

# What is African in Africa(n) Studies? Confronting the (Mystifying) Power of Ideology and Identity<sup>1</sup>

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Dealing with ‘Discovery and Denial’, recent explorations in ‘Social Science Theory and Interdisciplinarity in African Studies’ ended with the conclusion that ‘new theories arising from the African lived experience of the twenty-first century are the principal way forward’ (Bryceson 2012: 302). The author mainly concentrates on a critical re-assessment of the interaction between external agencies and their representatives and local responses bordering on the impacts of agrarian and development studies rather than Africa(n) Studies. She thereby documents that within the interdisciplinary context these borders are hardly visible and at best porous. Material realities, theories and ideological perceptions interrelate. They also shape and affect policy recommendations:

... apart from the sociology of theoretical production in Western academia, there is still the deeper question of African Studies’ theoretical relevance to the African continent’s material development. Each Western social science discipline represents a historically determined body of concepts and theoretical models. Each has its own unique foundation and developmental history lodged in the Western historical experience of industrialization and current post-industrial societies. To the extent that Western social science has confronted non-industrial societies, it has been primarily from the vantage point of its own evolution from agrarian societies, colonial conquest abroad, and now post-colonial spheres of economic and political interest. Western social science theory is bounded by disciplinary strictures and biased towards perceiving non-Western phenomena through the lens of Western centrality, if not supremacy. (Bryceson 2012: 299)

The power of definition held by actors relates to the terms of ownership – but also identity – within the sphere of knowledge production. Based on personal encounters with particular African realities and a secondary socialisation in southern Africa, which resulted in my engagement in Africa(n) Studies, this article presents a complementary perspective. To some extent it abstracts from direct (in the sense of economic) material realities and further explores ‘disciplinary control and theoretical fractures’ within Africa(n) Studies:

While academic freedom is highly cherished in Western societies, the compulsion to conform in African Studies and in the social sciences generally is subtle and pervasive. Strangely, social scientists spend their lives analyzing others, but rarely hold a mirror to themselves to question the hows and whys of their theoretical production. (Bryceson 2012: 296)

This article adds to such interrogatory undertakings by questioning and deconstructing notions we often use without deeper reflections.

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## AFRICA, AFRICA(N) STUDIES AND GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE

We live in a world of contradictions and their mystifications. Deconstructing and challenging perceptions, often promoted in contrast to social realities (but nonetheless part of them), remains a scholarly challenge. All too often, scholars and their academic engagements are – willingly or unintentionally – part of an ideological knowledge production. They contribute to hegemonic discourses by justifying or legitimising dominant assumptions instead of critically and robustly questioning them (which, strictly speaking, is also part of a counter-ideological endeavour and hence likewise not free from ideological dimensions).

This is also true for those 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. In contrast, 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 lasting legacy of colonialism and empire, currently still effective, seems highly misleading. Until now we have continued 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 characterise knowledge production. Hence Africa Studies – or ‘The Study of Africa’ (Zeleza 2006; 2007)<sup>2</sup> – seems a more appropriate label. It marks at the same time a challenge to transform Africa Studies into African Studies.<sup>3</sup>

Education and the knowledge reproduced through transmission is a powerful tool to influence and guide us. It impacts from kindergarten to university and beyond. Education matters. It enlightens or distorts. A focus on Africa and Africa(n) Studies therefore must also 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 mobilises. The *World Social Science Report 2010* has as its sub-title ‘Knowledge Divides’ (UNESCO 2010). The contributions to chapters 4 and 5 provide some sobering evidence to the fact that current global trends towards ever more internationalisation – like its preceding stages – tend to reinforce the dominance of the North.

