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# Beyond Sovereign Reason: Issues and Contestations in Contemporary African Identity

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## Abstract

Issues of collective identity discourses and integration in Africa often face competing national and primordial identities. We explore multilayered integrative mechanisms that have become constitutive of collective African identity. We examine the nature of this identity taking a modern constructivist view of Africa's encounter with Europe. But we also address basic anthropological concerns, focusing on present and future prospects and seeking to understand how this identity is shaped by international politics or synchronized with local political units.

**Keywords:** African regionalism; African identity; state formation in Africa; African international relations; African integration

## Introduction

Africa is not one country. One is hard pressed to find a coherent shared ideal that is shared by the peoples inhabiting the geopolitical area called Africa. African sociopolitical and cultural differences make it an uphill task to write of African identity as homogenous enterprise, in ways that mirror, for example, European identity. The entrenched diversity in terms of religion, language or history symbolizes the intensity of these cultural variations and ruptures any claim that a collective African identity exhibits homogenous universal coherence. Accordingly, any myth of a shared collective identity is primarily an imposed political reality, but a pseudo sociopolitical imagination that would erupt in the post-colony. At best such imposed ideas of shared collective initiatives remain globalized in content but fractured by contingencies of embedded cultural variations. Culturally therefore, the notion of a homogenous African identity is an oxymoron as no such ideal even is plausible except in terms of geographical fatality. As culture has become problematized as a critical source of that identity, we turn to history. In this article, we argue – from the perspective of political theory – that the mechanisms of constructing African identity are inherently different from those that led to European national and post-national identities.

In this article we explore different ways in which African collective identity has become conceptualized in modern times. We provide a regional perspective to this special issue, and also discuss how identity discourses have shaped social change and civic relations. Furthermore, we explore how emergent social change and relations impact on the understanding of African collective identity discourses. First, we discuss classical approaches to regional integration and their relationship with collective identification; exploring how these relate to the specific African experience. We then discuss the nature and after-maths of inherited colonial identities, focusing on two processes: the struggle for new national memories in era of independence, and the emergence of pan-African and regional identities in the continent. Finally, we discuss Afropolitanism as an alternative to these

forms of postcolonial collective identities, arguing that it can function as an integrative mechanism for regional and international cooperation (see also Eze, 2014).

### **Categories and Context: Collective Identity and Politics of Integration in Africa**

Kuhn and Nicoli (2020) in the introduction to this special issue offer an extensive description of how collective identities are conceptualized in the study of regional integration, discussing their multilevel and multidimensional nature, as well as their relationship to the supranational integration of low and high politics in the European context. Indeed, in political philosophy and the history of ideas especially, the very notion of collective identity generates different understanding along sociopolitical, historical and cultural dimensions. It is a concept that is not limited, as Geertz (1973, p. 449) puts it, merely to 'its internal structure, *independent de tout sujet, et de tout objet, de toute contexte*'. Linked to culture, collective identity is an 'ever-present phenomenon that remains irreducible to merely a metaphysical doctrine or "primarily" as an epistemological question' (Eze, 2011, p. 300). Connected to history, collective identities become functional as a discursive space by which 'individuals are classified into multiple *possible selves*' (Eze, 2011, p. 300). As historical experiences evolve so do the collective identities associated with them. The sociopolitical meaning of collective identity embodies an 'inchoate collective of subjectivities' (Eze, 2011, p. 300) that nevertheless engage in a meaningful process of what Melucci (1989, p. 34) describes as 'an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals who are concerned with orientation of their actions ... opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place'.

Collective identity is thus an endless process of 'continual investments' along a sequence of emotive and cognitive prescriptions: (1) it is concerned with 'goals, means and environment of action'; (2) it seeks interactive and active 'relationships among the actors' and (3) offers 'emotional investments' through which actors 'recognize themselves' in one another (Melucci, 1989, p. 35). Collective identity thereafter is a study of a 'group's symbols, rituals, beliefs, and the values its members share', not just that signified from the outside, but equally from the inside; that is, how members identify themselves within that group, as Van Stekelenburg (2013) comments: 'individual's beliefs, sentiments, commitment to the group, use of symbols, participation in rituals, and so on'.

The manifold signification of collective identity discourse broadens our terms of inquiry as constitutive not only of the 'technical classification in a certain social category' but also, an *affective interactionism*; 'a deep-rooted aspect of an individual that is the basis of one's self-respect or dignity' (Kuo and Margalit, 2012, p. 460). The subjective is reproduced in performative rituals of collective shared experiences. The formation of a nation-state in Africa following the European modernist ideal resonates with the technical classification of collective identity. It is technical in so far as the unity it inspires is based upon an imperial order. In exploring how collective identities contribute to regional integration in Africa we are committed to underscoring how they influence perceptions of the interests of groups and individuals on a regional, national and continental level. This means that determining who belongs to what groups also determines what interests an individual has and vice versa. We employ territorial boundaries to analyse collective identities to indicate the extent to which micronarratives overlap, transcend or shape political

identity on the transnational level. That is not to say that other social factors are irrelevant to the study of collective identities. Here we primarily want to use territorial boundaries to determine group interests and shared values. As our focus is on national and intergovernmental political organizations, the emphasis on collective identities through a territorial dimension offers a coherent outlook.

