

## **African Integration and the Challenge of Xenophobia: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy**

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By

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Your Eminences

Your Excellencies

Fellow speakers

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to commend His Excellency Ambassador Godwin George Umo for taking the initiative to organize a symposium of this nature at a time researchers, policy makers, and the diplomatic community are exploring alternatives to the more traditional forms of diplomacy. I am glad to be part of it.

### **Introduction**

Since the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to African Union (AU) in 2002, African leaders have been making concerted efforts to forge closer ties on a variety of issues. In fact, the first objective in the Constitutive Act of the African Union is to “achieve greater unity and solidarity between the African countries and the peoples of Africa” (Constitutive Act of the African Union, Article 3(a)). Although much has been done, especially in the formation of the African Union Commission and its various organs, the AU’s broader objective of a deeper social, political, and economic integration of the continent is still at its nascent stages. Of course, progress is being made but there are still major obstacles to overcome. One of such obstacles is xenophobia or “afrophobia”, as some analysts prefer to describe it, given that xenophobic behaviours in several parts of the continent are more often towards non-nationals of African origin than towards non-Africans.

As a way of improving understanding amongst African peoples, the paper argues that the promotion of cultural exchange at the level of ordinary citizens should be a core component of the diplomatic relations between African states. To this end, it analyzes the challenge of xenophobia to African integration as well as offers suggestions on how cultural diplomacy could help in addressing the problem. Methodologically, the paper is qualitative in nature and based on secondary sources while, theoretically, it is built on the “soft power” approach to international relations and supported by the “contact hypothesis” in social psychology. The paper is divided into four parts: a basic theoretical background to the issue, a discussion of the challenge of xenophobia to African integration, an exploration of the intersection between culture and diplomacy and, finally, some suggestions on how to strengthen the role of cultural diplomacy in the project of African integration. Meanwhile, given that the Nigerian Diaspora has been a major victim of xenophobic

behaviours on the continent, the paper makes a case for the establishment of a 'Jollof Institute' that would drive Nigeria's cultural diplomacy initiatives.

### **Theoretical orientation**

As stated earlier, this paper draws on the "soft power" approach to international relations. In contrast with "hard power", the "soft power" approach argues that countries can attain respect, prestige and achieve their foreign policy objectives not only by coercive, punitive (sanctions) or military means but they could also attract genuine respect and admiration by persuasion, dialogue and cultural exchange. Rather than using military might or coercion, Joseph S. Nye (2004) – who coined and popularized the term "soft power" - argues that nation-states can use non-military and non-coercive means to win the hearts and minds of people. This is attainable especially through the promotion of cultural goods – literary works, visual arts, music, film, sports, etc.

However, cultural exchanges do not always come easy as the projection of a country's cultural patrimony or the meeting of diverse peoples could lead to fear and suspicion of domination. This is more so, when a more dynamic and adaptive culture meets a conservative one. In the face of the possibility of conflicts arising from the meeting of different cultures, Allport (1954) proposes the "contact hypothesis" also known as the "Intergroup Contact Theory" in which he argues that, rather than sparking prejudice and conflict, under appropriate conditions, contact between people of different cultures can help improve mutual understanding and cooperation. The problem is, therefore, not about the meeting of different cultures but the structural and institutional conditions under which they meet. This leads to the debate on the best method of social integration and diversity management. The contributions of social anthropologists and sociologists have been key to this debate.

The initial proposal was that of assimilation. According to Park and Burgess (1969), assimilation is "a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups, and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (p. 735). Proponents of assimilation policy such as Furnivall (1948), Mill (1958), and Smith (1965) believe that culturally heterogeneous societies are conflictive by nature. Hence, every society that seeks social cohesion must work towards cultural homogeneity. In fact Mill (1958) believes that culturally heterogeneous countries cannot develop free institutions and, consequently, achieve prosperity because they are inherently conflictive

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist (Mill 1958: 230).

For this reason, immigrants must be ready to forego their culture and imbibe that of their host communities. Countries like France and the United States of America implemented this policy for a long time before realizing that it is almost impossible for immigrants to lose their identities completely in order to assume a new one. As such, the assimilation policy came to be viewed "as a worn-out theory which imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity" (Alba and Nee 1997: 827).

