

IS IT AFRICAN IDENTITY OR A MATTER OF SURVIVAL FOR THE AFRICAN?

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Abstract

To bring the subject of 'migration' face to face with 'African identity' is to cast a light on the horizon as to how the African is reacting to socio-political and economic changes around him. Migration is deeply motivated by the fact of survival. Certainly, a person in movement does retain a memory of self (identity); yet in order to survive one does not have to be numerically the same! Epistemological identity tells us about the evidence we have – like paper documents - for identifying persons. However, what it is like to be a person or what our evidence refers to (metaphysical identity) is not reducible to paper documents like international passports or identity cards, for such reality cannot be fully attended from a third person perspective. The African in the circumstances accepts epistemological identity only as a sufficient condition for identity in a pluralistic society organized by law as a matter of choice for more tolerable evil!

Keywords: Migration, Africa, Identity, Survival, Citizen, Indigenes.

Introduction

I feel honoured to be invited to chair this International Conference on Migration and African Identity: Question in a Contemporary World. The phrase 'migration and African identity' seems to bring together the intuitions of Heraclitus and Parmenides respectively. On the one hand, Heraclitus claims that "everything gives way and nothing is stable"; hence "one cannot step twice into the same water."² Waterfield comments that Heraclitus describes the world or its process as 'wise,' that is, "the whole world is intelligent and alive, and speaks to the wise man subtly, communicating its inner nature and enabling him to model himself on it."³ On the other, Parmenides asserts that "there are very many signs

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² Heraclitus of Ephesus in *Testimonium 4*, quoted from *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists*, a new translation with commentary by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

indicating that what is, is unborn and imperishable, entire, alone of its kind, unshaken, and complete. It was not once nor will it be, since it is now, all together, single, and continuous.”⁴ The enduring attribute of being, for Parmenides, then, is permanence or immutability. Inserting the philosophical ‘question of migration and African identity’ in-between the thought frames of Heraclitus and Parmenides, one can begin by asking: How does one characterize process and permanence at the same instance?

The African wants to be in a movement (a survival strategy), albeit he desires to be cognized as separated from other moving species in the process (a bid to retain self/personal identity)! One returns to the classical observation that, in the midst of change, something remains constant. But does that which survives have to be the same or identical with the original substance? It is unlikely! This opening remark would like to tickle the intellectual fancy of this audience along the following lines: (i) the exploration of ‘King Cotton’ and the consequent racism; (ii) the politics of racial classification: an African identity; (iii) epistemological identity: citizenship verse indigene-ship – a sorry story; (iv) to what extent does metaphysical identity matter now for the African; (v) and a matter of survival: epistemological identity as a tolerably less evil

The Exploration of ‘King Cotton’ and the Consequent Racism

It must be borne in mind that Africa had been in existence before the 15th century. It was just that at the end of 15th century, the New World – America – was discovered. Europeans or White men arrived in America, and later found black labour to be “suitable for the exploration of ‘King Cotton.’”⁵ Consequently, Africans were transported by European merchants to work in their plantations in America. Given the economic activity necessitated by the presence of cotton, a certain inter-relationship between Europe and Africans emerged. Subsequently, “certain ideas were developed in Europe and America which compromised the status of the African in the human family and adversely affected not only the physical development of Africa but also (and this is more tragic) the mind of the African.”⁶ This body of beliefs that compromised the status of the African was called racism. Racism is then “a set of beliefs, dispositions, and behavioral tendencies that express or are motivated by negative attitude toward the

⁴ Parmenides of Elea in Fragment 8, quoted from *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists*, a new translation with commentary by Robin Waterfield, 59

⁵ Emma U. Ikoku, *Self-Reliance: Africa’s Survival* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), 304.

⁶ Ibid.

members of certain groups, called races, who are 'marked' (physically) as different."⁷ It is an offshoot of a cultural pattern created by the colonial administration.

There was then a situation where the economic activity – Textile Mills in England and Western Europe – needed raw material (cotton), which was now found in America; then the labour was "African slaves, American Indians and white indentured farmers and labourers."⁸ It has to be noted that slavery has always existed as an old institution; hence, the state of affairs of one human being claiming superiority over another on the basis of colour of skin (racism) did not derive from slavery. Rather, racism derived "from a type of master-slave relationship in which, quite by accident – the dominant economic class (master) happened to be white."⁹ Given the consequence of the ideology of racism, the mind of the white became conditioned to regard the black man as inferior.

