

Africanity: A Combative Ontology*

Prelude

This article is inspired by *Out of One, Many Africas* (1999), an incredible intellectual insurrection instigated by William Martin and Michael West. For their courage, persistence, and intellectual integrity, they deserve all the recognition. The best way of appreciating their contribution would have been to review their book in full but for me there was the danger of biting more than I could chew. Therefore, I chose to respond to some of the leading ideas in the book. These include the pending demise of Africanity, and the necessity of Afrocentrism. As would be readily agreed, these issues are as big as they are controversial but intensely that even 'distinguished elders' are willing to jump in with both feet, perhaps, to the chagrin of 'Brave New World' advocates. Even so, the risk is not too great since they have the advantage of hindsight, unlike neophytes who are often too easily infatuated with fashions. Since fashions are very changeable, it stands to reason that ahistoricity is a greater risk than historicity. To evolve lasting meanings, we must be 'rooted' in something.

The fashionable 'free-floating signifier' is an illusion in a double sense. First, nobody can think and act outside historically determined circumstances and still hope to be a social signifier of any kind. In other words, while we are free to choose the role in which we cast ourselves as active agents of history, we do not put on the agenda the social issues to which we respond. These are imposed on us by history. For example, we would not talk of freedom, if there was no prior condition in which this was denied; we would not be anti-racism if we had not been its victims; we would not proclaim Africanity, if it had not been denied or degraded; and we would not insist on Afrocentrism, if it had not been for Eurocentric negations. Secondly, unlike the illusory 'free-floating signifier', it is the historical juncture which defines us socially and intellectually. At this point in time there are certain critical issues which African scholars have to clarify so as to indicate what might be the underpinnings of the eagerly awaited African renaissance.

Archie Mafeje
American University
Cairo, Egypt

Of necessity, under the determinate global conditions an African renaissance must entail a rebellion – a conscious rejection of past transgressions, a determined negation of negations. Initially, such representations will not be credited by those who uphold the status quo. If they be robust and persistent, they will sooner or later elicit a plea from men and women of reason and goodwill for a dialogue. Not surprisingly, this is already happening. Before they have rediscovered themselves and have exorcised all the evil spirits that have harboured on the continent for so long, African scholars are being invited to an extraverted contemplation about 'our common future'. The ostensible reason is that such self-affirming constructs as 'Afrocentrism' are too confining and will succeed only in 'ghettoising' African intellectuals. These entreaties should be resolutely spurned because the classical liberal idea of a universal (wo)man is like a mirage in the face of self-perpetuation hierarchies in Bush's and Clinton's 'New World Order'. For the Africans who are at bottom of the pile, authentic representations need not connote anything more than that 'charity begins at home (a very fitting Anglo-Saxon adage) which is a conscious refusal to be turned into 'free-floating signifiers'. Thus, Africanity, if properly understood, has profound political, ideological, cosmological, and intellectual implications.

Africanity versus Afrocentrism

Although in current debates the two terms are often used as interchangeable or, at least, as having a common referent, this need not be the case. Conceptually, it is possible to distinguish clearly between the two. Contrary to the suppositions of the Temple University school represented by Tsehloane Keto (now back in South Africa) in *Out of One, Many Africas* which made a fetish of it,

Afrocentrism can be regarded as methodological requirement for decolonising knowledge in Africa or as an antidote to Eurocentrism through which all knowledge about Africa has been filtered. Although this had been justified by appealing to dubious 'universal standards', the fact of the matter is that Africa is the only region which has suffered such total paradigmatic domination. In a simple and unpolemical manner Kwesi Prah (1997) in an unpublished but pointed communication makes the same observation:

Rather strikingly, in comparative terms it is remarkable that when Chinese study Chinese culture and society in their own terms and for their own purposes, western scholarship does not protest. This is because the sovereignty of Chinese scholarship on China is accepted. India and the Arab world have almost reached that point. Russians do not look west for understanding their society... Neither do the Japanese.

