African Cultural Identity and Self-Writing*

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For some time now, Achille Mbembe has warned African social scientists against the ghetto to which Marxism and nationalism has consigned them. This admonition is rooted in a personal belief that Africa lacks refreshing, internationally relevant and philosophically grounded scholarship. According to him, African scholarship is steeped in a self-imposed ghetto that has produced stultifying *nativist* and *Afro-radicalist* narratives. The narratives have, in turn, driven African scholarship to "a dead end," one that repeatedly laments the effects of the West's contamination of a pure "Africanness" and calls for a return to the self's mythical ontological purity. In reclaiming this lost purity, Mbembe adds, African scholarship draws its fundamental categories from Marxism and nationalism to argue for a revolutionary politics that would free the continent from imperialism and dependence. He identifies *suffering* and *victimization* as the main *episteme* in these narratives. These two, he argues, position Africa as always being acted upon by forces outside its control but never acting for itself. He therefore proposes African modes of self-writing that neutralize the power relations between Africa and its colonizers and restores "agency to Africans. Unfortunately, this restoration ends up alleging that Africans are as much responsible for their suffering and trauma as those others that they accuse whether one is considering slavery, colonization or apartheid.[1]

Mbembe's analysis borrows from, and is part of, a culturalist perspective that is characterized by two main trends. One, it treats identity as a mere cultural repertoire unconnected to material and political realities. Borrowing largely from literary and cultural studies, this trend focuses on identity solely as a cultural issue and does not pay sufficient attention to broader issues of political economy. Consequently, it treats identity as an imagined category different from daily struggles and realities.[1] No wonder, this perspective has an essentially polemical relationship to studies of a Marxist and nationalist orientation irrespective of their merits and strengths. These culturalist perspectives are reductionist and dismiss key texts from leading authors like Samir Amin or Walter Rodney with no serious counter-arguments.

Further, it perceives power as diffused in society; as a social relation equally accessible to all people irrespective of their relative economic and technological advantages in society. Mbembe, for example, argues

that even subjects have voice and power that resides in their ability to laugh at, mock and mimic the potentate. In so doing, they not only comment on the idiocy of imperial authority and postcolonial despotism, but argue that these acts also reduce each (coloniser/colonized) to an equal level of power(lessness). By abstracting culture into an object of mere intellectual curiosity and levelling all people into an equal plane of power, this culturalist perspective credits itself with restoring agency to Africans. Tragically, this is agency that lumps into one homogenous experience historically diverse regions like Africa, Australia, Canada, or the US.[2] This suspicious sameness operates under the rubric of postcolonial theory in which Mbembe, Mudimbe and Appiah constitute its African trinity.[3]

Whatever strategy the postcolonialists/culturalists adopt, three conclusions are inescapable. First, because they disengage identity issues from the broader domain of human social experience, they end up treating culture as if it were suspended above economic and political realities. Their works are largely ahistorical, they treat identity as a sign or text inscribed with multiple meanings that need only to be deconstructed as an exercise in mere intellectual curiosity and elegance. By laying out a notion of identity as multiple, shifting, entangled and intersecting, it becomes possible to render a permissive idea of Africanity as a tabula rasa on which one can create an identity at will, devoid of any relation to historical and social reality. Thus, Mbembe writes that "everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her as an African" while Appiah adopts the "cosmopolitan patriots" tag.[4] Like those they dismiss, these authors proceed by opposing uniqueness/difference with sameness which prevents them from seeing African writings that are nationalist/materialist but still engage complex philosophical questions of African identity.[5] Ironically, in the process of obsessively attacking *Afro-nativism,* these "new Africanists" often quickly end up in *Euro-nativism,* a standpoint that holds "a deeply recessed, but negative, view of Africa."[6] Their pet western theorists who constitute their authorities on philosophically engaging writings on identity illustrate this.

Second, because the new Africanists' analysis is deeply ahistorical, they refuse to examine the context that has promoted the Marxist and so-called nativist narratives they dismiss. In this respect, their analyses are inferior to other writers of the postcolonialist persuasion like Bernabe et.al., Glissant, and Lazarus. Glissant, as well as Bernabe et. al. produce works that not only proclaim the creole nature of identities, but

celebrate this creoleness in the face of essentialist narratives of purity and authenticity. They do not dismiss and disparage the earlier nationalist works of Cesaire and Senghor, which were indeed often affirmations and celebrations of an African particularity.[7] Lazarus, for example, defends the contributions of Amin, Fanon and James against the misreading found in Bhabha and Miller.[8] Like Bernabe and Glissant, Lazarus celebrates these earlier nationalists for making possible the present affirmation and celebration of the creole and combative character of African identities. It was these earlier nationalist works that critiqued the closed and essentialist Eurocentric discourse that equated the Universal with the European. It was these assertions of the existence and fertility of ancestries other than the European that created possibilities for the postmodern assertion and celebration of multiple ancestries. The attention to history that these works portray makes their analyses less polemical and spectacular and, therefore, more insightful than Appiah's or Mbembe's brash dismissal of all so-called nativistic narratives.[9]