A major distinction between the African and European context is that while in Europe national identities have historically been instrumental in the construction of the state, and therefore align well with political identities, the opposite is true in the African context. State formation in Africa was based on the colonial rule and resistance to this rule: the emergent political identities that were formed in Africa arose therefore in direct response to these political pressures. Accordingly, we historicize the development of collective identities starting with the colonial period, to offer a comprehensive view on the integrative mechanisms or what may (or not) constitute a collective African identity. In doing so we gain critical insights into the struggle for regional integration of core state powers in Africa. First, we begin by situating our study within the classical theories of integration with comparative lessons from the European experience.

The three leading theories of supranational integration – neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) each conceives differently the relationship between identification processes and integration (Kuhn, 2019). Neo-functionalism sees integration as a long historical process led by transnational actors (be they bureaucracies or interest groups). As integration advances in new policy fields, identities are progressively constructed: interests constructs allegiances and allegiances drive identification (Haas, 1958, p. 16). The more integration advances, the more interdependent nation-states become; needing common solutions to previously unforeseen problems, and ultimately moving towards an ever-closer union. Therefore, the theory is from the outset focused on the eventual emergence of a new political community, whose progression relies upon the dynamic relationship between allegiance and identification, and the spill over of integration in new policy fields until areas of core state competence become finally integrated (Haas, 1958, p. 16, Schmitter, 1970, p. 32).

Intergovernmentalism, on the other hand, employs the realist idea of the nation-state as a key actor in the integration process. The nation-state is not a passive actor but is active and influential in integration. As Andrew Moravcsik explains, intergovernmental theory ‘rest[s] on the assumption that state behavior reflects the rational actions of governments constrained at home by domestic societal pressure and abroad by their strategic environment’. It is in an ‘understanding of the preferences and power of its member states’ as active participants (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 474). Regional integration is thereafter primarily a choice undertaken by nation-state governments ‘to maximise their countries’ self-interest, as the primary purpose of the European project is to strengthen the nation-state framework, rather than weaken it’ (Kodate, 2018, p. 3). Framing the process as state-centric, the intergovernmental school critiques the naive optimism often associated with the neo-functionalism school in its assumption that the nation-state is a coherent homogeneity that enables smooth and inevitable integration procedures. As priority is given to the nation-state over the supranational community, the purpose of regional integration, intergovernmentalist school argues, is to negotiate and execute those tasks and activities that reinforce, reaffirm and reassert the sovereignty, legitimation and authority of member states.

Finally, post-functionalism (Hooghe and Marks, 2008, 2018) sees pre-existing national identities as fundamental limitations to integration. Like neo-functionalists, post-functionalists suggest that integration initially advances through the spillover mechanism, which in turn shifts the allegiances of transnational élites. The masses, however, remain untouched by these changes in allegiance, maintaining a permissive consensus towards integration – their national identity remains latent. However, if integration reaches the boundaries of core state power, political opponents to integration projects may activate these latent national identities, constructing political opposition to integration grounded in a new wave of nationalism.

How are these approaches related to the African experience? The first challenge, as Stanley Hoffman observes, is the failure of these theorists to recognize that the international political order is always changing and in flux (Hooghe and Marks, 2008; Moravcsik, 1993). With respect to Africa, the transitory character of the post-colonial state subverts the so-called inevitability of integration by way of spillover effects. Neo-functionalism is effectively in characterizing societies with shared democratic institutions and a clear set of common challenges that require initial joint-decision making. Accordingly, as such integration is conditioned on rational economic interest, they undercut the impact of sociocultural, political, and other non-economic identities that are vested in the grassroot political units (Hooghe and Marks, 2008, p. 2).

Although it can be argued that regional integration in Africa in certain ways displays the feature of classical integrative mechanisms, especially of the EU experience, procedural challenges often mar political imperatives for integration. The African Union (AU) was formulated as a transnational body politic yet did not possess any active political will. In other experiments of regional integration, memberships of multiple bodies coupled with overlapping and sometimes contradictory ideals have equally weakened the political incentive for transformative integration. Without any shared commitment to the supranational body, incentives for taking action and active membership are often mitigated by the existence of diverse and competing interests. Policies formulated without engaging the political will of active members is illustrative of this core weakness, as member states' willing and active participation in regional membership is influenced by the political goals of the elites in power. The post-functionalist theory nevertheless seems to capture these challenges by suggesting the possibility of a theoretical utility that is not dependent on a constitutive demand for integration, whether in terms of achieving comparative economic advantage through the bottom-up approach of liberal intergovernmentalism or the top-down neo-functionalist enforcement of supranational ideals. The post-functionalist approach focuses on the substantive character of integration as a multi-level approach to governance that 'conceives regional integration as part of a more general phenomenon, the articulation of authority across jurisdiction at diverse scales' (Hooghe and Marks, 2018, 2). This approach is tendentially holistic, engaging institutional structures and actors of integration.

