



From Pan-African Speeches to African Unity: Policy Coherence, Institutional Governance, and the Relevance of Abraham Lincoln's Unionism

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Article history:

Submitted: March 24, 2026

Revised: April 20, 2026

Accepted: April 28, 2026

Keywords:

Pan-Africanism, African unity, governance, policy coherence, unionism

Abstract

Pan-Africanism through all the ages has led to some of the most stirring modes of expression, speeches or otherwise, concerning African solidarity and liberation as well as collective destiny. However, the conversion of such rhetoric into a tangible, sustainable unity has been limited. This article explores the causes behind African unity being a goal that is often unattained in reality. It further contends that the main problem is not only the lack of political will but also policy inconsistency and weak institutional governance. Using Abraham Lincoln's unionism as a point of comparison, this article explains that unity discourse can be effective only if it: first, unmistakably identifies the political "we"; second, bases the duties on shared principles; and third, links the speech to valid and enforceable arrangements. Consequently, the article revisits Pan-African speeches alongside the tangible functions of governance, regional coordination, and institutional harmonization in Africa. It maintains that, under the right conditions, symbolic rhetoric can be converted into coherent public policies, institutional actions that are well-coordinated, and commitments that are measurable and thereby capable of producing integration in the political and economic life of ordinary people.

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Introduction

For a very long time, Pan-Africanism has been a crucial aspect of Black political ideology and the political vision of Africa. Initially, as a diasporic and anti-racist movement against slavery, racial oppression, and colonial subjugation, Pan-Africanism later on the African continent became the major ideological language of hope, dignity, and collective destiny that accompanied decolonization. As George B. N. Ayittey explains, the initial idea of Pan-Africanism was that since African people share common cultures, problems, and goals, they should therefore come together in their struggle for freedom and progress (Ayittey 86-87).

Kwame Nkrumah, among other Pan-African figures, drew on this tradition to deliver some of the most powerful speeches in African history, making the case for African unity as a moral, historical, and political necessity. However, mere powerful speeches do not necessarily lead to institutional unity. Nkrumah argued that Ghana's independence was closely linked to the freedom of the whole continent, but the Organization of African Unity remained largely a platform for the cooperation of independent states rather than, as some of its proponents had hoped, a supranational entity (89-90). Its successor, the African Union, has similarly continued to experience major problems with enforcement, policy coordination, and political accountability.

This clash between the language of unity and the continued existence of division is exactly why a new perspective is needed. As Katherine Verdery warns, a "nation" is an ever-changing concept rather than a tangible entity, and it is a symbol that different actors and situations contest and shape (Verdery 39). So, unity must not be a simple call to the conscience of individuals; it should be the very foundation of a political community, create a chain of obligations, and result in legal enforcement mechanisms. Bringing unity to this level is how Abraham Lincoln becomes an appropriate point of reference for comparison. Dorothy Ross demonstrates that Lincoln was so devoted to the nation that this commitment was the main influence on his politics, and it was through this loyalty to the nation that emancipation was to be either constrained or advanced (Ross 379-83). At first, diasporic movement members emphasized shared blood, victimhood, and struggles, whereas the continental movement, particularly during the 1950s, transformed the broader solidarity into a political anti-colonial action. Words mattered because colonialism had broken down space, identity, and power. Through Pan-

African rhetoric, isolated African populations were united, recognizing that their history was a shared destiny.

This article shows that the persistent failure of the African unity is not merely because of a lack of political will or inadequate rhetoric but rather the inability to convert Pan-African discourse into a clear policy framework, a system of governance at the institutional level, and regional commitments that are enforceable. Lincoln's idea of unity is significant as it demonstrates that discourse on unity only becomes politically potent when connected to law, obligation, and the joint action of states.

Pan-African Speeches and the Symbolic Construction of Unity

Speechmaking in the Pan-African movement has served as a very effective weapon for political revival time and time again. In fact, one of its functions was to prepare the ground for a political community by creating a shared dream community, a so-called fantasia, even before this political community came into existence. For this reason, Pan-African speeches did not just articulate the idea of unity; they also, in a symbolic way, fashioned the unity being talked about, making Africans recognize themselves as joint proprietors of a common historical and moral heritage (Ayithey 86-89).