Three, there is a dubious reason for restoring agency to Africans. This culturalist perspective 'restores' agency to Africans so as to accuse them of originating or complicity in slavery, colonialism and apartheid. The restoration is suspiciously double edged. It criticises African scholars of Afro-radicalism only because it seeks to absolve Europeans of the crimes of colonialism and colonialism of its ravages on the continent.[10] Thus, the postcolonial tag is convenient for sanitizing imperialism. The new Africanists adopt 'postcolonial' in place of 'neo-colonial' because the term is imperially pliant and it empties slavery, colonialism and apartheid off their invidious content. Consequently, it makes the reality of neo-colonial oppression less visible and, therefore, a hard target for the resilient revolutionary voices on the continent. The term conceptualizes all societies as postcolonial and dupes all into ignoring the repressive reality of neo-imperialism and its ominous effects. As often as possible, this smoothening is accompanied by equally deceitful slogans of a peaceful globalisation or an accommodating multiculturalism in which African identities are allegedly equally paired with other identities globally.

The ideological orientation of the culturalists, as often revealed in their citations, is an equally relevant aspect of identity politics and imperialism. Apart from contriving allegations, the theorists of choice for this culturalist perspective fit into the overall objective of ignoring imperialism as a theme or renovating it to appear palatable. Regarding contrived

allegations, it is noteworthy that the new Africanists carefully select those African authors they wish to attack. Often the focus is on those perceived to belong to the "dreaded" political economy approach. But such dismissals are cavalier in many senses. For instance, Mbembe fails to make a close reading of the texts he dismisses while Appiah is decidedly one-sided in his gaze at racism. Thus, Mbembe's "genealogical critique of African discourse appears in places to be too quick and allusive and this leads him into battling arguments that nobody actually ever really upheld."[11] Furthermore, the dismissal relies on writers who have not made any worthwhile contribution to key issues on African identity. Their works refer to Foucault, Bakhtin, Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Derrida, Heidegger, Lacan, Lyotard and Deleuze though "none of the names cited above ever exhibited the slightest intellectual curiosity of the issue of European colonialism and the concerns of non-European peoples."[12] Does this mean that colonialism and nationalism did not contribute anything to contemporary African identity? Or does ignoring Marxism make resilient revolutionary voices disappear? Haven't African cultural identities been forged in the process of struggle against slavery, imperialism and apartheid?

The combination of Africanist writings and postmodernist lamentations has misled new Africanists into a notion of 'multiple ancestries' that is conceived as a synthesis of the polar opposites of a unique Africanity and a universal sameness. Mbembe argues that African discourses on identity "are inscribed within an intellectual genealogy based on a territorialized identity and a racialized geography."[13] He concludes that the sin of nativism is its inability to conceive of an Africanity that is not Black or to conceive of the existence of Africans of European, Arab, or Asian origin.[14] Mbembe conveniently overlooks the point, forcefully made by the historian Roediger that whiteness involves "a terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back."[15] This is not just the case in the US where poles of racial difference "have remained relatively constant"[16] but also in Africa where white prejudice remains strong. Contrast this with the accumulating evidence that "the African voter is capable of prejudice free choice"[17] and the falsity of Mbembe's assertion is stark clear. Locals have extended a forgiving hand to a minority white population in Africa that reciprocates by receding into exclusive white domains as the case is in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

It is nevertheless obvious that the culturalists are eager to make race a

central issue in African discourses and the notion of "multiple ancestries" serves this purpose. It is not surprising that the array of scholars used to make race an African identity problem include Appiah, Gilroy, and Sarah Nuttall. The Black Atlantic or South African dimension is an extensively theorized area. The problem is that the racial discourse is imported and generalized for Africa from particular diaspora or continental experiences. This is definitely a flawed way of approaching African cultural identity issues. Multiple ancestries make immediate sense to those few who are compelled by their own self-identification with "a white triumphalist vision" to write a "social justification" of their mixed parentage or to white South Africans eager to redeem their multicultural credentials.[18] These are also the few who can identify with the "world as a network of points of affinity."[19] But are there that many Africans who enjoy this status as to elevate "multiple ancestries" or cosmopolitanism into a general basis of an African identity? Even if there were, can we escape the reality that the resulting network of affinity has some consanguines living off the "sweat and labours of others"?[20] These issues must be confronted for the idea of multiple ancestries to be relevant.