Nevertheless, for all the promises, post-functionalist theory fails to address key challenges to regional integration beyond the European (western) experiences. Although it speaks in terms of multilevel political engagement, it nevertheless assumes there are coherent institutional structures and political values that are functionally universal. In the case of Africa, it fails to address the tension between primordial collective identity and inherited post-colonial civic identity because in post-functionalism the clash is

*between levels* of identity, and here is *between different types*. The continued rupture of the civic state in favour of proto-nationalist ideals does not stand the test of multilevel governance in so far as other ideals beyond politics motivate the popular desire for integration. These theories also ignore the role of religion, tribalism and people's emotive connections to history and how all these continue to shape contemporary African imaginary and collective identity (see Cini and Perez-Solorzano Borragan, 2004, p. 89; Wiener and Diez, 2004, p. 51; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2006, p. 99). In the case of religion for example, the motivation behind the rise of Islamist terror groups like Boko Haram and Al Shabab or the Fulani terrorist groups in Nigeria, the varied motives that gave rise to these terror groups all critique the assumed priority and virtues of regional integration over primordial allegiances. In the latter case, both the nation-state and intergovernmental body are not only viewed with suspicion, but as an anathema, a Haram.

For these reasons we turn to history, firstly, to understand how collective identity has been conceptualized overtime in Africa and secondly, to sketch the steps that gave rise to modern African identity as culturally differentiated from European experiences, according to the sociology of knowledge. Thirdly, we explore points of convergence (if any) and articulate a new way of thinking about African collective identity that is sensitive to context and yet speaks to the future.

### Historicizing Collective Identity in Africa

The post-colonial African state is in itself a residual produce of 'the shattering forces of disintegration that characterize modernity' (Coleman, 1954, p. 405). This idea of a collective identity is therefore a binary product imposed by colonialists and their African counterparts or that emerged as a reaction to colonialism through centralized resistance but not due to any shared history or common descent. On this view, the dominant discourse on collective African identity is then racialized in so far as racism constitutes dual pedagogic mandate for oppression and eventual liberation. Should we, however, locate the post-colonial crises of nationalism only within the contours of failed imperial nation-states? Would it be that the nation that was inherited at independence was fundamentally structured to fail? (see also Okeja, 2012, for in-depth epistemic questions and analysis). Such Afro-pessimism plays into the Western vision of collective African identity, often conceptualized in terms of otherness dependency. We fall into the trap of colonialism, drawing on its experiences as the key to understanding contemporary African identity.

The Western conception of African identities and societies usually began with the idea of the tribe. The tribe – often imposed as the organic character of African societies – is an epistemic creation of colonialism in so far as it primarily reflects a *politicized ethnic group*. Having assumed that the locus of collective identity was the ethnos the Europeans politicized diverse groups and assumed that every African necessarily belonged to a tribe. To the contrary however, most Africans, as Ranger (1983, p. 248) argues,

moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as subject to this chief, at another moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and yet at another moment as an initiate in that professional guild.

Critiquing the homogenous claims of pre-colonial Chewa identity, Van Binsbergen (cited in Ranger, 1983, p. 248) notes how

historians fail to qualify the alleged Chewa homogeneity against the historical evidence of incessant assimilation and dissociation of peripheral groups.... They do not differentiate between a seniority system of rulers imposed by the colonial freezing of political dynamics and the pre-colonial competitive, shifting, fluid imbalance of power and influence.

We also need to recognize the embedded problematics of using political ideas and concepts evolving out of Western intellectual traditions as the epistemic point of reference for understanding the African experience, because of the inadequacy of such approach. To speak of collective identity in Africa is to look beyond the modern nation-state, which is primarily a reflection of European modernity. The pre-colonial African political identity was not a primordial homogeneity. Collective identity in Africa has always been amorphous, very often grafted on to culture and religious traditions. But as culture is always changing and the gods are never permanent, the identity derived from them must change to reflect changing circumstances. As Ranger (1983, p. 247) observes, cultural variations in terms of customs 'helped to maintain a sense of identity but it also allowed for an adaptation so spontaneous and natural that it was often unperceived'. Confronted with the onslaught of colonial conquest the need to survive inspired a collective identity of resistance, and an albeit transitional allegiance to primordial groups. Yet, those alliances do not speak so much in terms of a shared political identity as one that was opposed to the practical necessity of regional security. The societies were highly heterogenous and one could be a member of many ethnicities with various degrees of allegiance that overlapped different social, religious or political affiliations. Centralized collective identities were expressed through political, cultural or religious frames such as lineage, clans, age grades, elders-in-council, chief-priests and so on (see also Coleman, 1954, p. 405). Scholars like Eric Hobsbawm (1990, p. 138) remained optimistic, asserting that despite the false foundation, 'the unity imposed by conquest and administration might sometimes, in the long run, produce a people that saw itself as a "nation", just as the existence of independent states has sometimes created a sense of citizen patriotism'.

