like you were old friends. You could not but take ownership of him.

I am reminded of this conversation today because of the metaphorical similarities it bears with the events that occurred in Egypt and Tunisia specifically. At the height of the 'Arab Spring' many African and Pan African commentators were quick to counter the overwhelmingly western media narrative that positioned the uprisings as part of an Arab - Middle Eastern process, disconnected from the histories of democratisation in the rest of Africa. Some needed to take 'ownership' of the popular uprisings as Pan African in nature, as inspired by the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1990s in particular and shaped by the some of our liberation giants - Nkrumah, Cabral, Senghor, Sankara and Lumumba to name a few. In fact, the uprisings presented an opportunity to dismantle the North Africa - Sub Saharan Africa divide. Re-asserting the Pan African slant and situating the ideologies of the Fanons of this world offered an incredible opportunity - we hoped - to transform the uprising discourses and in turn those claimed by the youth in these countries.

This train of thought was re-echoed at a meeting convened by the African Union (AU) in 2011 on the democratization process in Africa in the wake of Libya. The importance of not losing the Pan African thrust to these shifts was underscored largely due to the NATO led intervention in Libya. For a post-post Uhuru child, I was hard pressed to understand how NATO happened on Libya given the seemingly strong and progressive political positions echoed by former and current leaders in the room, most of who were at the centre of UN led negotiations at the Security Council. The Monrovia and Casablanca divisions were re-echoed, the need to recognise that democratisation was a process not an event and was inherently linked to the liberation struggles that gave birth to independent African states was re-asserted powerfully. The importance of African leaders taking responsibility for creating space for external intervention was underscored. Having said that, I am also aware that politics and foreign policy decisions are often not simply informed by our ideological positions and therefore one can understand why NATO happened on Libya.

Perhaps, one of the most critical pieces of work to come from 'Arab Spring' wave of discourses was the African Awakening compilation by Pambazuka Press. The analysis in this publication underscored that what we were in fact witnessing was part of a broader canvas of a people-led third liberation that was also happening in other parts of the continent. The need to upset and un-seat demagogues and dictators was not unique to Tunisia and Egypt. Despite symbols of democracy such as a seemingly valid constitution, regular cosmetic elections in other parts of the continent, the democratic process was a journey which had effectively been reclaimed by the masses and not left to the political elite.

Whilst in Tunis in 2012 as part of the AU seminar series, the narrative shifted ever so slightly but powerfully in my view. You see most of the debates I draw attention to above have been shaped by

those in sub-Saharan Africa, by 'North Africans' in the diaspora or with Pan African histories. However, when in conversations with our Tunisian and Egyptian comrades at home, it was evident to me that this historical narrative rooted not only in the history of the OAU/AU as an institution but also as part of an intellectual political framework did not resonate here. I argue that it did not appear to resonate with the few who were present, primarily because of the way in which the revolution discourse was framed. It was rooted in connections with other moderate Islamic movements in the Arab world. The Ennahda movement in Tunisia is a case in point. The April 6th youth movement in Egypt for instance drew inspiration from American frameworks on non-violence for their own processes in addition to the most immediate inspiration - Tunisia. Admittedly, the constructions of Islam post 9/11 make it impossible for any conversation to occur without a feeling of the need to defend Islam as a religion, as a civilization and as well as its construction as antithetical to any democratic norms - a feature that has also been linked to the idea of Africa. In conversation, it was clear to me that their eyes and ears still look North (and here I literally mean the geographical North and not the Global North) for inspiration, to Africa for some belonging and to South Africa for lessons.

ON OWNERSHIP AND BELONGING

I must underscore that what I speak about here is not the instrumental debate of whether Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans consider themselves African. By virtue of geography and history they are African without a doubt. In fact, one of the most popular refrains today is the fact that Tunisia gave Africa its name. The more important question for me is whether being African is simply a process of naming or whether it is connected to belonging? If becoming African entails a much a more complex process that is not simply limited to a shared history of colonial oppression, then what do we need to do to differently as those interested in a Pan African agenda beyond invoking semantics?

Semantics are of course critical given that years of exclusion and disconnection of any form have a psychological effect that damages the possibilities of imagining alternatives. Three years ago when I lived in South Africa, I was initially amused and then increasingly irritated when I engaged with Capetonians who lived in the infamous "matchbox houses" [1] who would say to me " things are so terrible up there in Africa, no wonder you are here". DRC, Nigeria and Kenya were all one big country in their eyes, all war-torn and refugee producing. In fact, all Africans were Nigerians. Unlike the American or European students who arrived in droves every year at the University of Cape Town and were perceived as being able to offer 'something', I was constructed as unable to offer anything but would instead benefit from the new South Africa.