The failure of the assimilation policy created an opportunity for the proponents of the policy of multiculturalism to make their case. Basically, this policy argues that cultural diversity is an enrichment to society. Hence, people should be allowed to retain their cultural identity and live it publicly because distinct cultural groups can co-exist peacefully in society. In supporting multiculturalism, Parekh (2000: 67) argues that:

The cultural identity of some groups ('minorities') should not have to be confined to the private sphere while the language, culture and religion of others ('the majority') enjoy a public monopoly and are treated as the norm. For a lack of public recognition is damaging to people's self-esteem and is not conducive to encouraging the full participation of everyone in the public sphere.

Countries like Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand adopted this policy and promoted it, albeit with great difficulties. Amongst the problems of multiculturalism is its tendency to incentivize the formation of autocephalous cultural communities. No wonder the crisis of multiculturalism came to the fore with the rise of ethnic ghettos in several cities of the Western hemisphere. These ghettos, unfortunately, became breeding grounds for anti-Western values, civil unrest and, recently, extreme religious and political views as well as terrorism, in some cases. As a result, countries like the Netherlands and Denmark abandoned multiculturalism as a policy of social integration.<sup>1</sup>

Given the impossibility of assimilation and the crisis of multiculturalism, scholars and policy makers began to explore an alternative path to social integration. Recently, suggestions for a policy of interculturalism seem to be gaining assent. Although interculturalism is still at its nascent stages, as a policy of social integration, it entails accepting the fact of cultural heterogeneity in societies, recognizing the possible benefits of cultural diversity and designing a framework that encourages the cross pollination of ideas, mutual dependence, and the development of shared values. While it does not seek to totally eliminate cultural differences, it insists on the development of shared values that will guide social action – whether at individual or group levels. Interculturalism takes the middle course between assimilation and multiculturalism as it does not only recognize differences but seeks to promote what is common between cultures. Giménez (2008: 157) postulates that the three cardinal principles of interculturalism are: equality, difference, and positive interaction.

Having established the theoretical basis of the paper and explored the major approaches to social integration in multicultural societies, we now discuss the project of African integration in the face of xenophobia.

### **African integration and the challenge of xenophobia**

The transition from OAU's emphasis on state sovereignty and non-interference to the pursuit of greater collaboration and integration embodied in the AU is a major shift in the relations between African states. There is now a considerable increase in contact between African States resulting in, although slow, but steady progress towards strengthening ties between them through both bilateral and multilateral agreements. The fruits of these interactions are seen in the evolution of continent-wide programmes such as the African Peer Review Mechanism, Panel of the Wise, the New

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<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to note that multiculturalism as a policy of social integration is different from the fact of having a multicultural society. Most countries of the world are multicultural in nature but not all of them practice multiculturalism as a policy of social integration.

Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and, most recently, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). These programmes and projects are testimonies to the desire of African leaders to forge stronger ties in order to confront common challenges. The down side of these programmes, however, is that they have been largely elitist as ordinary Africans are neither well informed about them nor properly carried along in their implementation. This partly accounts for the xenophobic attitudes being witnessed on the continent.