Drawn from the Western epistemic tradition therefore, the very idea of an African collective identity engenders a disingenuous application. As Kwame Appiah (1992, p. 287) argues, the imposed claim of a homogenous and coherent universal is primarily a myth, a fictitious narrative that thrives by misrecognizing African identity as a complex phenomenon that 'grows out of a history of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces'. Within Africa, the changing responses and encounters can be contextualized in five historical moments. In historicizing these moments a few things become clear. Firstly, it delineates the political meaning of identity as contingent on history and geography. Secondly, it shows how both history and culture continue to shape and influence the variations and contingencies of contemporary African identity. These moments have become both the cause and consequence of Africa's encounter with European modernity. A credible evaluation of contemporary African identity must start by problematizing this notion, to reflect the political and cultural reality of everyday experience in the post-colony.

In what follows we historicize the complexities characterizing what we have termed four moments of collective aspirations in Africa in the modern period. John Coleman (1954) has tried to capture these moments into three movements; namely, traditionalists, synthetics and modernists.. Unlike Coleman however, we prefer the term moments to

movements. Coleman's notion of movements presupposes a rigid stratification whereas moments suggests epistemic expressions beyond chronological history. These moments overlap and sometimes endure or resurface in different epochs.

### *The Four Historical Moments in Collective African Identity*

The first moment mirrors what Coleman (1954, p. 406) has termed as the locus of primary resistance. This was a moment of fragmented resistance against physical domination and revolt against institutional oppression or the 'imposition of new institutions, or new forms of coercion (Coleman, 1954, p. 406)'. Thus understood, it became a moment described by Coleman (1954, p. 406) as 'nativistic, mahdistic, or messianic mass movement'. It is nativistic in appealing to culture as source of primordial unity. The ethnos functions as an integrative capital for achieving unity against foreign invasion.

The second moment is symbolized by waves of intellectual revolt against oppression. Universalistic in its measure of identity, movements like Negritude, pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, Ethiopianism and so on emerged to rehabilitate the subjectivity of the black person that was so truncated by colonial logic. The Africanist responses to European conquest and colonialism were all contextualized. As Fanon (1963) would have argued, the sociopolitical challenges of the Zulus were very different from those of the Hausa in northern Nigeria, the Akan of Ghana or the Kikuyu of Kenya. Fanon (1963) nevertheless assumes that an integrated national culture existed that was not dissimilar from the notion of a pan-African culture that he critiques. The point, however, is that a compass of collective suffering or oppression offered a collective unconscious that was able to lead to political action. These experiences as a source of a shared political imagination were real in only a severely limited fashion; namely, the restoration of black subjectivity, the reclamation of culture and the fight for political independence. The first appeals to a metaphysical unity as the key to the subjective revolt against the universalist tendencies of colonial racism. If black people were oppressed because of their race, the burgeoning sense of identity mediated a rupture of the intellectual roots of colonialism and its institutional expression.

The second speaks in terms of revolt and the refusal of the sovereignty of universal reason. It is a *refusal* of the false myth of colonization as the humanization or modernization of primordial structures. Linked to the first moment, cultural reclamation equally led to the subjective restoration of the truncated African subject. Upon these conditions emerged, the third moment, an ideological platform for a shared political praxis that would undermine 'the imposed colonial condition and generate a new era of socio-political and economic independence' (Eze, 2013, p. 678). Political independence became a pedagogic amalgam that symbolizes universal coherence of shared black experiences, the 'simultaneity of their suffering', revolt and refusal of imposed homogeneity, and racialized identity as political discourse (Eze, 2010, p. 110). The universal was integrated into the primordial as a new and formidable discourse of liberation.

The third moment was a phase of sociopolitical and militant rebellion against colonialism. Groups like the United Gold Coast Convention of Ghana, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun, the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique, the Front de Libération Nationale of Algeria, the Kenya Land and Freedom Army and the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO),

among many others. In some cases, the armed wing of these liberation movements, like the Mau Mau, the Umkontho Sizwe (ANC) and People's Liberation Army (SWAPO) fought mainly for the restoration of the land and social justice. They were not so much reacting to the structure of the state as opposing the conditions that emerged from its institutional arrangements. In other cases, they aimed at the complete eradication of colonial core state powers and institutions. Their reasons for rebelling against the colonial state were multilayered. First, they attacked the occupation and domination of physical space. Second, they attacked the forceful removal and destruction of old ways of life, customs and indigenous economies. Third, they aimed to overcome the exclusion of Africans in the government of their people. Finally, they sought to overthrow the cruelty and inhumanity of the whole colonial project.

The fourth moment was the era of political independence. Few African states were culturally homogenous at independence. The project of colonialism thrived by politicizing differences using divide and rule policies. Different cultures, traditions and histories were forcefully divided or integrated, in 'radically different degrees' (Appiah, 1992, p. 261). Where collective self-determination was measured through the medium of shared experiences of colonialism and revolting against it, the colonial geography inherited at independence lacked the minimal credentials for statehood in the classical sense of self-determined sovereignty. The upshot was that modernist epistemology of colonialism failed to create in African peoples bonds of affect and political integration. Where integration occurred, it was simply a residual narrative of the colonial imagination.

