

**African Identity:  
A Question of Conceptual and Theoretical Purchase**

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## PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

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Title of thesis/dissertation/mini-dissertation: African Identity: A Question of Conceptual and Theoretical Purchase

I declare that this thesis / dissertation / mini-dissertation is my own original work. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with university requirements.

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## Abstract

This thesis argues that the notion of African identity, in its essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of agency in contemporary African situations. By critically discussing literature on the notion of African identity in African philosophy, the study reveals that the notion of African identity has been caught between the polarities of essentialism and anti-essentialism. The thesis critically engages with the historical development of the notion of African identity and situates it within the contemporary works of Archie Mafeje (“Africanity: A Combative Ontology”) and Achille Mbembe (“African Modes of Self-Writing”). The thesis utilizes the conceptual framework espoused by David Scott which argues that bodies of knowledge are answers to contingent historical problems articulated from contingent conceptual frameworks. Within this conceptual orientation, the thesis argues that essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity are conceptualized from the 19th century Pan-African conceptual and theoretical framework which was a consequence of, and aimed at, a different cognitive-political constellation that is fundamentally different from our own (the present). Consequently, the essentialist view of African identity succeeds only at highlighting contemporary socio-political ills, while the anti-essentialist view only advances the fluid notion of identity. Neither views, therefore, offer accurate readings of the present cognitive-political context nor open possible spaces of socio-political and cultural agency.

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## Introduction

This research situates the notion of African identity within the debate between the essentialists and anti-essentialist views of the concept of African identity. The idea of African identity has been used in different historical moments to affirm the humanity of black people and imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of agency, free from white racism and demeaning colonial forms of political intercourse. Postcolonial or post-independence African experiences have led to numerous reflections on the conceptual and theoretical capability of the notion of African identity to theorize and imagine socio-political and cultural freedom of the formerly colonized. The dominant debate on the conceptual and theoretical purchase of the notion of African identity since the 1970s to the present (2016) has been between the essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity. The essentialist views argue for a re-appropriation of a persistent idea of African identity which pre-exists colonialism, and which is shared by all Africans as the only means to attain freedom for the African people. The anti-essentialist views, on the other hand, argue against the essentialist views by positing that African identity is multiple and constantly changing. For decades, the two views have been contending for the best theoretical approach to imagining spaces of agency for the peoples of Africa.

This thesis advances the argument that the notion of African identity, in both its essentialist and anti-essentialist views, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase or yield to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of agency in contemporary African situations. In my exposition of the contemporary debate between the essentialist and anti-essentialist views, I will focus on the works of Archie Mafeje (specifically with reference to “Africinity: A Combative Ontology” (2000)) and Achille Mbembe (focusing on “African Modes of Self-Writing” (2002)). To go about substantiating the thesis, the study will critically

survey a selection of literature on the notion of African identity from the 19th century to the present (2016).

In **Chapter One**, I do three things. First, I contextualize the debate between the essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity in postcolonial African philosophy. Second, I develop and outline the research question. Third, I lay out the theoretical framework within which the research question will be interrogated. Here I critically interrogate three dominant theoretical frameworks within which the notion of African identity has been conceptualized and articulated and underscore their weaknesses. I opt for an alternative, namely David Scott's idea of reading historical bodies of knowledge contingently to facilitate an interventional practice of criticism. Scott argues that bodies of knowledge are products of questions, conceptual paradigms, and political objectives. To fully understand bodies of knowledge, we need to understand them contingently within their constellation of cognitive and political contours. Scott's theoretical framework is best for a contingent interventional criticism such as this.

In **Chapter Two**, I critically discuss the essentialist views of African identity and problematize their shortcomings. The chapter begins by explicating the 19th century Pan-African views of Alexander Crummell and Wilmot E. Blyden. By critically interrogating Crummell's and Blyden's socio-political and conceptual paradigm, I argue that the two thinkers created the conceptual paradigm through which later anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers imagined the notion of African identity. The chapter demonstrates the conceptual indebtedness of the anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers to the 19th century conceptual paradigm by discussing Leopold S. Senghor's idea of "negritude" and Kwame Nkrumah's idea of "African personality". Using the theoretical framework established in Chapter One, I argue that despite the political justification offered by Senghor's and Nkrumah's ideas, anti-colonial and postcolonial conceptualizations of African identity faced some conceptual and theoretical inconsistencies because these ideas were inspired by a 19th century conceptual and political orientation, and thus failed to respond to the exigencies of their time.

Chapter Two will conclude with a discussion of the contemporary essentialist view of African identity with a primary focus on Mafeje's "Africanity: A Combative Ontology". I argue that despite Mafeje's attempt to move away from the 19th century conceptual framework, he does not succeed. Mafeje, like many contemporary essentialist proponents of African identity, appropriates the 19th century Pan-Africanist conceptual orientation which was a result of the contingent theoretical and political demands of that time, different from the present conceptual and political demands. The chapter concludes by underscoring the conceptual and theoretical contours of the essentialist view of African identity.

In **Chapter Three** I critically discuss the anti-essentialist views with a primary focus on Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing". I discuss Mbembe's critique of the essentialist views of African identity and draw on its weaknesses. I demonstrate how the anti-essentialist critique succeeds to de-essentialize the contemporary essentialist views of African identity, yet fails to critically interrogate bodies of knowledge produced in the past because it adopts an essentialist and reductionist approach. I conclude the chapter by showing how the fluid notion of African identity only succeeds at de-essentializing contemporary essentialist views but still appropriates to some extent the conceptual legacy of the 19th century pan-Africanism and therefore fails to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of freedom for the people living in Africa today.

**Chapter Four** concludes the research by positing the thesis that the notion of African identity, as articulated by the essentialist and anti-essentialist views, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of freedom.

Points of qualification should be noted at the outset of the research project. This thesis is a contribution to the discipline of African philosophy. The research nevertheless does not solely draw on literature in African philosophy, but also from anthropology, history, and Western philosophy. The interdisciplinary nature of the research points to the entanglement of the human experience and processes of knowledge production across geographical and perceived epistemological divides.

The notion of African identity has been widely used by thinkers and political actors over the decades. Consequently, the concept has accumulated numerous significations with multifarious connotations. In this study a concerted effort is made, as will become evident, to specify the usage of the concept within a specific theoretical context.

A last qualification: this research does not claim to be an exhaustive analysis of the essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity. On the contrary, the study brings into question the two dominant conceptual frameworks within which the questions of the socio-political and cultural freedom of the peoples of Africa have been articulated by way of the notion of African identity or Africanity. The claim which the study posits, aims at inviting productive conceptual and theoretical orientations which will speak from, and to, our cognitive-political contexts today, rather than a stagnating reflection on whether identity is static or fluid.

## **Chapter 1: Contextualizing the Problem: Postcolonial Conceptual Framework and Method(s)**

### **1.1. Introduction**

In this thesis, I shall attempt to argue that the notion of African identity is conceptually unsustainable or defunct as a theoretical tool with which to imagine spaces of socio-political and cultural freedom in contemporary situations on the African continent. Hence the research question: *does the notion of African identity still have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to imagine spaces of socio-political and cultural freedom in contemporary situations on the African continent?* This question will be situated within the context of contemporary debates on African identity between essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of African identity. Since for every journey to be travelled there is need for a path on which the journey is to be trodden, in this chapter, I will establish the theoretical foothold on which my research question rests and the springboard that will guide my analyses in the subsequent chapters. I start by providing an outline of the theoretical climate of postcolonial African philosophy on the issue of African identity, and then proceed to examine the dominant theoretical and methodological frameworks operative in postcolonial African philosophy pertaining to this notion. By critically engaging with the particularistic, universalist, and African hermeneutic philosophical approaches to defining African identity, I will establish the limitations of these approaches. I will draw on David Scott's argument that both knowledge claims and political ends are historically and conceptually contingent in order to establish the theoretical framework that undergirds my thesis. In what follows, I will outline the postcolonial African theoretical climate.

### **1.2. Postcolonial African Philosophy Climate**

The question of what constitutes African philosophy is heavily contested and complex. Much of what has come to be known as African philosophy have been anti-colonial discourses, attempts to describe African indigenous collective belief

systems as expressions of philosophical thought (ethnophilosophy), and later reactions to ethnophilosophy and reflections on African situations and colonialism. The category of ethnophilosophy captures diverse scholarship. Some scholars like Tempels and Mbiti may be considered to be more ethnographic in their approach, while others like Alexis Kagame, Ramose, Wiredu and Menkiti are more philosophical and present their own philosophical reflection on ethnic groups' world views.

Ethnophilosophical literature was mostly published between 1930 and 1960, inspired by anthropology and the work of a Belgian Catholic priest by the name of Fr Placide Tempels (Karp & Masolo 2000: 1). Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (1945) was seminal for the production of ethnophilosophy by African scholars both in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. The production of ethnophilosophy by African scholars was strongly influenced by the marginalisation of African cultures and peoples by the West in denying the indigenous peoples of Africa the capacity for self-critical thought i.e. philosophical thought. Masolo and Karp (2000: 1) argue that what has come to be known as African philosophy were reactions to ethnophilosophy, which started appearing as early as the 1970s to the exclusion of ethnophilosophy. Thus, African philosophy as defined by Karp and Masolo is postcolonial philosophical thought, discounting ethnophilosophy as being an illegitimate part of what counts as philosophy. Karp and Masolo's argument, which implies that African philosophy begins with the production of literature in the 1970s, has however been contested.

Eze has a different view from that of Karp and Masolo on which literature constitutes African philosophy. He (1997: 2) formulates the problem as follows:

*How do we articulate the conceptual and historical relationship between traditional African philosophies (predominantly practiced and recorded in "unwritten" traditions) and the contemporary practice of the profession which is dominated by philosophers whose training is quite often strictly defined by, if not limited to, the modern European philosophic tradition?*

Unlike Karp and Masolo who argue that the literature that was published in the 1970s marked the beginning of what has come to be known as African philosophy, Eze recognises different modalities in which philosophy has been practiced in Africa on African situations at different times. A distinction can therefore be made

between the “unwritten traditions” of African philosophy, and the contemporary practice of African philosophy, which has a Western methodological orientation. Postcolonial African philosophy may be considered as one (though with various strands and concerns) among many modalities or traditions of human reflection in the histories of Africa. Eze puts it clearly in the above quote that contemporary practices of African philosophy have been defined by professional philosophers trained, defined, and limited to the modern European philosophical tradition (Eze 1997: 2). One can also note that even within the “European philosophical tradition”, there are many traditions, the “modern European tradition” being one of them. It may be concluded that for Karp and Masolo, African philosophy begins with the practice of reflection on African situations by Western trained professional philosophers.

Although Eze is in agreement with Karp and Masolo that Father Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* offered fertile soil for reflection to contemporary African philosophers, he disagrees with them on the time of emergence of African philosophy, or the kind of literature that has come to be known as African philosophy. Eze (1997: 2), for instance, argues that:

*With the “discovery” of Bantu philosophy in Africa and the emergency in the United States of the Harlem Renaissance – with its philosophers and intellectual: Alain Locke, Claude McKay, W.E.B. [Du Bois] and others – where Africans in the Diaspora were already engaged in the critique of African colonialism and the racism of the New World, a third moment in the history of African philosophy was born: negritude.*

If the discourse of *negritude* is considered to be African philosophy as Eze insists, then African philosophy existed already during the anti-colonial struggles. This claim directly challenges Karp and Masolo’s claim as to when African philosophy emerged, its definition, nature and the function of criticism. By including the Harlem Renaissance, Eze’s claim further introduces the problematic of the geographical perimeters and racial implications of the notion of “African” in African philosophy<sup>1</sup>. The debate on what constitutes African philosophy and when it emerged alludes to

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<sup>1</sup> Attempts have been made by scholars such as Lewis Gordon to separate philosophy done on the life experience of black people living on the African continent and those in America and the Diaspora. But because of the racial undertones of the history of African philosophy, the distinction is sometimes blurred. Black American philosophy is sometimes referred to as Africana philosophy, while philosophy done on Africa (on the African continent) is commonly called African philosophy.

the problem or question of how we understand the nature and function of criticism as it operates within African philosophy. This question in turn provides a point of entry into postcolonial African philosophical problems.

As Karp and Masolo have elaborated, postcolonial African philosophical thought emerged as a reaction to ethnophilosophy and postcolonial situations (especially the failing postcolonial political thought and praxis) (Karp & Masolo 2000: 1). But this critical reflection on African literature and experiences expanded beyond ethnophilosophy and postcolonial African situations and thought to include anti-colonial literary works of thinkers such as, Césaire, Senghor, Crummell, Blyden and Du Bois, as well as Western anthropologies on Africans as exemplified by the works of V. Y. Mudimbe (*The Invention of Africa* (1988)) and A. K. Appiah (*In My Father's House* (1992)). But what is the nature of this critical reflection? Spivak is of the view that, “postcoloniality – the heritage of imperialism on the rest of the globe – is a deconstructive case” (Spivak in Eze 1997: 14). On this point, critical thought is applied to deconstruct essentialist and absolute knowledge claims and their methods which European imperialism established, and which African thinkers adopted. African philosophy has not escaped the deconstructive project of postcoloniality. African philosophy itself has endeavoured to interrogate its methods and the knowledge claims born of its methods<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the type of critical reflection that permeates postcolonial thought is essentially deconstructive in nature. According to Dirlik (2001: 612), postcolonial criticism...

*has done much to call into question identities that earlier anti-colonial ideologies took for granted. Postcolonial criticism, as it has unfolded over the last decade, has played a crucial part in bringing this question to the foreground of intellectual recognition — at least in the “First World”. But even this new phase of criticism has remained preoccupied with the legacy of colonialism. Its key move has been to introduce questions of culture and cultural identity — either as a substitute for, or in addition to, the earlier preoccupation with the material conditions and consequences of colonialism.*

In agreement with Dirlik on the dominant subject matter of reflection in African philosophy, Masolo (1997: 283) argues that:

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<sup>2</sup> The most influential works on this subject include: Hountondji P.J. 1983. *African Philosophy Myth and Reality*. London: Hutchinson & Co. and Mudimbe V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.



*One of the dominant themes of postcolonial theory is the issue of “identity”, in its most or various forms – personal, class, race, ethnic, gender, cultural, formal, professional, and so on. Its justification lies at the very heart of the historical occurrence of colonialism and its political and cultural impact on those societies which persevered many centuries and decades under colonial domination, and in the perceived meaning and implications of the removal of this domination.*

For his part, and in opposition to Masolo, Dirlik argues that the notion of “identity” has been a preoccupation of African reflective thought from the anti-colonial period through to postcolonial times. Postcolonial thought, however, changed the conception of the problem from anti-colonial thought in that it challenged what was taken for granted in anti-colonial identity pronouncements.

Scott has a similar but more nuanced articulation of the theoretical preoccupations of postcolonial reflection, which he relates to the anti-colonial period. He argues that there has been a rupture or discontinuity between the anti-colonial and postcolonial theoretical preoccupations. Anti-colonial discourse was preoccupied with the project of putting an end to colonial political power. Colonial political sovereignty, which was basically understood in the index of the psychological, social, political, economic and cultural forces impeding self-realization or -determination (self-determination sometimes articulated as “identity”) of the colonized, was the enemy of the anti-colonial theoretical project (Scott 1999: 12). The production of anti-colonial discourse therefore had the objective of overthrowing the colonizer’s psychological, social, political, cultural and economic domination over the colonized. Anti-colonial theory was a political theory of liberation (ibid., p. 11-12)<sup>3</sup>.

Anti-colonial discourse considered colonial representations of the colonized, which were taken to be essential for asserting the “identity” of the colonized, to be misrepresentations. First and foremost, the colonizer took it upon themselves to represent the meaning of experience and truth of the colonized by defining who the colonized were. On this point, Ramose states that “for centuries, discourses on Africa have been dominated by non-Africans. Many reasons account for this state of affairs and, not least, the unjustified violence of colonization” (Ramose 1998: 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Thinkers who produced political theory of this kind include Nkrumah, K. (1970), and Wamba-Dia-Wamba, E. (1991).

Secondly, the colonizer did not represent the image of the colonized as experienced and defined by the colonized themselves, but rather the colonized meaning of experience and truth was defined mischievously by the colonizer. It is within this context that Ramose asserts that “Africans were reduced to silence even about themselves”, hence, “[i]t is still necessary to assert and uphold the right of Africans to define the meaning of experience and truth in their own right” (ibid.). So, the theoretical preoccupation of the colonized and the later newly liberated was to produce an authentic self-representation of the colonized and/or former-colonized peoples. This attempt to formulate a more authentic mode of self-representation caused the emergence of an array of anti-colonial and postcolonial essentialized discourses on Africanity. Because colonial power was primarily understood along the registers of the psychological, social, political, economic and cultural, it was considered logical that the discourses on authentic self-representation would have great affinity with political theory and praxis. The discourse on authentic self-representation was an integral part of the liberationist political theory. Whether it was successful or not is a different question. It took about one to two decades after independence to realize that there was more to colonialism than material, social and psychological dispositions and misrepresentations. It was this realization that formed the postcolonial theoretical preoccupation.

The postcolonial theoretical preoccupation therefore shifted from the anti-colonial liberationist political theory to a new subject of interrogation. Scott (1999: 12)<sup>4</sup> describes the postcolonial subject matter as follows:

*The new question for postcoloniality turned not so much on the old idea of colonialism as a structure of material exploitation and profit (the question for anticoloniality) as on the idea of colonialism as a structure of organized authoritative knowledge (a formation, an archive) that operated discursively to produce effects of Truth about the colonized. Understood as a complex ensemble of knowledge/power, colonialist discourse constituted a will-to-truth about the colonized as part of the larger project of Europe's will-to-mastery of the non-European world. Moreover, what counted as the Truth of the colonial space was authoritatively produced through regimes of representation — and through protocols of discursive formation — that cut across simple ideological lines such as liberal/Marxist.*

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<sup>4</sup> Scott evidently draws heavily on various Foucaultian concepts, such as ‘power/knowledge’, ‘will-to-truth’, ‘discursive formation’, etc.

The postcolonial theoretical preoccupation therefore moved beyond the question of colonialism as a psychological, social, political, economic, cultural problem and misrepresentation, to the “question of *decolonisation of representation* itself, the decolonisation of the conceptual apparatus through which their political objectives were thought out” (ibid.). This theoretical preoccupation came to the realization that colonialism was an organized system of authoritative knowledge that was discursively employed to construct truths about the colonized for their subjugation. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1977), for example, was seminal for this realization. Also, Wiredu’s project of conceptual decolonization immediately comes to mind. However, thinkers such Mudimbe, Appiah and Hountondji are more pronounced than Wiredu in this theoretical space because of their targets of criticism. While Wiredu focuses on language(s) in his decolonizing project, Mudimbe, Appiah and Hountondji target articulated discourses of anti-colonial and postcolonial self-representative politics and theory<sup>5</sup>. Postcolonial theory therefore shifted critique from the realm of colonial political power as source of the misrepresentation of the colonized and political domination, to colonialism as systems of knowledge that create truths, which the colonized had assimilated into their self-representations.

By focusing on the systematic examination of anti-colonial and postcolonial self-representations in order to expose the reproduction of forms of knowledge that legitimized colonial power, postcolonial anti-essentialist discourse has “operated through a certain suspension or deferral of the question of the political, a deferral of the question of the renewal of a theory of politics” (Scott 1999: 14). On this view, postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism no longer took political praxis as its object of critique and theorization for liberating political praxis<sup>6</sup>. While postcolonial anti-essentialist critique suspended the problem of the renewal of a theory of politics, and sustained this form of criticism for some time, political situations on the continent were changing thus demanding different considerations from the practice

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Wiredu has a linguistic philosophical orientation that leads him to focus much more on language and propositional logic. One can argue that it is a matter of specialization. But the decolonizing project in which Wiredu situates his work demands a more socio-political foundation of thought and logic.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Wamba-Dia-Wamba’s critique of P.J. Hountondji in Wamba-Dia-Wamba E. (1991).

of criticism. The suspension of the political by the new (postcolonial) theoretical preoccupation created a theoretical space for revised versions of anti-colonial and postcolonial political theories of Pan-Africanism founded on some notion of Africanity or African identity. This debate between a theoretically oriented anti-essentialist project and persistent revisions of Pan-African political identities with a strong political orientation, according to Mbembe, “accentuated the conflict between a cosmopolitan and a nativist vision of identity and of African culture” (2001: 1).

However, the stagnant debate between the so-called cosmopolitans and Nativists, or the anti-essentialists and essentialists raises a salient problem with regards to the practice of African postcolonial criticism as it stands today. The salient problem is how do we go about imagining socio-political and cultural spaces of agency in contemporary African situations when the main conceptual tool (African identity) of liberation is stuck between the polarities of essentialism and anti-essentialism? It is the aim of this thesis to question the conceptual and theoretical purchase of the notion of African identity as pursued by some anti-essentialists and essentialists views in the postcolonial present, with specific focus on the notion of identity.

At this point you might wonder on what theoretical basis the problem of African identity between essentialism and anti-essentialism will be interrogated? In an attempt to establish such a theoretical basis, I will examine the three dominant theoretical foundations upon which the notion of African identity has been premised and draw on a fourth source in an attempt to formulate a more robust, higher-yielding framework within which the research question might be thought. The first dominant theory on the notion of African identity is the *particularist* trend, which informs the essentialist view on African identity. The second is the *universalist* trend, which informs the anti-essentialist view. The last of the three dominant theories on the theorization of African identity is the *African hermeneutical* trend, which takes the middle ground between the *particularist* and the *universalist* trends<sup>7</sup>. The fourth source, which I would like to add to the

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<sup>7</sup> The Kenyan philosopher, Odera Oruka was the first to make the distinction between the ethnophilosophers and the professional philosophers. The particularists are associated with

preceding triad, is David Scott's idea of the practice of a purchasing or yielding form of criticism that emphasize the contingency of both concepts and theories, as well as the contingency of both political conditions from which theory arises and the political aims at which theory is targeted. The reason for bringing in a fourth resource is precisely to end the stymie of the essentialist and anti-essentialist polarity without simply taking the middle ground which the African hermeneutic approach does. The reason for avoiding the middle ground will be made clear when discussing the African hermeneutic approach.

In this section, I have briefly outlined the dominant theoretical climate of postcolonial African philosophy. I began by highlighting the problematic demarcation of the precise commencement and scope of African philosophical criticism. Then I briefly outlined the problems that both anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers were preoccupied with. This section was concluded by way of a brief outline of the essentialist and anti-essentialist view on the notion of African identity. In the following section, I will critically discuss the three dominant theoretical orientations guiding definitions of the notion of African identity.

### **1.3. The Alterity of African Reason: A Quest for the Nature and Function of Critical Reason**

On a quest to determine the conceptual and theoretical purchase of the notion of African identity, it is necessary that the research establishes a theoretical position on the nature and function of critical reasoning (or philosophical reasoning to be precise) in relation to the production of knowledge on human experience. The established theoretical position will be the theoretical (epistemological) basis on which the research question will be interrogated. To go about establishing or rehearsing a theoretical basis on which the research thesis will be substantiated, the dominant theoretical frameworks which have defined postcolonial African philosophy will be critically interrogated. This part of the chapter will therefore focus on the dominant epistemological basis on which the definitions of

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ethnophilosophy while the universalists are associated with what Oruka terms professional philosophy. A clear definition of these categories will be made clear as the chapter unveils.

philosophical thought in Africa have been articulated. The objective of this section is to draw on the weaknesses of these dominant epistemological views on the nature and function of critical reasoning in relation to African human experiences.

There has been an ongoing debate on the identity of African philosophy. This debate was initiated by a response to the colonial discourse which denies black people the capacity to think. The European discourse claims the monopoly of human reason to itself alone, pushing black thinkers into a position where they must either admit that they do not have philosophy (which is understood to be the symbol of human reason per excellence), and be civilized into European reason and remain subjugated, or they must show or produce a philosophy of their own which is different from European reason or philosophy. This problem sent black thinkers on a quest for the alterity or identity of African philosophy in different directions.

The first thinkers to take on this problem are known as ethnophilosophers. This school of thought on the definition of African philosophy argues that there is philosophical thought in African traditional belief systems and practices which is different from Western philosophical thought. Philosophy is not an enterprise of white people alone, but all groups of human beings practice philosophy albeit in different ways. The Western way of doing philosophy is one among many, hence philosophy is a universal human enterprise instantiated in different cultural particularities thereby making philosophy particular. This school of thought was named ethnophilosophy by Paulin J. Hountondji, and later it was called the particularist school of thought on the definition of African philosophy. The second school on the definition of African philosophy reacted to the ethnophilosophy by arguing that there is no philosophy in traditional African societies. The only way of doing philosophy is the Western way of doing it. Philosophy for this school of thought is a universal human enterprise for universal human problems. Odera Oruka called this school of thought professional philosophy, and later it was called the universalist school of thought. The third school of thought reacted to both the universalist and particularist schools of thought by defining philosophy as an interpretation of African realities, hence it has come to be known as the African

hermeneutical school of thought<sup>8</sup>. Underlying these three theories on the identity of African philosophy among other things, are theories on the nature of human reason and knowledge production, and their relation to human experiences. These theories are answers to questions such as: What is the role of critical thinking in human experiences? What is the nature of knowledge? Is knowledge of universal veracity or particular veracity depending on context? Are modes of thinking about human conditions universally valid, or are modes of thinking cultural products finding their validity within their cultural setting? Answers to these questions are the basic epistemological assumptions on which the identity of African philosophy is defined by each of the three schools of thought. A critical discussion of the epistemological assumptions of the first school of thought, ethnophilosophy, is what follows below.

#### **(a) Ethnophilosophy: The Alterity of African Reason**

The term ethnophilosophy was first used by Pauline Hountondji to refer to texts which describe African cultural thought systems as philosophy<sup>9</sup>. It is believed that the founder of ethnophilosophy in African philosophy is the Belgian Roman Catholic priest, Fr. Placide Tempels, in his influential book titled *Bantu Philosophy* (1945)<sup>10</sup>. Although Tempels' purpose for publishing this work was to further European colonization and Christianization of the native people in Africa, his work has been used by native African thinkers to fight against Tempels' purpose. Despite this endeavour by native African thinkers, they failed to undermine or fully escape Tempels' approach, method and definition of African philosophical thinking. In the following passage, Tempels (in Kebede 2004: 26) defines his notion of philosophy:

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<sup>8</sup> The categorization of these schools of thought dominated debates on African philosophy in the 1990s. Odera Oruka's four trends of African philosophy initiated this categorization. See Van Hook J.M. (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Read Hountondji P.J. 1983. *African Philosophy Myth and Reality*. London: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd

<sup>10</sup> Many of Tempels' convictions about the Bantu people were earlier articulated by 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists such as Edward Wilmot Blyden and Alexander Crummell.

*The presence of these (Christian as well as Bantu) attitudes through centuries of simultaneous evolution can only be satisfactorily explained by the presence of a corpus of logically coordinated intellectual concepts, “a Lore”. Behaviour can neither be universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of things which surround him, of existence, life, death, and the life beyond.*

On this claim, Tempels attributes human reason to the Bantu people which was rare for a white person of his time and for those before him. But Tempels does not only attribute the capacity for reason to the Bantu people, he also attributes, to the Bantu ways of life, a philosophy, founded on “a logical system of thought”. In attributing philosophical reason or “a logical system of thought” to the Bantu people, Tempels also defined the nature and function of philosophical thought. Philosophical thought is the reason or reasoning underlying a people’s permanent or universal attitudes and behaviour. For Tempels, philosophy is “a logical system of thought” that explains a people’s attitudes and behaviour in relation to existence and the human condition. Despite the presence of the “logical system of thought” in Bantu beliefs systems and cultural practices, the Bantu apparently were not able to articulate their own philosophy. That is why Tempels took it upon himself to articulate the Bantu philosophy. “The nature of this thought that is assumed to be hitherto unthought, yet philosophical by nature and representable as such, is that of a system of unconscious, yet commonly agreed upon beliefs” (Praeg 2000: 113). Bantu philosophy is a collective system of thought which is not consciously thought by the Bantu people.

If philosophy is the logical systems of thought underlying Bantu belief systems and cultural practices, then the role of the philosopher is to excavate the unconscious logical systems that underlie Bantu belief systems and cultural practices. Masolo (1994: 160 in Praeg 2000: 113) defines the role of a philosopher in ethnophilosophy as follows:

*The philosopher’s role turns into that of being a mere revealer, in the physical sense of the term: he renders visible that which already is, he calls with a new name that which has already been. But the true subject of philosophy, he who makes it, remains the anonymous and eternal ethnic group.*



On this view, to engage in philosophical reasoning is to discover the reasoning underlying the worldview of a people. For his purposes, Tempels believed that true Bantu philosophy is the ancient truths that lie hidden in the belief systems and cultural practices of the Bantu. Bantu philosophy therefore has a stable system of thought that has survived for centuries. Positing that Bantu philosophy is unchanging over time, Tempels writes that “only if we set out from the true, the good and the stable in native custom shall we be able to lead our Africans in the direction of a true Bantu civilization” (1959: 18). The true, the good and the stable are the logic or philosophy behind Bantu belief systems and ways of life. Sharing Tempels’ belief in the existence of a stable system of thought, Onyewuenyi (1999: 29) writes that:

*The African has unwritten timeless codes of behaviour and attitudes which have persisted for centuries. The condition for the possibility of this, its explanation, lies in the presence of a corpus of coordinated mental or intellectual concepts.*

Tempels does not want to change the true and stable or timeless philosophy of the Bantu people, but rather, he wants to excavate it from the unconscious thoughts of the Bantu people and show that it is not logically different from Western philosophy. By proving the similarities between Bantu philosophy and Western philosophy, the colonialists were able to perfect their methods of colonization and Christianization.

Dissatisfied with the view that Bantu philosophy is a collective or ethnic unconscious thought which does not render individual intellectual capacity to the Bantu people, Odera Oruka formulated the notion of Philosophic Sagacity<sup>11</sup>. Philosophic Sagacity argues that there are individual African thinkers who engage with their cultures philosophically to support or reject the dominant cultural views and practices. Although Philosophic Sagacity attributes individual intellectual agency to sages, it holds an ethnic or cultural view of philosophy like ethnophilosophy.

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<sup>11</sup> Philosophic Sagacity is the view that there are individual sages in African traditional societies who philosophically engage with their traditional beliefs and practices to come up with their own positions based on critical reflection. While ethnophilosophy hold the view that African philosophy lies in anonymous collective folklore wisdom, philosophic sagacity holds the view that African philosophy lies with individual sages who critically reflect on their cultures and tradition and hold well-thought views.

Ethnophilosophers and those espousing Philosophic Sagacity absorbed Tempels' definition and theoretical function of philosophy, but set it to serve a different purpose. While Tempels developed Bantu philosophy for the colonial projects of civilization and Christianization, the followers of Tempels adapted it for reclaiming the lost humanity of black people and their liberation from colonialism. But the understanding of the nature and function of philosophy remained intact. "‘Ethnophilosophy’ and ‘philosophic sagacity’ both attempted to mine the philosophy imbedded in the traditional thought of pre-colonial African cultures" (Van Hook 1999: 11). This excavation was in order, because, it was argued, that the freedom of black people lies in reclaiming the philosophical systems from traditional African beliefs and cultural practices and to apply them to contemporary African conditions of life.

The conviction to pursue the ethnophilosophic and Philosophic Sagacity path is based on the argument that philosophy is a particularist human enterprise with as many approaches and methods as there are human cultures. This perspective argues that philosophy arises from people's cultural experiences, and a genuine African philosophy is one which appropriates African cultural modes of thoughts to address African cultural experiences. The individuality of African philosophy is contoured by the history of its heritage. The heritage of African philosophy is its pre-colonial traditions and cultures that Tempels, John S. Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, Barry Hallen, Odera Oruka, and many others laboured to theorize. While Tempels was looking to establish a fundamental similarity between Bantu philosophy and Western philosophy, African ethnophilosophers and African philosophic sages have come to establish the African philosophical difference.

The particularist view in short holds that there is, and there has always been, a uniquely African philosophy. This philosophy is embedded in African pre-colonial cultures and traditions. Its particularity lies in its specific mode of thoughts and concerns. The work of the philosopher is to excavate the philosophy from African cultures and traditions. The problem with this view of philosophical thought beyond

the discourse of rehabilitation<sup>12</sup> is, however, that it cannot help us to imagine alternative theories and concepts that must inform our contemporary political conditions. In addition, there is the assumption that there is an uncontaminated indigenous African philosophy that must inform our political praxis. Such a return to the so-called original, is – as we know – impossible. This view is founded on an absolute view of knowledge. What defines African knowledge is not so much what is held and believed by Africans today, but rather, it is the “true, stable, and good” knowledge formulated by the ancients which must be excavated for the contemporaries. This understanding of knowledge stands wanting in our contemporary lives, which seem to be constantly changing and demanding new concepts and knowledge systems in order to render it manageable and meaningful. Finally, critical thought in this school of thought is defined as a revealer of the original, not a quest for a better alternative as such. These problems have not gone unnoticed by African philosophers. Responses to the particularist view of philosophy gave rise to the universalist view of African philosophy.

### **(b) Universality of Philosophy: Persistence of Eurocentrism**

The universalist view of African philosophy was born as a response to ethnophilosophy. From the universalist point of view, the foundation of ethnophilosophy or the particularist view of philosophy in general depends on the colonial ideology of alterity. On this point, Kebede (2004: 85) writes:

*The thesis of otherness is the common source that inspires anthropological and ethnophilosophical discourses. The idea of a collective and unconscious philosophy is how the alleged otherness of Africans finds a philosophical corroboration.*

The particularist view believes that in propounding African philosophical alterity, it serves to state the truth about the nature of philosophical thought (as culturally defined) and rehabilitate the denigrated peoples of African descent. The

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<sup>12</sup> Rehabilitation: Affirming the humanity of black people that was disavowed by European racism by denying black people the capacity for reason. The rehabilitation discourse attempts to prove the presence of reason in African ways of life before and after the European encounter.

universalists, on the other hand, argue that the idea of African difference both in thought and praxis submits to the colonialist idea that black people are fundamentally different from white people, hence they deserve different treatment. The universalists argue that the particularistic view, which draws its individuality from the past, serves only to relegate the alterity of African philosophy to a subordinate position (Kebde 2004: 60). By emphasizing the excavation of the unconscious collective “philosophy” from the past without a critical interrogation of the cultures and traditions, ethnophilosophy, argues the universalists, fails to capture the essence of philosophical thought which is an individual critical enterprise. The universalists go as far as to argue that there is no philosophy in indigenous African traditional thought systems, as the ethnophilosophers have us believe. In fact, what may be claimed to be philosophical about the particularistic view of philosophy are the texts produced on African belief systems and practices by ethnophilosophers, and not the traditional cultures themselves.

Philosophy for the universalists is a universal human enterprise pursued by individual intellectuals concerning universal human problems, albeit in their particular manifestations. Hountondji (1983: 47), for instance, makes a distinction between philosophy in the “vulgar” sense of the word and philosophy as a discipline. Both definitions of philosophy are universal. He writes that “in this vulgar sense of the word, everyone is naturally a philosopher, and so is every society” (Hountondji 1983: 47). But in the stricter sense of the word, not everyone is a philosopher and so is not every society that practices philosophy. The reason being that philosophy, like any other science, such as chemistry, physics or mathematics “is a specific theoretical discipline with its own exigencies and methodological rules” (ibid.). On this basis, philosophy has “the infallible criterion by which to judge the absurdity or relevance of any proposition of philosophy, however general” (ibid.). This conviction echoes Marcien Towa’s belief that “philosophy is the courage to think the absolute” (2012: 13). While Hountondji’s philosophy is based on an infallible method and rules, for Towa the subject matter of philosophy is the absolute. It is on this thesis that the universality of philosophy is founded. Regardless of the particularity of cultures and human experiences, the knowledge that philosophical enterprise pursues is absolute knowledge, and the philosophical method by which absolute knowledge is sought is also infallible,

thereby making the philosophical method applicable to all cultures. On this view, the pursuit for the alterity of African philosophy seems to be unsustainable. According to the universalist view of philosophy, contemporary situations on the African continent can be correctly addressed by using universal methods and approaches to doing philosophy.

The universalist view, however, has not been exempt of criticism. While celebrating the universality of the philosophical method and knowledge, the universalist view has been shown to be espousing nothing more than the ethnocentrism of Eurocentrism. Hountondji's definition of philosophy does not have a universal consideration of human epistemological endeavours, but rather only considers the Western perspective on what constitutes critical thought. For instance, Hountondji's Eurocentrism is exposed when he writes the following with regards to ethnophilosophy: "let us now ask the crucial question: Is this the usual meaning of the word philosophy? Is it the way it is understood, for instance, in the phrase 'European philosophy', or 'nineteenth century philosophy' etc.? Clearly not" (Hountondji 1991: 116). Hountondji finds ethnophilosophy to be unphilosophical because it does not adhere to the Western version or standard meaning of philosophy or critical reason. It is clear that Hountondji's definition of philosophy is not based on a universal human experience for its universality. Rather, Hountondji takes the Western view or experience of philosophy or critical reasoning and crown it with universality.

In engaging with the universalist view of philosophy, Van Hook (1991) argues that while Hountondji and his sympathizers base their notion of the universality of philosophy on its method and practice, it is however difficult to identify this universality of method and practice. Van Hook (1999: 15) argues that:

*The universal essence of philosophy, in his view, appears to be the rational examination of beliefs. But what can he mean by "a single style of inquiry?" Even limiting the discussion to Western philosophy, it is difficult to see what common essence or style of inquiry is shared by Descartes and Nietzsche, or by Thales and Carnap.*

Challenging Bodunrin on the same idea of the universality of philosophical method and approach, Van Hook (ibid.) argues that:

*The universality Bodunrin attributes to philosophy seems to amount to nothing more than “critical thinking”, a notion which remains vague and undefined. Moreover, if the universality of philosophy consists merely in critical thinking, it is difficult to understand Bodunrin’s grounds for insisting upon ‘autonomy’ and ‘clearly delimited boundaries’ for the discipline of philosophy. Since critical thinking is an aspect of all disciplines.*

The universality of philosophy founded on a universal method of critical thinking is historically inaccurate. In support of this, Van Hook points to the fact that the ways in which philosophers have presented their philosophical ideas are methodologically inconsistent. The style of inquiry used by Thales, for instance, is different from that of Carnap, but they are both considered philosophers and their works philosophies. The difference in the style of thinking and method that Van Hook underscores points to the historicity of the method of thinking that the universalists are not ready to concede. If the methodology of thinking is historical, then the idea of the universality of philosophy premised on its methodology founders, since there are multiple historical moments with different histories which may inform the nature of the method of critical thinking. I concur with Van Hook (ibid., p. 18) when he says that:

*There is no universal philosophy in the sense of a single set of truths accepted by all genuine philosophers and true for all times and places... philosophical methods and styles have varied greatly throughout the ages and there is no unanimity about the matter even among contemporary Western philosophers.*

This conclusion leaves the universalist approach epistemologically unsustainable for interrogating the research question. What remains to be interrogated is the African hermeneutical approach.

### **(c) African Hermeneutical Approach: Interpretation with Recourse to the Original**

While ethnophilosophy defines philosophy as revealing or excavating the essential and stable logical systems underlying African traditional cultures and practices, the universalists define philosophy as a mythical universal critical method and approach to interrogating universal human problems. The African hermeneutic approach defines philosophy as the intellectual act of interpreting the conditions of

human life on the African continent. Hermeneutics emerged as a response to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which held the view that it is possible to arrive at "the level of human experience that would be common to all people and to all historical periods" (Nwigwe 2005: 8). Hermeneutics countered this Husserlian view by positing that every claim to knowledge is historical, and all people are products of their cultural and intellectual backgrounds (ibid., p. 9). With the influence of Gadamer's<sup>13</sup> hermeneutics and Heidegger's ontology, the African hermeneutic approach emphasizes the finitude and time-context bound nature of human knowledge (ibid., p. 10). The universality of philosophy on this ground is dissipated and the particularity of philosophy is maintained.

