The Inventions of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications

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1. Introduction

African identities, like African languages, are inventions, mutually constitutive existential and epistemic constructions. Invention implies a history, a social process; it denaturalizes cultural artifacts and practices, stripping them of primordial authenticity and essentialism. This is predictable coming from a historian, a field that investigates and invests the past with meaning, seeks to unravel the complex and often contradictory ebbs and flows of human institutions, inventions, ideas, and imaginations, in which change, often messy and unpredictable in its causes and consequences, is the only constant. Flagging my disciplinary affiliation is another way of trying to save myself from embarrassment in this gathering of eminent linguists, to tell you that while I know something about history, I know very little about linguistics, so you will have to forgive my uninformed remarks.

I have entitled my talk "The Invention of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications." I will begin by discussing the challenges of defining "Africa" because that affects, in considerable measure, how we identify and analyze African identities and languages, which in turn, has discursive and developmental implications. The term "invention" has become rather ubiquitous in African studies ever since the publication of Mudimbe's renowned book, *The Invention of Africa*.[1] For us historians, the signal intervention came with Terence Ranger's influential essay, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa."[2] The advent of the "posts"—postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcoloniality—further reinforced the constructivist view of social processes and practices. The term "development" enjoys an even more powerful presence in African studies and public policy; it constitutes the unyielding imperative by which all intellectual, institutional, and ideological prescriptions are judged.

My argument is quite simple. It is that Africa is exceedingly difficult to define, which makes many academic and popular discourses of African identities and languages quite problematic. The idea of "Africa" is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that extrapolations of "African" culture, identity or nationality, in the singular or plural, any explorations of what makes "Africa" "African," are often quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. Describing and defining "Africa" and all tropes prefixed by its problematic commandments entails engaging discourses about "Africa," the paradigms and politics through which the idea of "Africa" has been constructed and consumed, and sometimes celebrated and condemned.

I argue that Africa is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries—geographical, historical, cultural, and representational—have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including Pan-Africanism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the maps and meanings of "Africa" and "Africanness" are being reconfigured by both the processes of contemporary globalization and the projects of African integration. The subject of African identities, therefore, is as vast and complex as the continent itself. Needless to say, there are numerous perspectives on these, but it is possible, indeed, imperative for analytical purposes, to categorize them. One can think of religious, ecological, linguistic, and even ethnic taxonomies. I have chosen four that seem to me to capture a wide range of constructions of Africa: Africa as biology, as image, as space, as memory, that is, African identities as mapped in racial, representational, geographical, or historical terms. There are of course no discursive

Chinese walls separating the four typologies, nor do they exhaust other possible categorizations, but they do have heuristic value. The presentation, then, begins by focusing on the racial, representational, geographical, and historical conceptions of African identities,[3] then it examines the challenges of conceptualizing African languages in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

2. Constructions of Africa

There are at least seven origins of the term Africa, all of foreign derivation, which prompted Wole Soyinka, in a speech at the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) to express misgivings with the word "Africa" and all its descriptive associations.[4] As an act of self-definition, he proposed the adoption of terms for Africa and African rooted in an indigenous language, preferably Abibirim and Abibiman from Akan. Soyinka sought to capture the alterity of Africa's naming, but his rhetorical gauntlet was not picked up, perhaps because it was evident to many that he was striking at straws, ignoring the historically transmogrified meanings and the agency of Africans to appropriate and modify and shape words and terms to their own purposes. Soyinka's semiotic nationalism was strange coming from the great man of letters who relished his mastery over English and who had done so much to enrich the language and liberate it from its European provenance. Behind his cry of anguish lay an ontological demand, that Africa be coded "black," confined to the "sub-Saharan" zone, a designation that is common both within and outside the continent, as we shall presently see.

The problematic and politics of Africa's naming raise an important question: is there a materiality behind the name, a reality that is distinctive from other realities encapsulated in the monikers of, say, Asia or Europe? Or is it all a discursive fantasy, an unstable and ambivalent sign that cannot provide a foundational basis for an identity, an invention prey to and prime for deconstruction as some postcolonialists are wont to do. But the fact that something was socially constructed—virtually every aspect of human life since we evolved from the hominids—or invented elsewhere does not mean it is not "real." The pages of history drip with blood shed over invented identities. Indeed, African historians have long known about the invention of "Africa" as a "sign" with multiple and conflicted spatial, political, and cultural referents, but that has never stopped them from writing about "Africa" as an organic spatio-temporal configuration.

Clearly, there is little agreement on the sources and original meanings of the word "Africa." More certain is the fact that the term started to be used widely from Roman times to refer initially to North Africa, originally called by the Greek or Egyptian word "Libya," before it was extended to the whole continent from the end of the first century before our era. In this sense, then, Africa was a European imperial construct whose cartographic application was both gradual and contradictory in that as the name embraced the rest of the continent it increasingly came to be divorced from its original North African coding and became increasingly confined to the regions referred to in Eurocentric and sometimes Afrocentric conceptual mapping as "sub-Saharan Africa," seen as the pristine locus of the real Africa.

The divorce of North Africa may have started with the Arab invasions in the seventh century, but it got its epistemic and ideological imprimatur with the emergence of Eurocentricism following the rise of modern Europe, which for Africa entailed, initially and destructively, the Atlantic slave trade, out of which came the forced migration of millions of Africans and the formation of African diasporas that appropriated and popularized the name Africa and through whom Africa became increasingly racialized. Far less clear is when the appropriation of Africa, as a self-defining identity, occurred in the various regions and among the innumerable societies that make up this vast continent.