The problem of xenophobia on the continent came to limelight with the recent attacks on African migrants in South Africa. However, suffice it to note that it is not a purely South African problem. The South African case gained notoriety because of the magnitude and frequency of the attacks. Otherwise, the fear of foreigners and discrimination against them – whether fellow Africans or non-Africans – is widespread on the continent. In fact, the debates and violent conflicts arising from contestations over citizenship and belonging attest to this fact (see Marshall-Fratani 2006; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007; Manby 2009). Examples abound of how individuals – even fellow countrymen and women - and groups are discriminated against on the basis of indigeneity and citizenship. There have been cases of the outright revocation of the citizenship of individuals and groups. Some of the high profile cases include the current president of Cote d'Ivoire, Allasane Ouattara, and former Zambian president, Kenneth Kaunda, whose citizenships were once revoked by the countries they had previously served as Prime Minister and President, respectively (see Young 2007; Manby 2009). Rather than stereotyping a particular country or society, it is more appropriate to treat xenophobia as a problem in Africa that requires a continent-wide solution. As African leaders embark on the project of a greater social, economic, and political integration of the continent, it is important, at this time, they begin to create awareness and mobilize the people in preparation for the inevitable social and structural changes that will accompany the project. As mentioned earlier, the project of African integration has remained at the elite level of politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and technocrats. Most Africans know little about the project and are yet to key into it. Africans need to embrace the project, own it and support it. The project of African integration must help Africans to feel free and safe wherever they find themselves on the continent. This also entails that Africans must be comfortable with a dual identity as citizens of their particular countries and citizens of Africa. Obviously enjoying the rights and fulfilling the responsibilities attached to both identities. A lot of work still needs to be done in this regard. In the face of xenophobia, a major groundwork that must be done in order to enable a smooth take-off of the project of African integration is the mobilization of the people towards a broader understanding of citizenship and belonging on the continent. Several approaches and mechanisms can be adopted in order to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, as the continent moves towards greater economic and political integration, it is important that its leaders make the promotion of inter-cultural understanding a top priority, as it is the foundation on which the entire edifice of African integration will rest. Otherwise, the significant increase in the movement of people and goods between African countries that is expected to result from the implementation of the various programmes of the integration project will trigger negative responses such as fear, prejudice, stereotyping, and violent resistance from local communities that are ill-prepared for it.

### **Cultural diplomacy**

Although cultural diplomacy is hard to define, this paper conceives it as a coordinated employment of the cultural goods of a state for the purpose of promoting its image and prestige among foreign

publics. It is a people-centred diplomacy that aims at engaging ordinary people in the dialogue between nation-states. Cultural diplomacy seeks to attract the foreign public to a country's values, institutions and way of life. This practice is, however, not new to relations between independent peoples. Even before the evolution of the modern state, Kingdoms and Empires have promoted ties between them through the exchange of cultural goods. Sometimes, they have encouraged inter-cultural marriages – between royals and between subjects - as a way of strengthening ties. Also, people of diverse cultures have been engaged in different forms of contact and cultural exchange without the involvement of the state. At times, these exchanges are only symbolic like the 'Table Tennis (ping-pong) diplomacy' between the United States of America and China that led to the historic visit of President Richard Nixon to Beijing in 1972 and the 'Panda diplomacy' of China in several parts of the world. Other times, they make significant visible cultural impact such as educational exchanges like the Fulbright programme, the Rhodes Scholarship, the Erasmus programme of the European Union, the exchange of art works between museums, the activities of Diaspora communities as well as the role cultural centres like the British Council, Goethe Institute, *Alliance Française* and China's Confucius Institute. Cultural diplomacy also includes the cultural activities carried out by non-state actors who enjoy financial aid from the state or consular support. All these support the more traditional forms of diplomacy in bolstering a country's image.

With regard to Africa, the peoples of the continent have been engaged in different forms of cultural exchange even before the inception of the modern state. In fact, the modern state actually slowed down those interactions due to the interference of its institutions as well as its redefinition of the concept of citizenship and belonging. Despite the encumbrances of the modern state and its institutions, there is still significant movement of people across. Unfortunately, these movements are largely informal, ungoverned, and uncoordinated because people are either forced to migrate – as a result of conflict or climate change – or driven by individual choices to seek better standards of living. It is unfortunate that the contact between traders, students, labourers and highly skilled persons on the continent are hardly harnessed by African states for diplomatic purposes. This, however, does not mean that African governments care less about the promotion of cultural exchange on the continent. On the contrary, instruments such as the Pan-African Cultural Manifesto (1969), the Cultural Charter for Africa (adopted in 1976 and entered into force in 1990), the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance (adopted in 2006 but yet to enter into force) aim to showcase Africa's cultural goods. In addition, cultural centres established and maintained by individual African states are spread all over the continent and beyond. The major issues with the development of cultural diplomacy on the continent is that, first, state-sponsored cultural centres and programmes in Africa are largely focused on promoting relations with non-African states. In fact, the volume of coordinated cultural exchange between African countries is lower than the sum of the exchanges between individual African countries and their non-African counterparts. Second, most African states have failed to coordinate the resources and activities of their Diaspora for diplomatic purposes.

## **Conclusion**

As the paper draws to a close, I make a few suggestions on how cultural diplomacy can aid the project of African integration.

