

# Pan Africanism under elite capture

written by Naila Aroni | May 23, 2025

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, anticolonial theorist Frantz Fanon warned that Africa's postcolonial bourgeoisie would co-opt the symbols of Black liberation to advance their own narrow agendas, ultimately failing to break both the psychological and material chains of colonialism. Fanon's prophecy has proven true: African political leaders not only have seized power to replicate colonial structures of oppression through extractive capitalism and corruption, but also found willing collaborators among the African diasporic elite, distorting pan-Africanist ideals for personal gain.

There is a longstanding legacy of celebrity being used as soft power in cultural warfare to sanitize and exploit Africa, ultimately manipulating the postcolonial divide. As noted by author Frances Stonor Saunders, the US government recognized the role of music and the arts as a covert strategy to win hearts and minds, resulting in a "cultural Cold War." This took place in 1960, referred to as the "Year of Africa" against the backdrop of 16 African nations gaining independence, as African leaders such as Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah became global icons of postcolonial freedom. Fearing a united African front, as well as the perceived growing threat of communism, the CIA deployed musicians like Louis Armstrong and Nina Simone as "jazz ambassadors" of goodwill and freedom to counter the Soviet's message highlighting the racism in America.

This stirred an ethical dilemma for Black American artists, who were tasked with presenting a false image of racial harmony in the US which didn't reflect their lived experience or moral standings under Jim Crow racism. Armstrong initially refused to participate in the state-sponsored musical tours of Africa until legal progress was made on civil rights. The jazz ambassadors' contradictions between being civil rights activists while playing a role in continental Africans' plight was shown brilliantly in the critically acclaimed documentary *Soundtrack to Coup d'Etat*. Though these events didn't happen in succession, the film's timeline brilliantly links events such as Armstrong's visit to Congo just as Lumumba was placed under house arrest and the CIA invaded Congo. This provides both a striking and useful analysis of how these musicians potentially provided a smoke screen for the CIA's foreign interference, leading to Lumumba's assassination.

These celebrity-backed private-public partnerships have recently been reignited by Ghana's Year of Return in 2019, a government-led initiative positioning Ghana as a premier destination for African Americans and the African diaspora to reconnect with their ancestral roots after four centuries of separation due to chattel slavery. In 2019, tourism in Ghana accounted for 10.3 percent of the GDP, a significant increase from 3 percent in 2016. Soon, the Ghanaian government began welcoming high-profile celebrities such as Chance the Rapper and Meek Mill as unofficial ambassadors, promoting "experience-based tourism" through festivals and restored historical sites.

Kenya does not have a documented dedicated tourism strategy targeting the diaspora in the same fashion as Ghana, who launched a dedicated diaspora affairs unit under the oversight of former President Nana Akufo-Addo. In 2021, however, Naomi Campbell—who has frequently associated with infamously corrupt members of the global elite such as Jeffrey Epstein and former Liberian president Charles Taylor—was controversially appointed Kenya's tourism ambassador at a time when the sector was struggling due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Campbell is far from the exception in recent controversial investments from celebrities throughout Southern and East Africa: British actor Idris Elba, who has advocated for building Africa's film

industry, was allegedly awarded over 80 acres of land in Zanzibar by the Tanzanian government to construct modern film studios, during a political context where political freedom is critically absent for Tanzanians, especially those arrested on petty pretenses such as using “strong words” when simply criticizing President Suluhu Hassan. Moreover, John Legend also chose to perform at the Global Citizen festival in Kigali, despite the Rwandan government’s involvement in the M23 rebel takeover in Congo. By contrast, Tems canceled her headline show in Kigali around a similar time, as she recognized it would be insensitive to Congolese people.

In defence of his decision, Legend said the following, “I don’t believe that we should punish the people of Rwanda and punish the people of other countries when we disagree with their leaders.” While it is certainly true that not all Rwandans support their government’s political choices, cultural boycotts have proven to be highly significant in holding oppressive regimes accountable, such as the boycott that led to the apartheid South African government’s exclusion from the Olympics. Congolese people’s need for solidarity at a time when Rwanda’s role in the conflict is still invisibilized is markedly more urgent than the Rwandese people’s desire for a glamorous multimillion-dollar concert. Given the context, these high-profile moves reinforce the perception that their governments prioritize wealthy outsiders over their own citizens, an all-too-familiar pattern reminiscent of gentrification.

