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AFRICA AND AFRICA(N) STUDIES:

CONFRONTING THE (MYSTIFYING) POWER OF IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

Africa-Day Memorial Lecture

Centre for Africa Studies/University of the Free State

22 May 2013

"Knowledge is power" was the inscription on the ruler we received as gifts from one of the local branches of an international financial institution (I do not remember if it was Barclays or Standard Bank). It symbolized the kind of initiation rite when we were entering the senior standards in the late 1960s at the German Higher Private School in Windhoek, preparing for the *Matrik*. These days power in Southern African settler societies was identical with white supremacy and hence with racial belonging and a strictly defined identity. Most of us were pushed through various forms of indoctrination to obtain a school certificate, which only testified that we were not resilient enough to withdraw from the state induced brain washing. The flip side of *christelik nasionale onderwys* (which I have to admit - if only for reasons of fairness - was not the kind of more liberal and tolerant education which we received on the island of the German private school) has been on this coin of educational currency the notorious Bantu education. In separate ways we were all prepared for the distinct places we were supposed to occupy in society. – This cryptic excursion into (not only) my personal history should suffice to illustrate that the contents and forms of transmission of knowledge are an integral part of social engineering, of enforcing, anchoring and reproducing value systems and convictions, thereby seeking to perpetuate a specific power structure in society.

However, the mere fact that I can today, some 45 years later, stand in front of you to present an inaugural lecture on the subject of the mystifying power of ideology and identity with regard to Africa and Africa(n) Studies is evidence that we were neither pre-determined nor doomed by being exposed to these mechanisms of domestication. While the effects of Apartheid and the mental dispositions such a system created lingers on in the social structures, concepts of power and methods of governance in our Southern African post-colonial realities, the race-based minority regimes have collapsed. But far from being "the end of history", liberation movements as governments rather show the limits to liberation. If we are serious about the struggles for emancipation, we still have to engage with us and with others in soul-searching investigations beyond the academic debate. We have to leave behind presumably safe

grounds and explore the frontiers surrounding our comfort zone. We have to question, to re-position, and ultimately have to take sides.[1]

Let's not be misled: "The Intimate Enemy", as the Indian sociologist Ashis Nandy has termed it[2], remains alive. We remain confronted in our engagements for true emancipation with the enormous task not to take things for granted. We need to look beyond the surface by tracing and interrogating what has contributed to the shaping of our mindset and practices. We cannot escape the need to critically inspect and review the values, features and characteristics, which have encroached or were imposed on us and have been internalized since our early socialization. They continue to reproduce a past, which – as William Faulkner had put it – "is never dead. It's not even past."[3] We are currently seeking to occupy space in the interregnum, which Antonio Gramsci diagnosed as a crisis characterized by "the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born", while "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear".[4]

We live in a world of contradictions and their mystifications. Deconstructing and challenging ideological smokescreens, often in contrast to social realities, remains a scholarly challenge. All too often, we are part of such ideological production and thereby contribute to cover up and seemingly justify or legitimize what exists instead of critically and robustly questioning it. This is also true for those of us battling to come to terms with what is called Africa and African Studies – as opposed to Africa Studies. The latter seems to me the less used but more realistic term for a simple reason: while we find it difficult to define Africa and African, Africa Studies is the more open classification, since African Studies seems to suggest that these studies (and by implication their production and ownership) are mainly if not exclusively African – which at least historically and with the currently still effective and lasting legacy of colonialism and empire seems highly misleading. So far we continue to focus and rely far too often on and work much more with studies *on* Africa than studies *from* Africa. This is a reflection of the continued globally anchored unequal structures, which also impact on and characterize knowledge production. Hence "Africa Studies" seems to me a more appropriate label. It marks at the same time a challenge to transform "Africa Studies" more into "African Studies".

Education and the knowledge reproduced through transmission is a powerful tool to influence and guide us when being brought up. It impacts from Kindergarten to University. Education matters. It enlightens or distorts. A focus on Africa and Africa(n)

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[1] See for earlier reflections on related aspects Henning Melber, "The virtues of civil courage and civil disobedience in the historical context of Namibia and South Africa", *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2001, pp. 235-244 and Henning Melber, "'Where There's No Fight for It There's No Freedom': On Scholars and Social Commitment in Southern Africa. Which Side Are We On?" *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2006, pp. 261-278.