The reasons for the failure of the fourth moment are multilayered. Firstly, negotiations for political independence ignored the primordial differences violently suppressed by core state powers of colonialism. Geographical space was decolonized, but not the core state powers designed during the independence period, which were subsequently unable to relate to the new political realities, initiatives and policies. At the point when the imperial order became fractured, ethnic revivalism emerged in direct confrontation with the new state formations. The core state institutions merely perpetuated the mandate of the colonial enterprise. The inherited imperial geography did little to mitigate pre-colonial cultures and the ethnic differences that continue to conflict with the inherited idea of the nation-state. Allegiance to the cultural community was generally prior to any claim made by the nation-state. The cultural community was subsequently translated into a political identity. This phenomenon is what has become known as the 'tribalization' of the natives, that is, the politicization of the ethnic and cultural group (Eze, 2010, p. 69; Mamdani, 2001, p. 30).

This was the beginning of the crises of citizenship in the post-colonial African state. The politicized ethnic identity, that is, the tribe, was continually reproduced in so far as the ethnic identity-mediated divide and rule strategy for political domination (see Mamdani, 2001, p. 30). In inheriting this form of fractured collective, post-colonial Africa citizenship became a bifurcated identity: the citizen was both an ethnic citizen among her group and also a stranger in another native authority. In most of Africa, ethnic indigenes belong to what we now call regions, provinces or states. As these provinces are basically a modern representation of the colonial native authority, it is no wonder that even those who were born in the province, but do not belong to the dominant ethnic group are still considered strangers. They neither participate in elections nor are offered government positions and remain frozen as subjects even of the post-colonial state. But

tribalization is not only cultural, in other instances, it becomes racialized! In Rwanda it was the crises of citizenship between the Hutu and Tutsi; crises that intensified over time in immediate years following independence, cumulating in the genocide of 1994. In Uganda it was the expulsion and deportation of Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin through the racialization of citizenship, although these ethnic Asians had lived in that territory ever since it had been annexed by Britain in the 1880s. A similar example can also be seen in Côte d'Ivoire in which an ethnic minority was disqualified of citizenship by way of politicized cultural nationalism that excluded Ivoirians of Mandinka ethnicity.

The second reason for the failure of the fourth moment was that the nationalistic movements that championed political independence were in fact pan-Africanist and not nationalistic, in orientation. Speaking in Liberia in 1952, Nkrumah stated: 'Africa for the Africans! ... we want to be able to govern ourselves in this country of ours without outside interference (Appiah, 1992, p. 262)'. As Appiah observed however, Nkrumah's plea for a collective African political identity was at best a superficial universalism that was insensitive to context and history (Appiah, 1992, p. 262). The African intelligentsia believed that independence would liberate Africa from the oppressive clutches of colonialism. Freedom, it was thought, would inspire a new consciousness that would restore and redeem the truncated image of the black person and project her as an equal citizen of the world. What they failed to recognize, however, was that the political identity that was inherited was useful only as an ideology of resistance to colonial rule. Most critical is their failure to recognize that political identity is not synonymous with collective identity. They failed to distinguish between a colonial sovereign state and a national sovereign state. The former is a space of political compulsion and oppression, the latter is self-determined by democratic means. A colonial state is primarily a geographical expression while a nation-state is a subjective expression.

Writing about political identity in Africa therefore one needs first to recognize and appreciate that the very process of state formation in colonial Africa generated identities that thrived only through the subjection of other identities to the periphery. This is what Mahmood Mamdani (2001, p. 20) meant when he observed that scholars writing on identity formation in contemporary Africa have failed to historicize the political consequences of colonialism; they failed to recognize 'the colonial state as a legal-institutional complex that framed and set in motion particular political identities. The tendency was to discuss agency in an institutional void, by focusing on how it was harnessed to the colonial project' (Mamdani, 2001, p. 20).

### *Collective Identity and Regional Integration*

In the colonial period, racism nurtured geopolitical domination. The policy of divide and rule politicized ethnic differences for administrative efficacy. In French West Africa, for example, under the policy of assimilation and association the point of access to political membership was limited and various. Those born in certain colonial cities of Gorée, Saint Louis, Rufisque and Dakar had automatic citizenship. For the rest, citizenship had to be acquired via education to assimilate: without a certain level of education one remained merely a colonial subject (association) with severe limitations on human rights. In British colonies, citizenship was bestowed on the basis of direct and indirect rule in the crown colonies and protectorates, respectively. Africans who lived in crown colonies or

assimilation zones were favoured over other ethnic groups. In the language of Walter Mignolo, (2002, p. 160) ‘the ideological configuration of the moment does not vanish when the second moment arrives’. Indeed, the differences and conflicts did not disappear with political independence but were instead reconfigured as the current political reality, with devastating implications for any sense of a shared national unity. Many African political elites tried to deal with these challenges by forging new political theories as a creative resource for new collective identities and as an alternative to the inherited socio-political imaginary.

