



## TRUE NATIONALISM: A TOOL FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** *Despite abundant human and natural resources, many African states continue to face persistent challenges of underdevelopment, weak institutions, and socio-political instability. This paradox has prompted scholars to interrogate internal factors that hinder development beyond colonial legacies and external dependency. This article argues that true nationalism—defined as inclusive, civic-oriented, and development-driven patriotism—is a critical but underutilized tool for African development. Drawing on political theory, African political thought, and contemporary governance experiences, the article examines how true nationalism can foster unity, good governance, economic self-reliance, and sustainable development across the continent. The study concludes that without a genuine national consciousness anchored in shared values and collective responsibility, Africa’s development efforts will remain fragile and externally dependent.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nationalism, Patriotism, Nation-Building.



## INTRODUCTION

Africa's development trajectory since political independence has been characterized by persistent economic stagnation, political instability, and institutional weakness in many states. This reality is striking, given the continent's vast endowment of natural and human resources (Rodney, 1972).

Numerous explanations have been advanced for Africa's development challenges, including colonial exploitation, neo-colonial dependency as well as unequal integration into the global capitalist system (Amin, 1976). While these external factors are significant, growing scholarly attention emphasizes the importance of internal socio-political dynamics in shaping development outcomes in Africa.

One of such internal factors is nationalism. Nationalism played a decisive role in mobilizing Africans against colonial domination and inspiring the struggle for self-determination (Nkrumah, 1963). However, in the post-independence era, nationalist consciousness in many African states has weakened, giving way to ethnic loyalties, elite corruption, and fragmented national identities (Ekeh, 1975). This article believes that Africa's development crisis cannot be fully addressed without reviving true nationalism—a form of nationalism rooted in national unity, civic responsibility, and commitment to collective development.

### Conceptualizing True Nationalism

Nationalism is commonly understood as a sense of belonging and loyalty to a nation, often accompanied by the desire for political self-rule (Gellner, 1983). However, nationalism is not a monolithic concept. It can be inclusive or exclusive, progressive or regressive. In the African context, the distinction between true nationalism and distorted forms of nationalism is crucial. True nationalism refers to a civic-based commitment to the nation-state that transcends ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. It emphasizes shared citizenship, equal rights, and collective responsibility for national development (Ake, 1996). Unlike ethnic nationalism, which prioritizes sectional interests, true nationalism promotes unity, ethical leadership, and public accountability. It is not expressed merely through symbols or rhetoric, but through concrete actions that advance national welfare.

### Nationalism and the African Historical Experience

African nationalism emerged as a response to colonial domination and racial subjugation. Leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and others mobilized nationalist sentiments to challenge imperial authority and demand political independence (Nkrumah, 1963; Nyerere, 1968). Nationalism during this period was largely unifying, providing a shared purpose across ethnic and social divides. However, after independence, the nationalist momentum declined in many African states. Artificial colonial boundaries, weak institutions, and struggles for political power contributed to the rise of ethnic politics and patron-client systems (Ekeh, 1975). Instead of serving as instruments of national integration, state institutions often became arenas for elite competition and personal enrichment. As Achebe (1983) observes, the failure of leadership and absence of genuine patriotism have been central to Africa's governance and development problems.



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## TRUE NATIONALISM AND AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

True nationalism as a tool for African development will be looked at from the following angles:

### *National Unity and Social Cohesion*

National unity is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Societies divided along ethnic or religious lines are more prone to conflict, policy instability, and developmental stagnation. True nationalism fosters social cohesion by encouraging citizens to identify primarily with the nation rather than with sub-national groups (Ake, 1996). In many African countries, the erosion of national identity has fueled communal conflicts and weakened state legitimacy. A renewed nationalist consciousness can help rebuild trust, reduce identity-based violence, and promote collective action toward development goals.

### *Good Governance and Accountability*

True nationalism promotes ethical governance by redefining public office as a position of service rather than a means of personal accumulation. Leaders guided by nationalist values prioritize national interest, transparency, and the rule of law (Achebe, 1983). Similarly, citizens with strong patriotic commitment are more likely to demand accountability and resist corruption.

According to Ake (1996), development in Africa has been undermined by the privatization of the state by political elites. True nationalism counters this tendency by fostering a sense of ownership of public institutions among citizens.

### *Economic Development and Self-Reliance*

Economic nationalism is a critical component of true nationalism. It emphasizes domestic production, support for local industries, and strategic engagement with the global economy. Africa's excessive dependence on foreign aid and imports has limited its capacity for autonomous development (Rodney, 1972). By promoting self-reliance and indigenous innovation, true nationalism strengthens economic sovereignty and reduces vulnerability to external shocks. Nyerere's (1968) philosophy of Ujamaa, despite its limitations, illustrates the centrality of nationalist ideals in development planning.

### *Youth Engagement and Human Capital Development*

Africa's youthful population represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Without purposeful engagement, youth energy can be diverted into crime, political violence, or irregular migration.

True nationalism can transform this demographic advantage into a developmental asset by instilling civic responsibility, discipline, and national pride among young people (Mazrui, 2001). Nationalist-oriented education systems can promote skills acquisition, innovation, and a commitment to national service, thereby strengthening human capital development.



### *Cultural Preservation and Moral Values*

Development is not merely an economic process but also a cultural and moral one. True nationalism emphasizes the preservation of indigenous cultures, languages, and values such as communalism, solidarity, and integrity (Mazrui, 2001). These values provide a moral foundation for sustainable development and social justice. In an era of globalization, nationalism enables

African societies to modernize without losing their cultural identity, ensuring that development remains people-centered.

### **CHALLENGES TO TRUE NATIONALISM IN AFRICA**

Despite its potentials, true nationalism faces significant obstacles in Africa. These include ethnic polarization, leadership failure, corruption, weak civic education, and external economic dependency (Amin, 1976; Ekeh, 1975). Overcoming these challenges requires deliberate state policies, institutional reforms, and sustained public enlightenment.

#### The Way Forward

To harness true nationalism for African development, this article recommends the following:

- i. Integrating civic and nationalist education into school curricula;
- ii. Strengthening institutions to promote justice, inclusion, and accountability;
- iii. Encouraging leadership anchored in integrity and national service;
- iv. Supporting local industries and indigenous innovation; and
- v. Promoting media and civil society initiatives that foster national unity.

### **CONCLUSION**

True nationalism remains a vital but underexploited tool for African development. Without a shared national consciousness rooted in unity, responsibility, and ethical commitment, development strategies are unlikely to succeed. Africa's transformation must be driven from within, through a nationalism that places people, values, and collective interest at the center of development.

Ultimately, true nationalism is not an emotional attachment to symbols, but a practical commitment to building institutions, promoting justice, and securing a prosperous future for all Africans.



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