Africanity: A Commentary by Way of Conclusion*

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Socio-Historical Context

The publication of a special issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* on Africanity could not have come at a better time for a number of reasons. Repeated publication of solely editorial pronouncements had already generated great concern among African scholars, as shown by Zeleza' s unpublished letter to the former Executive Secretary of CODESRIA and its ramifications on the Internet. Privileged editorial declarations had truly become an intellectual hindrance and threatened to degenerate into a self-satisfied monologue. Therefore, according space to a variety of representations on the question of Africanity was a felicitous and facilitative event. It gave those concerned an opportunity to find out if there were still any real issues to be addressed, apart from personal fantasies or unnecessary mystification. Judging by the tenor of the general discussion in the *Bulletin*, it is apparent that Africanity is not a controversial issue in the philosophical sense but simply a historically determined political and social construct. It is an assertion of an independent identity under the present determinate conditions

A cursory glance would show that its resurgence among radical African scholars is traceable to three important events in contemporary African history. These are (a) the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the World Bank (b) the intellectual negation of African studies and (c) the demise of Apartheid in South Africa. These events are not related to one another but their impact on the consciousness of African scholars, particularly in the social sciences, was the same. Whereas in the 1980s the World Bank Programmes in Africa and African Studies ' made in USA' came to be seen as imposition from outside, continued white domination in post-Apartheid South Africa in the 1990s is perceived as a denial of Africanity. The latter is particularly true of those African academics who came from outside and had no first-hand experience of white-settler societies and mistook majority-rule for ' independence' , as is known elsewhere in Africa. Mahmood Mamdani' s vicissitudes at the University of Cape Town and Kwesi Prah' s preoccupation with Africanity in the same environment testify to this.

For testimony of Africanist revulsion against the intellectual and practical imposition of the World Bank, reference could be made to the startling representations of ECA in 1989 in a document entitled ' African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation' . This created a great stir within the Bretton Woods institutions, as nobody had ever imagined, that representatives of African client-states could be so defiant in their rejection of what they saw as the excesses of the West.

The second example of an Africanist challenge to the economic presumptions of the World Bank came from a research group of about 20 African economists whose primary intention was to stake their intellectual claim against the World Bank and its mischief in Africa. This is clearly reflected in the title of their final product: *Our Continent, Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment*, edited by Thandika Mkandwire and Charles Soludo (1999). As far as African Studies is concerned, reference has already been made in my contribution in the *Bulletin* to Mamdani' s authentic representation, 'A Glimpse at African Studies Made in USA' (1990) and to the final requiem for a gringo edited by William Martin and Martin West, entitled *Out of One, Many Africas* (1999).

Authenticity and Historical Conjuncture

The representations cited above are not random impulses. They are a culmination of political forces which have been at work over the last 20 years. In other words, Africanity is an expression of a common will. It is a historically-determined rebellion against domination by others. There is nothing new about it, except the historical conjuncture. Since the era of white colonialism, Africans have always referred to themselves as Africans in contradistinction to their foreign oppressors and exploiters. At no stage did this imply a desire to oppress others: the underlying sentiment has always been *self-liberation*, At the present historical juncture, what has made Africanity appear otherwise is the political insecurity of Southern African whites who for so long had treated the Africans as the ' other' now that the chickens have come to roost, they want the Africans to think of themselves as something other than what they think they are. This is a thoroughly perverse reaction. Properly understood, the problem is not Africanity but rather the ' otherness' on which the whites thrived and still do, as a socio-economic category. Whereas Southern African whites and their kith and kin overseas might genuinely believe that events such as land occupation in Zimbabwe are a transposition of ' otherness' by Africans, in fact, they are a mark of their failure to adjust under changed conditions wherein pre-existing relations of social domination are being challenged. If Southern African whites, like Bradley' s *Iceman*, are impelled to grab everything and, in pursuit of their avarice, are predisposed to treat the other with absolute callousness, then they can only succeed in confirming their historically-determined ' otherness' . This is exemplified by the white interviewee from Johannesburg who, after nearly two years of majority-rule in' South Africa, insisted that, to her, South Africa is a South Africa of swimming pools and picnics' . This made Mandela' s frequent declaration, ' There shall not be any trains of gravy any longer' , sound like a voice crying in the wilderness.

This is not a philosophical or technical question, as some apologists have to make us believe. It is a straightforward political and social issue determined by the march of times. It has nothing to do with race either, it is a social-construct. Fabien Boulaga presents the matter in its true perspective when he states: ' History shows that race is not a logical or scientific problem, but a political problem in

search of an absolute, metaphysical justification. Who should command and who should obey? In the name of what? (*CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1, 2000). But then our philosopher detracts from this insight by giving the impression that both the subjects and the objects of racism are guilty of the same crime. Rejecting racial subordination or being treated as the other cannot be construed as the reverse side of the same coin. Rather, it is a negation of a prevailing socio-construct and an affirmation of what is denied. This can be achieved only by proffering new self-identities. Africanity and the proclaimed ' African Renaissance' feature very strongly in this search for a ' second independence' . In the African context there is no evidence that these are aimed at debasing others expropriating them, yes, if that is the only way social equity and justice can be guaranteed. It is, therefore, false to suppose that those who had been victimised necessarily use this as a moral justification to debase or to dehumanise others. For that matter, Mbembe committed a gross sociological transgression by giving even the vaguest impression that there is a similarity between ' Jewish Messianism' (if by that he means Zionism) and Africanity. In contemporary history, it is only the Israelis who used their victimisation as a moral justification for visiting on the Palestinians and the Arabs in general the same sins as had been visited upon them during the holocaust. This does not seem to have earned them as much disapprobation from the Americans, the British and the South African whites as Africanity is threatening to in the case of the Pan-Africanists. The moral duplicity implicit in this is not lost to the Africans.

