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Who is an African? Rethinking the Identity in View of Changing Realities

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Abstract

For many 'Africans' and those that use the identifier in reference to a category of people, it might seem almost self-evident what it means. Yet, on basic conceptual inspection, it becomes apparent how behind the seemingly innocent label lie contradictions with difficult implications to reconcile with both demographic and political changes in Africa over time. Through constructivist identity theory, this paper traces the dialectical process in the construction of Africanness, the evolution of its boundaries, and the implications of its different forms of usage. In so doing, and by using the archive of the 1990s 'exchange' between Wole Soyinka and Ali Mazrui and reflecting upon the case of non-black Africans, the paper highlights some of the complicated questions in the debates on Africanness. Focusing the critique on selected two broad definitional categories, here referred to as the nativist and the cosmopolitan, I argue that a clearly delimited or essentialist definition of an African is beyond reach. Our use of the concept has to be deracialised and contextualised, for it may mean different things in different settings including both being a positive rallying nucleus and a tool for xenophobic mobilisation. I do not aim at providing an alternative definition or conceptual orthodoxy, but rather, analytically show the shortcomings embedded in some of the conventional usages.

Keywords: African, African identity, Nativism, Identity politics

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Introduction

In his article, *On Being an African,* reflecting on what it would be like for him as a white man to be an African*,* Abraham Olivier argues that:

> Africans are different, justas Chinese, Americans, Germans, and Arabians are different. I can go to Africa and live there, as well as adopt the style of a local African community. But my tongue will forever betray me, and if not, if I think I am completely African, the community will ever so subtly convey to me the contrary. They might not exclude me, but they will never completely include me ... Of course, I cannot … be an African "human," but I can choose to see "myself" as an African. There is something that it is like to be an African and that I cannot be. But there is something that it is like to choose to be an African. That I can be (2014, p.102).

What is it like to be an African that Olivier cannot be but that he can only choose to be? Why can't he be, but only choose to be? These questions emerging from the above quotation and other contemporary identity challenges do not come with easy answers, although easily taken for granted. Yet the implications of the ambiguities involved are often out of range for social cohesion.

Identity is increasingly becoming an important factor in the politics of recognition at all levels of engagement – internationally, within states, within groups and sub-groups of people in countries, and at a personal level (Koenig, 2017; Nyamnnjoh et al,. 2021). Today we witness more identity-driven conflicts, pursuits for belonging, and identity transformations (Adida, 2014; Keller, 2014; Ssentongo, 2016; Fukuyama, 2018; Gledistch, 2019). Whereas 'we' versus 'them' dichotomies have always shaped human relations in processes of boundary formation, increased mobility (migration), intermarriage, and the interaction of various kinds of people, the continually trigger new identity dynamics and destabilise old boundaries. As such, in the words of Mboti (2013, p.450), "identity is an exercise in productive invention and reinvention."

The question 'who is an African' therefore relates to how the identity has been invented, re-invented, and mobilised. The focus is on social identity, here conceptualised as one's self-concept derived from their knowledge of membership in a social group, including the value and emotional significance that may be attached to it (Fagbaybo 2016). This identity also includes how one is viewed by others, placing him or her in a particular group or a cross-section of groups.

Its wide diversity notwithstanding, Africa could be the only continent whose people have often been referred to in everyday talk and literature (not only negatively) as though they are all the same (Turnbull, 1962; Segun, 2014). It is rare to find reference to 'the European', 'the Asian', 'the Australian', and 'the American' in a

homogenous sense. But 'the African' is a very common expression, and quite often not contested because we all seem to essentially know what it refers to, including those who think that Africa is a country inhabited by Africans. The roots of this phenomenon can be located both in ascription from without and reactionary self-identification by black Africans.

The simplest approach to understanding the meaning of 'African' would be by etymological tracing of the root of the word Africa. There are various accounts on this, all of which point to the possibility that Africa did not name itself. In a summarised account in the Encyclopaedia Britannica;

> In antiquity the Greeks are said to have called the continent Libya and the Romans to have called it Africa, perhaps from the Latin *aprica* ("sunny") or the Greek *aphrike* ("without cold"). The name Africa, however, was chiefly applied to the northern coast of the continent, which was, in effect, regarded as a southern extension of Europe. The Romans, who for a time ruled the North African coast, are also said to have called the area south of their settlements *Afriga*, or the Land of the *Afrigs*—the name of a Berber community south of Carthage (cited in Segun, 2014, NP).

Segun goes further to argue that the roots of the concept 'Africa' show that it was never used to mean 'negro' but instead, even when it was extended, it was in reference to the continent. Africans were therefore the people from the continent, with no phenotypical boundaries. These accounts could be contested, but in any case, for the purposes of this paper, an etymological approach is not helpful in discerning and critiquing the present meanings of the concept, which have evolved over time, going beyond what could have been the initial connotations. We need to look at how the name has been constructed over the years – the process through which it has been assigned meanings and the factors informing the meanings.