American singer and farmer Kelis is the latest celebrity to venture into East Africa, purportedly under the guise of sustainability. She often markets her videos on her instagram account through short-form reels wearing no makeup and casual clothing, coupled by hashtags like #SupportBlackFarmers and #FarmLife, presenting herself as a relatable “girl next door” type of favorite lifestyle influencer. The artist and businesswoman recently expanded her entrepreneurial efforts after purchasing land in Kenya with the stated intention to establish a large-scale commercial farm surrounded by wildlife. To honor this announcement, she took to social media once again, branding herself a “pioneer,” and wearing a T-shirt labeled “Original Farm Owner” to emphasize this persona. On cue, this provoked mixed reactions, particularly among Kenyans concerned about farming close to endangered wildlife and disrupting natural ecosystems. While a minority of people welcomed Kelis using her platform to showcase Kenya in a positive light—arguing that she should be crowned as the new tourism ambassador for the country—amongst detractors, Kelis was quickly labeled a neocolonizer. Speculation began to spread that the land she acquired was reservation land, given its proximity to wildlife, and that she likely leveraged government connections to secure the purchase.

Though the exact whereabouts of Kelis’s farm are unknown, it’s most likely situated around Naivasha, a town named after its freshwater lake, originally inhabited by the Maasai tribe until it became a significant area for colonial development in the late 19th century. At present, the remnants of settler colonialism persist, as the area is now characterized by vast floriculture farms owned by white settlers. In response to these criticisms, Kelis clarified that the land was privately owned and purchased from a previous landowner, not from a wildlife reserve.

This defense misses the fundamental issue. Regardless of whether the land was legally available, the concern remains that these celebrity acquisitions reinforce existing patterns of wealth accumulation and land concentration. Kelis’s actions are perceived as emblematic of a broader lack of solidarity from diasporic Africans and the greater Black diaspora, who, in their pursuit of economic opportunity and connection to the African continent, risk becoming the “new wave of gentrifiers.” As Kelis continues to promote her farming enterprise, large-scale farming in Kenya remains largely reserved for white settlers and the Kenyan elite, while indigenous farmers in Kenya are disproportionately impacted by droughts and flooding, resulting in the loss of arable land for livestock and family. Moreover, Lake Naivasha’s water levels have been declining, with floriculture being the major contributor. How sustainable is Kelis’s new business venture when this land and

resources could be maximized to achieve food security in a nation where more than 13 million lack secure access to food?

Beyond the material consequences, these celebrities also aid African governments to craft a progressive, aspirational image that conceals deep-seated class inequalities and the dire material conditions of ordinary Africans. In this distinctively diasporic African imagination, Kenya and other African nations become idyllic homelands, fertile lands of possibility, sanctuaries from the racial injustices of the West, and places where lost ancestral connections can be miraculously restored. “Rwanda! It feels a Utopia like #wakanda truly stunning! So lush and Beautiful! The people here <3,” said Kelis in the caption of one of her other Instagram reels, captured on a hill overlooking vast farmlands. She expresses fascination with the young children “helping and carrying stuff”—not taking into account the implication of young children carrying firewood passing by who were unknowingly featured in the video like props.

The reel feels reminiscent of a scene from a modern *Out of Africa* remake, bringing to mind Black feminist historian Jade Bentil’s coinage “Wakandification” to capture this “process through which Africa \*as a product\* is reimagined to serve the interests of representation, nation, and capital.” This romanticized Africa is depicted as pure and unspoiled, populated more by wildlife than by people, perpetuating a colonial-era narrative that erases the lived realities of African citizens. It is the Africa of book covers—the Africa of bold colors and baobab trees, devoid of the humanity that lives alongside the vegetation.

On one hand, it is understandable that diasporic Africans, after centuries of dispossession and racism, are drawn to the aspirations of returning to the African continent. Long before 2019, African Americans have relocated back to Africa, drawn and inspired by these nations’ liberation movements, including prominent academics such as Maya Angelou and W. E. B. Du Bois, who made Ghana their home under the invitation of Nkrumah, while members of the Black Panther Party sought refuge in Tanzania, influenced by Nyerere’s embrace of pan-Africanism under his Ujamaa framework. Even then at the height of the pan-Africanist movement, however, there were noted tensions between these expats and indigenous Africans, as noted in Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother*, where she notes how Ghanaians resented expats for occupying land and “presuming to know what was best for Africa.”