This does not exclude challenges from within the belly of the beast. The Enlightenment was always ambiguous in establishing 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 for Eurocentric dominance through claims of universality. But the legitimising humbug of such claims has been questioned not only by those raised on the receiving end of such an introverted, self-centered mindset, but also from some of those socialised 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”, ethnicity, sexual orientation 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 those with distinct other features and embodiments. But primary experiences and socialisation processes do not deny us learning, changing, adapting and re-positioning. A continued supremacy of American-European

<sup>2</sup> As the second of the edited volumes documents (Zeleza 2007), African Studies are indeed very much Africa Studies conducted elsewhere by non-African scholars and often in their genesis rooted in earlier colonial trajectories.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, a senior scholar at one of the leading African Studies Centres in Western Europe was irritated by this passage and felt this distinction made no sense. In contrast, colleagues at South African universities responded in the affirmative that this passage resonated with their own intuition.

social sciences, executing the power of definition, therefore does not offer any excuses to abstain from joining counter-hegemonic strategies. There is no excuse for those coming from within the belly of the beast, or those who were exposed to these values and having internalised them during their secondary socialisation – in schools, other institutions of learning or simply through peer groups – not to question them. Everyone can embark on self-critical reflections, challenging a hegemonic discourse, which constructs and reproduces false superiority claims at the expense of others. In principle it should be possible for everybody to join Bob Marley in the rebuke of the *Babylon System*.<sup>4</sup>

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. It relates to what Jean and John Comaroff (2004: 330ff) critically and with references to the post-colonial school of thought challenged as 'modernity and its *camera obscura*'. The then French President Nicolas Sarkozy presented 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, delivered during a state visit to several West African countries, documented in spectacular fashion Eurocentric – if not colonial – arrogance:

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, rhymed 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.<sup>5</sup>

Given that such a perception has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> In a scathing response to Sarkozy's patronising, deeply offensive lecture, one of the numerous eloquent African intellectuals (who seemingly did not 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. (Mbembe 2007)

<sup>4</sup> '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 / 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.'

<sup>5</sup> See for a summary of the speech and reactions at [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discours\\_de\\_Dakar](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discours_de_Dakar). Among the many subsequently published critical interventions was an essay by Achille Mbembe, 'Nicolas Sarkozy's Africa', published in French in the Cameroonian newspaper *Le Messager* (Douala) on 8 August 2007. This was subsequently translated by Melissa Thackway and posted on 18 August 2007 at [www.africaresource.com](http://www.africaresource.com), which also posted an unofficial English translation of Sarkozy's speech, from which the quote is taken.

<sup>6</sup> And still asserted 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](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).

Emancipation from such caliber of European internationalism implies in the first place that those from the outside are denied the continued claiming power of definition. In Africa(n) Studies, this remains a relevant and contested issue. As Ebrima Sall concludes 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' (UNESCO 2010: 44ff). Adebayo Olukoshi, Sall's 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' (Olukoshi 2007: 17). He objected 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' (Olukoshi 2007: 15). He concurs with Mahmood Mamdani (1990a; 2004) that 'the culture of knowledge production about Africa ... is based on analogy: Africa is read through the lenses of Europe and not on terms deriving from its own internal dynamics' (Olukoshi 2007: 18).<sup>7</sup>

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 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? (Korang 2006: 454)

As Korang 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 (Korang 2006: 464). This shifts the focus more on to 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 Kambarege 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) held the potential of education, and 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 a degree of ownership over and above 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' (quoted in Othman 2000: 21; original emphasis). But self-reliance for him by no means implied moving into isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, it seeks cross-fertilisation for its own gains through insights into

<sup>7</sup> For an overview on the contestation of African Studies see also Melber (2009).

the thoughts, ideas and the knowledge of others.<sup>8</sup> 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. This shows that the South (and in particular representatives from the colonised 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 dismiss them as Eurocentric cultural imperialism when the same conventions and standards were applied to their new governments (cf. Burke 2010; Whelan 2010). 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 among the universally shared techniques of those in power.

