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An African Day Reflection | 25 May 2025

By Isaiah-Phillips Akintola

The Song That Must Not Be Forgotten

"Then David took up this lament for Saul and his son Jonathan, and he ordered that the sons of Judah be taught the Song of the Bow. It is written in the Book of Jashar." - 2 Samuel 1:17-18 (NIV)

David had spent years running from Saul. He had lived in caves, in foreign courts, and in the wilderness while the king he had served tried to destroy him. When the news of Saul's death arrived, David had every reason to be relieved, and by the world's logic, every reason to let the record stand as it was: a flawed king, a failed dynasty, a chapter better closed than eulogized.

David did none of that. He wrote a lament. Then he went further, ordering that the sons of Judah be taught the Song of the Bow, a deliberate, structured transmission of memory across a generation. This was not sentiment. David understood something that many leaders never learn: a generation that does not know what was built before it cannot build on it, and a people who have not been taught to honor the past will not know how to carry anything forward.

The instruction to teach the song was a governance decision. David was closing the gap between one season and the next with intention, refusing to allow transition to become disconnection. The things Saul had done well, his victories, his courage in battle, the legitimate authority he had carried, needed to be named and held even as a new era began. Honoring the past was not nostalgia; it was the foundation of a coherent national identity.

Africa is sitting at the same moment David sat in. A season has turned. Old orders are breaking down. New voices are rising. And the temptation, as it always is in transition, is to move forward without stopping to teach the song. The consequences of that omission are visible everywhere, and nowhere more sharply than in South Africa on this African Day.

A Day That Demands More Than Celebration

African Day, observed on 25 May each year, marks the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963, a moment when African heads of state gathered in Addis Ababa to declare that the continent's liberation was a shared project, not a national one. Sixty-two years later, with the OAU long transformed into the African Union, it is worth asking honestly what that declaration has produced and, more critically, what it still requires.

The commemoration this year takes place against a backdrop that makes comfortable celebration difficult. South Africa, one of the continent's most symbolic nations, a country whose freedom was purchased with the solidarity of the entire continent, is in the grip of a crisis that cuts against the spirit of everything African Day represents. Afrophobia and xenophobia have resurfaced with force, and the images coming out of South African streets carry a weight of irony that cannot be ignored without intellectual dishonesty.

African Day is not a day for spectacle. It is a day for reckoning. And a genuine reckoning requires going back, looking clearly at the road that was walked, and then turning that clarity toward the road ahead. David's instruction to teach the song is the model. Before you can build anything durable in the future, you must honestly account for what was given to you from the past.

What Africa Did for South Africa

The liberation of South Africa from apartheid was not a South African achievement alone. That statement is not a diminishment of the courage of those who organised, marched, were imprisoned, and died on South African soil. It is a recognition of the infrastructure of solidarity that made their struggle viable.

The frontline states, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, and others, paid an enormous price for their commitment to a free South Africa. They hosted ANC offices and training camps on their territory and absorbed retaliatory strikes from the apartheid military as a consequence. Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere were not peripheral supporters; they were architects of the international isolation strategy that eventually made apartheid politically and economically unsustainable. The Organisation of African Unity provided diplomatic legitimacy to the liberation movement at a time when Western powers were still classifying the ANC as a terrorist organisation.

Oliver Tambo spent decades moving between African capitals, building the external mission of the ANC from borrowed offices in Lusaka. When Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, and when South Africa held its first democratic election in 1994, those milestones were built on a foundation that stretched across the continent. Ghana gave the Pan-African movement its intellectual home. Nigeria contributed financially to the liberation struggle

at significant cost to its own resources. The solidarity was not symbolic; it was strategic, material, and costly.

This is the song that must be taught. Not as a transaction to be repaid, but as a truth that shapes identity. A people who do not know the full story of how their freedom was won will not understand the obligations that freedom carries. Saul was imperfect, as every human leader is, but David would not allow his people to reduce him to his failures. The continent that stood with South Africa was not without its own contradictions, but South Africa cannot afford to reduce it to a source of foreign competition.

This history is not adequately taught in South African schools, and it does not feature prominently in the public discourse that shapes how South Africans understand their relationship with the rest of the continent. A population that does not know what it owes cannot feel the weight of reciprocity. Afrophobia finds its easiest footing in historical ignorance, and historical ignorance is always the product of a failure to teach the song.

South Africa's Debt and Its Responsibility

South Africa's post-apartheid constitution is among the most progressive in the world. Its Bill of Rights extends protections not only to citizens but to every person within the country's borders. The architects of that constitution understood that a nation built on the suffering caused by exclusion could not reproduce exclusion as policy. The question is whether that constitutional vision has been translated into the kind of social and civic education that reshapes public consciousness.

It has not, and the gap between constitutional principle and public attitude is where Afrophobia lives.