Theophilus Okere (1983), the first to import the hermeneutic approach into the practice of African philosophy, rejected the universalist view of philosophy in favour of a particularistic view. But he also rejected the ethnophilosophical view of the 'unconscious' Bantu philosophy. Okere believed that the hermeneutic approach should be applied in constructing the identity of African philosophy from the encounter of the Western and African cultural worlds. Believing in the separate and different existence of the African and Western cultural worlds, Okere believes that "the authentic African cultural values could be wrest from such unfortunate circumstances" of Western imperialism which threatens to annihilate the authentic African identity (Nwigwe 2005: 10). Holding the context-time bound understanding of knowledge, Okere argues that African philosophy, through the hermeneutic approach, should construct the identity of African philosophy from African "past belief systems, poems, mythologies, proverbs, and so on" (ibid., p. 11). The forging of an identity of African philosophy from pre-colonial African cultures and practices, it is argued, should result in a comprehensible and clearly stated mode of existence for Africans today. Even though Okere acknowledges the contingency of knowledge and human experiences, he prioritizes traditional African cultural beliefs and practices as a basic resource for defining the identity or individuality of Africans. Another important figure in the African hermeneutic approach who shares this view is Tsenay Serequeberhan.

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<sup>13</sup> Gadamer was a pioneering proponent of hermeneutics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this does not mean he was the first to hold an interpretative and historical view of knowledge. The writings of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Herder, Friedrich Wolf, as well as Heidegger championed similar views.

With the aim of “actualising the possibility of an autonomous and free Africa in the context of the modern world”, Serequeberhan (1991: 9) defines African philosophy as a “reflective supplement to the concrete efforts underway on the African continent”. African philosophical thought is a reflection on the possible spaces of autonomy in contemporary conditions of human life on the African continent. Serequeberhan (ibid., p. 12) designates African autonomy as “identity”. Serequeberhan rightly points out that the fetters that chain African peoples today are the legacies of Western colonization of the native peoples of the continent and neo-colonial practices. While he recommends an investigation into African traditional “beliefs and myths”, Serequeberhan gives paramount consideration to contemporary African actual problems. He states (ibid., p. 10):

*To be sure, African thinkers can also reflect on their traditional “religious beliefs and myths”. But if African thinkers are really to engage actual problems, then it is clear that African philosophy has to – at some level or another – be connected with contemporary struggles and concerns facing the continent and its diverse peoples. For it is not the “beliefs and myths” of peoples of Africa – in their intricate magnificence – that are mindboggling, but the concrete misery and political insanity of the contemporary African situation.*

Understanding the cause of African “concrete misery and political insanity” to be imperialism in the form of colonialism and neo-colonialism (ibid., p. 7-9), Serequeberhan argues that to practice African philosophy existentially is to think for or against Western imperialism/Eurocentrism. He thus gives African philosophy a double theoretical function of deconstruction and reconstruction. The deconstructive aspect of African philosophy is aimed at dismantling and eradicating Eurocentric residues that have survived colonialism and are sustained by neo-colonialism in keeping Africans in bondage. The constructive aspect, on the other hand, “is aimed at critically revitaliz(-ing) (in the context of the modern world) the historical cultural possibilities of the broken African heritage” (ibid., p. 22).

The present African philosophical questions are “grounded on a shared understanding that it is the present-day African situation as it arises out of the ambiguous and broken heritage of the African past that calls for thinking”



(Serequeberhan 1991: 13). When African philosophers speak, they speak from this broken heritage knowingly or unknowingly, “and even when we deny this, it is a particular tradition (scientism?) that speaks and utilizes our voices” (ibid., p. 14). Within contemporary situations in Africa, Serequeberhan believes that there are two different traditions – hermeneutically speaking – from which we can interpret and imagine spaces of freedom. One is the Western tradition founded on Eurocentrism and the other is the broken African heritage.

Serequeberhan’s approach to defining African philosophy is, however, ironic. While arguing for the eradication of Eurocentrism, he appropriates Eurocentrism by using the hermeneutical approach (which is a European construct) to define African philosophy. Kebede realizes this problem when he writes that “the difficulty of the hermeneutical approach to free itself from eurocentrism illustrates the necessity of the prior deconstruction of Western concepts and methods” (2004: 20-21). Serequeberhan’s distinction between Europe and Africa is also a European invention, constructed and sustained by European concepts. Even more problematic is the fact that Serequeberhan cannot let go of the desire for an authentic African identity, a desire he shares with Okere, even though he considers it highly problematic. The desire for the authentic or true African identity is expressed by Serequeberhan when he speaks of the “existential indigence created by colonialism and perpetuated by neo-colonialism and *mistaken* for the true indigenusness of the formerly colonized African” (Serequeberhan 1991: 23-24). And this indigenusness is to be reconstructed by “revitalizing” or bringing back to life the “historico-cultural possibilities of the broken African heritage”, a “return to the source” (ibid., p. 22).

The African hermeneutical approach brings something very important to the definition of African philosophy, which is, the temporality of knowledge claims and the need to engage with the concrete socio-political and cultural conditions of the African people. But like the particularist and universalist views, it is constrained by the limits of Eurocentrism. Like the particularist view, it holds that philosophy is cultural and contextually bound. Similar to the particularist view, the hermeneutical view assumes that there is an authentic African cultural reason that must be revitalized, and from which the contemporary African situation can be interpreted,

in order to open spaces of freedom for the formerly colonized. The hermeneutical approach also inherits a dichotomous understanding of the African situation which consists of the West and the indigenous or African.

In agreement with the universalist view, the hermeneutical approach further appropriates Western hegemony, as Kebede (2004: 212) elaborates:

*The hermeneutical philosopher sets one condition for the reappropriation of the past, namely, critical examination. This approach accepts the imperative of the return to the past under the pain of perpetuating Western hegemony, but adds that the return to the past must be selective.*

What is selected from the African precolonial past is that which passes the test of Western standards. Because of this, the double function (deconstruction and reconstruction) that Serequeberhan tasks African philosophy with is immediately met with failure. Instead of deconstructing the Western hegemony, he appropriates it. And instead of reconstructing or “revitalizing” the broken African heritage, he accepts it on Western terms.

The difficulties that arise from the African hermeneutical approach in defining African critical reason, as stipulated by Okere and Serequeberhan, point to the challenges of appropriating a method that was born in a different context. These challenges do not suggest the impossibility of applying the hermeneutic approach (as developed in the West) within African philosophy as such, but rather a reevaluation of the assumptions of basic concepts such as the dichotomy between the Western and the African tradition, the “return to the source”, and the manner of appropriation. These concepts raise questions such as: To what extent does contemporary African situations or the “broken African heritage” constitute a tradition different from the West? Is it possible to imagine Africa without the West? Is our desire to deconstruct the West from a non-Western paradigm, or the replacement of one paradigm with another, conceptually and existentially possible? What narrative informs our imaginings of a return to the source? And what exactly is this source which has to be perceived from a perspective other than the one we inhabit (Western)? With such problems, the African hermeneutic approach remains theoretically an unsuitable basis for the research question. The

middle ground between the particularists and universalists taken by the African hermeneutic approach is imbued with theoretical difficulties and incapable of addressing the research question.

The three approaches to the definition of African philosophy all seem to be caught within the trap of Western hegemony with little hope, if any, to escape. So, on what theoretical basis should the research question be interrogated? The three views discussed so far seems to be riddled with too many theoretical shortcomings to serve as theoretical basis for the research question. The assumptions and contradictions inherent in their respective definitions of critical reasoning (philosophy) and its role in knowledge production will most certainly undermine the research objective if they were to be adopted. In order to salvage the virtues and abandon the problematics of the three theoretical perspectives discussed thus far for the purpose of establishing a theoretical basis on which the thesis of the research will be substantiated, David Scott's views of criticism after postcoloniality will prove instructive.

#### **1.4. David Scott and Postcolonial Practice of Criticism: A Theoretical Solution**

In the preceding section, I have demonstrated that ideas that practicing philosophy is (1) the revelation or excavation of authentic, stable truths for purposes of liberation; or (2) the practicing of a universal discipline with a universal style and method; or (3) the interpretation of and negotiation between these two traditions, with the aim of revitalizing the African paradigm are central to the three approaches thus far. I argued that these views render the three approaches theoretically unsuitable for the research question, since such views are conceptual and theoretical impediments to imagining spaces of freedom in contemporary situations on the African continent. This section will therefore develop a theoretical framework by engaging postcolonial forms of criticisms which will negate the weaknesses of the three approaches discussed and appropriate their virtues –

with the aid of the insights of David Scott. A critical look into postcolonial forms of criticism is warranted.

### **(a) Postcolonial Forms of Criticism**

The postcolonial theoretical space has been preoccupied with the problem of decolonizing knowledges that have legitimized colonial rule and its legacies in the postcolonial, by criticizing the conceptual paradigm from which anti-colonial and some postcolonial knowledges were conceptualized and articulated. David Scott is a Jamaican born anthropologist and a prominent postcolonial theorist, who is currently working at Columbia University in New York. His first book, *Formations of Rituals: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (1994), was written within the postcolonial theoretical space. In this book, he contends that unless anthropology attends to the conceptual and ideological formations of the objects which make up its practice, it will not evade reproducing colonialist discourse. This assertion was based on the understanding that anthropological objects are never objectively given prior to anthropological projects, but rather, they are constructs of historical epistemic and ideological domains conditioned by colonial histories.

In his second book, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (1999), Scott develops the three critical concepts which I shall utilize to develop the argument that ideas or knowledge claims and the political aims of ideas are conceptually and politically contingent. Scott's focus in this book is showing that knowledge is always produced within what he calls a "problem-space". And a purchasing practice of criticism is one which understands ideas as justified within their problem-space. A problem-space for Scott is a constellation of human social-political and conceptual-theoretical (cognitive-political) paradigms which give rise to questions and answers as knowledge claims. Basing the emergence of knowledge on the notion of problem-space, Scott proceeds to identify the failure of postcolonial theories to deal with the political (life conditions of postcolonial states) in the postcolonial present (Scott 1999: 1).

Despite attempts by postcolonial theories to deconstruct the negative heritage of colonialism, postcolonial politics seems to be still suffering from colonial fever. Scott argues that this is a result, not only of the failure of postcolonial criticism to raise anew the questions of the political, but most importantly, the failure to conceptualize a form of criticism that is not only politically and theoretically yielding, but also contingent. In other words, the postcolonial present inhabits forms of social-political and conceptual-theoretical paradigms that differ from those inhabited by the practice of criticism. To be sure, the postcolonial present still operates within the old problem-space of colonial critique belonging to the anti-colonial discourse. Hence, Scott raises fundamental questions pertaining to the practice of postcolonial criticism: “What is the demand of criticism in the postcolonial present? And, what does our cognitive-political present demand of a practice of postcolonial criticism?” (1999: 3).

These questions point to the view that, if criticism is aimed at critical and fruitful engagement with our cognitive and political situatedness, then there are certain modes of criticism that our cognitive and political contingencies demand from the practice of criticism. In other words, if I engage in criticism with the aim of identifying spaces of human freedom within a socio-political context, the success of my criticism depends on an accurate understanding of how power relations and knowledge constellate in that specific situation. There is a certain way of thinking that I should apply in order to archive what I am looking for. In the introduction of his book, Scott defines the kind of practice of criticism he recommends within a general postcolonial theoretical framework. In the rest of the book, he applies his practice of criticism to show the change in postcolonial Jamaica and Sri Lanka from the anti-colonial through to postcolonial problem-spaces<sup>14</sup>. For this reason, my engagement with Scott’s work will primarily focus on the introduction to *Refashioning Futures*, where he spells out the effective mode of the practice of criticism.

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<sup>14</sup> The postcolonial generality of Scott’s mode of practicing criticism legitimizes a transposition of his theory to a postcolonial African context. In other words, the theory is developed by looking at a general postcolonial theoretical climate, which is then applied to Jamaica and Sri Lanka, but can also be applied to similar postcolonial contexts. Therefore, there is no theoretical necessity to justify its application to the African context(s), because the African context(s) form part of the postcolonial generality.

His third book is *Conscripts of Modernity* published in 2004. In this book, he builds on the argument he espoused in *Refashioning Futures* regarding the notion of problem-space. He examines how our postcolonial presents are understood and how our present futures are imagined. With the notion of problem-space central to his conceptual tool kit, Scott examines how anti-colonial futures were imagined, and he learns that colonial presents were understood as violent and oppressive, while anti-colonial futures were imagined as victorious and liberated. Anti-colonial futures were romantic narratives of overcoming the colonial violence and domination. In this form of narrative, time is understood as a linear successive occurrence of events, freedom comes inevitably after domination, and the past guarantees the future. Realizing that our postcolonial present is the anti-colonial future that never came to be, or which is not what the anti-colonialists and postcolonialists imagined and hoped for, the hopes and dreams of anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles have dwindled. Scott therefore asks us to go back to the drawing board and rethink how we should understand our postcolonial present and imagine our futures. Faced with presents characterized by uncertainty and lost past hopes and future pasts, Scott argues that instead of understanding our present and imagining our futures with a romantic plot, with a happy ending like our predecessors, we should understand our present as tragedy characterized by uncertainty. He (Scott in Hall 2005: 57) states that:

*Tragedy reorients us away from any assumption that relation can be organized as a steadily rising curve; it orients us away from the assumption that the future can be guaranteed by the pasts accumulated in the present. And because action in tragedy is not guaranteed in this way by a progressive dialectical resolution, it is more willing to honor our openness to contingency, our vulnerability to luck and chance; it is more willing to recognize the frailty of will, the dark underside of mastery and the reversibility of all achievements.*

This means we need a different conceptual toolkit that will speak to our present, a present which is different from our predecessors'. This is not because our predecessors were wrong in their assumptions, but rather because our times are different from theirs. Our problem-space is different from theirs. The key to his conception of "romance" and "tragedy" as something more complex and instructive than mere opposites can be found in his examination of the two editions of *The*

*Black Jacobins* (1938 & 1963) by C.L.R James (Scott 2004). *The Black Jacobins* is about the history of violence in the Atlantic slave trade and the process of self-emancipation during the Haitian Revolution. In these two editions, Scott realized that the first edition of James' *The Black Jacobins* had a narrative plot which assumed that success and freedom necessarily follows after emancipatory struggles. This form of narrative is what Scott calls "romantic".

The introduction to the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, however, takes a different narrative from "romance", after witnessing the plight that came with emancipation after the Haitian Revolution. After the Haitian Revolution, the violence that preceded the revolution persisted. As a result, C.L.R. James came to the realization that emancipation is anything but an assured consequence of liberation struggles. This is reflected in the change of James's narrative perspective from 'romantic' to 'tragic' in the introduction to the second addition. Human history is one of uncertainty and no struggle can offer any guarantee that its outcome will result in emancipation. Scott applies this insight to the postcolonial context – the future of which, he maintains, should be conceived from a tragic point of view. This will enable us to constantly think with the changing socio-political situations without guarantee of human freedom before we have it, and a surety of freedom in the future based on the fact that we have freedom in the present.

Of Scott's three main works, *Refashioning Futures* provides a salient theoretical and conceptual tool for establishing a theoretical basis on which the research will interrogate the research question. In this book, Scott attempts to define the role of critical reason and the production of knowledge in the postcolonial, both of which are central to the present chapter. In the following, I will outline Scott's argument, which will inform my theoretical approach to the problem of African identity in our present postcolonial context.

In *Refashioning Futures* Scott claims that postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism has fallen into the seductive trap of rationalism. To build his argument, he situates postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism within a postmodern theoretical framework. The postmodern theoretical and conceptual paradigm is characterized by the deconstruction of "identity" in its essentialist form as articulated mostly by modern

thinkers such as Kant, Herder, Hegel, and the like. Stuart Hall gives a succinct view of the postmodernist project of deconstruction when he states that “deconstruction has been conducted within a variety of disciplinary areas, all of them, in one way or another critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity” (Hall 1996: 1). Postmodernism has indeed been critical of the (post-)Cartesian self-sustaining subject in Western metaphysics and politics, as well as the consequent essentialism in Modern discourses on race, ethnicity, cultural identity, social and political location. It has also been critical of the claim to objectivity and universality of knowledge or epistemological absolutism. It is within this move of anti-essentialism that postcolonial criticism in general, and influential African postcolonial criticism, such as the universalist and African hermeneutical approach discussed above, have been practiced. Anti-essentialism has become the theoretical norm of African philosophy, with variations on the object of de-essentialization. Some critics deconstruct Western essentialist master discourses and oppressive narratives in order to posit their own, while others deconstruct anti-colonial and postcolonial essentialist discourses<sup>15</sup>.

Scott endorses a postmodern theory of knowledge insofar as it is understood as a critique of Enlightenment and Modernist essentialist and foundationalist philosophies and anthropologies with their hegemonic and totalizing practices (Scott 1999: 4). Postmodernism challenges ideas and practices that authorized European violence and domination over Non-European peoples. Like the African hermeneutical approach, Scott commends postmodernist views which argue that positions should be taken as contingent, histories as local, subjects as historically constructed, and knowledge entangled with power relations (ibid.). In other words, there is no view from nowhere; there is no panoptic view or Master/Grand narrative; no Hegelian World History or a single underlying Reason directing the movement of human histories.

After commending the merits of Postmodernism as a deconstructive theory of European Enlightenment and Modernity, Scott raises a pertinent problem with regards to the postcolonial practice of anti-essentialist criticism of some anti-

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<sup>15</sup> This point will be elaborated and substantiated as the chapter develops.



colonial and postcolonial knowledge claims. In utilizing the postmodernist logic of anti-foundationalism, postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism appears to be undermining the epistemological views of postmodernism (ibid.). In Scott's view, postcolonial criticism has been influenced by a theoretical practice that basically focuses on showing the essentialism of some anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses. The *telos* of this form of anti-essentialist criticism is primarily to show the essentialism of its adversaries' views as if these views have no cognitive, moral, political or historical support (ibid.). But this focus on demonstrating the essentialism of these views alludes to a desire for an essentialist theory of knowledge, for mastery:

*In their zeal for their own version of epistemological purity, the anti-essentialists show themselves unable to put away or suppress their own desire for mastery, for certainty, for the command of an essential meaning. It were as though, as Stuart Hall has put it, if they go on "thinking about Heidegger and Derrida long enough [they] will come to a moment when all will be transparent, and . . . will hold" (Scott 1999: 4).*

The anti-essentialists create a false theoretical dichotomy where one is forced to choose either to support foundationalist claims or anti-foundationalist views. This practice of criticism is a quest for epistemological sanctity. It is a search for a stable foundation of knowledge: new Kantian categories to which all knowledge should be subjected for their validity. To practice criticism in this way re-inscribes a kind of rationalism, a grand point of view, an essential meaning to which all knowledge claims should aspire for their justification, a rationalism which postmodernism has so ardently laboured to overthrow. The mode of practising criticism has a striking similarity with the universalist approach to practising African philosophy. The universalist starts with problematizing the essentialism found in ethnophilosophy but only to posit their own essentialism in their universalism. In Scott's (ibid.) own words:

In effect, then, what starts out being a welcome humbling of certain hegemonic regimes of Truth turns out to be little more than the adoption of an updated counter-design procedure, a counter-rationalism, a counter-claim to the right way for criticism to carry on.

In a different setting, Leonard Harris (1997: 255) echoes the same sentiment when he argues that:

*Authors employing postcolonial theory disavow a totalising narrative such as Christianity and deny envisioning the world as monocultural. However, these are not differences that matter. The world, for the postcolonialist is already monocultural in the sense that it is an abiding tenet of postcolonial theory that we live in a postcolonialist world of common cultural currencies. Consequently, by default, a totalizing narrative already rules.*

An example of this kind of criticism in African philosophy is Pauline Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy and Kwame Nkrumah's *Consciencism* (1964). It should be remembered that Hountondji has been categorized as taking the universalist approach to the practise of African philosophy. In his critique of ethnophilosophy and Nkrumah's work on the "unanimism" of Africanity, Hountondji argues that if Nkrumah had practised "rigorous self-criticism" or authentic philosophical critique, his criticism should have logically led to pluralism instead of the "unanimism" on Africanity (Hountondji 2002: 133-134). Hountondji argues that "real pluralism does not consist in affirming, against the West's cultural hegemony, the plurality of cultures... It consists in recognizing the complexity, diversity, tensions, contradictions, internal dynamics of each culture, and seeing in that a source of richness and creativity" (ibid., p. 132). Hountondji (ibid., p. 142) additionally proposes that

*[t]he reinsertion of thought in the real movement of history should enhance both a recognition of the specificity of the works of speculative thought, and their relationship to the social, economic and political context of the different periods.*

In as much as Hountondji knows the need to situate speculative thought in its original situation, he does not consider the bodies of knowledge he critiques in their "complexity", "internal dynamics", in their "richness" and "creativity". He does not contextualize them in terms of historical movements, nor does he consider their socio-political and economic stakes as justifications of their knowledge claims. Instead, he renders them un-philosophical and unscientific, wrong and unsubstantiated, because of the underlying essentialism and unanimism they contain and their failure to valorize pluralism<sup>16</sup>. Scott (1999: 9) captures this anti-essentialist flaw succinctly when he writes:

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<sup>16</sup> This criticism does not however render Hountondji's project in its entirety unjustified. There are a number of pertinent points he raises that are justified and profound.

*The anti-essentialists, in other words, are not interested in what constellation of historically constituted demands may have produced the supposedly “essentialist” formulations. They are not interested in determining what the strategic task at hand was or what the epistemic and Ideological material conditions were that formed the discursive context in which their moves were made and their positions taken. They are only interested in establishing their own epistemological superiority.*

This form of postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism is predicated on a number of assumptions that are problematic when given a critical look. Because it basically sets out to identify essentialism as a sufficient condition for disqualifying its adversaries' claim to true or correct knowledge, this practice of criticism assumes that criticism omnisciently knows *apriori* all functions or targets of knowledge claims. The political-cognitive contingency that informs knowledge productions, and the questions and conceptual apparatus which inform the preoccupations of knowledge claims under critique (ibid., p. 5). Only under these assumptions can one proceed to critique knowledge claims without taking into account the multiple conceptual and material conditions that contoured the production of the knowledge claims which are being critiqued. It is not surprising, however, that Hountondji arrives at this conclusion for he believes in a universal method and approach to philosophy which reasons to seek to arrive at a universal answer.

It is also assumed that any knowledge claim can be justified only if it passes the test of the constructionist view of knowledge. From this anti-essentialist epistemological view, it is taken for granted that identities are fluid, that subjects are constructed through competing discourses, and that cultures are never homogenous, without giving any consideration to what constellation of historically constituted demands may have produced the supposedly 'essentialist' formulations (Scott 1999: 9). Consequently, knowledge with any essentialist implications whatsoever are discounted out of hand. Put differently, it has become an epistemological rule or norm that identities are fluid and multiple, socially constructed and competing. As such, this kind of criticism does not take the critical responsibility to question the conceptual and theoretical constellations and the historical conditions that allowed for some essentialist formulations. When these critics happen to investigate the conceptual and theoretical paradigm from which

the essentialist views they critique were articulated<sup>17</sup>, it is mainly to show how epistemologically unfounded or naive the essentialist views are.

Scott contends that a form of criticism that takes this approach does not investigate the epistemological, material, social, political, and historical conditions that have made it possible for particular questions to be raised in the way they were, nor does it understand the knowledge claim it critiques as an instance of an answer to a historical question. This is because, according to these critics, all knowledge claims must prove their legitimacy to the universally and a-historical rule of anti-essentialism.

This kind of postcolonial criticism takes knowledge claims as answers to perennial or canonical human questions. It assumes that the questions that people before them attempted to answer are the same questions they are trying to answer. Only this time the critics assume they will be able to provide a definitive and final answer. The anti-essentialist criticism, which Scott critiques, historicizes the knowledge claims that they critique, but do not historicize the questions to which the knowledge claims they critique were answers (ibid.). In other words, it is assumed that ideas that were articulated by anti-colonial and some postcolonial theorists were answers to universal objective human questions. It does not occur to them that ideas are answers to contingent human questions. For this reason, the research finds the universalist approach, and some assumptions of the particularist and hermeneutical approaches theoretically unsustainable for supporting the interrogation of the research. To be sure, assumptions such as the existence of authentic African logical systems and values on the part of the particularist, and the existence of the two separate traditions, one African and the other Western, on the part of the hermeneutical approach, theoretically and politically submits to Scott's criticism. These ideas, as the research will show in the forthcoming chapter, emerged at particular historical moments. If these forms of practicing criticism are found wanting, what better alternatives are available?

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<sup>17</sup> Hountondji, Masolo, Appiah, and Mudimbe have all highlighted the historical conditions that have allowed essentialist views to be pronounced by their adversaries, but still went ahead to disqualify their adversaries' knowledge claims based on the essentialism in them.

In what follows, I will discuss Scott's argument as a response and alternative to the problem of anti-essentialist criticism discussed in this section. As we shall see, he responds by insisting that bodies of knowledge should be examined as answers to particular historical questions.

### **(b) The Logic of Question and Answer**

The postcolonial present calls for a critical and comprehensive understanding of the present. To come to a such an understanding of the present, a robust engagement with the past is imperative. As we have seen, contemporary anti-essentialist criticism with its insistence upon epistemological rationalism is unable to furnish us with a comprehensive and critical excavation of the past for the needs of the present. It is for this reason that the research finds Scott's idea of reading historical bodies of knowledge contingently appropriate for the purpose of excavating the past and intervening in the cognitive-political present. This will enable the research to critically interrogate the research question with lesser risks of adopting, consciously or unconsciously, the weaknesses discovered in postcolonial African anti-essentialist criticism.

To justify his claim that criticism should examine discourse as historical ideas, Scott situates his understanding of knowledge in terms of R. G Collingwood's notion of "the logic of question and answer". In Collingwood's *An Autobiography* (1939), there is an instructive chapter where he addresses the problem of knowledge. The problem of knowledge that Collingwood raises pertains to the problem of how we come to know and understand historical bodies of knowledge. This developed into an epistemological problem for Collingwood after he had an encounter with a monument (the Albert Memorial Monument in London designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott) which he found disproportionately made: "A thing so obviously, so incontrovertibly, so indefensibly bad, why had Scott done it?" (Collingwood 1939: 29). After this encounter, Collingwood (*ibid.*, p. 29 – 30) raises a number of questions with regards to the monument:

*What relation was there, I began to ask myself, between what he had done and what he had tried to do? Had he tried to produce a beautiful thing; a thing, I meant, which we should have thought beautiful? If so, he had of course failed. But had he perhaps been trying to produce something different? If so, he might possibly have succeeded. If I found the monument merely loathsome, was that perhaps my fault? Was I looking in it for qualities it did not possess, and either ignoring or despising those it did?*

What we are presented with here, is a mind trying to understand and know the statement the monument is making or was intended to make. Seen from Collingwood's epistemic disposition, the monument as it stands does not seem to make sense. The misfit between his expectation of what a monument should be or do (it should look beautiful or arouse pleasant aesthetic sense) leads him to ask the aforementioned questions. What he is looking for is knowledge. In order to acquire knowledge of the monument, Collingwood wonders what the architect meant to state in producing the monument. Collingwood then realizes that he is asking a number of questions in order to acquire knowledge, and that his expectation regarding what a monument should be or look like might not coincide with the architect's intention. At this point, Collingwood discovers that there is an activity of asking questions in his process of acquiring knowledge. He consequently develops, from this experience of the Albert Memorial encounter, an understanding of the necessity of the activity of questioning in the process of acquiring knowledge (ibid., p. 30). What we learn from Collingwood's experience, firstly, is that there is a purpose for which the monument was constructed, and secondly, that there is an expectation in Collingwood's disposition of which the Albert Memorial monument was supposed to conform.

Additionally, there is a specific audience for which the monument was built. A very important distinction to consider in this epistemological situation is that the reason for which the monument was constructed or its purpose and Collingwood's expectation of what a monument should do may not coincide. If Collingwood does not seek to understand the disposition of the audience of the architect and the intention of the architect, he may never have a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the monument as a conversation between the architect and his audience.

The Albert Memorial monument was constructed as an answer to a problem. That is, it serves a particular purpose of communicate something. Hence, for the monument as a body of knowledge to be produced, there had to be a question or a problem to which the Albert Memorial as an object of knowledge was an answer. Collingwood also had to raise a number of questions to acquire some knowledge of the monument. The activity of raising questions therefore proves to be necessary in the process of knowledge acquisition. This insight led Collingwood to question contemporary theories of knowledge (ibid.). It became apparent to him that when people produce bodies of knowledge or ideas, it is because they were confronted with questions. And the bodies of knowledge they produce are answers to the questions they were confronted with. Consequently, a quest to understand a historical body of knowledge entails considering the questions to which the body of knowledge one seeks to understand was given as an answer. It is for this reason that Collingwood (1939: 30) states:

*The principle that a body of knowledge consists not of 'propositions', 'statements', 'judgements', or whatever name logicians use in order to designate assertive acts of thought (or what in those acts is asserted: for 'knowledge' means both the activity of knowing and what is known), but of these together with the questions they are meant to answer; and that a logic in which answers are attended to and the questions neglected is a false logic.*

The convergence or agreement of the African hermeneutical approach and Scott's view of knowledge is realized at this point. Like the African hermeneutical approach, Scott – through Collingwood's ideas – holds a time-context bound definition of knowledge. But while the African hermeneutical approach emphasizes traditions and/or horizons, Scott emphasizes the question-answer constellation. Such an emphasis on the question-answer relation does not rule out the idea of a horizon, but it rules out fixation on tradition.

Understanding bodies of knowledge primarily in terms of their logical (linguistic or grammatical) structure without the consideration of the questions to which they were given as answers amounts to "false logic". This approach of extracting the meaning of the bodies of knowledge in the logic of language independently of historical dynamics is problematic for Osha (2005: VI) as well, as evidenced in his critique of Wiredu:

*Wiredu's handling of the problems of language does not appear to be sufficiently profound. Language, we must note, forms a vital nexus in his project of conceptual decolonization. In his treatment, language and its attendant cultural dynamics appear rather staid and static, a limitation attributed to an inadequate responsive linguistic philosophy.*

In Osha's view, even the understanding of the meaning of language cannot be premised on a static structure of language, which is autonomous from the cultural dynamics that gives it meaning. Cultural dynamics are horizons that give meaning to concepts. It is for this reason that this study, in agreement with Osha, argues that a conceptual decolonization project that does not historicize concepts in the dynamism of cultures is headed for failure. Following this line of reasoning, Collingwood (1939: 31) contends that:

*You cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements, even though he has spoken or written with perfect command of language and perfectly truthful intention. In order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was (a question in his own mind, and presumed by him to be in yours) to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer.*

This means that a body of knowledge should be understood as an answer to a question within the dynamism of cultures. Language structure in the form of propositional logic alone cannot afford us a robust, comprehensive and contextual understanding of any body of knowledge.

With reference to Collingwood's encounter with the Albert Memorial Monument, the activity of questioning and a desire for an answer comes before any production of knowledge. Hountondji (2002: 83) is in agreement with Collingwood when he says that "every thought, however original it may be, is to some extent shaped by the questions that it is asked". Hence, reason permits us to argue that in order for one to know what the author, inventor, painter, sculptor, or architect meant by his/her work, one has to consider the question or problem to which his/her work was an answer.

In Scott's observation, Collingwood's logic of "question and answer" has not received sufficient attention (1999: 6). A thinker who has engaged and expanded Collingwood's logic of "question and answer" is Quentin Skinner. Skinner



developed Collingwood's argument beyond the strict logic of "question and answer". Skinner's view challenges the thought that bodies of knowledge are historical attempts at answering permanent or recurrent human questions. Skinner (in Scott 1999: 6) argues that:

*The history of thought should be viewed not as a series of attempts to answer a canonical set of questions, but a sequence of episodes in which the questions as well as the answers have frequently changed.*

In other words, every question raised by human beings is always a specific question formulated within a specific situation.

On another level, Skinner adds an additional perspective to Collingwood's logic of question and answer. He argues that bodies of knowledge are not just answers to specific contingent historical questions, but they are also performatives. Skinner uses J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory to illustrate this point. According to Austin, there are certain utterances which in their function are not aimed at describing or declaring the state of affairs; neither do they claim to be true nor false (Austin 1962: 6): "The uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something" (ibid., p.: 5). Examples that illustrate such utterances are: When a bride or groom says "I do" during a wedding ceremony; and when a priest says, "I baptize you" during a baptismal ceremony. The utterance "I do" and "I baptize you" do not describe a state of affairs, neither do they claim to be true or false, but rather, they are actions that create or institute marriage and baptism. He calls these utterances *performative sentences*, deriving from the verb 'perform', with the noun 'action', designating that these utterances do something as they are uttered: "It indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action - it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (ibid., p. 6 – 7). These sentences, then, are not mere words that communicate meaning; they *do* things when they are uttered. It is in this field of performative language that Skinner inserts Collingwood's logic and argues that bodies of knowledge should not be understood only in terms of their internal logic or logical status, but also necessarily in terms of what these bodies of knowledge do (or attempt to do) when they are generated.

The performativity of knowledge claims is given a slightly different accent in a postcolonial context when Lewis Gordon (1997: 246) asks the question: “When such intellectuals “speak out”, what is the scene that is being laid by such a gesture?”. Certainly, bodies of knowledge do act as gestures and create scenes in fields of numerous constituents at stake. It should, however, be understood that Austin’s notion of performatives is not to be understood as gestures, but rather, they are utterances which are actual actions constituting social institutions such as marriages, baptism and even political offices. In all the three approaches to the definition of the practice of African philosophy discussed, not one accounts for this dimension of knowledge which is instructive in understanding knowledge claims with strong political accents such as those found in African philosophy.

Skinner implants the performativity of knowledge claims in what he calls a determinate position that people take in an ongoing argument. Skinner (in Scott 1999: 7) makes the following assertion:

*Any act of communication always constitutes the taking up of some determinate position in relation to some pre-existing conversation or argument. It follows that if we wish to understand what has been said, we shall have to be able to identify what exact position has been taken up...I have expressed this contention in terms of Austin’s claim that we need to be able to understand what the speaker or writer may have been doing in saying what was said. But it is, I think, a fascinating though unnoticed feature of Austin’s analysis that can in turn be viewed as an exemplification of what Collingwood called the ‘logic of question and answer.*

In this vein, bodies of knowledge are not just effects of logical structure or propositions in their own right, or for descriptive or representative purposes, or for answering questions. Bodies of knowledge are also positions that people take within an argument, and by taking particular positions or stances, these bodies of knowledge perform actions or do certain things, or even at minimum, intend to do things with those particular positions that they occupy. Consequently, if one wants to critique the failure of a body of knowledge, then one should not only look at the logical structure of knowledge, but also, necessarily consider, if I may use Austin’s words the “*infelicity*” or “*felicity*” of the performative. In other words, one should consider if the position taken or idea that was propounded, effected the purpose for which the position was taken or idea was articulated. Moreover, the taking up of determinate positions in an ongoing historical argument should be understood as

constrictive of the pronouncement of knowledge claims. In order for a critic or knowledge claimant to present her position in a historically constituted argument, she has to articulate her discourse in a particular fashion without which it loses its performativity.

If we do not consider the question that a body of knowledge was meant to answer, the position taken within the movement of the argument, and the action that a body of knowledge was intended to perform, it is easy for critics to identify contradictions in a body of knowledge (Collingwood 1939: 33). This, however, does not mean that there cannot be contradictions in bodies of knowledge. In some instances, bodies of knowledge contradict each other. But contradictions should not be founded on logical contradiction alone, but should take into account all the constituting variables of the knowledge situation in question. If contradictions in knowledge claims are basically identified at a purely logical level, then this understanding of contradiction reduces the constituent of ideas to grammatical structures only. This reduction is also problematic as it has been shown through Osha's argument, since even the meaning of language cannot be properly understood independently of the dynamism of culture. Propositions as bodies of knowledge do not have an objective stance or a pure logical function because they are results of questions, positions in arguments and actions within a movement of the argument. Consequently, the notion of contradiction loses its logical purity or superiority because of the other considerations (question, positions or performativity) in a body of knowledge. Collingwood (ibid.) argues this point clearly:

*If you cannot tell what a proposition means unless you know what question it is meant to answer, you will mistake its meaning if you make a mistake about that question. One symptom of mistaking the meaning of a proposition is thinking that it contradicts another proposition which in fact it does not contradict. No two propositions, I saw, can contradict one another unless they are answers to the same question. It is therefore impossible to say of a man, 'I do not know what the question is which he is trying to answer, but I can see that he is contradicting himself.*

The argument on the notion of contradiction spills over to the notion of truth. If the meaning of a proposition is relative to the question it was meant to answer, then it follows that its truth must also be relative to the same question.

*Meaning, agreement and contradiction, truth and falsehood, none of these belonged to propositions in their own right, propositions by themselves; they belonged only to propositions as the answers to questions: each proposition answering a question strictly correlative to itself. (Collingwood 1939: 33).*

The truthfulness of bodies of knowledge does not belong to the grammatical structure or “propositions in their own right”, neither does it belong to the coherence of related propositions taken together as a whole in a body of knowledge; nor a correct representation of the state of affairs; nor its utility in the case of pragmatism, but it belongs to a complex constellation of questions and answers (ibid., p. 37). Each question arises from a specific relevant space it occupies in a whole, and each answer is a “right” answer to a specific question. By “right” answer, Collingwood does not mean it to be true or false, but rather, “the ‘right’ answer to a question is the answer which enables us to get ahead with the process of questioning and answering” (ibid.). This means that a “right” answer to a specific question may be true or false, felicitous or infelicitous depending on the conditions under which the question arises, and its underlying presuppositions. And most importantly, a right answer is not one that gives an absolute answer to historically contingent questions, but one that opens up new spaces for an on-going process of questioning and answering.

These conditions that Collingwood establishes for understanding knowledge claims, and the development that Skinner brings to Collingwood’s argument, reinforce the notion that you cannot know the meaning and truthfulness of a proposition without knowing the question it was meant to answer, and the conditions under which it was articulated. Accordingly, I concur with Scott that “this is an important principle for any practice of historical or philosophical (and I might add anthropological) understanding” (Scott 1999: 6). In critiquing rationalist and absolutist views prevalent among contemporary anti-essentialist postcolonial African critics, as well as among the essentialists they critique, one cannot straightforwardly expose the error of a knowledge claim at anti-essentialist face value without knowing the question and the conditions to which the proposition was meant to be an answer.

Further, and most importantly, some postcolonial anti-essentialist African critics or approaches (specifically the universalists) seek closed-ended answers to human existential problems, while starting their arguments from an open-ended theoretical framework (postmodernism). Others (particularist and hermeneutical approaches) take absolutist socio-political and theoretical categories (Africa and the West) in otherwise entangled contexts with time-context bound approaches. Others, particularist and hermeneutical approaches, locate intellectual and socio-political freedom in revitalizing the authentic but broken past. But these ideas, this section argued, are premised on an inaccurate understanding of the nature of knowledge and function of criticism, at least as understood today. It is for this reason that the research holds the view that knowledge claims are historical answers to historically constituted questions. And knowledge claims are not only propositions, but also socio-political positions and performatives aimed at achieving specific historical ends. This, however, does not instruct us on how to practice criticism on such an understanding of knowledge in the postcolonial African present. In the following section, I will critically discuss what Scott calls strategic-criticism as a robust and comprehensive manner of practicing criticism.