These diasporic frictions have persisted to present day, as some African Americans have made direct attempts to claim African citizenship. While the bulk of the efforts have taken place in Ghana, one US citizen who has lived in Kenya since 2008 petitioned for recognition as a Kenyan citizen, citing ancestral rights. While most African Americans who are descended from enslaved people trace their lineage to West Africa, his choice of Kenya as his ancestral home was informed by the Abuja Proclamation, a pan-African declaration sponsored by the African Union in 1993. This proclamation calls upon all African states “to grant entrance as of right to all persons of African descent and right to obtain residence in those African states if there is no disqualifying element on Africans claiming the right to return to his ancestral home”—an idyllic goal that has yet to be sustainably implemented in reality beyond catering to elite classes of the Black diaspora

As the push for economic growth continues, African nations such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda, where tourism is central to GDP, are likely to begin marketing themselves as relocation destinations for the Black diaspora. While African Americans may not have explicit ancestral ties to East Africa, the region’s infrastructure and perceived stability may attract more returnees. It would not be surprising to see these nations adopt policies similar to South Africa’s “digital nomad” visas to facilitate long-term diaspora migration.

Given the circumstances, it is easy to direct anger towards the incoming communities of Black

expats, who seem to be reaping the benefits of this current incentivized hierarchy. Most of these newcomers, however, are also victims of the neoliberal structures of class exploitation that disenfranchise Black communities across the globe, particularly in America. The real culprits remain the African political and economic elite and the Western powers, former colonizers, and financial institutions who shape their self-interest and continue to amass capital at the expense of genuine racial solidarity, distorting radical unifying principles through the sanitizing process of elite capture.

In the case of Kenya, the cost of living remains at an all-time high following the country's #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests against neoliberalism and poor governance, with Kenya's debt-to-GDP ratio projected to reach 70 percent. Meanwhile, the Kenyan government remains mired in scandals, from selling fake fertilizer to farmers, to a defunct Social Health Authority (SHA) system leading to a public health crisis. Even more concerning, Kenya's current administration seems to be deepening economic ties with oppressive regimes, recently hosting Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the same military group responsible for war crimes in one of the most devastating civil wars in recent history, allowing them to charter meetings aimed at forming a parallel government in Sudan. In retaliation, Sudan banned all Kenyan produce imports, disrupting Kenya's tea trade and further destabilizing the economy. Describing Kenya as a "paradise" of any kind, farmland or otherwise, requires a willful ignorance of the circumstances that Kenyans are fighting to survive in.

What history warns us is that the pivotal issue lies at the feet of economic mismanagement and lack of structural economic reforms to uplift local African societies. For instance, Nigeria's Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77) was a billion-dollar celebration of Black pride, but failed to deliver lasting economic benefits for Nigerians, with massive shanty towns surrounding the display and famed Nigerian artist Fela Kuti declining to participate, calling the event a propaganda exercise. As Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah pointed out in a 1985 essay "The Festival Syndrome," such festivals risk becoming "wasteful demonstrations of intellectual bankruptcy" rather than vehicles for meaningful change. As African countries continue to find ways to participate in the global community and diaspora, Africa's resources must be used to address pressing issues like famine, poverty, and economic inequity that persists within its borders.

Kwame Nkrumah understood the importance of cultural exchange and its practical benefits. "You must not be content with the accumulation of knowledge about the arts," he declared at the opening of the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies in 1963. "Your research must stimulate creative activity; it must contribute to the development of the arts in Ghana and in other parts of Africa." Tourism and long-term diaspora migration do not need to be inherently exploitative; they could be a dialogue in service of national needs and true local development. This could mean skills training for locals, fostering job creation and economic sustainability.

Moreover, diasporic public figures genuinely interested in engaging with the continent should not only seek to develop profit making opportunities that burnish their own reputations, but also make a point to support local grassroots initiatives as opposed to enabling the celebrity-washing practices of corrupt governments. Initiatives like Noname's book club which builds community through political education, provides a model for ethical engagement—the Chicago rapper and avowed anticapitalist does not center herself with her platform but rather is currently partnering with local African bookstores in places like Nairobi, Accra, and Lagos to host a book club tour.

The question is not whether the African diaspora has a place on the continent—they always have. As the writer Shamira Ibrahim succinctly puts it, the Black diaspora does not deserve to be turned into "shields for administrative neglect." Rather, it is about ensuring that their return does not reproduce the same exploitative dynamics that colonialism and neoliberalism have long upheld. True pan-Africanism must be built on mutual solidarity, land equity, and economic justice, not on elite-driven spectacles that serve the privileged few.

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