## NON-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES

There have always been schools of thought and convictions which challenged hegemonic definitions and cultivated a counter-culture of global humanity seeking commonalities based upon respected differences. Among those representing such values has been Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (1953–1961).<sup>9</sup> He showed that firm roots in one's own society, and 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 entering into a dialogue with 'strangers' if one knows where one comes from. Hammarskjöld was a product of 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 socialisations, 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 manifold"' (quoted in Marin 2010: 11).

Perhaps surprisingly, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a remarkable affinity with 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. (Freire 1996: 70)

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 generalised 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

<sup>8</sup> 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.'

<sup>9</sup> For a recent appraisal of the relevance of his ethics see Stahn and Melber (2014).

liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire 1996: 21)

More than half a century ago, Dag Hammarskjöld addressed students at the University of Lund in southern Sweden. Commenting on Western perspectives on Africa and Asia dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 coloured by an unthinking, self-assured superiority’ (Hammarskjöld 1974: 382). He clearly dismissed any claims based on a kind 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. (Hammarskjöld 1974: 383, 384)

Hammarskjöld concluded his speech with the story of a colleague from Asia educated at European universities:<sup>10</sup>

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’ (Hammarskjöld 1974: 386ff).

As the example of Dag Hammarskjöld shows, the question ‘which side are you on’ (cf. Melber 2006) is relevant for any kind of proponent, no matter their background, socialisation, cultural, class, sexual, religious or any other affinity. Being African (whatever that means) is hence not in any way a conclusive indicator of 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 nuanced. The geographical factor is one among many. It is an important, but certainly not the exclusive factor. 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 opposition to contradictory meanings and interpretations.

## DECONSTRUCTING ‘AFRICANITY’

A recent PhD thesis based its central sections purely on articles by African scholars in African periodicals – in itself a pioneering undertaking and interestingly done by a young European scholar. She resists claiming definite statements or clear-cut characterisation of

<sup>10</sup> According to the editors it was the United Nations Under-Secretary General Ahmed Bokhâri, who died in December 1958.

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’ (Krenceyova 2012: 15ff).

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 Krenceyova (2012) documents, there are several distinctive approaches among African scholars, which have little or nothing in common except the claim or definition of the authors as ‘being African’ based purely on their local/physical origin. Their thinking, convictions and arguments differ. And why should they not? Europeans, or Asians, or South Americans or North Americans 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 21<sup>st</sup> century become less and less reliable and increasingly misleading (just take the national athletics or football teams of European countries). 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, except for physical-territorial boundaries, for that matter? There is no easy definition at hand, and no conceptual clarity, despite several more or less systematic efforts; for Africa, most prominently, the ones by Mudimbe (1988; 1994). Answers depend not simply 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 character. Then we can of course draw the lines geographers have fixed 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 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): ‘there is no consensus on what Africa means and who is an African ... the construction of Africa and African identities is the complex state of being and becoming mediated through and through by spatial, agential, structural, historical and contingent variables’ (Ndlovu-Gathenshi 2013: 100).<sup>11</sup>

This reinforces Kwame Appiah’s argument that Africa is ‘not a primordial fixture but an invented reality’ (Ndlovu-Gathenshi 2013: 111; cf. Appiah 1992). 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’ (Nyamnjoh 2012b: 71).<sup>12</sup> Nor is it for the tribe of so-called Africanists, one is tempted to add.

Denouncing the proclaimed universality of some classical philosophers as ethnocentrism in its core, Paulin Hountondji undertook to deconstruct notions of ‘Westernness’ and ‘Europeanness’ in as much as ‘Africanness’. For him, the critique of ethnocentrism (a concept applicable for every culture) points to ‘a de-territorialization of cultural values. It makes them free-floating at most, detaches them from their

<sup>11</sup> On the variety of African identities see also Nyamnjoh (2001).

