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Appraising Africa: Modernity, Decolonisation and Globalisation

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In addressing the nature of the current African problematic regarding development as progress towards a viable modernity, it is necessary to identify the conceptual dimensions that created the predicament in the first place. Indeed, it is necessary to define its historical origins if we are to find solutions to it. Part of the problem of not being able to locate appropriate solutions is that we do not always address the predicament in ways that are broad or comprehensive enough. At the moment, Africa's intellectuals are showing much impatience at Africa's disappointing political and economic performance, and at a deeper level, this impatience is directed at the difficulties Africa is experiencing as it seeks to come to terms with its post-colonial status, modernity and the new economic phenomenon known as globalisation. What I intend to do in this chapter is to discuss the issue of African development in the context of its ongoing experiences with modernity, decolonisation and globalisation. An obvious impatience lies too at the heart of the politics of the Western universal, in its quest to abolish once and for all, the self/other cultural dichotomy, in its drive to reverse the gains of decolonisation and finally in its aspirations to universalise all notions and projects of modernity.

This new approach as an ethos of universalism devalues the exigencies and politics of the particular. It is an orientation that has emerged partially in the aftermath of the 'September 11' event in the United States. Part of the legacy of that tragedy is the strong critique of particularist manifestations of cultural difference that present themselves as being at odds with the Western universal (Mamdani 2004). I suggest that the September 11 tragedy in the United States has provided a moral occasion to redefine the conception of the universal. I also suggest that a new ethos of the universal can easily become complicit with a certain hegemonic logic. In other words, it can lead to a new form of social Darwinism. This could mean that the integrity of African forms of territoriality will come under assault; concepts such as sovereignty, citizenship and belonging will be reformulated. However, there are concerns that they will not be redefined according to the dictates of African agency. So, if Africa misses the most liberating gains of modernity and decolonisation, then under the

order of the new ethos of the universal, it may also miss a significant degree of the propellants of the contemporary dynamics of globalisation.

The three processes – modernity, decolonisation and globalisation – are like paradigms, influenced by different world views that sometimes overlap and which also at times act in contradictory ways. African responses to them must include aspects of African creativity and forms of African agency. Again, I do not intend to imply that the three processes discussed here – modernity, decolonisation and globalisation – do not at times overlap. They do in many ways but our understanding of their conceptual potentials needs to be clearer in order to appreciate the particular problems each of them presents. For instance, the current wave of globalisation presents new kinds of challenges in terms of global security which are prompting a different kind of international response to the African crisis, one which threatens to redefine the nature of sovereignty and classical national territoriality. This kind of response is coming at the moment African nations are trying to reframe the question of the classical nation-building project as part of the ongoing process of decolonisation. It is also coming at a moment of a reconfigured pre-colonial idea that is sceptical about orders of otherness that establish and defend hierarchy rather than equality.

Within the context of this disconcerting international climate, Africa's problems have become even more amplified. This new engagement with the politics of the universal, or in more contemporary terms, the politics of the global, rather than address the historical demands and specificities of Africa's problems creates its own peculiar version of a negative African exceptionalism. It also becomes a new opportunity for the promotion of an ideology of pessimism regarding the African continent. Indeed, the new challenges of global security have provided the platform for a radical reconsideration of Africa's difficulties. In my view, three conceptual categories need to be analysed in order to grapple with the current nature of the African dynamic, and these are modernity, decolonisation and globalisation. Of course, these categories are not intended to address all the dimensions of the African problematic. They are meant to provide multilayered mechanisms for problems and issues that are not always related to the three major concepts of this discussion: modernity, decolonisation and globalisation. None of these three major conceptual processes have been fully realised or implemented within Africa itself. All three of them have assumed dramatically different and often contradictory trajectories.

If our understanding of modernity derives from the European idea of the Enlightenment; if it stems from the modern reformulation of the project of democracy and faith in the promise of science and technology; if it stems from a sense of a radical discontinuity with medievalism and in a belief in the rationalities of thinkers like Kant, Hume and J. S. Mill; if finally it stems from an espousal of a politically appropriate sense of progressivism, then all these legacies and influences have had problematic diffusion into Africa. Certainly, there are powerful moments of assimilation and acceptance just as there have been equally dramatic reversals of those moments of assimilation. The point is that Africa has not yet quite decided

what to do with modernity, has not discovered what version[s] of modernity best serves its interests, and has not resolved the contradictions of the continual tussle between its indigenous traditions and the wide ranging transformations proposed by the project of modernity. This is a crucial problem that faces projects geared towards the construction of African modernities. African modernities have never been the same as Euro-modernity. Modernist expressions in Africa are instead a combination of aspects of Euro-modernity, secularism, Christian cosmology, Islamic beliefs, indigenous African systems of knowledge and other syncretic cultural forms that lie outside these categories. Indeed, African modernist expressions are an invention of post-coloniality and are as such suffused with a profound hybridity (Diouf 2000).

