

WHAT DO YOU SAY AFRICA IS?

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There is a saying that as a person thinks, so they are. Africans grow up belonging to an ethnic group, and are often shaped by those ethnic markers. Then, in conjunction with their ethnic identity, they also forge a national identity. But there are Africans whose cultural and religious practices transcend political and national boundaries. And there are Africans outside of the continent who do not see themselves along ethnic lines, nor along the lines of African nation states. So, what are the characteristic “trademarks” of an African? Is it skin color? Culture? Language? Geographical location? A cluster of all or many of these together? For Africans outside, is Africa a continent, a geographical place that one leaves behind when one travels to other continents? For many on the continent, Africa is a place where one experiences a multitude of linguistic, cultural, religious, political, and socio-economic variety. Africa is a place of hybrid identity. And the people that make up the nations of Africa have a history, in fact histories, individually and collectively. The complex history of individual ethnic groups and nations, the similarities and differences between their experiences, and the cultural and religious overlaps make Africa the “cradle” of multiplicity. So the starting point for discussing Africa’s image and future is not monoptism, monologue, and dictatorship, but pluralism and serious political and religious dialogue.

The challenge, and indeed the opportunity, is for Africans is to think along the lines of John Mbiti’s idea that “I am because we are.” This is a philosophy that undergirds the best of African thinking and action. Whether it is in Ngugi Wa-Thiongo’s *The River Between* or Jean Marc Ela’s *My Faith as an African*, the search for a new African reality and identity touches on a number of things: cultural change versus cultural tradition; life away from home versus life back at home; individual goals versus community goals; self developed image versus an externally imposed image, among others. To all these issues, there are no easy solutions. There is however a real invitation to engage such challenges, recognizing that the answers need not be either-or. Our cultural pluralism should have prepared us to think beyond simple dualistic terms and categories. Therefore, African Renaissance Ambassadors will engage in the pursuit of their dreams in ways that those dreams, when partially and fully realized, will also become part of the community’s dreams. In the search for a new Africa, we must not just focus on our individual identities and who we are, but also on the community identities and who we can *become* as a people.

Africa is in need of statesmen and stateswomen that will inspire the people to think and act in ways that transcend their cultural, religious, and political individualities and self interests. For the African Renaissance is about Africans, but more importantly about Africa as a whole. Therefore, any individual and community “traditions” and practices that have become an impediment to the full development of Africans need to be debated and changed for the better. One thing we know is that the story we have told since independence has not lived up to the promises of the continent and the potentials of her people. We need a new story, told by us, not a story full of sound and fury signifying nothing, but one that is full of potential, hope and transformation, signifying newness of life. God bless the African Renaissance!!