Colonialists appropriated the name Africa (and Africans) in a defining act for colonial convenience, whereby the name provided a distinguishing category by which the African was the inferior other (savage) at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Thus, the easiest marker to instrumentalise was colour. That is how Africanness becomes synonymous with blackness and geography. It is also partly the reason why, following Hegelian racist logic, Africa is divided into North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa where the latter is 'Africa proper' (the primitive). Colonialism was thus the primary consolidating agent in the construction of the African racial identity beyond the loose name that it found on the continent.

Consequently, on top of there being a certain degree of colour similitude among many people in Africa that provides a common rallying point, their bond is reinforced by common

historical experiences, including being a generalised invention and object of the Western anthropological gaze (Mudimbe, 1988; 1994; Hountondji, 1996). "Common pigmentation, [history of] subjection to slavery, and suffering colonialism are factors and experiences that most people with black skins share" (Bankole, 1976, p. 25). As constructivist theories of identity suggest, it is common for people to rally around their common experiences to create and build group solidarity. The experiences, painful in this case, and aspirations to overcome them provide the emotive glue that binds the people into a common identity, which is then fed with primordial constructions of cultural closeness or sameness built on both real and imagined commonalities.

Whereas the label 'African' draws its generic ascription from European imperial cartography and anthropology, it was locally appropriated and re-imagined as part of the decolonisation project (Mungwini, 2016). In its colonial use, where racial politics was convenient, there was often a tendency to treat black Africans as generically 'other' and paling into insignificance any differences between them in emphasis of their overwhelming difference from Europeans (Angier, 2019). Though the anti-colonial struggle rejected racial differentiation as an imperial human hierarchy construction project, it largely retained the black-white (we-them, African-others) dichotomy in its collective response. This explains why remote areas that were not closely in contact with colonialism, anti-colonial struggles, and (post) colonial education hardly associate with the concept Africa(n), except in the sense of identifying with fellow black people. My aunt, who was born, raised, and only lived in a village in southern Uganda for all her 90 years, with only basic elementary education, may never conversationally refer to herself as an African. She may only talk about being a Muganda, Catholic, or/and woman.

The first wave of pan-Africanism and decolonisation in the 1940s and 60s and led to the political 'independence' of many African countries, whereas locals, in various ways, bore a solidarity code that was grounded on common colour (negritude) and fate – thus the trend that the different strands of socialism in various countries were commonly presented as 'African Socialism' and that African identity was stretched by some to include blacks in the diaspora. There was/is a common generic reference to 'traditional African society' (Sesanti, 2016), although the societies in Africa could have had varied traditions even before colonialism. Politically interpreted, "the Africans looked at themselves and knew that vis-à-vis the Europeans, they were one" (cited in Fagbayibo 2016). According to Appiah (2011) and Tabensky (2016), sometimes when people suffer oppression on account of their identity, one form of healing is by a reactionary inversion

of the insult to embrace the collective identity as a valuable part of who one is and not as a limitation. In this sense, African identity is political since it is situated within a response to hegemonic suppression in the process of identity reconstruction to steer clear of the vestiges of negative colonial representation of black people. Thus Mafeje announces, "we proclaim Africanity as the affirmation of an identity that has been denied and demeaned… 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" (Mafeje 2000, p.106). This could also explain why, to date, it is common for many Africans to self-identify as African, a continental 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) rare among inhabitants of other continents.

However, whereas many assume African identity as a unifying factor, it is not in itself an affirmation of a boundary into which those there self-placed always mutually include each other in their imaginations and spaces. Zeleza (2006) rightly observes that usage of the notion 'African' is quite slippery, with a tendency to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. Sometimes, as situations might require, there is a passionate attachment to the category in race terms; in other cases, racial Africanness sits in tension with other social identities – and is relegated to the rear. For some historical reasons and under certain circumstances, some black South Africans do not identify as African in the same sense as Africans from elsewhere (Ndlovu-Gatsheni' 2010). Quite evidently, "… the postcolonial 'subject' mobilises not just a single identity, but several fluid identities that, by their very nature, must be constantly 'revised' in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required" (Mbembe, 1992, p.5). The several bouts of xenophobic attacks in South Africa mainly targeting black non-South Africans (Kasembeli, 2019), for instance, demonstrate a case where Africanness is sometimes relegated to the backseat to give way to other more 'effective' mobilisation identities – such as that of South-African-black people. This shows that, as a political identity, the deployment of Africanness and other collective identities is situationally selected and boundaries shifted in view of associated benefits and disadvantages.