[2] Ashis Nandy, *The Initimate Enemy – Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.

[3] *Requiem for a Nun* (1950), Act I/Scene III.

[4] Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers 1971, p. 276. As quoted in Tejumola Olaniyan, "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and African Studies", in: Zine Magubane (ed.), *Postmodernism, postcoloniality, and African Studies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press 2003, pp. 39-60 (here: p. 54).

Studies therefore also has to deal with education and its massive manipulative intervention. After all, by being involved in Africa(n) Studies, we also teach and thereby pass on knowledge (or what we consider to be knowledge). This shapes, intervenes, impacts, maybe distorts, and at times hopefully also mobilizes. The "World Social Science Report 2010" therefore has as its sub-title "Knowledge Divides".[5] Especially the contributions to its chapters 4 and 5 provide some sobering evidence to the fact that the current global trends towards even more internationalization – like its preceding stages – tends to reinforce the dominance of the North.

This does not exclude challenges also from within the belly of the beast. The Enlightenment always had the ambiguity to establish on the one hand a rationality, which promoted a pseudo-scientific belief in mono-causal, linear progress and development as all-embracing concept to explain and master the world while at the same time providing the tools and instruments for emancipation based on questioning this claim. The era of Enlightenment produced a smokescreen to cover Eurocentric dominance through claims of universality. But the legitimizing humbug of such claims has been questioned not only from those raised on the receiving end of such introvert, self-centered mindset, but also from some of those socialized within the system and supposed to be an integral part of its reproduction. Emancipation from hegemony, power and subjugation is a collective effort, which crosses boundaries and is in itself internationalism in practice.

Being European or Northern or of any other descent does not categorically pre-determine once and for all our worldview and convictions, even though cultural factors, in as much as class, gender, race and religion should not be dismissed lightly in the formation of identities and mindsets. Exposure to some of these experiences cannot be felt the same way by others with distinct other features and embodiments. But primary experiences and socialization processes do not deny us learning, changing, adapting and re-positioning. A continued supremacy of American-European social sciences, executing the power of definition, therefore does not offer us any excuses to abstain from joining counter-hegemonic strategies. There is no excuse for us, coming from within the belly of the beast, or those who were exposed to these values and have internalized them during their secondary socialization, why we should not question them. We can embark on self-critical reflections, challenging a hegemonic discourse, which constructs and reproduces false superiority claims at the expense of others. For us too it is possible to join Bob Marley in the rebuke of the *Babylon System*:

> We refuse to be
> What you wanted us to be
> We are what we are
> That's the way it's going to be, if you don't know
> You can't educate I
> For no equal opportunity

[5] *World Social Science Report 2010. Knowledge Divides*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Social Science Council (ISSC) 2010.

Talking about my freedom
People freedom and liberty

Yeah, we've been trodding on
The winepress much too long
Rebel, Rebel
We've been trodding on the
Winepress much too long, Rebel

Babylon System is the Vampire
Sucking the children day by day
Me say the Babylon System is the Vampire
Sucking the blood of the sufferers
Building church and university
Deceiving the people continually
Me say them graduating thieves and murderers
Look out now
Sucking the blood of the sufferers

Tell the children the truth
Tell the children the truth
Tell the children the truth right now
Come on and tell the children the truth

Bob Marley's refusal to succumb to the hegemonic project through his rebellious reggae culture leads us directly into the (dis-)comfort zone of the contested areas of knowledge production in the field of Africa(n) Studies. Let me begin with a drastic example. The then French President Nicolas Sarkozy presented us a prominent testimony concerning the magnitude of problems we are confronted with. His infamous speech on 27 July 2007 at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar/Senegal, delivered during a state visit to several West African countries, documented in spectacular fashion Eurocentric – if not colonial - arrogance. Sarkozy had the audacity to state the following:

> The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time, rhythmed by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words. In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress. In this universe where nature commands all, man escapes from the anguish of history that torments modern man, but he rests immobile in the centre of a static order where everything seems to have been written beforehand. This man (the traditional African) never launched himself towards the future. The idea never came to him to get out of this repetition and to invent his own destiny.[6]

[6] See for a summary of the speech and the reactions: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discours_de_Dakar. Among the many subsequently published critical interventions was an essay by Achille Mbembe, "Nicolas

