

Opinion:

‘Identity and Empowerment’: An African Evolution

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It seems that within us, something inherent, is a feeling of a project unmet. The nation-states that comprise this world always seem to be striving towards some new ideal. Policy makers, actors for change, the world’s go-getters throw themselves behind the latest -ism with a fervour that only seems to die when two or three generations realise the impracticability of the ideal. In the West, so many of the abstract ideals that unite us seem, to this cynical writer, to come from within. Certain historians of the previous half-century have employed their time and efforts to attempt to understand why imperialism’s (the first of my much maligned -isms) proponents threw themselves so self-righteously into its practice. The modern liberal has no difficulty in seeing the evil of empire and finds no difficulty in convincing him or herself that the ‘ideals’ of empire were little more than a thin veneer over what was ultimately a thirst for profits. Nevertheless, this same modern liberal would face arguments from many of these post-colonial historians. Capitalism, communism, nationalism, and its younger brother, separatism all come under scrutiny for the motives that propel them. The perceived universality of these ideals, the need to export them, import them, reimagine them or overthrow them, always seem to be at the forefront of our agenda. Something inherent within human nature turns us into political actors; all of us struggle with a need for purpose.

Like the individual, Africa is striving towards a new identity; the continent is in evolution. Let’s take Kenya as our example. Globalised capitalism is still a new system for Africa; imported by imperialists, in many cases less than 200 years ago, it has forced a massive realignment in commercial practice. The indigenous populations of the continent, which at first used to produce for sustenance, were forced to produce for profit to satisfy colonies to Europeans, and Kenya is still coming to terms with imperialism’s legacy. Rapidly growing urban centres and an increasingly large disparity in the spread of wealth have combined to impoverish elements of the population, who are in increasing danger from viral diseases. Couple these relatively modern phenomena with pre-colonial issues such as outdated cultural modes, consider the subjugation of women and the culture of rape, and the threat posed by Malaria and one can see part of the impetus for the redefinition of modern Kenya. The political sphere makes manifold this impetus. Tribal tensions govern a political framework designed for parliamentary democracy. Recent national elections have seldom ended without bloodshed and Kenya’s most recent one was no different. The first election held on the 8th of August this year was annulled by the Supreme Court. The Magistrates of the Supreme Court found that the electoral process had been carried out in an unconstitutional manner. The re-election of Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya’s standing president, was overturned. Never before had an African federal election been annulled. The result had the ability to suggest, in a country where the legal process is constantly undermined by corruption, that no man, not even the standing president, was above the law. For Kenyans, however, implications such as these were soon forgotten. The second Kenyan general election of 2017 was held, following the withdrawal of Kenyatta’s only real rival, Raila Odinga. Amidst Odinga’s allegations of the corruption and the illegality of the second election, the vote went ahead. Kenyatta was appointed president with 98.26% of the vote, with a 38.84% voter turnout (IEBC electoral results). And Kenya was, once again, left divided and unable to place any trust in its electoral system.

Kenya, like all the nation-states of the world, is a project in continued evolution attempting to shape its identity within the parameters, and despite the limitations, of its history and the global modernity. How, though, does the listless individual relate to the Kenyan project? Both yearn for a new identity and, it seems to me, through cooperation, this can be accomplished.

There are, all over the world, pursuits of purpose that are willing to divert away from the divisive movements our modernity seems to be enamoured with. Let us swap the exclusive notions of Brexit or Catalan cessation for movements of inclusion. Near Lake Victoria, in western Kenya, Gideon's Orphanage, in conjunction with Awaken Love for Africa, has provided a safe space for young orphaned and abandoned children. Ever since joining forces with Gideon's in 2009, Awaken Love has offered education, guidance, homes and support for orphans in the area. 'Awaken Love for Africa' is a name that shapes an ideal; it's a name that hopes for a world governed by togetherness. At Gideon's the ideal is given its reality. The orphanage offers more than priceless shelter and protection. The foundation offers secondary schooling and the means with which widowed local women can get back on their feet. Through education young orphaned Kenyans are offered the opportunity to break free from a cyclical process of continued strife. With their widow rehabilitation scheme, Gideon's gives the marginalised and downtrodden the opportunity to reshape their destiny. Both within and without Africa organisations, such as Awaken Love, are valuable not just in the tangible effects they have on others but also for the ideals enwrapped in their enterprise.

The problems ingrained in the evolution cultural modes, the inequity of an economic system imposed and exploited from above, and the fractured Kenyan political backdrop are problems which – to a certain extent – can be found in many of the world's less economically developed countries. For those of us looking for purpose, something with which to identify with, and define ourselves alongside, Awaken Love should be our example. Choose to envelope yourself in an ideal that promotes unity, not division.