In the 'African' self-identification into which I was socialised, I have as well always taken African identity for granted and have never paused to ponder about who qualifies to be called an African and who does not. It is one of those cases that demonstrate Bertrand Russell's critical observation in *Problems of Philosophy* that "in daily life, we assume as certain many things which, on closer scrutiny, are found to be so full of apparent contradictions…" (Russell 1912, p.1). What has always immediately come to my mind (rather not meditated)

at the mention of 'African' is 'black people[1]', what Mbembe refers to as "the utopian vision of an Africanity that is coterminous with blackness" (Mbembe, 2002a, p. 264). Thus when, for example, Mbiti says that "the African [in a traditional setting] is notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1969, p.1), I would cross–check the authenticity of the generalisation by thinking of the different black African sub-groups that I know of to see whether they bear the religious notoriety he asserts. This kind of conceptualisation has been referred to as nativist (Mamdani, 1996; 2001; 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2010; Tembo, 2016).

However, later experiences and thoughts have led me to inconvenient questions. As Tembo (2016) has asked, for instance, if the conceptual basis on which the notion of African identity has been grounded is still appropriate in light of contemporary situations on the African continent? With the question of the 'Ugandan-Indians'[2], the Zimbabwean 'White settlers', the South African 'Whites', and the Saharan 'Arab-Africans', the East African Swahili people, some Africanist scholars (nativists) chose to add specifying (though exclusionary) qualification to the category of 'Africans' by an outright shift to 'indigenous/native African', but some stuck to the use of the same term (African) with specific reference to black Africans (Segun, 2014).

Some people choose to refer to Africans as all those (whatever the race) who live in Africa, take it as their home, and are committed to the betterment of its image and the well-being of its people. Among these is Thabo Mbeki, former president of South Africa, as expressed in his famous (or infamous?) speech, 'I am an African' (Mbeki, 1996). This definition has met stiff scholarly resistance from nativist Africanists, who utterly reject it as hypocritical rhetoric (Marx, 2002; Mboti, 2013).

The above background, together with other allusions to the definition of African identity in writings on Africa and Africans, point to the fact that "the subject of African identities … is as vast and complex as the continent itself" (Zeleza, 2006, p.16). What I mainly set out to do is critique some of the definitions of Africanness in the literature, highlight their implicational extensions in light of developments in Africa over time, and demonstrate the complexity immanent in reductionist approaches to defining who an African is. I endeavour to highlight some of the complicated questions in this debate, but not to provide an alternative definition of Africanness. For example, in an online discussion, Mwangi asks: "Aren't there dark –skinned people born in Asia, South America, and Australia who

[1] In the exclusion of Indian blacks and the Australian Aborigines.

[2] This is viewed by some as a contradictory name as one would either be Indian or Ugandan, but not both. However, it is just meant to indicate the origin of the sub-group, which is also detested by some members of this subgroup as they would prefer to be refered to simply as Ugandans like members of other sub-groups.

do not consider themselves to be African? And aren't there people who do consider themselves to be African who others might identify as Caucasian?"[3] (Mwangi, 2008). If the measure is indigeneity, how far do we go in establishing who is indigenous to Africa and who is not? How about people of mixed races? Who qualifies as black (Hall, 2017)? Are 'blacks' of mixed race less African, as Wole Soyinka implied in an exchange with Ali Mazrui in the 1990s (which we shall discuss later)? The article analytically curves out the many questions that still remain, even after the various attempts that we have so far had at defining an African. These serve to reinforce the point that a clearly delimited or essentialist definition of an African is beyond reach. Our use of the concept has to be deracialised and contextualised, for it can mean different things in different settings for different people, including being both a positive rallying nucleus and a tool for xenophobic mobilisation.

In this article, I mainly use the lenses of constructivist social identity theory to critique two broad approaches to Africanness, which I categorise as 'nativist' and 'cosmopolitan'. This is not to suggest that they are the only available meanings of the concept or to overlook the different definitional sheds within each of them, rather, they are selected in view of their general pervasiveness and because they carry tenets of many other sub-frames. I do not aim at providing an alternative definition or understanding of the concept; rather, to analytically show the shortcomings embedded in some of the conventional usages.

The Nativist Definition of an African

Nativism "encapsulates the 'identitarian promotion' of the priority of, and preference for, the native-born 'exclusively on the grounds of 'being native'" (Betz, 2019). Luganda provides a close concept, *ba nansangwa,* which can be translated as 'original inhabitants' or 'indigenous'. Nativism takes on different forms, often depending on context. Sometimes it manifests through outright xenophobic rejection of 'others' (Mamdani, 2001; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2010) or, at other times, through subtle forms of exclusion. It could as well present in symbolic forms as a defensive mechanism seeking to protect 'a cherished heritage' that is seen to be or allegedly under siege (Higham, 2002). In some cases, as with most of Africa, nativism is reinforced by what Betz (2019) refers to as 'nostalgic deprivation' or, in Mbembe's (2002b) view, a politics of loss of African purity or authenticity. In such cases, nativism serves as a 'project of self-regeneration' and buffering against re-subjugation, both in genuine terms and as an excuse.