The conflation of Africa with "sub-Saharan Africa," "Africa South of the Sahara" or "Black Africa" so common in discourses about Africa ultimately offers us a racialized view of Africa, Africa as biology, as the "black" continent. It rests on the metaphysics of difference, a quest for the civilizational and cultural ontology of blackness. For G.W.F. Hegel and his intellectual descendants Africa was the ultimate "undeveloped, unhistorical" other of Europe. Hegel's "Africa proper," to use his divisive and dismissive phrase, is a truncated monstrosity, "the land of childhood," from which North Africa and especially Egypt is excised and attached to Europe, and where history, philosophy and culture are "enveloped in the dark mantle of night" because its inhabitants, "the Negro exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state."[5]

Hegel's ghost still stalks African studies and can be sighted in the special vocabulary of disparity and disparagement to describe African phenomena, in the agonizing and often grotesque searches for either African difference or authenticity, in Africa's absence from disciplinary canons and the ordinariness of humanity and world affairs. To be sure, the language of race is now shunned by both Hegel's descendants and their adversaries, leaving the enduring abridged and racialized cartography of "sub-Saharan Africa" to serve as proxy. The diminution and racialization of Africa is of course not confined to western scholars. Many African scholars, some of impeccable progressive credentials, also subscribe to it. The epistemological fixation with "black Africa" is so insidious that few remark on it, and when they do they are forced into performing agonizing intellectual acrobatics, often invoking a mystical cultural unity.

Unlike Hegel, of course, many African scholars seek to invest, not divest, "sub-Saharan" Africa with history and intellectual agency. But it is a limited maneuver for it reproduces Hegel's cultural mapping of Africa, in which "Africa proper" excludes North Africa because of the region's purported extra-continental connections and Arabness, itself constructed in racialized terms despite the invocation of culture. The characterization of North Africa as exclusively Arab erases the history of the peoples and cultures that existed in the region long before the coming of the Arabs and Islam and the subsequent creation of complex creolized cultures.

Attempts at explicating the "cultural unity" of "sub-Saharan Africa" often sound, at least to a historian like me, mystical. Unless culture is coded in skin color, the homogeneity or heterogeneity of cultural practices in Africa, or elsewhere for that matter, should not be assumed a priori in so far as these are historical processes. Take language and religion, two critical attributes of culture: the Hausa of West Africa had more in common with their neighbors to the North than with the Zulu of South Africa with whom they had no intensive and sustained contacts despite the affinities of skin color. The Hausa and their neighbors in North Africa traded with each other for centuries, shared religion— Islam—and a script—Arabic—and their languages are part of the Afro-Asiatic family. This familiar material, moral and mental universe should count for something, certainly more than melanin.

One of the great contributions of the "posts" is the insistence that identities are invented. V. Y. Mudimbe's seminal work has mapped out this discursive process for Africa. In The Invention of Africa he interrogates the construction of Africa through Eurocentric categories and conceptual systems, from anthropology and missionary discourses to philosophy, an order of knowledge constituted in the sociohistorical context of colonialism, which produced enduring dichotomies between Europe and Africa, investing the latter's societies, cultures, and bodies with the representational marginalities or even pathologies of alterity.[6] He is sharply critical of the subservience of African intellectuals to western ideologies and epistemologies, and he urges them to commit epistemic patricide of the impostor European fathers in order to rupture Africa's blockage. In *The Idea of Africa*, Mudimbe seeks to demonstrate that conquering Western narratives, beginning with Greek stories about Africa, through the colonial library, to contemporary postmodernist discourses, have radically silenced or converted African discourses. African intellectuals, he argues, have been reacting to this ethnocentric epistemological order, itself subject to the mutations of Western material, methodological, and moral grids, with varying degrees of epistemic domestication and defiance, in the process of which Africa's identity and difference have been affirmed, denied, inverted, and reconstituted.[7]

One of the most important aspects of Africa's representation lies not in its invention per se, a phenomenon that is by no means confined to the continent (think of "Asia" and the "Americas" and "Europe" itself and indeed the origins of the names of numerous nations and ethnic groups), but in the fact that Africa is always imagined, represented and performed as a reality or a fiction in relation to master references—Europe, Whiteness, Christianity, Literacy, Development, Technology (the comparative and colonizing tropes mutate continuously)—mirrors that reflect, indeed refract Africa in peculiar ways, reducing the continent to particular images, to a state of lack.

Some postcolonialists denounce the use of "race" as a biological determinism that should have no place in Africanist scholarship while affirming the possibilities of forging a common African identity. Kwame Appiah is perhaps the most renowned proponent of this critique in his book, *In My Father's House*.[8] Appiah seeks to demolish essentialist conceptions of Africa and demonstrate that Africa is not a primordial fixture, but an invented reality, and Africans are not molded from the same clay of racial and cultural homogeneity. This is a celebration of the diversity, complexity, richness, hybridity and

contingency of African identities and social and cultural life, mounted to challenge the totalizing narratives of both African nationalism and European imperialism with their dualistic and polarized representations. As compelling as his analysis appears, on race Appiah beats a dead horse: we all know biology has disowned race, that racial ideologies have no scientific basis, but we also know from painful experience that race remains a powerful social reality with material consequences.