Perhaps there is a crisis at the heart of the project of modernity. When modernity is disentangled from this unclear logic of the hegemonic, it becomes transformed into a promise of cosmopolitan inclusiveness. In other words, it loses its aura of cultural elitism and presents itself as a kind of multicultural cosmopolitanism. So, if Africa has not discovered what to do with modernity, that is, has not defined its relationship with a promoted universalist paradigm, then it would not be able to establish what belongs to the realm of the universal and what belongs to the realm of the African particular. African tensions with modernity fold into other contradictions embedded in the process and project of the modern. In more stark political terms, the colonial legacy of modernity is often played out as a struggle between ethnic and civic categories as Peter Ekeh (1975) and Mahmood Mamdani (1996, 2001) have demonstrated in several ways. The tussle between these postcolonial categories is often seen as the bane of the formation of the nation state in Africa.

Similarly, decolonisation as a project and process all over Africa has been uneven. If colonialism assumed different features, histories and outcomes, decolonisation has also been considerably diverse in the nature of its unfolding. Decolonisation has been inflected with the politics of ethnicity (Nnoli 2003; Osaghae 1994), race, territoriality, citizenship and belonging, all of which have had profound effects on the dynamics of nationhood. Indeed, every history or project of nation-building is unique and cannot be replicated. If colonialism created the first modern African nation states, decolonisation has been with varying degrees of success an attempt to consolidate the features of these artificially imposed political geographies. Consider the relative embeddedness of thoroughly artificial identity constructs such 'francophone', 'anglophone' 'sub-Saharan Africa' and the equally incongruous 'Commonwealth nation'. It is always convenient to associate decolonisation with political liberation, but reality tells us otherwise. Decolonisation is modern Africa's first self-directed attempt at nation-building. Africa clearly suffers from some exhaustion as the era of slavery and colonisation has had an obvious impact. Also, there was the error of mistaking decolonisation with political independence alone. Decolonisation clearly entailed more than political liberation; it was rather an invitation to nation-building without adequate resources in terms of personnel and institutions.

And as Africa grappled with the incomplete processes of modernity and decolonisation, a third conceptual category enters the scene: globalisation. I will not engage in a full definition of globalisation except to say that it is a project that encompasses not only economics but also the political and the cultural, but implemented under the direction of the West. It also implies in this sense a radical acceleration of the project of universal modernity – technological, political and economic – emanating from the West. Again, just as with the two other processes – modernity and decolonisation – Africa as a globalisation object and subject has not yet decided how to deal with this new world order. I have also suggested that the notions and present realities of sovereignty, territoriality, citizenship and belonging are changing under conditions of contemporary globalisation. These changes directly affect Africa yet its institutions are not flexible and responsive enough to them. This institutional vacuum is attractive to stratagems of foreign intervention. To fill this vacuum, African nations must address the dilemmas and difficulties posed by disjointed projects and processes of modernity, nation building and globalisation.

But what exactly is the face of globalisation as it descends on Africa? First, it should be read as evidence of the open and untrammelled field that the West now has at its disposal after being straitjacketed for seventy years of rivalry with the Communist bloc. Globalisation means not much more than the West's free rein to explore its advantages of unequal economic exchange within a context of IMF, World Bank and WTO *diktats,* enforced free markets that have ruined any semblance of agricultural autonomy for African farmers' strategic agricultural items such as rice, and have pushed such farmers even further to work in macro units that produce cash crops for the international market. Globalisation has also led to an accelerated rural exodus from the countryside to cities then on to urban crime, political unrest, wars fuelled by easy access to Western weaponry, or finally escape to the Western lands of hard currency and menial labour. In all of this are the constant Machiavellian ministrations from the West: democracy, rule of law and sustainable development while the neo-colonial dictators are coddled and allowed easy access to their foreign accounts bulging with the hard currencies of their paymasters.