### **(c) Strategic Criticism**

In order to practice criticism without at the same time re-inscribing a rationalism or an essential meaning that Postmodernism and other cognate projects have laboured to deconstruct, Scott proposes an understanding of criticism as a strategic practice. He distinguishes strategic criticism from 'strategic essentialism', which justifies essentialist views for political purposes or otherwise (1999: 5). This distinction does not mean that Scott is of the view that strategic essentialism is not justifiable. Rather, he believes that some kinds of essentialism can have cognitive, political and moral justifications (ibid., p. 4). Before discussing the notion of strategic-criticism, allow me to briefly revisit the notion of problem-space.

The notion of problem-space champions the understanding of criticism as a temporality. Scott gives an elaborate account of a problem-space in his later work, *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004: 4), where he states that:

*A “problem-space,” in my usage, is meant first of all to demarcate a discursive context, a context of language. But it is more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on — though it is certainly this. It is a context of argument and, therefore, one of intervention. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.*

Within this definition, Scott accounts for all the elements constitutive of knowledge: 1) the logical or cognitive part of knowledge; 2) the logic of question and answer; 3) the ideological and political stakes and positions or the performative aspect of knowledge; and 4) the historicity or contingency of questions raised and answers given. When understood as a temporary constellation of variables, and generative of objects and conceptual apparatus of discursive practices, criticism will no longer be taken as a quest for answers to perennial questions. Further, understanding criticism as practiced within a problem-space, which is a constellation of concepts and ideologies that allow us to conceive of a problem in a specific way and that generates objects of criticism, demands not only a historicized conception of objects of criticism, but also a historicized or contingent conceptual apparatus that criticism inhabits. One cannot have contingent objects of criticism, on the one hand, and a perennial conceptual apparatus of criticism on the other. Both objects of criticism and conceptual apparatus should be historicized. Therefore, problem-spaces are historically constituted, and it is on this conception of ‘problem-space’ that the notion of strategic-criticism is premised.

Scott extends Collingwood’s principle of “question and answer” to what he calls a “*strategic practice of criticism*” (1999: 4). Collingwood’s and Skinner’s principle of question and answer was applied to inquiring about the past in order to understand the present (Scott 1999: 7). As Collingwood puts it: “You cannot find out what a man means by simply studying his spoken or written statements ... in order to find out his meaning you must also know what the question was ... to which the thing he has said or written was meant as an answer” (1939: 3). Collingwood clearly indicates that what is of interest to him is what has already been said or written. He is interested in knowing the past for understanding the present. Scott, on the other hand, focuses on reading the present in order to establish whether or not what we are preoccupied with in the present can be carried on into the future. Focusing on the present for the future should not be understood as disregarding the past. As it

has already been intimated, we need to read the past, in order to understand the present. Because the present is the result of the past, and the present is also the future's past. While Collingwood's focus is the relationship between the past and the present, the guiding principle, in Scott's strategic-criticism, becomes the relation between the present and imagined or hoped future. Scott (1999: 7) defines his practice of strategic criticism in these words:

*A practice of strategic criticism is concerned with determining at any conjuncture what conceptual moves among the many available options will have the most purchase, the best yield. On this view, a critic has not only to be concerned with whether or not the statements that might be made are logically adequate answers to the questions that can be shown to underlie them (the burden of Collingwood's preoccupation), but with whether or not these questions themselves continue, in the conjuncture at hand, to constitute questions worth having answers to.*

Accordingly, if criticism is to be understood as a position that is taken in an on-going historical argument, and aimed at finding out whether the questions we are preoccupied with still have the currency to provide us with knowledge of the present and worthy of shaping the future with, then criticism should not understand itself as a yardstick for correct measurement. Criticism should not be understood as all-knowing: knowing all political-cognitive contingencies in advance; knowing in advance all demands of specific historical constellations; knowing in advance the demands of historical moments on criticism; knowing the questions and conceptual apparatus that animate and preoccupy the past, present, and future. Instead criticism should be reformulated based on contingency and strategy (ibid., p. 4-5). Criticism should be understood as a practice of finding answers to historically constituted problems, which constantly changes as social phenomena change. It is for this reason that Scott (1999: 7) further elaborates the strategic character of criticism:

*I mean to urge that criticism must understand itself self-consciously as a practice of entering an historically constituted field of on-going moral argument, of gauging that argument's tenor, of calculating the stakes (what might stand and what might fall as a result of a particular move), of ascertaining the potential allies and possible adversaries, of determining the lines and play of forces (what might count and what might not as a possible intervention), and so on.*

At every historical moment of criticism on Scott's view, a critic is faced with the responsibility of examining the conceptual apparatus that animate his/her practice

of criticism: The available conceptual and political stakes and possibilities; the present cognitive-political demands on criticism; and the position s/he takes in this on-going argument. After these considerations, a critic must then ask whether or not the conceptual apparatus that animate his/her practice of criticism and the questions that s/he is preoccupied with, meet the present cognitive-political demands on criticism, and have a defining force on the future (ibid., p. 8). Instead of focusing on showing the essentialism in the ideas or answers to the questions our predecessors were preoccupied with, Scott is of the view that questions are of most relevance to strategic criticism.

As earlier intimated, because an idea is formed by the question with which it is tasked, “an adequate interrogation of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) depends upon identifying the difference between the questions that animated former presents and those that animate our own” (Scott 2004: 3). This instructive claim is based on an understanding that when a question is posed, it is conditioned by its historicity. And a question can never escape the material, conceptual and historical conditions that gave it birth and still remain salient. In other words, it cannot escape its problem-space and remain politically and theoretically justified. An examination of questions therefore becomes necessary because, it does not only allow a better understanding of the answers our predecessors were preoccupied with, but also permits us to find out if the questions our predecessors were preoccupied with have salience within our present context. This necessitates a thorough understanding of both our predecessor’s and our own cognitive-political habitats, and then proceeding to identify what our own cognitive-political conjuncture demands from the practice of criticism based on our future hopes or imaginations.

The realization of the demands of the cognitive-political conjuncture or problem-space on the practice of criticism, on Scott’s understanding, should contour the kind of questions that are to be raised and answered in each conjuncture. It is common practice in contemporary African postcolonial criticism to let methodologies and approaches define the questions that criticism raises and attempts to answer, as elaborated earlier in the example of postcolonial anti-essentialist discourse. An anti-essentialist approach becomes the generator of



questions and the method by which these questions are addressed. It is hardly questioned if the methodology and approach can still read the present and open our imaginations to possible futures. For instance, questions such as, can the ethnophilosophical approach still yield the political possibilities we hope to achieve for the future from our contemporary situatedness? Therefore, if criticism is tasked to face the demands of the cognitive-political conjuncture that a critic inhabits, then methodologies and approaches become merely tools (the choice of which is defined by the questions raised within the cognitive-political conjuncture which the critic inhabits) for understanding the past, the present and for refashioning futures.

The failure to examine strategically (taking account of all constituting variables in an epistemic situation) our predecessors' question-answer problem has led to postcolonial African criticism taking the questions and contexts that allowed Fanon or Nkrumah, for example, to theorize the colonial situation, as the critic's own. The point here is that the way Fanon or Nkrumah experienced colonialism is different from the way we are experiencing our postcolonial present. And if it is Fanon's or Nkrumah's cognitive-political experience of colonialism that first of all informed the questions the critic raised, and secondly, if the questions s/he raised informed the answers given, then our imagination of our questions and answers to postcolonial problems should not be thought within the Fanonian/Nkrumahian colonial experience. We ought rather to be informed by our own cognitive-political experience. This however does not mean that we should not interrogate the Fanonian/Nkrumahian problem-space, which, to be sure, informs our present. If we do not interrogate the questions that conditioned anti-colonial and postcolonial imaginations but the answers only, we are likely to mistake these anti-colonial and postcolonial problem-spaces for our own; mistaking the Fanonian/Nkrumahian image of colonialism as representative of our present. Alternatively, if we are to practice criticism consciously so that it is within a historically constituted space, then we should interrogate not only the answers to anti-colonial and postcolonial questions, but more pertinently, the questions which gave rise to the answers, and so be able to "determine the contingent demands of and on criticism in any conjuncture" (Scott 1999: 7). Scott (*ibid.*, p. 8) elaborates:

*These conjunctures are in effect “problem-spaces”; that is to say, they are conceptual-ideological ensembles, discursive formations, or language games that are generative of objects, and therefore of questions.*

This brings me to the conclusion that Scott’s notions of problem-space and strategic-criticism will furnish us with a robust and comprehensive critical tool with which to ascertain whether the notion of African identity has the conceptual and theoretical purchase to imagine spaces of freedom in contemporary situations on the African continent. Unlike the three approaches in African philosophy discussed in this chapter, Scott’s theory provides the conceptual tools (problem-space and strategic-criticism) to interrogate: 1) the contemporaneity of conceptual and theoretical assumptions; 2) the material conditions; 3) the ideological and political stakes; and 4) the questions to which knowledge claims are given as answers. By exploring the historical development of the notion of African identity within the various problem-spaces it has occupied throughout the centuries, Scott’s ideas of the nature of knowledge and the function of criticism in the postcolonial present offers a better alternative to the particularist, universalist, and African hermeneutical approaches. To be sure, these three approaches attempt to challenge the given theories and practices in order to open up spaces of freedom on the continent. Scott’s approach, on the other hand, interrogates the historicity of the theories and concepts that underline the three approaches, and question whether they are purchasing or yielding, within the present conjuncture and worthy of shaping the future with. And this is exactly what the present study aims at – to find out whether the notion of African identity remains conceptually and theoretically instructive at this particular historical juncture, and worthy of shaping the future with.

What I have done in this segment is to espouse Scott’s notion of strategic-criticism, which states that criticism should be understood as interrogating whether or not the questions and concepts we are currently preoccupied with still have any purchase to address our present cognitive-political habitat. Strategic criticism probes the relevance of our current problems and conceptual tools for our future present. In this way, strategic criticism goes beyond Collingwood’s logic of “question and answer” which interrogates the past to understand the present.

Strategic-criticism operates on the understanding that knowledge claims arise from problem-spaces. A problem-space is a historically constituted constellation of concepts, ideologies and socio-political conditions, which gives rise to questions and answers as knowledge claims. I concluded the section by stating that Scott's ideas of problem-space and strategic-criticism offer a better theoretical framework than the particularist, universalist and African hermeneutical approaches to interrogating whether the notion of African identity has the conceptual and theoretical purchase to do the work it is being tasked with, that is, to imagine spaces of freedom in contemporary situations on the African continent. Before turning to the next chapter, a summary of this chapter is given below.

### **1.5. Conclusion**

What I have done in this chapter is establish the theoretical framework within which I will interrogate the question: whether or not the notion of African identity has the conceptual and theoretical purchase to do the work it is tasked by essentialist and anti-essentialist views. I began the chapter by establishing the theoretical climate of postcolonial African philosophy. In the African postcolonial climate, it was argued that two dominant views on the notion of African identity emerged – the essentialist and the anti-essentialist view of African identity. I went on to identify and discuss the three dominant approaches to the African philosophical practice of criticism: the ethnophilosophical/particularist approach; the universalist approach; and the African hermeneutical approach. In the light of their theoretical shortcomings I ventured on in search of an alternative theoretical framework and discovered that David Scott's manages to appropriate the virtues of the three African theoretical frameworks while avoiding their theoretical shortcomings. It was found that Scott's theoretical approach in *Refashioning Futures* provides a robust and comprehensive critique of postcolonial forms of practicing criticism.

Utilizing Scott's criticism of anti-essentialist postcolonial criticism, it was established that the latter in its universalist form is reductionist in its approach to the complex and contingent African anti-colonial and postcolonial discourses,

because the approach primarily aims at exposing the essentialism within its adversaries' discourses. Further, it was shown that this postcolonial anti-essentialist criticism in its focus on theoretical and logical correctness, has neglected the political demands of postcolonial African situations to the effect of continued revised versions of anti-colonial and postcolonial discourse of African identity.

To challenge the anti-essentialist approach to anti-colonial and postcolonial theoretical and political discourses, the chapter used Scott's application of R. G. Collingwood's argument of the "logic of question and answer", and expanded the latter beyond Scott's employment in his work. The chapter argued that to facilitate comprehensive critique thereof, knowledge claims should be understood beyond the logical structure of language. Such critique demands that ideas should be taken as answers to questions; questions which are historically constituted and conditioned; and answers which are not only logical positions that thinkers make, but also positions and actions which they take in an on-going historically constituted argument. This forms a problem-space. A problem-space, as defined by Scott, is a constellation of conceptual, political, ideological and material conditions that permit individuals to raise particular questions and find particular answers to these questions. I went on to argue that this is a better way of practicing criticism because it understands criticism as contingent.

Still working with David Scott's theory, the chapter went on to utilize his notion of strategic-criticism. While Collingwood used the "logic of question and answer" to understand historical bodies of knowledge, Scott expands the logic of question and answer to a future-oriented practice of criticism. This entails identifying both the questions and answers that occupy not only the past, but also the contemporary practice of criticism, and ask whether these questions are worth carrying on into the future. Underpinning this idea is an understanding that the political and cognitive situation each age inhabits demands a particular kind of practice of criticism. Hence, in asking whether the questions can be carried on into the future, the critic has to know the current demands of the cognitive and political conditions on the practice of criticism. On this understanding, the chapter has established that

Scott's theory through the notions of problem-space and strategic-criticism is the best theoretical alternative on which to interrogate the research question.

The following chapter will critically interrogate, through the theoretical framework established in this chapter, the conceptual and theoretical purchase of the notion of African identity in its essentialist view.

## Chapter 2: 19th Century Pan-Africanism and the Essentialist View of African Identity

### 2.1. Introduction

The task of this study is to uncover the conceptual and theoretical incapability of the notion of African identity in its essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions to theorize the socio-political and cultural constellations, and identify spaces of agency/freedom in contemporary African post-postcolonial<sup>18</sup> situations. In the previous chapter, I outlined the theoretical framework from which the research question will be interrogated. Through critically examining the three dominant theoretical approaches (particularist, universalist, and African hermeneutics) from which the notion of African identity has been interrogated and articulated, I drew on their strengths and weaknesses, opting for an alternative theoretical approach, which I found in the work of David Scott.<sup>19</sup> I reviewed Scott's argument that in order to critically engage with our contemporary conceptual and political demands in a productive or yielding fashion, we need to understand knowledge claims as both multiple and historically constituted. Following Scott, Collingwood and Foucault, I showed that knowledge claims are not only products of logical or propositional inference, but rather, they are also conceptually and politically oriented and aimed at achieving specific ends. Both the political ends and conceptual framework from which knowledge is produced are historically defined. It is on the basis of the multiple constituent and historical contingent nature of knowledge and political ends that I am going to argue that the notion of African identity no longer has the conceptual and theoretical purchase to do the work it is being tasked to do in contemporary debates by some theorists and critics.

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<sup>18</sup> By post-postcolonial, I mean the period beginning with the late 1990s. The postcolonial is period characterised by the experience and reflection on meaning of independence after colonialism. Mudimbe's (1988) and Appiah's (1992) works can be categorised as postcolonial precisely because they attempt to theorise postcoloniality in relation to the colonial experience. Post-postcoloniality on the hand attempts to theorise the present in relation to the postcolonial. Politically, postcolonial politics were understood in relation to colonialism, while post-postcolonial politics, not entirely divorced from the colonial experience, but are understood in relation to the postcolonial.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Scott 1999 and 2004.

In this chapter I will critically discuss the essentialist view of African identity in order to show its historicity and to establish the limits of its conceptual and theoretical orientation. To this end, I will investigate how the notion of African identity emerged from 19<sup>th</sup> century imaginations of Pan-Africanism, and how it has come to influence our contemporary conceptions of socio-political and cultural constellations. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist thinkers, I explicate the ideas of Alexander Crummell and Edward Wilmot Blyden who defined Pan-Africanism for the black people living on the continent of Africa.

In interrogating the Pan-Africanist ideas of Crummell and Blyden, I will argue that their conceptions of Pan-Africanism were a result of the conceptual paradigm they inhabited, the socio-political and conceptual problems they were faced with, and the end to which their ideas were harnessed within their historical moment. I will conclude by positing that their articulation of Pan-Africanism created a conceptual orientation from which the notion of African identity found its genesis or mode of formation.

After establishing the conceptual orientation of the notion of African identity from the Pan-Africanist ideas of Crummell and Blyden, I will briefly discuss how the anti-colonialists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century inhabited the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African conceptual paradigm. I will then proceed to give an exposition of Mafeje's conception of African identity in "Africity: A Combative Ontology" as representative of the contemporary essentialist view of African identity. I will then argue that despite Mafeje's attempt to move away from the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual orientation of Pan-Africanism (like most essentialist views of African identity), he fails to do so, because the notion of African identity is founded upon the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual orientation, its problems and socio-political and cultural ends, which differ fundamentally from our own.

But how did the notion of African identity come to be a conceptual and political tool among African thinkers and political protagonists? What problems was it aimed to

answer, and from which conceptual paradigm where the problems registered and the answers given? In the following section, the research will answer these questions by critically exposing and examining the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist ideas.

## 2.2. The First Pan-Africanists

Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism is regarded the most influential version of Pan-Africanism, the idea of Pan-Africanism, as such, does not originate with the 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thinkers and writers such as Anton William Amo (1703-1759), Philip Quaque (1741-1816), Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), Olaudah Equiano of Benin (1745-1797), and Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had already imagined, in their own ways, Pan-African ideas. Before these black intellectuals and writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European explorers and missionaries had already categorized peoples with black bodies of African origin as Africans or Negros possessing biological, mental, and moral characteristics different from those of other peoples around the world<sup>20</sup>. Some even argues that the idea of Pan-Africanism dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>.

Although Crummell's and Blyden's American contemporaries, such as Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper and Booker T. Washington, may have shared a Pan-African notion of black people, Crummell's and Blyden's conception of Pan-Africanism had a particular affinity to the continent of Africa and its black peoples. Unlike other influential thinkers and writers at the time, Crummell and Blyden had the privilege of living on the continent of Africa, identifying with its native peoples and assuming the responsibility of defining the peoples and their future. For this reason, the work of Crummell and Blyden has had a profound influence on the black African imaginations of what it means to be African and/or black and how to go about resolving the problems brought about by European white racism. Their work on Africa has been resourceful for intellectual and political imaginations, as

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mudimbe (1994). S

<sup>21</sup> This view is held by Martin and West (1999), as well as by Eze (2013).



evidenced in the works of politicians and thinkers such as Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Valentine Mudimbe and Anthony Appiah, to mention but a few<sup>22</sup>.

The influence of the work of Crummell and Blyden on the conceptualizations of African identity and on African minds makes it pertinent for this research to critically interrogate the conceptual and political constellations that resulted in their conceptualizations of Pan-Africanism. It will become apparent that their conceptual legacy is central to the genesis of the notion of African identity or Africinity, as defined and debated in contemporary discourses.

The historical moment in which Crummell and Blyden imagined their Pan-Africanism is one characterized by the transition from slavery to colonization on the African continent. The transition from slavery to colonisation did not signal the abolishment of white racism and the dehumanization of black people, but its continuation in a different form. To understand Crummell's and Blyden's conceptualization of Pan-Africanism, we need to come to an understanding of the problems they tried to address therewith.

### **(a) The Black Problem of the 19th Century**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought different problems for different black peoples of the African continent. One dominant problem, which has had many political and intellectual implications and received much scholarly and political attention, is the problem of white racism. Needless to say, the African-European encounter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century has been historically defining for black people. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century, since Europeans "discovered New Lands" and encountered black people, black people became objects of European dehumanization culminating in African slavery. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, African slavery flourished on the Eastern and Western coasts of the African continent. Some Europeans captured and bought

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<sup>22</sup> The ideas of these thinkers will be discussed in due course.

black slaves on the Western coast of Africa, while some Arabs and Portuguese captured and bought black slaves from the Eastern coast of Africa. On the continent of Africa, some black people were perceived as commodities both by their black brothers and sisters and by the white and Arab slavers. Overseas, despite the British and American State abolition of slavery, black slavery gained renewed impetus and flourished because of the economic recession and other socio-cultural factors especially in the American South (cf. Lynch 1967). For black people living in North American States and in Latin American countries that had abolished slavery, emancipation did not mean much because they were still regarded and treated as inferior members of society (Lynch 1967: 1). In other parts of the American continents, black people did not have rights both in law and custom (ibid., p. 2). In some instances, it was normalized by law and custom that black people had no human rights. A black person was inferior everywhere; on the continent of their origin where they were captured into slavery and in the New Lands to which they were shipped as cargo. The black problem of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the problem of black inferiority. Lynch (ibid., p. 3) captures the problem of black inferiority concisely in the following quote:

*Perhaps the most wrong inflicted on the Negro race in the 19th century was the successful building of a myth that the Negro was inherently inferior to other races – the myth that had been originally elaborated in an attempt to justify Negro slavery, and later European imperialism in Africa.*

Negro inferiority was constructed on the notion of race. Human beings were categorized into races. Based on their phenotype, socio-cultural differences and geographical origins, races of people were hierarchized: the Caucasoid race at the top of humanity, and the other races were placed under it. The 19<sup>th</sup> century conception of race held that:

*There was a hierarchy of races with the Negro at or near the bottom; there were 'innate and permanent differences in the moral and mental endowments' of races: each race had its own 'talents', 'instincts' and 'energy', and that race rather than environmental or circumstantial factors 'held the key to the history' of a people; that there existed 'an instinctive antipathy among races', and that homogeneity of race was necessary for successful nation building; that miscegenation was 'unnatural', and that mulattoes were 'immoral' and weak people with 'confused race instincts' (ibid., p. 59 – 60).*

To be sure, “race became a term at once claiming scientific, providential and pragmatic significance” (Larimore 2008: 342). This was the dominant view that informed most intellectuals, political protagonists, and ordinary socio-political actors of Crummell’s and Blyden’s time. Those at the near bottom or bottom of the hierarchy were denied human rights. Black people, defined as Negroes belonging to one race, were allocated the lot of sub-humanity and were denied conditions of human life. The conditions that constituted racial differences were defined as biological, cultural and persisting overtime, as Lynch (op. cit., 1967) correctly points out above. This meant that whether one succeeds in mastering the culture of another “race”, one could not escape the hierarchy of races and the socio-political implications or consequences. Whatever the Negro did could not elevate him/her from the inferiority of his/her “race” and the socio-political implications thereof.

Distinguished Enlightenment thinkers and theorists of human liberty, such as Rousseau, Locke, Kant, Hume, and Hegel, did not only write to explain the inferiority of the Negro peoples as a race, but also went as far as justifying the enslavement of black people (Bernasconi 2003: 37 & Buck-Mors 2000). On describing the ontological sub-humanity of the Negro race, Hegel (2001 [1837]: 110-111) for instance, writes the following:

*In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence — as for example, God, or Law — in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being.*

The Negro race on this view was seen as not yet human. The Negro race has not yet attained the capacity for volition or “they feel no impulse (*Trieb*) towards freedom” (Bernasconi 1998:50). This argument of the absence of the impulse to freedom was used to justify the enslavement of black people. On this logic, the question was: how could one expect freedom from a being that does not have the impulse to freedom? Since the Negroes, as constituted by their race, do not have the impulse to freedom, it makes no difference to enslave them. The Negro, Hegel and many of his contemporaries argued, cannot “realise his own being”. More

importantly, Hegel maintains that the Negro is devoid of volition both in terms of phenotype (physical) and psychic make-up. This meant that when you see a person with a black body, you encounter a sub-human being incapable of volition. The black body is reduced to a black person or black consciousness<sup>23</sup>. As culture and politics are understood as products of human volition, the Negro was excluded from the political due to his/her ontological status as a sub-human incapable of volition and therefore incapable of culture and politics. On this basis, it was logical for Hegel (2001 [1837]: 109) to argue that:

*Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained — for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World — shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself — the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night.*

For Hegel, Africa proper, which is Negro Africa, Black Africa or Sub-Sahara Africa, does not feature in human world history because its race or people has not yet developed the ability for human actions such as voluntary actions: Hegel, like many of his European predecessors and contemporaries, did not see the enslavement of the Negroes as dehumanization in the same way that the enslaved Negroes may have experienced it. On the contrary, Hegel argued that “existing in a State, slavery is itself a phase of advance from the merely isolated sensual existence — a phase of education — a mode of becoming participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it” (ibid., p. 117). Hegel’s justification of slavery was celebrated by the majority of the people of his day. Consequently, the discourse of Negro sub-humanity was sustained and it shaped the lives of black peoples under the influence and control of white people.

Crummell and Blyden inherited a world that did not consider them human because of their phenotype and supposed mental structure or consciousness. They lived in a world that did not allow them to be human beings, that is, to be socio-political and cultural agents and to be recognized as such; a world that only allowed them to be slaves, or, second class citizens of a white European world, at best. This was

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<sup>23</sup> The association of peoples of African origin with blackness and lack of self-consciousness has led some thinkers to protest calling peoples of African origin as black. (Cf. Tsri 2015).

the problem(s) to which Crummell and Blyden reacted when they formulated their ideas of Pan-Africanism. They expected their pronouncements of Pan-Africanism to achieve what Hegel and many others had denied the Negro people. Crummell's and Blyden's ideas of Pan-Africanism reflect not only the problem(s) to which they were answers, but also the basic assumptions from which their world was constructed. In what follows, I will critically expound Crummell's notion of Pan-Africanism. As Crummell is an older contemporary of Blyden and the co-founder of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism, it is fitting to begin our discussion of Pan-Africanism with him.

### **(b) Alexander Crummell (1819-1898)**

Alexander Crummell was born from free parents in 1819 in New York, United States of America. He was trained to become a priest in the American Episcopal Church despite racial resistance. Even though he was a free man, Crummell encountered racial abuses at a tender age, which was not novel at his time even to free black people. Crummell writes that: "When I was a boy of 13, I heard the utterance fresh from the lips of the great J.C. Calhoun, to wit, that if he could find the Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man" (1891: 54 – 55)<sup>24</sup>. Such racial abuses Crummell witnessed in his everyday life made him join the anti-slavery movement in America as an adult. He received a descent education while he was young and after he was ordained a priest and exiled from his diocese because of his involvement in anti-racial activism, he went to England where he studied Moral philosophy at Cambridge University. Crummell is regarded as the first black graduate of Cambridge University (Ilo 2013).

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<sup>24</sup> Crummell's statement is informative of one the criteria used to separate humans from sub-humans. It seems that for J.C Calhoun, one needed to know Greek syntax to be respected as a human being. This mirrors the Eurocentric and cultural definition of humanity. One had to be acquainted with European knowledges and ways of life to qualify as human. This view informed and was informed by the civilization discourse which aimed at converting difference to European sameness.

In 1856, Crummell went to Liberia with the intention of creating a black Christian republic (ibid., p. 144). After spending 16 years in Liberia, Crummell returned to America in 1872 where he continued his involvement in Black Civil Rights Movements. He lived his last years in America as a pastor and professor at Howard University, lecturing and writing (ibid., p. 144). Alexander Crummell died in 1898.

Crummell's achievements both in America and Africa are renowned. Stephen Thompson writes that “Alexander Crummell was the most prominent rationalist of the black American Enlightenment thinkers in the nineteenth-century” (2011). In America, apart from being one of the prominent black thinkers of his time, Crummell co-founded the American Negro Academy where he enlisted prominent black American intellectuals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke (Ilo 2013: 144). While in Liberia, Crummell was professor of English and Moral philosophy at the College of Liberia. In the capacities of pastor, professor, and black man in Liberia, Crummell attempted to create a black Christian republic that would extend from Liberia to the entire African continent through the civilization and Christianization of the black people of the African continent. Although this was a failed project, it was during Crummell's presence in Liberia that he imagined and defined the future of Africa through his notion of Pan-Africanism (Moses 1992). His presence in Africa and his work on Africa has had an enormous impact on African imaginations of self-craft.

He published several works on race, theology, and his contemporary black experiences. His major works include *The Future of Africa* (1862), *The Greatness of Christ* (1882), and *Africa and America: Addresses and Discourse* (1891). Crummell's ideas of Pan-Africanism runs through his many works

### (c) Crummell's Pan-Africanism

Crummell's notion of Pan-Africanism borrows a lot from the idea of the Negro race as defined by the dominant Western European political and intellectual discourses of his time. At the centre of Crummell's conception of Pan-Africanism is the idea of race. According to him, to be African meant to belong to the Negro race. That is why the word African and Negro were synonymous for Crummell, his contemporaries and his predecessors. Pan, means all, and African or Negroes, means black people; therefore, Pan-Africanism was about all black peoples of African descent. If to be black meant to be African or Negro, then being Negro meant more than phenotype or morphological sameness. For Crummell, being Negro means belonging to a race above other things. Race for Crummell (1891: 48), is "a compact homogeneous population of one blood, ancestry and lineage". The "one blood, ancestry and lineage" had deterministic socio-political and cultural consequences. In the following quotation, Crummell (ibid., p. 35) gives a comprehensive articulation of the meaning of race:

*Remember, just here, that all effectual revolutions in a people must be racial in their characteristics. You can't take the essential qualities of one people and transfuse them into the blood of another people, and make them indigenous to them. They abide in their constitution. They are absolute and congenital things. They remain, notwithstanding the conditions and the changes of rudeness, slavery, civilisation and enlightenment. The attempt to eliminate them will only serve to make a people factitious and unmanly.*

From this quote, Crummell provides essential characteristics of his conception of race. First, he thought that human beings in their biological make-up have essential qualities that distinguish them into races, for example the Negro and Caucasian races. Second, Crummell believed that the socio-political and cultural actions of people are rooted in their essential racial qualities which have a biological foundation. These essential racial qualities which determine a people's socio-political and cultural actions are transmitted from one generation to the next through their blood. Third, Crummell held that these essential qualities cannot be transfused from one race to another because they are "absolute and congenital" in a race's blood and they are constitutive to what makes a people or race. Fourth, he further thought that the biological constitution of the essential qualities that make people into a race cannot be changed by socio-political and cultural conditions

such as “the changes of rudeness, slavery, civilisation and enlightenment” (op. cit., 1891). In other words, environmental circumstances do not influence people’s actions because socio-political and cultural behaviour is a consequence of essential racial qualities. Crummell also argued that if a person tries or is forced to live without consideration of her essential racial qualities, she will be living an inauthentic and dehumanized life. Lastly, Crummell believed that any social-political and cultural collective action initiated without giving due consideration to the essential racial qualities can only result in failure, hence all “effectual revolutions in a people must be racial in their character” (1891: 35).

To emphasize the biological nature of race and its social-political constitution, Crummell compares race to family. He writes that: “Indeed, race is a family feeling. The principle of continuity is as masterful in races as it is in families - as it is in nations” (ibid., 46). The obligation for racial continuity is like a biological instinct to master the continuity of family. To cement the obligation of racial continuity on individuals and collectives, Crummell argues that race is a Divine ordinance, ordained by God: “Races, like families, are organisms and the ordinance of God. And race feeling, like family feeling, is of divine origin” (ibid.). On this view, the preservation of races finds justification not only on biological grounds, but on spiritual grounds as well. In addition, this view endorses both individual and collective responsibility for the preservation of human races. The preservation of races was necessary, according to Crummell, for the existence and development of culture and socio-political life. Following this line of thought, the basis of cultural and socio-political difference springs from the constitution of racial essential qualities (ibid., p. 355). Because race is ordained by God, racial difference must be maintained, as Crummell writes: “It is a law of moral elevation that you must allow the constant abidance of the essential elements of a peoples’ character” (ibid., p. 35).

For Crummell, a call to racial preservation is a call to human authenticity. To be authentically African or Negro means to coincide with one's essential racial qualities without which you become “fictitious and unmanly”. Crummell, however, does not clearly stipulate the nature of the essential qualities which constitute human races. What he clearly states is that the “essential racial qualities” are



biologically rooted and they are principles on which human socio-political and cultural life is founded. On this point, Appiah (1992: 10) comments:

*There is no reason to believe that Crummell would ever explicitly have endorsed any very specific view about the biological character of racial difference; or wondered, as Du Bois came to, whether there was a "permanence of essence." Though he always assumes that there are races, and that membership in a race entails the possession of certain traits and dispositions, his notion of race—like that of most of the later Pan-Africanists—is not so much thought as felt.*

In some instances, however, referring to the Negro race, Crummell writes that an aesthetical disposition is “a special vocation of the race .... it is an aptitude I acknowledge, constitutional to the race, and it cannot be ignored” (Crummell 1891: 22). Crummell presents the sensual or aesthetic appreciation of harmony and colour as indigenous to the Negro race. That is why:

*After 200 years' residence in the higher latitudes, we are still a tropical race, and the warmth of the central regions constantly discovers itself in the voices and love of harmonies, both those which appeal to the eye by colour, and those which affect the sensibilities through the ear. Such an original quality should not be disregarded (ibid., p. 22).*

Many of Crummell's contemporaries shared the view that the Negro race had a special aesthetic aptitude. Du Bois (2006 [1903]: 10), for example, writes:

*The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people.*

Even though Crummell thought that aesthetic disposition is constitutive of the Negro race, he argued that “taste and elegance albeit natural cravings are always secondary to things absolute and necessary” (1891: 22-23). The things absolute and necessary in all human beings are duty and moral responsibility (ibid., p. 23). The Negro race therefore should not only celebrate its aesthetic appreciation and achievements, but more importantly, the race should show their racial qualities through duty and moral responsibility. What Crummell means by duty is the cultivation of the intellect and the acquisition of knowledge. For he believed that without knowledge, the human soul is no good. For Crummell, moral responsibility goes hand in hand with intellectual responsibility. If the Negro race does not

cultivate its intellect and acquire knowledge, the race risks lapsing “into its former ignorance and benightedness” (ibid., p. 24). Crummell reasoned that all human beings possessed intellectual and moral capacities, because these things are what make them human<sup>25</sup>. But for one to live humanly, the need to cultivate the intellect and live morally is warranted. The cultivation of the intellect and moral responsibility separates superior peoples from inferior peoples. Those that cultivate their intellect are superior to those who do not cultivate their intellect. The manifestation of a cultivated intellect is civilisation, while the manifestation of moral responsibility comes with the Christian faith.

Crummell consequently believed that there are human races that have superior cultures (civilized) and are morally responsible (Christian), while others have inferior cultures because of their lack of both. He argued that races can learn from other races of superior civilization and moral responsibility, and that civilization is a result of exchange among races. He writes: “Civilisation is always in its first outgrowth, among rude people, an exotic. It never springs up, in any new land spontaneously. It must be transplanted from an old to a new soil” (1891: v). For this reason, he saw no problem for the native Negroes of the continent to be civilized into Caucasian forms of life and be converted to the Christian faith. The native Negroes in their native state were a rude and barbaric people. The native Negroes’ way of life was considered inferior to that of the Caucasian race and the American Negroes because the native Negroes’ way of life lacked intellectual cultivation and the Christian faith. The inferiority of the native Negroes should not, however, be taken to mean that they are less human, since Crummell (ibid.) argued that “Africa differ in no respect from all the other sections of the human family”. The inferiority of the native Negro people in Crummell’s view lies not in their humanity, but in their way of life. Since the Negro race is as human as all other human races, the Negro race should embrace Western civilization and the Christian faith cultivated by the Caucasian race because they are superior modes of being human. Civilization and

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<sup>25</sup> Crummell’s definition of humanity founded on the intellect and morality has a striking similarity with that of Immanuel Kant. This may point to Kant’s influence on Crummell’s intellectual orientation. To be sure, reason and morality were basic to the definition of humanity in the dominant Enlightenment discourse.

Christianity are progressive and make all human beings better intellectually and morally, through their racial essential qualities, as ordained by God.

Crummell's love for his Christian faith and Enlightenment reason came at the cost of despising native African ways of life. He considered African native languages, values, and practices as inferior and barbaric. He commended the English language and Western cultural practices as superior to native African languages. On African native languages, Crummell (1862: 19) writes:

*But how great soever may be, their differences, they are nevertheless definite marks of inferiority connected with them all, which places them at the widest distance with civilised languages. Of all this class of languages, it may be said in the aggregate that (a) They are, to use words of Dr Leighton Wilson "harsh, abrupt, energetic, indistinctive in enunciation, meagre in point of words, abound in inarticulate nasal and guttural in sound, possess but very few inflections and grammatical forms .... These languages moreover are characterized by lowness of ideas... they lack those ideas of virtues, moral truth, and those distinctions of right and wrong... the absence of clear ideas of Justice, law, Human Rights and Governmental Order...lastly, Those Supreme Truths of a personal Deity, of the moral Government of God, of man's Immortality, of Judgement...*

Crummell's negative view of native African languages translated into a negative view of native forms of intellectual, moral, political and spiritual life which were informed by the inferior languages. The native Negroes therefore needed civilization and redemption; they had to be regenerated. But if Africa "is ever to be regenerated, the influences and agencies to this end must come from external sources" (Crummell 1891: v).

With regards to regenerating Africa, Crummell contended that neither commerce nor European missionary work can regenerate native Africans. Africa needs the Christian faith for its regeneration through men of cultivated intellect, but this must be done with indigenous agency. Without involving and humanly consulting the native people, Christianity will not plant the seed of the faith. He gives examples of how the Roman Catholics and other European missionaries have failed to convert the natives after two centuries of preaching the faith. Using the examples of God's encounter with the Jews through the Jewish people, and the European initiation into Christianity through fellow Europeans and peoples of European culture, Crummell argues that the best people to regenerate Negroes in Africa are Negro

Americans. He believed that Negro Americans were the right people to regenerate native African Negroes because they are of the same race. As earlier stated, Crummell believed that for any social-cultural change or revolution to be effective, it must be racial in character and that the agency of American Negroes is necessary for cultivating the native African Negro's intellect and moral responsibility because "no people can be lifted by another to grand civilization. The elevation of a people, their thorough civilization, comes chiefly from their internal qualities" (ibid., p. 30). Hereby Crummell emphasized the autonomy of the Negro race from other races. It was justifiable in Crummell's view for civilized American Negroes to dictate the lives of uncivilized native Negroes, because they both belong to the same race and Africa is the continent of the Negro race. On this point, Appiah (1992: 5) writes that:

*At the core of Crummell's vision is a single guiding concept: race. Crummell's "Africa" is the motherland of the Negro race, and his right to act in it, to speak for it, to plot its future, derived—in his conception—from the fact that he too was a Negro. More than this, Crummell held that there was a common destiny for the people of Africa—by which we are always to understand the black people.*

The freedom to fashion the future of the natives and the continent as a whole, was restricted to the Negro race. Crummell's application of the notion of race in his discourse is sure to be considered highly problematic in contemporary societies<sup>26</sup>. However, it should be understood that the use of the notion of race appears to have been the only viable route available to Crummell through which to imagine the freedom and humanity of the Negro people. Crummell's emphasis on his idea of essential qualities as constitutive of a race and foundational to a people's socio-political and cultural life, and the inability of one race or people to civilize another people points to Crummell's demand that the Negro race should be left to its own devices, socio-politically and culturally. In emphasizing the point that to deny a people the right to live under the influence of their essential racial qualities is to make them "fictitious and unmanly (inhuman)", underscores the dehumanization of the Negro race having been denied the freedom which can only be realized through their essential racial qualities.

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<sup>26</sup> Appiah gives a fascinating critique of Crummell's ideas which I will discuss later.

Crummell understood very well that the basis of the Negro problem of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the definition of race. For centuries, the socio-political and cultural plight of the Negro people was defined and constituted by the notion of race, which denied the Negro people the ontological condition of freedom which belongs to all of humankind. He writes: “For 200 years, the misfortune of the black race has been the confinement of its mind in the pent-up prison of human bondage” (Crummell 1891: 17). Crummell therefore thought that to redeem black people from their plight will entail reconceptualising the notion of race by vesting their rights and their humanity in the ontological constitution of all races, which is at once essential and unchanging. It is for this reason that Crummell rejects the view that the rights of the Negro people should be based on socio-political negotiations. On the contrary, he argues in favour/insists upon an ontological foundation of the human rights of Negro people by positing that all races are equally human<sup>27</sup>. By postulating a Pan-Africanism founded on an ontology of essential racial qualities that are unchanging, and which cannot be transposed to other races, Crummell propounded an essentialist notion of Pan-Africanism.