More importantly, there is a paradox in the text in that when he tries to compare the different roles of religion and the modes of thought in what he calls the traditional oral cultures of Africa and the industrialized literate cultures of the West, the comparisons drip with a fundamental tension rooted in a binary conception of African "orality" and European "literacy." This is a problematic formulation, not only because he draws his African examples largely from one culture, Asante, but the conflation of orality with Africa and literacy with Europe is simply false, for there were African societies that were literate long before the imposition of European colonial rule. Moreover, the two, orality and literacy, do not necessary mark sequential stages; as several scholars have amply demonstrated there has always been a dialogic interaction between them.[9]

These discourses of Africa are rooted in the "colonial library." They ignore in particular what Mamadou Diouf calls the "'Islamic library' which has a longer history and a broader demographic and cultural scope."[10] As Bachir Diagne has argued, "for Muslim scholars the Saharan desert was not the wall Hegel supposed as they would travel the Islamic world, North Africa, Egypt, Arabia, for intellectual purposes, often taking the opportunity of the pilgrimage to Mecca to do so. There is today a need to assess the importance of a written tradition of African philosophy in Arabic and in Ajami, that is in African languages using Arabic script."[11] A similar point has been made by Hélèn Tissières with reference to the expressive culture and the creative arts that there are deep historical connections between societies to the north and south of the Sahara, characterized by mutual influences, borrowings, exchanges, transcriptions and translations, mediated by shared ancient practices and Islam, and the experiences of colonization and the challenges of postcolonial transformation.[12]

If we dispense with the epistemic racialization of Africa that African identities are expressions of the ontology of "blackness," we are left with the notions of Africa as geography and as history, Africa as a spatiotemporal construct, at once a process, product and a project of a complex and contradictory historical geography. The concept of historical geography, sitting at the intersection of two disciplines, allows us to combine the spatial and temporal interests of geography and history, to understand that the physical environment and human agency are mutually constitutive, that people's creativity and thought produce places as much as places produce people's cultures and identities, in short, that landscapes are not only important aspects of culture, they are products of historical processes.

No one can of course deny that a geographical entity called "Africa" exists, but for some this is merely a cartographic reality, not a cultural one, an exercise in mapping devoid of experiential meaning for the peoples that have lived within the continent's porous borders. They would be right if the argument were that Africa's peoples have always been conscious of living in a place called "Africa." Clearly, they have not, no more than people who are today called "Asians" or "Europeans" have always had such a spatial consciousness. Historically, local spatial identities, encapsulated and articulated in ethnic, regional, and national terms, have been far more important, while broader (continental) spatial imaginaries have tended to develop as the processes of globalization, understood here to mean the expanding circuits of trans-regional connectedness, have grown in extensity and intensity.

Thus, in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there is a hierarchy of spatial identities that are interwoven and interactive in complex ways engendering multiple cultural identities. Space and the spatial stage and contextualize cultures, economies, and politics, and invent and inscribe places and landscapes with ethical, symbolic and aesthetic meanings. Spaces as experiential sites are socially produced and they produce the social, that is, in as much as space is socially constructed the social is spatially constructed, too, for all social phenomena, identities, activities and relations have a spatial form and a relative spatial location. "'Space' is created," argues Doreen Massey, "out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global."[13] Space, then, is not a static and passive template of social existence, but an active, constitutive force of the social's very composition and construction. Space and spatiality are complex and articulated material, cultural, symbolic, and discursive formations that structure and are simultaneously structured by historical change.

Seen in this way, then, the multiple mappings of Africa are indeed to be expected. The numerous peoples and societies that have carved out a place of their own across this vast continent have, in a sense, been creating their little Africas, each laying their bricks across the huge and intricate cartographic, cognitive, and cultural construct known as "Africa." A geographical conception of Africa, therefore, does not need the existence of racial solidarity or the invention of cultural homogeneity. But this is not an empty cartographic vessel either in so far as the diverse cultures and identities that have emerged and have yet to emerge, have been and will continue to be shaped by the mapping and materiality of Africa as an ever changing spatial entity and social construct.

The map of Africa, as with all maps, entails many things. Maps are not simply representations of the geographical world. A map is, as Woodward and Lewis argue in their massive global history of cartography, simultaneously a cognitive system, a material culture, and a social construction. They speak of "cognitive or mental cartography," "performance or ritual cartography," and "material or artifactual cartography."[14] As recent studies on indigenous cartography in Africa demonstrate, all three have been employed by Africa's various peoples to map, name, and claim their landscapes, stretched over varying scales of expansiveness. In the nineteenth century, many European explorers solicited and used some of these maps to produce their own maps.[15]

The European mapping of Africa was implicated with imperialism both directly and indirectly, directly in that mapmaking facilitated the voyages of exploration and colonization, and indirectly in so far as it was part of the ideological architecture of inscribing European nationalisms at home and forging collective European grandeur globally: from Mercator's projection, still widely used today, tiny Europe was inflated in size and massive Africa was dwarfed. It was almost as if Africa' civilizational diminution had to be accompanied by a cartographic one. Upon this shriveled "blank darkness" Europe sought to write its cartographic and epistemic will, dividing the continent into colonies, themselves further splintered into allegedly primordial and antagonistic ethnic enclaves, a cognitive mapping sanctioned by the structuralist-functionalist paradigms of anthropology, the premier colonial science.

