



# MAPUNGUBWE

INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC REFLECTION (MISTRA)

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**For Africa to Live, the Nation Must Die?**  
**The fluidity of African identity in a Changing Continent**  
By Graca Machel

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Comrades and friends,

It is a pleasure to join you this evening to explore a few new, and not so new ideas. I thank MISTRA for challenging me to reflect and share my personal experiences and views.

Let me begin by an anecdote of how I landed in a Frelimo military training camp. I had just left university and I joined a group of young women from the two provinces up north of Moçambique. In these two groups, none of the girls could speak Portuguese. They had been mobilised from their communities and villages. They had never been to the capital of their province. The first time they came across electricity was at the camp. They had no idea of what Moçambique as a country was all about, and I landed up with them for military training.

It was at the end of the first two weeks that the leaders of the camp realised that these women could not clearly grasp the basic instructions of "To the left" or "To the right." So my first shock was the first day of training when our instructor said: "*esquerda ire*" (turn left) and he had to turn to the left, so that the girls would understand in which direction to turn. And then when he said "*direita ire*" (turn right) he would turn to the right so that the girls could understand to turn right.

You can imagine for someone like me coming from university, you have all these very fancy ideas of fighting for independence and who you are, and I asked myself: "What? Who am I here? And who are my peers?" The camp had developed an extraordinary programme; at the beginning all of us would have to tell who we are and why we had decided to join Frelimo to fight for the liberation of our country. Each one of the girls of course had to tell this story and that is where my education started.

When they had to say what oppression meant for them, what colonialism was, and then what Moçambique was and how they had decided to join the movement – I'm not going to go into detail – it was the first shock for me to understand that what I always thought of as Moçambique, was much more diverse, much more complex than I had imagined. I learnt that there were people in my own country whose understanding of the country was just the small village where they had lived. They had no idea of what the sea was; yet Moçambique has 3000 kilometres of coast. They had no idea what a building of three or four stories was. Their understanding of nation and country, and the diversity of Moçambique, was completely different from mine.

So we started the journey together. We'd have to train and live together, many times communicating by means of signs. Why I'm bringing in this example is to illustrate that on this continent of ours, there are still millions and millions of Africans who are born, grow and die in the very limited space of their village and their community, without having an opportunity of understanding the magnitude of what a nation represents; and remember, many African countries are not like South Africa. In many areas of the continent, Africans cannot read and write, and they have no television. The only medium is radio, oftentimes in local languages.

So I'm suggesting this as a first reflection of what identity - of what a citizen who belongs to a certain country - means. I think that our initial relationships, family and others, our positions in our family, our community, our society, our relationship with authority, with our elders, with our peers – these are the first fundamentals which mould us as social beings.

This evening I have been asked to address the implications of a quote from the great Mozambican freedom fighter and President, Samora Machel. He stated: *'For the nation to live, the tribe must die.'*

If as a continent we are to thrive, then we must make the time, take the opportunities to explore the multiple questions that challenge our 'African' identities.

All of these are moulded by the specific socio cultural context that we are born into. Common history and language are key components or elements of cultural identity. These become the references that build the social being, the human being that we initially are.

So generally speaking, these socio cultural contexts, these resulting relationships can be seen as the 'seeds' of our identities, or our social beings. They can, and will expand, be built upon, change shape, but they are still the seeds of our future selves. We can look at the contexts within which these seeds are planted in a range of ways – socio cultural, economic, socio economic, etc. and see that many of those contexts overlap. In considering the socio cultural contexts, ethnicity is a core framework and this is how the 'tribe' helps form the seeds of our identities.

It is clear that the many overlapping contexts of our early years means that sometimes our 'tribes' develop in different ways. Ethnicity provides one set of lenses; economic wealth or financial poverty might provide another; age and gender provide yet other lenses. Yet I would argue that some of those lenses are subsumed within the wider socio cultural lens of 'tribe'.

If tribal norms then 'seed' our identities, is the argument that for a national identity to thrive, the tribal identity must die? Or that further: for Pan Africanism to thrive, national identities must die?