Interpreted this way, Afrocentrism is nothing more than a legitimate demand that African scholars study their society from inside and cease to be purveyors of alienated intellectual discourse. The underlying belief that this will issue in authentic representations. Indeed, it is only logical to suppose that when Africans speak for themselves, the word will hear the authentic voice, and will be forced to come to terms with it in the long-run. This might prove to be a long march, especially under the unfavourable educational conditions in Africa and the prevailing dearth of requisite scholarship. But the principle is a noble one and is worth nurturing. Once again, Kwesi Prah (op. cit) has argued that if we are adequately Afrocentric the international implications will not be lost on the others. In this context he recalls Mao Tse Tung's words of wisdom regarding internationalism: 'If what we say and do has relevance for our humanity, its international relevance is guaranteed'. Asia in general is a living example of this. However, mutual awareness or recognition does not breed universalism, as the dominant West has been preaching since its ascendancy. Contrary to current western

suppositions about 'globalisation', different conceptions of humanity and different ways of ordering human life might well lead to polycentrism rather than homogeneity/homogenisation.

Insofar as this is true, 'universal knowledge' can only exist in contradiction. It is perhaps recognition of this historical experience that led to the questioning of classical European epistemological suppositions, especially by the post-modernists who proffered a dialogue between cultures as the only way forward. It seems that, theoretically, even this can only suffice if by 'culture' is meant civilisations in which the intellectual and scientific function is primary. By some curious coincidence, Afrocentrism might be an appropriate response. It is this probability which African scholars have to investigate with all seriousness. What forms of accumulated knowledge do African scholars have? Are they serviceable under modern conditions? Modern Africans justifiably reserve the right to address this question themselves. Why not? They fought colonialism successfully and have delivered Southern Africa from white settler tyranny. They are making steady progress in the arts and, as the records of the African Academy of Sciences show, they might yet prove themselves in the field of science, given enough resources and opportunities which are non-existent at the moment. As can be seen, there is absolutely no reason why Afrocentrism as an epistemological/methodological issue should be ideologised or demonised. Secondly, it is a mistake to presume that it can be grown on foreign soil or be universalised before its birth. Probably, Kwesi Prah speaks for a significant number of indigenous African scholars when he declares: 'We must be national before we become international'. This would seem to contradict the supposition that Afrocentrism is or could be trans-Atlantic, short of ideologising it for other reasons – a problem to which we will return.

Africanity versus vindicationism

Unlike Afrocentrism, which we argued was basically referential, Africanity has an emotive force. Its connotations are ontological and, therefore, exclusivist. This is to be expected because its ontology is determined by prior existing exclusivist ontologies such as white racist categorisations and supremacist European self-identities in particular. These insinuated that blacks were inherently

inferior. Hence, the blacks in the New World, especially, felt the need to prove themselves and thus produced what Martin and West call the 'vindicationist' intellectual tradition. On this side of the Atlantic this found its greatest ovation in Senghor's famous concept of 'Negritude' and to some extent in Nkrumah's idea of 'African personality'. The idea of a distinct inner quality being, a 'black soul', if you like, was not an appeal to race but a claim to greater human qualities. For people who had been degraded and accorded a sub-human status, it would not take much effort to fathom this reflex. Probably, even this would not suffice for ordinary Africans who are not vindicationists but firmly believe that they, as a people, are endowed with greater human qualities than the whites. In Bantu languages the collective abstract noun for describing this is *ubuntu*, which is not translatable into English (carelessly translated, it comes out as 'humanity' which is a generic term with no social-cultural connotations). Highest among these qualities are human sympathy, willingness to share, and forgiveness. It is interesting that during his African tour His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, acknowledged the same revelation (probably with South Africa in mind) for which he specifically commended and blessed the Africans.

