

# Africa Day in the Spirit of Pan-Africanism

By Melaku Muluaalem

Most African countries spent two generations under European colonial power. In one way or another, almost all African countries were victims of the colonial period. The effects of colonialism are still visible in the continent.

Many scholars say that the current political instability, social disorder and economic crisis in Africa have their roots in the colonial period. Other scholars have reservations on this matter. Personally I share both ideas, in a sense that there are still impacts of colonial period, but not all problems can be taken as the legacy of the colonial period. Just to give an example, the current problem between Ethiopia and Eritrea is the impact of European colonial power.

In the 1950s some African countries gained independence from their colonial powers. These independent countries tried to establish a specific day to be celebrated by Africans, to create a sense of unity and solidarity. A conference of independent African States was held in April 1958 in Ghana. Including Ethiopia, the conference was attended by eight states, and April 15 was declared as African Freedom Day. In order to celebrate the advance of liberation movements in the continent of Africa, this day was celebrated in a few countries for five years until the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was established.

The OAU was established on May 25 1963, by the leaders of independent African states. In this year about two-thirds of the continent had achieved independence. Article 13 of the resolution, which was adopted in the first conference of independent African Heads of State and Government, held in Addis Ababa from 22 to 25 May 1963, appoints "the day of 25 May as African Liberation Day, so as to organize popular demonstrations on that day and to disseminate the recommendations of the Summit Conference"

This historical day was commemorated by the OAU annually as African Liberation Day. In 2002 the Heads of State and Government of African countries replaced the OAU with the African Union (AU), and a vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena". Since all African countries had already gained their independence from European colonial powers, the name "African Liberation Day" was changed to "Africa Day".

In celebrating the day, the AU develops a theme. For instance, the theme for the 2012 day was "Africa and the Diaspora". The theme for the 2013 Africa Day was "Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance", marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the continental organization. African Diasporas also celebrate the day through various

activities. This shows that Africa Day is widely observed on a global scale by various African communities.

Considering the struggle and determination of the people of Africa for independence and unity, celebration of Africa Day is of paramount importance. On May 25 2012, Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said that "Africa Day provides an opportunity to acknowledge the achievements of the people and governments of Africa".

The celebration of Africa Day gives an opportunity to remember the great historical achievements of the Pan-Africanist and founding fathers of the continental organization. Moreover, it gives a chance to look forward regarding Africa's development, peace and security. Different countries observe the day with various activities, such as panel discussions, speeches by pan-Africanists and political leaders, rallies, cultural entertainment, poetry, symposiums, special university lectures and the like.

It is clear that there are 54 member states in the African Union. Africa Day is a day for all African countries. However, Africa Day is observed as a public holiday in only twelve African countries, Ghana, Mali, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Lesotho, Liberia and Mauritania. My argument lies in this crude fact.

As mentioned above the continental organization decided May 25 to be Africa Day. But the resolution didn't say that the day should be celebrated by African countries as a public holiday. This may have contributed to the differing celebrations among African countries. Some celebrate the day as a public holiday, while others do not.

One can argue that the spirit of pan-Africanism in the countries that made May 25 a public holiday is much more than in other African countries. On the public holiday workers and students do not have to go to work or school, and instead participate or attend mass media events marking the ceremony. But it is not wise to say that there is no celebration in other African countries that do not make the day a public holiday. Even if Ethiopia does not celebrate May 25 as a public holiday, there is the spirit of pan-Africanism in Addis Ababa, where the Headquarters of the AU is located. This is because the AU always celebrate May 25 in Addis Ababa, with various activities and themes in which politicians, scholars and other sections of Ethiopian society participate in one way or another.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary celebration of the continental organization, Mr Jean-Baptiste Natama, Chief of Staff of the bureau of the Chairperson of the AU Commission, said that the "same spirit will help to consolidate the unity of all the Africans and the Diaspora, as the organization plan to embark on its journey for African renaissance". Based on this premise, in my opinion, Africa Day should be commemorated by all African countries with similar spirit. If the Heads of State and Governments of Africa decide that Africa Day should be a public holiday in all African

countries, it will be implemented without any doubt. But it seems legally unacceptable by the AU Commission to order all African countries to celebrate the day as public holiday i.e in the absence of resolutions by Heads of State and Government. To fill this gap I have my own personal recommendation in the commemoration of Africa Day by all African countries.

As is well known, the Assembly of the AU conducts two regular annual meetings – in January and July. My recommendation is for one of the regular Summit days to be on May 25, conducted in Addis Ababa where Africa Day will be celebrated alongside it. This will help to strengthen the spirit of Pan-Africanism in all African countries, rather than only in a few African states.

I recommended the above date for various reasons. To begin with, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) decided the day to be African Liberation Day, so it will be a good opportunity to celebrate the day by the leaders of Africa in the birthplace of the organization – Addis Ababa. The present African leaders will also get an opportunity to pay tribute to the founding fathers of the organization, and recite their wisdom and vision to Africa. On the other hand, the spirit of pan-Africanism will flourish on that specific day in all African countries through international and local media. Moreover, it can be a good occasion for Africans to gather in Addis Ababa to conduct various activities that promote the vision of Pan-Africanism (such as the pre-Summit Great Run of Africans and the like).

At the time of the establishment of the OAU in 1963, Emperor Haile Sellassie, who was one of the founding fathers of the organization, said: “What we lack, despite the efforts of past years, is the mechanism which will enable us to speak with one voice”. But now we should not lack the ability to speak in one voice to celebrate Africa Day on the continent. There is no need to wait another 50 years to celebrate Africa Day in all African countries in a colorful and graceful manner. Rather, it is possible to celebrate it yearly in the birthplace of the organization – Addis Ababa.

The AU is a pro-active organization that is trying to find African solutions to African problems. The AU Commission has disclosed the fact that it will receive “inputs informing Agenda 2063 until November 2013. The Agenda will be tabled for adoption and subsequent implementation in June 2014”. I believe that the organization will give attention to the issue of disparity in the celebration of Africa Day in African countries. My recommendation on the way to celebrate Africa Day can be taken as one option for developing the spirit of pan-Africanism in the continent, in the year of “Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance”. Long Live Pan-Africanism.

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