I would argue that this is not the case. Let's look at the analogy of a seed. When a seed is planted, it does not die. With the right conditions, including soil, water, sun, the seed does not die. It is transformed into another living entity.

The seed transforms – at one point spreading its roots, and then growing out of the earth and forming a stem, eventually a trunk, branches and leaves. Indeed, what is in the seed is what dictates the nature of the transformation that emerges from its sowing.

The very being of the seed maintains its identity in the transformation process. There is an Akan saying: '*a crab does not give birth to a cow*'. Thus the seed from an orange will produce an orange. The seed from an avocado will produce an avocado. The innate influences the transformation, yet does not kill in the transformation. And as human beings we are able to influence the transformation; to use old seeds to breed stronger hybrids; to develop new strains, new strengths.

Tribal values feed into national identity, and the nation feeds into tribal identity. There has to be a value proposition for the tribe to feel embraced by, and integrated into, the nation. But at the same time the nation has to be able to embrace and integrate the tribe. By extension I'm actually talking about ethnic diversity, racial diversity, and class diversity.

On our continent I think we are still struggling with the question of nation building. I can mention maybe one country where history and language have played a role in such a way as you can say that it is close to being a nation with some sort of cohesion – Tanzania.

And if we look outside of our continent – and I know this is controversial – the United States of America, despite its huge diversity and people of all origins, has one thing in common: they feel American. They are Americans. We have to question what it is that make people of Japanese origin, of Irish origin, Latin American, African, and all the other diverse permutations, even the huge diversity of class – that at the moment of the truth, they are all Americans. What is it? What are the elements of that national identity which builds what you can call the pride of belonging to a nation?

These are complex dimensions, which African nations are struggling to comprehend, to manage in the process of forging a nation.

I dare to say that with the exception of Tanzania, none of our African nations have resolved the question of nation building. And even worse, I do not think we as a continent have clarity on how to build on that diversity and to forge a cohesive nation.

I am looking at the tribe, and more widely at the nation as at the heart of the identity we form through our ethnic socio-cultural contexts as the seed that is within us all. That seed of our identities is transformed as we grow, as we extend our relationships, our physical, emotional and intellectual contexts. Yet our identities remain rooted in the original influences and norms within which our social beings developed. So the seed does not die. It is rooted, but transformed.

So our original identities do not die. We are rooted, but as additional influences and contexts are added to our lives, so we transform and our identities are expanded, transformed.

So no, I do not believe that the tribe must die for the nation to live.

I believe that ethnic diversity, racial diversity, and class diversity must be offered a clear value proposition that makes them feel that they benefit from being part of a nation state.

We have this space we call our homeland — in Portuguese I would say “*patria*” — the space where we all feel we belong, yet it’s not very clearly defined. I would thus submit that tonight we should think, what does it mean for each one of us to be a South African? Why do we feel, and what makes us believe that we are, South African?

In a nation where today we still say: “*I’m African and this one is Indian, and that one is white, and that one is coloured*”, the racial divide in South Africa is still very clear and deep. Yet I will suggest that there are elements that bind us all; what are they? How do we cultivate them so that we grow away from that kind of (race and class) separateness, and feel all of us, that we are South African?

I believe that we must provide the right conditions for the tribe to root a national identity, and a continental identity, to move beyond its initial ‘senses’ and enable a stronger, equally vibrant, but possibly further-seeing and more connected individual and collective (national and continental) ‘being’ to emerge.

However, we must provide the right conditions for the tribe to root a national identity and a continental identity; to move beyond its initial lenses and enable a stronger, equally vibrant but possibly further seeing and more connected being to emerge – whether in our individual identities or in our national or continental identities.

With a tree, the stronger the roots are, the better able the tree is to resist winds and external shocks; because it is deeply rooted, but also because the transformation has allowed it to protect itself through its branches, its leaves, its fruit or flowers – and through its connectedness with other products of the earth. There is an intrinsic relationship with the initial seed but the final product is more intricate, bigger, stronger and more connected to the external world.