This could not have been of any special significance to his listeners because these are taken for granted. Rather, it is their absence which draws attention and comment. It is a reflexive dialogue which makes it easy for ordinary Africans to make a distinction between themselves and others, without feeling the need to develop it into a discourse. In the hands of modern black intellectuals Africanity has been developed into something much bigger than simply a state of social and spiritual being. It has become a pervasive ontology that straddles space and time. Instead of being limited to continental Africans, it extends to all black of African descent in the Diaspora, especially African-Americans.

Inevitably, it has acquired racial overtones precisely because it is a counter to white racism and domination, especially in America. However, its intellectual project is much wider than this. Among other things, it aims to gain respectability and recognition for the Africans by establishing the true identity of the historical and cultural African. This has necessitated

excursion into the past, going as far as the beginnings of the Egyptian civilisation in the Nile Valley, and the deciphering of African cosmologies and myths of origin. This is undoubtedly a continuation of the 'vindicationist' tradition in which the first generation of African-Americans played a leading role. But in the present juncture, African-American scholars have been joined by a younger generation of African scholars and this has presaged a possible rupture in what Martin and West, perhaps unwittingly, refer to as a 'seamless treatment' of all people of African descent. Certain discontinuities are beginning to manifest themselves.

From what one can discern, the idea of Africanity as perceived by African scholars such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Kwesi Prah, Paulin Hountondji, and Valentin Mudimbe refer to what is considered to be the essence of Africa, as opposed to distorted images that have been imposed on the continent by others (meaning Europeans and Americans). The point of reference is the history and cultural underpinnings of contemporary African societies. It is hoped that a genuine understanding of this heritage will enable African scholars to develop theories and paradigms that will help the Africans to combat foreign domination and to forge an independent Pan-African identity. In other words, the emphasis on Africanity struggles for a second independence in Africa or an African renaissance. It has more to do with African meta-nationalism than race or colour. Therefore, those who feel compelled to declare that 'Africa is not black' or that 'Africanity is regressive' are barking up the wrong tree. In Africa only Southern African white settlers, who are the prime authors of racism, are preoccupied with colour and are unable to deal with their Africanity for they have persistently played 'European' to the extent that they unconsciously granted that they were aliens whereas blacks were 'natives'. Thinking individuals amongst them are acutely aware of this anomaly.

Africanity is an assertion of an identity that has been denied; it is a Pan-Africanist revulsion against external imposition or refusal to be dictated to by others. In this sense it is a political and ideological reflex which is meant to inaugurate an African renaissance. In our view, this should not be confused with black solidarity in the original Pan-Africanist sense, which included blacks of African descent in the

Diaspora. This is still valid and desirable. But, socially and conceptually, it is odds with reality. Culturally, socially, and historically the African-Americans and the West Indians have long ceased to be Africans unless we are talking biology, which itself is highly hybridised. Black Americans are first Americans and second anything else they choose, like all Americans. This also applies to the West Indians or Caribbeans. The historical and cultural heritage and contribution of the black Americans to the making of America is largely denied and grossly understudied by American standards. Like Africanity for the Africans, this is a provenance of Black Studies, correctly conceived. Irrespective of what they do, black Americans cannot hope to re-appropriate Africa. Any attempt to do so can only lead to intellectual confusion and conceptual distortions. There is already evidence of this.