At the continental level, a large-scale effort to create a collective African identity can be found in the formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on 25 May 1963. As a residual impulse for fighting colonialism and neocolonialism, the primary goal of the OAU was the socioeconomic and political integration of the continent. A pressing question at this stage was to decide on the kind of political identity that was needed to overcome the vacuity of the nation-state idea inherited at independence. The shared historical experience of colonialism and its policy of divide and rule was an influential factor. Deeply influenced by the pan-African and pan-Negro movements, the basis of this intended unity was the people’s specific shared historical experience, but as that experience was now over, geopolitics was sought as an alternative to the earlier racial bias. They were not concerned with the constitutive legitimation of the idea of the nation-state but were preoccupied with forging a geopolitical unity derived from their shared experience of colonialism. The source of unity was as a binary, to thwart Western imperial ambitions for Africa. Even at its inception, the ideological nature of this political undertaking was contested among three groups, the so-called Monrovia, Brazzaville and Casablanca blocs, each consisting of several newly independent African countries. The two former groups advocated a loose union in which newly independent states recognized institutionalized colonial boundaries and arbitration, while the latter advocated the immediate and closer union of African states. But this ideal of collective identity ignored the deep religious and culturally embedded variations of experience in the continent. Moreover, any creative impulse to bring about substantive African unity was to be undermined by the events of the Cold War, during which the OAU paid lip-service to ideologically convenient constitutive allegiances.

The ideological aspirations of earlier black transnational movements like pan-Africanism and Garveyism<sup>1</sup> would come to constitute an ideological framework for the Constitutive Act through which AU came into effect in 2002:

Inspired by the noble ideals which guided the founding fathers of our Continental Organization and generations of Pan-Africanists in their determination to promote unity, solidarity, cohesions and cooperation among the peoples of Africa and African States... Guided by our common vision of a united Africa and by the need to build a partnership ... to strengthen solidarity and cohesion among out peoples. (United Nations, 2000)

The AU was designed to transcend the limitations of OAU such as the fractured ideological positions it undertook; its lack of political will and its doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. Constitutively, the AU succeeded in so far as the spirit of the Constitutive Act was more comprehensive than the OAU. In fact, the

<sup>1</sup>Marcus Garvey argued for a United States of Africa as the key to decolonization and political independence.

blueprint recognizes that empowered core state institutions are critical for socioeconomic development of the continent. On this point the Act stipulates that necessary measures be taken to 'strengthen our common [state] institutions and provide them with necessary powers and resources to enable them discharge their mandates effectively'. In substantive terms, however, the evolving challenges that led to the dissolution of the OAU remained. For most part, the vision of a coherent political unity would be plagued by the ideological fractures and disillusionment characteristic of the OAU. Another issue it faces is the continued acceptance of inherited colonial borders and its eurocentric ideal of state sovereignty. Regional bodies and blocs thus undertook a minimal attempt at integration to harness and fulfil the aspirations of a collective union using different levels of collaboration. Where the OAU was adamant on the priority of national sovereignty over a pan-African unity, as discussed earlier, it has been the regional blocs that have permitted the delegation of sovereign authority to newly established regional military bodies. These included the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the South African Development Community (SADC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) in 1975, 1992 and 1994, respectively – although COMESA and SADC have roots in the 1980s. Other regional groups include the Economic Community of Central African States in 1981, the Community of Sahel–Saharan States in 1998 and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989. The aim of these organizations – on paper – is regional integration and cooperation in policy areas, including monetary policy, development, defence and migration. Other regional groups, especially in North Africa, and religious and cultural affinities like the Arab league or AMU became the primary source of collective identity.

While the regional blocs make progress towards economic integration, for example, in the free trade areas created by SADC and COMESA, in most states the absence of an integrated mechanism for collective identity has led to new forms of affiliation, sometimes leading to collective unconscious that have transcended the geopolitical boundaries inherited at independence. This political void has partly enabled the eruption of proto-nationalist movements like Boko Haram, Al Shabab and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. These movements, that share a religious criterion for identity, are both the trigger and consequence of the failure to integrate political unity at both the national and continental level. Their eruption equally challenges our understanding of what constitutes collective African identity as their membership transcends both racial and regional borders. But they are also engaged in revolting against the core state institutions that they found to be unjust and oppressive tools of Western modernity.