This kind of linguistic endeavor was well reflected during Nkrumah's time. According to Ayithey, after the mid-1940s, Nkrumah spearheaded the continental Pan-Africanism, organizing conferences and networks aimed at both decolonization and eventual political union (89-90). Nevertheless, the Pan-African unity of the Nkrumah era was not solely put forward in formal speeches and diplomatic initiatives. Janet Hess reveals that, through public art, spectacles, iconography, and state-sponsored representation, Pan-African unity was also "produced" (Hess and Quarcoopome 16-20).

Political expression under Nkrumah took the form of exhibitions, documentaries, monuments, portraits, and ceremonial language, all of which contributed to the vision of the country and Ghana's role in African liberation (Hess and Quarcoopome 16-20). In other words, the oratorical communication manifested in a broader semiotic system. This semiotic function carried political meaning because it made the nation's and the continent's aspirations tangible. Through Nkrumahist cultural products, the intention was to absorb the regional loyalties unconsciously into the national identity, and to associate the person of Nkrumah with liberation, moral

authority, and Pan-African destiny (16-20). As a consequence, the political figure, the nation, and the continent were powerfully fused in one image. Not only was he depicted as the prime minister, but also as a moral mentor, “Redeemer,” and epitome of collective ideals (Hess and Quarcoopome 18-20). These kinds of symbols played an important role in stimulating popular consciousness and anti-colonial resistance. It supported the idea that political independence in one part of the continent should be seen as part of the larger struggle for the freedom of the entire continent.

In terms of political expression, Pan-Africanism formulated what could be termed a rhetoric of expansive belonging. It disallowed the colonial mindset, which limited African potential to arbitrarily drawn borders. Also, it protested the isolation of each nation’s politics, stating that the liberation of one African country was connected to the liberation of all others. An interesting excerpt from the Pan-African Journal stresses that the unity of Pan-Africa should not turn into an “ism,” a mere theoretical concept disconnected from real life, but it should actually guide the “building of the communities Africans desire” (“More Steps Towards Our Freedom” 156). What makes this statement powerful is its rejection of mere rhetorical flourishes. It is understood here that the significance of unity depends on a shift to normal social and political arrangements.

Nonetheless, this same insistence points to the vulnerability of Pan-African discourse. If unity has to be protected at all costs from becoming an empty word, it is because it may only inspire people and not be institutionalized. The unifying speeches were very useful in mobilizing people against colonialism, as they identified the enemies, affirmed dignity, and envisioned a future. However, building a postcolonial continental system needed more than emotional bonding. It called for defining a community, power centers, and capabilities, and for executing the plan. Verdery’s idea that national symbols are always debatable is also applicable to us since it shows that the language of unity is never automatic (39). Different actors can cite the same symbol while giving it dissimilar institutional meanings. “Unity” may mean political union for one leader, diplomatic cooperation for another, regime legitimacy for a third, and merely ceremonial fraternity for a fourth.

This being the case, one of the significant deeds of Pan-Africanism speeches was to establish a robust symbolic system of collective African destiny. The downside was that the symbolic power oftentimes overshadowed

the precision of the institutional framework. They were better at loudly proclaiming the inevitability of the unity than at specifying the very structure through which the unity would regulate the daily political and economic life.

Why African Unity Has Often Remained Aspirational: Policy Incoherence and Weak Institutional Governance

Initially, the challenge of Pan-Africanism was to produce symbols. However, the second problem was to give them institutional life. The problem was not that the concept of African unity was not supported by history. Actually, one can argue that the historical rationale for African unity was very strong after independence and remains so today. The challenge concerned the emergence of African postcolonial states and the irregularity of the institutions set up to coordinate them. Ayittey indicates that many African leaders opposed Nkrumah's idea of a central United States of Africa largely because they were unwilling to give up the sovereignty they had just achieved (90). Hence, the OAU developed as a voluntary form of collaboration rather than as a political union with a supranational character.