Given that such perception has survived into the 21st century one should not be too surprised that only a few decades ago the French textbooks used in West African schools made reference to "our ancestors, the Gauls "[7]… - Not by accident, this might also bring back memories as to how the *Groot Trek* has dominated my generation's upbringing during primary and junior secondary school days. In a scathing response to Sarkozy's patronizing, deeply offending lecture, Achille Mbembe as one of the numerous eloquent African intellectuals (which seem not to exist on the map of the French head of state) concluded that

> the new French ruling elite's Africa is essentially a rural, magical, phantom Africa, partly bucolic, partly nightmarish, inhabited by peasant folk, composed of a community of sufferers who have nothing in common other than their common position on the margins of history, prostrate as they are in a outer-world – that of sorcerers and griots, of magical beings who keep fountains, sing in rivers and hide in the trees, of the village dead and ancestors whose voices can be heard, of masks and forests full of symbols, of the clichés that are so-called 'African solidarity', 'community spirit', 'warmth' and respect for elders and chiefs.[8]

Emancipation from such caliber of European internationalism implies in the first place that those from the outside are denied to continue claiming the power of definition. In Africa(n) Studies, this remains a relevant and contested issue. As Ebrima Sall concludes in his contribution to the "World Social Science Report 2010": "The challenge of autonomy, and of developing interpretative frameworks that are both scientific and universal, and relevant – that is, 'suitable' for the study of Africa and of the world from the standpoint of Africans themselves – is still very real."[9] Adebayo Olukoshi, his predecessor as Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is as adamant in advocating a similar dismissal of foreign perspectives imposed upon the continent and its people as integral part of the "North-South asymmetries in international knowledge production".[10] He criticized that "mainstream African Studies has constituted itself into a tool for the mastering of Africa by others whilst offering very little by way of how Africa might master the world and its own affairs."[11] He concurs with Mahmood Mamdani that "the culture of knowledge production about Africa … is based on analogy: Africa is read through the lenses of

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Sarkozy's Africa", published in the French original first in the Cameroonian newspaper "Le Messager" (Douala) on 8 August 2007 (translated by Melissa Thackway and posted on 18 August 2007 at www.africaresource.com, which also posted an unofficial English translation of Sarkozy's speech, from which the quote is taken).

[7] As even confirmed until today by an official web site of the French government, see http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/france_159/history_6813/an-history-spanning-more-than-eleven-centuries_6937/from-alesia-to-asterix-the-gallic-heritage_12271.html

[8] Achille Mbembe, *op. cit.*

[9] *World Social Science Report 2010*, *op. cit.*, pp. 44f.

[10] Adebayo Olukoshi, "African scholars and African Studies", in: Henning Melber (ed.), *On Africa. Scholars and African Studies. Contributions in Honour of Lennart Wohlgemuth*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute 2007, pp. 7-22 (here: p. 17).

[11] *Ibid*., p. 15.

Europe and not on terms deriving from its own internal dynamics."[12]

Hegemonic Eurocentric perspectives disguised as pseudo-universalism have infected knowledge production and in particular area studies, most prominently Africa(n) Studies. The virus is reproduced and passed on not through genetically inherited pigmentation but through mindsets and intellectual dispositions. Hence it does not help to draw a dividing line based on the place of origin of proponents or the place where theories are produced and applied. The balancing act undertaken by Kwabi Larbi Korang in exploring manifold orders of engagement also among African scholars is instructive. In his engagement with what is dubbed "postcolonialism" he compares those he calls the "rejectionists" (advocating Afrocentric nationalist positions) with the "accommodationists" (proposing a universalist line of argument) – only to argue that there is certain value and justification in both. As he suggests, we need to move beyond a reference point cast in stone. We need to deal with

> the important and substantial question of how Africanists must construe a normative 'Africa' in cultural knowledge and socio-political practice. That is, are we to assume a normative 'Africa' that is always already guaranteed such that this absolute 'Africa' is the type of subject/object of which we can ask the same questions, and which we can task cognitively and practically to perform the same jobs eternally, world without end? Or ought we to define and position 'Africa' contingently and relationally – hence an 'Africa' open to the modifying pressures of time and of its global situation?[13]

As he concludes, an obligation to operate within universal paradigms ("migrancy", as he calls it) is not by definition antagonistic to particularism (as a loyalty to "home"). The notions are not mutually exclusive.[14] This shifts the focus more on ownership than exclusiveness in the sense of one-dimensional perspectives reduced to cultural isolationism.