Being not only acquainted with philosophy, but also with science and the Christian faith, Crummell gave scientific and theological justifications for his essentialist view of Pan-Africanism. If races are ordained by God and they have a biological or natural foundation, it was logical for Crummell to argue that the freedom of black people is an ordinance of God and a natural or biological dictate. Crummell argued that the humanity and freedom of the Negro people as a race has been ordained by God and dictated by biological nature through the presence of essential racial qualities in human beings which constitute them as races. On this view, Crummell maintained human racial ontological difference, but rejected inherent human racial inferiority and superiority.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thompson (2011).

Crummell conceptualized his Pan-Africanism from the very conceptual paradigm that his oppressors used to justify the victimization of his Negro people. This may explain why he condoned several practices and ideas that we may perceive to be problematic today. For example, as indicated earlier, Crummell considered native African cultures, values and practices as barbaric and uncivilized, and he condoned the colonization of Africa by both black Americans and Europeans for the sake of civilizing and Christianizing the native Africans. Like Hegel (op. cit., 2001) and others, he condoned slavery by appealing to his Christian faith and the idea of civilization (Crummell 1898: 415 & 418). Crummell's use of the notion of race, which does not fundamentally differ from his oppressor's conception in many ways, coupled to his insistence upon the equality of all races, show how Crummell was influenced by the dominant conceptual paradigm of his time.

He also adhered to the evolutionist progressive view of history which justified his objective to civilize the barbaric peoples of the African continent and the people of his race. He also subscribed to the scientific causal view of the world which explains the fact that he considered human racial difference to be biologically founded. Indeed, for better or for worse, Crummell was a man of his time, what Scott would have called a "conscript of Modernity"<sup>28</sup>. Besides being a firm believer in the idea of progress, influenced by the science of his time, Crummell (1891: 413) also believed in a Christian deterministic view of history:

*There is no such thing as chance. All human events have their place in that grand moral economy of God, in which he Himself is an ever-present, ever-active agent; they are all elements and instruments of His hand, for the accomplishment of the august objects of His will".*

In summary, regardless of his indebtedness to the conceptual paradigm of his dehumanizers, Crummell emerged as one of the important black thinkers and co-founders of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism. Using the notion of race as an essential feature of being human, he imagined Pan-Africanism as an answer to the problem of the dehumanization of black people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the purpose of

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<sup>28</sup>The idea of 'conscripts of modernity' mean that a person's world view and life has been conditioned by the European Modern definition of human life and its praxis (Scott 2004).

affirming the humanity of black people, Crummell argued that race is the principle of human socio-political and cultural life, and no race has the mandate to fashion the socio-political and cultural life of another race, thereby creating a socio-political and cultural space for black people to fashion themselves. By positing such an argument within a constellation of racial essentialism and racial socio-political and cultural dehumanization, Crummell started laying the foundation for what later came to be known as African identity or Africanity. I will now turn to a critical exposition of Blyden's notion of Pan-Africanism.

#### **(d) Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912)**

Edward Wilmot Blyden was born in 1832 in St Thomas, Virgin Islands. He was born to free black parents in a relatively privileged family. Blyden was intelligent and he realised that he was very good at mastering different languages at a tender age. With the racial problems that determined all spheres of socio-political and cultural life of the time, he was fascinated with the history of his Negro race and to plan its future. Out of fear of enslavement, he migrated to Liberia in 1850 at the age 18 where he was ordained a minister in 1858. He went on to hold various distinguished academic positions and diplomatic functions before finally retiring in Sierra Leone where he died in 1912.

Blyden's adult life was spent in Africa where he emerged as the most important thinker on Pan-Africanism on the African continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He published several works; his magnum opus being *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (1887), which is a collection of his articles, speeches, and sermons he wrote over a period of time. Despite his initial biases, Blyden, unlike his contemporaries, later identified some valuable practices and values in African native ways of life, which he thought could contribute to humanity. His view on native African ways of life enabled him to develop a different conception of Pan-Africanism from those of his contemporaries, including Crummell. An exposition of his Pan-Africanism follows.

### **(e) Blyden's Pan-Africanism**

As indicated earlier, during Blyden's life time, people who belonged to the Negro race were considered sub-human. The sub-humanity of black people found justification both in intellectual and socio-political discourses for more than two centuries before and throughout Blyden's lifetime. It was because of the discourse of black sub-humanity in both intellectual and socio-political practices that Blyden, like Crummell, felt compelled to justify the humanity of Negro people and their right to self-determination. European justification of African slavery and black sub-humanization was based on the notion of race. It is for this reason that Blyden's conception of Pan-Africanism was also founded on the concept of race.

Blyden subscribed to the 19<sup>th</sup> century conception of race. He believed that human beings have immanent and persisting moral and mental differences which constitutes them ontologically as belonging to particular races. Each race has "aptitudes", "instincts", and "purpose" or "mission" in the grand history of humanity. Individual human beings cannot fully realize their agency and purpose in history outside of their racial character. Collective racial action was thought to be necessary for the successful building of any society. On this basis, socio-political and cultural life was understood as essentially a racial consequence.

Blyden viewed historical agency as determined by racial qualities and destiny. To act as a significant historical agent, one must act in unison with one's racial tendencies. Blyden, like Crummell, attributed the existence of races and their destinies to God. Blyden (Blyden 1887 cited in Lynch 1967: 61) explains the nature and role of individual and collective human agencies as follows:

*"For everyone of you — for everyone of us — there is a special work to be done — a work of tremendous necessity and tremendous importance — a work for the Race to which we belong ... there is a responsibility which our personality, which our membership in the Race involves ... the duty of every man, of every race is to contend for its individuality — to keep and develop it ... Therefore, honour and love your Race. Be yourselves .... If you are not yourself, if you surrender your*



*personality, you have nothing left to give the world. You have no pleasure, no use, nothing which will attract and charm men, for by the suppression of your individuality, you lose your distinctive character .... You will see, then, that to give up our personality, would be to give up the peculiar work and glory to which we are called. It would really be to give up the divine idea — to give up God — to sacrifice the divine individuality; and this is the worst of suicides.*

From this quote, it is explicit that Blyden shared with Crummell the idea of preserving the individuality of races. The striving or contending for racial identity or individuality is the only way by which individual human beings and collectives become who they are, and the only way to contribute to humanity. Blyden situates human self-realization or actualization, individually and collectively, within the limits of racial characteristics. To be authentically human is to coincide with one's racial identity or individuality. Pan-Africanism is an identity or individuality, in Blyden's view, which is determined by the characteristics of the Negro race.

Taking from the dominant discourse on race that which proved helpful to his quest, Blyden also rejected some views that did not serve his purpose. Most importantly, Blyden rejected the view that there are races which are inherently superior or inferior. Likely influenced by Herder's views on nationalism, Blyden argued that all races are equal, despite their ontological racial differences. Unlike arguments that posit that some races contribute to civilization because of their superiority while others do not contribute because of their inferiority, both Blyden and Herder argued that "the ultimate goal of a nation or race was to serve humanity at large" (Lynch 1967: 61). On this basis, all races are equal but different as they all have different things to contribute to humanity as a whole.

To justify the humanity of his Negro people, Blyden embarked on the reconstruction of history to show that black people too have histories of great civilizations as other races do. This was an obvious response to the European definition of Africa as the Dark Continent, denying Africa a history. Hume, Kant, and Hegel, again, are among the protagonists of this discourse<sup>29</sup>. Blyden's writings "were designed to vindicate the Negro race" (ibid., p. 54). Vindicating the Negro race was not particular to Blyden's writings, but was common among the Pan-Africanists of his time and those before him. It is for this reason that the early Pan-

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<sup>29</sup> On this point, also see Eze (1997), Buck-Morss (2000) and Bernasconi (1998).

Africanists are sometimes referred to as vindicationists<sup>30</sup>. Lynch (ibid., p. 54-55) provides a summary of Blyden's leading arguments in his work:

*His major themes were: that the Negro race did have past achievements of which it could be proud; that it had special inherent attributes which it should strive to project in a distinctive 'African Personality'; that African culture — its customs and institutions — were basically wholesome and should be preserved; and finally, that Christianity had a retarding influence upon the Negro, while that of Islam had been salutary — his most controversial theme, and one on which he wrote at length.*

Blyden further rejected the view that environmental or circumstantial conditions do not contour the course of the history of a race or people. On this point, he starts to deviate from Crummell's conception of Pan-Africanism. After analysing the impact of slavery on the Negro people, Blyden argued that socio-political conditions do influence the history of a people. The plight of the Negro people was not a result of their inherent inferiority, as the dominant views on race maintained. On the contrary, Blyden showed how racial enslavement made the Negro people inferior to other people (Celarent 2015). On this point, Ceralent (2015: 1289) writes that Blyden was the first to analyse the effects of racism: "He produced a truly revolutionary analysis of the impact of domination on the psychology of the dominated". He exposed some reasons which influenced Negro history and impeded the progress of the Negro race. Firstly, based on his conception of race, he argues that it is wrong for one to expect people of one race to emulate the enterprise of another race when they are constituted with different racial aptitudes and talents. He also thought that if the socio-political and cultural environment denigrates the aptitudes and talents of a people, which in turn limit their freedom for self-craft, then it is difficult and sometimes even impossible for a people to live up to their destiny as determined by their racial personality or individuality. On this point, Blyden (1881: 9) writes:

*And in countries like this, where they are free from the hampering surroundings of an alien race, they still read and study the books of foreigners, and form their idea of everything that man may do, or ought to do, according to the standard held up in those teachings. Hence without the physical or mental aptitude for the enterprises which they are taught to admire and revere, they attempt to copy and imitate them, and share the fate of all copyists and imitators. Bound to move on a lower level, they acquire and retain a practical inferiority, transcribing very often the faults rather than the virtues of their models.*

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Martin & West (1999) and Mafeje (2008).

For Blyden, there are certain “physical and mental” aptitudes that are characteristically racial-based. Further, there are certain racial-cultural practices that cannot cultivate the racial aptitudes in individuals of other races. It is in such environmental circumstances that Blyden believed that both the individual and his/her people’s racial aptitudes, instincts, and mission can either be fostered, or impeded. What is profound in this idea, is Blyden’s demand that people should think with and from their experiences. If one does not think from his/her experience, she can only be an imitator of another’s life.

Unlike Crummell, Blyden managed to articulate the African racial “talents, instincts, and energy” or the racial “essential qualities” in Crummellian terminology. Contrary to Crummell who supported complete assimilation of black people into Western civilization and the Christian faith for their moral and intellectual superiority, Blyden built his notion of Pan-Africanism, or what he called the “African personality” (African difference/identity), on native African ways of life. For Blyden, native African cultures and values have some things to reveal about the Negro racial individuality, and they also have something to contribute to the human world. Blyden gave African cultures and values the central role of shaping and organizing contemporary and future African lives. The future of the African people, in Blyden’s understanding, was in their cultures and values. It was for this reason that Blyden started advancing the preservation of African cultures and values and warning Europeans and “educated” Negroes against destroying native cultures and values. Blyden’s biographer writes:

*He [Blyden] clearly saw that the impact of European culture on Africa might result in the destruction of wholesome African customs and institutions, and repeatedly he warned Europeans that if they were to be useful in Africa, they would have to lay aside their arrogant assumption of the superiority of European culture, recognize that African culture was, on the whole, best suited to the circumstances of the African people, and carefully study African society so as not to destroy any customs and institutions which were important and humane elements of African culture (Lynch 1967: 66).*

From African cultures and values, Blyden constructed an African “personality” which was later developed into the notion African identity<sup>31</sup>. The notion of African personality was meant to indicate African identity as determined by its racial

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<sup>31</sup> See Mudimbe (1988) and Appiah (1992) for their critique of Nkrumah and Senghor.

characteristics. Lynch (ibid., p. 61-62) further stipulates Blyden's notion of the African character as follows:

*In the character of the African, averred Blyden, was to be found 'the softer aspects of human nature': cheerfulness, sympathy, willingness to serve, were some of its marked attributes. The special contribution of the African to civilization would be a spiritual one. Africa did not need to participate in the mad and headlong rush for scientific and industrial progress which had left Europe little time or inclination to cultivate the spiritual side of life, which was ultimately the most important one.*

Blyden's characterization of the African personality later influenced anti-colonial imaginations such as Senghor's and Cesaire's idea of Negritude. One can also identify a striking similarity between Blyden's characterization of the African personality and contemporary discourses on the notion of *Ubuntu*<sup>32</sup>. Lynch argues that Blyden's construction of the idea of African personality was a direct response and an antithesis to the worst European influences and tendencies of his time (ibid., p. 61). Blyden's articulation of African racial characteristics "was obviously influenced by the historical circumstances of the Negro race, as well as by certain aspects of contemporary nationalist ideas" (ibid.).

Blyden's celebration of the native African personality did not blind him to the benefits of learning from other cultures and values. Though he worked to make sure that some African traditional values and practices were preserved by both foreign missionaries and "educated" Negroes, he also encouraged Africans to learn from European ways of life.

Blyden's recourse to indigenous African cultures and values for his characterization of the African personality or individuality opened a conceptual space that allowed the genesis of the notion of Africanity or African identity. Although Africanity and African identity may owe their origin to the Pan-African movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, it is Blyden's imagination of the "African personality" that has shaped the ideas of African identity from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Blyden developed his notion of Pan-Africanism based on the idea of race as essential to human socio-political and cultural agency. Unlike most of his

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<sup>32</sup> See Mafeje (2008) and Ramose (1999).

contemporaries who despised native African ways of life, Blyden developed the notion of African personality from native African cultures and values. Blyden's recourse to native African cultures and values enabled him to critically interrogate Eurocentrism, while respecting native African ways of life. In other words, he paved the way for the discourse propounding the relativity of human cultures. Blyden's conceptual dependence on the notion of race reinforced the idea that human culture is a racial consequence and sustained the idea of race as constitutive of humanity. Like Crummell, his notion of Pan-Africanism was essentialist.

### **2.3 19<sup>th</sup> Century Pan-Africanism and the Conceptual Orientation of African Identity**

The Pan-Africanist ideas of Crummell and Blyden left in their wake a conceptual and theoretical legacy for future African liberationist thinkers and political activists. Like other intellectuals' ideas, Crummell's and Blyden's ideas have both been applauded and critiqued. Within philosophical circles, those who object to Crummell's and Blyden's ideas have focused on the fundamental concept in their discourses, which is, the concept of race. And those who have appropriated their ideas have focused on the ideas that propound the humanity of black peoples and the socio-political objectives in their respective discourses. A critical engagement with the responses to Crummell's and Blyden's Pan-Africanist ideas is the focus of this section. The aim is to establish their legacy as a conceptual foundation for the genesis and sustenance of the notion of African identity or Africanity in its essentialist form. I will commence with the critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism.

#### **(a) A Critique of Crummell's and Blyden's Use of Race**

The main objection to Crummell's and Blyden's Pan-Africanist ideas is the role that the notion of race plays in their discourses. The main critic of Crummell's and Blyden's Pan-Africanism is Anthony Kwame Appiah (*In My Father's House* (1992)). As the notion of race is central to Crummell's and Blyden's conception of Pan-Africanism, Appiah has charged the two thinkers with racialism and racism. On the

former, Appiah (1992: 13) argues that Crummell and Blyden both committed a cognitive error in believing that:

*There are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racist view, a sort of racial essence; it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the "Races of Man" account for more than the visible morphological characteristics — skin colour, hair type, facial features — on the basis of which we make our informal classifications.*

Appiah argues that there are no human races with heritable characteristics exclusively distributed among members of a race which account for both morphological and moral characteristics. Conceptually, therefore, Crummell and Blyden, together with the Western intellectual discourse which informed their conceptual orientation on the notion of race, were founded on an erroneous a belief (ibid., p. 19).

Not only were they guilty on the charge of racialism, but, Appiah also argues that Crummell and Blyden were racist because they believed that: (1) human races have essential racial qualities which warrant differential treatment (what Appiah calls 'extrinsic racism'); (2) each race has a distinct moral status independent of the moral characterization constituted by its racial essential qualities (Appiah calls this intrinsic racism) (ibid., p. 13 – 15). An example of extrinsic racism is to believe that all white people are endowed with superior intellectual capacities than black people because white people are leading in intellectual endeavours and they should be given a racial superior treatment in this regard. In the case of 'intrinsic racism', one would treat a member of a certain race in a morally inferior or superior fashion not because of the essential racial qualities that the individual may possess, but rather, because of the belief that one race is intrinsically superior to the other race. Appiah (ibid., p. 19) argues that Crummell and Blyden adhered to both extrinsic and intrinsic racism, thereby making them racists. Appiah believes that "intrinsic racism is a moral error, and extrinsic racism entails false beliefs" (ibid.).

On Appiah's understanding, Crummell and Blyden were morally wrong in believing that Negro people had to give each other preferential treatment based on the

commonality of their race. Furthermore, Crummell and Blyden committed an epistemological error in believing that Negro people are in need of special socio-political and cultural treatment because they possessed unique racial “aptitudes”, “talents”, and “missions”.

Appiah’s criticism of Crummell and Blyden has itself evoked differing reactions<sup>33</sup>. Mosley (1995), for example, argues that Appiah’s criticism opens a conceptual space for epistemological and moral interrogation of the present. On the other hand, it risks the de-contextualization of their ideas, specifically the fact that the notion of race played a central role of in their discourse at the time. Instead of being quick to brand Crummell’s and Blyden’s ideas as immoral and epistemologically wrong, it is appropriate, I think, to attempt to read their ideas within the specific conceptual and political constellation at the time. A critical and contextual reading of their ideas entails identifying the problems to which their ideas of Pan-Africanism attempted to provide answers, the conceptual and political limitations of their historical moment, and the purpose their ideas of race were meant to serve.

The problem to which Crummell and Blyden were responding, as earlier indicated, was the plight of the black people both on the American continents and in Africa. Crummell and Blyden correctly diagnosed the dominant conception of race to be the cause of the plight of black people, because it was used to justify the dehumanization of black people. To be sure, the concept of race operated with other concepts such as reason/intellect, morality/Christianity, civilization, and humanity to create a world that was anti-black people<sup>34</sup>. It was within these conceptual constellations that Crummell and Blyden, accepting the views that supported the freedom and humanity of black people, and rejecting views that imprisoned and dehumanized them, imagined and articulated their Pan-Africanism. Their contention was not to find out whether people constituted races or not, which was later to become became a postcolonial problem - Appiah’s problem.

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<sup>33</sup> Kebede (2004), for example, argues against Appiah’s critique of negritude and Pan-Africanism based on the fact that the idea of race is disabling and wrong.

<sup>34</sup> On this topic, see Gilroy (1993) and Crummell (1862).

It was taken for granted that there existed human races of which the Negro race was one. Crummell's and Blyden's preoccupation was how to justify the humanity of the Negro people, despite their morphological and cultural differences, in light of the dehumanization inflicted by the white people. Mudimbe correctly points out that Blyden's "political ideology arose as a response to racism and to some of the consequences of imperialism" (Mudimbe 1988: 131). To Crummell and Blyden, the notion of race may have been the only viable possibility, conceptually and politically, for attaining freedom and humanity for the black people at that moment in history. As Mudimbe further points out, "Blyden had to emphasize the ideological structure of race thinking" (ibid., p. 108). It is easy for Appiah to criticize Crummell and Blyden for opting for a racial foundation of Pan-Africanism. But when one takes the political context into account, another perspective emerges as Crummell's biographer points out:

*Whites, for the most part, ignored the efforts that some blacks were making to become civilized, assimilated Christians and to otherwise meet the cultural demands of American society. Whites simply were not fond of Negroes and there was very little that black people could do about it (Moses 1983: 8).*

Some Black people indeed attempted to imagine and live a race-free existence. But time and again they ran up against racial segregation and dehumanization. In such circumstances, I find Crummell's and Blyden's racial options understandable, especially since their conception of race had no intent of causing harm to others, not even to their oppressors. Appiah (1992: 17) writes: "Crummell never for a moment contemplated using race as a basis for inflicting harm" (1992: 17). On this view, Crummell and Blyden morally stands apart from other proponents of race theory, such as Hegel and Kant who used it to inflict harm<sup>35</sup>.

In a situation where "interracial" solidarity was rejected, the solidarity of the black people, through the notion of race, appeared to be the only viable possibility for attaining freedom and humanity, as one commentator points out:

*Moses states that "Pan-Africanism seems to have originated with the awareness of Westernized Africans that all Black people were suffering from the slave trade which tended to confer an inferior status upon all Black people, whether slave or free, regardless of the continent upon which they lived" (1978:16). Where colonialism used the theory of divide and conquer to rule, Pan-Africanism used unity as a strategy to defeat colonialism (Ilo 2013: 152).*

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Eze (1997) and Bernasconi (1998).



In my view, there were limited conceptual resources from which Crummell and Blyden could have drawn to imagine the freedom and humanity of their people besides the notion of race. As a result, Crummell's and Blyden's socio-political possibilities seem to have been limited, as Moses indicates above. They could either exist together as equal citizens with white people through assimilation or by synchronizing their cultures and socio-political ambitions, or they could mobilize themselves as Negroes. The former proved untenable given the white people's insistence upon their racial superiority. The only option was for the dehumanized black people to imagine their own way of being in the world with others. Crummell and Blyden harnessed the very notion of race – mobilized to justify the dehumanization of the black people - for the humanization of the Negro folk.

To read the ideas of Crummell and Blyden within their problem-space in order to understand their work and how it has shaped our present is one thing, but to use their ideas as answers to our problems is quite another. Appiah's criticism certainly has merit if we take Crummell's and Blyden's Pan-African ideas as solutions/answers to contemporary problems. If, on the other hand, we read Crummell's and Blyden's ideas as answers to their own problems, then Appiah's criticism is found wanting of conceptual and socio-political historicity. Furthermore, the very possibility of Appiah's criticism is indicative of a difference in conceptual paradigm from that in which Crummell and Blyden imagined their ideas. Appiah is certain that during Crummell and Blyden's life time the notion of race was customary: "As I say, it is central to my view that Crummell's inchoate theoria, which Du Bois turned to organized theory, was thoroughly conventional" (1992: 43). The 'theoria' Appiah refers to is race theory. To be sure, Appiah (*ibid.*, p. 31) even doubted the possibility of Crummell's contemporary to think outside the conventional theory of race when he states that:

*But it is plain enough that Du Bois cannot have been contemplating this possibility: like all of his contemporaries, he would have taken it for granted that race is a matter of birth.*

If Du Bois, with his contemporaries Crummell and Blyden, could not have contemplated the possibility of a non-racial socio-political and cultural agency, then how does Appiah expect them to reason otherwise? It is ironic as it appears that

Appiah is demanding from Du Bois, Crummell and Blyden what he is convinced they cannot give him.

Another difference can further be noted between Crummell's and Blyden's, and Appiah's motivation for engaging with the notion of race. While Crummell and Blyden used the notion of race to mobilize and unify all black peoples globally, because the dehumanization of black people was a global practice, Appiah (ibid., p. 176) challenges the notion of race politically for a different reason, as he writes:

*"Race" disables us because it proposes as a basis for common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort; it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the "intra-racial" conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world.*

Appiah needs a non-racial Africanity to solve "intra-racial" problems, which is not the reason Crummell and Blyden used the notion of race. Crummell and Blyden did not use the notion of race to resolve "inter-racial" problems. Race, for Crummell and Blyden, was the basis for common action in reaction to the fact that race was used as a basis for a common action for dehumanizing them. To be sure, Blyden acknowledged the cultural differences between indigenous African ways of life<sup>36</sup>, but opted to ignore them and put emphasis on the cultural and racial unity which served his purpose of overthrowing white racism. Black dehumanization did not take into account the differences among black people. Crummell and Blyden therefore did not see the need to take account of the differences among black people because that was not the cause of their problem in the first place.

On this basis, Crummell's and Blyden's use of the notion of race has political and conceptual purchase within their problem-space. But if we are to take their ideas into a different political and conceptual constellation like that of Appiah or that of

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<sup>36</sup> Blyden was aware of the differences among African peoples but he believed that the European encounter brought them together: "The cruel accidents of slavery and the slave-trade drove all Africans together, and no discrimination was made in the shambles between the Foulah and the Timneh, the Mandingo and the Mendi, the Ashantee and the Fantee, the Eboe and the Congo - between the descendants of Nobles and the offsprings of slaves, between kings and their subjects - all were placed on the same level, all of black skin and woolly hair were 'niggers,' chattels . . . And when, by any course of events, these people attempt to exercise independent government, they start in the eyes of the world as Africans, without the fact being taken into consideration that they belong to tribes and families differing widely in degrees of intelligence and capacity, in original bent and susceptibility" (Blyden 1887 cited in Mudimbe 1988: 119 – 120).

the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the notion of race should not be allowed to serve as a basis for political action, as Appiah correctly points out: “It is dangerous” and based on illusion that “black, white, yellow people are fundamentally allied in nature” (ibid.). The danger and erroneous definition of human action as biologically founded (race) is an insight of our day.

My contention is that when we read Crummell’s and Blyden’s use of the notion of race in their Pan-Africanism within their conceptual and political constellation, their application of the notion of race can be justified. But the moment that we decontextualize their ideas beyond their conceptual and political context, their use of the notion of race is found wanting. Appiah’s criticism of Crummell’s and Blyden’s application of the notion of race finds justification within the postcolonial context. But to charge Crummell and Blyden of moral and epistemological error the way Appiah does, is an essentialist and ahistorical approach to understanding knowledge claims. Even though Appiah and those rejecting Crummell’s and Blyden’s conceptual foundation of Pan-Africanism disagree with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists, their work may still be considered a legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism.

#### **(b) Legacy for the Successors: The Abiding Mind of the Founders**

While the criticism levelled against Crummell’s and Blyden’s ideas of Pan-Africanism has focused on their use or application of the notion of race, the appropriation of their ideas came in the form of a conceptual legacy. Crummell’s and Blyden’s Pan-Africanist ideas created a conceptual orientation which later became the conceptual framework for the genesis and survival of the notion of African identity or Africinity.

Of the two thinkers, Blyden’s ideas seem to have had a more profound influence on African thought than that of Crummell. Although Crummell is the co-founder of the Pan-Africanist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is “Crummell’s fellow commissioner, Edward W. Blyden, [who] was eventually to become the principal spokesman for Pan-Africanism in the nineteenth century” (Moses 1989: 141). In

fact, his ideas had a lasting influence on later generations of black thinkers. Commenting on the influence of Crummell's and Blyden's thoughts, Crummell's biographer writes:

*Crummell's hostility to African languages and cultures prevented his creating a brand of Pan-Africanism with the staying power of Blydenism, which was, as it turned out, the wave of the future. Blyden's staying power was largely due to his interest in African languages and his willingness to study them before passing judgement on their aesthetic features or philosophical depth (ibid., p. 289).*

Blyden's interrogation of some African languages and cultures allowed him to recognize in native African ways of life what he considered to be the basis of African individuality. While the dominant views on the future of Africans by both whites and black non-natives at the time, including Crummell, was that Africans should be assimilated (civilized) into European ways of life, Blyden objected to this view because he believed that the future of Africans was in their native cultures and values. Blyden's reasons for this position were both practical and philosophical-racial. He thought that African native cultures and values exhibited favourable socio-political and cultural values for the lives of Africans, and were even better than Western values. The Western character "according to Blyden, was harsh, individualistic, competitive and combative; European society was highly materialistic: the worship of science and industry was replacing that of God" (Lynch 1967: 61). This Western character was not good for African societies, Blyden thought. He also believed that it is through the native cultures and values that the Negro race is able to express their racial tendencies best, thereby fully realizing their humanity. By holding this view, Blyden established the idea that to be authentically African means upholding the native cultures and values without which an African becomes inauthentic<sup>37</sup>. This became one of the fundamental conceptual orientations in the imagination of African identity.

With the notion of authenticity through native African cultures and values came the idea that assimilation into Western cultures and values renders black people ontologically un-free. This became a second conceptual orientation to imagining what is considered African. Whatever is considered Western became imagined as an ontological other to what is African. The two conceptual orientations mentioned

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<sup>37</sup> This view is held by thinkers such as Serequberahn and Mafeje as we shall see later in this chapter.

thus far found their justification in the idea of race. It is essential racial qualities and tendencies which accounted for these differences. Native African cultures and values must be preserved because they reveal what is uniquely Negro, and assimilation into Western way of life will make the Negroes “factitious and unmanly” (inauthentic and dehumanized). Here we should remember Blyden’s injunction that “the duty of every man, of every race is to contend for its individuality — to keep and develop it” (Blyden 1887 cited in Lynch 1967: 61).

A contextual understanding of this idea may render Blyden’s ideas historically plausible. The constant failure of black people to be fully integrated into Western societies either on the African continent or the diaspora due to the political resistance from white people and the constant humiliation of black people led Blyden to believe that it was because of racial aptitudes and tendencies that some races cannot be integrated into the ways of life of another race (Blyden 1881: 9). And what fundamentally constitutes one race is different from what constitutes another. Crummell shared this view with his notion of essential qualities, as he writes: “You can’t take the essential qualities of one people and transfuse them into the blood of another people, and make them indigenous to them” (Crummell 1891: 35). What Blyden termed ‘African individuality’ – what distinguished them from other races – became the principle foundation of African identity. While Blyden used the words “personality” and “individuality”, later generations replaced these words with identity. What is conceptually consistent in both Blyden and later generations, is the idea of the persistence of individuality or identity of Africans. To be African means to be different, especially from the West.

Still within the terrain of native cultures and values, Blyden, as in the discourse of his oppressors, synthesized numerous, sometimes heterogeneous, native African cultures and values into a single idea of African personality. This homogenization was something that Blyden absorbed from his fellow Pan-Africanists albeit on a different basis. But as indicated, the homogenization of black people into a race was a racial invention of the Western discourse which also imagined human individual freedom as racially constituted<sup>38</sup>. For instance, Herder believed that “the

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Mazrui (2005).

individual could fulfil himself best through unselfish, dedicated service to nation or race [nation in Herder's language]" (Lynch 1967: 61). What Blyden did with this discourse was to bring together different native African cultures and values (albeit acknowledging differences among them) forming a Negro unity and synchronizing it with the idea of African freedom. The freedom of Africans was thought to be possible only through collective racial agency. From this was born the third conceptual orientation to imagining African identity which is: To be free Africans, collective race action(s) or agency is needed. While Crummell did not stipulate exactly what the essential racial qualities are, he also imagined a single location of individual and collective human freedom as racial in character. Blyden located the agency of African peoples in his notion of African personality.

It is important to remember that Blyden and Crummell lived in Liberia, a very small part of the continent inhabited by black people mostly from America. In addition to that, in different parts of the continent different people had different experiences of the European encounter and developed different imaginations in response to the problems of the European encounter. Appiah (1992: 6) says the following on this point:

*In the prewar era, colonial Africans experienced European racism to radically different degrees in differing colonial conditions, and had correspondingly different degrees of preoccupation with the issue.*

Blyden nevertheless thought that it was justified to think and speak on behalf of the entire continent without knowing the thoughts and desires of his Negro brothers and sisters from other parts of the continent. Mudimbe (1983: 106) identifies this conceptual aspect in Blyden's work when he writes:

*Nevertheless, the essential point is that he envisioned the extension of Liberia's experience to all the continent, convinced that in support of "black authenticity," "whatever others may do for us, there are some things we must do for ourselves. No outward protection, no friendly intervention, no deed of gift can give those personal virtues-those attributes of manhood-self-reliance and independence".*

More than anything, the notion of race played a central role in imagining a racial space of freedom. Most notions of African identity have a tendency of theorizing issues from parts of the continent and present them as problems and ideals of the entire people of the continent. This fact became a fourth basic conceptual

orientation to the imaginations of African identity. Hountondji (1976), Mudimbe (1983) and Masolo (1997) all identified this orientation albeit in different contexts.

The last conceptual orientation worth mentioning, but which the Pan-Africanism of Blyden and Crummell left for later black thinkers, is the vindication of the African past(s). Martin and West (1999) call the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists and those before them 'vindicationists'. As earlier indicated, some white Enlightenment thinkers argued that black people were sub-human because they do not have a history of civilization. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists embarked on an intellectual endeavour to vindicate their race by showing that Negro people had great civilizations, and by correcting the misrepresentation of the Negro race by the white race (1999: 19). Reconstruction of the African past became an important, even an essential, part to imagining the restoration of the dignity of the Negro "race". This has resulted in searching for the future of Africa in the past as a necessary condition for black authenticity and the regaining of humanity<sup>39</sup>.

In brief, the conceptual orientations are: (1) to be authentically African means upholding native African cultures and values; (2) what is considered African is ontologically other to what is considered Western; (3) the homogenization of African individuals and collective socio-political and cultural freedom or agency into the notion of African identity or African personality; (4) the tendency to present issues from parts of the continent as universally continental; and (5) the future of black people lies in reconstructing the past. These conceptual orientations became the necessary conditions for imagining African identity. To be sure, these conceptual orientations are that which render the notion of African identity conceivable. Most dominant discourses on the notion of African identity have at least one of these conceptual orientations as their basis. The possibility of imagining African identity without any one of these conceptual orientations seems to me to be a futile one. Hence the conceptual and socio-political constellation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism, with Blyden as the most influential figure, laid a conceptual foundation on which African anti-colonial and postcolonial socio-political possibilities were imagined through the notion of African identity.

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<sup>39</sup> See Mbembe (2002) and Diagne (2002).

### **(c) Inheriting the Mind of the Founding Fathers: Conceptual Appropriation**

The problem that faced African anti-colonial thinkers, such as Senghor and Nkrumah, was how to overthrow Western monopoly over the definition of human experience or what it means to be human. This was their problem precisely because Western white racism continued to deny black people the conditions of human life. So, the project of the anti-colonial thinkers was premised on the conviction that the freedom of black people from Western racism and imperialism will only be achieved by relativizing European ethnocentrism. As long as what it means to be human is defined from a particular experience and imposed on African experiences, black people will never be free. This problem was premised both on the political situation of the time (colonialism and racism) and on the conceptual legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism. In this section, I will critically discuss the appropriation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African conceptual orientations by the 20<sup>th</sup> century African anti-colonial thinkers, and underscore its conceptual and theoretical limitations. The discussion will focus on the ideas of Senghor and Nkrumah.

Senghor's notion of *Negritude* and Nkrumah's idea of the "African personality" have at their basis some, if not all, of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conceptual orientations, as identified in the previous section. "Like Pan-Africanism, *negritude* begins with the assumption of the racial solidarity of the Negro" (Appiah 1992: 6). Senghor's idea of race, however, is different from that of his predecessors. Beginning with the work of Du Bois, the notion of Pan-Africanism began attempting to move away from a biological foundation of Negro racial unity to a more sociological and historical foundation.

*Difference in thinking and behaviour are not the emanations of biological prods: they are instead constructs reflecting the association of physical features with definite social positions as a result of conflictual encounters with other people (Kebede 2004: 53).*



While the first Pan-Africanists ascribed the connection between the mental and physical to biology and divine decree, *negritude* and Du Bois<sup>40</sup> attribute this connection to human and environmental conjugation overtime, as Kebede (ibid., p. 54) explains:

*Senghor correlates the physical traits and the mental orientation of the black essence with environmental influences on the grounds that the environment “causes those physical and psychic mutations which become hereditary”.*

In Senghor’s view, “race is an acquired determination” (ibid.). Inversely, Blyden held the view that mental aptitudes and talents persisted as conditioned by essential racial individualities as ordained by God, which meant the environmental or circumstantial conditions could only impede or foster their flourishing. The environment for Senghor is the conditioning factor in the development of mental and physical characteristics. The mental aptitudes that constitute races are a consequence of the human and environmental conjugation. Race becomes the transmitter of acquired characteristics, not the original donor (ibid., p. 54).

Senghor’s understanding of the racial difference between white people and black people is presented in his famous words: “Classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object, African reason is intuitive and participates in the object” (Senghor 1965 cited in Kebede 2004: 57). Senghor’s attribute of emotion to black essence and reason to white essence is, however, placed on unstable grounds, depending on the environmental circumstances over a long period of time. If it is human and environmental conjugation that produces the dominance of either reason or emotion in people, then whites can be dominated by emotion, and blacks by reason (Kebede 2004: 54). Reason and emotion are faculties common to all peoples, but due to environmental conditions, one can be dominant over the other. Neither the dominance of reason nor emotion represents a higher moment in human history but rather a complementarity. Without an objective definition of the difference between white and black people, Senghor does not find an explanation that could explain this difference without exploiting black people with the discourse of evolution and white superiority. “Senghor’s assumption is clear enough: The ascription of a different mental orientation to black essence, and that

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<sup>40</sup> For an account of Du Bois’s idea of race, read Du Bois (1897).

alone is liable to a non-derogatory explanation of the African technological lag” (ibid., p. 51).

In Senghor’s view, accepting the sameness of humans through European assimilation will only give justification to the ideas of progress and the white people as prototypes of humanity (ibid., p. 56). A call to otherness and originality therefore will instill pride in a degraded people and allow cultures and races to flourish within their own conditions and at their own pace. On this view, people will not be forced to copy or imitate other people’s cultures, since there will be no identification of superior cultures in opposition to inferior cultures. The evolutionary view of the world founded on the technological advancement of the West will not hold.

Senghor’s attribution of emotion to the essence of the Negro, and reason to white essence, has faced strong opposition. Opponents argue that although Senghor’s aim may have been to dignify black people’s ways of life, instill human pride in black people, and propound relativity of human cultures, his reduction of black ways of knowing as emotion only justifies European categorization of black people as pre-logical and underdeveloped. Further, Senghor’s desire for a return to the past cannot meet the challenges of contemporary African life. But Kebede points out that even though critics of *negritude* may be right, there is a point that Senghor raises that should be taken seriously which his critics do not take into account. This point is that: “The African ceases to be a failure by the very fact that the European is dethroned from the position of prototype” (ibid., p. 61). Senghor’s championing of otherness is aimed at relativizing Europe in order to create a space for African ways of life. Kebede is also quick to point out that the regression that Senghor is accused of is not sustained because Senghor argues that “there is no question of renouncing the industrial world” (Senghor cited in Kebede 2004: 61). Senghor advocates the appropriation of the technical industrial world by black people. Here Senghor is understood to be espousing essential African characteristics within modern African societies, assimilating Western technological reason, but at the same time creating the world through essential indigenous African characteristics.

Kebede, however, appears not to be aware of the contradiction he has exposed in Senghor's discourse which he inherited. Kebede cites Senghor stating that "classical European reason is analytical and makes use of the object, African reason is intuitive and participates in the object" (Senghor cited in Kebede 2004: 57), which explains European technological advancement and African technological lag. But:

*The price for controlling and manipulating things, that is, the gift of technicalness, is metaphysical superficiality. By contrast, the resolution to know things in their depth and inner reality require giving up the conquering impulse (Kebede 2004: 57).*

If Senghor does not want to lose the profundity of African reason/emotion and he also does not want to be assimilated into the Western hegemonic definition of humanity, how does he go on to embrace, on the one hand, the industrial world which is a result of analytic reason and metaphysical superficiality, and on the other hand, remain faithful to the African reason which, in essence, does not objectify and manipulate things? The two ontological and epistemological conditions that Senghor sets for himself appear to be practically irreconcilable and epistemologically contradictory. Even though Kebede underscores the one-sidedness of Senghor's critics, Senghor's own explicitly contradictory ideas, which he attempts to reconcile because of existential socio-political and cultural demands, are conceptually and theoretical unsustainable. It is at this point that the conceptual orientation of the 19th century Pan-Africanism starts to lose its critical force.