Finally, how valid is the view that African discourse has reduced Africanity into a black identity? We could contrast this view with that of "Africanity as an open question" and show how, contrary to the culturalists view, African scholars have always been open to a broad understanding of cultural identity. Souleymane Bachir Diagne uses the notion of *evaluation* to argue that every society has the ability to assess its tradition and appropriate aspects it deems worth integrating while ignoring irrelevant impositions. Using the Senegambia region as a reference point, he argues against the need for a cultural charter to prevent the erosion of Africa's cultural identities. After all, the long years of Senegambian contact with western mercantilism has not obliterated local cultural values. This testifies to local propensity for self-preservation. Diagne criticizes the hoary imagination of traditional culture as always opposed to a modern one. He postulates an understanding of tradition that is dynamic and renders useless the polarity between tradition and modern identities.[21] He cautions against approaches that postulate an "immanent tension between identity, on the one hand, and 'the forces of cultural alienation' on the other."[22] These approaches present the traditional homeland as "inherently hostile to change" and the modern as constantly seeking to obliterate the former. Mbembe's, and by extension, Appiah's work resonate with the hoary formulation in so far as their multiple ancestries sound like charters for co-existence pronounced by a book professor with no inkling of how life is lived beyond the ivory tower. Mbembe's and Mudimbe's Africanity is continuously created through the very process of writing. But more damning for Mbembe is his refusal to factor in the local capacity for *evaluation* and *appropriation*, something that is obvious and is encapsulated in, among others, Mafeje's idea of Africanity as "combative ontology." Diagne links this ontology to Sartre's conceptualisation of Negritude as constituting "one single refusal."[23] What is clear for Diagne, as for Mafeje, is that they centre Africans in the dynamic process of *evaluation* and acknowledge the "capacity of traditional mentalities to mount self-preserving reflexes."[24]

Thus, if the postcolonialists/culturalists intended to substitute the combative aspect of Africanity with pliant co-existence, Diagne, like Mafeje, underlines local capacity for choice, resilience, resistance and self-preservation. Their ideas on resilience/resistance differ but the baseline point is a consistent search for alternatives to the dominant line. In analysing Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "performing Africanity", Diagne emphasizes language as a vehicle for developing solidarity, revealing the possibilities open to action and mounting resistance to dominant forces. Mafeje directly develops Africanity as "a historically-determined rebellion against domination by others" in which the underlying sentiment of Africanity is self-liberation and its focus is white racism as "a pernicious social construct."[25] As a combative ontology, Africanity differentiates colour or race from the pernicious acts committed under their guise. Resistance to these acts cannot therefore be confused with resistance to change.

In sum, there is no doubt that African cultural identities have multiple ancestries. But to emphasize race at the expense of other equally important identities like ethnicity, religion, and language, is to ignore the totality of the African experience. Conceived widely, the idea of multiple ancestries can be fruitfully applied to the key challenges of religion, ethnicity and culture that plague many African societies like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Sudan. But the notion needs to be sufficiently historicized to avoid the traps and dangers of the "all-Africa catastrophe" studies.[26] With regard to self-writing, there can be no doubt that the pernicious effects of racism, their connection to capitalism and empire have influenced African cultural identities and generated specific modes of self-writing. The context requires that we give precedence to these forces over mere scholarly elegance. Many African scholars are suspicious of elegant studies of sexuality, orifices, the body, and race because beneath their elegance lie attempts to sanitize empire under the guise of a modernity that is at large. The new globalism that these studies trumpet benefits some far more than others. Furthermore, not all of us have the capital to explore those cosmopolitan links that are proclaimed. In a nutshell, any notion of African cultural identity that disengages culture from its material context, treats culture as an artefact suspended above daily realities and refuses to heed the facts of history within which identity becomes intelligible is superficial and inconclusive. ❑

Notes

[1] This summary is based on Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing" in *Public Culture*, 14, 1, 2002, pp. 239-273 which was initially published in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 1, 2000, pp. 4-19. Other versions have appeared in French as and in English in various publications.

[2] The idea of 'imagine' draws from misreading Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991 while that of invention draws largely from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983 which was later picked up in V. Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988. These two terms have been misused in African studies to mean imagining or inventing into existence things that do not necessarily exist in reality. Anderson and Ranger have cautioned against this de-contextualization.