The consequences of this deal were very far-reaching. The OAU's prudent set-up was well justified when most African countries were still under colonial rule and gaining state sovereignty was a very recent achievement. However, it was a sure way for the organization to stay weak in terms of enforcement and coordination as well. Ayittey expresses himself very strongly about the OAU: it drifted, generally chose to remain silent when serious abuses occurred, and it never got over the intrigues and rivalries that discredited the continental cause (86, 90-95). Whether one agrees with all of Ayittey's one-sided conclusions or not, the structural issue is clear: a unity project without effective institutional authority will remain a mere declaration.

Moreover, fragmented policies only made this problem worse. The constant talk of Africa as one continent did not prevent individual countries from designing their development goals in ways that duplicated, competed with, or were altogether disconnected from one another, thus undoing any advantages of integration. Ayittey shows how ridiculous it is when countries next to each other attempt to build and expand the same industries and infrastructure simultaneously without proper regional coordination, thereby weakening the economic case for integration (90-91). Under such conditions, on the one hand, political speeches extolled unity, but on the other hand,

policy decisions strengthened division. Saying the words “Africa must unite” was just the start and far from enough to harmonize the different trade, transport, industrial, fiscal, or migration dynamics.

According to Diane Chido, genuine regional or continental cooperation should not be mistaken for mere formal membership in organizations. It is a serious policy-making effort that directly addresses member states’ interests and achieves a level of implementation that leads to real outcomes rather than mere symbolism (Chido 8-9). At the same time, she highlights the role of regional organizations as “pilot integration” instruments, a shift that highlights the importance of gradual institutionalism as opposed to rhetorical maximalism. While we are still not living up to the ideals of the continent, as intermediate institutions develop their coordination, compliance, and benefit-sharing practices, these ideals will become within reach.

That is why governance is a major issue. René Grotenhuis’s analysis of the state sheds light on this by pointing out that a state is not simply an area with people but also a structured authority that citizens can expect to provide, among others, participation, security, justice, and public services (Grotenhuis 13-15). Now, if a large number of postcolonial African states themselves are hard-pressed to internally consolidate an inclusive political order, then it is obvious that a continental union built on those states will also bear those weaknesses. Ayittey makes this point very aptly by asking where one can find a viable continental project if unity within the majority of states remains fragile (100). However, the rhetorical aspect of that statement will depend on how one weighs it; it nonetheless points to a real institutional issue: supranational integration presupposes that some minimum level of domestic legitimacy and administrative capacity must be in place.

The lack of strong continental enforcement only increases the problem. Chido makes the point that external organizations have often failed in their attempts to foster good governance because, even when there were mandated expenditures or formal requirements, they were sometimes not implemented, and there was also a lack of enforcement of commitments that made them meaningful (Chido 8-9). When member states sign protocols, African regional bodies suffer similar problems of ineffective internalization in national systems. While on paper, a regional court, parliament, or commission can be found, the lack of political will, failure to domesticate the laws, or lack of administrative capacity render the framework very thin.

Another reason behind this structural failure can be traced back to the discourse. Pan-African oratory often emphasizes the moral imperative of unity without specifying the particular type of unity being called for. A philosophical warning that there can be several forms of unity holds true here. The old notion that unity can differ according to kind, degree, and relation is suggestive of the fact that politicians must not only point out which of the five types (symbolic, diplomatic, legal, economic, and federal) unity is being talked about but they must also not confuse one type of unity for the whole (“Types of Unity” 534-35). A great deal of misunderstanding in African integration debates stems from the failure to keep these various levels separate. In other words, one may easily celebrate a ceremonial summit as “unity” even though it does not produce a binding policy. One’s very strong and heartfelt identification with the common anti-colonial memory may generate solidarity and even cohesion, but it may not necessarily lead to being able to share fiscal or judicial mechanisms. Simply put, unity as sentiment is not the same thing as unity as governance.