### *Core State Powers*

The extent to which collective identities in Africa impact on or influence the integration of core state powers is highly contested. The West and China play an important role in orientating political behaviour in Africa at the regional level. The discourse about a pan-African or regionally shared collective identity fundamentally reflect the originators, so that questions of collective identity and policy decisions on this topic remain in the elitist realms of conversations between regional politicians. In the absence of direct representations at the intergovernmental or regional levels, policies are made at the whims of persuasive and charismatic regional leaders. The national interest, and not decentralizing

representation, informs policy agreement. It is for these reasons that such policies remain out of touch with the notion of metaphysical shared experiences, or as Ellie Kedourie (1993, p. xiv) puts it, they are ‘policies, devised in a spirit of impersonal and all-knowing benevolence ...[and] ... in reality devoid of even the smallest spark of human sympathy or fellow-feeling’. This impersonal approach to politics underlies the extent to which a pan-African collective identity is often experienced as a grandiose gesture of political goodwill with no real or substantive power of execution. Regional bodies like SADC or ECOWAS have adopted in principle, albeit to a limited degree, the concept of the free movement of persons within their regional bloc. Yet, none of these policies anticipated or prevented the massive outbreak of xenophobic attacks among black migrants from the same region. The political elites, often blindsided by the realities of the tensions between cultural and political identity, do not recognize the anachronism of their populist pan-African ideals and how disconnected these are to sociopolitical realities on the ground.

Most significant, however, is the cultural residue of colonial politics. Francophone Africa, for example, prioritizes its inherited French identity over and above other regional initiatives. Historically, these were the countries that accepted the French Constitution of 1958, which offered paper independence to African countries that were dependent on France for everything else (their politics, their economy and their defence). Only Guinea voted no and declared immediate independence. As Sekou Toure, the Guinean leader put it in his rejection of this offer, ‘it is better to be poor and be free, than to live in opulence and be a slave’. The French reaction to Guinea was severe to give a lesson to other colonies. The administrative machinery of the state structure was literally destroyed. There was no official handover, files were burnt, and infrastructures were destroyed, after which all ties between it and France were severed. Guinea became effectively an enemy of France. In the other French African territories the cozy relationship with France continued into the post-colony as territorial states were transformed into an ideological bloc tied to France in terms of their culture, politics and economy. The Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, to which the sub-Saharan African group belongs, forges a collective identity tied to France in language, heritage and culture. French interventions in Africa, such as the civil war in Côte d’Ivoire demonstrates how an inherited French colonial identity influences the relationship among nation-states in Africa but also the course of politics within sovereign states.

Despite these limitations, intergovernmental organizations have had a great impact on Africa’s economy and political stability across the continent. The CFA, for example is tied to the French treasury and this helps curb inflation and promote economic stability among Francophone countries. Politically, SADC has successfully helped to restore order after the coup in Madagascar in 2009 and is working on stabilizing the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. ECOWAS, through its military wing, helped to stop the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. They also helped to usher in a smooth political transition to The Gambia following the end of Yahya Jammeh’s 22 years in office. The East African Community has ambitious goals for regional integration, such as the creation of a monetary union, but has so far been unsuccessful. The AU has produced its most ambitious plan so far in its Agenda 2063 – The Africa We Want. The Agenda aims for good government and democracy across the continent; an integrated and politically united continent ‘with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics’. An effective implementation of this agenda will require cooperation between all African states.

Shared values and ethics are both the goal and the starting point for this cooperation because willingness to transfer core state powers from the state to an intergovernmental or even supranational organization comes from these shared values. In return, a well-functioning organization based on these values will strengthen respect for these same values.

From a distance it seems reasonable to compare integration of core state powers in Africa with the European experience. On both continents there is a demand for the enhancement and integration of core state powers. For example, the EU is trying to create a unified immigration and border patrol policy as a response to the 2015 refugee crisis. Issues of immigration, visa policy and border patrols have been on the agenda of the AU as well in efforts to create a more unified continent. Nevertheless, the practical modality of this integration of regional organizations cannot be depicted as permanent feature of the public imagination. In Europe, for example, contestations in the public sphere have been high, with the most dramatic example being the British referendum to leave Europe. In Africa, regional integration and cooperation has been contested too. Although it may not have been voiced loudly by the public, the slow pace of implementation of many AU, ECOWAS, SADC and other policies can be sign of resistance to them on the regional and national level. In the next section, we will discuss these continuities and discontinuities, showing more clearly the extent to which, these regional bodies have succeeded in negotiating collective African identity in geopolitical structures.

### **Afropolitanism as an Integrative Mechanism**

Our proposal is to disrupt the embedded residual binary of identity construction that has percolated throughout colonial history. Chielozona Eze (2014) has made a case for this in *Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan model*. To do this demands a rethinking of identity formation in Africa that moves beyond imposed political identity categories, that negotiates and accommodates different layers of identity as grounded in history and yet not anachronist to our immediate sociopolitical experiences. The pre-existing binarism traps us within an Afro-pessimistic outlook of a people 'hopelessly imprisoned in its past', within 'a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, and held hostage to corrupt institutions' (Gikandi, 2010, p. 9). To speak thus of African identity using the terms of the Western imagination becomes an othering experience; making African identity the "'other" of modern reason and progress' (Gikandi, 2010, p. 9).

In response to this limited sociopolitical identity paradigm, the term Afropolitanism was coined by Taiye Selasi. In her essay 'Bye-Bye Babar', Selasi (2005) proceeds to frame a new understanding of identity discourse that transcends national and ethnic categories: 'We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world'. One's Africanness does not diminish just by crossing the border. The idea of the border is itself the subjective transcendence of geographical fatalism. A key consequence of such proscription is the dogmatic inference that one's identity is tied to a geographical fatalism with massive sociopolitical and economic consequences. Here, what it means to be an African human is primarily defined by one's geographical imaginary, even when there is no affective attachment or commitment to such a space. What it means to be a Kenyan or Ethiopian in the 21st century is constitutive first, of these limitations imposed on subjective mobility.