Earlier, reference was made to a threatened rupture between black American notions of Africa and those of indigenous Africans. Henry Louis Gates Jr. made a name for himself when he published *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), which made extensive use of Yoruba symbolism, and subsequently established a big Afrocentric empire for himself in Harvard. But in the meantime, the authenticity of his representations had been questioned by Olufemi Taiwo in an article entitled, significantly enough, 'Appropriating Africa: An Essay on New Africanist Schools' (1995). Using very fine tools indeed and relying on greater command of Yoruba semiotics, he demonstrated that Gates had done less than full justice to his chosen texts. There is no doubt that what gave Taiwo enough courage to tackle a black American celebrity such as Gates is the fact he was standing on home ground, the ultimate *firma terra*. Nonetheless, it is not Taiwo who goes on a space odyssey riding trains from Kampala to Mombassa or Timbuktu in glorification of Africa on TV. Has 'Skip' Gates Jr. become an intellectual tourist in the name of Afrocentrism? Anthony Kwame Appiah, the author of the celebrated *In My Father's House* (1992), who is Ghanaian by origin but ended up in Harvard as a member of Gates' 'Dream Team', suffered a similar interrogation in the hands of a fellow-Ghanaian, Kwesi Prah. Surprisingly enough, Prah questioned the authenticity of Appiah's conception of the African

and eventually accused him of holding the stick from the wrong end by 'accusing the victims' for what had been imposed on them by colonialism. Here, the only possible conclusion to draw is that Appiah's discourse is extraverted precisely because it is not Afrocentric in Prah's sense of the term. In the meantime, African students in the United States have complained that Appiah is not accessible to them because he has priced himself out of their reach and that he is unwilling to stoop to conquer – another instance of 'accusing the victims'. Certainly, there is something afoot but as yet has not been problematised.

Towards the end the Civil Rights Movement, black Americans came to Africa in droves. They found it very different and by their confession preferred home, despite their initial romantic desire to rediscover their roots in Africa. On their part, the Africans complained that the black Americans thought and behaved like whites, including the tendency by some to raid the continent for exotic artefacts to go and sell in America. In Tanzania they were referred to outrightly as *bazungu* (whites), their colour notwithstanding. In the States black Americans find the Africans a bit strange and say as much. This is not simply a problem of false consciousness, as some idealist Pan-Africanists would like us to believe. Over time the two cousins have grown apart and in reality their common African identity cannot be assumed. We have the experience of Liberia and Sierra Leone where the arbitrary return of ex-slaves by Britain and United States led to the establishment of a dual society, wherein the 'westernised' ex-slaves reserved the right to lord it over the natives. The rest is well-known to the Africans but they are too embarrassed to talk about it openly. But one thing certain, judging by the turn of events in both countries, The creation of Liberia and Sierra Leone by foreign powers was not a felicitous event by any means. This marks the limits of transcendental Africanism.

For the time being, it can be stated with a fair amount of certainty that, whereas at the political level there is a great deal that co-joins Africans and the blacks in the Diaspora, namely, what Skinner identifies as white racism and 'paradigmatic hegemony' of the West, historically, culturally, and sociologically a significant, and sociologically a significant disjunction exists between the two. Skinner, who is

an unflinching defender of Africanity in the vindicationist tradition, is equally convinced that ontological claims to a universal African culture are unsustainable and that African-Americans distort certain aspects of African culture to suit their needs. To Kwanzaa which, according to *the Economist* as quoted by him (Martin and West, op. cit, p. 80), the founder 'concocted his festival by borrowing from a number of cultural sources...His idea was to create a ritual for America's blacks to express pride in their African roots'. Of course, Skinner does not say anything about continental Africans who trade in African 'culture' in America for their own opportunistic purposes. All this makes nonsense of ontological claims to authenticity and African cultural identity which transcends all boundaries. If not fraudulent, these claims are nothing more than an adulteration of the truth.

In the totality of things, Afrocentrism made in America is a contradiction in terms. Black Americans, no matter how well-intentioned they are, cannot make indigenous knowledge for Africans in Americans nor could continental Africans do the same for any length of time in America. While individual African-Americans can become 'experts' on Africa, they cannot in the name of Africanity speak for the Africans. Africanity, as is perceived by the African scholars mentioned earlier, is an insistence that the Africans think, speak, and do things for themselves in the first place. This does not imply unwillingness to learn from others but a refusal to be hegemonised by others, irrespective of colour or race.