<sup>12</sup> Responses to the article by Andrew Hartnack, Jean-Pierre Warnier, Isak Niehaus and Sanya Osha were published in *Africa Spectrum* 48 (1) (2013). The debate concluded with interventions from Robert Gordon, Annika Björnsdotter Teppo and a final response by Francis Nyamnjoh in *Africa Spectrum* 48(2) (2013). All these articles are accessible at <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/issue/view/89> and <http://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/afsp/issue/view/95> respectively.

geographical base, or more precisely, relativizes their relationship to a base by demonstrating how accidental, contingent, and not intrinsically necessary this relationship is' (Hountondji 2002: 137).

The deconstruction of 'Africa' is also advocated by Achille Mbembe. He 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 not a dividing line between some imaginary dichotomy of 'them' and 'us' but between different schools of thought crossing geographical borders and spaces. According to him, 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' (Mbembe 2001: 9). 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.

Scholars – and human beings in general – have options. They can try to maintain a framework and references guided by universal humanism and its values, which then also impact on their individual perspectives, including an approach to academic discourses. As scholars, 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 *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 summarised 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' (Fanon 1968: 222; emphasis in the original).

## THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE

If *Knowledge is Power*, 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, or our ultimate decision about how and in whose interests to use our accumulated knowledge and the insights we gain. 'Knowledge is necessary for action', as Kwasi Wiredu stated. 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' (Wiredu 2000: 181).

Human beings have choices, and educated human beings with at times a relatively privileged existence even more. All in academia (including those in Africa Studies) are a species of highly educated human beings in the 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 in a much deeper sense among those considered as uneducated, in the sense of having little or no formal school education). We have been trained to argue, to rationalise, 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' (Nyamnjoh 2012a),<sup>13</sup> and have the means to do so. Not only but also in the field of Africa(n) Studies.

What we need to remember is the awareness, self-confidence and pride of Lawino. In Okot p'Bitek's poem *Song of Lawino* (1972: 63) she claims her identity and thereby her human dignity.<sup>14</sup> Instead of following her example in confidently claiming space, we sometimes tend to become resigned 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 our agency too. Asking what academics can do, a prominent 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' (Lonsdale 2005: 397). Put 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. (Olaniyan 2003: 47)

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. [...] 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.' (Serequeberhan 2012: 150, 151)

Rick Turner, the South African academic who was assassinated in cold blood in an ambush in January 1978 while 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:

... 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. (Turner 1972: 7)

As Kwasi Wiredu (2000: 181) conceded, 'one good thing about utopianism is that it may give us a clear idea of the things worth struggling for'. Rick Turner, Steve Biko, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Ruth First and many more were aware of the ideals worth engaging with and struggling for. They are among the role models for those 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. They died 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

<sup>13</sup> The quote in the title, referring to those Africans socialised in the Western institutions of learning, is from an essay by Mamdani (1990b: 3).

<sup>14</sup> '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.'

emancipatory potential of Africa(n) Studies to contribute to such a better world, including in Africa.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Among the many known political activists, who paid for their convictions and engagement with their lives, was Anton Lubowski. He was assassinated 12 years to the day 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 these reflections to his memory.

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## ABSTRACT

The power of definition executed by scholars relates to the terms of ownership within the sphere of knowledge production. In Africa(n) Studies this is exacerbated by the fact that Western scholars continue to dominate the field. But identity and concepts (and ideology, shaped by values and norms not least internalised through personal and academic socialisation) as integral parts of scholarly knowledge production are important ingredients. As contributing factors they provide options and not pre-determinations. Hence the definition of Africa and Africa(n) Studies is a relational matter and open to contestation. This article presents perspectives and reflections, which to some extent abstract from material realities and engage in scholarly debates on the discipline and its orientation(s). It thereby further explores ‘disciplinary control and theoretical fractures’ – in the words of Deborah Bryceson – within Africa(n) Studies, through investigations into the meanings of Africa and Africa(n) Studies based on a variety of arguments. It invites examining our concepts and (self-)understanding as well as definitions as scholars in Africa(n) Studies.