I recognise the gallant efforts that have been made by various civil society formations to engage 'North Africa'. In fact, holding the next World Social Forum in Tunisia offers an incredible opportunity to open it to Africa. However, the process of belonging and ownership requires much more than our civil society jamborees. It demands a concerted engagement around some of the central issues that limit real connections. On Africa's Liberation Day it is to the question of how as citizens we re-assert a new Pan African agenda that we must focus. There are a number of practical realities that we must deal with head on.

"Africans moving around Africa with African passports [this distinction is important"> are still treated as others. Neither abroad nor at home do we receive first class treatment" (Tajudeen Abdul Raheem)

The limitation of mobility in Africa is a critical starting point. Holding an African passport in Africa buys you no favours. In 2009, when the African Union summit was held in Sirte, most African citizens despite Brother leader Gaddafi's calls for a united Africa could not get into the country easily because of the securitisation of travel. Your passport had to be submitted to a specified local mosque for translation; you had to have an invitation from a sanctioned Libyan NGO: all of this before you actually got to the embassy where appointments had to be secured through the ministry of foreign affairs or through the African Union. The fact that our State systems are anti-people and citizenship and immigration systems are constructed to exclude must be at the forefront of our engagements today. African people especially their women move daily with or without passports but it is the implications of illegality linked to this movement that makes it insecure and subject to micro-economies on the borders that are often hinged on bodily integrity. Of course, progress has been made on this score through the Regional Economic Communities but this has instead resulted in regional balkanization, which was interestingly affirmed in the election debacle of the AU

Commission's chairperson. As citizens our seeming disinterest in playing a central role in determining who heads the AU's commission is worrying to say the least.

The second reality is the question of language. My fellow Kenyan and a prolific author Ngugi wa Thiong'o has always insisted on the importance of reclaiming indigenous languages as part of the process of decolonizing the mind. Wa Thiong'o has ensured that his novels are first written in his mother tongue Gikuyu and then translated into English. This is a powerful political statement but one which means that even in his own country only give or take 6 million people are able to read his publications in their original form despite their global appeal. This is one layer of the problem, which a country like South Africa 'resolved' by making all languages national, including sign language.

The second layer involves our 'inherited' languages. Those of us colonized by the British walk around the world with an air of superiority (at least I do) and are appalled when we reached African ports of entry where immigration staff speak to us in what they have espoused as a national language. Their blank stare when you ask 'can you speak English' is less disconcerting than their refusal to engage after your continued attempts to get through the border by insisting on speaking English. Nkrumah's calls to unity make little meaning when you cannot communicate. My attempts to interview Ahmed Maher, one of the leaders of Egypt's April 6th movement, failed because between us we could not find one language that we could communicate in fully. He spoke some English, I spoke a lot of English, he spoke a lot of Arabic, I spoke no Arabic, he spoke no French, I spoke some French. Of course my mother tongue and Kiswahili would not have been useful here. Given that language is perceived as a key repository of one's identity, this creates a challenge, but it is one that we must devise strategies for.

The third issue is rooted in how we need to organize. If there is one powerful lesson to be claimed and owned from Tunisia and Egypt despite the reversals has been the place and pressure of masses pushing for change. The lack of a state owned security apparatus no doubt played an important role in ensuring that citizen's voices were not quashed a la Libya. The inability to transform those institutions or at least place that as a critical agenda post the uprisings means that security apparatus designed to secure elite interests are maintained: the turn of events in Egypt are instructive here. In addition, the subversion of various interests groups and their voices is also critical here. The construction of youth voices as limited to the streets and not re-constructed in political players driving demands is an effect of the uprisings that must be monitored. That said, these struggles have been disconnected from organized civil society, largely independent of proposal writing and grant reports and removed press statements. The democracy debates and resultant discourses are produced on the squares and on the streets and are not predicated on a network secretariat or per diem for travel. This is not to argue that these movements have not been confronted with what is constructed as the inevitable need to organize, create a structure and name leadership because we need a hero.

In my view, the important question post-uprising is not about where the initial influence was derived from: that is a battle that has been lost. Instead focus must be placed on how we influence each other today. Herein lies the importance of a renewed source: a renewed Pan African agenda led by citizens that addresses the fundamental challenges hampering African unity. If we must own anything, let us claim and own the legitimacy and opportunities created by mobilization that is not shackled by funding deadlines and let us remember that liberation is not an event.

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African unity: revisiting the popular uprisings of the North

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Article-Summary:

The most important question post-uprising is how to entrench a Pan-African agenda led by citizens that addresses the fundamental challenges hampering African unity.

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