The theory of human races with special racial aptitudes which are fundamental to socio-political and cultural agency may be plausible in justifying African technological lag, instill pride in the degraded people of Africa, call for African unity, and dethrone Eurocentrism (which it has failed to do). But it cannot plausibly conceptualize and theorize the realities that Eurocentrism has created in African societies. Senghor's conceptual foundation of *negritude* could only support his anti-colonial project for African humanity and political independence, but it was not equipped with the conceptual resources to account for and theorize the socio-political and cultural aftermath of the colonial encounter in the postcolonial.

Senghor's appropriation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist conceptual orientation is apparent. Even though Senghor's notion of *negritude* shifted from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist biological foundation to a socio-historical and environmental foundation, two fundamental conceptual and theoretical orientations remain intact: Whether ordained by God or a result of human and environmental interchange, human races exist, and whatever constitutes human races is fundamental to how people create the world and experience their humanity. Senghor's conception of *negritude* therefore remains conceptually indebted to his predecessors, an indebtedness which is both a blessing and a curse at the same time. His conceptual indebtedness is evident, as Mudimbe (1988: 133) points out:

*Blyden established the "black personality movement" which stands for "the sum of values of African civilization, the body of qualities which make up the distinctiveness of the people of Africa." This empirical equivalent of negritude has been instrumental in sustaining the struggle for African independence by opposing colonization as a process of falsification and depersonalization of Africans and by criticizing imperialism as a means of exploitation. Blyden foresaw the immediate future of Africa.*

The strength of the *negritude* movement lies in its ability to mobilize black people to unite against white racism and imperialism. Further, it brings into question the European construction and representation of the lives of black people. And this is exactly what Blyden did a century before Senghor.

Senghor's appropriation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism is thorough, which makes it difficult for the notion of *negritude* to conceptually and theoretically transcend Blyden's call for African unity against colonialism and re-establish the humanity of black people. Senghor's juxtaposition of Africa as emotion and Europe as reason comes from Blyden's antithetical characterization of the African and the European. In the very conception of the word, *negritude* is the "revolt against" the European discourse of African civilization and Christianization, which was considered to be the key to humanization (Diagne 2014).

Senghor, like Blyden, located the individual and the collective socio-political and cultural agency of black people in native African cultures and in the values that he constructed based on the notion of *negritude*. Finally, it can also be discerned that Senghor saw it fit to speak on behalf of all the native African people due to his

influential studies of some of the Senegalese cultures, but without having interrogated all the native cultures of the African continent (ibid.).

While Senghor's idea of *negritude* was born during the anticolonial struggles, which may locate Senghor in a similar socio-political and conceptual constellation as that of Blyden, Nkrumah's idea of the "African personality" and Consciencism, on the other hand, may be considered to be postcolonial. Nkrumah did not only inherit the notion of "African personality" from Blyden, but also the latter's conceptual paradigm. Like Blyden's, Nkrumah's "African personality", was articulated from the conceptual orientation which locates African authenticity in native African cultures and values. On this point, Nkrumah (1970 [1964]: 78) writes:

*I have stressed that the two other segments, in order to be rightly seen, must be accommodated only as experiences of the traditional African society. If we fail to do this our society will be racked by the most malignant schizophrenia.*

Traditional African society is perceived as abiding, regardless of changing circumstances. If traditional cultures and values are not adhered to, Africa will become an internally divided society: split between an essential and immutable traditional African way of life, and external alien influences of Western and Islamic origin. Like Blyden, Nkrumah in *Consciencism* (1964) defines traditional African society in contrast to Western and Christian values, such as individualism. For instance, he writes:

*In the traditional African society, no sectional interest could be regarded as supreme; nor did legislative and executive power aid the interests of any particular group. The welfare of the people was supreme (Nkrumah 1970 [1964]: 69).*

This resembles what Lynch wrote earlier about Blyden's antithetical position to the West. It is also instructive to note that Nkrumah's Africa is not made up of societies. There are no societies in Africa, only a *society*. Consciencism, Nkrumah writes, "is the map in intellectual terms of the disposition of forces which will enable African society to digest the Western and the Islamic and the Euro-Christian elements in Africa, and develop them in such a way that they fit into the African personality" (ibid., p. 79). Africa, in Nkrumah's understanding, is one big society faced with the challenge of reconciling three contradictory ideologies of African traditional society, Western values, and Islamic values. Nkrumah, in this instance, homogenizes multiple, sometimes contradictory, native African cultures and values

into one. He also presents an Africa that seems to have an equal influence of Western, Christian, and Islamic elements everywhere. In the words of Mudimbe (1988: 133):

*Blyden expressed the essentials of the black personality movement and the Pan-Africanist program, with its focus on the ideological necessity of becoming reconciled with one's heritage and its particular sociohistorical experience and reality, which presaged Nkrumah's "Consciencism".*

The postcolonial Nkrumah, like the anticolonial Senghor, imagined their African identity through the notions of *negritude* and "African personality" from the same conceptual orientation as Blyden and his contemporaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did. To show that *negritude* and Nkrumah's "African personality" was articulated from the same conceptual paradigm as Blyden and Crummell is not to argue that they were wrong. What I am saying is that their imagination of African identity is conceptually founded on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist conceptual orientation and therefore is limited to a specific problem-space. To be sure, Senghor and Nkrumah found justification for their views because white racism and imperialism still had a similar form as it had had during the colonial and pre-colonial times. And the immediate postcolonial times were still open to re-colonization. The emphasis on Pan-Africanism by both Senghor and Nkrumah may then be considered as having been the appropriate political strategy for a collective will aiming at the complete overthrow of white racism and imperialism. The emphasis on traditional societies by both thinkers reflects the division between the majority of life forms of the native (traditional society) and that of so-called "civilized" society that colonialism had created<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, even though the anti-colonial and immediate postcolonial imaginations of socio-political and cultural freedom through the notion of African identity may have been articulated from a 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual paradigm, these views still found political justification within their problem-space. Besides the call for unity during the struggles for independence and the recognition of African cultures and values as resources for building African societies, the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual orientation ultimately proved incapable of conceptualizing realities created by the European encounter in the postcolonial, and for identifying spaces of socio-political and cultural agency. Despite this incapacity that started becoming

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<sup>41</sup>On the differences between the Westernized Africans and non-westernized Africans, read Mudimbe (1988) and Sartre (2006).

apparent as early as in Senghor's *negritude* and later in the 1970s<sup>42</sup>, the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual orientation nevertheless remained fundamental to the imagination of African socio-political and cultural freedom. Over four decades and well into the post-colonial, the notion of African identity remained a dominant conceptual tool for theorizing situations on the African continent, and the only imagined location of socio-political and cultural freedom. In the following section, I will critically expose the contemporary essentialist view of African identity and argue that it is still based on the conceptual legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before a critical exposition of the contemporary essentialist view of African identity, a brief reiteration of what has been discussed thus far is due.

The main argument I have presented above is that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism laid a conceptual orientation from which the notion of African identity emerged. To sustain my argument, I revisited Alexander Crummell's and Wilmot Blyden's ideas of Pan-Africanism and identified five conceptual orientations which later became the conceptual basis for the genesis of Senghor's notion of *negritude* and Nkrumah's notion of "African Personality". Of the two Pan-Africanists, I have shown that Blyden's version of Pan-Africanism has been the most influential because, unlike his contemporary, Crummell, who despised native African cultures and values, Blyden located Africanity or African individuality/identity in native African cultures and values.

The first conceptual orientation identified is that to be authentically African, one needs to uphold native African cultures and values. The second conceptual orientation is setting the idea of Africanity in ontological opposition to what is considered Western. The homogenization of individual and collective socio-political and cultural agency of black people into the notion of African personality or identity is the third conceptual orientation. The fourth conceptual orientation is the tendency to expose particular issues from a part of the continent as universally representative of the entire people of the continent of Africa. And lastly, I showed that the idea of reducing African authenticity to native African cultures coupled to

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<sup>42</sup> Read Hountondji (1976).

the vindication of the African past has resulted in the idea of the reconstruction of the African past as the only option for liberating the native people of the continent.

To sustain the argument that the Pan-Africanism of Blyden and Crummell laid a conceptual foundation for the genesis of the notion of African identity, I discussed Senghor's idea of *negritude* and Nkrumah's idea of the "African personality". I concluded by showing that Senghor's and Nkrumah's appropriation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual orientation only enabled them to call for the unity of black people against white racism and imperialism, and provided a recourse to African native cultures and values as resource for building African societies. However, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African conceptual orientation was unable to conceptualize existential African realities as created by the African-European encounter and to identify spaces of socio-political and cultural freedom for African people in the postcolonial.

#### **2.4 Mafeje's Africinity: A Contemporary Essentialist View**

Following the preceding discussion of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial conceptual orientations of the notion of African identity and the work that the notion of African identity was tasked to do, this section will focus on the contemporary essentialist view of African identity. This section is preoccupied with the following questions: Is the conceptual basis on which the notion of African identity has been conceptualized, still appropriate in light of contemporary situations on the African continent? Has the conceptual basis of the contemporary essentialist view of African identity changed from that of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists and the 20<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial thinkers? These questions are derived from the research question, which seeks to determine whether the notion of African identity has the conceptual and theoretical yield to conceptualize contemporary situations on the African continent.



The aim of this section therefore is to establish the conceptual basis of the contemporary essentialist notions of African identity and to expose its weakness. To this end, this section will critically engage the work of Archie Mafeje on the notion of Africanity. I will begin by contextualizing the notions of Africanity or Pan-Africanism as transcontinentally and continentally defined. The research will then proceed to outline Mafeje's notion of Africanity, and to identify the conceptual orientation from which his notion of Africanity is conceptualized. The chapter will conclude by arguing that the contemporary essentialist conception of African identity is fundamentally articulated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist conceptual orientation, which leaves it conceptually and theoretically impotent to theorize contemporary African situations, and to imagine spaces of socio-political and cultural agency in the postcolonial present.

Contemporary discourses on African identity go by different names. Archie Mafeje, for one, refer to the notion of 'Africanity'. Molefe Asante and his followers, on the other hand, use the notion of 'Afrocentricity', while others, as we have seen, use the notion of 'Pan-Africanism'<sup>43</sup>. There are also different theories of African identity, Africanity and Pan-Africanism. At times, Africanity or African identity may refer to the cultural unity of native African cultures, while at other times it is used to denote the racial unity of black peoples. Pan-Africanism, Africanity, African identity, and Afrocentricity are sometimes even used synonymously, while in other contexts, these concepts, can mean different things. For the purpose of this study, I will use African identity and Africanity synonymously, while avoiding as far as possible the terms 'Pan-Africanism' and 'Afrocentricity' because of multiple meanings given to them by different theorists. These theorisations of African identity can be divided into two traditions, based on their definition of Africa or Africans. The first tradition is what has come to be known as the transcontinental tradition, while the second is known as the continental tradition<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> On Afrocentricity and Pan-Africanism, read Molefe (1989) and Mafeje (2008).

<sup>44</sup> I take the distinction between the transcontinental and the continental tradition from Martin and West (1999).

The transcontinental tradition, in Martin and West's (1999) understanding, is rooted in the earlier development of Pan-Africanism among black American intellectuals. This tradition defines Africans as all black peoples both on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora, hence the name transcontinental. The transcontinental tradition in its original version is the Pan-Africanism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its definition of Africanity founded on the notion of race. The objective of this intellectual tradition was to theorize the lives of all black people across the globe with the aim of creating spaces free from the burden of European dehumanization. It is argued that in its inception, "the primary goal of the vindicationist tradition was to valorise the African past, to construct a historiography to refute white supremacist notions that Africa and Africans had played no part in the development of world cultures and civilizations" (Martin & West 1999: 19)<sup>45</sup>. The two Pan-Africanists I have discussed previously fall under this category. The contemporary version of the transcontinental tradition finds its most pronounced articulation in Molefe Asante's (1989) discourse of Afrocentricity and some versions of Pan-Africanism.

Unlike the transcontinental tradition, which was born in the diaspora and nurtured mostly in America<sup>46</sup>, the continental tradition was born on the continent of Africa. Different from the European and American Post World War II study of Africa, which defined Africa as Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>47</sup>, the continental tradition defines Africa from the North to the South and the East to the West of the continent. For the continental tradition, Africa is the entire continent. The continental tradition is also different from the transcontinental tradition, because the continental tradition defines Africa continentally and excludes black peoples who do not live in Africa. And since there are peoples of different ancestral origin living on the continent,

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<sup>45</sup> As we have seen earlier the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries Pan-Africanists are sometimes called vindicationists and belonging to the transcontinental tradition.

<sup>46</sup> There are a few black intellectuals in Europe, such as William Amo and Equiano, who espoused some form of Pan-Africanism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Most thinkers of Pan-Africanism, however, came from America.

<sup>47</sup> Martin & West (1999) define the post war study of sub-Sahara Africa initiated in the USA from a colonial paradigm as the Africanist tradition. This tradition was initiated by the ASA for American imperialist, academic and cultural agendas. It was unquestionably racist in its study of Africa.

Africa in this tradition has not been defined on the basis of human phenotype or race. The continental tradition was not only born on the continent, but it has also been grown on the continent (Martin & West 1999). This tradition is an attempt to adapt 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism to contemporary African socio-political and cultural demands. This tradition of the study and definition of Africa is the youngest tradition because it found its inspiration from the anti-colonial struggles during the post-World War II period. In their view, Martin and West believe that the continental tradition is mainly a reaction to the American and European intellectual hegemony and racial arrogance. It is in the continental tradition that I will situate Archie Mafeje's notion of Africanity.

In 2000, Mafeje published an article titled, "Africanity: A Combative Ontology". In this work, Mafeje developed a notion of Africanity in response to Martin and West's book titled, *Out of One Many Africas* (1999). The central thematic of the book is the insistence upon "the [supposed] demise of Africanity and the necessity of Afrocentrism", although Mafeje maintains that this claim is not consistently argued by the contributors to the book. (Mafeje 2008 [2000]: 106). In his article, Mafeje proceeds to define the notions of Africanity and Afrocentrism, and their role in African scholarship and politics. To some extent he also engaged with the argument pertaining to the demise of the American construction and study of Africa. It is in response to this demise of the American construction of Africa that Mafeje developed his notion of Africanity<sup>48</sup>.

Mafeje begins his discussion of Africanity by providing a historical and epistemological context for his argument. He writes:

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<sup>48</sup> As an intellectual endeavour, the Africanist enterprise basically aims, "to construct the body of knowledge and to interpret the continent (Africa) for various audiences in the United States, notably the university community, policy makers and the media" (Martin & West 1999:1). From the American governmental perspective, the Africanist project was "originally designed somewhat as crash programs to create requisite numbers of young Africanist specialists for posts in government, industry, or in international public and private agencies" (Cowan in Martin & West 1999: 90). On this view, Africa was seen as an opportunity for expanding America's rising global domination or supremacy.

*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 (ibid., p. 106).*

In Mafeje's view, the fact that the ideas of Africanity and Afrocentrism play a dominant role in intellectual debates and political practice should not come as a surprise. The prevalence of these two ideas is warranted because they represent "the historical juncture which defines us socially and intellectually" (ibid.). Mafeje continues:

*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 (ibid.).*

In this quote, Mafeje sketches the context to which his notion of Africanity was a response: the quest for freedom; the struggle against racism; resistance to the marginalization effected by Eurocentrism; and the reaffirmation of an identity which was denied and degraded. According to Mafeje, these global conditions and their determinant forces on the African continent call for an insurrection in the form of an African renaissance. An African renaissance entails "a conscious rejection of past transgressions, a determined negation of negations" (2008 [2000]: 106). Past transgressions include white racism in the form of slavery, colonialism, Apartheid, and its aftermath. Thus, it comes as no surprise to Mafeje that the two leading ideas in *Out of One Many Africas* are Africanity and Afrocentrism. A leading claim that Martin and West make is that Africanity is losing its potency both as theoretical and political tool, which makes Afrocentrism all the more necessary for addressing current African theoretical and political problems. But Mafeje disagrees with the claim that Africanity is becoming obsolete<sup>49</sup>. To make his point, Mafeje goes on to define the concepts of Africanity and Afrocentrism, and their place in the African renaissance. In order to critically interrogate Mafeje's argument, I shall treat the

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<sup>49</sup> The conception of Africanity which is becoming extinct is the transcontinental conception of Africanity. Mafeje agrees with the idea that a transcontinental conception of Africanity is dwindling hence he attempts to reconceptualise Africanity within the continental tradition.

two notions of Africanity and Afrocentrism separately in the following sections. In what follows, I will present Mafeje's notion of Afrocentrism.

### **(a) Afrocentrism**

During the time Mafeje wrote the article (2000), he argues that the notion of Africanity and Afrocentrism were used interchangeably as if they are conceptually synonymous. However, there is a conceptual difference between Africanity and Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism, in Mafeje's (2008 [2000]: 106) view, "can be regarded as a methodological requirement for decolonizing knowledge in Africa or as an antidote to Eurocentrism through which all knowledge about Africa has been filtered". The reason for promoting Afrocentrism lies in the history of knowledge production in Africa. For centuries, knowledge that has been produced in/about Africa has been produced by the West<sup>50</sup>. Such knowledge has thus been produced from the West's point of view, relegating the African to the position of mere object of knowledge and never as an active agent in knowledge production<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, the West has been producing denigrating knowledge on and about Africa through the racial politics from which they conceptualized what was considered African. Another important point for the necessity of Afrocentrism is that, compared to other regions of the world, "Africa is the only region which has suffered such total paradigmatic domination" (ibid.). This means that Africans have been allocated no indigenous conceptual systems which qualify as knowledge, and no indigenous scholars are "allowed" to study their societies and cultures from within their own epistemic paradigms, and for their own purposes. Mafeje (2008 [2000]: 106) cites Kwesi Prah (1997) to illustrate this point:

*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.*

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<sup>50</sup> Mudimbe (1988) engages with subject extensively.

<sup>51</sup> Mafeje (2001) also discusses this issue extensively.

While the Chinese, Indians, Arabs and Russians study their cultures from their own epistemic paradigms and for their purposes, Africans are not allowed to do so by the West. Afrocentrism, therefore, is a justified demand by African scholars to study their cultures and societies from within their own epistemic means and for their own purposes rather than acting as parrots or puppets in an alien Western intellectual discourse. If African scholars take an Afrocentric approach to studying African cultures and societies, it is believed it will result in an authentic representation of African realities. Mafeje puts it thus: “When Africans speak for themselves, the world will hear the authentic voice, and will be forced to come to terms with it in the long-run” (2008: 106). Even though Mafeje considers the mission of Afrocentrism to decolonize African knowledges to be a difficult and long one, he insists that Afrocentrism is warranted.

Mafeje appears to be cautious of the risks of taking a particularistic position in intellectual practices. He notes that taking an Afrocentric approach to studying African cultures and societies may result in producing solitary and particularistic knowledges in an age of interdependence. But Mafeje is quick to point out that if African scholars seriously study human cultures and societies, and produce knowledge that is relevant to human beings, then it will have international value. He, however, cautions not to mistake international value for universalism. Instead of universalism, Mafeje commends mutual recognition where diverse ways of thinking about different human cultures and societies can co-exist (*ibid.*). Indeed, Mafeje commends polycentrism rather than universalism, because universalism denies difference. He argues that universalism, which has been preached by the West since its ascendance, only aims at domination. If we agree that there are different ways of conceptualizing and ordering human life, then “universal knowledge can only exist in contradiction” (*ibid.*, p. 107).

Mafeje is not alone in his negation of universalism. Some European postmodern thinkers have realized that universalism, which has been celebrated for years, has been nothing but Eurocentrism. The postmodernist proposal for dialogue between

cultures appears, for Mafeje, to be the only avenue for polycentrism<sup>52</sup>. But problems immediately arise. How is Africa, which has been denied science and its own epistemic paradigm, going to “speak” with an authentic voice? For Mafeje, when some postmodern thinkers propose dialogue between cultures, this dialogue can only be possible if by culture “is meant civilizations in which the intellectual and scientific function is primary” (Mafeje 2008 [2000]: 107). So, in response to the problem of the epistemic paradigm domination of Africa, Mafeje proposes an excavation of African knowledge systems. Taking stock of the knowledge which African scholars have accumulated thus far, and Africans themselves examining their relevance for the present at this point is what Mafeje hints at when he speaks of culture in terms of intellectual and scientific civilization. For Mafeje, Afrocentrism is an epistemological or methodological approach that can aid African people in realizing the African renaissance.

### **(b) Africanity**

Unlike Afrocentrism, which is purely epistemological and methodological, Africanity, for Mafeje, “if properly understood, has profound political, ideological, cosmological, and intellectual implications” (Mafeje 2008 [2000]:106). Besides these implications, Africanity, Mafeje argues, has exclusivist ontological connotations (ibid., p. 107). Africanity therefore seems to be broader than Afrocentrism. If, within the profound implications of Africanity you find intellectual implications, and Afrocentrism is an epistemological/intellectual methodology, then one may be led to conclude that Afrocentrism is implicated in Africanity. Although Mafeje himself does not explicitly make this claim, it may be logically inferred from his definition of Afrocentrism along with what he has stipulated as the implications of Africanity. Let us take a look at how he defines and outlines the implications of Africanity when properly understood.

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<sup>52</sup> See critiques of Eurocentrism by Said (1977), Mudimbe (1988) and Asante (1989).

To begin with, “unlike Afrocentrism, which we argued was basically referential, Africanity has an emotive force. Its connotations are ontological and, therefore, exclusivist” (ibid.). The emotive and exclusivist connotations of Africanity stem from the historical exclusivist ontologies of Western reason in the form of white racism. On this view, Mafeje’s Africanity is a response to Europe’s conceptual and political interchange with Africa. Mafeje (ibid., p.109) states that “Africanity is an antithesis of this and, like all social revolutions, its terms of reference are exclusive of its negations”. On this definition, Africanity is a response and antithesis to the European conceptual and socio-political imposition on Africa. Its objective therefore is to negate Western forces in Africa.

The antithetical nature of Africanity does not start with Mafeje. It is justifiable, in Mafeje’s view, that thinkers such as Senghor with the notion of *negritude* and Nkrumah with the idea of “African personality” responded to the European discourse of black inferiority. Unlike the common critique levelled against Senghor’s and Nkrumah’s ideas as being racist, Mafeje (ibid., p. 107) is of the opinion that “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”. Furthermore, for people who have been subjected to the discourse of inferiority for centuries and thus “degraded and accorded a sub-human status”, it should not take much intellectual effort to understand the reflexive effort to affirm their humanity.

Mafeje distinguishes between how he conceptualizes Africanity from how the earlier period of anti-colonial and immediate postcolonial thinkers thought of Africanity. He names Senghor and Nkrumah with their ideas of *negritude* and “African personality” as belonging to the vindicationist tradition. The aim of espousing their ideas, among other things, had been necessary to reaffirming the humanity of black people which has been denied by Western exclusivist ontologies.



Although Mafeje argues that the idea of “black souls” is vindicationist and therefore different from his notion of Africanity, he nevertheless seems to appropriate the same vindicationist conception when he writes about the “distinct inner quality” of black people:

*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 (2008 [2000]: 107).*

For Mafeje (ibid.), the idea of *Ubuntu*, which is not only a state of inner human qualities but also “a state of social and spiritual being”, is what allows “Africans” to make a distinction between themselves and others”. It appears here that the virtues of *Ubuntu* are the features by which ordinary Africans distinguish themselves from whites. If, for Mafeje, *Ubuntu* is an “inner quality” and a “state of social and spiritual being” which separates the “Africans” from the “whites”, then how do we explain, conceptually and theoretically, the inner, social and spiritual difference that cuts across “Africans” and “whites”? How is this inner, social and spiritual difference racially distributed evenly among “Africans” and “whites” who share the same socio-political and cultural spaces? Mafeje, on this view, seems to lapse back into essential categorization of blacks and whites founded on something other than socio-political intercourse.

Convinced that he is not racially essentialist, Mafeje (ibid.) argues that it is unfortunate that in the minds of contemporary black intellectuals, Africanity has come to mean something other than “a state of social and spiritual being”:

*It [Africanity] has become a pervasive ontology that straddles space and time. Instead of being limited to continental Africans, it extends to all blacks of African descent in the Diaspora, especially African-Americans.*

Africanity, for Mafeje (op. cit., 2008), is an inner quality of being which translates into a social state of being where “higher human” qualities are shared: Qualities

such as sympathy, willingness to share and forgiveness. Mafeje's unjustified conviction that his view of Africanity is not founded on the idea of race and his restriction of Africanity to the continent of Africa means that his theory cannot in actual fact be defined as belonging to the transcontinental tradition. For Mafeje, those who claim that Africanity is shared by all black people, also by those beyond the boundaries of the African continent, are misguided. Africanity does not transcend time and space. He states that "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 hybridized" (ibid., p. 108). But one is left wondering if there is something like a cultural or "a social and spiritual" unity on the African continent.

Contemporary discourse on Africanity has inevitably acquired racial overtones because, among its many implications, Africanity counters white racism. It is on this issue of opposing white racism that Africanity can extend hands of solidarity beyond the continent. Africanity can be engaged by continental Africans and African-Americans alike to counter white racism which has relegated black people to an ahistorical sub-human people. It is in connection with the historical degradation of black people that Mafeje alludes to the intellectual implications of Africanity. In order to restore the recognition and respect of black people, Africanity as an intellectual project, among other things, aims at "establishing the true identity of the historical and cultural African" (Mafeje 2008 [2000]: 107). This entails excavating the past, "going as far as the beginnings of the Egyptian civilizations in the Nile Valley, and deciphering of African cosmologies and myths of origin" (ibid.). But Mafeje's idea of going back into the past is characteristic of the vindicationists tradition.

Mafeje's claim that Africanity has inevitably acquired a racial overtone is misguided, however. As I clearly demonstrated earlier, at the very inception of the discourse of Africanity (before the notion of Africanity was even discursively developed, and only Pan-Africanism existed), the idea of race was central to the discourse. Despite his explicit claim to the contrary, it is in actual fact Mafeje

himself who is attempting to leave the notion of race out of the definition of Africanity.

Mafeje believes that there is an African essence which has been distorted by Europeans, but that must be rediscovered. He echoes African thinkers such as:

*Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Kwesi Prah, Pauline Hountondji, and Valentine Mudimbe which 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 (ibid.).*

The essence of Africanity, in Mafeje's view, can be discovered through the study of "the history and cultural underpinnings of contemporary African societies" (2008 [2000]: 107). A scholarly investigation into the history and cultural underpinnings of contemporary African cultural practices, Mafeje hopes, "should enable African scholars to develop theories and paradigms that will help the Africans combat foreign domination and forge an independent Pan-African identity" (ibid.). From this claim, Mafeje acknowledges that a Pan-African identity is not yet in existence, hence it has to be forged. But at the same time, Mafeje says that Africanity has an essence that underpins African history and culture, both past and present, which means that there is already something like an essential Africanity. Mafeje's belief in the prior existence of African identity is also stated at another instance when he writes that: "Africanity is an assertion of an identity that has been denied; it is a Pan-Africanist revulsion against external imposition or a refusal to be dictated by others" (ibid.). If Africanity is an identity that has been denied, it means that it is already existent. If African identity already exists, then it is a matter of just re-asserting it.

The belief in a prior existence of identity is also shared by Kanu (2013: 40), when he writes that "African renaissance is about the reawakening of fellow Africans to the need for a change that would bring about a revival or rebirth of the African identity". For Kanu (ibid., p. 34), African identity is the African being one with herself, consistent with herself and being different from others. For one to be consistent with oneself, "identity should establish that the present can be linked to

the past” (ibid., p. 37). On the essence of African identity and the quest for constancy, Kanu and Umeagu<sup>53</sup> (2013) worry about the destruction of African identity by Western influence or hegemony. Their concern stems from the belief that they share with Mafeje the idea that there is a pre-existing essence constitutive of African identity.

By arguing on the one hand that there is a “true identity of the historical and cultural Africa” which constitutes the essence of Africanity, and on the other hand, that there is need to forge a Pan-African identity through the study of historical and cultural underpinnings of contemporary Africa and past societies, presents us with a problem. Mafeje, on this issue, holds positions that are potentially oxymoronic and theoretically unexplainable. The problem which arises from Mafeje’s ideas is how to forge an identity which is already in existence. Unfortunately, Mafeje did not realize this inherent contradiction in his views, nor did he provide any theoretical background to support such views.

Mafeje’s appeal to the cultural and historical underpinnings of Africa and his insistence upon a pre-existing essence of Africanity evoked criticism from Mbembe and Diagne. Mbembe’s (2002: 253) criticism holds that Mafeje’s view “emphasizes difference and specificity by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (tradition) and the values of autochthony. The point where these two political and cultural moves converge is race”. Replacing the notion of originality with the notion of authenticity, Diagne (2002: 621) concurs with Mbembe:

*Authenticity here conveys the idea that meaning does not come from the past (the figure of tradition, or repetition); that it is not a projection of tradition on the present and the future. On the contrary, it is the future that continuously sheds its light on the African past and present and endows them with meaning.*

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<sup>53</sup> Umeagu (2013) presents a conflated articulation of African identity. It is both distinctively Nigerian and African and the difference between the two is not apparent. This bipolarity is characteristic of many pronouncements of African identity.

As shown above, Mbembe argues that Mafeje's emphasis on the reconstruction of cultural and historical Africa (which to Mbembe is tradition) as the vehicle through which to attain African socio-political and cultural freedom finds justification in the notion of race. Diagne challenges Mafeje to imagine authenticity as a present performative which is future oriented, rather than past oriented. Mafeje oppose this critique for he believes that his view of Africanity is not founded on race, but rather on socio-political historical conditions. Mafeje (2008 [2000]: 107) argues that:

*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 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'.*

By posing the view that his notion of Africanity is not a black "ontology" and a regression into the African past, as Mbembe and Diagne contend, Mafeje believes that he is only bringing the issue of the racial injustice perpetrated against black people into the discourse of Africanity. He argues that historically, the problem of race has been proven not to be a scientific/biological problem, but rather a political problem that has been in search of a metaphysical justification for who should dominate and who should be dominated (ibid., pp. 111-112). By bringing the issues of racial injustices into the discourse of Africanity, Mafeje believes that he is not appealing to some static racial ontology to ground his idea of Africanity. For Mafeje, African problems have, as one of their basic causes, racial inequality caused by Western domination of the African continent. On this basis, Africanity entails resolving the problem of inequalities brought about by the political problem of race. For instance, Mafeje (ibid., p. 113) argues that:

*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.*

The problem of race therefore features in the notion of Africanity as a quest for justice and social equality. And because the problem of race is not exclusive to the African continent, but an international problem, Mafeje sees the necessity of black people to unite and demand their equal share in contemporary global politics. This

is where the political and ideological implications of the notion of Africanity rests. Mafeje (ibid., p. 108) states 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.*

Africanity therefore does not refer to the unity of black people or a return to pre-colonial times. Mafeje's Africanity "should not be confused with black solidarity in the original Pan-Africanist sense, which included blacks of African descent in the Diaspora" (ibid., p. 107-108), as Mbembe argues<sup>54</sup>. Rather, Mafeje believes his notion of Africanity is a struggle for African independence and unity starting from where Africa is today with all the people who inhabit the continent as their home. Mafeje (ibid., p. 113) makes this claim:

*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.*

The problems that afflict African people on Mafeje's observation are external control of the continent (politically, intellectually economically and culturally), internal authoritarian regimes, and social deprivation. The primary cause of these problems appears, in Mafeje's view, to be European white racism and persistent colonialism over the span of centuries. Mafeje finds the answer to these problems in his notion of Africanity. Mafeje believes that by rediscovering the principles that underlie native African cultures and values, African people will be able to recover from their inflictions. Mafeje believes his idea of Africanity to be the weapon by which the evil spirit of European racism on African lives will be exorcized.

It is for this reason that Mafeje sees his notion of Africanity as a second independence (ibid., p. 107). According to him, the "first" independence was won by anti-colonialists which resulted in African national states, whereas the second independence should result in a Pan-African identity.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mbembe (2002).

In summary, Africanity for Mafeje is an ontological assertion of the freedom of the people of Africa. It is an identity which was denied. Because of its history of negation, Africanity is the antithesis of the European definition of Africa: It is a response to European white dehumanization of black people. It is also an insistence upon justice and equality. To be fully realized, Africanity should be discovered both in contemporary and past indigenous African knowledge systems and ways of life.

### **(c) A Cause for Contradictions**

Following the above exposition of Mafeje's conception of African identity, I will turn to a critical discussion of Mafeje's articulation of Africanity. It will become apparent that the dominant essentialist conceptions of Africanity is articulated from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African conceptual orientation, which accounts for a lot of conceptual and theoretical contradictions inherent in the discourse. I will conclude by arguing that the contradictions found in the essentialist view of African identity are a result of the conceptual and theoretical misapplication and impotence of this notion in its essentialist form.

Earlier in the chapter I identified five conceptual orientations from which (through which and towards which), Blyden and Crummell imagined their notions of Pan-Africanism. These orientations, I further argued, became the conceptual incubator of the notions of African identity during the anti-colonial and post-colonial times. I will show how the essentialist view of African identity is founded on some of these conceptual orientations, and how, in turn, because of their historicity, fail to meet the conceptual and theoretical demands our historical moment.

Mafeje's articulation of African identity, even though it is among the influential sources on the subject of African identity, lacks theoretical justification. This means

that I will have to source theoretical backup from a different thinker to theoretically supplement Mafeje's views. To this end, I will draw on Serequeberhan's (2009) conception of African socio-political and cultural agency. Unlike Mafeje, who does not abide by the disciplinary convention to back up his views theoretically, Serequeberhan provides us with a solid philosophical and conceptual foundation for his views on African agency. Despite this difference, there is a fundamental agreement between Mafeje's views and Serequeberhan's theorization.

By taking the notion of "human generic identity" (which means the power of human initiative and creativity for socio-political and cultural agency) from Marcien Towa, Serequeberhan argues that the European conquest of the African peoples, denied the vanquished "human generic identity" (2009). Put plainly, European conquest denied the African peoples the human initiative and creativity for socio-political and cultural agency (Serequeberhan 2009: 49-51). Serequeberhan argues that underlying every human cultural and socio-political community, one finds human initiative and the creative ability to sustain and develop their society. It is this creative power that determines the history of a community. Once a people's cultural and socio-political life has been disturbed or destroyed, the victimized people are consequently robbed of the creative power to determine the course of their history. Socio-political and cultural agency therefore is the principle on which human social freedom rests. "The African's mode of life, her/his human habitat was unhinged and destroyed" by European conquest, making the African a mere instrument in the European "human generic identity" (ibid., p. 50). Therefore, the contemporary situation of African people is conditioned in such a way that the Occident (Europeans) have the creative and initiative power of "human generic identity", while Africans are deprived of it. "This difference – which today constitutes the lived actuality of our contemporary situation – was created by force of arms" (ibid.). This situation "is managed and maintained – to this very day – by the neo-colonial 'cadres' or the '[Westernized]' elites of peripheral areas," formed by the "epistemology" and "faith" of "universalism" (Serequeberhan 2009: 50). According to Serequeberhan, Eurocentrism is the main catalyst in sustaining the condition of the Africans' lack of "human generic identity". Oyedola (2015: 24) agrees with Serequeberhan on this view: "Europeans and Americans, which till



date, still make Africa and Africans to look up to the West for recognition, acceptance, to rubber stamp any work done in Africa and by Africans”.

For the Africans to regain their “human generic identity”, therefore, a critique and displacement of Eurocentrism, and the reorientation to African indigenous sources are necessary in Serequeberhan’s view (op. ct., 2009). He writes:

*In re-orienting our philosophic work to indigenous sources and in challenging the Eurocentric constructs that sanctioned our subjugation, contemporary African philosophy would thus be involved in concretely re-claiming our “generic human identity.” To re-claim our “generic human identity” means to tangibly challenge, on the level of ideas and reflection, that which puts it in question (ibid., p. 50).*

The difference between Mafeje and Serequeberhan in this context is that Serequeberhan provides a philosophical exposition of the need for reorienting African philosophical discourse to indigenous African sources, while Mafeje does not. But the principles of both Mafeje’s and Serequeberhan’s endeavours are the same. They both believe that African peoples have lost the socio-political and cultural agency or initiative and creative power as a result of European conquest. As European conquest and domination is the main cause and impediment to Africans regaining their “human generic identity”, both Mafeje and Serequeberhan believe that Eurocentrism must be questioned and dethroned. And finally, Mafeje and Serequeberhan further argue that for the African peoples to regain their “human generic identity” or their independence, in Mafeje’s terminology, it is of necessity that Africans revisit native African modes of thought and being in the world. The reason that Serequeberhan’s (ibid., p. 49) theory of “human generic identity” provides for reorienting African philosophical thought to native African sources is that:

*“Generic human identity” is the grounding source of our human existence “the constituting activity of all culture” which “lies beneath all particular cultures because it is that which engenders them all.*

For this reason, African human existence cannot be engendered outside of their cultural constituting activities. As such, the possibility of a human life for Africans depends on reclaiming the lost cultural orientation. As much as Serequeberhan’s

theorization is correct about the source of socio-political and cultural creativity and initiative as constituted within and engendered by modes of life and their underlying values, his identification of indigenous African cultures (of which I understand African cultural practices as opposed to “Western” cultural practices) as the locus of contemporary African “generic human identity” is, however, unsatisfactory. Serequeberhan’s indigenous cultures are not cultural practices and values that inform human lives on the African continent today, but rather the *pre-colonial* indigenous cultural practices and values. If culture is what people do and that which informs their practices and values, how is it that Serequeberhan chooses not to interrogate or source primarily from contemporary African cultural practices and values in order to unearth the possibilities of Africans’ “human generic identities”, but rather opts for indigenous re-orientation? It is here that we can start identifying the 19th century Pan-Africanist conceptual influence on the ideas of Mafeje and Serequeberhan. Serequeberhan’s notion of African indigenous sources and cultures rests upon the African and European dichotomy. On the one hand, you have an African culture with its own “generic human identity”, and on the other hand, you have a Western culture with its own “generic human identity”.

Underlying this presumed dichotomy and the quest for “human generic identity” is the view that it is impossible for Africans to practice freedom outside of their indigenous practices and values. This view is premised on the theory of essential racial qualities as the basis of human socio-political and cultural freedom and creativity, as outlined by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists. One is also left wondering what makes Serequeberhan and Mafeje so sure that if Africans re-orient their philosophical/intellectual enterprise to native African traditional views, Africans will be able to resolve current socio-political and cultural ills and regain “human generic identity”. Only historicists believe that the future is a logical consequence of that which has already been set in place.

Like Blyden, they argue that the only possibility of African freedom lies in native African cultural practices and values. But while Blyden had the conventional notion and theory of race and the majority of the black population living native forms of life

to support his claim, Mafeje, Serequeberhan and their sympathizers do not have either. Neither Mafeje nor Serequeberhan believe in the racial essentialism of Blyden and his contemporaries, as Mafeje persistently argues against the racial foundation of his notion of Africanity, as intimated earlier. The racial foundation of Africanity leads Mafeje into contradictions. On one occasion, he makes a distinction between “Africans” (meaning blacks) and “whites”, while on another, he argues that white South African settlers are failing to deal with their Africanity. Mafeje attempts to apply a racial concept to a non-racial context, which leads him into contradiction.

The persistent dichotomy between Africanity and Europeanism in Mafeje’s and Serequeberhan’s thought points to their inability to read contemporary situations on the African continent, since it leaves them stuck between either considering Africanity as representing the contemporary situation(s) in Africa or as its historical heritage and cultural identity. However, since they conceive of Africanity as deriving from a persistent ontological difference from the West, they locate the “generic human identity” of Africans in the African historical (past) heritage and cultural identity. This clear-cut difference between Africanity and the Western has been proved inaccurate by Mudimbe (1988). Starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists, whatever has been defined as African has been defined from a Western epistemic paradigm (ibid.). What is often considered as traditional African societies does not stand in ontological contradiction to what is considered Western. Rather, it has always been a Western epistemic construction. To be sure, “what exists in Africa is no longer the traditional society but, a peripherized society” (Kebede 2004: 124). To be even more accurate, it’s not peripherized society, but peripherized societies.