Those who tolerated the presence of the black person in the interim devised a humane way of obliterating his presence from the face of the earth. This was to be done by a gradual process through the policy of assimilation. This policy was adopted by French and Portuguese colonialists that through some kind of inter-marriage the black race (considered as the weak race) will gradually disappear from existence. One recalls that Leopold Sedar Senghor's Negritude was a re-affirmation of the essence of being black. The assimilation, which was a failure in any case, deepened the black man's despair about the secret intention of the Whiteman as embodied in the French policy. Senghor asseverated: "Earlier, we had become aware within ourselves that assimilation was a failure; we could assimilate mathematics or the French language, but we could never strip off our black skins or root out black souls; And so we set out on a fervent quest for the 'holy grail': our collective soul; And we came upon it."¹⁰

Assimilation was intended as a process of miscegenation - total elimination by complete assimilation. It was a policy that Senghor regarded as unrealistic; even if biological miscegenation could be realistic. Accordingly, it was pointless for the French to adopt such a policy. Even if biological miscegenation could be

⁷ John Christman, *Social and Political Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002),158.

⁸ Ikoku, *Self-Reliance: Africa's Survival*, 305.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Excerpts from a speech delivered by Senghor at Oxford University in October 1961, reprinted by permission from *West Africa*, November 4, 1961.

accommodated as part of the laws that govern life, cultural miscegenation, according to Senghor, is not possible for culture is a horizon of free encounter in which the black or the African stands voluntarily free to co-operate or “prevent the synthesis of cultures.”¹¹ Yet the question remains, as Jacob Drachler asks, whether Senghor is “more African than French, or more French than African?”¹²

It has to be borne in mind then that “the question of African identity arose in the context of counter-assertions and polemics. In this regard, talks about races become instruments for exclusion, derogation and domination of certain groups or reinforce stereotypes about the African or the Negro as primitive, cunning, illogical, emotional, capricious and backward.”¹³

The Politics of Racial Classification: An African Identity?

The issue of identity is an aspect of the claim of the first principle of being as exemplified in the transcendental properties, which corresponds to the principle of contradiction that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time. This points to the identity claim that every being is one and consistent in itself, determined itself and separated from others.¹⁴ How does one then capture African identity?

Areoye Oyebola, in his *Black Man's Dilemma*, presents studies of racial classification in terms of colour.¹⁵ A Swedish naturalist, Carolius Linneaus, in classifying races in 1738, recognised four categories: *Americanus*, *Europeaus*, *Asiaticus* and *Afer* (African); Five racial groups were identified by Otto Blumenbach in 1775, namely: Caucasian (white); Mongolian (yellow); Ethiopian (black); American (red); and Malayan (brown). Boyd's classification of races in 1950, based on gene, also recognised five major races: European or Caucasoid; African or Negroid; Asiatic or Mongoloid; American Indian; and Australoid. Scholars are not agreed as to which racial classification is better, but anthropological scientists are comfortable to reduce the racial classification to

¹¹Ibid.

¹² Leopold S. Senghor, “Three Poems” in *African Heritage: An Anthology of Black and African Personality* Selected and edited, with an Introduction by Jacob Drachler (New York: Collier Books, 1964), 128.

¹³ Francis O. C. Njoku, *Development and African Philosophy: A Theoretical Reconstruction of African-Social Political Economy* (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2004), 111.

¹⁴ See William A. Wallace, *The Elements of Philosophy: A Compendium for Philosophers and Theologians* (New York: Alba House, 1977, par. 32, 93

¹⁵ See Areoye Oyebola, *Black Man's Dilemma* (Ibadan: Board Publications, 1982), 1; See also Francis O. C. Njoku, *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought & Theology* (Owerri: Claretian Institute of Philosophy, 2002), 262-263.

three major groups “based on geographical isolation,” namely: Caucasians, Mongols and Negroes.