Against the "tribalization" of Africa and African cultures and identities by the colonial administration and colonial anthropology, which were contested by local circuits of exchange, movement and interaction, there emerged the countervailing elite paradigms, politics and projections of Pan-Africanism, the progenitor of the numerous territorial nationalisms in Africa. As an ideological, intellectual, and institutional formation Pan-Africanism embodied within itself conflicting tendencies and imaginaries of Africa, premised on racial, spatial, and ideological constructs. I argue elsewhere that there are at least six versions of Pan-Africanism: transatlantic, Black Atlantic, continental, sub-Saharan, Pan-Arab, and global.[16]

Each of these Pan-Africanisms developed its own advocates, discourses and movements, but it could be argued that in organizational terms for most African leaders and intellectuals trans-Atlantic Pan-Africanism predominated in the first half of the twentieth century, while continental Pan-Africanism assumed ascendancy from the second half as decolonization accelerated. The formation of the Organization of African Unity in 1963 was a triumph for continental Pan-Africanism and a setback for trans-Atlantic Pan-Africanism. It entailed a remapping of Africa, the creation and consumption of new national, regional, and continental maps, which were produced, performed, and internalized everywhere from schools, the media, and academic and political conferences, to international forums where regional blocs assumed representational identities. In 2001, the OAU gave way to the African Union, which despite all its political and structural shortcomings marked a new milestone in the history of continental Pan-Africanism, of imagining Africa as a cohesive cartographic, cognitive, and conceptual unit.

In short, "Africa" the map and the place was becoming increasingly "Africa" the idea and the consciousness, buttressed by an intricate web of continental institutions. By the beginning of the 21st century, "Africa" was perhaps more "African" than it had ever been in its history, i.e., more interconnected through licit and illicit flows of commodities, capital, ideas, and people, not to mention multilateral conflicts and ecological and health panics, and more conscious of its collective identity in the global panorama and hierarchy of regional identities. The historical geography of "Africa" had been stretched and deepened despite, on the one hand the centrifugal push of spatial and social identities within the continent itself, and on the other the centripetal pull of contemporary globalization

and its glocalization effects—its tendency to simultaneously internationalize and localize identities and cultures—and the enduring seductions of extra-continental alliances for some regions and countries.

From the discussion above it is evident that I conceive Africa and African identities both as states of being and of becoming. They are dynamic historical processes, messy spatio-temporal configurations of agency, structure and contextuality that are subject to change, which is not always easy to perceive or predict. Historians have been in the forefront of constructing Africa as a coherent and complex object of study, investing the continent with a distinctive civilizational identity. They were among the first to take up the Eurocentric lie that Africa was a continent and Africans were a people "without history," an indictment intended to devalue their humanity.

The pivotal and central role of historians is precisely to propose a space, an axis to locate and make sense of the human experience, politically, socially, culturally, and economically. By the end of the twentieth century, they had produced a phenomenal amount of scholarship, invented and refined methodologies of research, and excavated the histories of African polities, societies, economies, cultures, and environments from the onerous weight of Eurocentric derision and Afrocentric romanticism. The publication of the UNESCO and Cambridge histories of Africa, each in eight thick volumes, marked the apotheosis of this spectacular scholarly achievement.[17] To be sure, there is much one can criticize about African historiography, methodologically and theoretically.

Nevertheless, the fact remain that in postcolonial Africa, history dethroned anthropology as the premier human science. The latter underwent a moment of epistemic, ethical and political crisis as it tried to rescue itself from its discredited colonial complicity. As it slowly renewed itself anthropology became more historical, more global, and more reflexive, so that even if the ethnographic method retained its foundational supremacy and the romance with the "local" persisted, African cultures were increasingly expanded in scale, time, and connectedness to each other and to international cultural flows in the process of which they lost some of their timelessness, essentialism, and exoticism, and Africans could at last begin to escape from the suffocating confines of stable and static "traditional," "kinship," and "lineage" systems and identities.

Neither historians nor anthropologists have been anxious to propose general classifications of African cultures and identities, regarding that as an exercise in futility especially in these postal times. But there are of course more courageous intellectual souls who have not shied away from proposing the defining trajectories of African history in general, and African identities and cultures in particular. Perhaps the most comprehensive and controversial model is the one proposed by Ali Mazrui, the notion of the triple heritage, that the African world is constituted by the confluence of three civilizations: the indigenous (traditional), Western (Christianity), and Arabic (Islam).[18]

The three forces apparently exhibit enormous variations in their spatial, temporal and social manifestations. But the journey in Mazrui's gnosis seems not to be towards the harmonious and universal synthesis of the Negritude writers and philosophers, who posited a duality between Africa and Europe, reason and emotion, materialism and morality, humanity and nature, out of whose dialectical encounters and reconciliation a universal civilization would be forged.[19] Rather it is towards a triumphant resurgence and reclamation of Africa's cultural spaces by tradition and Islam.

Mazrui did not invent the trilateralist view of African cultures and identities. The idea can be traced back to the work of Edward Blyden, for whom the modern "African personality," as he called it, was formed and would flourish out of the organic integration of the best elements from indigenous culture, Islam, and European science and Christianity.[20] Kwame Nkrumah further elaborated on Blyden's notion of the "African personality" in his concept of consciencism, a cultural and cognitive synthesis between the humanistic and socialist ethos of "traditional" Africa; the acquisitive capitalist values and redemptive Christian hopes of the "West," and the holistic secular and spiritual precepts of Islam.[21] Forged out of this crucible, the "African personality" would emerge, modern, assured, and liberated, ready to take its rightful place in the world.

