



Culture of Unity

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Welcome to this, the second year of the second cycle of Together for a New Africa. Greetings from all at Sophia. My task is to speak about what we call a “Culture of Unity” and especially the understanding of diversity in a “Culture of Unity”. First, however, let me say something about diversity seen as a challenge.

It is not hard to see why diversity is often seen as a challenge. People are usually more comfortable with those with whom they share ethnic identity, political alliance, language, lifestyle etc. Having much in common with another person means that you have a whole range of advantages in building a relationship with that person. You can speak directly to that person because you share the same language. You know how they live, what they eat, how their family works. You share economic interests and are able to quickly form contracts and trade. You know what their values and beliefs are. In brief, sharing all of these, and many other things, means that you can quickly build a relationship. It doesn't necessarily mean that you become friends with everyone, but it does mean that you know how to interact with that person.

All of this is obvious, I suppose. The challenge comes when one

zooms out from the interpersonal level to the level of communities, tribes and nations. As people, leaders are not exempt from what I have described as a natural and understandable tendency to more quickly and easily understand and interact with people with whom they have most in common. Leaders too tend to more quickly form relationships and alliances with those with whom they share much. Leaders, however, often find themselves in communities characterized by great diversity.

Let us quickly consider the difference between the situation in which a leader finds himself or herself in traditional societies (I say "or herself" because in some West African societies women had recognized leadership roles), and the situations in which the leader finds himself in today's more complex situation.

In traditional societies things were simpler. In a traditional village everyone shared almost everything: from language, to education, to work activities, to belief structure, and so on. In that context, the challenges of diversity arise less frequently. Of course, there are differences: the elders of the village are different to the children, the men and different to the women. Everyone, however, knows their role within the society, and the leader knows precisely what their responsibility is, and to whom. There are, of course, good leaders and bad leaders, but at least things are clear.



If a person of another culture or background comes to the village, there are rules which govern the situation: the person is most likely considered a guest, a person to be treated with respect and hospitality. In the case that the person remains, they can be integrated over time. In such a case, the diversity represented by the stranger tends to be eliminated, with a corresponding increase in unity.

In our times, however, fewer and fewer people live in such a traditional village. As urban dwelling comes to be the norm for most. Increasingly people live and work in situations where the challenges of diversity are in full display. I have heard people in Kenya comment that in a city like Nairobi there is no culture, and I suppose that what they mean is that there is no “default” culture: Luo, Kisii and Luhya live alongside Kalenjin, Kikuyu and Somalis, and so on. The political structures in such a situation do not coincide with geography, and the temptation will be to attempt to use political power in favor of your people, and be less concerned with the interests of other peoples. The leader, whether we are speaking of political leadership, or leadership roles in business, education, health care or whatever other context is constantly faced with the challenge of diversity in his or her function, and constantly called on to take a position on how to deal with the other. Should the leader favor his own people, or the growth and flourishing of all?

If we move from the urban level to the national or continental level, the complexity of the challenges increases exponentially. It is calculated that there are more than 3000 tribes in the continent, each with their own culture, language and traditions. These tribes do not each have

political power over their own territory, for complex reasons, including the long history of migrations in pre-colonial times, but also the fact that European colonial powers were responsible for drawing national borders without reference to tribal territories, and did so competing one with the other in the so-called “Scramble for Africa”. The result, of course, was the fact that tribes are often spread across different nations: e.g. the Maasai spread across the Kenyan-Tanzanian border, or the Somali people split between Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya. These artificial borders lead to situations of resource competition and stunt economic development, but also the difficulty of maintaining their nomadic lifestyle. Larger tribal populations become minorities in each of the nations, which leads to their marginalization and loss of political agency. In some cases, these difficulties even lead to conflicts, such as the Nigerian, or Biafran, civil war (1967–1970), or the war which toppled Idi Amin in Uganda (1972–1979) which was partly related to border disputes with Tanzania. One could give many such examples.

Other levels of complexity include religious diversity. The majority of Africans are either Muslims or Christians. Both of these are religions that aim at peace and unity, of course, but extremist groups on both sides have used religion to justify acts of violence and terrorism,



further fueling tensions between Christians and Muslims. To this, we can add the forms of diversity related to economic disparities between families. In an urban context without any predominant tribal culture, we can see signs that people of similar socio-economic backgrounds, but different ethnic and tribal identity, begin to have more in common among themselves than people of the same tribe but of different socio-economic class.

All of this increases the pressure on leaders. In the political field, for example, this is particularly challenging, where the "winner-takes-all" nature of many electoral systems can leave minority groups feeling marginalized and excluded from power. It is very easy for the leader to adopt positions that subtly or blatantly aim at the increase of power or economic influence for their group rather than for all of the people over whom they have governing authority.

All of this is just to raise the question of how the leader handles all of this diversity. Looking at the recent history of African history we can see how diversity can be quickly transformed into division, and ethnic, political and religious divisions can be manipulated to gain power and serve the interests of one group, neglecting or directly damaging the interests of others. Alliances can be formed and dissolved according to the challenges and opportunities of the moment.

There are many ways for a leader to manipulate diversity for their own advantage. Youth are particularly vulnerable to being drawn into diversity-based conflicts. High unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities leave many young people susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups or manipulation by politicians. The demographic youth bulge in many African countries amplifies this challenge.