This is the closest one can get to an answer to why Pan-Africanism has remained, on the one hand, a necessity and, on the other, a deficiency. It is necessary to the extent that it embodies a continental perspective that transcends colonial division and parochial nationalism. It is deficient in that, in the absence of harmonized policies and aligned institutions, it is vulnerable to takeover by regimes, individualization by a charismatic leader, or degradation into mere symbolic performance. Hess’s study of the Nkrumahist symbols clearly shows how nationalist and Pan-African symbols can be utilized in praising a single leader (18-20). What is suggested here is not to devalue the historical significance of such personalities but rather to recognize that long-lasting institutions cannot be substituted by a person’s embodiment. If political power is excessively identified with a charismatic figure, changes in leadership, regime, or political reversal may significantly increase the risk of damaging the broader agenda. African unity, as a result, has frequently remained a dream, largely because the rhetoric has not been consistently backed up by ratifiable policy frameworks, responsible institutions, and step-by-step regional integration. What is lacking is not the value of the ideal but the means through which the ideal is supposed to materialize.

Abraham Lincoln’s Unionism and the Politics of Effective Unity

The main reason for bringing up Abraham Lincoln here is not to equate the US with Africa in some oversimplified way, but rather to highlight how his political language brought the concept of unity down to earth. For Lincoln, love for the Union was not just a warm feeling for the nation coming together. It was a political philosophy that saw the nation as a moral and constitutional community, the preservation of which could involve sacrifice, law, and concerted action. Ross points out that in Lincoln's time, being loyal to the country was an element of morality so strong that it could either stand in the way of or help the cause of freeing the slaves (Ross 379, 383). That idea is key because it implies that "Union" was not just beautiful words; it was a reason for commitment to politics.

Furthermore, Lincoln's unionism can shed light on the connection between public speech and the political system. Ross observes that in the US during the 1800s, the nation was seen not just as a community defined by ethnic or cultural similarities but also as a political community defined by the Republic, the Constitution, and the Union (383). This implies that the "we" in Lincoln's tone was not left totally undefined. It was identified through a government, a set of fundamental laws, and the machinery of the state. Even though the Union was disputed, it continued to be a legal-political entity around which debates on authority, rebellion, liberty, and duty could be organized.

Craig Symonds's research supports this argument by pointing out that Lincoln's plan of action during the war was a series of moves that subordinated other issues to the one of keeping the nation together. For Lincoln, the idea of secession was not merely an expression of disagreement but a state of rebellion against lawful authority. He therefore made his military, diplomatic, and political decisions with this goal in mind (Symonds 63-70). Symonds even goes so far as to argue that the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation can only be seen as part of Lincoln's wider strategy of uniting the country (70). Dorothy Ross takes this a step further by pointing out that when Lincoln wrote to Horace Greeley that his "main purpose" was to save the Union, it was not just a cover-up of his real intentions; he was, in fact, disclosing the highest value system under which emancipation was made politically possible (Ross 388-89).

The comparison to Lincoln underscores that his Union rhetoric was successful because it met at least three major criteria that Pan-African

discourse has frequently failed to meet in practice. First and foremost, it clearly politicized the meaning of “we” through a direct reference to certain institutions. Implicitly, the Union of Lincoln pointed towards a constitutional order that was existing even though it was under severe threat. Contrary to this, Pan-African leaders in their speeches have always shifted from one community-level discourse to another, e.g., from race to continent to postcolonial states to peoples to regions to diaspora. Each level is important, but its institutional repercussions differ. A continent-wide moral fraternity on its own does not identify the authority that has the power to legislate, judge, impose taxes, or enforce. Lincoln’s example shows that the political effectiveness of unity requires members and their rights and obligations to be linked to definite institutions.

Another thing is that Lincoln based his sense of obligation on shared principles, which were embedded in the law and the political system. The Union was something not only to be loved but also something to be upheld by law. Even as he extended constitutional powers during the war, Lincoln still linked the rationale of his orders to safeguarding the constitutional order rather than to its total bypass (Symonds 66-70). In the same way, Pan-African rhetoric has to move on from the moral affirmation to the pinpointing of norms. The shared memories of anti-colonial sentiment are positive, but they should be translated into legal obligations in trade, free movement, infrastructure, democratic standards, fiscal coordination, conflict resolution, and compliance. Otherwise, unity is only a morally beautiful but practically weak concept.