This issue was also very much a concern of Tanzania's first President Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922-1999). He last visited the University of Dar es Salaam in December 1997 when he participated in an international conference in honour of his 75th birthday on "Reflections on Leadership in Africa – Forty Years after Independence". The late *Mwalimu* (Swahili for "teacher", a respectfully fond title he held not only because he had this profession before taking political office) had the potential of education and

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 18. Cf. Mahmood Mamdani, "African Studies Made in USA", *CODESRIA Bulletin*, no. 2, 1990; and "The Challenge of the Social Sciences in the 21st Century", in Ruth Mukama/Murindwa Rutange (eds), *Confronting 21st Century Challenges: Analyses and Re-dedications by National and International Scholars*. Volume 1. Kampala: Faculty of Social Sciences/Makerere University 2004. See for an overview on the contestation of African Studies Henning Melber, "The Relevance of African Studies", *Stichproben. Vienna Journal of African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 16, 2009, pp. 183-200 (also published in *The New Legon Observer. A Ghana Society for Development Dialogue Publication*, vol. 3, no. 7, 28 May 2009 and no. 8, 25 June 2009).
[13] Kwaku Larbi Korang, "Useless Provocation or Meaningful Challenge? The 'Posts' Versus African Studies", in: Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (ed.), *The Study of Africa. Volume I: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters*. Dakar: CODESRIA 2006, pp. 443-466 (here: p. 454).
[14] *Ibid*., p. 464.

especially "Education for Self-reliance" as a centerpiece of his convictions. He has also been an advocate of "African socialism" for most of his life. But in his speech in front of several hundred students, he stressed the degree of ownership over affairs over and above the ideological orientation:

> Throw away all our ideas about socialism. Throw them away, give them to the Americans, give them to the Japanese [...] so that they can, I don't know, they can do whatever they like with them. *Embrace* capitalism, fine! But you *have* to be self-reliant.[15]

But self-reliance did for him by no means imply to move into isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, it seeks cross-fertilization for the own gains through insights into the thoughts and ideas and the knowledge of others.[16] It also by no means implies a distancing from normative frameworks seeking to define and implement a degree of universal relevance for and commitment by as many people as possible.

The historical discourses and stages of contestation over the definition and applicability of the Universal Charter of Human Rights is a fascinating case in point, which shows that "the South" (and in particular representatives from the colonized world, not least from Africa) were indeed able to claim ownership over these fundamental platforms created also for the sake of their own emancipation - if only at times to later forget about it or dismiss them as Eurocentric cultural imperialism when the same conventions and standards were applied to the new governments.[17] - Opportunistic selectivity of such dubious nature is among those matters political rulers seem to share when it suits them – no matter where they are and what they represent. Double standards are so to say among the universally shared techniques for those in power.

But there have always been schools of thought and convictions, which challenged hegemonic definitions and cultivated a counter-culture of global humanity seeking the commonalities based upon the respected differences. Among those representing such values had been Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (1905-1961). He showed that firm roots in one's own society, with its history and culture, are no obstacles or limiting factors but a valuable point of departure if not taken as the one and only absolute "truth'" The awareness of one's own upbringing in a specific social context, anchoring one's identity in a framework guided by a set of values, allows for curiosity towards "otherness" and explorations into the "unknown" for one's own benefit and gain. There are no risks to enter a dialogue with "strangers" if

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[15] Quoted from Haroub Othman (ed.), *Reflections on Leadership in Africa – Forty Years After Independence*. Brussels: VUB University Press 2000, p. 21 (original emphasis).

[16] As Haroub Othman mentioned in his introductory comment on Nyerere's speech in the same volume: "Mwalimu Nyerere's last intellectual work was the translation into Kiswahili of Plato's The Republic. As he was lying in bed at London's St. Thomas Hospital, he went through the manuscript, made the necessary corrections and completed them before he died."

