

Migration, African Integration and the Challenge of Xenophobia: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

The project of African integration has been given a great boost with the adoption and implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). However, despite the euphoria expressed by some African leaders, academics, and business people regarding the expected economic gains of such a project, African elites should not be oblivious of the many challenges it will confront. Among the envisaged challenges are migration and the social tensions that accompany the influx of foreigners into a community. Africa has already witnessed serious cases of xenophobia and it is expected that, as a consequence of the implementation of AfCFTA, there will be a rise in xenophobia-related issues as the movement of people and goods increase across the continent. This may also be exacerbated by the expected competition for market share between foreign and local goods as well as between foreign and local workers in the labour market. Drawing on secondary data and a synthesis of the "soft power" approach to international relations as well as "contact hypothesis" in social psychology, this paper identifies poor migration management and xenophobia as potential threats to the entire project of the social, political, and economic integration of Africa. As such, it proposes cultural diplomacy as a viable tool for promoting understanding and cohesion among African peoples.

KEY WORDS:

Migration, Integration
Xenophobia

Introduction

Africa has never been a politically unified or culturally monolithic entity. Even before colonial intervention in the history of the continent, there were many strong kingdoms and centralized states as well as horizontally organized autocephalous stateless communities on the continent. Wars of conquest took place between African communities before the advent of colonialism. As such, some people speak of many Africas. However, the need to resist colonialism and to establish self-rule created a common purpose between the disparate ethnic and political groups of Africa. The desire for self-rule created the need for establishing a united force against foreign occupation. Africans sought to delegitimize and overthrow colonial rule by organizing themselves in several ways ranging from espousing afro-centric political philosophies to organizing armed resistance movements.

After a considerable number of the continent's peoples got political independence

in the early 1960s, the pan-African movement was given a boost by the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. A deeper desire to forge closer ties on a variety of issues gave rise to the transformation of the OAU to the African Union (AU) in 2002. To buttress this point, the first objective in the Constitutive Act of the African Union is to “achieve greater unity and solidarity between the (sic) African countries and the peoples of Africa” (African Union, 2002, 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 stage. Progress is surely 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. Nevertheless, the xenophobic attitudes being witnessed on the continent are highly associated with poor migration management.

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 challenges of migration and 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 seven parts: an overview of migration in Africa; a discussion of the African integration project; an exposition of the challenge of xenophobia; a presentation of the theoretical orientation of the paper; an exploration of the intersection between culture and diplomacy; some concluding remarks and, finally, some suggestions on how to strengthen the role of cultural diplomacy in the project of African integration.

Migration in Africa

Migration, in recent times, has become one of the major challenges of governments and community leaders. The phenomenon of human mobility is on the increase in practically every part of the world (World Bank Group, 2023). It is estimated that over 281 million people are international migrants (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2024). Although the figure appears to be high, it is important to say that there are many undocumented migrants around the world. Africa, as a region, has equally witnessed serious migratory movements recently. Africans have moved both within and outside the continent. Movements outside the continent have been to Europe, North America, Oceania and, recently, to the Gulf states. However, the movement of Africans within the continent has also been significant, even though it is difficult to give an estimate of intra-African migration. Any estimate of international migrants within Africa could be misleading even because of the movement of people whose communities or

ethnic groups straddle across multiple countries. Such people do not necessarily consider themselves as migrants since they do not recognize international boundaries or, at best, consider them as artificial demarcations that have no implications for either their status or their relationship with their kins on the other side of the border. Migration comes with its challenges and nation-states always seek ways of managing their borders. However, effective social integration is one of the best ways of managing migration. This can be done through bilateral or multilateral agreements. In a bid to promote or even strengthen pan-African ties, the continent's leaders thought it wise to promote a borderless continent for the citizens of African countries. This gave rise to the African integration project.

African integration

The need for a stronger relationship between African countries is necessitated by several factors amongst which is low intra-continental trade. As at 2021, trade between African countries is less than 13% of the total volume of trade on the continent compared to America's 44.4%, Asia and Oceania's 63.8% and Europe's 66.9% (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023). Strangely, African countries trade more with Western countries than with fellow African countries. In order to harness their economic potentials as well as promote social cohesion, different geographic regions of Africa formed economic groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), East African Community (EAC), the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Some of these groups are still at their budding stages while others, such as ECOWAS have advanced in both structures and their functioning.

