

**LIBERATION IS EARNED, NOT GIVEN:
DECOLONIAL IMAGINATION, YOUTH AGENCY**



& THE RESPONSIBILITY OF AFRICA'S EDUCATED GENERATION

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PICTURE BY MICHEL ASSOUKA

There comes a moment in the life of every generation when history ceases to be merely a memory and instead becomes a teacher, a tool, and a mandate. For African youth, that moment is not located in some distant future, it is now. The destiny of the African continent will not be decided solely in state houses, international summits, or party conferences, but in the daily decisions young Africans make. Those decisions may involve surrendering to feelings of powerlessness, accepting only colonial explanations for current circumstances and avoiding to take accountability for the roles we have played or they may involve mobilizing, educating ourselves, confronting the continent's painful historical experiences, and honoring the sacrifices of previous generations who fought for freedom. That hard-won freedom has enabled access to education, mobility, and dignity. Learning from these lessons provides the foundation for building societies that reflect the aspirations of those who struggled before us.

If Africa's future is to be stable, prosperous, and sovereign, its youth must claim ownership of that future. Political liberation and economic freedom, as history repeatedly demonstrates, are not granted, they are earned. They have never been freely given, and this

reality is unlikely to change. The continent's demographic profile makes this responsibility unavoidable. With the youngest population in the world, African youth represent the largest political, economic, and intellectual force on the continent. Yet this potential remains underutilized and, if neglected, may become an obstacle to stability and growth rather than a catalyst for progress. Colonial legacies, governance deficits, economic dependency, and internal divisions continue to impede development. The challenge facing this generation is therefore not simply to critique these constraints but to transcend them by cultivating a decolonial imagination, assuming accountability, and taking active responsibility in nation-building. This article argues that African youth must move beyond narratives of inherited victimhood and instead embrace agency, responsibility, and solidarity through education, participation, and collective action.

The Unfinished Struggle of Liberation

The political independence achieved across Africa in the mid-twentieth century represented a monumental victory against colonial domination. Leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, and Nelson

Mandela articulated visions of dignity, unity, and political and economic self-reliance. Their struggles were not merely about replacing colonial flags with national ones; they were about restoring African agency and sovereignty.

However, independence did not automatically produce freedom. Colonial economic structures persisted, new elites sometimes replicated old hierarchies, and external dependencies remained deeply entrenched. In many contexts, resources continued to flow outward while instability and poverty persisted domestically. Although the form of control changed, the logic of dependency endured. Consequently, Africa's liberation remains incomplete. The current generation inherits not only the victories of the past but also the unfinished responsibility of transforming inherited systems into institutions that genuinely serve African peoples. The struggle has shifted from anti-colonial resistance to internal reform, accountability, and structural renewal.

Decolonizing the Mind and Reclaiming Agency

True decolonization is not solely territorial or political; it is also psychological and intellectual. Colonial rule imposed not only foreign governance but also

foreign epistemologies, ways of thinking that positioned Africa as dependent, inferior, or perpetually behind. These mental frameworks continue to shape how problems are diagnosed and how solutions are imagined. Decolonizing the mind, therefore, becomes a prerequisite for meaningful development.

This process requires rejecting the assumption that progress must be imported, that governance models must be copied uncritically, or that Africa's challenges are inherent rather than structural. It calls for valuing indigenous knowledge, local innovation, and African histories as legitimate sources of guidance. At the same time, decolonization demands introspection. It is insufficient to attribute all contemporary difficulties solely to colonialism or external interference. While these forces undeniably shaped present realities, internal failures such as corruption, weak institutions, ethnic manipulation, and civic disengagement also contribute to stagnation. A persistent victim mentality risks absolving societies of responsibility. Liberation requires accountability. Youth agency, therefore, begins with a shift in perspective: from asking what has been done to us to asking what we can build together.

Youth as Builders of Stability and Governance

African youth are often portrayed as a problem to be managed, unemployed, restless, or politically volatile. This framing obscures a more accurate reality: youth are the continent's greatest resource. Across Africa, young people are organizing for electoral transparency, launching entrepreneurial ventures, using technology to address local challenges, promoting peacebuilding initiatives, and demanding government accountability. These efforts demonstrate that youth are not passive observers of history but active agents of change.

Nevertheless, potential alone does not produce transformation; participation does. Good governance does not emerge spontaneously but is cultivated by citizens who vote, organize, volunteer, question authority, and insist on transparency. Stability is not accidental; it is the outcome of collective effort. Each instance of civic disengagement leaves space for mismanagement and exploitation, while every act of engagement strengthens democracy and accountability. Nation-building cannot be outsourced. It belongs to all sons and daughters of Africa, especially its youth.

From Brain Drain to Brain Responsibility

One of the most visible symptoms of frustration across the continent is the persistent "brain drain," whereby talented young Africans seek opportunities abroad. While mobility and global exchange can be valuable, the mass departure of skilled citizens often weakens the domestic institutions that most need their expertise. The deeper issue is not migration itself but the belief that success can only be found elsewhere. No society develops sustainably when its brightest minds feel detached from local progress.

Development requires commitment to building at home rather than merely escaping constraints. This does not mean that every young African must remain geographically rooted. Rather, it means that wherever education and skills are acquired, they should ultimately serve African communities. Knowledge without responsibility becomes another form of extraction.

The Ethical Responsibility of the Educated Generation

A particularly urgent responsibility falls on Africans who have had access to higher education. Education is not merely a personal achievement; it is a

social investment. Families, communities, and public institutions often make significant sacrifices so that one individual may study. Such privilege carries an obligation.

To be educated is to possess tools for transformation. If degrees serve only individual advancement, inequality deepens. However, when knowledge is shared, mentorship is offered, and skills are transferred, education becomes a collective asset. Educated citizens must therefore commit to mentoring younger generations, sharing technical expertise, supporting local initiatives, and ensuring that progress is not confined to elite spaces. Nation-building is communal. When one person is educated, many should benefit.

Conclusion: Liberation as Responsibility

The task before African youth is neither symbolic nor optional, it is historical. Apathy, cynicism, and fatalism must be rejected. Meaningful change requires active and deliberate participation: joining civic organizations, creating businesses, strengthening schools, promoting peace, voting, questioning authority, and building institutions. Those privileged with education must reach back and uplift others, en-

sureing that progress is shared rather than isolated.

Africa does not need a savior. No external organization will grant the prosperity the continent seeks. What Africa requires is the collective commitment of its sons and daughters. History will not remember what was lamented but what was built. Previous generations earned political independence through sacrifice; the present generation must earn intellectual, economic, and institutional independence through responsibility and action. Liberation is earned, not given, and the future of Africa will be written by those who choose to claim it.