David's lament was public. He did not grieve Saul privately and move on quietly. He made the grief communal, because national memory has to be communal to function. South Africa must do the same work with its continental history. The role that African solidarity played in its freedom must be woven into public life, into school curricula, into national commemorations, into the way ordinary citizens understand what it means to be South African. The continent did not watch from a distance; it bled for this country's liberty.

Beyond the historical obligation, South Africa carries a continental responsibility as Africa's most industrialized economy. Its infrastructure, its institutions, its financial sector, and its universities have all benefited from decades of stability and investment that other African nations did not enjoy under colonialism and its aftermath. That advantage does not belong to South Africa alone; it belongs to the continent that helped produce it. The African Union's Agenda 2063 envisions a continent of free movement, integrated markets, and shared development. South Africa is a signatory to that vision. The violence on its streets is a direct contradiction of what its government has committed to at the continental level.

The Africans Building Africa

One of the most significant failures of African public discourse is the invisibility of the people actually building the continent. The mainstream news cycle in Africa and internationally is dominated by crisis narratives, corruption scandals, and conflict reports. The architects of African development, the engineers, entrepreneurs, scientists, medical researchers, economists, and educators who are doing the work of reconstruction, rarely occupy that same space.

This is the same problem David was solving when he ordered the song to be taught. Left to its own momentum, public memory gravitates toward drama and defeat. It requires a deliberate act of leadership to redirect it toward what was built, what was won, and who did the building.

Aliko Dangote's refinery in Nigeria is the largest single-train refinery in the world. Its completion changes the economics of petroleum across the continent, reducing Africa's dependence on imported refined fuel and retaining value within the region. Strive Masiyiwa built Econet Wireless into a pan-African telecommunications company that has connected millions of people in some of the continent's most underserved areas, and has invested in African education at scale through scholarship programs that have sent thousands of young Africans to university. Mo Ibrahim created mobile payments infrastructure in Africa before the rest of the world understood what mobile money was, then redirected his resources into the Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, one of the few mechanisms that rewards good governance publicly and financially.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala serves as Director-General of the World Trade Organization, the first African and the first woman to hold that position. Agnes Kalibata leads the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, working to transform food systems across the continent. These individuals are not footnotes. They are the architecture of an African future already under construction, and their work belongs in the national conversation the same way David's song belonged in the education of Judah's sons.

A person who cannot see the builders cannot imagine themselves building. Teaching the song is not only about honoring the past; it is about giving the present generation a vision large enough to step into.

The Idea and Its Limits

The call to solve African problems with African solutions has gained real traction. The instinct behind it is sound. But the idea needs to be unpacked before it can be applied, because calling for African solutions without defining what that means produces noble sentiment without workable direction.

The problems Africa faces are not unique to Africa. Unemployment, migration, resource mismanagement, governance failure, and identity tension are global challenges that manifest in African contexts with African textures. The solution cannot stop at being African in name; it has to be African in understanding, African in design, and African in execution. That requires a clear-eyed look at what is actually broken before reaching for what can fix it.

The recent eruptions of Afrophobia and xenophobia in South Africa are surface expressions of something far deeper. They are visible symptoms of structural failures that have been left unaddressed at every level of society, and reacting to the symptoms without diagnosing the disease will produce the same outcome every time.

Four Levels, One Conversation That Never Connects

When African leaders, thinkers, and communities speak about these challenges, they are rarely speaking the same language even when they use the same words. There are at least four distinct vantage points from which people are engaging the same problem, and the failure to connect them is itself one of the core problems.

At the continental level, there are leaders and policy architects who see Africa as an integrated economic system with the potential to become a global powerhouse. Their language is one of integration, investment corridors, trade agreements, and long-term positioning. At the national level, governments are grappling with immediate realities: unemployment figures, political pressure, currency instability, and the demands of a population that needs results within an electoral cycle.

At the community level, people are not thinking in terms of policy frameworks. They are thinking about whether their child can afford school fees next month, whether the clinic has medication, whether the business in their neighborhood is owned by someone from their street or by a foreigner who sends money elsewhere. These concerns are real. At the personal level, there are individuals with qualifications they cannot convert into income, skills they cannot find a market for, and a growing sense that the system was not built with them in mind. These are the people most susceptible to being mobilized by populist anger, not because they are unintelligent, but because the gap between their expectation and their reality has become intolerable.

All four levels are simultaneously engaged in the same conversation, but they are not speaking to each other. The intellectual at the continental level produces frameworks that the person on the ground cannot see themselves in. The person on the ground expresses pain that the policymaker sanitises into a statistic. Until these four levels are genuinely connected through a coherent, shared vision, Africa will keep having the same crisis with different faces. David did not just write the lament for himself. He made sure it reached everyone, from the military commanders to the youngest sons of Judah. A vision that does not travel all the way down is not a vision; it is a memo.