As social beings, as we grow and absorb the influences of a wider society, so we transform ourselves and gain a broader sense of belonging – beyond the family, beyond the tribe, beyond the nation. In a world where modern transport means that we can travel hundreds of thousands of miles in less than a day, our ability to move within other geographies, other cultures is multiplied.

So the influences that mould our identities are multiplied and extensive. When that works well, we can gain a broader sense of belonging in a continental or international context.

Yet where we are grounded, that broader sense of belonging still recognises and salutes the initial relationships and intellectual and emotional linkages that root our belonging.

For this transformation to take place in positive contexts, building on the strengths of our socio cultural roots rather than being strangled by them, we need the appropriate influences to surround our sense of being. We need the right contexts, motivations and visions to move beyond the tribe, beyond the nation and into a vibrant sense of Pan Africanism.

Let me recall our recent history. When Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah at independence reopened his country and its borders to welcome all the liberation movements (being the first sub-Saharan country to become independent) he was joined then by the likes of Haile Selassie, Modibo Keita, Ben

Bella, Julius Nyerere and others. They formed a huge movement of pan-Africanism, together with others from the diaspora, like Du Bois, to say “freedom for all of us”.

Pan-Africanism is rooted in an understanding that from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, from the Cape to Cairo, as we say, from all corners of the continent we had experienced the same slavery; we were experiencing colonialism and oppression; and we had a common destiny. So pan-Africanism was born out of the necessity to achieve freedom and independence for all on this continent.

Then we had a second generation of pan-Africanists, at the moment the continent was politically free we had equally visionary leaders, such as Thabo Mbeki, Olusegun Obasanjo, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Joaquim Chissano and others, who established the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Peer Review Mechanism through which we would be able to build prosperity for all Africans. Theirs was a leadership that understood that there is no nation that can survive alone. Pan-Africanism has to be based on a clear set of principles, values, goals and targets if we are to work together.

Africans must feel that there is value and benefit belonging to a broad African entity, beyond birthright. Let us use the example of the European Union. Many countries are queuing to join the European Union because they perceive that there is something concrete which will help them, which is going to uplift their nation if they join.

We must question ourselves: what is it our African Union is offering our nations? Why do we join? Why do we need to be part of this organisation? Is it about intent and political statements? Do we have clarity, as the founders of pan-Africanism had in the past? They clearly sent the message to every African: freedom and fairness. Today do we have a very clear message; a very clear goal when we join and we say we are Africans?

I would like to suggest that pan-Africanism has to strive to claim Africa’s own pre-colonial identity.



This map is a product of the Mandela Institute for Development Studies, from one of the programmes we are undertaking – the African Heritage Research Programme. In this programme we are questioning who we are as Africans. The Berlin Conference carved up the continent into more than 50 states. But what was it before Berlin? Who were we before Berlin? We existed. We had history. We had culture. We had a way of being. So the first study, which we are undertaking is to define languages. The blue indicates Afro-asiatic regions using mostly the Arabic language; yellow Nilo-Saharan; and red is what we can call Niger-Congo. The orange is Niger-Congo-Bantu, and I want to dwell on this one. This map shows us that people migrated from mid-west Africa down to central Africa and on to southern Africa. These peoples have very much in common in terms of language, social institutions, practices, and traditions. So as South Africans we have much more in common with Ghana and Nigeria, than we may think.

The programme is thus starting with language, to identify certain words that mean exactly the same thing. They may be pronounced a little bit differently, but they mean the same thing. We are in the process of learning what are the practices, the traditions, and the institutions that are shared. Of course there are also differences; but there is much more commonality than difference. We say to ourselves we are much more than English-speaking countries. We are much more than French-speaking countries. We are much more than Portuguese-speaking countries. In fact, we have our own languages, and why this is important is that pan-Africanism has to have that emotional element attached to it.