Nkrumah has been faulted for not giving the "traditional" and Islamic legacies the kind of serious analysis accorded the western one in his book, *Consciencism*. Part of some critics' unease with Nkrumah's schema is based on doubts that there indeed exists an exclusive and distinctive African traditional culture or a homogeneous African cultural universe. The same critique has been leveled against Mazrui, who has been attacked for what some regard as his evident partiality to Islam as the more benevolent force than the Euro-Christian and indigenous parts of the triad. In his withering

critique of Mazrui's television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Soyinka accused Mazrui of denigrating indigenous religions and cultures, a charge Mazrui vigorously denied.[22]

The Mazrui-Soyinka debate may have acquired some of its vitriolic force from the clash of gigantic intellectual egos, but it does underscore the unresolved issues and stakes in contemporary definitions of "Africa" and "Africanness." Both Soyinka and Mazrui do not historicize the moral, societal, and cultural values that constitute African identities. Their ethnographic notions of tradition are problematic; they ignore the sedimentations of exchanges, adaptations, inventions, and changes that the traditions in question, whether seen positively or negatively, have undergone. Often forgotten in these debates, it seems to me, are several basic questions, such as: how foreign, indeed, are Christianity and Islam to Africa, for example? As histories of both religions clearly indicate, Christianity and Islam were implanted in certain parts of Africa almost at their inception and Africans made significant doctrinal contributions to both religions, long before they were introduced to many parts of Europe and Asia where they are considered "indigenous," "traditional," or at least their "foreign" pedigree is not always emphasized.

This is to suggest that while the notion of the "triple heritage" highlights the diverse sources of African identities and cultures and seeks to capture the complex streams that have flowed into their making, it flirts with an essentialized and ahistorical notion of a primordial Africa, a "real Africa," that somehow exists alongside external cultural diffusions, a narrative that is quite reminiscent of the misguided Hegelian search for "Africa proper." The inadequacies of the Blyden-Nkrumah-Mazrui cultural typologies do not mean that all attempts at creating such schemas are mistaken or doomed. Typologies or conceptual categories are essential to intellectual analysis, for clarifying complex social phenomena. Difficulties often arise when the categories cease to be explanatory devices sensitive to human agency, social structure, and spatiotemporal contexts and begin to wallow in their own transcendental magnificence.

3. Constructions of African Languages

Clearly, African identities and all their constitutive elements, including language are, in their construction and composition, historical and heterogeneous. They are braided from different threads of memory and meaning that contain within them the possibilities of mutation into new configurations. Searches for a primordial and pristine Africa, an authentic African cultural self awaiting retrieval and renewal beneath the contaminations of foreign cultural exchanges and invasions are often motivated by nationalist angst and they are almost invariably ideological. Projections or prescriptions of a singular African identity often sit ill with the existence of multiple African languages. In fact, the multiplicity of African languages is often seen as the bane of African unity whether at the national, regional or continental level. But linguistic diversity, in itself, like ethnic diversity, need not be a problem; it becomes a problem under specific conditions.

Two inter-related language questions have preoccupied postcolonial Africa: what to do about the proliferation of African languages and what to do about the predominance of European languages. Sometimes the first is used to justify the second when the argument is made that too many African languages impede national unity and the European languages provide a neutral alternative. Central to the contestation between the colonial and indigenous languages is the question of capacity, their respective capacities to carry the weight of Africa's social thought and modernist dreams, to act as communicative media for African culture and aspirations for scientific and material development. The protagonists swear on the superiority of their preferred languages. The arguments range from the epistemological to the pragmatic, and so those in support of the European languages see them as instrumental for nation-building and globalization. They find fault with African languages for their apparent lack of scientific and technical vocabulary, or they see their very multiplicity as an impracticable and costly obstacle.

The proponents of the African languages invoke ontological and epistemological arguments, duly buttressed with the rhetoric and rage of cultural nationalism, that language is the carrier of a people's culture, it embodies their system of ethics and aesthetics, and it is a media for producing and consuming knowledge, a granary of their memories and imaginations. Ngugi wa Thiongo is perhaps the best known advocate for African languages among African writers and intellectuals.[23] He has argued consistently that the African intelligentsia has a historic responsibility to promote and

modernize their languages. Historical analogies are often summoned for support, that the currently dominant languages of Western Europe were once seen as provincial and primitive vernaculars, or that Japan and the economic tigers of South East Asia modernized by importing western techniques not tastes, by supporting not surrendering their languages.

Others such as Kwesi Prah challenge the very notion of Africa as a Tower of Babel, that Africa has hundreds if not thousands of mutually unintelligible languages. According to the project on the Classification of African Languages on the Basis of Mutual Intelligibility conducted by Prah's Center for Advanced Studies of African Society, "over 80 percent of Africans speak no more than twelve key languages (clusters that enjoy 85 percent mutual intelligibility.... The linguistic landscape of contemporary Africa is complicated by the fact that, many African speech-forms and dialects have been rendered into writing by rival missionary groups which have elevated some dialects to the status of full-blown languages. To undo the mess arising out of this situation requires systematic orthographic engineering which fortunately has commenced."[24]

In the realm of education it has often been pointed out that children learn better in their mother tongues than in foreign languages. Writing in 1991, Eyamba Bokamba noted that Francophone African countries that maintained the French colonial language policy and its legacies in education had higher rates of illiteracy and wastage than their Aglophone counterparts that promoted instruction in African languages in the early grades. Moreover, the regional lingua francas in these countries were among the least developed. [25] For Neville Alexander language confers symbolic power or cultural capital, and in the language market privileges and exclusions are offered according to one's possession of linguistic capital; those without it are not only marginalized but also effectively censored. In the South African context, denying African students to learn and staff to teach in their indigenous languages is to curtail their academic freedom and to continue privileging white students and teachers whose mother tongues are used as the languages of tuition.[26]

It is surely a travesty that, outside of Arab North Africa, the first languages of the majority of Africans are not the languages of public and intellectual discourse. As Ali Mazrui has reminded us, the concept of an African Marxist, economist, physicist, or any other scientist who does not speak a European language, or an academic conference conducted primarily in an African language is, for the time being, "sociologically impossible."[27] The "linguistic curtain" as Mahmood Mamdani calls it reproduces and sanctifies the separation of academics from working people, and devalues the relevance of academic work.[28] This might be one reason why African academics have tended to be organic neither to civil society, whose languages they often ignore, nor the state, whose policies they sometimes oppose.[29]