The question then is what ought to be Africa's response to the tidal wave of globalisation now engulfing Africa? The economic power of the Western nation-state sponsors of globalisation derives from what amounts to their politically created 'hard currencies' which have been overvalued to attract cheap labour from the non-European world and to acquire products from the non-European and African world as cheaply as possible. This is the significance of the concept of 'unequal exchange'. In response, Africa can seek to create its own continental-wide hard currency which would have as its collateral Africa's abundant mineral and petroleum resources. Given that gold is no longer held as the ultimate guarantor of value, Africa need only to have an established central bank create any amount of credit necessary for trade and economic transactions. The rate of currency exchange between the Western currencies of the dollar and the euro could be established by fiat – in exactly

the same way the West has established the value of its own currencies. The ultimate goal would be intra-continental trade within an African commonwealth of nations. In this context, infant technologies could be protected by a prudent application of the principle of autarky. However, the technological and cultural transformations necessary for development and modernisation would not be possible without the implanting of the modalities that make such possible: investments not only in human scientific, technological and cognitive capital, but also in the physical infrastructure to accommodate such. This would entail Africa standing the Western project of globalisation on its head and employing it as an intra-continental project whose goal would be meaningful development in all its dimensions. Africa's response to globalisation could then be primarily the globalisation of Africa in the first instance.

Colonialism created rudimentary and barely viable modern nation-states. Projects of decolonisation sought to stabilise these fragile nation-states even as they rejoiced over the euphoria of political liberation. With the crises of the nation-state in Africa under its own specific forms of post-colonial authoritarian rule on the one hand, and under homogenising tendencies of the new ethos of the global on the other, it becomes unclear as to how to create states that address the challenges of the modern nation-state; that demand the prerequisite nimbleness of the contemporary globalised state and the tensions and interactions between the artificially created African states and their historically structured counterparts of the West. These tensions may appear manageable but they implicitly promise periods of institutional dissolution, confusion, and political collapse.

There is indeed a great deal of announced impatience with Africa on the part of its intellectuals and also persistent afro-pessimistic critiques from all intellectual sectors of the West. However, there is confusion on all sides as to what decolonisation actually entailed, given that old legacies that proved to be deleterious were maintained. As mentioned earlier, decolonisation does not mean political liberation alone. It also means the construction of viable political geographies and identities. These experiments with nation-building are not quite fifty years in the making. Obviously, the velocities of the current waves of globalisation are creating many more opportunities for critique and a whittling away of the prescribed post-colonial project that promised rapid development to culminate in modernity (Mbembe 2003). If indeed aspects of Euro-modernity are being adopted in Africa, the question then would be how can such be adopted minus its parochialism? How can the tensions between the universal and the particular within the general project be addressed? How can we best deal with the critique of Africa that globalisation now seems to foster? Posing these kinds of questions restores a certain historicity and conceptual clarity to African problems. In addition, it also re-establishes the continuing dialogue between the universal and the particular in instances where the former tends to deny the presence of the politics of difference and a future of more numerous possibilities. To encourage this kind of impatience – this conceptual closure – is to deny the presence of the particular, the local and its promise of difference. In a way, it is also a denial of the imagination to create new models and modes of being.

If the African continent is to overcome its numerous present difficulties, it has to re-evaluate its relationship with the project of modernity. As it is, an acceptance of that project entails an espousal of an ethos of the universal. African nations have to resolve the tensions and contradictions of their encounters with modernity (Wiredu 1980, 1996). They have to reformulate the question: what does modernity entail? They have to resolve the problems posed by aspects of their traditions that are in conflict with modernity. Modernity does not merely involve the creation of the appropriate institutions (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). It is also a way of life, a total engagement with the world. If it is Africa's desire to adopt this general ethos of existence, then it is necessary to restructure and debate those institutions bequeathed to it by the colonial legacy. Those institutions, we have to note, were not meant to embrace all the dimensions of modernity. They were created to be able to have marginal interactions with modernity. They were part of the apparatus of the colonial regime. Most African nations that inherited them did not upgrade them or refashion them into fully modern institutions to serve local needs. Instead, they became syncretised as the grounds on which the struggles between tradition and modernity took place. And the products that emerged from these processes of syncretisation were not always modern in orientation. In many respects, they sig-nalled a withdrawal from the ethos of modernity, given that they were often reformulations of indigenous African cultures that were usually in conflict with modernity (Appiah 1992).