[3] See for example Bill Ashcroft, et. al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 1989

[4] This is Richard Werbner's characterization. See his "Multiple Identities, Plural Arenas, in Richard P. Werbner and Terence O. Ranger (eds.) *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, London, Zed Books, 1996. Among these three, Mudimbe is the most intellectually persuasive and it seems unfair to lump him together with the other two who seem to use their intellectual resources in defense of Eurocentrism. But Mudimbe has on occasion endorsed Mbembe's views as in the debate in *Public Culture*, 4, 2, 1992 and 5, 1, 1992. In addition to those identified above, Mudimbe's other key text is *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

[5] See Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," p. 258 and Kwame Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Patriots," in *Critical Inquiry*, 23, 3, 1997

[6] Interestingly, the philosophically engaging works of Chiekh Anta Diop did just this. Further research into the cultural content of Diop's work has recently been taken up by Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, London, Zed Books, 1997. Another philosophically engaging and materially conscious writer is Jacques Depelchin.

[7] Nkiru Nzegwu develops this point in a forceful, elaborate and damaging review of Appiah's *In My Father's House*. See Nzegwu, "Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*," in *Hypatia*, 11, 1, 1996, pp. 187-189. It should also be noted that the new Africanists use nativism with an imperial slant, as stemming from the idea of a native as "the inferior inhabitants of a place subjected to alien political power or conquest or even of a place visited and observed from some supposedly superior standpoint." It is only this way that one can account for Appiah's disrespect for the stool. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Revised Edition) New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 215 for this definition of native.

[8] See for instance, Aime Câesaire, *Return to My Native Land*, Penguin, 1969; Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, et. al., *Eloge de la Créolité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993; E. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1989 and Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999

[9] Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice*, chapters 2 and 3.

[10] I owe the insights in this paragraph to my colleague Kwame Henry Dougan.

[11] A central theme of Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001 is that the roots of the present political problem in Africa lie not with premeditated European rupture and incursions into the continent but in the configuration of socio-political forces and behaviour patterns on the continent. Thus, Mbembe locates the problems on the continent in the nature of the contact, not the imperial intentions that date deep into European history. This theme is carried into his "Modes of Self-Writing" where he accuses Africans for the ravages of slave trade (p. 260-1) and the World Bank/ IMF structural adjustment programs (p. 243).

[12] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Keeping Africanity Open," in *Public Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (2002), p. 621

[13] Dane Kennedy, "Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory," in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24, 3, 1996, p. 348. Mikael Karlsstrom shows the contradictions in Mbembe's analysis of power in the postcolony that arise from and also explain his misuse of Bakhtin. He also shows that that Mbembe ignores the historical specificity of Bakhtin's thesis. See his "On the Aesthetics and Dialogics of Power in the Postcolony," in *Africa*, 73, 1, 2003, p. 62.

[14] Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," p. 257.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 256-257.

[16] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New York, Verso, 1991, p. 13.

[17] This point is emphasized in Faye V. Harrison, "The Persistent Power of "Race" in the Cultural and Political Economy of Racism," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 1995, pp. 47-74.

[18] Michael Chege, "Africans of European Descent," in *Transition*, 73, 1997, p. 85.

[19] This is taken from Molefi K. Asante's response to Appiah. See his *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1999, pp. 77-8.

[20] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. viii.

[21] Kwesi Prah, "Accusing the Victims – In My Father's House," in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 1, 1997, p. 14.

[22] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "The Future of Tradition," in Momar Couba Diop (ed.) Senegal: Essays in Statecraft, Dakar, CODESRIA Book Series, 1993 and "Africanity as Open Question," in Diagne, et. al., *Identity and Beyond: Rethinking Africanity*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2001. See also Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997 and Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990, pp. 257-263 on traditions as processes.

[23] Diagne, "The Future of Tradition," p. 270.

[24] Diagne, "Africanity as Open Question," p. 20.

[25] Diagne, "The Future of Tradition," p. 274 and "Africanity as Open Question," p. 19. See also Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Henri Ossebi, *The Cultural Question in Africa: Issues, Politics and Research Prospects*, Dakar, CODESRIA Working Paper Series 3/96, 1996.

[26] See Archie Mafeje, "Africanity: A Combative Ontology," in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1, 2000, pp. 66-71 and Archie Mafeje, "Africanity: A Commentary by Way of Conclusion," in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 3 & 4, 2001, pp.14-16.

[27] See Thandika Mkandawire, "The Terrible Toll of Post-colonial 'Rebel Movements' in Africa: Towards an Explanation of the Violence Against the Peasantry," in *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40, 2, 2002, pp. 183-184.