More fundamentally, the Mazruis (Ali and Alamin) contend, Africa's linguistic dependence or Eurocentricism excludes ordinary people from the affairs of state and public life, making the pursuit of development and democracy so much more difficult to realize.[30] Looking specifically at human rights culture and consciousness, Alamin Mazrui points out that the entire discourse on human rights is trapped in a European linguistic idiom, which has grave consequences. The imperial languages were introduced to Africa as media of command, not of rights, and after they had shed that role they remained languages of a middle class minority patronized by the West and well attuned to its liberal or neo-liberal doctrines. Barred from this middle class linguistic enclosure, the ordinary masses, proficient in their own languages that are not languages of the law, government and business, are prevented from influencing the reconceptualizing of the dominant human rights discourses. Indeed, they are excluded from full participation in public affairs, whether parliaments or the courts, and African languages are denied the opportunity to develop a robust legislative and human rights register.[31]

I find most of these arguments compelling. Yet, I am intrigued by the fact that despite widespread support to promote African languages in academic and even political circles, practice continues to lag behind prescription. We hear that Tanzania is sliding back from Swahili thanks to the pressure of globalization and neo-liberalism,[32] and inadequate resources and the high symbolic value of English hamper South Africa's constitutional commitment to African languages as Thobeka Nda has demonstrated.[33] This indicates that the problem is not the lack of planning or indeed policy advice, of which Africa perhaps gets more than any other region from both friends and foes and foes pretending to be friends, but of political will and economic wherewithal.[34] The journey from rhetoric to reality,

policy to implementation is often slowed, or even aborted, in the slippery quicksands of African histories and political economies.

At the heart of the language question in Africa are the conjunctures of colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization, which have left extremely complex and contradictory legacies. It is an abiding assumption of nationalist historiography and ideology that the European languages are alien and the African languages are authentic. Looked at from an historical point of view, in terms of the various cultural streams that have flown into the making of contemporary African identities in all their splendid or bewildering diversities, the picture is decidedly more murky and the European languages appear less foreign and the African languages less indigenous. Neither group of languages emerged with unsullied Africanness or Europeanness from colonialism. Perhaps this is why prescriptions based on the assumed binary opposition between them, the dichotomies of languages that are "good" and "bad" for African identities and development have not had much success. Rather, the real challenge may be how people in each community and country navigate their linguistic continuum or multilingual heritage, negotiate particularization and universalization, in short, become glocal.

Colonialism not only brought European languages to Africa, it also sought to invent indigenous languages, and to establish hierarchies between them, in which the European languages were hegemonic, as part of the process of constructing colonial states, spaces, and societies. As Ranger noted, the invention of tradition involved both colonial ideologues and African elites, and reflected complex contestations and compromises between them, as well as the social struggles and cultural negotiations of the masses themselves and responses to them by the colonial states.[35] Producing, regulating and constituting new languages and language regimes were an essential part of the project and process of imagining and narrating colonialism. Sinfree Makoni and several of his colleagues have shown in a series of papers that colonial agents, including missionaries, government officials, and anthropologists played a major role in naming, codifying and standardizing many of Africa's current languages.[36]

Naming entailed countability, what Makoni and Alastair Pennycock call "census ideology."[37] The enumeration of languages as autonomous objects and the number of speakers for each language entailed two discursive maneuvers. First, establishing boundaries between languages and dialects in which some languages were unified (such as Shona and Yoruba) and others were separated (such as Zulu and Xhosa) according to the imperatives of colonial administrative cartography and evangelization. "Ironically," Makoni, Griffler and Mashiri tell us, in much of Southern Africa the native speakers of these "languages were displaced and rendered irrelevant to the process of codifying 'their own' languages the alleged repositories of their cultural authenticity…. The direct sources of the constructed language were…at best, second language speakers of the language they were recording."[38] Second, as indigenous languages were being invented or reinvented, the metalanguages to describe them were also being invented. In other words, African languages became subject to European notions of language and languages, to western linguistic categorizations, conceptualizations, and classifications. "Our argument," Makoni and Pennycock state, "is that just as languages were invented, so too were related concepts such a multlingualism, additive bilingualism, or code-switching."[39]

The legacies of colonial language making were many and profound. Previously fluid identities were increasingly calcified into new linguistic and political identities. In effect, missionaries and other colonial agents were involved in a project of creating foreign indigenous languages, "of imposing alien ways of thinking through vernaculars," in a systematic effort to develop command over languages and languages of command. Thus colonialism not only separated the language of the home—the African languages—and the language of the school—European languages—but for the indigenous languages there was also a separation between the codified language and the spoken language. Given this history, wrapping indigenous languages in untarnished authenticity is problematic, for it fails to take into account the full implications of the colonial intervention.