This perennial conflict with the ethos of modernity is played out in several ways – confusions between the private and public domains which often result in the privatisation of public authority and institutions, perplexities in the subject-citizen dichotomy (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000), the retention of the nepotistic net-work of the extended family for public affairs in spite of its conflict with modernity, and the political economy of the gift in traditional African cultures and its transla-tion into the political economy of corruption within the context of modernity (Oli-ver de Sardan 1999). These confusions mar the drive towards development in particular, and modernity in general. In other words, African nations must transform the typologies of their colonially-inflected institutions on the one hand, and refashion the fabric of their everyday lives on the other. Indeed, there is a certain colonial logic to be read in the conception of modernity as an espousal of the politics of the universal. The problem derives from the fact that indigenous institutions have de-veloped organically and that African societies have repeatedly demonstrated that certain traditions and orientations are vital to their continued existence (van Binsbergen 2003).

For instance, in the African conception of people-as-wealth (Simone 2004), popular mythologies of the notion of the *human* that conflict with the rationalities of moder-nity are specific forms of African sociology. African institutions have always made more sense to themselves than to the rest of the world since they are based on the specific socio-anthropology of their particular life-world (Gyekye 1997). A large part of the ethos of modernity disavows this tendency. African problems rise pri-

marily out of this set of circumstances, these tensions and contradictions. Once again, Africans must decide the nature of their relationship with modernity in order to deal with the new global interdependencies (Sindjoun 2005). Deciding this question will in turn affect the nature of its projects of global interaction. The truth is that the present ideological contestation in a supposedly post-ideological milieu has become incredibly impoverished because of a certain intellectual inflexibility. The general nature of this struggle manifests itself as a somewhat sterile conflict between the universal and the particular which, within the context of current global processes, is complicit with a popular Western intellectual paradigm. In other words, the logic of this hegemonic quest is camouflaged as the politics of the universal.

I have argued that Africa's problems with decolonisation and the nation-building process, the unresolved conflict between tradition and modernity and the tensions between the particular and the universal are largely conceptual. Indeed, African problems are part of the struggles for self definition. Immediately after decolonisation was embarked on there was optimism concerning the idea of African socialism as it was supposedly in conformity with traditional African social structures. There was an ideological conflict between those who argued for a universal socialism as opposed to its local instantiations. After the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, a new Western ideology was promoted, that of economic neo-liberalism and globalisation. In a post-colonial and post-Soviet world, Africa's response was an attempt to integrate the past into the present by appeal to the two ideas of 'renaissance' – note that this concept appeals to Africa's long archaeological and historical past – and the 'union of African states' – a response to the massive Euro-American cultural, political and economic bloc and the vast integrated economic community of East Asia. This is the template on which Africa seeks to work out its problems with the ultimate aim of development as modernity.

My guess is that the appropriate kinds of institution will eventually emerge out of these struggles. As they are waged, one must also remember to point out the hegemonic propensities of the politics of the universal. Africa is now in the midst of many problems that it must resolve on its own terms by taking stock of its indigenous traditions as they conflict dynamically with the dictates of the modern (Hountondji 2002). Thus the ongoing dynamic will express itself in any number of possible ways – political, cultural, intellectual, technological and economic. This is the intellectual task that Africa must seek to accomplish before development as modernity can be realised. In practical terms, this would express itself at three levels: the domestic, the national and the Pan-African. What does the post-colonial African expect from life other than to live in an environment where his or her talents and dispositions have the chance of being fully developed so that the opportunities for rewarding work can be pursued? He or she would also hope for the best available education for his or her children in a society where an indigenously generated modern technology will have made available and the best social conditions for such goals be pursued. At the national level, the post-colonial African would hope that his or her representatives in government would have developed the

commitment to ensure that promised public goods be delivered fairly in an atmosphere of maximum freedom. At the level of the Pan-African, the hope is for freedom to travel according to the dictates of commerce and trade in much the same way that pre-colonial Africa configured itself. As such the ongoing tragic, alienating and humiliating, longing for Euro-America for employment, health care, modern technology and education will have long evaporated.

For Africa's post-colonial and modernising intellectual classes, the hope is for vibrant and free civil societies, flourishing universities and academic institutions to discuss, debate and build on the prescriptive templates for progress already formulated, courtesy of the ideas on development of Nkrumah; on the nature of colonialism bearing the seeds of neo-colonialism of Fanon, and on the recounting of the African archaeological and historical past of C.A. Diop. As mentioned above, there are ideological, cultural, political and economic forces of all kinds that are constantly seeking to derail linear progress toward development as modernity in a context of post-coloniality and globalisation. Such forces have historically taken on the guise of a self-inflicted neo-colonialism on the part of Africa's tragically alienated, anti-African and historically ignorant post-colonial and Euro-dependent managerial classes. It is these intellectually and politically irresponsible bankrupt classes that serve as a major stumbling block in Africa's struggle to attain modernity.