A first task for African governments is to agree on the social integration policy they will adopt in pursuance of the integration project. In this regard, I would suggest they adopt interculturalism as a

policy of social integration. While the uniqueness of every culture must be recognized and respected, efforts must be made to promote inter-cultural exchanges, mutual respect, collaboration and the evolution of shared values. African leaders will also need to figure out how best to implement the social integration policy they choose – whether at the national, regional/state/provincial or local levels. A good mix of activities at the various levels of government is always advised.

Second, in designing a programme of social integration, it is also important to recognize that some cultures are more dynamic, progressive and adaptive to changes than others. As such, when such cultures encounter a more conservative one, there tends to be resistance from the latter. If not managed properly, these encounters could result in violent conflicts. Managing the encounter between ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ cultures is key to social cohesion in Africa.

Also, African countries must engage in the massive education of their citizens on the integration project; its implications, the socio-cultural changes that may be witnessed by communities but, more importantly, the advantages and benefits of the project. In developing educational curricula, more needs to be done to encourage Africans to study African arts and literature. Africans tend to know more about Western art and literature than they know about those of fellow African countries. It is also important that a curriculum on African Integration be designed and taught in secondary/high schools in Africa.

As a tool of cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges will play a key role in the project of African integration. As such, African countries must increase the level of academic exchanges - teachers, students, conferences, seminars, researches – between them. The AU should explore the possibility for African university students to spend, at least, a semester of their undergraduate studies in another African country. On this note, I suggest that the AU studies the Erasmus programme of Europe and the Fulbright programme with a view to developing similar programmes for Africa. Furthermore, African cultural institutions - museums and cultural centres - must strengthen collaboration between them. There tends to be more exhibitions of African arts and literature in Europe and the United States of America than in Africa.

While all forms of censorship that can stifle creativity and the freedom of expression must be avoided, African states must engage actively with people in the performance art – film and music industries – in the production of content that would enhance the understanding of the country’s culture(s) and promote its image abroad. Sometimes, the content of films and music reify pre-existing prejudices and stereotypes about a people or culture.

Just as states seek to protect the interest of their corporate investors abroad, so should they be interested in the activities of their small and medium scale business entrepreneurs abroad. In fact, this category of the Diaspora have direct contact with local communities and are largely responsible for the kind of image host communities develop about their country and culture. African countries must, therefore, constantly devise innovative ways of actively engaging with their Diaspora communities for the promotion of their foreign policy. One of such ways could be the award of an honorary role of “Cultural Ambassador” to their citizens who have distinguished themselves in foreign lands. Also, countries like Nigeria that have large business Diaspora communities in several parts of the continent must encourage their citizens to participate actively in the lives of their host communities especially by learning the local languages and through the implementation of projects that would help improve the living conditions of the communities in which they ply their trades. Fear, envy and hate arise, particularly, when host communities feel that foreigners are interested

only in making wealth and repatriating it to their countries of origin without investing in activities that would help improve living conditions in their communities.

Since cultural diplomacy will play a key role in the project of African integration, it would be important for African states to create an organ of government such as a Ministry of Culture and African Integration, an institute or a section for cultural diplomacy in their diplomatic missions that will be charged with the coordination and promotion of cultural relations with other countries, particularly African countries. For example, the Nigerian Diaspora has been a major victim of xenophobic behaviours on the continent. The Nigerian government can establish an institute – I suggest the name ‘Jollof Institute’ - to drive the country’s cultural diplomacy initiatives or ‘Jollof diplomacy’. The institute will collaborate closely with Nigeria’s foreign missions in promoting the country’s literary works, visual arts, film, music, cuisine, fashion, business, tourism, etc., among foreign publics. Just as Nigeria recently signed a ‘Jollof bond’ with the United Kingdom, promoting an annual ‘Jollof Festival of Nigerian Arts and Culture’, ‘Jollof Expo’ or supporting the establishment of a ‘Jollof Restaurant’ chain – like the Japanese Sushi Restaurants - can help to improve the country’s image abroad.

Finally, the economic gains of cultural diplomacy is neither immediate nor easily quantifiable like in trade deals and other commercial exchanges. However, they have long-term benefits as they contribute to creating an environment that is conducive to economic exchanges - conditions of peace and trust. As such, African governments should be interested in it and seek to promote it.

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