As I was saying at the beginning, it is the village where you are born and the family where you are raised that moulds your value system and defines your identity. Through a pan-Africanist lens, these are the fundamentals, not whether one speaks French, English or Portuguese. Language-based fights for positions at the African Union fly in the face of these principles. Even in West Africa, although it is a regional economic community, when it is the turn of West Africa to take a position, the first thing they discuss is: “*Is he French-speaking? Is he English-speaking?*” to establish the difference between someone from Côte d’Ivoire and someone from Ghana, irrespective of the qualifications and the ability to deliver in that position.

I am thus proposing that in our journey to define the roots and the values of pan-Africanism, we have to claim this map. Without changing the borders which were imposed on us by Berlin, we have to expand our sense of identity by returning to source, who we were, to discover who we want to be so that our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, will be proud of being African, and not simply proud to be speaking Portuguese or speaking English.

The notion of ‘Africa’ and of Pan Africanism sometimes presents as a vexed concept. I am sure we have all argued at some point in our lives against the generalisations that are made about ‘Africa’. So very often negative and ignorant generalisations prompt us to point out that our continent consists of 54 states, making generalisations virtually irrelevant and often insulting.

Yet, many of us that have made those arguments are also strong believers in some kind of African identity; in some kind of Pan Africanism that goes beyond the borders of our 54 nations; that builds on commonalities that can be found in what at first seem to be completely different and diverse corners of our continent.

The dominance of the Berlin agreement and the consequent acceptance of its political boundaries both by colonial conquistadors and later by our own liberation movements has set up paradoxes

that we continue to struggle with as individuals and as nations. And we need to fight the ramifications of those paradoxes if we are to grow in collective strength and collective identity.

Recent research conducted by the Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS), explores the spread of what they describe as four language communities that existed and traversed the geographic continent of Africa for generations before colonialism divided the continent into the Berlin drafted physical spaces. These language communities spread throughout the continent in different patterns and mean that even today there are some communities in West Africa with close linguistic and other social cultural ties with communities in Southern or Eastern Africa.

So our personal and national identities and the similarities between them do not have to be dominated by the current political disposition on the continent.

These were the beliefs held by our Pan African forebears. The Nkrumahs, the Nyerere's and others looked beyond the Berlin boundaries to an Africa where we could build on our commonalities and our similarities to form cohesive and collaborative African institutions, African cultures, African economic systems, African ways of thinking and being that would help our continent to thrive and protect our continent's peoples from further generations of colonialism and imperialism. They highlighted our shared experiences of slavery and of colonialism but also our shared cultural heritages that had protected our communities through the ravages of imperialism and other oppressions.

They emphasised the importance not only of nation states (after all, these were the people who led the fights against colonialism in their various countries) but also of how those nations could work together to protect our continent from further manifestations of imperialism. That was why solidarity with national liberation movements was crucial to their beliefs and actions. They saw an Africa with strong political and economic nations, but they saw an Africa where those nations worked together to give us a continental advantage through various types of economic, social and political integrations. Those Pan African activists provided the conditions, the thinking and the contexts that have helped our 'seed' of nations to begin to transform into a stronger entity that is Pan African.

I fear however, that we might allow that transformation to wither under the lack of rain (new and collective thinking, integrated institutions), poor soil (the paucity of joint initiatives, the rarity of future planning together not separately and for decades not months and years) and a proliferation of weeds (unhelpful nationalistic competition, short sighted conflicts of all types, narrow mindedness and social injustice and oppression).

We must question what it is that is dividing people in South Sudan. What is it that is dividing people in the Congo, the DRC? What is it that is dividing Africans when they engage in wars against brothers and sisters within the same boundaries, brothers and sisters who in the past, fought together? What is it?

In order to provide good conditions for the transformation to a vibrant, healthy Africa that revives our fading traditions of challenging the world, bringing new thought, new art, new economics, new science and new cultures to our global contexts – we need the rain of a clear and positive vision of *our* Africa. We need the fertiliser of new generations of thought and youthful energy that looks beyond narrow interests and shallow, dying ideas. We need the soil that pulls through our positive

traditions and links them with new ways of being, new ways of interacting with our peers, with our comrades across this continent and with the new trends across the globe.