Race as a Form of Mystification

It is interesting to note that, while social scientists and philosophers have still to contend with the problem of the concept of ' race' . Once again, Boulaga assures us that ' there is only one human species or race ' and marshals a great deal of up-to-date scientific evidence to prove his case. But even I as a biology student in the late 1950s at the University of Cape Town had been taught the same by my white professors, who nonetheless regarded or treated me as the ' other' . Even anthropologists suffered from the same intellectual schizophrenia, despite the persuasive writings by Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton in the 1930s.This is proof of the fact that the theory of difference is not based on scientific knowledge. It is socially-founded. For instance, to justify their claim to superiority, racists seize upon morphological differences or phenotypes, as Boulaga points out. The most pervasive of these is colour, which manifests itself as an essential difference between black and white. Yet, in reality, colour is the most indefinite human feature. This is made worse by the fact that human beings do not breed true. It is for this reason that, contrary to Boulaga' s suggestion, they cannot be divided into subspecies or ' sub-races' . At best, we can talk of human varieties that run into one another, i.e. they constitute a continuum. For instance, the people who are called ' black' in Africa and America (not in South India or Sri Lanka) are mostly not black. They vary from dark brown to very light brown. This is particularly true of Southern Africans and African-Americans. The phenomenon is mostly attributed to continuous miscegenation among human varieties. In South Africa, it is significant that an uncompromising Africanist such as Winnie Mandela would lay claim to the so-called Coloured, as ' our cousins, children of our mothers raped by whites' . In insisting on Africanity the advocates are not blinded by sheer colour.

It is therefore surprising that, all of a sudden, a long-standing member of CODESRIA, Mahmood Romdhane, finds it necessary to make apologies for being a ' non-black African' . Is he afflicted by social amnesia or has he been infected by a new virus in CODESRIA? If so, it is well to remind him not only did he become a *bona fide* member of CODESRIA but that the issues he is raising had long been resolved before his time. If he did not know, CODESRIA was founded by North Africans led by Samir Amin as a Pan-Africanist organisation. The Sub-Saharan Africans took the latter at face-value and embraced CODESRIA with both hands and became its backbone. Although latter-day reactionaries tried to introduce ' race' in the organisation by making references to strange notions such as ' Arabophone' , in CODESRIA circles North Africans were referred to as such. This was consistent with the division of Africa into four subregions. West, North, East, and Southern African for purposes of representation. Not only this, if Romdhane' s memory is failing him, it is well to remember that the North Africans played a very prominent role in the formation of OAU. Figures such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ahmed Ben Bella became shining symbols of the Pan-Africanist movement and, to this day, nobody in his/her right sense could question their Africanity. In passing, it is also worth noting that, during the Congo crisis in 1960, which led to Lumumba' s assassination, the victim' s sons were immediately given permanent custody by an Egyptian family, ' black' as they might have been. Hence, pathetic and tendentious responses from old colleagues such as Romdhane, who should know better, are to be regretted. In contrast, novices such as Achille Mbembe, who believe that ' Pan-Africanism defines the native and the citizen by identifying them with black people' , are to be forgiven, for they know not.

As it has been reiterated, the object of Africanity is white racism as a pernicious social-construct, not non-black peoples. While in the ensuing political discourses the terms of reference are ' black' and ' white' , especially in South Africa and America), it is important to note that both terms are used metaphorically. As was indicated earlier, ' black' is a social category and ' African' is a social identity used in opposition to ' white' , whether this be European settlers in Southern Africa or the imperialist West. However, in reality, ' whites' are not white. They vary from pink to tan and olive-brown. What distinguishes them is that they have been hegemonic over the last five hundred years and still insist on it, as shown by the new generalissimo dubbed ' globalisation' . As would be expected, this has produced its own antithesis. It is the latter which should be the focus of discussion and not the illusion of colour or race. The whites in Southern Africa have not been denied citizenship by black governments. But inexorably they are being denied the right to dominate the blacks, however defined. Nevertheless, as the new developments in Zimbabwe demonstrate, this does not automatically confer upon ascendant blacks the right to dominate others. This has been made abundantly clear to President Robert Mugabe, despite his un-flinching stand on white racism, as is socially defined. This contradicts Mbembe' s metaphysical insinuation that: ' The victim (meaning the African), full of virtue, is supposed to be incapable of violence, terror, and corruption' . Supposed by whom and where? As shown by the intense struggles for democratisation subsequent to the disillusionment with independence, for the last 20 years, Africans

have been fighting their own dictators and African scholars have spent an inordinate amount of time writing about dictatorship and corruption in Africa. This is so much so that they have been blamed for-being long on criticisms and short on positive suggestions.