The conceptual cousin to nativism is autochthony, which connotes claims to belonging based on ancestral

[3] http://village.africanpath.com/forum Viewed on 30th January 2010.

attachments to the soil (homelands) – original 'sons [and daughters] of the soil' (Ceuppens and Geschiere, 2005; Geschiere, 2009). Appeals to autochthony are often based on the estimation that it offers self-evident grounds for inclusion (and exclusion) and demanding for more citizenship rights. Because citizenship in Africa is still largely modeled along the colonial blue print that was built on ethnicity, autochthony is still very strong in Africa. As has been observed by Keller (2014), it is common to find two publics within African countries; the national and the subnational that is ethnic. One can be a national citizen, but a local stranger. Whereas at the national level, all are constitutionally proclaimed to hold the same citizenship rights, at subnational levels, rights often tend to be differentiated, with the autochthons having or claiming more than others (strangers). When this approach is projected onto a continental scene in Africa, autochthony tends to be tagged with blackness and territoriality.

As noted in the preceding section, in defining an African, some scholars base their criteria on a racial line, reducing African identity to the phenotype. The autochthonous argument is basically that each people have their own places of origin (homelands) which we ought to look at when defining or placing them in a given geography. In *Define and Rule*, Mamdani (2012) traces this tendency in Africa to colonial systems of administration (especially indirect rule), which divided people on the basis of race and tribe. Non-natives were categorised under races, while natives were put under tribes with the primary consideration being origin rather than residence. "By obscuring an entire history of migrations, the state portrayed the native as the product of geography rather than history" (Mamdani, 2012, p. 49). And "… non- natives were identified as such no matter how many generations they had lived in the area; no amount of time could erase the difference in origin" (Mamdani 2012, p. 51). Under such autochthonic criteria, therefore, Africa becomes a place for black Africans, who are its known indigenous peoples. This is exemplified in the tendency to consider North Africa as part of the Middle East rather than Africa. It subtly plays out during the World Football Cup; when teams like Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt are playing, there is often less enthusiasm in black Africa than seen with Cameroon, Nigeria, or Senegal.

Thus, as Mbembe (2002a) observes, nativist thinking is based on a unique African identity founded on membership in the black race. This line of argument was sometimes alluded to in some strands of Pan Africanism, especially Negritude, and in Steve Biko's Black Consciousness. Mbembe further explains the nativist approach to defining Africanness as one that:

> …defines the *native* and the *citizen* by identifying them with black people. In this mythology, blacks do not become citizens because they

> are human beings endowed with political rights, but because of two particularistic factors: their color and a privileged autochthony. Racial and territorial authenticity are conflated, and Africa becomes the land of black people. Since the racial interpretation is at the foundation of a restricted civic relatedness, everything that is not black is out of place, and thus cannot claim any sort of Africanity [thus whites cannot be Africans]. 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 color or ancestors is a brother or a sister (Mbembe 2002b, p. 256).

The processes that produce nativism have been variously explained, especially through primordialist and constructivist social identity theories. Primordialists attribute the group bond to a long history bound in kinship ties and shared stories of ancestry which hold members responsible for protecting the identity and interests of the group from others. Their explanation posts such identities as givens. For instance, Van den Berghe (1979) posits a biological basis for primordialism, arguing that humans have evolved a 'nepotism instinct' that bases on physical differences between people to form groups. As such, it is argued, that the groups built on such a basis are difficult to change because of the intense attachment and loyalty to the group (Coetzee, 2009).

On the other hand, constructivist social identity explanations hold that social reality is not given to us, and that group meanings are socially constructed. Constructivism pays particular attention to how identities are built over time in view of considerations such as material (economic), psychological, spiritual, or self-preservation (Brittain, 2006; Jeong, 2008). Nativist attachments are thus conceptualised as moves at asserting a group's identity and attendant claims in order to protect itself from threats from other groups. 'We-them' binaries are born out of such processes where by the outcomes are shaped by experiences, perceptions of the experiences, and the kind of mobilisation that might arise out of the contestations involved – sometimes with certain elite groups instrumentalising the differences for their own ends. Any group formation process involves drawing boundaries to demarcate those who are in and those who are out. Sometimes this process is triggered by fear of a common threat or "… a perception that the out-group wishes to increase its share of valued resources and statuses at the expense of the in-group" (Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2007, p. 80). This is vividly demonstrated by the process that has produced black (nativist) African solidarity – born out of resistance to colonial domination.

