Reclaiming The Sahara as a Bridge to Afro-Arab solidarity

Authors : Radwa Saad

Abstract : The Sahara is normatively treated as a barrier separating "two Africas"; one to the North with closer affinity to the Arab world, and one to the South that encompasses a diverse range of racial, ethnic and religious groups, commonly referred to as "Sub-Saharan Africa". This dichotomy however was challenged by many anticolonial leaders and intellectuals seeking to advance counter-hegemonic narratives that treat the Sahara as a bridge facilitating a long history of exchange, collaboration, and fusion between different civilizations on the continent. This paper reexamines the discourses governing the geographic distinction between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. It argues that demarcating the African continent along the lines of the Sahara is part-and-parcel of a Euro-centric spatial imaginary that has served to enshrine a racialized global hierarchy of power. By drawing on Edward Said's concept of 'imagined geography' and Charles Mill's notion of "the racial contract", it demonstrates how spatial boundaries often coincide with racial epistemologies to reinforce certain geopolitical imaginaries, whilst silencing others. It further draws on the works of two notable post-colonial figures - Gamal Abdel Nasser and Leopold Senghor - to explore alternative spatial imaginaries while highlighting some of the tensions embedded in advancing a trans-Saharan political project. Firstly, it deconstructs some of the normative claims used to justify the distinction between North and "sub-Saharan" Africa across political, literary and disciplinary boundaries. Secondly, it draws parallels between Said's and Mills' work to demonstrate how geographical boundaries and demarcations have been constructed to create racialized subjects and reinforce a hierarchy of color that favors European standpoints and epistemologies. Third, it draw on Leopard Senghor's The Foundations of Africanité and Gamal Abdel Nasser's The Philosophy of the Egyptian Revolution to examine some of the competing strands of unity that emerged out of the Saharan discourse. In these texts, one can identify a number of convergences and divergences in how post-colonial African elites attempts to reclaim and rearticulate the function of the Sahara along different epistemic, political and cultural premises. It concludes with reflections on some of the policy challenges that emerge from reinforcing the Saharan divide, particularly in the realm of peace and security.
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