The Way Forward

In their concept paper, ' Race and Identity in Africa' , Wambui Mwangi and Andre Zaaiman contrived to make race and African identity a problem for research. Scientifically, it is agreed that ' race' is a meaningless' concept. Therefore, it cannot be a subject for research. Secondly, the African identity is a self-imposing concept. In the same way as Europeans, Asians or Latin-Americans take their identity for granted, Africans know and have always known that they are Africans at least since the colonial imposition. Otherwise, the independence movement would have been inconceivable. The problem of identity concerns those who live in Africa but do not know whether they are Africans or not. Even this is not a problem for research but rather for introspection. Once this problem has been resolved, there would be no need to talk about ' minority groups' . Indeed, this might not be for protection of the human rights of minorities but an excuse for preservation of privilege. It is common knowledge that, in Africa, there is a number of the so-called minority groups that came to dominate the indigenous people. As pointed out earlier, this was often achieved through racism in one form or another. Thus, the issue is not ' minority' or ' majority' but social equality and equity. These latter two know no colour.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that those African intellectuals who insist on Africanity do not think of it only as a necessary condition for resisting external domination but also as a necessary condition for instituting social democracy in Africa. In support of this supposition, reference could be made to the works of African scholars such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Claude Ake, Kwesi Prah, Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, Jacques Depelchin and many less obvious examples. Theirs is a call for a new Pan-Africanism that brooks neither external dependence nor internal authoritarianism and social deprivation. Currently, this is metaphorically referred to as ' second independence' or ' African renaissance' . These are glimpses of utopia that need to be translated into actionable programmes.

When the movement for democracy swept throughout the continent towards the end of 1980s and in the early 1990s, it seemed that this movement was going to usher a new era in Africa. Alas! This did not happen. The movement only succeeded in authoritarianism, namely ' democratic authoritarianism' since the two main criteria for instituting it were multi-partyism and regular elections. Both turned out to be fraudulent and the African citizens were back to square one. As far as African scholars have not been able to explain why this was the case.

Unconvincing references have been made to the frailty of civil society in Africa. The intriguing question though is, if the same civil society had been strong enough to sweep away the older generation of African dictators, why has it not been able to contend with the new petty dictators? Furthermore, not all African societies can be said to have weak civil societies. For instance, South Africa (and Zimbabwe for that matter) can hardly be accused of having a weak civil society. Yet, while formal liberal democracy prevails in the country, it cannot be claimed that its civil society has been able to guarantee social democracy. When President-elect, Thabo Mbeki, in his movement of glory proclaimed that the South African revolution ' has not been completed' and, accordingly, declared his great aspiration for an ' African renaissance' , what was he actually alluding to? Whatever it was and still is, it is apparent that he cannot realise his dream, without significant intellectual labours or inputs.

Therefore, it would appear that, instead of wasting their time debating sterile issues such as race and how black or not so black Africans are, African intellectuals could devote their energies to more relevant conceptual problems. For instance, the question of social democracy vis-à-vis social development has to all intents and purposes not been clarified. Furthermore, it could be asked: in the name of Africanity, how do Africans combat racism, without being drawn into unrewarding discourses such as are being proposed by some self-appointed universalists? Secondly, in the name of Pan-Africanism, how do Africans reconcile statehood and regional integration? The existence of sub-regional organisations such as ECOWAS and SADC notwithstanding, it is obvious that African metanationalists have no clear formula for resolving the manifest tension between parochialism and universalism in their own context, let alone in the global context. These are some of the issues that could give Africanity a substantive referent. Also, it is concei-vable that their resolution could inaugurate the projected African renaissance. In other words, Africa needs not simply a metaphorical but a real renaissance. For the last three decades or so, Africa has been in the doldrums. As would be readily agreed, it is impossible to combine pride with depravity; or to combat racism, without proving oneself (including the actually despised Third World within ' united' Europe). For the time being, it is appropriate to recognise the fact that the way ahead is paved with stones and that some of the wounds suffered are self-inflicted.

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Mafeje receiving the CODESRIA Lifetime Membership Award from Samir Amin at the 30th Anniversary Conference, Dakar, 2003

Tandeka Mkiwane and Archie Mafeje

Archie Mafeje and Thandika Mkandawire at the Conference on the Social Effects of the Economic Crisis and Reactions in Africa (Dakar, July 21-23, 1986)

Archie Mafeje Ebrima Sall

Jimmy Adesina, John Foye and Archie Mafeje

Georges Kobou, Tereza Cruz e Silva and Archie Mafeje

Shahida El Baz, Archie Mafeje and Sulaiman Adebowale

7th CODESRIA General Assembly, February, 10-14- 1992

Adebayo Olukoshi with Archie Mafeje

El hadj Sane with Archie Mafeje

Ali El Kenz and Archie Mafeje

Archie Mafeje, CODESRIA Commemorative Conference, Decmber, 10-12-2008