Thirdly, Lincoln ensured that words led to enforceable actions. Ross points out that nationalism helped to turn emancipation into a tool for nation-building because slavery came to be seen as a danger to the nation’s life (397). In other words, a moral ideal was successful only by merging with a political project backed by authority. Africa has to learn here that while coercive centralization is not necessarily the answer every time, language that is disconnected from implementation loses the ability to instigate change. Chido’s argument for regionally based, participatory integration and Ayittey’s appeal for a more pragmatic, staged regional union both converge on this idea (Chido 8-9; Ayittey 100). Unity has to be managed as much as it has to be declared.

On the other hand, we must be cautious with Lincoln as a role model.

Ross points out that his nationalism was ethically ambiguous, and he always viewed his abolitionist stance through a hierarchy in which the Union often came before (379-83, 388-97). This is really important because it protects from the danger of blind idolization. So, the relevance of Lincoln in this article is that he is presented as an example demonstrating that a discourse of unity can become historically significant when it is connected to a framework of obligation, legality, and governance. At the same time, his life also serves as a warning that national unity alone can turn into exclusion or moral partiality.

As a matter of fact, African repurposing of the same ideas does not necessarily imply copying American nation-building. Rather, it should be about the need to make representational speech through institutions a point of reference. Unity should neither be regarded as an empty façade nor as a unifying monology. It must be envisaged as a coordinated plurality: a political scenario in which different states and nations agree to live by shared rules in well-specified areas to their common benefit. Hence, regional economic communities are like changing rooms of disciplined integration, where one makes a promise, it is verified, and one is given time to fulfill it, in a controlled manner. The continental ambition, thus, is not only the distant and indefinite direction but the combined outcome of functional law, economy, and governance.

Conclusion

Pan-Africanism has never been short of eloquence. Indeed, it has given Africa and its diaspora a shared language of solidarity, dignity, resistance, and a sense of historical mission. Through this language, it has been one of the driving forces behind the struggle against colonial rule as well as the inspiration for liberation; it has kept alive the dream of overcoming Africa's division. However, the history of the continent after independence has proven that speaking powerfully is different from having strong institutions. Declared unity is not the same as unity that is effectively governed.

This paper has argued that the main reason the dream of African unity has not been fulfilled, despite the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism, is the failure to translate speeches calling for unity into coherent policies and the effective governance of institutions. Pan-African speeches visualized a shared African destiny but failed to elaborate considerably on what political community, legal obligations, and administrative structures would be needed to accomplish it.

The OAU and, subsequently, the AU acquiesced to this conundrum: they had strong symbolic legitimacy but limited capacity to harmonize policies, enforce norms, and coordinate the implementation of decisions.

It is at this juncture that we can consider Abraham Lincoln's unionism. Lincoln demonstrates that the discourse on unity acquires political significance only when it can specify the political "we," derive duties from shared principles, and link language to enforceable institutional action. Besides, his example also shows how unity can give rise to ethical challenges such as exclusion and domination and, therefore, needs to be constantly guarded against. Nevertheless, as a point of comparison, it is quite instructive in shedding light on what Pan-Africanism must accomplish in order to be more than just a desire for unity.

More inspiring speeches are not what African unity needs the most. The building of viable governance systems by Africans themselves is what matters most. Regional coordination needs to go beyond summit diplomacy, and common policy should not be limited to mere rhetoric. Pan-African discourse will become genuinely inspirational and far-reaching if and only if it is converted into public policy that is coherent, institutional action that is coordinated, and commitments that are measurable - commitments that can not only be advocated for in manuals and academic journals but also encountered in ordinary political and economic life.

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How to cite this article/Comment citer cet article:

MLA: Aboka, Kossi Agbenyega. "From Pan-African Speeches to African Unity: Policy Coherence, Institutional Governance, and the Relevance of Abraham Lincoln's Unionism." *Uirtus*, vol. 6, no. 1, April 2026, pp. 322-333, <https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.apr2026.n180>.