Yes, African identities are fluid but so many of our continental proverbs point to the strength of fluidity, to a core holding that fluidity true. I stand here before you with many identities: I am a woman, a Mozambican, an African, and much more.

My children and those of you in younger generations have a multitude of other identities that you claim. Identities that have been influenced by our technological age, in which social media allows people across the globes in starkly different geographical, cultural, economic and social settings to exchange ideas, share their lives and influence each other in ways my generation barely dreamed of. It is exciting, it is motivating and it feeds the fluidity of identity that can generate new concepts of 'African' and 'Africanism'.

Our children and grandchildren's identity as African is no longer grounded in the tribe. Sometimes they do not even speak the language of their parents, but they are nonetheless Africans. You will even see those who return from the diaspora, when they come back, they choose to come to the continent, not necessarily to the countries of their parents. They can come to Ghana, to Ethiopia, to Rwanda. Wherever they go, they are 'coming home'. They are coming to Africa.

So we do have a new identity of Africanness emerging. What we need is the rain, and I think today what we miss is that strong, clear message, which is telling us where we come from, who we are today, where we have to go together, building on that sense of solidarity. In other words, I am saying that what we miss today is clear leadership. Being African is not something which just happens simply because we were born here and because of the air we breathe.

So I repeat my question: what does it mean to be South African, what does it mean for you to be African? I do not have answers, and I do not think there is a blueprint. What the Mapungubwe Institute is challenging us to do however, is to think through the issues, and to question ourselves about our identity, our identities, many identities, and how the overlapping of those identities makes us strong, not weaker, as we seem often to believe. How to go beyond the small community and embrace the nation, and how as a nation to embrace the rest of the continent? I think the challenge for us in different positions, different ages, men and women, young and old, is to claim these identities and turn them into strengths. Our different identities should be understood to be elements making up a greater vision for the continent.

Yet, I would argue that when my generation and my children's generation dream, we dream rooted in our early experiences, in our early lessons. We dream in ways that are deeply African.

I'd like to tell a story that I think illustrates my point. At some point I worked with a former Sudanese Ambassador. I remember him telling me how he had worked and visited in many parts of Africa and the thing that struck him most was that in so many countries, when he asked people who they were, they would reply that they were Kikuyu, or Tutsi or Mende etc. But in three countries, the replies were always consistent 'I am Ghanaian', 'I am Tanzanian', 'I am Mozambican'. It is not coincidence that those are the countries of our Pan African forebears. And it is no coincidence that Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere are remembered not only as a great Ghanaian and a great Tanzanian respectively, but as the towering leaders of Pan Africanism.

## **Postscript**



I wanted to close by saying something personal, if you'll allow me. For many of you it is the first time I see you since my bereavement. I want to say to each one of you and all of you, thank you. In many ways Madiba went through 2013 because there was such a positive energy being sent to him to keep him alive. South Africans kept him alive, and he felt that. That is why, even at a critical moment, Madiba would bounce back. So I want to say thank you for the love and support. Many of you prayed, I don't know how many times, for him. I just want to say thank you. We don't take it for granted. I don't take it for granted.

I want also to thank you because when the moment came and we had to accept he had to go, there was a moment of unity, of total unity in this country, which maybe is unique and I am of the belief that this was his last gift to South Africa. It was precisely an opportunity for all South Africans, regardless of the diverse identities I talked about, all South Africans to be united in love and best wishes for him. So in essence the last message of Madiba to South Africa is this: You are not Indian South African, you are not White South African, you are not Xhosa South African or Zulu South African, you are South Africans. This is what he wanted – through those moments of uncertainty, he wanted you to experience one single thing. This you did, you united in love around him. So thank you. Thank you so much.

But more importantly, I would urge that with reflections of this nature, sooner than later we should identify ourselves as belonging to this nation, this great nation of ours, and not to the small restricted identities which are still defining us.

I thank you very much.