[17] See i.a. Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010 and Daniel J. Whelan, *Indivisible Human Rights. A History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010. It should at least be mentioned in passing here, that education is an integral part of the canon of human rights and hence an entitlement.

one knows where one comes from. Hammarskjöld was a product of the Swedish society between the two World Wars, on its way to the welfare state. His exchanges with the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber testify to this conviction and his practiced dialogue in search of solutions to conflicts and differences deeply entrenched in sets of values, norms and specific cultural socializations, but transcending a narrow confinement. Five days after his re-election as the United Nations Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld in a letter to Martin Buber (dated 16 April 1958) expressed his admiration for Buber's philosophy "of unity created 'out of the manyfold'".[18]

Maybe for some a bit surprisingly, the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" enters the picture here. As Paulo Freire emphasized in a remarkable affinity to what has just been referred to as the substance of the Buber-Hammarskjöld discourse:

> Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible, if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself.[19]

Strangers, then, through mutual empathy turn into fellow human beings who can relate to each other despite all distinctions. Becoming aware of this commonality despite differences, specific knowledge - wrongly so generalized as universal knowledge - could be modified and transformed through interaction and exchange among equals and thereby turned into common knowledge across boundaries:

> The radical committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a 'circle of certainty' within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This person is not afraid to meet people or enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.[20]

More than half a century ago, Dag Hammarskjöld addressed students at the university of Lund in Southern Sweden. Commenting on the Western perspectives on Africa and Asia dating back to the early 20th century, Dag Hammarskjöld found it striking "how much they did *not* see and did *not* hear, and how even their most positive attempts at entering into a world of different thoughts and emotions were colored by an unthinking, self-assured superiority."[21] Hammarskjöld clearly dismissed any claims based on a kind

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[18] Quoted in Lou Marin, *Can we save true dialogue in an Age of Mistrust? The encounter of Dag Hammarskjöld and Martin Buber*. Uppsala: The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2010 (Critical Currents; no. 8), p. 11.

[19] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum 1996, p. 70.

[20] *Ibid*., p. 21.

[21] Dag Hammarskjöld, "Asia, Africa, and the West". Address Before the Academic Association of the University of Lund. Lund, Sweden, May 4, 1959 (UN Press Release SG/813, May 4, 1959). In: *Public Papers of the Secretaries-General of The United Nations*. Volume IV: Dag Hammarskjöld 1958-1960. Selected and

of naturalist concept of dominance rooted in some biological advancement over others and also questioned the legitimacy sought by dominant classes to justify their privileges:

> The health and strength of a community depend on every citizen's feeling of solidarity with the other citizens, and on his willingness, in the name of this solidarity, to shoulder his part of the burdens and responsibilities of the community. The same is of course true of humanity as a whole. And just that it cannot be argued that within a community an economic upper class holds its favored position by virtue of greater ability, as a quality which is, as it were, vested in the group by nature, so it is, of course, impossible to maintain this in regard to nations in their mutual relationships.
> (…)
> We thus live in a world where, no more internationally than nationally, any distinct group can claim superiority in mental gifts and potentialities of development. (…) Those democratic ideals which demand equal opportunities for all should be applied also to peoples and races. (…) no nation or group of nations can base its future on a claim of supremacy.[22]

Hammarskjöld concluded his speech with the story of a colleague from Asia educated at European universities[23]:

> He once told me how, in his early youth, he lived with and loved the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. He thought he had made the original text entirely his own, until he came to Britain and became acquainted with Fitzgerald's translation. Then, this in turn became – in the academic surroundings that began to transform him – his 'real' Rubaiyat ... He returned home, however, and again found Omar Khayyam's poems such as he had once made them his own. The pendulum kept swinging, and, he concluded, 'even today I do not know which Rubaiyat is mine, Omar's or Fitzgerald's.'

And he ends with the vision: "We must reach the day when … all of us can enjoy in common the Rubaiyat and the fact that we have it both in Omar's and in Fitzgerald's version.[24]

As the example of Dag Hammarskjöld shows, the question, "which side are you on", is relevant for any kind of proponent, no matter of her/his background, socialization, cultural, class, sexual, religious or any other affinity. Being African (what ever that means) is hence not in any way a conclusive indicator for the perceptions, mindsets, or ideological orientations. The we-they dichotomy is not one between Europeans and Africans or Africans and the rest of the world. The dividing line is more complicated and

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edited with commentary by Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote. New York and London: Columbia University Press 1974, pp. 380-387 (here: p. 382, original emphasis).

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 383 and 384.

[23] According to the editors it was the United Nations Under-Secretary General Ahmed Bokhári, who died in December 1958.

[24] Dag Hammarskjöld, *op. cit.,* pp. 386f.

nuanced. The geographical factor is one among many. Maybe it is an important, but certainly not the exclusive one. This reduces the notion of Africa as a specific form of an inclusive or exclusivist claim, since Africa remains for all making reference to it an arena and area for projection, which allows beyond the term a variety of different and at times opposing to contradictory meanings and interpretations.