Caucasians were said to derive from Europe and subsist in the present day Europeans. Mongols derived from Asia which major subdivisions are Chinese and Indians. Negroes derived from Africa, and they subsist in the people of West Africa. Without prejudice then, if one is asked who are the Caucasians or Mongols or Negroes, one can simply refer to a group by pointing at their respective colours or geographical locations. But racial classifications do not always stop at sociological descriptions or geographical designations. For example, Linnaeus went further to add that the *Americanus* are tenacious, contented, free, and ruled by customs; the *Europeaus* are light, lively, and inventive and ruled by rites; the *Asiaticus* are stern, haughty, stingy, and ruled by opinion; and *Africans* are cunning, slow, negligent, and ruled by caprice.¹⁶ David Hume claimed that Negroes were naturally inferior to whites such that even the most barbarous of the whites were still more respectable than Negroes.¹⁷ And G. W. F. Hegel denied “consciousness of substantive objective existence to the blacks” just because they are blacks.¹⁸

Furthermore, although blacks are said to derive from, or subsist in, Africa, it has to be pointed out that the vast continent of Africa has Hamites (Berbers), Semites, Arabs with White skin or White North Africans,¹⁹ who call Africa their home. The classification in terms of colour or geography as basis for designating who is the African is largely scuppered in port. In addition, Edward Blyden wrote about the ancient race – Africa – renowned for her arts and great civilization, arguing that the descendants of Noah included Ham, as presented in Genesis Chapter 10, who built Egypt, were black.²⁰ But the identity of this group of great achievers, according to Blyden, was being eroded as they were gradually absorbed by the

¹⁶See Oyebola, *Black Man's Dilemma*, 1.

¹⁷ David Hume, On National Character' quoted from E. Chukwudi Eze “Modern Western Philosophy and African Colonialism” in *African Philosophy: An Anthology* edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 214.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 93.

¹⁹ Oyebola, *Black Man's Dilemma*, 3.

²⁰See Edward Blyden, ‘The Negro in Ancient History,’ in *The People of Africa: a series of Papers on their Character, Condition and Future Prospects* ed. Henry M. Schieffelin, 2d (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1974), 8. (This article first appeared in *Methodist Quarterly Review*, January, 1869). Cf. Luc Croegaert, *The African Continent: An Insight into its Earliest History* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa) especially Ch 2.

Caucasians, a move he saw would spell eventual loss of identity of the blacks.²¹ In Blyden's opinion, the black person seemed to have forgotten his great contribution in history, and had come to accept the position of inferiority.

It has been, however, corroborated that blacks were the centre of ancient culture for biological development of man has been traced to Africa; at least, evidence of tool-making first appeared in Africa.²² The studies of physical and cultural anthropologists and ethnographers show that the earliest evidence of culture, as discovered by Dr and Mrs L. S. B Leaky, was at Olduvai Gorge "situated in northern Tanganyika in the Eastern Rift, and cuts through some 300 feet of old lake sediments of Lower and Middle Pleistocene."²³

Furthermore, it is said that African achievement had been stolen by the West, albeit Blyden's claim about Chapter 10 of Book of Genesis might be shaky because there are doubts as to whether that Chapter 10 was giving a historical account. One recalls the claim that Thales, regarded as the father of philosophy, studied in Egypt.²⁴ Aristotle himself confirmed that the science of philosophy as can be seen in the mathematical arts was founded in Egypt that already had the environment of leisure for the cultivation of such art, to which the Egyptian priestly caste was involved.²⁵ However, the present wretched status or incompetence generally noticed in Africa and her children queries such claimed pristine achievement, and casts doubt on African as being originator of a laudable civilization in the first place.

Oyebola has brilliantly insisted that the black man is his own burden; hence, he cannot be using colonialism as an excuse for not convincing anyone that the so-called achievements claimed on his behalf by Blyden are defensible.²⁶ In the US where all the races are represented, the black man is seen as the underdog given

²¹ Edward Blyden, 'The Negro in Ancient History,' in *The People of Africa: a series of Papers on their Character, Condition and Future Prospects* ed. Henry M. Schieffelin, 2d., 33.

²²J. Desmond Clark, 'The Prehistoric Origins of African Culture,' in *Papers in African Prehistory* eds. J. D. Fage and R. A. Oliver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1.

²³*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ See Innocent C. Onyewuenyi, *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentrism* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 1993), 43.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book 1 (A), Chapter I, 918b14-24. Quotation is from *The Complete Works of Aristotle* edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), in 2 Volumes Princeton/Bollingen Series LXXI. 2.

²⁶ Oyebola, *Black Man's Dilemma.*, 31-32.

his own mischief: black leaders helped to sell their people; blacks have terrible attitude to work, and seem to have inherent tendency to sabotage public good: "Therefore blacks cannot convince many after all these years by appealing over and over again to slavery and colonialism to justify their present backwardness."²⁷ One admits that colonialists moved Africans for their own economic interests and subjected them to all sorts of horrors.²⁸ Now it is evident that internal circumstances are driving Africans to migrate to be commissioned for a new form of subjugation in the West and other African countries.