As stated earlier, the quest for a deeper social, economic and political integration of Africa led to the formation of the AU in 2002. 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 New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) which was adopted in 2001, the African Peer Review Mechanism which was established in 2003, Panel of the Wise (PoW) which was established in 2007. Other policies include the African passport project that was launched in Kigali, Rwanda in 2016, the mutual recognition of academic titles which adopted in 2014 but came into force in 2019 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2014), the Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018-2030) (African Union, 2018b), the free movement of persons and goods (African Union, 2018c), the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) which was established in 2018 (African Union, 2018a)

and, most recently, the right to social protection and social security was adopted in 2022 (African Union, 2022). These policies, programmes and projects are testimonies to the desire of African leaders to forge stronger ties in order to confront common challenges. Their down side, however, is that they have been largely elitist as ordinary Africans are neither well informed about them nor properly carried along in their implementation. Hence, as laudable as the AfCFTA project is, for example, it was greeted with some level of suspicion and fear by some African leaders and societies. Such fears border on customs, revenue generation from imported goods, labour migration and wages, etc. However, a major obstacle to African integration will be social in nature. This will involve different forms of discrimination, marginalization, exclusion and xenophobia against fellow Africans.

The challenge of xenophobia

African societies are multicultural in nature. For example, Nigeria has over 350 distinct ethnic groups that speak mutually unintelligible languages, Kenya has over 40, while the Democratic Republic of Congo has over 200. Despite a long history of ethno-religious pluralism in Africa, ethno-religious intolerance is still a big problem on the continent. Thus, xenophobia is a major challenge for African countries. Xenophobia is a problem, not only towards non-nationals but also to fellow citizens of the same country. This is a major reason why some of the difficult problems bedevilling Africa are around indigeneity or autochthony. This problem is couched in the indigene versus settler issues.

The problem of xenophobia on the continent came to limelight with the infamous attacks on African migrants in South Africa. However, suffice it to note that it is not a purely South African problem as there are other cases such as the situation of Nigerian businessmen in Ghana, despite the ECOWAS protocol on the free movement of persons, goods and services (ECOWAS, 1999). Nevertheless, 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. Debates and violent conflicts arising from contestations over citizenship and belonging attest to this fact (Marshall-Fratani, 2006; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2007; Manby, 2009). Examples abound of how individuals – even fellow country-men 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, the late Kenneth Kaunda, whose citizenships were once revoked by the countries they had previously served as Prime Minister and President, respectively (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.

Theoretical orientation

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, 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 such as 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 interpenetration 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. Mill (1958) argues 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, p. 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 & Nee, 1997, p. 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, p. 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. Little 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 (Stowell, 2007; Kaya, 2009). On the other hand, anti-immigrant sentiments and attacks by natives as witnessed in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2024, for example, have been on the increase. As a result, countries like the Netherlands and Denmark abandoned multiculturalism as a policy of social integration. Suffice it to say, however, 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.

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 stage, 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, p. 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.

Towards 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 (Heritage & Strozenberg, 2019; Chou & Spangler, 2018). 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 of 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 (Iliffe, 2007). Actually, the modern state 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 the continent. 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 of 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 are: first, state-sponsored cultural centres and programmes in Africa are largely focused on promoting relations with non-African states. As a matter of 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

This essay sought to establish that, among other factors, the success of AfCFTA depends, to some extent, on the capacity of AU member states to manage the migratory flows that would arise as a result of the implementation of the free trade agreement. While an enhanced intra-regional trade would help in improving the economic fortunes of many African countries, social factors such a sudden

increase in immigration and the fear it may trigger in locals as well as the competition for both skilled and unskilled labour with foreigners, especially in the better performing economies of the continent should not be under-estimated. Hence the need for a greater social integration through the promotion of cultural exchanges within the region. This might not be an easy task as a lot of historical prejudices have to be broken down and fears allayed. However, regardless of the potential economic benefits of AfCFTA to the continent, the ability of Africans to enjoy the fruits of such an ambitious and laudable initiative depends, to a large extent, on the ability of the continent's leaders to build open and inclusive societies across the region. Such is possible through the promotion of cultural diplomacy.

Recommendations

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

1. The first task for African governments is to agree on the social integration policy they will adopt in pursuing the integration project. In this regard, interculturalism as a policy of social integration, could be considered. 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.

2. In designing a programme of social integration, it is 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 can result in violent conflicts. Managing the encounter between 'progressive' and 'conservative' cultures is key to social cohesion in Africa.

3. 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.

4. 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, the AU may study 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.

5. 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.

6. 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 has direct contact with local communities and is 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 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.

7. 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 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 African countries. Such agencies or institutes will collaborate closely with their foreign missions in promoting the country's literary works, visual arts, film, music, cuisine, fashion, business, tourism, etc. among foreign publics, especially their African counterparts.

The economic gains of cultural diplomacy are 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 be committed to promoting it.

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