Over time, identities born out of such processes might grow to take expressions that make them appear

to be self-evident and essential to the group. While I am inclined towards constructivist social identity theory, I do not consider it to be incompatible with primordialism. Sometimes, identity construction builds on elements that are themselves given. For instance, how nativist definitions of Africanness ground on colour or how some groups could indeed have a common ancestry that becomes the basis of other attributes that are added along the process of consolidating their social identity.

The nativist mode of defining Africanness and its ramifications are well illustrated in the case of Soyinka versus Mazrui, analysed below.

The case of Ali Mazrui and Wole Soyinka

An exchange that ensued towards the end of the twentieth century between two of the greatest African scholars, Ali Mazrui and Wole Soyinka, following the former's release of a highly publicised documentary, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (Mazrui 1986), dramatically demonstrates the nativist thesis and its shortcomings. I will dwell on it at some length to draw out insights for this discussion. Soyinka's initial concern had been that Mazrui's analysis of the African condition was a "continuation of denigration against the African spiritual heritage" (Soyinka, 1991a, p.19). I will not go into the merits of the central discussion itself, but the side allusions that carried the day in a good debate gone vile. In the heated exchange that ensued, Soyinka referred to his category as '*we, black Africans with no hang-ups ...*' with the insinuation that Mazrui, whose roots are in the coastal Swahili Mazrui family with Arab blood links, is not African enough.

In his disturbed response, Mazrui asks sardonic questions that easily reveal the absurdity of a pure black conception of Africanness: "By all observable evidence, Ali Mazrui carries African genes. But how much? By what percentage? Is his hair not curly enough? Is he too brown? Not black enough? Is Ali Mazrui's nose not African enough?" (Mazrui 1992, p.136). But what would this mean for the many Angolans, Mozambicans, and South Africans of mixed blood? Ironically, Swahili, which is a mixture of Arabic and Bantu languages, is considered by many black Africans to be an African language.

Mazrui (2000) condemns this identity politics as championing 'racial purity' and 'racial bigotry', which are sisters to 'anti-Semitism'. He asks:

> … is it not enough that a near-70 year-old Ali Mazrui has been a patriotic African all his life? Is that insufficient? Are you insisting that what matters most about Mazrui is that his African blood is mixed with Arab blood, thereby making him less African or not an African at all? It is out of racist logic of this kind that such evils as ethnic cleansing and fascism are born. Do you want to be associated with such evils? … If purity of race is your basis for defining

> who is an African, why did you ever boycott apartheid South Africa? It pains me that your racial paradigm has a lot in common with the kind of society the white racists there were trying to create.

Drawing a parallel between nativism and Nazi anti-Semitism, Mazrui recounts that the Nazi holocaust gathered momentum with when Nazis embarked on a systematic programme of eliminating the Jews since they were unsatisfied whether or not German Jews were really German. In the comparison, Mazrui concludes that Soyinka's nativist line of argument is no different from the Nazis, for whom it was not enough that a 70 year-old German Jew had been a patriotic German all his or her life. What mattered was that he or she was a Jew.

For Soyinka, though, if race goes with cultural identity, then it is always important in contextualising one's worldview and belonging; by all means it cannot be ignored. He thus insists:

> Being part Arab is a fact of Mazrui's life, so why does he complain? Mazrui, however, is not just culturally Arabized, he is by both blood and vocal identification part Arab. Surely we who have listened to him proudly speak of his Arab lineage have a right to refer to it in a relevant context. How does this constitute a prejudice? We can propose, objectively, that Mazrui says this or does this because his cultural roots are also forged in the Arab hearth (Soyinka, 1991b, p.180).

It could still be asked, though, as we shall later see in the African-Indian case, if to be an African means shedding off all the identity marks of one's 'origin'. In this case, Mazrui is not expected to speak proudly of his Arab lineage. But even if one is culturally identified with the 'natives', how about the 'blood' element? Won't the inclusion criteria now shift to physical appearance and its geographical associations? Illustrating the absurdity of this identity politics, Mintsa has argued that "if everybody starts looking upon where his forebears came from and says: 'I am not from here, but rather from where my forebears had come', no one would have an identity, since even the forebears of your forebears must also have migrated from somewhere else" (Mintsa, 2007, p. 298). Relatedly, the other obvious difficulty in this becomes apparent if we tried, as by the moral instruction of Immanuel Kant in the Categorical Imperative (CI), to universalise this approach to belonging. The first formulation of the CI normatively provides that "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, 1895, in Kant, 1999, p. 73). If everyone were to go back to their place of origin, so many people worldwide would be rendered strangers in places they identify with and call home. Mintsa jokes that maybe we would all end up in the

'garden of Eden' (Mintsa, 2007, p. 298).