In one of his many political pamphlets, Kwesi Prah once remarked regretfully that in the past African presidents have always had foreign advisers. In the case of Nkrumah, to one's surprise, he included George Padmore, one of the founders of Pan-Africanism. This is a strong indication that in the new Africanity the primacy is on African self-autonomy. In spite of any possible temptation, this cannot be described as chauvinistic or parochial because it is the right of all peoples of the world. The only difference is that under the present international and racial dispensation some have more and some have much less. That is the rub, and the only rub. By insisting on Africanity the Africans are staking their claim. For this reason, it would be incongruous, if the instruments for establishing Africanity were

forged elsewhere. In the same way that Afrocentrism cannot be imported from America, Africanity cannot be nurtured outside Africa. As an ontology, it is inseparable from the projected African renaissance. It is a necessary condition for the mooted African renaissance, the second independence of African meta-nationalists.

One is aware of the fact that in making the various distinctions and sociological observations in the preceding section, one is treading on hollowed ground and that one might incur the wrath of black essentialists and black intellectual careerists alike. But that is no reason why black intellectuals with any integrity at all should forsoever deceive themselves or bury their heads in the sand in an ostrich-like fashion. The truth is staring them in their faces, despite any grand illusions about a universal African culture immune to space and time. Whites in Southern Africa have every chance of becoming African themselves, instead of reserving the right to tell Africans, how to be 'modern' Africans, meaning how to be like themselves, a presumption which is anti-African in a profound historical, social, and culture sense. Africanity is an antithesis of this and, like all social revolutions, its terms of reference are exclusive of its negations. It is an attempt to put an end to domination and self-alienation and the collective level but anchored in this denied, hot piece of land, full of strange venomous creatures.

Africanity and the end of African Studies

The rise Africanity, as is defined in the foregoing discourse, spells doom for African Studies for the simple reason that African Studies is an American institution run by Americans for their purposes, good or bad. African Studies are an anomaly in African found only in South Africa, the vortex of white racism. To study themselves, Africans do not need African Studies as a separate intellectual or political endeavour. In instituting African Studies both the American and the white South Africans were politically and ideologically motivated. Now that those considerations have fallen by the wayside since the end of the Cold War and of Apartheid in South Africa, both Americans and white South Africans are going to find it nigh impossible to sustain or to redefine African Studies. The fundamental reason is that, as an intellectual enter-

prise, African Studies were founded on alterity. If those responsible deny this absolutely, then they will be bereft of Africanity in the contemporary setting. Jane Guyer in defending what is clearly her vested interests states:

Research on Africa by African scholars as well as ourselves, is not just a geographical stake in an 'area studies' world; it is a contribution to the understanding of global phenomena and common human experience that has made African culture and societies 'special cases' (as quoted by Martin and West, op. cit; p 11).

This is a convenient afterthought and evades the issue altogether. African culture and societies became 'special cases' to whom and why? That is the question. There is nothing Martin and West know about the history of African Studies in America that Jane Guyer does not know. She knows as well as anybody else that what she proclaims has never been the case and that is why African Studies is in a big crisis at this historical juncture. African scholars predicted this not because of their own growing intellectual maturity. The article written by Mahmood Mamdani, 'A Glimpse at African Studies, Made in USA', which appeared in *CODESRIA Bulletin*, No. 2, 1990, was a clear signal and spoke for a sizeable constituency of African scholars. The turning point was the meeting of thirty Africanist scholars at the Carter Centre in Atlanta in February, 1989. The designs of the American Africanists were thoroughly exposed. Instead of looking at themselves, they treated the whole indictment as an individual aberration (see Goran Hyden's rejoinder: 'Mamdani's One-eyed Glimpse', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 4, 1990).