Serequeberhan’s African re-orientation has a continental universal self or agency. On this point, he writes that “it is for this reason that we need an indigenous re-orientation of our thinking focused on exploring the possibilities of our history” (2009: 50). In Africa, there are no histories, but a history as reflected in Serequeberhan’s “our history” instead of “our histories”. Heterogeneity and

sometimes even the inherent contradictions between African historical and contemporary agencies are reduced to a single site of creativity and agency. On this point, Serequeberhan at once singularizes African agency and speaks for Africa as a whole. Mafeje's conception of Africanity is also characterised by speaking for Africa as a whole. Mafeje's preoccupation with the problem of race is characteristic of South African socio-political and economic problems<sup>55</sup>. Not all countries in Africa were settler colonies or protectorates, such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya or Botswana, for instance. This means that many African countries have had a very small presence of white settlers, which gives a different shape to the problems of socio-political and economic equality and equity brought about by colonialism. However, Mafeje presents South African racial problems as continental problems. He transposes an issue from a specific context onto the continent as a whole and makes it universally African. Masolo (1997: 285) describes this practice as follows:

*While the overarching view of postcoloniality as an emancipatory movement is completely justified, a problem arises with regards to its two-pronged assumption, prevalent in most postcolonial text: first, that all formerly colonized persons ought to have one view of the impact of colonialism behind which they ought to unite to overthrow it; second, that the overthrow of colonialism be replaced with another, liberated and assumedly authentic identity.*

Masolo (op. cit., 1997) maintains that this view of a united and objective identity is so strong that it is seen as a solid rock which has withstood the test of time with the exception of colonialism. If this quest for monolithism is maintained as a basic assumption in postcolonial texts, "[p]ostcoloniality remains only, and vividly so, a search for something constantly allusive" (ibid., p. 286). This is a result of the fact that white racism and colonialism meant different things to colonial subjects and created different worlds.

As we have seen, the contemporary essentialist conception of African identity has at its basis the conceptual legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism. Removing from the foundation of contemporary notions of African identity all five conceptual

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<sup>55</sup> Mbembe (op. cit., 2002) and Masolo (op. cit., 1997) realised this problem as well.

orientations left behind by 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism, the whole notion of African identity, as conceptualized from an essentialist position, falls apart. For any essentialist view of African identity to hold conceptually and theoretically, it is forced either to reduce African differences and possibilities of socio-political and cultural agencies into a single site of agency; or to speak on behalf of all the peoples of the continent, while articulating issues from specific contexts representing only (a) part(s) of the continent. In addition, it needs to define itself against some “other”, mostly the West. It also needs to locate the authenticity and human freedom of Africans in native African culture and values. Finally, but directly connected to the former and the first two, it must reconstruct the African past identity.

My contention is not that these conceptual orientations are wrong in themselves. As earlier indicated, Blyden’s and Crummell’s Pan-Africanist ideas are justified conceptually and politically within their own problem-spaces. My contention, rather, is that these conceptual positions or orientations are a result of a specific conceptual and political constellation, which differ fundamentally from the ones we currently inhabit. For instance, conventionally, we no longer hold the view that people possess essential racial qualities which are the basis of human socio-political and cultural agency. There is no clear-cut distinction between the Western epistemic paradigm and the African epistemic paradigm, as Kebede (2004: 124) correctly points out:

*We must not underestimate the impact of these western concepts. Such concepts are no longer what Africans have borrowed; they have been internalised to the point of becoming their unconscious references.*

There is simply no cultural unity among people living on the African continent, even in Sub-Saharan Africa, without recourse to theories of race. Needless to say, it is impossible to go back to ways of life which existed during pre-colonial times. Life forms on the continent have been radically transformed both by force and choice following Western imperialism, both in rural and urban areas. If we leave out these claims, there is no conceptual foundation for the notion of African identity as articulated by the essentialists. So, why do we need an essentialist conception of

African identity? There is no African individuality, or personality that is central to the forms of human life on the African continent, apart from the marginalization brought about by colonialism and sustained by neo-colonialism. But these have different faces and divergent rationales all over the continent, and to understand them entails analysing them in their specificity without having to resort to 'an' African identity.

The essentialist view of African identity tells us very little conceptually about what is at the basis of socio-political and cultural practices in different parts of the African continent. Our understanding of what it means to be human has changed fundamentally from the conceptual orientation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism and the essentialist notion of African identity, and cannot be derived from a single conceptual orientation that constructs our world today. Mamdani (2016: 79) succinctly explains what I am trying to say:

*Our understanding of decolonization has changed over time: from political, to economic to discursive (epistemological). The political understanding of decolonization has moved from one limited to political independence, independence from external domination, to a broader transformation of institutions, especially those critical to the reproduction of racial and ethnic subjectivities legally enforced under colonialism. The economic understanding has also broadened from one of local ownership over local resources to the transformation of both internal and external institutions that sustain unequal colonial-type economic relations. The epistemological dimension of decolonization has focused on the categories with which we make, unmake and remake, and thereby apprehend, the world. It is intimately tied to our notions of what is human, what is particular and what is universal.*

Mafeje's and Serequeberhan's preoccupation with external domination, reconstruction of indigenous sources, and a continental agency constituting principles of African identity fails to capture the local ethnic conflicts and how they shape the worlds of the locals; the ideas that inform local institutions and how they create and sustain economic and socio-political relations; how local institutions shape and are reshaped by foreign institutions; and how Christianity, Islam, native traditions and neoliberalism have become syncretized locally to create the conditions of possibility of human life in the multitude of locales on the African continent.

If, as Serequeberhan (2009: 40) rightly puts it, “generic human identity ... lies beneath all particular cultures because it is that which engenders them all”, then we should first interrogate what constitutes African cultural practices today and discover the possibilities that particular socio-political and cultural communities in present-day Africa have in store for their peoples. Only after this, based on what we understand to be constituting our life worlds, can we excavate the past and reconstruct what we consider as resourceful for our different societies. The essentialist conception of African identity, which derives from the 19<sup>th</sup> century conceptual Pan-Africanist paradigm, is alien to the ones we construct and that sustain our worlds in the present. It therefore no longer serves as conceptual and theoretical tool with which to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of freedom in contemporary African contexts.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to show that the conceptual foundation of the essentialist view of African identity is conceptually and theoretically impotent to conceptualize contemporary situations on the African continent with. This argument was made to bolster the thesis that the notion of African identity, in its essentialist and anti-essentialist views, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to theorize socio-political and cultural agency in contemporary situations in Africa. To achieve the aim of the chapter, the chapter began by critically discussing 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism as articulated by Alexander Crummell and Edward Wilmot Blyden, as the conceptual progenitors of the notion of African identity. In discussing Crummell’s and Blyden’s ideas, five conceptual orientations, as foundational to the concept of African identity, were identified. It was also argued that these conceptual orientations were consequences of specific socio-political and cultural ends at a particular historical juncture.

The five conceptual orientations include the view that all black people, to be authentically human, must live in accord with African native cultures and values;

what is defined as African identity is ontologically different from what is defined as Western; black socio-political and cultural agency was conflated into the notion of African identity; the habit of theorizing particular situations on the continent and holding them up as representative of the continent as a whole; and the desire to reconstruct the African past as necessary condition for the possibility of African humanity and freedom. These conceptual orientations, however, found justification in race theories and the political demands of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and anti-colonial era.

Anti-colonial thinkers, such as Leopold S. Senghor and Kwame Nkrumah, derive their ideas of *negritude* and the so-called “African personality” from the conceptual paradigm inherited from Crummell and Blyden. The ideas of *negritude* and “African personality” are conceptually plausible from the perspective of racial theories and found political justification in their ability to mobilize black people against colonialism and to recover human dignity that was denied by slavery and colonialism. But when it came to understanding the socio-political and cultural conditions of people in Africa at the time, these ideas started facing conceptual contradictions and turned out to be theoretically implausible. This was a result of the conceptual and political difference between the conceptual orientation of the notion of African identity and that of the situation it was tasked to theorize.

The chapter further discussed the contemporary essentialist view of African identity with a focus on Mafeje’s notion of Africinity. In this section, it was shown that the contemporary essentialist view of African identity mobilizes a conception of African identity premised on implicit racist and historicist assumptions to theorize contemporary African socio-political and cultural agency. As such it fails dismally to capture the contemporary conceptual and socio-political milieu. The chapter concluded by arguing that the notion of African identity, in its essentialist view, does not have the conceptual and theoretical capacity to theorize contemporary socio-political and cultural spaces of freedom on the continent.



As shown by some of the criticism of the essentialist view discussed in this chapter, an alternative to imagining African identity has emerged, an alternative which I have called the anti-essentialist view. In the following chapter, the anti-essentialist view will be discussed.

## Chapter 3: The Anti-Essentialist Critique of African Identity

### 3.1. Introduction

As should be clear by now, this study seeks to critically interrogate the notion of African identity. In the first chapter, the theoretical framework was established from which the research question is being interrogated. Following David Scott, I opted for a multiply constituted and historically informed practice of criticism, which is capable of intervening in both theoretical and political problems of its time. In line with Scott's concept of problem-space and strategic-criticism, I emphasized that critical theoretical intervention should be understood as underscoring the limitations of the conceptual and theoretical apparatus operative in the practice of criticism and capable of pointing towards workable alternatives to that which is found to be problematic in the theoretical and political present. In the second chapter, I proceeded to critically interrogate 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism and how these theories have shaped contemporary essentialist conceptions of African identity in order to expose the conceptual and theoretical limitations thereof.

The aim of the present chapter is to examine the anti-essentialist view of African identity and to draw on its conceptual and theoretical weaknesses. The chapter will focus on Achille Mbembe's anti-essentialist critique of African ways of thinking African identity as a representative of the anti-essentialist view of African identity broadly speaking. It will also uncover some of its limitations for an interventional criticism of the theoretical and political present. I will begin with an exposition of Mbembe's anti-essentialist critique of his adversaries in "African Modes of Self-Writing". I will attempt to ascertain to what extent the work – by way of its critical engagement with the notion of African identity – is able to conceptually and theoretically intervene in the cognitive-political present in order to open spaces of freedom. In my interrogation of Mbembe's argument, I will begin by questioning his contingent conceptual framework within which he claims to launch his problems and answers. On this point, the research will establish that, even though Mbembe claims to be historical in his approach, informed as it is by a multiply-contingent, constantly changing notion of African identity, the work under investigation is

found, at some instances, to be reductionist, ahistorical and essentialist. The chapter will then proceed to interrogate the conceptual and theoretical alternatives that Mbembe offers to the essentialist views. Central to the alternative that Mbembe suggests is a fluid notion of African identity as embodied in the idea of self-styling<sup>56</sup>. I will argue that Mbembe's notion of self-styling is deeply entrenched in, and constricted by, the binary conceptualization of identity as either static or fluid, which unfortunately leads Mbembe to champion self-styling even in overdetermined socio-political situations such as slavery, colonialism and postcolonial states of wars that have afforded their victims nothing more than convoluted forms of consent. Drawing on the same line of reasoning, I will demonstrate that the unconditional practice of self-styling, propounded by Mbembe, is based on an ontological understanding of human freedom which ideally exists, but which can only be actualized in specific socio-political settings not already overdetermined by forces of domination. The chapter will conclude by showing that Mbembe's determination to espouse the fluid notion of African identity to intervene in African theory and politics is conceptually conflated and has limited his intervention to only challenging the essentialist views of the notion of African identity, leaving the undesired and dehumanizing modalities of fluidity unchallenged. But before I present Mbembe's argument(s), a brief introduction of Mbembe, the academic, is in order.

Achille Mbembe is a Cameroonian historian, postcolonial theorist and public intellectual currently based in South Africa. Mbembe works for the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Witwatersrand as a senior researcher. Mbembe has had a prolific intellectual career thus far and has captured the attention of world scholars, especially in postcolonial theory. At the beginning of the 21st century, he published a number of works whose main aim was to challenge the manner in which African intellectuals have conceptualised African identity and to propose a different way in which we can imagine and articulate contemporary realities on the African continent. Principle among his works on the same theme is his 2001 book, *On the Postcolony*, and the articles

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<sup>56</sup> Self-styling according to Mbembe is the individuals' autonomous choices and 'performatives' in socio-political situations which define who they are as human individuals. See Mbembe (2002).

"Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism" (2001) and "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2002). In these works, Mbembe challenges how African identity has been conceptualized as a "substance" in dominant African narratives. His work positions him in the deconstructivist or postmodernist theoretical framework because of his critique of older generations' 'essentialist' conception of Africanity, and his insistence on the instability/fluidity and multiplicities of 'African identities'. For my purpose, I will mainly engage with "African Modes of Self-Writing", which may be read as a summary of *On the Postcolony*. Moreover, it is considerably more nuanced than "Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism". More importantly, however, it is in "African Modes of Self-Writing" that he explicitly engages with the notion of African identity and directly challenges both his predecessors and contemporaries on the subject, whereas in *On the Postcolony* he mainly theorizes about power relations in postcolonial Africa.

To be sure, some theoretical and conceptual links can be found between "African Modes of Self-Writing" and *On the Postcolony*, even though the former focuses on African identity, while the latter is more concerned with power relations. In the course of this chapter, I shall attempt to show in what precise sense the two notions of identity and power differ from each other. A close reading of "African Modes of Self-Writing" and *On the Postcolony*, however, can create the impression that he is talking about the same phenomenon. But let me begin by extrapolating Mbembe's argument against dominant modes of conceptualizing African identity in "African Modes of Self-Writing".

### **3.2. African Modes of Imagining African Identity: The Anti-Essentialist Critique**

In "African Modes of Self-Writing", Mbembe's aim is to interrogate how African intellectuals have imagined what African peoples are and how these conceptions have shaped African political landscapes. Mbembe's interventional project is twofold. First, he attempts to situate African human misfortune and colonial injustice in a single systematic theological-philosophical framework within the problematic of self-constitution and modern philosophy of the subject (Mbembe

2002a: 239-240). Second, he aims to determine the conditions under which the African subject can attain full self-hood, “become self-conscious and be answerable to no one else” (ibid., p. 240). Mbembe’s intended intervention is thus both theoretical and political.

The notion of African identity takes centre stage in Mbembe's analysis. Mbembe does not define what exactly he means by African identity *per se*. In fact, he uses notions such as self, subjectivities and identity synonymously. But reading through his work, one comes to understand the notion of African identity to mean at least two things. Firstly, identity means how people individually understand themselves and this understanding creates the world in which they live. Secondly, identity means individual human agency. Hence, Mbembe’s critical intervention is aimed at the mis-conceptualization of African identity as self-understanding and human agency in dominant African modes of thought.

To go about his intervention, Mbembe begins by positing that influential modes of thinking about African identity, although philosophically insubstantial, have prevented the development of better ways of understanding African situations. This has resulted in the failure of African reflections to yield an integrated philosophical-theological system comparable to that of German and Jewish philosophical traditions. According to Mbembe, numerous factors have stymied the full development of African ways of conceptualizing the African past and present with reference to the future (ibid.). Fundamental among these factors is historicism (Mbembe 2002a: 240). Efforts that have been made by African intellectuals to find conditions that should have allowed African people to attain full selfhood and be answerable to no one but themselves have been colonized by what Mbembe has identified as historicist thinking.

According to Mbembe, historicist thinking is based on a deterministic understanding of human agency. He argues that “in African history, it is thought, there is neither irony nor accident. We are told that African history is essentially governed by forces beyond Africans’ control” (ibid., p. 251). Based on Marxist and indigenous notions of history, the African is not conceptualized as an agent of free action, but rather, what happens in the African world is as a result of forces beyond

the African's control. "The diversity and the disorder of the world, as well as the open character of historical possibilities, are reduced to a spasmodic, unchanging cycle, infinitely repeated in accord with a conspiracy always fomented by forces beyond Africa's reach" (ibid., pp. 251-252). Hence, the figure of the African subject is that of a victim without the capacity to create his/her world, the African is "merely a castrated subject, the passive instrument of the Other's enjoyment" (ibid., p. 252).

Historicism has colonized African thought on African identity in two forms. The first form may be termed "Afro-radicalism" "with its baggage of instrumentalism and political opportunism" (ibid., p. 240). The second form of historicism Mbembe identifies is inflected by the metaphysics of difference, what he calls "Nativism". Central to both Afro-radicalism and Nativism are the three historical events: African slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. These three events form the central point of reference from which Africans have come to conceptualize African identity.

Three canonical meanings may be attributed to the three historical events. The first canonical meaning that Mbembe identifies in the African discourse on slavery, colonialism and Apartheid, is at an individual level. He argues that at the level of individual African identities, it has been canonically understood that "the African self has become alienated from itself (self-division)" (Mbembe 2002a: 241). As a result, the African has become estranged from him/herself to the point of no longer recognizing itself (ibid.). Because of the three historical events of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid, the African subject no longer knows who she is because she has lost her human identity. Among the thinkers who have espoused this notion of self-alienation, in Mbembe's view, is Franz Fanon in his seminal work, *Black Skin White Mask* (1952)<sup>57</sup>.

Where the first canonical meaning deals with the effect of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid at a psychological level, the second canonical meaning attributed to the three historical events deals with material expropriation (ibid.). Mbembe is of the

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<sup>57</sup> On the alienation of the black subject from herself, read Allen E, Jr. (1997) on Du Bois' notion of self-alienation.

view that it is a canonical conviction among African intellectuals, that slavery, colonialism and Apartheid led slaves, colonial subjects, and Apartheid victims to become dispossessed of their property, including land<sup>58</sup>. The violence of these three historical events did not only expropriate property from them, but the confiscator also falsified the history of the black African people. In Mbembe's view, material expropriation and historical falsification are constitutive of the so-called "uniqueness" of African identity in dominant African discourses on the identity.

Following from the alienation of the African-self from itself and the expropriation of property from the African people, the third canonical meaning argues that the three events plunged the African subject not only "into humiliation, degradation, debasement and nameless suffering. But also into a zone of nonbeing and social death characterized by the denial of dignity, heavy psychic damage and torment of exile" (Mbembe 2002a: 242). With these three canonical meanings, self-alienation, expropriation of property and history, and social death, the three historical events of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid "serve as a unifying centre of African desire to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty) and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy): (ibid.).

Another way of explaining Mbembe's argument would be to consider the two modes of historicism, namely Afro-radicalism and Nativism separately. In the following section, I will explain Mbembe's notion of Afro-radicalism as an historicist approach to thinking African identity based on the three aforementioned historical events.

### **(a) Afro-radicalism**

Afro-radicalism, Mbembe (2002: 249) argues, originated from the abolitionist discourses of African liberation, which for the most part appropriated the Enlightenment conceptual paradigm:

*During the nineteenth-century conjuncture of abolition and the advent of formal colonialism, when African criticism first took up the question of self-craft regarding*

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<sup>58</sup>Rodney (2012) explains how Europe underdeveloped Africa through expropriation of property.

*self-government and self-imaging, it inherited these three moments but did not subject them to a coherent critique. On the contrary, subscribing to the program of emancipation and autonomy, it accepted, for the most part, the basic categories then used in Western discourse to account for universal history. The notion of "civilisation" was one of these categories. It authorised the distinction between the human and the nonhuman or the not-yet-sufficiently human that might become human if given appropriate training. ... In reality, it was less a matter of understanding what led to servitude and what servitude meant than of postulating, in the abstract, the necessity of liberating oneself from foreign rule.*

The failure to properly interrogate the premises of the dominant discourse they have inherited and convinced that they are and always have been at the mercy of forces beyond their control, the politics of Africanity spawned a hatred of the world, while buying into a conspiratorial reading of history understood as a progressive discourse of emancipation and autonomy (ibid., p. 252). On the politics of Africanity, Mbembe references Archie Mafeje's article, "Africanity: A Combative Ontology" (2000), amongst others, as a contemporary proponent of Afro-radicalism. Mbembe argues that Afro-radicalists adopted Marxist and nationalist categories to develop a cultural and political theory with a manipulative rhetoric by using notions of autonomy, resistance and emancipation as the only criteria for determining an authentic African discourse. Mbembe (ibid., p. 243) argues that Afro-radicalism has been infiltrated by a contradiction between voluntarism and victimization. On the one hand, African modes of writing the self claim to espouse African modes of being autonomous. On the other hand, these modes of conceptualizing the African self always imagine the African-self as a victim that lacks agency. He argues that this contradiction is manifest in four characteristics governing African ways of thinking about the self. The first is characterized by a lack of self-reflexivity and an instrumental understanding of knowledge and science (ibid.). Mbembe, however, does not elaborate further on this point to explain what he means by self-reflexivity and a lack of instrumental conception of knowledge. But a connection can be made between the idea of self-reflexivity and his notion of the practices of the self, which I will discuss later.

The second characteristic reveals a mechanical and regurgitated conception of history (ibid.). On this view, African modes of thinking about who Africans are and how they experience the world are always determined – *apriori* – by forces other than African subjects themselves. This mode of conceptualizing African identity



always sees the African subject as acted upon; as always subjugated by some other. These forces that have always subjugated the African subject have thwarted the blooming of the uniqueness of African identity. Consequently, Africans are believed not to be responsible for the catastrophic conditions that they have historically found themselves in. The present undesirable conditions on the continent of Africa do not derive from the actions of free, autonomous and responsible African subjects but rather they have been imposed on the African people by the three historical events of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid.

Mbembe takes the problematic belief by some Africans that they lack agency to be thoroughly entrenched in Africans. Recently he challenged the South African ruling political elite on precisely this issue:

*"Oh, white people are everywhere, they are dominating everything, and we are powerless." And I was saying, "OK, look, how can you be powerless, you hold political power, don't you? And if you hold political power, how can you say that you are powerless?" and then they tell you, "Oh, we hold political power, but those who hold political power are just ... in French ... marionettes ... puppets ... yah, they are just puppets in the service of white capital. So, in fact, they don't have power." So the argument I was making was, this is nonsense, you cannot tell me that you are entirely powerless. You have political power and for sure you can do something with political power. You may not have economic power entirely, but with your political power, you can achieve a whole set of things other people did achieve with it (Mbembe 2016).*

To this day, the African finds it difficult to imagine him-/herself as an autonomous self empowered to act on his/her own volition. The "other" is always seen as subjugating the African subject. The present is still seen to be overdetermined by the violent past encounter with European violators. In this way, African identity is imagined from the history of violence and subjugation, thus from victimization. For Mbembe (2002a: 243-244), this mode of historicist thinking "leads to a naive and uncritical attitude with regard to the so-called struggles of national liberation and to social movements". Accordingly, this "naive and uncritical" attitude has resulted in justifying violence as an authentic mode of self-determination, in "fetishized state power", in the rejection of liberal democracy, and the support of "populist and authoritarian dreams of a mass society" (ibid., p. 244).

The third characteristic is linked to the second, as they are both based on Marxist ideas. Mbembe (ibid.) argues that the Afro-radicalist system of thought destroys

tradition and the belief that “authentic identity is conferred by the division of labour that gives rise to social classes, the proletariat – urban or rural – playing the role of universal class per excellence”. It is at this point that Mbembe diagnoses *apriori* Marxist historicist convictions related to human agency because of the persistent belief that it is only through the proletariat that people can achieve universal emancipation. If it is indeed the case, then Mbembe is right to protest that this line of reasoning denies the possibility of multiple possible means of exercising social agency for social-political emancipation within the contours of the situation. I would argue that Mbembe fails to provide sufficient evidence which demonstrates that those ‘African self-writers’ he critiques consistently uphold the Marxist conviction that the working class is the only practical agency that can engage in universal emancipatory activity or exercise social power.

In fact, it might be objected that Mbembe’s own argument fails to be logically coherent. His contention that this Marxist-nationalist discourse is bent on destroying tradition (Mbembe 2002a: 244) seems to contradict his earlier statement that “these three fundamental elements of slavery, colonization, and apartheid are said to serve as a unifying centre of Africans’ desire to know themselves, to recapture their destiny (sovereignty), and to belong to themselves in the world (autonomy)” (ibid, p. 242).

The fourth and final characteristic that Mbembe (ibid., p. 244) identifies is a “polemical relationship to the world, based on a troika of rhetorical rituals”. The first among the three rituals underscored by Mbembe is the practice, in African theoretical works, of contradicting and refuting Western definitions of Africa by pointing out unjustified Western definitions of Africa and their malicious intentions. The second ritual is the habit of African intellectuals’ constant damnation of what the West has done to Africans and what they are still doing through such definitions. The last ritual is characterized by providing proof of the West’s misrepresentation of Africa and challenges Western monopoly on the definition and expression of what true humanity is. These refutations on the part of Africans, it is argued, are aimed at opening a space in which they can finally narrate their own stories. For Mbembe (ibid., p. 244), what might appear to be the struggle for autonomy and self-representation (what he terms, “the apotheosis of voluntarism”),

however, "is here accompanied by a lack of philosophical depth and, paradoxically, a cult of victimization".

In other words, what runs through African discourse on African identity is a philosophically flawed conception of autonomy paradoxically coupled to the pervasive sense of victimization. The African subject, in Mbembe's view, is conceptualized as a subject who demands freedom, but is not imagined as an agent of free actions. Mbembe here shows that there is a problem when one has chosen to consistently perceive oneself as a subject who is always subjugated almost at an ontological level, without the possibility of freedom. How can one think of autonomy without the capacity for freedom? This, for Mbembe, is oxymoronic. Afro-radicalism with its oxymoron of voluntarism and victimhood founded on Marxist historicism is philosophically unfounded, according to Mbembe cannot help us to understand African history or change the political malaise which has afflicted Africa for the better part of its historical encounter with Europe.

In this segment, I have presented Mbembe's view of the problematic standpoint of Afro-radicalism, with the conceptual contradiction of voluntarism and victimhood at its foundation. In the following section, I will present the other tenet of historicist thinking, namely, Nativism, which Mbembe argues has also colonized African ways of thinking about African identity, preventing these conceptions from developing to the point where they could enable Africans to "attain full selfhood, become self-conscious, and be answerable to no one else" (2000a: 240).

### **(b) Nativism**

Unlike Afro-radicalism that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century African imagination and was later sustained by the use of Marxist and nationalist categories, Nativism, developed from a discourse that emphasized the conditions of the native people of Africa by promoting a unique African cultural identity based on their membership to a people identified as black. While Afro-radicalism, as we have seen, is characterized by a tension between voluntarism and victimization, Nativism, on the other hand, is permeated by a contradiction between "a universalizing move that

claims shared membership within the human condition (sameness) and an opposing, particularistic move" (ibid., p. 252). Mbembe (ibid., p. 253) argues that:

*This latter move emphasizes difference and specificity by accenting, not originality as such, but the principle of repetition (tradition) and the values of autochthony. The point where these two political and cultural moves converge is race.*

The particularistic line of thought holds that its specificity as a cultural identity is based on the "black race". This argument echoes Anthony Appiah's critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism as represented by the ideas of Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, and Du Bois, discussed in Chapter 2. Mbembe points the reader's attention to the historically constructed notion of race and how it shaped relations of power between people of European origin and people of African origin. The notion of race has been used not only to identify human physical attributes, but also to differentiate among the peoples of the world, based on phenotype, cultural-political and social-economic human characteristics (ibid., p. 254). The differences in human species were further used to establish a hierarchy of human species whose political, economic, cultural and social effects were mobilized to perpetrate violence against those "species" positioned on the lower rungs of the hierarchy<sup>59</sup>. This violence was justified on the ground that those who were positioned lower down in the hierarchy were less human, and sometimes not even human at all. Africans, being accorded an inferior place in the hierarchy of the human species, were not recognized as humans by the general discourse of the time. Accordingly, slavery, colonialism and later, Apartheid, found their rationale in the discourse of race, and consequently, native African people were dehumanized. It is for this reason that Mbembe (2002a: 253) states that:

*This denial of humanity (or attribution of inferiority) has forced African responses into contradictory positions that are, however, often concurrently espoused. There is a universalistic position: "We are human beings like any others."<sup>41</sup> And there is a particularistic position: "We have a glorious past that testifies to our humanity." Discourse on African identity has been caught in a dilemma from which it is struggling to free itself: Does African identity partake in the generic human identity? Or should one insist, in the name of difference and uniqueness, on the possibility of diverse cultural forms within a single humanity — but cultural forms whose purpose is not to be self-sufficient, whose ultimate signification is universal?*

Mbembe (ibid., p. 245) believes that the claim that Africans make when they say that "we are human beings like any other", seen from the historical denial of their

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<sup>59</sup> The previous chapter discusses the problem of race at length.

humanity, belongs “to the discourse of rehabilitation and functions as a mode of self-validation”. Mbembe (ibid., p. 254), nevertheless, agrees with Kwame Appiah’s *In My Father’s House*<sup>60</sup> that the Nativists do “not challenge the fiction of race”. In fact, the notion of race becomes foundational to their conception of African identity. From this understanding, the idea of race is translated into a moral and political reason for solidarity by the Nativists. Further, the idea of race also translates into the idea of a black nation:

*The basic underpinnings of nineteenth-century anthropology, namely, the evolutionist prejudice and the belief in the idea of progress, remain intact; racialization of the (black) nation and the nationalization of the (black) race go hand in hand. Whether we look at negritude or the differing versions of Pan- Africanism, in these discourses the revolt is not against Africans' belonging to a distinct race, but against the prejudice that assigns this race an inferior status (ibid.).*

In their insistence on “a glorious past that testifies to [their] humanity”, the Nativists return to the notion of race to justify the specificity of their traditions and customs. Tradition, Mbembe explains (2002a: 254), takes a privileged place in Nativist thought. Converging race and tradition, Nativist thought claims that “Africans have an authentic culture that confers on them a peculiar self irreducible to that of any other group. The negation of this authenticity would thus constitute a mutilation” (ibid.). The group in question is a racial group, and avoiding mutilation to maintain authenticity means maintaining the group’s racial difference.

The argument goes even further. Because of the historical degradation and denial or mutilation of African authentic identity through slavery, colonialism and Apartheid (to which the African-self has been subjected for centuries), Africans were forced to leave tradition behind. Therefore, the most important thing to do in order to recover this identity is to move backwards into the past to recover what was lost (ibid.). This means that moving backwards, “tapping into the source”, becomes a “necessary condition for overcoming the phase of humiliation and existential anguish caused by the historical debasement of the continent” (ibid.)

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<sup>60</sup> Appiah states that “for the postwar Pan-Africanists the political problem was what to do about the situation of the Negro. Those who went home to create postcolonial Africa did not need to discuss or analyze race. It was the notion that had bound them together in the first place. The lesson the Africans drew from the Nazis—indeed from the Second World War as a whole—was not the danger of racism but the falsehood of the opposition between a humane European “modernity” and the “barbarism” of the nonwhite world” (Appiah 1988: 6).

and for becoming an authentic self once again. Theoretically, at issue here with this line of reasoning, for Mbembe, is the conception of the backward movement of time, which results in imagining identity as a thing, a substance, as something to be recovered; something that was lost, somehow remaining where it was lost waiting to be recovered. Time in this way is not conceived as anticipating what is to be achieved through self-creation by performatives, but rather, it is conceived as a non-agential expectation of recovery. The implication for human agency in this conception of time is deterministic. The African subject already knows what constitutes her identity, which she has only to recuperate or repossess.

In Mbembe's view, this quest for the authentic self has resulted in a search for particularity in all things. Everything that pertains to the African has to be different, because the African self, though human like any other, is different from other human "races" of the world. Hence, the Nativist "emphasis on establishing an 'African interpretation' of things, on creating one's own schemata of self-mastery, of understanding oneself and the universe, of producing endogenous knowledge have all led to demands of an 'African science', 'an African democracy', an 'African language'" (Mbembe 2002a: 255).

Within the same discourse of Nativism, Mbembe identifies more and less extreme versions. In the more extreme version of Nativism, instead of promoting difference for the sake of greater universality, difference is praised as both an "inspiration for determining principles and norms governing African lives in full autonomy and, if necessary in opposition to the world" (ibid.). Mbembe appears to be supporting universalism in this argument. It is a known fact that one of the principle causes of European racism and dehumanization of native Africans is Eurocentrism masquerading as universalism.

The softer version of Nativism, on the other hand, espouses difference as a means to contributing to the universal. Mbembe takes Leopold Senghor's position as a soft version of Nativism. Despite the difference that Mbembe (ibid.) draws between soft and extreme Nativism, he still argues that in both cases, "it is this alterity that has to be preserved at all costs". The African does not present him-/herself as an alter ego among fellow human beings, but rather asserts "loudly and forcefully their

alterity”. Furthermore, since both soft and extreme versions of Nativism maintain the alterity of the African cultural identity by notions of autochthony and the quest for the original, Mbembe, like Appiah (1992), argues that Nativism conflates the concepts of race and (spatial) geography. Mbembe (2002a: 256) writes the following:

*In the prose of nativism (as well as in some versions of the Marxist and nationalist narratives), a quasi-equivalence is established between race and geography. Cultural identity is derived from the relationship between the two terms, geography becoming the privileged site at which the (black) race's institutions and power are supposed to be embodied. Pan-Africanism, in particular, defines the native and the citizen by identifying them with black people.*

Finally, citizenship and racial identification are conflated. One becomes a citizen not because of political rights, but rather because of skin colour. “Racial and territorial authenticity are conflated, and Africa becomes the land of black people” (ibid., p. 256). According to this line of thinking, “the idea of an Africanity that is not black is simply unthinkable” (ibid.)<sup>61</sup>. The conception of an African of another origin than Africa is impossible, because at the basis of Africanity is race and autochthony. “The spatial body, the racial body and the civic body, are thenceforth one, each testifying to an autochthonous communal origin by virtue of which everyone born of the soil or sharing the same colour or ancestors is a brother or a sister” (ibid.). Consequently, the basis of Africanity becomes race, based on the metaphysics of different human species.

In this section and in the previous section, I have presented Mbembe's views of what he calls historicism in the form of Afro-radicalism and Nativism as lines of thoughts that colonized conceptions of African identity. And in Mbembe's view, these forms of thought have prevented Africans from theorizing African identity in a productive philosophical and political fashion. Consequently, historicist thinking, Mbembe argues, has resulted in misconstruing African realities and sustaining the image of an African as lacking in what is human, i.e. a human without human agency, always a victim of the other's making. In the following section, I want to

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<sup>61</sup> This argument, however, is unsustainable because there are a number of black thinkers who imagined African subjectivities with multiple ancestries. See, for example, Blyden (1887); Nkrumah (1970); Mazrui (2005); and Mafeje (2008 [200]).

elaborate on Mbembe's proposed solutions to the conceptual problems of African ways of conceptualizing African identity.

### **(c) Beyond the Problems of Historicism**

Mbembe does not only identify the conceptual and theoretical problems with African modes of conceptualizing African identity, but he also offers solutions to the problems that he identifies.

For Mbembe, the dominant discourse on African identity is founded on the myth of race and its dichotomies (civilized vs. uncivilized, white vs. black). To find solutions to these conceptual and theoretical problems, Mbembe argues that we need to start thinking about African identity outside the racist paradigm with its debilitating consequences. These include the theoretical denial of agency and responsibility to Africans, even in the tragic events of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid. Mbembe argues that Africans should be seen as people with human agency like any other human being. Moreover, even though global capitalism may have been at the origin of the African tragedy, "Africans' failure to control their own predatory greed and their own cruelty also led to slavery and subjugation" (Mbembe 2002a: 257).

Mbembe is not the only one who shares the conviction that Africans' own cruelty and greed also led to slavery and subjugation. Megan Vaughan (2006), in the quest to understand why postcolonial African people have been having troubles relating to the modern world with its enduring problems of poverty, shares the view that Africans' greed and cruelty led to their subjugation and contemporary economic problems. Vaughan begins her argument by insisting that Africans actively participated in the making or remaking of the modern world (Vaughan 2006: 144-146). She argues that "slave trade had a very particular appeal to ruthless [African] rulers. It offered them the possibility of making large profits without the problem of extracting and disciplining labour" (ibid., p. 155-156). Vaughan does not stop there; she goes on to give an explanation of why Africa is still faced with the problems of poverty today. She states:



*It is not just that millions of Africans were lost to the slave trade and all the human tragedy involved in that, but, Cooper argues, the external trade in people entrenched a model of accumulation which has persisted. Neither colonial rulers nor their post-colonial successors found it easy to pursue strategies of sustainable exploitation internally to African economies, but easy money was always to be made at the interface with the outside world, as in the period of the slave trade. Independent African rulers, writes Cooper, have presided over 'gatekeeper states' able to control the interface with the outside world better than production and commerce within (ibid., p. 156).*

In other words, the poverty that native African people face today is as a result of the mode of accumulating wealth that native Africans learnt during the period of the slave trade, in Vaughan's view. Consequently, native Africans have not learnt how to develop internal self-sustaining economies, because, during the slave trade, they learnt that wealth came from outside. Just as African ancestral ruthless rulers used to sell slaves (raw materials) during the Atlantic Slave Trade, postcolonial African rulers sell natural resources to the external market without the desire to manufacture products in their countries, which can be sold to foreign countries. Wealth in Africa is not attained through hard work, but it comes through a mysterious avenue:

*As a whole body of work on the 'modernity of witchcraft' shows, wealth in Africa is often assumed to have been acquired through invisible means. Shaw, amongst others, suggests that such understandings of the workings of the modern world can be traced back to the era of the slave trade (ibid., p. 158).*

I would argue that the contention that contemporary African poverty is a result of a mysterious way of accumulating wealth that Africans learnt from the slave trade seem to trivialize the parts played by the history of colonial racial politics, postcolonial African politics, neo-liberalism, and contemporary politics of economy through international co-operations that hardly support local entrepreneurship. I would nevertheless agree that the extent of the ruthlessness of African rulers may in fact be the result of the legacy of the slave trade. Their emphasis is on the fact that some Africans are also responsible for what has been happening to the continent and to its peoples. Vaughan's contention that the accumulation of wealth in Africa has had no human agency, but may be attributed to witchcraft or the insidious workings of mysterious forces, seems to augment Mbembe's argument that the role of human volition or 'free' agency would appear to be absent in African modes of thinking about African identity.

I would nevertheless not agree with Mbembe's insistence that African modes of thinking about African identity have been articulated within the victimization paradigm, without accounting for the native's role in the slave trade and in colonization. Writing about the structures of violence of colonialism, Césaire (1972: 7), for example, writes:

*I too, talk about abuses, but what I say is that on the old one – very real – they have superimposed others – very detestable. They talk to me about local tyrants brought to reason; but I note that in general, the old tyrant gets on very well with the new ones, that there has been established between them, to the detriment of the people, a circuit of mutual services and complicity.*

The worked cited was first published in 1955 (in French), and it is articulated by one of Mbembe's adversaries. Césaire here acknowledges the role of the native, as well as the violence done to the people. Césaire critiques the structure of violence perpetuated by both the native and by the colonizer. So, for Mbembe to argue that African imaginations of the self have not accounted for the native's role in violence does not hold in this case. Nonetheless, Mbembe, Vaughan and Césaire all agree that some native people of Africa, to be precise, some rulers, played a role in instituting and sustaining the structures of racial violence and domination. Mbembe's problem here is the role of the African in shaping local living conditions.