Putting Mazrui and Soyinka's exchange into our context, it becomes clearer that appealing to race to exclude someone from Africanness is of a racist inclination. I thus agree with Mbembe (2002a) that the sin of nativism is its inability to conceive of an Africanity that is not black or to conceive of the existence of Africans of European, Arab, or Asian origin. Comparatively, how different would it be from the claim that blacks of slave ancestry in America are either not Americans or Americans of a lower status?

Some autochthonous nativists like Blyden would argue that since the African geographical space constitutes the natural homeland of black people, those whom slavery has taken away from it must "return to the land of [their] fathers . . . and be at peace" (Blyden, 1967, p. 124), an option that is neither viable nor just for the black people in America. In creating a unique case, and perhaps rightly, for the blacks in America of African origin, some have argued that whites, Indians, and Arabs in Africa did not come to Africa 'kicking and screaming'. The blacks in America are thus a unique case because they were forcefully taken there and uprooted without the possibility of tracing for their homeland. It thus becomes only fair for them to either choose to stay where they were reestablished and take on the American identity or to choose to come back to Africa and procedurally establish themselves in some section of their ancestral continent. The claim to Africanness by black Americans would thus not be on the mere grounds of their being black, but a claim to a belonging from which they were violently alienated. But, by nativist standards, the other races in Africa that voluntarily pitched camp there do not qualify to share in Africanness. I will respond to this argument in the next section on what I have called cosmopolitan definitions.

Cosmopolitan Definitions

By cosmopolitan definitions, I mean those that approach Africanness from a pluralist, non-racial angle that takes into the account possibilities of living with difference. Under these, one's race would not necessarily count in establishing whether they are African or not. However, even under this definitional approach, there are some variations in what ought to be considered for one to be counted as African.

As highlighted earlier, one of the most popular definitions is that advanced by former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, in his speech (*I am an African*) on behalf of the African National Congress on the occasion of its adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill, 1996. He says that "the Constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that

our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender, or historical origins. It is a firm assertion made by ourselves that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white."

In his speech that has been contextualised within a wider 'African renaissance' project (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2010), it sounds like he so much ground on the history and furtherance of South Africa to construct an all-inclusive definition. There are a variety of races in South Africa, and many other parts of Africa too, that cannot be wished away. Some of these look at South Africa or Africa as their home with no other. Thus, Mbeki observes that a nativist definition of Africanness would be functionally problematic. Moreover, even if race was an acceptable boundary for inclusion and exclusion, as explored under the nativist definitions, some people he mentions, like the Malays and Indians, did not come at their wish.

In this category, in an online debate on whether there is such a thing as a white South African[4], some anonymous contributor gives a *prima facie* challenging analogy that "If my father threatens to beat me up or kill me … does that justify me to come and do the same to you, and then proceed to call your house mine". Let me refer to this as the 'oppressive refugee argument'. To this I would respond that, yes, it would be morally wrong of the refugee (of any sort) to subject his or her hosts to the conditions that led him or her to flee his or her own home, and it would be ethically justified for the host to defend themselves by sending away the refugee where they cannot reform. The refugee's claim to belonging would be intolerably antithetical to the host's. But this is not a sufficient case against the fact that people of races other than black can be Africans. Not all non-blacks have been oppressive to blacks, and even of those that were oppressive, 'not all' of them have resisted change towards cooperation and harmonious living with blacks. The 'oppressive refugee argument' therefore, if not a deliberate excuse, falls into the trap of the fallacy of hasty generalisation. Of the 'disciplined' refugee, it would be every human being's moral obligation to give home where it is within their means.

Similarly, some who came voluntarily (and perhaps with undesirable motives) have settled through generations and have no home but South Africa. Some are innocent descendants that may not be loaded with the burden of the sins of their parents and grandparents. As noted by Wende (2004), the long years of white colonial rule and the destruction of traditional ethnic identities have distorted the notion of an 'African self', but in its search for a new, 21st-Century way of belonging, the continent cannot afford to ignore the multiple truths of individual lives." There is an apparent irony of reverse racism here. Whereas colonial administrators constructed

[4] From http://www.topix.com/forum/world/south-africa/T8RMQ036BT7HJTRJ6 viewed on 3rd March 2009.

citizenship in terms of race, with the settlers as citizens and natives as subjects, nativist postcolonial nationalism uses the same card in reverse. While claiming back black belonging, the rest are othered. It could be argued that since Africanness was appropriated as a self-asserting response to anti-black racism, the claimants retained the self-entitling residual feeling that it was for blacks.