A recent PhD thesis based its central parts purely on articles by African scholars in African periodicals – in itself a pioneering undertaking and interestingly so done by a young European scholar. She resists from claiming definite statements about or clear-cut characterization of so-called African discourse. Contrary to the criticism of a universalist configuration with regard to human rights and development, her approach "does neither claim that African thought per se can offer alternatives to hegemonic discourses because it is African, nor claim that different African positions can be assessed according to any alleged degree of 'mental colonization'". Rather, representations of Africa "have political, i.e. emancipatory, or repressive effects, because all representations do contain either hegemonic or subversive potential".[25]

Being African has at best a geographical meaning, which in our times of global mobility is reduced even further in its relevance as a factor. As the PhD thesis documents, there are several distinctive approaches among African scholars, which do have little to nothing in common except the claim or definition of the authors as being African based on purely their local origin. Their thinking, convictions and arguments differ. And why not? As Europeans, or Asians, or South Americans or North Americans we are not by definition bound to have more in common than a basic set of mainly visible physical features (if at all), which in the world of our 21st century become less and less reliable and increasingly misleading. Having a black minister for gender equality in Sweden between 2006 and 2013, who was born in Burundi, might be among the obvious cases in point. Who is European, and who is African?

And what is Europe or Africa, for that matter? There is no easy definition at hand, and no conceptual clarity, despite several more or less systematic efforts - for Africa more prominently the ones by Mudimbe.[26] The answers depend not only but also upon the power of definition, the interests and the forces at play. And the result is different according to circumstances – unless we retract into a formalistic construction by defining territorial entities without any meaningful substance in terms of the character. Then we can of course draw the lines geographers have fixated as demarcations and put the matter to rest. But the definition of territorial space is anything but a qualitative insight, admittedly important for concepts related to physical origins, law, international relations and similar matters, which focus on entitlements rooted in statehood and citizenship. But it allows no substantive definition in terms of social concepts, values, or

[25] Michaela Krenceyova, *Africa and the Rest. Imaginations beyond a continent in African scholarship on human rights and development*. PhD thesis submitted in December 2012 at the Institute for African Studies, University of Vienna, pp. 15-16.
[26] Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press and London: James Currey 1988; and *The Idea of Africa. African Systems of Thought.* Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press and London: James Currey 1994.

other notions beyond legalistically fixed rights (or denial of rights). It certainly is not enough for a definition of Africa(n) Studies (or any other regional or area studies, for that matter). As put by Ndlovu-Gathseni,

> … there is no consensus on what Africa means and who is an African (…) the construction of Africa and African identities is the complex states of being and becoming mediated through and through by spatial, agential, structural, historical and contingent variables.[27]

This reinforces Kwame Appiah's argument that Africa is "not a primordial fixture but an invented reality".[28] Under such circumstances there is no Third World or Africa knowledge in distinction from European or Western knowledge. Francis Nyamnjoh has provoked an inspiring debate over the role and focus of anthropological studies in Africa, which is in a similar way applicable to Africa(n) Studies. "If belonging to Africa is a contested and ambiguous relationship", he maintains, "belonging to the tribe of anthropology is not any different".[29] – Nor is it for the tribe of so-called Africanists, one is tempted to add.

Denouncing the proclaimed universality of some classical philosophers in its core as ethnocentrism, Paulin Hountondji undertook to deconstruct notions of "Westerness" and "Europeanness" in as much as "Africanness". For him, the critique of ethnocentrism – applicable everywhere – leads

> … to a de-territorialization of cultural values. It makes them free-floating at most, detaches them from their geographical base, or more precisely, relativizes their relationship to a base by demonstrating how accidental, contingent, and not intrinsically necessary this relationship is.[30]

We might in this context of deconstruction of the imagination of Africa also consider an appeal articulated by an African scholar, who argues against the continued cultivation of self-pity and a pseudo-radical "Afrocentrism". As disputed and controversial as his proposed view of the subject matters might be, it helps to identify that the "frontier" is

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[27] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gathseni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa. Myths of Decolonization*. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa 2013, p. 100. See on the variety of African identities also Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "Concluding Reflections on Beyond Identities: Rethinking Power in Africa", in: Souleymane Bachir Diagne/Amina Mama/Henning Melber/Framncis B. Nyamnjoh, *Identity and Beyond: Rethinking Africanity*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet 2001 (Discussion Paper; no. 12), pp. 25-33.