Very few scholars have identified the disabling conceptual and political contours of Afro-radicalist and Nativist thought on African realities, in Mbembe's view. Mbembe recognizes the work of Valentine Mudimbe (*Invention of Africa*, 1988) and Kwame Appiah's work (*In my Father's House*, 1992), but he is quick to add that Mudimbe and Appiah “do not go to the heart of the matter” (Mbembe 2002a: 258). To get to the crux, for Mbembe (ibid.), is to ask the following question:

*How to deal with the spectres invoked by the nativists and so-called radicals in their respective attempts to hypostatize African identity — at the very time when the imaginative and social practices of African agents show that other orders of reality are being established. In other words, how should we conceive, creatively and in their heteronomy, the all-purpose signifiers constituted by slavery, colonization, and apartheid?*

African intellectuals have been raising the wrong questions about the tragedies of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid, according to Mbembe. Instead of propounding the metaphysics of difference and Afro-radicalism, Mbembe calls for an

identification of realities that are currently being established by African agents. For Mbembe, in order to go to the heart of the problem, he raises some questions on philosophical, anthropological, and sociological levels that African intellectuals should have raised much earlier in order to effectively interrogate the realities that slavery, colonialism and Apartheid had created. On a philosophical level, he argues that African intellectuals should have examined the historical models that initially led to their enslavement. This, on Mbembe's view, entails rejecting the historicist and racist paradigm from which Afro-radicalism and Nativism have been conceptualized. On an anthropological level, Mbembe argues, they should have given up their "obsession with uniqueness" and supported themes of sameness or universality. The commitment to human sameness or universality, according to Mbembe, would have resulted in imagining actual free African agents like other human beings in the world. And sociologically, they would have given attention to everyday practices that ordinary Africans were preoccupied with to make sense of their world. Had they followed this route, the African subject would no longer be perceived as both subject to a predetermined African identity and on the receiving end of forces beyond the African's control. With these proposals, one can identify Mbembe's (2001b: 15) theoretical approach to human subjectivity also espoused in *On the Postcolony* where he writes:

*While willing to take up a philosophical perspective when needed, I started from the idea that there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality — that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular — or, to use the term, a "spirit" (Zeitgeist). These distinctive and specific things are constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals' imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called "languages of life".*

By emphasizing the daily experiences of ordinary social actors, Mbembe propounds an existential phenomenological approach to conceptualizing African realities<sup>62</sup>. To understand what it means to be African, for Mbembe, one has to be immersed in the realities of the subject's temporality and the subject's autonomous actions in response to her situatedness. Thus, to philosophically think African

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<sup>62</sup> Jeremy Weate is of the view that "Mbembe's project, in terms of a critique of the textual paradigm, is that he occupies an interstitial space somewhere between poststructuralism and existential phenomenology" (2003: 27). Weate's view may help us to understand Mbembe's oscillation between taking account of the socio-political contours impacting upon individual autonomy, and conceptualizing autonomy regardless of the socio-political context.

identity means thinking about African subjects' temporalities. His emphasis on the historicity of intelligibility of human actions is not far from what David Scott espouses with his notion of problem-space, which I have explained in Chapter 1<sup>63</sup>. Thinking with time and in time is what Mbembe believes his adversaries should have done. Whether Mbembe's theoretical adversaries did or did not think with the everyday practices of ordinary people is a question that I will raise later. Mbembe takes his proposed perspective and proceeds to offer a new way of conceptualizing African identity. He begins by posing the following questions: "What ways of imagining identity are at work and what social practices do they produce? What has happened to the tropes of victimization, race, and tradition?" (Mbembe 2002a: 263).

African realities are changing, Mbembe insists. He maintains that the discourse of anti-imperialism is exhausted although this does not mean that the suffering inflicted by victimization has been transcended. He further argues that themes of Pan-Africanism and Nativism are now merging to oppose globalization, despite the fact that racial and blood relations on the continent are constantly shifting depending on contingent conditions. The new merging of Pan-Africanism and Nativism is a sign of the persistence of the pathos of victimization.

To show that his adversaries were wrong to conceive of African identity as a substance or in an essentialist fashion, Mbembe takes account of how contemporary African peoples *create* their identities. This does not only show that African identity is not a substance, but it also shows that the authentic past, which both Afro-radicals and Nativists long for, is unattainable.

Applying his new approach in the form of existential phenomenology, Mbembe looks at how people categorized as black fashion their identities amidst the present postcolonial conditions. He argues that global practices of symbolic exchange have affected African lives in different spheres, including individual African identity. The result is a complex matrix from which Africans fashion their identities and the intersection of global flows and local practices is the site of

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Scott (1999).

African identity formation. Chief, for Mbembe, among prevailing conditions from which Africans fashion their identities, is the state of war. Mbembe (2002a: 267) argues that “the state of war in contemporary Africa should, in fact, be conceived of as a general cultural experience that shapes identities, just as the family, the school, and other social institutions do”. He briefly explains the cruelty and lawlessness of the state of war. He describes the state of war as “a zone of indistinction” where “decisions about life and death become entirely arbitrary” (ibid.). Amidst this state of war, and in the “the zone of indistinction”, Mbembe (ibid., p. 269) insists that native Africans still practice agency, as he puts it: “In the act that consists of putting to death innumerable sacrificial victims, the agent of the massacre also seeks to transcend and reinvent the self”. He further elaborates that:

*Trembling with drunkenness, he or she becomes a sort of work of art shaped and sculpted by cruelty. It is in this sense that the state of war becomes part of the new African practices of the self. Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new — something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented (ibid., p. 269).*

Another major factor that informs the matrix from which African identities are fashioned today, is the state of religion. As the state of war, the site at which the state of religion conditions the formation of African identities is at the conjugation of cosmopolitan and local practices (ibid.). He argues that there has been a significant growth of Pentecostal Christianity among the African urban elite. The expansion of Pentecostal Christianity has instituted “structures of meaning, each of which provides a means of psychic negotiation, self-styling and engagement with the world at large” (ibid.). In this religious context, the subject’s main source of meaning is shaped by the relationship to the Divine sovereignty.

Mbembe is aware of his anti-essentialist position at this point. Whence, he argues that these structures, the state of war and state of religion, produce identities that are far from being homogeneous and stable. In the state of war, new lines are continually drawn. New friends and enemies are made, while old alliances are lost and forgotten as conditions change. A similar activity is identified for those found in the state of religion. Relations of those conditioned by Pentecostal Christianity

always change, “new non-biological relationships among members of a family or even an ecumene are formed, at the same time as notions of divine sovereignty and patronage are transformed, and new dogmas emerge” (Mbembe 2002a: 270). It is also important to note here that Mbembe recognizes the entangled nature of knowledge with practices of the self. Dogmas, as he calls them, continually inform or conduct behaviour, and vice versa. At this particular point, we can see that Mbembe is aware that prevailing modes of thought govern both individual and socio-political practices, and at the same time, prevailing socio-political practices inform the production or formation of knowledge.

In conclusion, Mbembe argues that we should move away from thinking of African identity within a racist paradigm that has constituted historicist thinking based on the contradictions between voluntarism vs. victimization, and particularism vs. cosmopolitanism. Instead, we should start theorizing African identities from the existential conditions from which Africans find meaning for their daily lives. This entails realizing that African people, like all other human beings, are agents of their actions. What happens to Africans today can no longer be solely attributed to the subjugating forces of the “other” responsible for thwarting the blossoming of African uniqueness.

In the last two sections and in the current section, I have presented Mbembe’s argument(s) in his work under study. In the first section, I presented his conceptualization of Afro-radicalism, and in the second section, I presented his conception of Nativism. Both Afro-radicalism and Nativism are forms of historicist thinking that have stymied the development of African thought on African identities, because they rely on a racist and deterministic conceptual paradigm. In this third section, I have outlined his proposed solutions to the problems he has identified in African ways of thinking about African identity. Mbembe, emphasizing historical contingency and individual human performatives, and argues that native Africans perform free actions in their daily lives which constantly constitute their identities. In the following section, I will critically interrogate Mbembe’s argument(s) from within the theoretical framework I established in Chapter 1.

#### **(d) Mbembe and his Critics: What Mbembe Said**

The main objective of this section is to unearth Mbembe's main argument. I will begin by situating Mbembe's work in the debates that it elicited after its publication. "African Modes of Self-Writing" evoked a tremendous response from both critics and supporters. Adherents concur with Mbembe's lamentation of the colonization of African conceptions of African identity by historicism, thereby challenging the conception of African identity as a substance. Critical responses, on the other hand, have ranged from allegations of unjustified generalizations to the lack of historical basis for some of his assertions. It is also important to note that some commentators read "African Modes of Self-Writing" in light of his main project, *On the Postcolony*<sup>64</sup>.

Firstly, Mbembe's work is obviously highly polemical. As Ato Quayson (2002: 585) rightly observed and commented: "A response that any polemical piece encourages is the desire to isolate its more extreme propositions for refutation". Indeed, some of Mbembe's claims are expressly excessive and unjustified and one wonders whether the hyperbole is worthy of refutation or designed to make a point that have otherwise gone unnoticed. For instance, he argues that Africans have not critically interpreted the three historical events of slavery, colonization, and Apartheid in scholarly and cultural practices:

*These three meanings might have been used as a starting point for a philosophical and critical interpretation of the apparent long rise toward nothingness that Africa has experienced all through its history. Theology, literature, film, music, political philosophy, and psychoanalysis would have had to be involved as well (Mbembe 2002a: 242).*

Mbembe makes such a generalization without providing further evidence or qualification. The most glaring is Mbembe's contestation that there has not been

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<sup>64</sup> See Weate (2003), and Murunga (2004).

psychoanalytic work done on the three historical events even as he cites the exceptional works of Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin White Mask* (1952). Further, there are numerous scholarly works that discuss the notion of African identity, an issue so pertinent and pervasive in postcolonial African theory and politics.

The essay raises important and urgent issues and proposes the need to open up new spaces for effective conceptual frameworks for understanding and theorizing contemporary African experiences. The manner, however, in which Mbembe conveys this important message of the advent of contemporary modes of imagining African situations and subjectivities, is problematic. It is for this reason that Guyer (2002: 599) comments that the essay “has facets, some clear and some opaque, some true in their refraction and some distorting”. Commenting on the facets of the essay that are distorting, Guyer (ibid.) states that “Mbembe's attack on African modernist self-writing as impoverished (thin, superficial, reductionist) evokes a confusion of ironies and contradictions that would take a much longer comment to dissect”. In other words, the manner in which Mbembe bunched together all the literature and experiences he categorizes as Afro-radicalism and Nativism, and condemning them as unreflective, not philosophical and leading Africa to a dead end, is reductionist and methodologically unfounded. His interpretation and outright rejection of the works of authors such as Franz Fanon, Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Samir Amin, Valentine Mudimbe – the list goes on – is founded on sweeping statements of little substance. Weate (2003: 31) criticizes “African Modes of Self-Writing” and *On the Postcolony* in the following words:

*As with these projects, there is the proclaimed necessity of beginning again, and as a corollary, the necessity to dismiss and then erase the past. This tabula rasa approach is deeply problematic, not least from an African perspective. The implicit assumption is that there is no pre-existing form of African theory that deserves to survive the criticisms Mbembe has mounted. The problem with this assumption is that it only works if we consider that all African theory neatly slots into Mbembe's principle target zones of nativism, neoliberal discourse, or finally what he refers to Afro-radicalism (that is, various strands of African nationalism and Marxism).*

Mbembe does not take the time to engage with his adversaries' arguments, but merely dismisses their works as unreflective and therefore unphilosophical. In the same line of reasoning, Quayson (2002: 585) also comments that “the essayist



has not taken account of enough scholarship, that the polemical propositions have been carelessly established, and that the entire set of questions could have been better posed in a different light”.

Indeed, Mbembe's generalizing tendencies have rendered his work vulnerable to criticism from every angle of theory and cultural practice. Jules-Rosette (2002: 603), for instance, posits that "in balancing universalism against particularism, Mbembe covers numerous philosophies of the invention of Africa with blanket criticisms and provides little discussion of the creative spaces opened up by cultural resistance". Mbembe's sweeping style of criticism furthermore impoverishes his critique of African modes of imagining subjectivities. Mbembe does not engage with other forms of African subjectivities, such as women. As females are the majority of the people categorized as Africans, Jules-Rosette argues that Mbembe does not systematically discuss gender as an aspect of African subjectivity, but rather he focuses on “dominant ideologies, institutions, and public instruments of power over private sources of resistance. The absence of any treatment of women's initiatives and unique inscriptions of selfhood is both a theoretical and empirical lacuna in Mbembe's argument” (ibid., p. 604).

Against Jules-Rosette's (2002: 606) argument, I would pose that it is not necessary that Mbembe should look at all forms of subject formations for him to question some African modes of imagining African identities. One is at liberty to choose what site best suits one's interest for interrogation. Her argument, however, finds merit because of Mbembe's hasty generalizations and blanket criticisms aimed at all forms of African imaginations of their experiences.

On the positive side, Guyer (2002: 601), for instance, argues that "Mbembe throws down the gauntlet, and it does have to be picked up. African existence demands risky and ambitious thought. Polemics help to provoke the mind, but there remains work to do beyond the polarizing moment". Mbembe's work does nothing more than being suggestive of an ambitious, risky reflection on African situations. Jules-Rosette (2002: 605) offers a slightly different view when she states that:

*With the African continent pushed to the margins of the contemporary global scene, Mbembe's act of self-writing is a chilling reminder of the continent's fragile future. Far*

*more than an instance of “salvage social history”, Mbembe’s essay places Africa’s dire situation in perspective. But it offers no solutions. The only hope for Africa — and therefore the world — in the turbulent twenty-first century lies in a creative spirit.*

Jules-Rosette thus takes note of Mbembe’s insistence that we should critically reflect on African conditions with regards to global relations and influences which, in Mbembe’s analysis, are central to African daily existential conditions. Unsympathetic of romantic narratives of some postcolonial futures, Jewsiewicki is of the view that “Mbembe’s reasoning goes quite effectively against the grain of a framing of memory as a miracle that would restore the lost truth” (Jewsiewicki 2002: 596).

On a conceptual level, Diagne (2002: 621) thinks of Mbembe’s work as “carrying out a double movement of desubstantiation: On the one hand, desubstantiation of difference, and on the other, desubstantiation of identity”. On de-substantiating difference, Diagne concurs with Mbembe that we should not conceptualize Africanity by relying on the metaphysics of difference and on Afro-radicalism. The peoples categorized as Africans are human beings like every other human being and their difference, like those of other people placed under different categories, is cultural and open to change. The uniqueness of the people categorized as African is not founded on a metaphysical level, but rather on a cultural and historical level. De-substantiation of identity, for Diagne (ibid.), is to hold an open-ended view of Africanity. In both the first and second movements of de-substantiation, Diagne argues that what is at stake is authenticity. In the first case, to be authentically African or to find meaning, one does not need to project the past onto the present and future through the figure of tradition. But rather, one should find meaning by allowing the future to shed light on the African past and present. Diagne correctly alludes to Mbembe’s idea of time as creative duration in “a continuous unfolding of multiple possibilities” that are open to affirmation through subjectivity” (ibid.).

The second case of authenticity concerns identity. Identity, according to Diagne (ibid., p. 622), is the self. Diagne argues that “authenticity is also an exploratory attitude. Self-writing, as we understand it from Mbembe’s essay, is not to be understood as a practice of writing of or about a preconstituted self” (ibid.). Diagne is of the view that the self from its genesis to its end does not remain the same.

Thus, we should conceive of it as an open project that is continuously affirmed through the subject's performatives in daily practices. In my view, Diagne gives an accurate summary of Mbembe's alternative to the Nativist and Afro-radicalist paradigm. Diagne's understanding of Mbembe's main argument is echoed in the latter's own words:

*To be sure, there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably practices of the self (Mbembe 2002a: 272).*

Indeed, Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing", despite its generalizations and blanket criticism, still has something to contribute to the discourse of African Identity. Its yield is in being a "chilling reminder" of contemporary Africa's immersion in global relations. It is a call for ambitious, novel and risky thought, and serves to remind us of the reality of Africa's fragile future. Importantly, it is a much needed rejection of the continuous conceptualization of Africanity as a substance. To these proceeds commended by some commentators, I would add two more: the need to emphasize that the formerly enslaved and colonized have the agency to change the negative racial location that white racism has relegated them to. Secondly, Mbembe's discourse is suggestive of a new space of reflection on African situations. The former is confusedly theorized in his criticism of the discourse of victimization. While the latter space is paradoxically realized in Mbembe's failings, which to my mind are conditioned by the use of the concept of African identity, which might have led to his blanket criticisms, generalizations and the failure to suggest interventional solutions to some of problems he underscores. "African Modes of Self-Writing", in other words, opens a space to reflect on how the notion of African identity has conditioned the limits of African conceptualization and theorization of African situations *today* rather than during its hay-days from the anti-colonial times to the 1980's. The following section will re-introduce David Scott's argument into the debate, in order establish Mbembe's anti-essentialist essentialism.

### 3.3. The Contour of Anti-Essentialist Criticism

The view I am proposing in this section is that despite Mbembe's anti-essentialist conception of African identity in his notion of time, and his proposal to rethink the realities captured by the concept of African identity with new concepts, Mbembe's anti-essentialist criticism fails to transcend essentialist criticism. Before I begin my examination, I would however like to revisit how "African Modes of Self-Writing" may be situated within the anti-essentialist discourse. I take this point seriously because Mbembe makes a concerted effort to present more than an anti-essentialist argument. He (2002a: 272) writes:

*The all-too-familiar and clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indetermination is just one more inadequate way to come to grips with African imaginations of the self and the world. It is no longer enough to assert that only an African self-endowed with a capacity for narrative synthesis — that is, a capacity to generate as many stories as possible in as many voices as possible — can sustain the discrepancy and interlacing multiplicity of norms and rules characteristic of our epoch.*

Mbembe references his book, *On the Postcolony*, as an example of a theory that goes beyond the "clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality" (op. cit., 2002a). Regrettably in "African Modes of Self-Writing", however, Mbembe fails to go beyond the rhetoric of nonsubstantiality. In fact, this essay is a sterling example of the "clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality":

*To be sure, there is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably practices of the self. Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. Rather, these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible, and unstable. Given this element of play, they cannot be reduced to a purely biological order based on blood, race, or geography. Nor can they be reduced to custom, to the extent that the latter's meaning is itself constantly shifting (Mbembe 2002a: 272).*

In my view, Mbembe argues for a de-substantiation of African identity, just as Diagne rightly understood his work. Mbembe's reference to *On the Postcolony* does not do justice to his claim of going beyond the rhetoric of nonsubstantiality.

Mbembe's theorization of time, which is central to his claimed transcendence of the "rhetoric of nonsubstantiality", is conceptualized by way of "time as lived, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians" (Mbembe 2001b: 8). He goes on to affirm what he means by time:

*By age is meant not a simple category of time but a number of relationships and a configuration of events — often visible and perceptible, sometimes diffuse, "hydra-headed," but to which contemporaries could testify since they are very aware of them. As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an entanglement (ibid., p. 14).*

The way in which Mbembe goes on to articulate his notion of time in *On the Postcolony* is not fundamentally different from the anti-essentialist conception of identity that he espouses in "African Modes of Self-Writing". Mbembe does not only claim to think outside or beyond the fluidity of the notion of identity, but he also claims to think beyond the domination-resistance understanding of power. But he fails to uphold this claim in both "African Modes of Self-Writing" and in *On the Postcolony*, as a commentator remarks:

*The irony in the text above [On the Postcolony] is that the very terms Mbembe rejected in polemical fashion in the introduction, "fluidity," "agency," and other Foucauldian, Gramscian and poststructuralist concepts, he returns to precisely in order to articulate the power dynamics within African existential contexts at close range and at the same time maintain his refusal to engage with the discourse of resistance (Weate 2003: 35).*

Using the conceptual framework that he denounces, Mbembe describes power relations in some countries that he sometimes presents as Africa as a whole through the notion of postcolonial African power relations. Had Mbembe situated his theory in a proper theoretical framework, he would have known that numerous thinkers had already espoused similar views. Even in *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe fails to clearly situate his work in a particular theoretical framework from which he could have systematically developed his theory. He would like to think of this work as monumental in the history of African thought. To this self-perception of the prophet of novel and authentic African universal thought, accompanied by a tendency to rubbish his predecessor's works, Jeremy Weate (ibid., p. 27) generously but unsympathetically comments that,

*Mbembe fails in his stated intentions of thinking through postcolonial Africa, and his project is theoretically confused and devoid of substantial productive argument. Furthermore, I will argue that the ultimate failure of his book is not to recognise all the important work that has already been written on Africa that avoids the criticisms he claims to apply to all existing African theory.*

My contention here is that Mbembe's work under discussion situates itself within an anti-essentialist discourse. And in no way does it successfully attempt to transcend the "clichéd rhetoric of non-substantiality". The view of de-substantiation of identity echoes many postcolonial works on African identity, even decades before the publication of Mbembe's work. Scholars have argued in different tones and from different premises to say that African identity is fluid. Mudimbe (1988: xi), for instance, states that: "Yet his critique meets my fundamental beliefs: Identity and alterity are always given to others, assumed by an I- or a We-subject, structured in multiple individual histories, and, at any rate, expressed or silenced according to personal desires vis-à-vis an episteme". Another important thinker on African identity, Appiah (1992: 174), echoes Mudimbe's conviction when he writes that "an African identity is coming into being. I have argued throughout these essays that this identity is a new thing; that it is the product of a history". A contemporary work of "African Modes of Self-Writing" also de-substantiates African identity in the following words:

*Identity (including African identity) is best thought of not as singular, whole and given but rather in Lacanian-influenced psychoanalytic theory terms, as a series of identifications come to life (Wright 2002: 10).*

More works on de-substantiating African identity have been published after the publication of Mbembe's work:

*African identities, like African languages, are inventions, mutually constitutive existential and epistemic constructions. Invention implies a history, a social process; it denaturalizes cultural artefacts and practices, stripping them of primordial authenticity and essentialism (Zezeza 2006: 14).*

There are more works justifying the fluidity of African identity, thereby echoing Mbembe's principle argument in "African Modes of Self-Writing". All these, and many more others, agree with Mbembe, before his work and after his work, that identity is fluid. For most of the anti-essentialist views of African identity, the objective of their criticism is not to critically engage with the historicity of the work they critique or to clearly define what they mean by identities and why discuss identities, but rather just challenge essentialist views. A critical review of the anti-

essentialist position espoused by Mbembe will show the shortcomings of the anti-essentialist critique.

In Chapter 1, I rehearsed David Scott's view that knowledge claims must be understood as questions to answers constituted within a particular historical configuration. The conceptual and socio-political configuration from which the questions and the answers arise are also historically contingent. Additionally, I also espoused David Scott's view that the veracity of knowledge claims should not be judged primarily on their proposition or logical structure, but rather more importantly, on their ability to answer the question, and the reality the knowledge claims attempt to institute. It is on this understanding of knowledge claims or ideas that Mbembe's anti-essentialist position will be interrogated. I will specifically examine Mbembe's anti-essentialist criticism in order to expose the limitations of the anti-essentialist conception of African identity.

Weate's view that in *On the Postcolony* Mbembe does not recognise the important works done on Africa as problematic, is not far from the comment that Dirlik makes on "African Modes of Self-Writing". Dirlik (2002: 611) states that Mbembe's "critique of the two different approaches to the question of African identity represented by Afro-radicalism and Nativism focuses on their problematic assumptions, but largely bypasses questions of historicity — the circumstances, in other words, that rendered those assumptions plausible, and also made it possible to overlook their limitations and contradictions". This observation augments Scott's proposal to understand knowledge claims within their historical configurations. It is from this premise that I undertake to demonstrate that Mbembe's reading of his adversaries is essentialist.

For instance, he argues that the Negritude movement and all versions of Pan-Africanism do not reject the notion of race as such, but only the lower status that their black race is accorded (Mbembe 2002a: 254). In Mbembe's view, this claim is unphilosophical and unjustified. Here as elsewhere, Mbembe is quick to bunch together the Negritude movement and all versions of Pan-Africanism as if they were all responding to the same political and theoretical problems. In the previous chapter, I explained the conceptual and political conjuncture that informed the

problems which gave rise to the ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanism. I further argued that 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist ideas, when considered within their problem-space, may be seen as conceptually and politically justified. To illustrate Mbembe's anti-essentialist essentialism, I will briefly engage with Césaire's and Senghor's Nativist ideas in order to avoid generalization. In addition, I will emphasize the difference between the respective problem-spaces occupied by Mbembe and his adversaries – the Negritude movement in particular.

Living in a world where everything associated with a person with a black body is negative, and every black person is relegated to the sub-human “race”, founders of the *negritude* movement, Césaire and Senghor, mobilized the idea of race to resist the dehumanization of black people. Kebede captures the re-humanizing project of the Negritude movement when he writes that Césaire and Senghor “invest otherness with the task of defending and rehabilitating Africans. What is more, they make the success of modernization dependent on the African dedication to otherness” (Kebede 2004: 51). These thinkers saw redemption in the alterity of the African because they had to relativize Europe’s insistence upon the inferiority of black people in relation to Europeans. Césaire (1972: 28-29), for instance, argues that *negritude*, “was really a resistance to the politics of assimilation”, “there was a defiant will, and we found a violent affirmation in the words of the *negre* and Negritude”. In this way, the aim of the Negritude movement was not to pronounce once and for all what it meant to be black, but rather, it aimed at resisting assimilation which relegated black people to a position inferior to whites and subjected them to white racism.

Césaire's use of *negritude* and his insistence on tapping from African civilizations to contribute to human civilization caused him to be criticized for being an enemy of Europe and being an essentialist, long before Mbembe published his work. To this criticism, Césaire responds as follows:

*This being said, it seems that in certain circles they pretend to have discovered in me an “enemy of Europe” and a prophet of the return to the anti-European past. For my part, I search in vain for the place where I could have expressed such views; where I ever underestimated the importance of Europe in the history of human thought; where I ever preached a return of any kind; where I ever claimed that there could be a return (Césaire 1972: 7).*



To argue that there is something we can learn from the past and use it to enrich our humanity in the present is not the same thing as a return to the past. Césaire appears to be espousing the former. The traditional reading of *negritude* has been an essentialist construal of the work of its authors. When *negritude* is read within the interpretative grid of the logic of “question and answer” and problem-space as explained earlier, one realizes the complexity and continuous changing of positions necessitated by the shifting political landscape in Césaire’s and Senghor’s works. Their works were responses to specific social-political and philosophical problems of their times, responses formulated within their particular conceptual and theoretical paradigm, in other words, their problem-space. Gary Wilder’s 2015 book, *Freedom Time* is exemplary in challenging the traditional reading of Césaire’s and Senghor’s works as nothing but essentialist.

Mbembe, for example, wants to make us believe that all anti-colonial thinkers thought black people were obsessed with nationalist autonomy and political sovereignty (Mbembe 2002: 242; 251), while Wilder’s reading of Senghor and Césaire suggests otherwise. When referring to Senghor and Césaire, Wilder (2015: 2) argues that “refusing to accept the *doxa* that self-determination required state sovereignty, their interventions proceeded from the belief that colonial peoples cannot presume to know *a priori* which political arrangement would best allow them to pursue substantive freedom”. The idea that African thinkers have equated identity to race and geography, which Mbembe champions, is not correct either. Senghor and Césaire initially wanted French colonial subjects to be French citizens, not African citizens.

*Aime Césaire considered the place of the Antilles in the world and concluded that integration into the new French republic on terms of unconditional legal equality would be the best framework for pursuing self-management [ex-colony] and substantive freedom (Wilder 2015: 106).*

And

*Senghor and his Sudanese colleague (and critic) Gabriel d’Arboussier “shared the strategic objective of a multinational state in which the former colonies would associated with France, [and Senghor] (Samir Amin in Wilder 2015: 136).*

It was only later that Césaire and Senghor opted for state sovereignty after France denied the subjugated peoples French citizenship and equal rights in the French Union (ibid.).

On an epistemological level, Senghor and Césaire took an interventional understanding of knowledge as opposed to Mbembe's absolutist and objectivist knowledge claims he alludes to by situating slavery, colonialism and Apartheid in a single system of thought (Mbembe 2002: 240). Senghor and Césaire

*Attempted to transcend conventional oppositions between realism and idealism, objectivity and subjectivity, positivism and rationalism, singularity and universality, culture and humanity. The resulting conception of poetic knowledge, concrete humanism, rooted universalism, and situated cosmopolitanism now appears remarkably contemporary (Wilder 2015: 3).*

Mbembe claims to introduce the idea of cosmopolitanism in African thought with the notion of "global exchange", while Senghor and Césaire in fact thought of cosmopolitanism many decades before, but within a problem-space of subjected colonial peoples. I am not suggesting that Césaire's and Senghor's ideas hold for our present cognitive-political context. What I am saying is that Mbembe read his adversaries out of context.

Mbembe's clumping together of all African thought and his offhand dismissal of his opponents' arguments exhibits his desire not to understand what the problems or questions were that the proponents of *negritude* and the earlier versions of Pan-Africanism were preoccupied with. His exclusive concern is to expose the essentialism inherent in his adversaries' work. The Negritude movement was not espoused to ascertain whether or not identity is a substance or fluid; it was espoused to resist the racism which relegated everything associated with black people to the category and experience of the non-human. Unity among black people was central to the success of this movement. Within their conceptual paradigm, the notion of race had long been established, and it became a political tool for unity among black people.

Mbembe's critique of the Negritude movement and of earlier versions of Pan-Africanism, including that of Nkrumah, does not take into account what kind of problems within their historical moment anti-colonial and immediate postcolonial thinkers faced. If he attempts to find their questions, he quickly dismisses them as poorly formulated. What is problematic with this practice of criticism is to assume that the problem-space from which he raises his questions and levels his critique is the same as the problem-space from which anti-colonial and immediate

postcolonial thinkers raised their questions. The way racism, for instance, is experienced today is not the same as during the anti-colonial and immediate postcolonial times. To be sure, Mbembe (2001b: 15) seems to be well-aware of the fact that knowledge claims are produced within what we have called a “problem-space”, as is evident in the following paragraph:

*While willing to take up a philosophical perspective when needed, I started from the idea that there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality — that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular — or, to use the term, a “spirit” (Zeitgeist). These distinctive and particular things are constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals’ imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called “languages of life”.*

If Mbembe believes that a *Zeitgeist* inform each age then one is left wondering why he does not consider the material conditions that form the “language of life” of his adversaries’ knowledge claims. If Mbembe, for instance, believes and understands the implication of his assertion that subjectivity is a temporality informed by a multiplicity of practices, signs and fictions, experienced by individuals and informing their ways of making sense of the world, then how can Mbembe be in the best position to judge which questions to raise within a problem-space with its own “language of life” of which he was never a part albeit an heir to its legacy? Here Mbembe goes against the very ideas of subjectivity and temporality he espouses. Mbembe’s only goal, it would seem, is to expose the essentialism of his adversaries. Anti-essentialism is raised to identify its opposite, and nothing more.

David Scott (1999: 5) argues that criticism cannot omnisciently know in advance any cognitive-political demand it has to meet, “what its tasks are supposed to be, what target ought to make a claim on its attention, and what questions ought to constitute its apparatus and animate its preoccupations”, unless it operates within a logical essentialist paradigm. This means that we cannot know what would have been the best questions for our predecessors based on our current cognitive-political configuration. Knowing omnisciently what would have been the right questions to ask, Mbembe provides the questions his adversaries should have asked within their problem-space to qualify as the “philosophically correct” questions. Referring to anti-colonial thinkers, he argues that “the possibility of a properly philosophical reflection on the African condition having been set aside,

only the question of raw power remained” (Mbembe 2002a: 551). He suggests that instead of being preoccupied with "raw power", "[t]he first question that should [have been] identified concerns the status of suffering in history — the various ways in which historical forces inflict psychic harm on collective bodies and the ways in which violence shapes subjectivity”, i.e. ; the questions Jewish thinkers have raised in relation to the Holocaust (Mbembe 2002a: 259). Mbembe appears to intimate that to know and understand the place of suffering in human history as a whole, is a problem that is not informed by context and that everyone reflecting on the experience of human tragedy should automatically be able to theorise it.

To supplement the argument that Mbembe is at times rationalist and absolutist in his critique of African ways of thinking African identity, his understanding of the role of the researcher is in order. In *On the Postcolony*, for instance, he criticizes political science and developmental economics for trying to be social engineers (Mbembe 2001b: 7). One may agree (depending on the evidence provided) that the approach taken by political science is no longer effective in understanding the social realities and ills that people on the African continent may be facing. But to reject the interventional aspect of research in attaining desired social-political ends is problematic. Mbembe (2001a: 3) states that "African, neoliberal positivism and Marxist dogmatism have led to the replacement of the figure of the researcher with that of the expert/consultant and the activist/militant. Both are concerned with stating what Africa should be rather than with describing what African actually is". Whether African researchers have become militants or not is a question for another day. But to reduce a researcher to only describing phenomena without prescribing what should be the case restricts critics to describing (and thereby critiquing) African realities, without providing workable alternatives or suggestions for “what Africa should be”. If knowledge claims are answers to questions, and questions arise from a historical conjuncture determined by conceptual, material and political conditions demanding a solution, I argue that researchers who prescribe what Africa should be – whether one agrees with their suggestions or not – are within their epistemic right.

When reflecting on African realities, past and present, the interventional aspect of criticism and knowledge production becomes inevitable because most questions

arise from a sense of dissatisfaction with some prevalent social-political ills. Here already, context determines what kind of philosophical questions one will raise. African thought for the most part has emerged from the context of socio-political and cultural ills which have necessitated imaginations of different worlds to replace existing situations. This has necessitated the production of prescriptive thought in response to the questions raised. To argue that African prescriptive thought disfigures the image of the researcher does not bear in mind that the context – a continent with ailing socio-political and cultural institutions – requires more than mere description. This line of argumentation echoes Hofmeyr’s sentiment when she writes that “like Foucault, I am sensitive to the fact that thought is always rigorously limited by the particular historical horizon in which it germinates” (Hofmeyr 2011: 21). In the case of Mbembe’s contemporaries who tell us what African should be, I believe they are justified to occupy that theoretical space. Based on our understanding of the current conditions in Africa, some theorists may take up the responsibility of imagining alternative worlds, especially when we are not satisfied with the present conditions. Mbembe is equally within in his right to occupy a theoretical space that *describes* what “Africa actually” is, since – and here I wholly agree with him – suggestions for workable alternatives must necessarily be preceded by a critical understanding of “what Africa actually is”.

A deeper and critical interrogation of Mbembe’s problems posed in “African Modes of Self-Writing”, and to a certain extent in *On the Postcolony*, reveal that Mbembe attacks his adversaries for his own sins. David Scott (2004: 6) warns us not take Fanon’s problems as our own. Conversely, Mbembe takes the answers of his adversaries as answers to his own problems. Once he realizes that the answers his adversaries gave do not answer his problems, he charges his adversaries with raising wrong and philosophically unfounded questions. But the problem that he does not seem to be sufficiently sensitive to is that his cognitive-political context is different from that of his adversaries. Mbembe (2001a: 16) believes that:

*Time is made up of disturbances, of a bundle of unforeseen events, of more or less regular fluctuations and oscillations, not necessarily resulting in chaos and anarchy (although that sometimes is the case); moreover, instabilities, unforeseen events, and oscillations do not always lead to erratic and unpredictable behaviours on the actors’ part (although that happens, too).*

So, he fails to pay sufficient attention to the breaks and instabilities of human experiences and thoughts. Instead of committing to proving how old ideas are wrong for our time and sometimes even for their time (pasts), I would argue that a more instructive and critically lucrative mode of practicing criticism is to try and understand how earlier ideas shaped our present, to attempt to come to a critical understanding of the cognitive-political present, to raise new questions within our cognitive-political present(s), and to attempt to formulate our own responses to these questions. This is what I mean by interventional criticism. This, however, does not mean that we cannot interrogate to what extent old answers might serve as a response to our new problems. But the habit of proving old ideas wrong for their times and our own is often symptomatic of understanding philosophy as a practice of answering perennial human questions and looking for answers once and for all.

So, does it mean that the ideas espoused by Mbembe's adversaries are founded on a thin philosophical basis as Mbembe (2002a: 245) argues? I argue that past African modes of imagining African realities are not founded on a thin philosophical basis as Mbembe wants us to believe. For them to be philosophical, they do not have to be ahistorical or provide answers to all the questions raised throughout human or African history. They do not have to simulate German and Jewish thought; they have to speak to their problems within their context. Mbembe's attack on his adversaries, to my mind, may be said to be theoretically unfounded, rationalistic and reductionist. Mbembe embarked on a witch-hunt of essentialist views in the history of African thought. Without critically interrogating the views of his adversaries, he bunched them all together, (even works that do not have essentialist notions) and rendered them un-philosophical and un-scientific; a tendency shared by Appiah and his sympathizers. If Mbembe found his predecessor's ideas problematic, it is because they occupy different problem-spaces. When reading Mbembe's work, one realizes that what drives him on this witch-hunt is the debate between essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions of identity, of which he supports the latter.

The argument I have presented in this section is that the anti-essentialist theoretical approach to the notion of African identity fails to be instructive, because

it is reductionist, absolutist and essentialist. After a critical discussion of Mbembe's anti-essentialist approach to the notion of African identity, the final section of this chapter will examine his conception of a fluid notion of African identity.

### **3.4. The Self-Styling Subject: The Limits of the Fluidity of African Identity**

In this final section, I argue that Mbembe's espousal of a fluid concept of identity leads him to transpose the notion of self-styling from the very specific political setting within which it emerges as instructive response, to all the forms of power relations and domination. Consequently, this has led Mbembe to overlook the socio-political structures that have been central to the discourse of African identity. The chapter concludes by showing that the anti-essentialist view of African identity, as articulated by Mbembe, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to interrogate and theorize contemporary realities on the African continent and imagine spaces of freedom.

The way in which Mbembe, at times, imagines and articulates the African subject is suggestive of a Cartesian subject of sorts. For instance, he argues that “the essential message here is that everyone can imagine and choose what makes him or her an African” (Mbembe 2002a: 258). This claim approximates Rene Descartes' famous dictum “Cogito ergo sum” — “I think therefore I am”. If we can choose and imagine what makes us African, then the world is easier than we make it out to be. Mbembe's subject, in some instances, is ahistorical. Statements like these suggest that he does not take sufficient account of the historical determinants impacting upon human subject-formation. Furthermore, it would appear that Mbembe's African subject does not understand him-/herself in relation to other people and things in his/her environment. Against this line of thought, Murunga (2004) comments that:

*Mbembe's analysis borrows from, and is part of, a culturalist perspective that is characterised 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.*

Murunga's claim is justified if we take Mbembe to mean that we choose what makes us African without any political and historical stakes that come with such choices. Murunga (ibid.) goes on to assert that:

*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.*

The freedom that Mbembe affords his subject to choose what makes him/her African is only feasible if the idea of Africanity, as Murunga rightly puts it, is perceived as a tabula rasa or experienced and articulated as a blank slate not already over-determined by forces not of his/her choosing. Only if it was possible to isolate human self-understanding and self-identification from the forces of social experiences governed by economic and political realities does Mbembe's Cartesian-self become plausible.