Who doubts that Africa is a continent endowed with enormous rich mineral and human resources, and cultural diversity? Africa's resources, on the contrary, have made her a den of robbers from within and without: foreigners steal from her; her children steal from their own mother's bosom; they rape her and milk her to death. In fact, the pathetic fate of many African countries shows that a traitor from within is worse than a traitor from without, albeit the contrary holds for 'accepted legal logic.' Africa's cultural diversity does not blend to unite her children. Africans attack fellow Africans on their own lands; sometimes they prefer the Whiteman in their midst to fellow Africans.

In addition, Africa is astonishingly rich for she houses a variety of languages. Language is a mirror of culture and identity. Africa can boast of over 1000 languages on the continent²⁹ but Africans talk pass each other. They take refuge in the colonizer's language, if they must communicate meaningfully to the rest of the world!

Paulin Hountondji totally disregards blackness as a distinctive racial category, arguing that it is a dangerous thing for one group to wait for another to validate its humanity.³⁰ Ethno-philosophers' insistence on uniqueness makes African philosophy to lose claim for universality; hence, Hountondji writes that "in a word, through the history of our cultures, through their present greatness and misery and through our own sufferings, we rediscover the adventure of a single and same humanity which has forever been seeking itself and which today more

²⁷ Njoku, *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought & Theology*, 289-290.

²⁸ See Eric Williams, 'The Origin of Negro Slavery,' in *African Philosophy: An Anthology* ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 386-387.

²⁹ See Njoku, *Essays in African Philosophy, Thought & Theology*, 106-107.

³⁰ See Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 177.

than ever must re-learn solidarity.”³¹ Whether whites will accommodate Hountondji’s blacks to have the same platform in the human solidarity quest is a different thing. It is important to remind Hountondji that the word ‘solidarity’ has even become ideological and discriminatory in philosophers like Richard Rorty. Rorty restricts its use to people who share the same ideological, pragmatic and utilitarian principles with members of his post-philosophic culture.³² Postmodernist culture-club of Rorty insists that right and wrong are a matter of description of what one wants to do.³³ This post-philosophic culture, in Rorty’s presentation, considers humans as mere webs of beliefs and impressions with no reference to either the divine or objective truth,³⁴ arguing that our use of humans determines how we can describe them.³⁵ One then queries, whose (single and same) humanity, culture or solidarity is Hountondji talking about?

Epistemological Identity: Citizenship Vs Indigene-ship - A Sorry Story!

Identity can be approached from two perspectives, namely epistemological or qualitative identity; and metaphysical identity or numerical identity. African countries pride themselves as independent countries with their various passports identifying their citizens. Yes: for example, a Nigerian citizen can be identified with his country’s passports. But how much does this passport, apart from paper identity, guarantee one from within the status of a free citizen? Passports only designate epistemological identity, that is, “the evidence we use to judge of personal identity over time.”³⁶ In the midst of being identified with one single paper document, Nigeria is still a country where one’s name, religion, tribe and geographical location determine what one gets, and how others – people, communities and governments – treat one. What seems to reign in disguise within the country is *indigene-ship* or belongingness on the basis of indigeneousness! The various passports of African countries identify one outside, but designate one, at international ports of entry, as a member of ‘unwanted lepers among men,’ a product of a questionable race; hence, one is

³¹ Paulin Hountondji, ‘The Pitfalls of Being Different’ *Diogenes International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies* 131(Fall 1985): 56

³² See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 95-96.

³³ See Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays (1972-1980)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), 193; See Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) Vol. 1, 47.

³⁴ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) Vol. 1, 93.

³⁵ See *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁶ Colins McGinn, *The Character of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 107.

given special and specialised scrutiny. And let one turn inside, one sees that indigene-ship assigns one a limited space from within one's own country.

To what extent does Metaphysical Identity now matter for the African?

With reference to the African, metaphysical identity deals with the question of what it is like to be an African, which has to be answered from the first person perspective within the universal stage. The bad news is that the African is not in control of the universal stage of encounter even with the present language of globalisation. The instruments of communication are a borrowed; the rules of the global arena and the attendant economic manoeuvring are not determined by him; his disposition is from a fragmented mentality of the battered individual, raped by colonialism, with its attendant cultural distortion. He seems to be present to himself and the other as a victim of economic exploitation, cultural marginalisation, and political alienation. In the circumstances then, we may not arrive at the pure and uncontaminated African who can freely, without confusion, say what it is like to be him, and to donate oneself freely in a universal encounter. But does his personal identity matter in the attempt to retrieve authenticity from memory or relieve the memory of experience?