The Ecosystem of Development

Africa is the continent with the youngest population and, by extension, its largest economic opportunity sits in that population. That is not rhetoric; it is a demographic reality that either becomes an asset or a liability depending on what is built around it.

A refinery does not automatically translate into dignity for the person at the bottom of the economic chain unless there is a deliberate ecosystem built around it, one that includes training pipelines, supplier development programs, community employment strategies, and clear communication to local people about what is being built and why it benefits them. Without that ecosystem, macro development becomes a symbol the masses cannot inhabit, and a symbol that cannot be inhabited breeds resentment.

The person who cannot get a job in the very facility built in their region will not feel pride in national development; they will feel excluded from it, and that exclusion is political fuel. Building the factory is not enough. Building the pipeline from the community to the factory is what converts infrastructure into social stability.

The Migration Question

When someone moves from one African country to another, they bring their culture, their identity, their habits, and their values. Cultural exchange requires a framework of mutual respect, and that framework breaks down when the receiving community feels economically threatened. Perceived competition for scarce resources turns difference into grievance.

The response cannot be to tell the receiving community that their feelings are wrong. Feelings grounded in real economic pressure are not irrational. The response has to address the economic pressure while simultaneously building the cultural infrastructure that allows communities to coexist without one feeling consumed by the other.

South Africa has a particular responsibility here. Its cities are not simply destinations for economic migrants; they are the product of a continental investment in South African freedom. The African who walks into Johannesburg from Harare or Lagos or Kinshasa is

not an intruder. They are, in a very real historical sense, coming to a place their own country helped to build. That reframing is not a political argument. It is a historical fact, and it needs to be part of how South Africans understand the movement of people across their borders. Saul's victories belonged to all of Israel, not just to the tribe that fought beside him. Continental solidarity works the same way.

What Leadership Actually Requires

Visionary leadership is not a vague call for better politicians. It is a specific demand for leaders who can hold the full picture without losing sight of the individual person in it. A leader working on African development must be able to stand on a continental stage and articulate a long-term economic integration vision, then walk into a township meeting and explain in plain terms how that vision connects to the employment of a young person who has been out of work for three years.

That leader must also be willing to resist the temptation to weaponize poverty. Every demagogue understands that people who cannot feed their families are easy to mobilize. A genuine leader refuses that leverage, because mobilizing the desperate against the foreign is cheap and the cost is paid in blood, burned infrastructure, and economic regression that sets the country back by a decade.

David's greatness as a leader was not that he was without conflict or complication. It was that he refused to let personal injury determine national policy. He had been wronged by Saul repeatedly and profoundly. He still wrote the song. Africa needs leaders with the same capacity, people who can absorb the complexity of history without using it as an excuse to avoid the responsibility of the present.

Accountability structures matter. People at every level need to see, on a regular basis, what is being built, what employment has been created, what training programs are running, and what industries are being established. When people can see that the direction is real and the movement is measurable, they can wait. When they can see nothing, they do not wait; they break things.

The Shared Vision Imperative

Africa cannot be built by competition between its own people. The conditions that produce Afrophobia are conditions of manufactured scarcity, political negligence, and the deliberate fragmentation of solidarity. A continent that fights within itself cannot negotiate from strength outside itself.

Proverbs 29:18 states that where there is no vision, the people perish. That is not a statement about optimism. It is a statement about coherence. A people without a shared vision become ungovernable, not because they are bad, but because they have no common

reference point. Every person acts from their own immediate reality because no one has given them a larger reality to act from. David gave Judah a larger reality to act from. He gave them a song that held the full story, including the parts that were uncomfortable, so that they could move into the future without being ambushed by a past they had never been taught to carry.

Building that shared vision requires investment in education that creates African thinkers rather than imported intellectual frameworks. It requires economic development that is genuinely inclusive across all four levels of the conversation. It requires leadership that refuses to manage crises and insists on building institutions. And it requires the courage to name what is broken clearly enough that the right people can fix it.

The solution is not purely African in the narrow sense. It is human in its foundation, African in its application. Human dignity, economic justice, integrated development, and accountable governance are not Western ideas or Eastern ideas. They are the conditions under which any society functions. Africa has the people, the land, the resources, and the history to build something the world has not yet seen.

African Day is the right moment to remember that. Not as a performance of solidarity, but as a recommitment to the work. The founders who gathered in Addis Ababa in 1963 were not celebrating; they were deciding. David did not eulogize Saul and then sit down. He taught the song and then went to work building a kingdom. Sixty-two years after the OAU's founding, the continent still needs leaders willing to decide rather than perform, to build rather than manage, and to teach the song to a generation that has never heard it.