On an attempted positive view, Jewsiewicki does not throw the baby of anti-essentialism out with Mbembe's ahistorical bathwater. Jewsiewicki (2002: 593) argues that "Mbembe refuses to deal with the subject whose particular quality is that of being 'African'. That is a quality imposed upon the subject — sometimes self-imposed — either by virtue of his or her continent of 'origin' or by virtue of invention by the Other, who vis-à-vis the subject is then affirmed as anything but African". Whether self-imposed or imposed by the other, invented or otherwise, the category of Africanity should not be an over-determining notion to imagine the African subject. Jewsiewicki (ibid., p. 596-7) goes on to argue that:

*To the extent that Mbembe is opposed to the idea of a totalizing Africanity, deconstructing the idea of any such identity that reduces the subject to its application, it becomes meaningless to define the Other in terms of non-Africanity. This is the provincialization of the West, since it is no longer necessary as the subject's Other. The Other who really matters is the one with whom the subject shares the space of a village, a city, a diaspora. If identity is not an essence but a relation to the Other, as Emmanuel Lévinas (1981) maintains; if every human being possesses the quality of formulating and enunciating his or her identity as constructed in the relation to the Other, the one who elicits the enunciation of identity is the one who is closest.*



What Mbembe is protesting against, in Jewsiewicki's view, is reducing the people categorized as African to the application of what is conceived and articulated as Africanness. However, Jewsiewicki's formulation evokes two concerns. Firstly, his use of Levinas's notion of the Other; and secondly, the risk that his conception of space can take us back to the problem of a-historicism. He is correct to argue that the deconstruction of the totalizing notion of African identity will theoretically render Africanness's Other, which is the West, powerless in terms of Africa's self-understanding. The people recognized as African will not need an Other, which is the West, to imagine their selves. The Other that Jewsiewicki suggests should be of importance to the self-understanding of the people categorized as African, is the Other with whom one shares space, for instance, one's schoolmates, colleagues, and fellow villagers. In Levinas's ethics of the Other, one should relate with an individual human being in the so-called face-to-face encounter. This encounter should not be based on the assumption that one knows the Other, because the Other person as absolute alterity is fundamentally unknowable. The problem, however, is that Levinas's Other is abstract in the sense that s/he cannot be known or reduced to cultural qualities. This encounter is not an empirical encounter and the Other is not a socio-politically situated other always-already overburdened by history.

The socio-political other, unlike Levinas's absolute Other, almost always comes already 'known' due to preconceived ideas and connotations. Jewsiewicki misses this important point that leads him to propose a notion of ahistorical space. He argues that "this relation to the Other that constitutes identity could be formulated in terms of co-presence rather than in terms of succession. Identity would then be organized according to the category of space rather than that of time" (Jewsiewicki 2002: 594). As much as I agree with Jewsiewicki that we should formulate what he calls "identity" relationally, i.e. in terms of co-presence rather than succession, he does not make explicit what co-presence might mean and what its implications might be. It seems not to occur to him that the past can be co-present (immanent) with the present and the future, for instance. Jewsiewicki also suggests that we should organize what he calls "identity" in terms of space. But Jewsiewicki does not further imagine that spaces have memories which may have an overwhelming determining influence on people's self-understanding and socio-political relations.

Jewsiewicki (ibid., p. 597) is correct to state that “if every human being possesses the quality of formulating and enunciating his or her identity as constructed in relation to the Other, the one who elicits the enunciation of identity is the one who is closest”. But Jewsiewicki’s assertion, informed as it is by Levinas’s notion of the Other, implies that the one closest is not a conscript of history. Jewsiewicki’s notion of space does not attend to the possibility that space is almost always synchronized with time as experience and memory are synchronized with expectation. And in most cases, time is experienced as a conflated troika of the present, past and future in space. Taking account of this burden of space can open up a productive avenue for interrogating undesirable subjectivities.

What Jewsiewicki attempts to do by presenting these arguments is to explicate Mbembe’s conception of identity. Jewsiewicki’s attempt to save Mbembe’s main argument compels him to remind us that Mbembe’s argument is based on the Foucaultian notion of self-styling. He argues that:

*To place his reflections in a philosophical context, the question should be raised of the path and the master. Beginning with the title, then, it is clear that marking out the route and accompanying Mbembe is the Foucault of the 1980s — “Writing the Self” was published in 1983 — Foucault, that is, as the historian of the subject rather than the historian of power. The point of departure from which Mbembe conceives of the subject and of the enunciation of identity becomes clear in the context of Foucault’s earlier publications (ibid., p. 592.)*

Mbembe’s notion of self-styling is clearly moulded on Foucault’s practices of liberty. Mbembe, following Foucault (1982: 222), argues that “power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted ‘above’ society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of”. The emphasis on the social conditions as a matrix from which African “identities” are constructed is a crucial point that Mbembe makes in the paper, and which informs his existential approach to his argument that the African subject – like all subjects – is the result of practices of the self. For both Foucault and Mbembe, individuals are subjects of the social nexus of power relations in which they find themselves immersed. ‘Subject’ here should be understood in a double sense, as Foucault (ibid., p. 212) rightly points out:

*There are two meanings of the word subject: Subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.*

Both Mbembe and Foucault agree that self-styling and the practice of liberty take the latter meaning of subject, that is, subjecting oneself to particular forms of truth and knowledge. The notion of power through which the double sense of subject is realized is central to both Foucault and Mbembe. According to Foucault (ibid., p. 221):

*By power, we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with the field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse compartments may be realised. Where determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains. (In this case, it is a question of physical relationship and constraint).*

The similarities between Foucault and Mbembe, however, begin to diminish. For Mbembe, even postcolonial African victims of war and slaves<sup>65</sup> practice self-styling crafted by cruelty. Foucault, on the other hand, insists upon and distinguishes between liberation and the practices of liberty or self-styling, the former being a necessary condition for the latter. Liberation has to do with the putting into place those socio-political conditions in which practices of liberty become possible. Inversely, the state of freedom attained by way of liberation struggles has to be continuously maintained by practices of liberty, since they remain vulnerable to succumb to domination. The practice of liberty is only possible under certain conditions, in the case of colonized people, liberation must come before practices of liberty. Foucault (1984: 113-114) further qualifies this point referring specifically to liberation from colonization:

*I do not mean to say that liberation or such and such a form of liberation does not exist. When a colonial people try to free itself of its colonizer, that is truly an act of liberation, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practice of liberty that later on will be necessary for this person, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society. That is why I insist on the practice of freedom rather than on the processes which indeed have their place, but which by themselves, do not seem to me to be able to decide all the practical forms of liberty.*

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<sup>65</sup> In "Necropolitics" (2003:22) Mbembe argues that slaves in America practiced self-styling. He writes: "In spite of the terror and the symbolic sealing off of the slave, he or she maintains alternative perspectives toward time, work, and self. This is the second paradoxical element of the plantation world as a manifestation of the state of exception. Treated as if he or she no longer existed except as a mere tool and instrument of production, the slave nevertheless is able to draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it. Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another".

A distinction that Foucault makes between struggles for liberation and practices of liberty or self-styling is an instructive one. Liberation from domination is necessary, since domination signals a total loss of agency on the part of the subject and therefore also an absence of the mobile power relations necessary for action and reaction. Under these conditions practices of liberty or obsession with uniqueness self-styling are impossible. For Foucault, the latter requires “acceptable forms [of] political society” (1984: 114).

Consequently, when Foucault is asked, “do not the practices of liberty require a certain degree of liberation?” (ibid., p. 114), he gives the following response:

*Yes, absolutely. That is where the idea of domination must be introduced. The analysis I have been trying to make has to do essentially with the relationship of power ... The relationships of power have an extremely wide extension in human relations. There is a whole network of relationships of power, which can operate between individuals, in the bosom of the family, in an education relationship, in the political body, etc. ... When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable, and to prevent all reversibility of movement – by means of instruments which can become economical as well as political or military – we are facing what can be called a state of domination (ibid.).*

From Foucault's argument, to care for the self or self-styling does not happen in Mbembe's “state of war”, where one is dominated from every side, and one must do whatever it takes to see another day. In the state of war, people are more concerned with safeguarding their lives than with fashioning their subject-identities. To my mind, the struggle for survival within a context of violence and domination cannot be equated to Foucault's notion of practices of liberty. Even the colonial socio-political situation is not necessarily a sufficient condition for self-styling, as Foucault intimated earlier.

Mbembe would counter that states of war are a spasmodic but enduring feature of the lives of many African subjects which affords them space – minimal as it may be – to style themselves. He for instance argues that “in the act that consists of putting to death innumerable sacrificial victims, the agent of the massacre also seeks to transcend and reinvent the self” (Mbembe 2002: 269). But this self-craft accounts for the culprit of war not its victim. For Foucault, care of the self is

expressly an ethical labour involving discipline and moderation as opposed to contexts of war that is necessarily characterized by violence and excess.

Even if we are to locate the notion of self-styling in less cruel conditions, Mbembe's notion of self-styling still departs from Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty. In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe successfully attempts to explain the fluidity of power relations in postcolonial Cameroon. He nevertheless fails to convincingly characterize the strategies of resistance employed by the subjugated in terms of self-stylization. Mbembe (2001: 128 – 129) argues that:

*Thus, we may assert that, by dancing publicly for the benefit of power, the “postcolonized subject” is providing his or her loyalty, and by compromising with the corrupting control that state power tends to exercise at all levels of everyday life, the subject is reaffirming that this power is incontestable — precisely the better to play with it and modify it whenever possible. In short, the public affirmation of the “postcolonized subject” is not necessarily found in acts of “opposition” or “resistance” to the commandment. What defines the postcolonized subject is the ability to engage in baroque practices fundamentally ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even where there are clear, written, and precise rules.*

By publicly affirming the subjugating power and not publicly opposing it, the postcolonial subject hopes to resist the subjecting force of the subjugating power in the hope of modifying it. In this case, the public affirmation of the subjugating power is a strategy of resistance. To be sure, the postcolonial subject does not desire the subjecting force of the subjugating power, as indicated in the postcolonial subject's desire to modify the subjugating power. Though the baroque practices performed by the postcolonial subject are “ambiguous, fluid, and modifiable even when there are clear, written, and precise rules” (ibid.), the desire which gives rise to these baroque practices is to resist, by modification, the subjugating power. Mbembe's refusal to recognize the baroque practices as modes of resistance may be critiqued on the grounds that the public affirmation of the subjugating power does not tell the whole story, that is, it is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. The end to which these non-resistance practices aim is “to modify it [subjugating power] whenever possible” (ibid.). This modification offers the possibility to reject or resist the subjugating power.

The kind of resistance that we see in Mbembe's postcolonial power relations, including in the state of war, is a struggle for liberation, according to the distinction

that Foucault makes between liberation and practice of liberty. To be sure liberation, like the practice of liberty, takes place within power relations which are “ambiguous, fluid and modifiable” (therefore not domination), but this fluidity does not necessarily mean that the struggle for liberation is the same as the practice of liberty, at least as defined by Foucault earlier.

To take Foucault's argument that the subject's mode of being, acting and reacting to events constitutes self-styling and transpose it to the *unacceptable* (unacceptable since Foucault (1984: 114) expressly states that the practice of liberty is possible within “acceptable forms of [...] existence or political society”) socio-political setting of war is to misconstrue Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty. If indeed there is a distinction between the struggles for liberation (from colonialism) and the practices of liberty as Foucault earlier intimated, then Foucault's notion of the practice of liberty is not the same as Mbembe's notion of self-styling. Foucault's notion of self-styling is based on the ancient Greek practices of citizens, not slaves, colonized peoples, or victims of war. For instance, Foucault (ibid., p. 117) argues that “I think in the measure that liberty signifies for the Greeks non-slavery – a definition which is quite different from ours – the problem is already entirely political”. Mbembe (2002a: 267), on the contrary, defines the condition under which the African styles her-/himself as the state of war, which is a zone of indistinction where the decision between life and death is arbitrary. Characteristic of Mbembe's zone of indistinction is violence and cruelty. Put in Foucaultian terms, the zone of indistinction would be a domain in which power relations run the risk of congealing into a state of domination, and therefore hostile to the practice of liberty. It is within these conditions that Mbembe argues that the African practices self-styling through which s/he (can) become(s) a work of art. Foucault, on the other hand, argues that practices of the self come with ethical responsibility towards others. Foucault (1984: 118) states that “care for the self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others”. States of war with its technologies of violent struggle and killing cannot easily, if at all, be equated to any form of caring for others. We might wage war for the sake of keeping our loved ones safe, but what we become in the act of waging a war is an undeniably destructive force. Furthermore, Foucault (ibid., p. 116) argues that:

*Naturally one cannot care for self without knowledge. Care for self is of course knowledge of self – that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect – but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one's self out with these truths.*

To think of self-styling in Cartesian terms, as Jewsiewicki (2002: 594) argues when he states that “[i]dentity, being a political formulation of the self's relation to the Other, it is correct to follow Descartes in the assertion that every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity, as long as he or she applies the right method”, stands in direct opposition to Foucault's conception of truth and the practice of liberty. Aristotle taught us that there is a difference between something existing in potentiality and actuality. The claim that “every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity” only exists in potentiality. Beyond potentiality, it demands a certain amount of freedom in a public space and subjective agency. Foucault's practice of liberty is practiced within the limits of discourse which is fluid and constantly changing, while the Cartesian discoverer thinks from the position of an already created subject. While the Cartesian self focuses on the correct method towards a personal discovery of truth, the Foucaultian method takes the truth as a construction subject to a complex flow of forces of relations governed by discourse. Foucault's practices of subjectivization are subject to a number of disciplinary practices. Contra to this environment informed by discipline, Jewsiewicki (2002: 595-569) defines the claimed undisciplined nature of African societies in the following passage:

*But in Africa, where societies have been marked by the slave trade and by colonization, indiscipline offers the subject its sole tactical recourse — a negative one, to boot. Indiscipline makes it possible to resist, to remove oneself from the actions of the Other, to act as if one has been converted — sometimes, indeed, to the point of believing it oneself. But by the same token, it does not allow one to impose one's own priorities.*

African societies characterized by indiscipline to the point that “it does not allow one to impose one's own priorities” seems to be incongruent with Mbembe's insistence upon Foucaultian practices of the self. I would like to believe that “imposing one's own priorities” is key to the practices of liberty in Foucaultian terms. Of course, I understand that priorities are determined within the constrictions of discourse. If the Foucaultian subject practices liberty in a disciplined discourse, then to transplant the practice of liberty into undisciplined situations which do not allow one to impose their priority without theoretical

development is simply unjustified. Neither Jewsiewicki nor Mbembe explains the theoretical possibility of imagining a Foucaultian subject who practices liberty in a disciplined discourse, in an undisciplined situation, especially when discipline is a necessary condition for the practice of liberty. The argument that I am putting forward here is that, even though both Mbembe and Foucault may agree that subjection happens within a social matrix – subjection understood as being “subject to” in double sense of the word – Mbembe’s conception of the conditions under which one becomes a subject through the practice of liberty fundamentally differs from that of Foucault. Consequently, the very conception of self-styling becomes something other than what Foucault imagined.

The conditions under which one can identify Mbembe’s self-styling as a Foucaultian practice of liberty is in Mbembe’s state of religion. In the state of religion, there is discipline in the form of doctrine, and people are free to form relationships with the Divine Sovereignty. They engage with the doctrine to transform it (not necessarily to resist it), based on their experiences. Also, the doctrine transforms the subjects’ conduct. There is no cruelty or force used, according to Mbembe, which makes it possible for subjects to negotiate through available truths in order to style themselves from the available choices. It should be remembered, however, that absolute subjection to Christian doctrine would not qualify as a practice of liberty for Foucault in its strictest application. Christian dogma, especially in its fundamentalist form, requires absolute obedience. In other words, one is free to choose to subject oneself to Christian dogma, but once this choice has been made, one no longer retains the freedom to choose how to stylize your life entirely. Homosexuality, for instance, remains an option not sanctioned by many Christian dogmatic or fundamentalist discourses to this day. The discipline imposed by Greco-Roman practices, on the other hand, was prescriptive in form but not so much in content. In other words, it was not so much a question of which choice one exercised, but the extent to which one practised it or indulged in it. Moderation was not an absolute prohibition, as are many Christian dogmas, but rather an insistence on the dangers of excess.

It could be argued that because Mbembe's self-styling is ascribed also to forms of subjugation, it is not Foucaultian. Mbembe's move to attribute the agency of self-



styling to all peoples categorized as black in the past and present, slaves, colonial subjects, postcolonial victims of war, and those adherents to the Christian dogma of the Divine Sovereignty, regardless of the socio-political conditions, situates the notion of self-styling not only in forms of power relations but also in forms that approximate domination. And it is not surprising that even Jewsiewicki subscribes to this logic when he states that

*[i]dentity being a political formulation of the self's relation to the Other, it is correct to follow Descartes in the assertion that every human being is capable of attaining the truth as well as his or her identity, as long as he or she applies the right method (Jewsiewicki 2002: 594).*

The question of the practice of liberty is no longer investigated in political modalities, but in all power relations except for absolute domination. That is why the practice of liberty is within the capacity of every human being, on condition that they use the right method, as Jewsiewicki argues. Interrogating the kinds of political modalities which may guarantee self-styling is completely neglected by focusing on proving that identities change or power relations are fluid. Adverse political conditions, from Mbembe's logic of self-styling, cannot stop one from practicing self-styling because it appears as if self-styling comes prior to forms of political life.

The latter part of Mbembe's (2002a: 242) charge against his adversaries that "in reality, the production of the dominant meanings of these events was itself colonized by the two ideological currents introduced above — the one instrumentalist, the other nativist — that claim to speak in the name of Africa as a whole", reappears in Mbembe's insistence upon self-styling. The move from interrogating political modalities which may be conducive to self-styling, which is nuanced and sometimes contradictory in Africa, to an exclusive insistence upon the fluidity of African identities is motivated by a desire to speak on behalf of Africa as a whole. In his attempt to provide an alternative mode of thinking about African subjectivities, he therefore ends up making the same mistake as his adversaries.

Apart from the fact that this tendency to speak on behalf of Africa as a whole is a legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanists and their political situations, the anti-

essentialist's speaking on behalf of Africa as a whole is also a conceptual constraint of the notion of African identity.

The conceptual conflation of the notion of identity as static and fluid, which Brubaker and Cooper (2000) identify<sup>66</sup>, is also apparent in the anti-essentialist views of African identity. To expose this conceptual conflation, I brief discussion of Appiah's critique of Du Bois' notion of African identity (1992), and of Mbembe's utilization of the concept of identity will prove instructive. Appiah's critique of Du Bois' conception of African identity can be divided into two parts. In the first part, Appiah establishes that Du Bois' notion of African identity is based on the idea of race. In the second part of his argument, Appiah proves that the idea of race is epistemologically erroneous (essentialist), therefore making Du Bois' notion of African identity epistemologically unfounded.

Appiah begins his critique by challenging Du Bois' claim that his notion of African identity is not founded on race, but rather, on the social history shared by black people. Appiah believes that Du Bois' claim is unfounded because black people do not share a social history or civilization as Du Bois claims. But even if black people may have had a shared culture in the past, this may not be the basis of an all-black or African identity because it is based on memory. Appiah argues that "we cannot tell whether a memory is evidence of the rememberer's identity, even if what is 'remembered' really did happen to an earlier person, unless we know already that the rememberer and the earlier person are one" (Appiah 1992: 32). On this view, Du Bois' memory of the social history that black people share (whether it is true or not), does not tell us anything about the persistence or the identity of the rememberer. In other words, Appiah (1992: 32) argues:

*My general point is this: just as to recognize two events at different times as part of the history of a single individual, we have to have a criterion of identity for the*

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<sup>66</sup> Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 8) argue that: "Clearly, the term 'identity' is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of 'self', a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently 'activated' in differing contexts". Hence, the concept of identity is conflated to mean two contradictory things; one static and another fluid.

*individual at each of those times, independent of his or her participation in the two events, so, when we recognize two events as belonging to the history of one race, we have to have a criterion of membership of the race at those two times, independently of the participation of the members in the two events.*

On this view, a shared history is not enough to constitute the basis of African identity because it does not provide a criterion to show the persistence of Africanity over the different shared historical moments. Appiah goes on to wonder what remains the same, or what persists in black people throughout the different past historical moments they may have shared. Appiah identifies nothing but race and the place of origin, that is, the African continent. On this basis, Appiah rejects Du Bois' claim that there is a shared history among black people which could be the basis of African identity. This leads Appiah to conclude that Du Bois' notion of African identity finds justification in the concept of race and geography, since these two are the only persisting similarities among black people.

Underlying Appiah's critique of Du Bois is an essentialist or static notion of identity. Du Bois' argument that the basis of African identity is a shared social history among black people does not hold for Appiah, precisely because it does not prove persistence or continuity of their Africanity. It does not hold because it does not persist. This criticism is carried onto the definition of identity as an essence which endures.

The second part of Appiah's argument goes on to contest the veracity of the idea of race, because he argues that there are no human races, biologically speaking. As Appiah correctly explained, the fiction of biological racism implied the fiction of psychological and moral racism because the latter two are founded on the former. This led to the logic that Du Bois' notion of African identity has no true foundation because there are no human races. On this understanding, Appiah rejects Du Bois' view of African identity not because it is essentialist, but because the essentialist foundation of Du Bois' African identity, which is race, is not correct or valid (there are no human races). Consequently, Appiah (1992: 174) advises us to find a correct and useful basis of African identity because identity is "the product of a history ... every human identity is constructed, historical; everyone has its share of false presuppositions, of the errors and inaccuracies that courtesy calls 'myth',

religion ‘heresy’, and science ‘magic’”. In other words, identity is fluid. But then an important question arises, why does Appiah reject Du Bois’ conception of African identity because of its inaccuracies and lack of persistence of essence, if identity is fluid and has no essence? Here, Appiah rejects Du Bois’ idea of African identity because it is not essentialist and it does not persist over time, and then he goes not to argue that identity as such is not essentialist and does not persist over time. The idea of identity in Appiah’s application is conceptually conflated which makes his argument untenable.

Such are the conceptual problems that arise from using the notion of African identity in trying to analyse literature and conditions of human life on the African continent. Although Appiah holds a fluid concept of identity, he fails to escape the traditional meaning of identity, which is essentialist. But at the same time, while espousing a fluid notion of identity, he fails to address the problem of white racism, which is the problem that Du Bois responds to with his essentialist racial conception of African identity. To be sure, white racism and the injustices black people have suffered at its hands have persisted over the centuries. This explains why Appiah has received criticism for imagining “identity” without the material conditions that it entails. But such critique often falls into essentialism as it tries to account for the materiality of “African identity” while failing to capture the ideas and practices that sustain white racism and other ideologies that deprive some black people the possibility of better human lives.

Similarly, Mbembe argues that African identity is neither constituted by a single category or substance, nor can it be captured by a single term. Defining African identity, Mbembe (2002a: 272) writes:

*There is no African identity that could be designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category. African identity does not exist as a substance. It is constituted, in varying forms, through a series of practices, notably practices of the self. Neither the forms of this identity nor its idioms are always self-identical. Rather, these forms and idioms are mobile, reversible, and unstable. Given this element of play, they cannot be reduced to a purely biological order based on blood, race, or geography. Nor can they be reduced to custom, to the extent that the latter’s meaning is itself constantly shifting.*

I would argue that despite his insistence upon the fluidity of African identity, Mbembe’s construction of African identity also falls prey to a conceptual conflation

of the static and fluid conception of identity. Firstly, he acknowledges that there is something called African identity. Then he proceeds to say that, in its constitution, this thing called African identity is not a substance. This ‘thing’ called African identity is characterized by variety and constituted by individual human performatives. The varieties and individual human performatives that constitute African identity cannot possibly be self-identical, because by their very nature they are constantly changing. In other words, ‘identity’ is in flux. Following this construction of African identity, some questions arise: What makes these varieties and individual human performatives, which are not identical, identically African? Put differently, what makes Mbembe call these variations that cannot be reduced to blood, race, geography, and custom, and the individual human performatives, identity and African, if there is nothing similar or identical among them? If all there is, is difference, then what is the point of their unity or congruence that makes them identifiable as “African”, and does this point of unity qualify the term “identity”?

In order to answer these questions, Mbembe and those who share his view of African identity are left with a choice to either name a definite point of unity of all the varieties and non-identical individual human performatives, or not to call all those non-identical practices and conditions “African identity”. They also have to make sure that, whatever point of unity these varieties and individual human performatives have, they conceptually qualify the notion of identity without contradiction.

Mbembe’s rejection of an African point of congruence or unity is conceptually futile. The futility lies in his argument that identity (meaning a sense of a congruence or sameness of realities), is non-identical or incongruent<sup>67</sup>. Indeed, it is a conceptual

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<sup>67</sup> Etymologically, the word identity comes from the Latin word *idem* (same), *idem* plus *entitas* or *idem et idem* (same entity or same as before), which meant *identitas* in Late Latin (180-600 A.D) and *identicus* in Medieval Latin to identify the sameness of an entity, translated into English to mean identity (Partridge 2006: 1495). The combination of *entis/entia* (a thing or material object), later developed into *ens* (existence) (material and non-material) with *idem* (same) gave rise to the meaning of *identitas* as the sameness of an entity or existing thing over-time. In Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks to modern philosophy, the notion of identity has been associated with the constituting principle of a thing which persists over-time. The concept of identity has “been used to address the perennial philosophical problems of permanence amidst manifest

oxymoron. On the one hand, he holds the view that African identity cannot be “designated by a single term or that could be named by a single word or subsumed under a single category”, completely denying a point of congruence, and yet he goes ahead to call non-identical conditions and practices “African” and “identity”. On this point, Mbembe and those who share his view of “African identity”, are guilty of what Brubaker and Cooper describe as some analysts’ use of the notion of identity only to reify the realities they seek to eradicate (2000: 4-6). Mbembe wants to challenge the unity of African identity (be it based on blood, race, culture, or geography), but he ends up reifying the same unity he attempts to eradicate by using a concept of African identity which conceptually assumes the unity of Africa or African alterity.

Mbembe’s fluid notion of African identity through the notion of self-styling, notwithstanding its conceptual confluences, fails to capture the problems that many African intellectuals have been trying to address. The problems that Mbembe himself notes are the following:

*How to renegotiate a social bond corrupted by commercial relationships (the sale of human cargoes), the violence of endless wars, and the catastrophic consequences of the way in which power was exercised (2002: 25).*

And how to develop:

*Modalities of reinventing a being-together in a situation in which . . . all the outward appearances of a possible human life seemed to be lacking, and what passed for politics had more to do with the power to destroy and to profit than with any kind of philosophy of life or reason (ibid., p.25).*

The failure becomes apparent in Mbembe’s attempt to address socio-political problems from “a perspective that tends to treat the social as an aggregate — that thinks that collectivities form when several persons experience the same shifts of interior orientation and draw together through this echoing, prefabricated commonality” (Vogler 2002: 626). The problems that gave rise to the discourse of African identity cannot be “resolved individually from the inside out in order to allow for more effective modes of collectivity” (ibid., p. 627). Rather, instead of thinking that effective ways of living together will be fostered by a Cartesian self-mastery, I concur with Vogler that we need to think from the collective and interrogate how

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change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 2). In this intellectual tradition, identity has been a technical term used to address ontological problems.

collective imaginations condition the individual. This misperception of the problem, on the part of Mbembe, arises, I argue, from expecting too much from the fluid notion of identity.

The theoretical confusion, generalizations and the failure to come up with an apposite contemporary theorization of both individual and collective political agencies (within the context of postcolonial Africa) in Mbembe's work lies in the limitations of his notion of African identity. Mbembe's concept of identity as multiple and constantly changing cannot conceptually account for the persistence of degraded forms of human lives on the continent that seems to follow from the logic of white racism and neo-liberalism. Mbembe's notion of fluid identity seems to amount to an ontological understanding of the individual human being with the capacity for freedom. The conceptual orientation of this fluid notion of identity is a response on Mbembe's part to the essentialist conception of identity. His anti-essentialism comes at a considerable political cost, since it does not provide him with the means by which to specify how to renegotiate socio-political relations that have been disrupted by the dehumanization of human beings. The fluid notion of identity further leads Mbembe to focus on self-styling with no consideration for the contours of the socio-political. But what remains unclear is Mbembe's insistence upon the use of the concept of identity when he means human agency and self-understanding, which is always changing. Additionally, Mbembe's choice to allocate the concept of African identity to individual agency without any consideration given to geography, race or any socio-political alliance is highly problematic, even untenable.

In conclusion, Mbembe's fluid notion of African identity through the idea of self-styling is conceptually plausible on the grounds that human socio-political phenomena are multiply constituted and constantly changing, but not on a socio-political level where an emancipated politics is the end goal. This renders his critical intervention in the postcolonial debate on the contemporary socio-political situations on the African continent impotent because it leaves the socio-political agenda unaccounted for. Mbembe's fluid notion of African identity argues that all human actions or performatives instantiate change in the life of the actor, which in turn, constantly challenges and changes the self-understanding of the actor. My

critical response to Mbembe's argument presented in this section is that not everything that changes, changes itself, or not everything that moves, moves by its own accord. Not all the actions that postcolonial African subjects perform are a result of self-styling, at least on a Foucaultian understanding as defined in the chapter. In order to effectively intervene in the perverted contemporary African socio-political constellations, we will have to come up with a critical account that is more convincing than Mbembe's rather naïve rendering of African people as free agents, unfettered by socio-political forces.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter critically discussed the anti-essentialist view of African identity and interrogate its conceptual and theoretical purchase. With the primary focus on Mbembe's work "African Modes of Self-Writing", I presented the anti-essentialist view contained in this work. In this essay, Mbembe argues that African modes of thinking about African identity have been colonized by two historicist ways of thinking, namely Afro-radicalism and Nativism. While Afro-radicalism is characteristic of the contradiction between voluntarism and victimization, Nativism is imbued with the discrepancy between particularism and universalism. In Mbembe's view, both Afro-radicalism and Nativism present African subjects who do not have the agency to control the direction of their history. To be authentically African, the African has to reclaim her Africanity which was lost through the colonial encounter. Mbembe believes that African identity has been conceptualized within a racist paradigm which equates identity to the merging of race and the geographical origin of people. This way of reasoning, according to Mbembe, has permeated African thinking about African people to the detriment of political practices. Thus, the African, both in theory and in political practice, has emerged as a sub-human, always acted upon by others. Afro-radicalism and Nativism have therefore led African ways of thinking about African people to a dead end.

Mbembe argues that his work provides a way out of this impasse. To this end, Mbembe argues that African identity should not be thought of as a substance, but



rather as malleable and therefore constantly changing as a result of people's daily practices of the self. To substantiate his argument, he goes on to show how contemporary Africans create their "identities" through the persistent state of war and religious practices in contemporary postcolonial Africa. In both "cultural" states, Mbembe argues, individual Africans emerge as self-crafted subjects through practices of the self.

Using the theoretical framework established in the first chapter, which argues that knowledge claims are historically contingent with multiple constituents, I interrogated Mbembe's work. I began my examination by pointing out Mbembe's generalizations and blanket criticisms levelled against his adversaries. Then I proceeded to show that Mbembe's anti-essentialist criticism is reductionist, rationalist and consequently essentialist. On this point, I demonstrated that Mbembe was more interested in showing the essentialism in his adversaries' ideas than the political and moral positions those ideas stood for. I argued that Mbembe took his adversaries' questions and answers as his own, disregarding the differences in the problem-spaces from which they were articulated. The chapter further emphasized two points that Mbembe alludes to, but because of his choice of concepts and theoretical orientation, these points remain unarticulated in his argument. The first point was that some postcolonial Africans possess the individual and collective agency to challenge the conditions of their political situatedness. The second point was the need to find new concepts and theoretical apparatuses with which we can read the present cognitive-political context we inhabit.

I went on to engage with the notion of self-styling, which is central to Mbembe's view of African identity as not static but constantly changing through individual performatives. Mbembe utilizes the concept of self-styling to argue that Africans, like all other human beings, have the capacity to choose what makes them African. I argued to the contrary by engaging with Mbembe's sympathizer, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, who argues that Mbembe's notion of self-styling is equivalent to the Foucaultian notion of practices of liberty. The chapter argued against this correspondence by engaging Mbembe's conceptualization of self-styling from the perspective of Foucault's notion of practices of liberty. I showed that while

Mbembe's notion of self-styling is founded on the human ontological capacity or potentiality for individual freedom, Foucault is explicit in his insistence that practices of liberty only become possible under certain political conditions. From this conclusion, I argued that Mbembe's notion of self-styling neglects what is at issue in the problematic notion of African identity propounded by anti-colonial and certain postcolonial thinkers, which are the political modalities which guarantee socio-political and cultural freedom. In Mbembe's quest to show that African identity is not a substance and cannot be subsumed under one category or be pronounced once and for all, Mbembe ventured into an idealized ontology of human freedom and completely neglected the fact that certain political modalities limit socio-political and cultural agency. As we have seen, he celebrates self-styling even in conditions of slavery, colonialism and postcolonial states of war. He therefore completely neglected to question the implications of violence and domination for the practices of self-styling. As a result, Mbembe's critical intervention into the debates on the contemporary cognitive-political contexts on the African continent, to my mind, fails dismally.

The chapter concluded that Mbembe's arguments are constricted by his application of the fluid notion of identity. The fluid notion of African identity only affords Mbembe the view that, at an ontological level, human beings have the capacity to fashion their self-understanding. It does not, however, enable Mbembe to interrogate the socio-political questions which are at the centre of the discourse on African identity. In the final chapter, the critical attempt undertaken in this study to examine the conceptual purchase of the notion of African identity both in its essentialist and anti-essentialists views, will be concluded.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion and Possible Implications

In this research, I have attempted to substantiate the thesis that the notion of African identity, both in its essentialist and anti-essentialist conceptions, does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to theorize contemporary African situations or imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of agency.

In **Chapter 1**, I began by situating the notion of African identity within context of postcolonial African philosophy. I explained that the debate between the essentialist and anti-essentialist views of African identity emerged as reflections on anti-colonial literature and postcolonial socio-political and cultural realities. The essentialist view with a political orientation and the anti-essentialist with a theoretical orientation are the two positions on African identity that contend for the best theoretical framework within which to imagine spaces of socio-political and cultural agency in postcolonial Africa. I then posited the research question: does the notion of African identity, both in its essentialist and anti-essentialist mould, have the theoretical and conceptual purchase to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of freedom today?

Before moving on to Chapter 2, and in search of a theoretical framework within which to interrogate the research question, I critically discussed dominant theoretical frameworks from which the notion of African identity has been articulated. I argued that the dominant theoretical frameworks from which the notion of African identity has been theorized have shortcomings which may adversely affect the rigour, resilience, and theoretical intervention of the research. I therefore opted for an alternative theoretical framework based on David Scott's idea that we should read historical bodies of knowledge contingently. In Scott's view, knowledge claims are results of questions, concepts, propositional logic, and socio-political and cultural positions which are contingently constituted. This framework made it possible to identify the contingency of the notion of African identity as a knowledge claim in order to question its conceptual and theoretical yield.

Based on the theoretical framework established in Chapter 1, **Chapter 2** interrogated the conceptual and theoretical development of the essentialist view of African identity. The chapter critically discussed the Pan-Africanist views of Wilmot E. Blyden and Alexander Crummell and argued that within their problem-space, the two thinkers justifiably sought to imagine the socio-political and cultural freedom of black people. After positing this thesis, I went on to establish that Blyden and Crummell laid down a conceptual and theoretical orientation within which the notion of African identity has been conceptualized and articulated by African anti-colonial and postcolonial thinkers. The conceptual and theoretical orientation established by Crummell and Blyden in the 19th century can be summarized in the following five points: (1) to be authentically African means upholding native African cultures and values; (2) what is considered African is ontologically other to what is considered Western; (3) the homogenization (or conflation, if you will) of African individuals and/or subjectivities, as well as collective socio-political and cultural freedom or agency into the notion of African identity or African personality; (4) the tendency to present issues from parts of the continent as universally continental; and (5) the insistence that the future of black people lies in reconstructing their past. I argued that these conceptual orientations were informed by the conceptual and theoretical paradigm and political objectives of that time. I also demonstrated that the dominant socio-political and cultural theory which inform these views is race theory.

After identifying the conceptual and theoretical orientations established by Crummell and Blyden, I went on to identify these conceptual orientations in Senghor's and Nkrumah's ideas of *negritude* and "African personality". I argued that, like Blyden and Crummell, Senghor and Nkrumah conceptualized their ideas of *negritude* and "African personality" from the five conceptual and theoretical orientations mentioned above. Although Senghor and Nkrumah imagined the notions of *negritude* and "African personality" from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist conceptual orientation, I argued that their ideas had the political purchase of mobilizing the colonized people of Africa to stand united against European colonialism and racism. I further noted that notwithstanding the political yield of Senghor's and Nkrumah's ideas at the time, their conceptual frameworks no longer speak to the demands of their present.

In the last section of Chapter 2, I discussed the contemporary essentialist conceptions of African identity with the primary focus on Mafeje's work on the notion of Africanity. I argued that even though Mafeje and those holding a similar view attempt to move away from the 19th century Pan-Africanist conceptual and theoretical orientation, they did not succeed. Like their predecessors, the contemporary proponents of the essentialist view use the notion of Africanity to imagine the socio-political and cultural agency of the people of Africa. But unlike their predecessors who had the conceptual-theoretical and political justification for their essentialist views, I argued that contemporary essentialist conception of African identity is theoretically and socio-politically untenable. The reasons for this, I argued, are that the conceptual and theoretical framework within the essentialist notion of African identity is articulated is a 19th century Pan-African conceptual framework which was a result of a specific conceptual and political constellation different from our own. For example, we conventionally no longer hold the view that essential racial qualities are the foundation of human socio-political agency. It is also evident that the strict dichotomy between the Western life world and African life worlds as imagined by the 19th century Pan-Africanist no longer holds, for colonialism and globalized neo-liberalism have infiltrated the African continent. Continental socio-political and cultural collective agency, which the essentialist view holds, does not offer viable possibilities of freedom if the institutions responsible for the creation and perpetuation of conditions of unfreedom are still intact and left unchallenged.

In **Chapter 3**, I demonstrated that the anti-essentialist view of African identity emerged as a response to the essentialist view of African identity. The primary focus of the discussion was on the work of Mbembe. From the anti-essentialist view, African identity is not a substance or an essential something through which Africans realize their authenticity and exercise agency. On the contrary, Mbembe argues that African identity is fluid and is constantly changing through individual Africans' self-styling.

Critically engaging with Mbembe's notion of self-styling as a theorization of the fluid notion of African identity, the study demonstrated that Mbembe's total

commitment to the fluidity of identity fails to fully take into account those conditions of possibility necessary for the self-stylization of identity. Consequently, he does not account for the desirable and undesirable socio-political and cultural conditions under which the fluidity of Africa realities occur, which I believe, has been central to the debate on the notion of African identity.

I further noted that although Mbembe attempted to move away from the essentialist conception of “African identity”, he does not succeed. The reasons for this failure are twofold. First, conceptually, the notion of identity when used to account for something that lacks sameness amounts to a conceptual conflation. Second, following from this conceptual conflation, the anti-essentialist view, while denying any point of congruence as a basis for similarity or identity in constantly changing and diverse realities on the continent, still uses the notion of African identity which is supposed to point to some alterity or sameness of the reality called African. Consequently, the anti-essentialist view of African identity cannot go beyond the critique of the essentialist view to intervene conceptually and theoretically in imagining present day socio-political and cultural spaces of agency.

I therefore concluded with the contention that the notion of African identity in its essentialist and anti-essentialist views does not have the conceptual and theoretical purchase to imagine socio-political and cultural spaces of agency in the postcolonial present. The reasons as demonstrated include the fact that the essentialist view of African identity operates from a 19<sup>th</sup> century Pan-Africanist political and conceptual framework which is fundamentally different from ours today. Besides its conceptual conflation, anti-essentialist view of African identity, on the other hand, can only challenge the essentialist view of African identity, but it does not have the conceptual resources to interrogate the changing modalities of human socio-political and cultural exchange to identify spaces of freedom for the peoples of Africa.

This study does not pretend to be an exhaustive analysis of the notion of African identity and the realities the notion is used to signify or represent. On the contrary, the research posits a much more modest thesis aimed at disputing the dominant conceptual and theoretical orientations within which the cognitive and socio-

political realities on the African continent have been represented and interrogated. It is therefore inspired by the need to find heuristic theoretical frameworks within which to imagine spaces of socio-political and cultural agency in diverse often contradictory post-postcolonial realities on the continent. By not providing alternative conceptual and theoretical orientations to those which the study challenges, the research seeks to elicit interventional critique on the conceptual frameworks within which socio-political and cultural spaces of freedoms have been imagined. At the same time, in not providing alternative conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the study recognizes the limitations of its scope and the magnitude of what remains to be done in this field.

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