A Matter of Survival: Epistemological Identity as tolerably Less Evil!

Perhaps the huge rate of migration in the contemporary world is telling us that to survive personal identity does no longer matter! Does one keep track, again, of the dehumanising jobs and conditions Africans encounter in foreign countries? To step out of the question for personal identity and to simply wear the banner of survival, the African is like Albert Camus' tragic hero – a stranger and an exile tramped in illusions “without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised paradise.”³⁷ The African is despised abroad and hunted at home by the combined evils of social discrimination and economic and political hardship! It is now a question of survival for citizens of a continent who are manipulated to infinite variables, and who themselves have demonstrated colossal incompetency in managing their own affairs.

Even if there is an African passport that identifies all Africans as belonging to a single bloc, it will still remain an epistemological designation because what is it is like to be an African, that is, metaphysical identity that asks for “our conception of what evidence we use to judge personal identity for” is not

³⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* translated by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 12.

reducible to paper documents. But the good news is that it can guarantee survival that can be replicated in the various ways African countries attempt to curb the evil effects of discrimination on the basis of indigene-ship, tribe or religion. This will create a legal identity, as law is required and enforced to guarantee the basic conditions and respects for the survival of multiplicity of persons in a modern state. For example: we can make law that stipulates that for one to contest in an election in any part of the country, the minimal information to be contained on the form to be filled will be thus: name, residence, length of residence in a place, activity/work, and tax clearance. If one has certified the required months/years (for example, 6 months or 2 years) for residing in a place as a Nigerian citizen, then one qualifies to contest for the post of local government chairman or member of state house or national assembly or presidency.

I reiterate that what it is like to be oneself is not reducible to epistemological identity. It belongs to metaphysical criterion of identity. The African will seem to be stuck for a very long time with epistemological identity given that it is difficult to carve out a single being from multiplicity of persons and tribes that compose each country in Africa, especially when African tribes exhibit ontological disposition to hate one another. However, it does not seem to be to the advantage of someone in process or in movement to begin to insist on 'numerical identity' for the question of survival has taken a centre stage. It is enough that in the present circumstances the person is qualitatively the same, without being numerically the same! One can survive without personal identity! Perhaps the end result of the present search for African identity by the African may find an African of a fractured existence embodied in the fact of migration - the instinct to survive! Who would dispute that survival is not a best possible world in the torturous journey of the existential African whom both country and government have failed?

No one might give full account of what the individual African feels, and what it is like to be him, (but this again is not peculiar to the African for it deals with what it is like to be person/self in generally that cannot be exhausted from the third person perspective. At present, the epistemological criterion gives us the minimum and sufficient condition for characterising the African in the midst of tumbling conditions and fractured relationships among her citizens. Perhaps, this conference will unravel the dilemma of one whom circumstances have forced into the process of global negotiation for space to survive (migration),

while carrying a memory and conviction that what it is like to be one (African identity) is indelible in one's soul, but still would remain veiled for a very long time in the womb of time.

Those who insist, however, on the uniqueness or distinctness of the African in the midst of others must be circumspect. Blyden's warning is instructive in admonishing blacks towards self-improvement when he said that it was acceptable if blacks improve in culture and training and become respected class honoured by the whites given their innate and unique capacity as builders of civilisation. However, still referring to blacks, Blyden observed that "it is plain that, as a class, their inferiority will never cease until they cease to be a distinct people, possessing peculiarities which suggest antecedents of servility and degradation."³⁸ So, far, I have not really tried to deny African identity. I have only attempted to highlight the direction the question of identity, consciously or unconsciously, might be going for the young African in a contemporary setting. And this direction towards survival as embedded in 'migration' cannot be ignored. If one must insist on African identity, it must be sought at a competitive level of what is best in the Africa that first gave the world human and intellectual civilisation, albeit one has to give room for its survival in many forms.

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³⁸ Blyden, 'The Negro in Ancient History,' in *The People of Africa: a series of Papers on their Character, Condition and Future Prospects* ed. Henry M. Schieffelin, 2d., 33.

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