[28] Ibid., p. 111. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992.

[29] Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 47, no. 2-3, 2012, pp. 63-92 (here: p. 71). The debate over the article was opened with contributions by Andrew Hartnack, Jean-Pierre Warnier, Isak Niehaus and Sanya Osha in *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2013 (accessible at: http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/index) and will end with further interventions by Robert Gordon, Annika Björnsdotter Teppo and a final response by Francis Nyamnjoh in *Africa Spectrum,* vol. 48, no. 2, 2013.

[30] Paulin J. Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning. Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa.* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 2002, p. 137.

not a dividing line between "them" and "us" but between different schools of thought crossing any geographical borders and spaces. According to Achille Mbembe, the claimed "historicity" of African societies is "rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized". He therefore rejects the notion of any "distinctive historicity" of African societies since the times of the slave trade, which are "not embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination". This understanding consequently "presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it".[31] Such common ground implies the journey into the belly of the beast, "the horror", as visualised by Mister Kurtz on his deathbed in Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness", which sets the scene in midst of the horrific and most brutal forms of colonial exploitation and oppression in King Leopold's Congo. It demands not to ignore or put aside but to accept the connecting line that might exist between "us" and "them" and the dialectical relationship, which unfolded its devastating dynamics during the history of violent expansionism.

As scholars – and as human beings – we have options. We can try to maintain a framework and references guided by universal humanism and its values, which then also impact on our individual perspectives, including our approach to academic discourses. We are not doomed or confined to a certain mindset by merely originating from a specific place or society. There are powerful agencies shaping and influencing our orientations, but they can result in very different ways of engaging with social realities.

Frantz Fanon's revolutionary convictions, as most prominently articulated in his manifesto on "The Wretched of the Earth", were not least a result of the humiliation and alienation he was exposed to when studying in France during the late 1940s. He summarized his rude awakening to the realities of being black in a white dominated society in "Black Skin, White Masks". In this challenge of white dominance he stated more than 60 years ago

> that man is a *yes*. … *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity. But man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom.[32]

If "Knowledge is Power", as the inscription on my ruler alerted me, then "our" knowledge – as opposed to "their" knowledge - has power too. Knowledge is ambiguous: it is a powerful instrument to domesticate, to brainwash, to coopt, and to alienate. But it is at the very same time as powerful an instrument to emancipate, to liberate, and to empower. It is a double-edged sword. Knowledge does not pre-determine our minds, our thoughts, and our ultimate decision how and in whose interests to use our accumulated knowledge and the insights we gain. "Knowledge is

[31] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2001, p. 9.
[32] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press 1968, p. 222 (French original 1952)

necessary for action", as Kwasi Wiredu stated. And he further pointed to the problem, "that much of the knowledge we need in Africa now is in the hands, and sometimes in the heads, of non-Africans."[33]

Human beings have choices, and educated human beings with at times a relatively privileged existence even more. You, we, all of us in academia are a species of highly educated human beings in a formal sense of accumulated, abstract knowledge (which should not be misunderstood as superior to the education which life offers to everyone and can create wisdom of a much deeper sense also among those considered as "uneducated"). We have been trained to argue, to rationalize, to justify and to explain. We should use knowledge as empowerment for emancipatory action and escape the fate of ending as "potted plants in greenhouses"[34] and have the means to do so. Not only but also in the field of Africa(n) Studies.

What we need is the awareness, self-confidence and pride of Lawino. In Okot p'Bitek's poem *Song of Lawino* she claims her identity and thereby her human dignity:

> I am proud of the hair
> With which I was born
> And as no white woman
> Wishes to do her hair
> Like mine,
> Because she is proud
> Of the hair with which she was born,
> I have no wish
> To look like a white woman.
>
> No Leopard
> Would change into a hyena,
> And the crested crane
> Would hate to be changed
> Into the bold-headed,
> Dung-eating vulture,
> The long-necked and graceful giraffe
> Cannot become a monkey.
>
> Let no one
> Uproot the Pumpkin.[35]

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[33] Kwasi Wiredu, "Our Problem of Knowledge: Brief Reflections on Knowledge and Development in Africa", in: Ivan Karp/D.A. Masolo (eds), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2000, p. 181.