Nevertheless, the rebellion continued and reached a climax in a meeting organised by Martin and West at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1994. The African participants rejected in no uncertain terms the idea of African Studies 'made in the USA'. Most outspoken amongst them was Micere Mugo from Kenya. The Africanist antithesis, as can be seen in the introduction to *Out of One, Many Africas*, vindicated the position of those American scholars such as Martin and West who had been arguing for developing a new concept of African Studies. Although there are some Africanists such as Jane Guyer who sincerely believes that African Studies 'made in the USA' can

still be redeemed, it is apparent that the rise of Africanity and Afrocentrism is its ultimate negation.

This in itself does not mark an end to the study of Africa by white American scholars. It marks the end of their taken-for-granted intellectual hegemony and institutionalised domination in African Studies. One suspects that there will be a forced retreat into traditional disciplines from which lone (not lonely) American scholars will pursue their research interests in Africa. It is conceivable that the institutional void created by the disappearance of African Studies 'made in the USA' will be filled by such African organisations as CODESRIA, OSSREA, AAPS, SAPES/SARPIS, CASAS, CAAS, etc. These are potentially democratic institutions because they are run by African scholars themselves and not beholden to any government. If they prove viable, it might be appropriate for foreign scholars to work through them, while waiting for the revival of the collapsed African universities. In other words, they hold prospects for intellectual and scientific cooperation which could be of great mutual benefit, as against the historical imperialistic appropriation of Africa by others.

The irony of all these developments is that there might never be any African Studies anywhere in the future. Christopher Fyfe and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch in *Out of One, Many Africas* both report the decline of African Studies in Britain and France, respectively, as a sequel to the end of empire and growing self-assertion by Africans. Americans as the last-empire-builders might suffer the same fate. Coquery-Vidrovitch thinks that the collapse of empires, whether political or intellectual, is an auspicious event since it creates opportunities for new initiates, especially by those who had been denied. In the Francophonie she sees a new universalism spear-headed by the youth from the former French colonies. While one shares Coquery-Vidrovitch's revolutionary optimism, one is inclined to think that she underestimates nationalism in the developing world as a reaction to one-dimensional globalisation from the West, which transcends any supposed division between Francophone and Anglophone. Theoretically, it is arguable that the national democratic revolution had been aborted in Africa. Responses are symptomatic of this. As was suggested earlier, this has nothing to do with colour or race but with domination and the resultant

politics of independence. It is predictable that in this millennium everybody will pay lip-service to universalism but it is equally evident that all comers are going to pursue their parochial interests. Naturally, this will happen under different guises.

As was hinted above, African Studies will certainly be one of the casualties of the new millennium. It has reached its atrophy in Europe and America and it cannot be resurrected in Africa. There has never been any 'African Studies' in African universities, except in the damned Southern African settler societies. There, they had replicated the colonial paradigm, wherein white subjects studied black objects. In the ensuing process of subordination and subordination black were not allowed to study themselves, except as aids. After independence in the sub-region it was supposed that African Studies could be rehabilitated by upgrading the African handy boys and girls. Those who so thought were courting trouble for they had not clearly discerned the rising tide of Africanity in the aftermath of the fall of

the old order. They thought that they could stage-manage the whole thing. How mistaken they were, as is shown by the Makgoba affair at the University of Witwatersrand and the Mamdani fiasco and the ensuing debacle of the envisaged African Studies at the University of Cape Town which blew in their faces.

Owing to either their insularity or isolation, the South African white academic community behaved as if they lived in a cuckoo-land of their own. They could have learnt from the experience of the British and French colonialists and fellow-American upstarts in Africa. This is apart from the fact that they were caught between the devil and the deep sea and could not define themselves as they were neither European nor African. In the newly conceived but doomed 'African Studies' who is going to study whom? Africanity predicates that there shall be neither white subjects nor black objects. Therefore, a plague upon both their houses and everlasting blazes upon Gomorrah and Sodom.

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* *CODESRIA Bulletin*, Number 1 & 4, 2000, (p. 66-71).



Archie Mafeje and his wife, Shahida El Baz