The case of Africans of Indian origin

The cosmopolitan approach brings to mind, among others, the often emotive debate concerning the citizenship and Africanness of people of Indian origin in African countries. Citing examples from Kenya, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Uganda, Cote d`Ivoire, and Ghana, Ng'weno and Aloo (2019) observe that notwithstanding the racially neutral language of the constitutions, some groups of people of foreign origin still find their citizenship status uncertain.

Let us consider the following illustrative conversation between Wende (a white African BBC correspondent) and Jean-Paul (a black Rwandese soldier) about whether Indians living in Africa are Africans. Unlike Wende, who insisted that they had their place just like anyone else in Africa, Jean-Paul insisted that they were not. Jean-Paul's argument was that "Whenever things go wrong, they get up and leave. They never stay when things are bad… I don't see how they can say they belong to Africa if they don't share our hardships" (Wende, 2004). This is a problematic criterion of exclusion. First of all, it may not be true that all of them flee. Some actually have no ties outside Africa. Second, even if it were important whether all African-Indians (could/would) flee, there are also quite a number of 'indigenous' Africans who flee for safety into other countries outside Africa. By the same criteria, would these also be excluded from the African category? Both the criterion itself and its generalisation are problematic.

We could apply Jean-Paul's argument to those who look to Africa with an exclusively economic utility, whose claim to Africanness ceases when their economic prospects in Africa become hopeless. But this too collapses when we consider that even some black Africans have made home in foreign places they have found to be homelier, identifying as Britons, Americans, Europeans, etc. Belonging operates at different levels. Whereas some people emotively attach to places that cannot provide for their existential needs, for some, belonging is inseparably connected to survival and therefore they would look for such a conducive place to call home. Others will seek economic and personal survival while passionately remaining in close attachment to their identity of origin or choice.

However, the argument appears to be that if one is not black or native, then they are expected to do more to prove their qualification for Africanness. In Uganda, some Indian

families came as far back as the 1890s as labour during the construction of the East African Railway, when Uganda was still a British Protectorate. Over a century later, their descendants are still Indians in the minds of many black Ugandans, and perhaps in the minds of some of them.

In 2007, when the Ugandan government had proposed to give part of one of the biggest natural forests in central Uganda (Mabira) to a Ugandan-Indian mogul to grow sugarcane, in the protests that followed, one of the chants was 'go back to India'. Their case was not helped by the fact that they tend to be closed in marriage and other cultural expressions. One of their recent responses to being othered was to request to be added to the list of Ugandan 'tribes'. This had started in neighbouring Kenya earlier, leading to their official recognition as the 44th tribe in 2017. Following the event, Zain Verjee, one of the Kenyan Indians, said:

> Others have seen it as a demonstration of Kenya's unhealthy obsession with indigenous identities and an extension of its warped tribal politics. For me, as a Kenyan Asian woman, it means I'm now -- finally -- a first-class citizen in my country… Our new status has placed us on equal footing with the other tribes in this land. I'm no longer simply a "Muindi", Swahili for Asian [Indian]. Today I don't need to justify how Kenyan I am (Verjee, 2017)[5].

This project comes forth as a response to the ethnic nature of citizenship in many African countries, mostly as a legacy of colonial administrative structures (Mamdani 1996; Ngw'eno and Aloo, 2019). There is a clear nativist delineation of access to certain citizenship privileges on account of indigeneity. In the Third Schedule of Uganda's Constitution (1995), Uganda's ethnic groups are listed, considering those that had native provenance in Uganda by February 1, 1926. For one to qualify to stand for president, at least one of their parents should belong to one of the listed groups, of which Ugandan-Indians are not included. While Barundi (Burundians) and Banyarwanda (Rwandese), some of whom migrated into Uganda in the 1950s, are included on the list, after over a century of existence in the country, the Indians are not!

Considering the derogatory roots of the notion 'tribe' (Mafeje, 1975), one might be surprised that groups of people are still demanding to be recognised as tribes. What we note here though is that, apart from the fact that the concept has been normalised in many parts of Africa, being recognised as a Ugandan or Kenyan 'tribe' is a legitimising gesture of enhancing citizenship within a nativist state. But since African identity is not necessarily acquired through

[5] https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/04/africa/kenya-asian-community/index.html Viewed on 15th November 2019.

legal citizenship, it is still possible in nativist frames that one becomes a citizen of an African country but not be regarded as an African, even though they were completely cut off from their place of origin.