A Culture of Unity

Things look quite different, however, if rather than being animated by a "culture of division", a leader is animated by a "culture of unity". The word "culture" here is not, of course, the culture of a particular ethnic or tribal grouping.

What is a "culture"? We might offer a simple definition of a "culture" as follows: the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behavior that characterize and inform society as a whole or any group within it. By that definition, a culture belongs to a group, and not necessarily to the group to which one belongs to by birth. We speak of the "culture" of organizations, corporations, and so on and these are clearly not groups that one is born into. Perhaps one way of understanding Together for a New Africa is that it is a group that is formed through its various activities and Summer Schools. And the "culture of unity" is the "culture" of this group, which intends to form a network of leaders for the leaders of tomorrow. It is true that we often speak of T4NA as a kind of training program. Our various initiatives are intended to train leaders capable of



taking practical steps in the right direction working to build bridges between different communities and foster a shared national identity that transcends ethnic and religious divides. The training that T4NA offers encourages participants engage with topics such as conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and effective communication across ethnic and linguistic barriers. This approach aims to create a new generation of leaders who can navigate Africa's complex cultural landscape and promote inclusive governance.

By these means, however, we are also aiming to express a “culture of unity”. As stated, a “culture” is made up of attitudes, feelings, values, and behaviors of a group. The culture of T4NA is characterized by the belief that Africa's diversity can be a source of strength rather than division. The initiative encourages participants to view cultural differences as opportunities for learning and growth rather than obstacles. Through structured interactions and collaborative projects, young leaders from different backgrounds learn to appreciate each other's perspectives and find common ground. In these ways, the aim is to foster the attitudes of leaders to view diversity as that of which our unity will be forged. If we work on practical problem-solving, the underlying aim is to reinforce the hope in participants that challenges can be a springboard for progress towards unity.

T4NA's impact, thus, wishes to extend beyond individual participants. It is hoped that participants become ambassadors for cultural diversity and unity in their home countries. Many have gone on to implement community projects that bring together people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, applying the principles learned through T4NA.

When I began my comments today, I drew a kind of comparison between the experience of unity in a traditional African village culture, and the experience of almost overwhelming diversity that experienced in modern urban settings. It is clear that if there is to be unity in such a setting, the key will be in the development of a culture that binds the many together in one. For this we need to work on the attitudes, values, beliefs, feelings and behaviors that will characterize us as a group – for all cultures are expressions of groups – if we are to be leaders of a new Africa. I spoke of the fact in a traditional village there was the capacity to welcome the stranger. In a group characterized by a “culture of unity” there needs to be the capacity to welcome multiple strangers: all of those we find in our complex modern societies.

This years program wishes to focus on some key themes, illuminated by what we call a “culture of unity”. It is based on the conviction that there can be a culture of unity that works to build in participants the vision, attitudes and skills to be agents of unity. This is the kind of culture that Sophia University Institute intends to communicate to students. In our common sessions we will focus specifically on three themes. All of them are intended to look at the challenges of diversity and how they might be approached in the spirit of a “culture of unity”.



1. Raphael will speak to us about the management of conflicts, specifically focusing on interpersonal conflicts. He will discuss the definition of conflict, its various types (such as conflicts of interest, power, identity, and territory), and the attitudes individuals can adopt to manage conflicts effectively. He will emphasize the importance of understanding that conflicts are inherent in human relationships and that adopting positive attitudes, such as recognizing the equality and dignity of all individuals, can help in resolving conflicts. He will also highlight the value of learning from others and the importance of community, using the African concept of Ubuntu to illustrate the interconnectedness of human beings.

2. Annette will speak to us about the importance of understanding the contextual factors that shape our lives and potential for success. She will speak about how external circumstances, such as historical legacies, geographical constraints, and systemic barriers, can significantly influence our ability to grow and succeed. She will also speak about how poverty and inequality are not solely the result of personal shortcomings, but rather are often the result of broader systemic and structural issues. She will emphasize the need for collective efforts and systemic change to address these issues and create environments that support growth and opportunity. A “culture of unity” is one capable of interacting with complexity and imagining the paths that lead towards overcoming the issues that compromise human flourishing.

3. Finally, Genevieve will discuss the roles and relationships between men and women in society, particularly focusing on the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped these dynamics. It explores how traditional divisions of labor, where women are often associated with unpaid care work and men with paid employment, have led to systemic inequalities and undervaluation of women's contributions. She will argue for a reevaluation of these norms and calls for a more equitable distribution of work and care responsibilities between men and women. She will look at the specific challenges faced by women in Africa and the need for a culturally sensitive approach to gender equality that recognizes the unique contexts and traditions of different societies.

We hope that through these and all of the activities of this summer school you have a way to develop ways to recognize and overcome the challenges of diversity, and learn to project paths that overcome these, transforming diversity into the opportunities to build unity. Above all, we hope that the school offers the opportunity to build unity within and between the national groups. Each group is characterized by internal diversity, and the diversity between national groups is even greater. What we are aiming at is the development of a group or village characterized by a shared set of values, beliefs, behaviours, and experiences that will be invaluable to the building of a new Africa.