If colonialism created the conditions for the reconstruction of indigenous African languages, it also facilitated the reconstruction of European languages. As many postcolonial scholars have shown, colonialism was implicated in the mutual constitution of the identities of the colonized and the colonizer, the African and the European, whiteness and blackness. European languages in the colonies did not escape the steady reconditioning of the colonial encounter, the appropriations, adaptations, and domestications of new accents, grammars, and vocabularies. Even Ngugi admits: "In European languages—English, French and Portuguese principally—also are also immense deposits of some of

the best in African thought. They are granaries of African intellectual productions, and these productions are the closest thing we have to a common Pan-African social property."[40]

Indeed, it was in the European language writings, rather than in the indigenous languages, that a self-consciously nationalist "African" literature emerged. Moradewun Adejunmobi puts it this way: "By and large then, African vernacular writing, to use Gerard's preferred term, remained at some remove from the nationalist movements of the colonial period, in contradistinction to literature in European languages which frequently functioned as a sort of creative extension to the activity of nationalist politicians. Precisely because authors in the vernacular tradition were not always concerned with 'writing back' at imperial discourses, their texts reflected local and at times parochial concerns without ramification beyond their own immediate community."[41] This underscores a simple point that Africanness was likely to be proclaimed loudest among those with the most extensive exposure to European cultures and languages for whom the need to define and defend the Africa maligned and marginalized by Europe was most acute. These writers were able, as Fanon once suggested, to seize and subvert the European languages and use them as weapons of combat and self-fashioning.[42]

The processes of European linguistic appropriation and domestication have continued in postcolonial Africa. It is true that this reflects the failure by African states to fully decolonize their educational systems rooted in the neo-colonial propensities of Africa's ruling elites, the weight of the unbroken chains of dependent development, and the authoritarian reflexes of the postcolony in which, until the recent democratic wave, civil society had no room to flex its muscles and hold the state to account. Thus, the suppression of civil society and the class interests of the dominant elites in Africa can partly account for the lukewarm support for African languages. But there were also the pressures from the impoverished masses for access to education in general and to the linguistic cultural capital of neo-colonial economic and social advancement. Whatever the case, after independence education exploded at all levels, which raised African literacy rates from 9 percent in 1960 to more than 60 percent forty years later. Literacy in the European languages ceased to be a privilege of a tiny minority and as they spread beyond the elites wedded to the conceits of metropolitan linguistic rectitude new national and regional varieties of English, French and Portuguese crystallized. The phenomenon of World or New Englishes is a belated academic recognition of this social phenomenon.[43]

More recently, globalization has brought a new context to Africa's enduring language questions. Stripped of the globaloney that characterizes much of the popular rhetoric about globalization, it is important to distinguish between globalization's different registers, as a historical process and as an ideological project. As a process it refers to the increased flows of capital and commodities, ideas and images, values and vices, the deepening interconnectedness among the world's communities, countries and continents in economic, political, cultural and social spheres facilitated by the new information and communication technologies. As a project it is a synonym for global capitalism and entails a ruthless regime of neo-liberal capitalism and restructuring, of free market fundamentalism and American triumphalism. The cultural dimensions of globalization, in which the issue of language can be situated, can be analyzed in terms of the directionality, agencies, content, and consequences of the cultural flows. It is now clear that the possible trajectories of cultural globalization can range from hegemonization to homogenization to heterogenization to hybridization depending on the constellation of the relevant forces in different parts of the world at different times.[44]

More immediately, for our purposes, for Africa globalization has meant draconian structural adjustment programs, which from the 1980s triggered struggles for democratization that resulted in the establishment of a new democratic political order and culture of politics that have yet to fully consolidate themselves. The democratization of politics and the expansion of civil society were reinforced by the proliferation of new information and telecommunication technologies, from photocopiers and faxes to the Internet and cellular telephony. These technologies coming as they did when media laws were being liberalized, led to the rapid expansion of media outlets including radio and television stations, film and video production, and computer-mediated communication of email messaging and Internet surfing. The implications of these developments for language development are complex and need systematic study. The African media of today, increasingly freed from the clutches of state control, is simultaneously more local, diverse, commercial and transnational than ever in which ethnic and national languages and metropolitan and regional varieties of English and French vie for audiences.

The presence of African languages on the Internet—both the indigenous languages and Africanized European languages—is growing with new websites, weblogs, and discussion lists being established every day although African content and access to the Internet remain far below world averages. It used to be thought at the dawn of the Internet age that English would spread like a juggernaut pulverizing other languages. These fears have not been borne out. In 1997 users of the net were predominantly English speakers—45 million compared to 16 million non-English speakers. In 2003, the equivalent figures were 203 million and 403 million for English-speakers and non-English speakers, respectively. Estimates for 2004 are 280 million to 657 million, respectively. Thus, the Internet is becoming a more multilingual arena as the dominance of English declines and the number of other languages increases. At play here are the contradictory tendencies of economic and cultural globalizations: global capital needs local languages and cultural codes to penetrate local markets because, as consumer research indicates, "native linguistic identity plays a crucial role in consumers' decision-making processes."[45]

The Internet is transforming the relationship between standard and colloquial languages as has been reported from Egypt where colloquial Arabic is spreading at the expense of standard Arabic. Daniel Dor contends that the changes in the political economy of language brought about by the new information and communication technologies "will most probably weaken the nation-state's ability to control the dynamics of language change, the patterns of language use, and linguistic standardization. In other words, it will change the balance of power over national languages and transfer many of the traditional roles that nation-states played vis-a-vis their languages to the agents of the global market."[46] Much of the control over languages will fall "in the hands of the software, media, and advertizing industries.... Most probably, it will result in a state of market-based, imposed mulilingualism."[47] How will African languages fair in this brave new world?