In this politics of recognition, it is important to look at how some of the natives responded in Kenya, and later in Uganda. Many said that the Indians cannot be an African tribe (and, by extension, not Africans), yet they have no territory (homeland) in Africa (Tacca, 2019; Kibudde, 2019), and do not even allow intermarriage with other Ugandans and retain their links to India. In other words, since they are not natives, they had something more to prove in order to be included. Yet still, as I noted earlier, even if they proved to be immersed in African reality, their physical appearance would keep them outside the native boundary when the race card proves handy in other contestations. In Uganda, the offspring of Indian-native Ugandan relationships are referred to as Kyotara, and they are still regarded as being more Indians and not really Africans. Both their colour and lack of an ethnic homeland exclude them, even in some cases where they have tried to assimilate. Therefore, practically, intermarriage does not necessarily dissolve the boundary.

It is indeed an important gesture for pluralism to intermarry with each other (Ssentongo 2015). But would this be a *conditio sine qua non* for being allowed into a national or continental identity? On the other hand, should closed communities be accepted under the gesture of respecting diversity? This is a more complex question beyond the scope of this paper. But what is clear is that the nativist argument, whereas politically appealing in the context of how Africanness has been historically constructed, is a recipe for racism and xenophobic exclusion. The cosmopolitan arguments, while relatively more tenable, are limited by their inability to accommodate the residual phenotypical pan-African attachment to Africanness as a rallying identity for racial solidarity in response to challenges that black Africans still face on account of being black.

Conclusion

I have highlighted the dynamics that have chararacterised the construction of Africanness as a political identity, and how it survives and repackages itself in the face of new realities long after some of the circumstances that produced it. From the above discussion, it can be clearly observed that the nativist definition of African identity that foregrounds colour and possession of ethnic homelands is functionally problematic since sooner or later it breeds racism and xenophobia. It does not provide room for the inclusion of those who, for one legitimate reason or another, fall outside its phenotypical boundaries. It also fails to cater for contemporary phenomena of migration and intermarriage. As an identity that has

been under construction in response to political needs at different points in time, Africanness should still be open to change to suit new realities. The challenge, though, is that some of the identity challenges in response to which the bonding identity was born in resistance to domination and subjugation are still prevalent. Therefore, the identity still plays a political function in mobilising solidarity in the face of imperial and racist suppression. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan definition builds on stronger grounds that de-racialise Africanness by shifting attention to citizenship and co-existence in difference. The challenge though is that the concept of citizenship, in its spatial reference, is narrower than Africanness. As such, in African politics of recognition, one can acquire legal status as a citizen of a particular country, yet still face forms of exclusion and discrimination constructed around their not being African. Africanness is not an identity provided by law, but by trans-legal social dynamics above nation-state infrastructure. In fact, one could argue that the concept of 'African' can be done away with without losing anything essential. However, knowing that it still widely carries emotive appeal constructed from its history, it cannot simply be wished away or abandoned as a vocabulary.

Asked why he considered himself an African, Professor Yolanda Sadie of the University of Johannesburg (then) answered that "I am an African because I was born here, I live in Africa, and I have an emotional attachment and loyalty to Africa and I don't have any alternative place to go" (Motsoene, 2009). Though not a perfect depiction, this definition bears a number of important elements to build on. One may not necessarily be born in Africa to be African, they may not even have an emotional attachment to Africa, and may even be having an alternative place to go but still be African. The point is that it may not be easy to arrive at a simple definition or to precisely highlight what should define an African, and this paper does not seek to do so. Rather, I show that it is a humongous political identity, fluid and of multiple meanings in today's circumstances beyond the explicit bonds it denoted during colonial appropriation, anti-colonial struggles, and the early years of independence. The process of its construction is still ongoing, mostly at a spontaneous level. It can be guided and socialised towards pluralism to avoid violent exclusive expressions, but it may not be dictated what it should mean to individuals.

For other races whose origins is are from other continents, one may say, as I said before, that they should be having emotional attachment and loyalty to the continent, but does it mean that if they lack this criterion, they cease being African? If the criterion to be born in Africa; how about those of indigenous parents but born and raised outside Africa? And if a native African has Canada as an alternative place to go; does it

make him/her less/non-African? The answers to all these questions do not come easily, but the questions open us to more reflection about what we often take for granted, and to more nuanced implications of the meanings we choose. A 'continental' definition of self inevitably becomes more complicated with increased intercontinental contact, mobility, intermarriage, and citizenship-based claims. Even as a cultural identity, Africanness can no longer adequately accommodate the diverse expressions of black people alone. However, the concept is still of psycho-political importance in carrying the residual common historical legacies, neocolonial commonalities, and continental experiences of blackness. The challenge is how to sustain the above function without relapsing into mobilisation in essentialist racist exclusionary terms. The key contribution of this paper is in its invitation to appreciate the conceptual and practical complexities in conventional notions of Africanness and to call our attention to the socio-political implications inherent in nativist and cosmopolitan framings. This can provide a basis for further reflection on how we ought to construct Africanness in view of the changing realities of the continent.

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