[34] Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "'Potted Plants in Greenhouses': A Critical Reflection on the Resilience of Colonial Education in Africa", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 129-154. The quote in the title, referring to those Africans socialized in the Western institutions of learning is from an essay by Mahmood Mamdani, *The Intelligentsia, the State and Social Movements: Some Reflections on Experiences in Africa*. Kampala: Centre for Basic Research 1990, p. 3.

[35] Okot p'Bitek, Song of Lawino. Nairobi: East African Publishing House 1972[4], p. 63.

Instead of following this example in confidently claiming space, we sometimes tend to resignate in the face of established neoliberal corporate power, worldwide structural imbalances and growing inequalities under greedy global and local elites obsessed with control. We might at times be tempted to give up, feel like Don Quixote in the battle against the windmills and risk ending in cynical bitterness of an intellectual arrogance if not – even worse – just decide to join the Babylon system. But this would mean capitulation while against all odds we can retain a voice and are agency too. Asking what academics can do, John Lonsdale as a European scholar in Africa(n) Studies concludes:

> Our only power is to educate imaginations. But that is potentially enormous, both in what we write and what we advocate.[36]

Put differently but at the same time similarly in the perspectives of an African scholar in Africa(n) Studies:

> By no means has the battle been won, but increasingly African voices are being heard in a manner and on a scale that before 1945 Europe never imagined would ever be possible. From this perspective alone we ought to be very actively interested in the discomfort, no matter how minor, our having a voice is causing our oppressors, so that we can know where to add more poison to the injury, to make it fester and become gangrenous enough to bring down the Goliath.[37]

This does not imply any rejection of "the West" or "Western thought", nor "Western" agency, as another African scholar insisted, "but to cultivate and develop a concrete synthesis" committed to the task "of intellectual work focused on Africa" as "an ongoing conceptual purging of all that was imposed on us".[38]

> For as intellectuals – African or otherwise – working within the domains of various disciplines, the responsibility that we have is to make our respective scholarly projects concrete undertakings aimed at human betterment.[39]

Rick Turner, the South African academic who was assassinated in cold blood in an ambush in January 1978 while being under house arrest in Durban, stressed "The Necessity of Utopian Thinking" in his collection of essays published more than 40 years ago. What he then had to say for South Africa is applicable to all other African societies too – as a matter of fact, to all societies, and not only then:

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[36] John Lonsdale, "African Studies, Europe & Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2005, pp. 377-402 (here: p. 397).
[37] Tejumola Olaniyan, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
[38] Tsenay Serequeberhan, "Decolonization and the Practice of Philosophy", in: Nicholas M. Creary (ed.), *African Intellectuals and Decolonization*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 2012, pp. 137-159 (here: p. 150).
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

> … unless we think in Utopian terms about South African society we will not really come to understand how it works today. We will take for granted its inequalities, power relationships and behavior patterns which need to be explained. Nor will we be able to evaluate the society adequately. We will not understand on how many different levels there are alternatives, and so the possibility of choice, and so the possibility of moral judgment.[40]

As Kwasi Wiredu conceded, "one good thing about utopianism is that it may give us a clear idea of the things worth struggling for".[41] Rick Turner, Steve Biko, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Ruth First and many more were aware of the things worth struggling for. They are among the role models for those of us taking side in Africa(n) Studies as an integral part of the struggle for emancipation. Like them numerous other - known and unknown – scholar activists were murdered for their commitments. For their determination, to promote the ideals of a decent world of human beings living in dignity based on true equality and respect. We owe it to them to apply the emancipatory potential of not only but also Africa(n) Studies in contributing to such a better world not only but also in Africa.[42]

[40] Richard Turner, The Necessity of Utopian Thinking. In: *The Eye of the Needle. An essay on Participatory Democracy.* Johannesburg: Special Programme for Christian Action in Society 1972 (Spro-cas 2), p. 7.
[41] Kwasi Wiredu, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
[42] Among the many known political activists, who paid for their convictions and engagement with their lives, has been Anton Lubowski. He was assassinated on the day 12 years after the murder of Steve Biko outside of his home in Windhoek in a similar way as Rick Turner, by a hail of bullets on the evening of 12 September 1989. Being among the last victims ahead of the elections paving the way to Namibia's Independence, I dedicate this inaugural lecture to his memory.