4. Conclusion

Besides the subterranean movements of history, the structural shifts of political economy, and the unpredictable eruptions of social struggles, the future of African languages and identities will be decided in the mass media and on the streets of the continent's ever-expanding cities. Lest we forget, in a decade or so the majority of Africans will be urbanized.[48] This is a historic, geographic, and cultural shift of monumental proportions with profound implications for African identities and social imaginaries. In most countries language policies have not come to terms with the urban vernaculars. "The widespread use and social importance of these urban vernaculars in Southern Africa has been given market recognition, as, for example, in their presence as a staple of television and radio programs, particularly those targeting the youth," to quote Makoni, Bruitt-Griffler and Mashari again. "There has been, however, no similar institutional recognition, which has profound implications on educational policies. While urban vernaculars are the mother tongues of most urban children, the latter continue to be tested in 'indigenous' languages that sound foreign to their users. A main reason for this discrepancy between actual language use and educational language policy is the reification of the colonial linguistic heritage of written standards that do not correspond to language use." The result is that "while the official indigenous languages remain to a large extent mother tongues in search of speakers, the urban vernaculars have been rendered spoken languages in search of legitimacy."[49]

Empowering African languages requires, first and foremost, recognizing and empowering the multiple identities of the speakers of those languages, and breaking the unproductive dichotomies between language use and educational language, indigenous and European languages, and 'official' and 'vernacular' indigenous languages. Multilingualism is a reality in much of Africa, not simply in terms of the proficiency that many people have in African and European languages, but in terms of the proficiency they have in several African languages in which mixed language forms and code-mixing among these languages characterize communicative practice as people encountering each other from different ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds seek to create new identities out of their engagements. The processes of creating new identities through old and new languages are etched deep in the historical landscape of this ancient continent, where modern humans first emerged, if modern archaeology and genetics are to be believed, and where they first humans learnt to speak. To paraphrase, Ali Mazrui talking about the family in his television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*: we invented language and the state of our languages is vibrant in their multiplicity.

Notes

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[2] Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," In Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 211-262.

[3] This part of the paper is a summary of a longer discussion in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Africa: The Changing Meanings of 'African' Culture and Identity," in Elisabeth Abiri and Håkan Thörn, eds., *Horizons: Perspectives on a Global Africa*, Göteborg, Sweden: National Museum of World Cultures and Göteborg University, 2005, pp. 31-72.

[4] Wole Soyinka, "The Scholar in African Society," in A. U. Iwara and E. Mveng, eds., *Second World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture: Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education. Colloquium Proceedings*, Volume 1, Lagos: Federal Government of Nigeria, 1977, pp. 44-53.

5 G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York: Dover Publications, 1956, pp. 91, 93.

6 V.Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa

7 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.

8 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

[9] See, for example, Eileen Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992, and Grey Gundker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[10] Mamadou Diouf, *Historians and Histories: What For? African Historiography Between State and the Communities*, Amsterdam and Calcutta: Sephis and CSSSC, 2003, p. 8.

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[13] Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time," in Michael Keith and Steve Pile, eds*., Place and the Politics of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993: 155-6.

[14] David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, "Introduction." In David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, eds. *The History of Cartography: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, Volume Two, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 1-10.

[15] See, for example, Thomas Bassett, "Indigenous Mapmaking in Intertropical Africa." In David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis, eds., *The History of Cartography: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, Volume Two, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 24-48; and Mohammed Mbodji, "'So Geographers in Africa Maps with Savage Pictures Fill Their Gaps': Representing Africa in Maps," in George Clement Bond and Nigel C. Gibson, eds., *Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories: Contemporary Africa in Focus*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 2002, pp. 37-58.

[16] Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, "Pan-Africanism," in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Dickson Eyoh, eds. *Encyclopedia Twentieth Century African History*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 415-418.

[17] *UNESCO General History of Africa*, Volumes 1-8, London: Heinemann, 1981-1993; and *Cambridge History of Africa*, Volumes 1-8, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977-1985.

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[28] Mahmood Mamdani, "The Intelligentsia, the State and Social Movements in Africa," in Mamadou Diouf and Mahmood Mamdani, eds., *Academic Freedom in Africa*, Dakar: Codesria Book Series, 1994, 349.

[29] For an insightful analysis of the position of African intellectuals and their relationship to the state and society see, Thandika Mkandawire, "African intellectuals and nationalism," in Thandika Mkandawire, *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, Dakar and London: CODESRIA Books and Zed Books, pp.10-55.

[30] Ali A Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui, *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience*, Oxford and Chicago: James Currey and Chicago University Press, 1998.

[31] Alamin Mazrui, Globalization and Some Linguistic Dimensions of Human Rights in Africa," in Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Philip J. McConnaughay, eds., *Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Development in Africa*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp.52-70.

[32] See Alamin M. Mazrui, "Education and Intellectual (Re)Production in Africa: Towards a Paradigm Shift," in Lawford Imunde, ed., *Reflections on Education Systems in Africa*, Rehburg-Loccum, Germany: Loccumer Protokolle Series, 2002, pp. 187-206.

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[36] Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook, "Disinventing and (Re)Constituting Languages," forthcoming; Sinfree Makoni, Jamina Brutt-Griffler, and Pedzisai Mashiri, "Mother Tongues in Search of Speakers: Crossing Ethnic and Linguistic Boundariers in Southern Africa"; and Alastair Pennycook and Sinfree Makoni, "The Modern Mission: The Language Effects of Christianity," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4, 2 (2005): 137-155.

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[39] Makoni and Pennycock, "Disinventing and (Re)Constituting Languages," p.18.

[40] wa Thiong'o, "Europhone or African Memory," p.163

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[45] Daniel Dor, "From Englishization to Imposed Multilingualism: Globalization, the Internet, and the Political Economy of the Linguistic Code," *Public Culture* 16, 1 (2004): 104.

[46] Dor, p. 112.

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[49] Makoni, Brutt-Griffler, and Mashiri, "Mother Tongues in Search of Speakers," p.5

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