This is the beginning of a new theoretical framework on African (collective) identity, which is not based on European definitions and identifications of the African and 'the

African continent and forms of “the other”, but promises ‘some moral re-examination of the world’ (Eze, 2014, p. 244). Afropolitanism constitutes an indigenous attempt to ‘recover alternative narratives of African identity in search of hermeneutic redemption ... a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being an African in the world’ that is grounded in specific geographies and is yet transcendent; local but cosmopolitan, unique yet inclusive (see Eze, 2014, p. 244). This vision of identity is transcultural, trans-political, trans-ethnic but also grounded in ‘knowable African communities, languages and states’ (Gikandi, 2010, p. 9). On this view, Afropolitanism, suggests Achille Mbembe (2007, p. 15), is a recognition that ‘our way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it, has always been marked by, if not cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds’. What we may term the mobile subject is constitutive of the Afropolitan character, which Mbembe (2007, p. 15) describes as:

Awareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, the relativisation of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness and remoteness, the ability to recognise one’s face in that of a foreigner and make the most of the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites – it is this cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity that underlies the term ‘Afropolitanism’.

Chielozona Eze (2014, p. 240) describes an Afropolitan as: a ‘human being ... who has realized that her identity can no longer be explained in purist, essentialist and oppositional terms or by reference to the African continent’. Afropolitanism thus invokes the following credentials: it is cosmopolitan, yet unlike Western cosmopolitanism it is discursive and ‘anti-essentialist, open to cultural and intellectual hybridization, but endowed with a particular consciousness for Africa’s historical wounds’, yet, inspiring a political moment, one that would contribute to complete the ‘unfinished decolonization process of Africa’ (Gehrmann, 2016, p. 64). During the era of decolonization scholars often feared for the stability of Africa states due to the diversity within the borders of each (Balakrishnan, 2016, p. 3). During this period, newly emancipated states in Africa laid claim to a false homogenous national memory that they never possessed. The national identity they had was deceptive, for it did not correspond to the cultural or ethnic condition which the imperialists unrealistically partitioned them. The struggle that followed was one of many different cultural, religious and linguistic groups subjected to a state’s regime without ever forming a nation. The concept of cosmopolitanism introduced in the 1990s and Afropolitanism in the 2000s provided an alternative to the fear of pluralism. Balakrishnan (2016, p. 3) explains:

[I]nstead of regarding pluralism as a threat to state stability, Africa’s cosmopolitan cities and zones are now thought to be harbingers of a new post-racial political future; rather than supposing that states will progressively coalesce into defined nations, as per the organic analogy, ethnically heterogeneous states are increasingly upheld as ‘modern’.

Furthermore, Afropolitanism, as an approach to collective African identity is thus differentiated from the classical approaches typical of pan-Africanism or even Negritude. It is not racialized as an epistemic binary where functions as a residual term of revolt. These models, which were popular in the 1980s and 1990s, sought to ‘abjure any obvious cultural identifications with the West’ and aimed to find a ‘common identity for all people with dark skins’ (Eze, 2014, p. 235). Pan-Africanism was a ‘determinedly non-European epistemology – a

way of seeing, being and thinking through the world that was uniquely “African” (Balakrishnan, 2016, p. 3). Afropolitanism assumes sociopolitical and cultural unity beyond racial solidarity. It rejects racial solidarity as basis of contemporary African collective identity and instead offers a new understanding of a collective African identity that is neither in opposition to the West nor a residual narrative, but is a subjective space of contemporaneous identity. This identity is never static or essentialist, and Afropolitanism does not require it to be. It has the potential to incorporate multilayered identities.

### *Afropolitanism: Towards a Theory of Collective Action*

The possibilities for Afropolitanism as an integrative mechanism for regional integration and cooperation are perhaps best demonstrated through its effect on political agreements in general, and on security issues more specifically. Afropolitanism speaks in terms of the fluidity of contemporary African collective identity. Thus, it is captured by the multilevel governance theory of post-functionalist school, yet unlike this theory, it recognizes that collective identity is not merely a numerical collective of individuals but a group of active agents that are non-essentialist but discursive. The discursive character of identity is what Thomas Risse (2005, 295) meant when summarizing various European studies (Citrin and Sides, 2004; Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2008), concluding that individuals who identify strongly with the nation-state do not necessarily reject the idea of a European identity and European integration. In fact, evidence suggests that many individuals identify with both their nation-state and with Europe, and that they support European integration. The one group most strongly opposed to European integration consists of individuals who adhere to one identity only: that of the nation-state.

As Afropolitanism takes a stance against the essentialist, binary and oppositional identities offered by other mechanisms such as assimilation mechanisms and pan-Africanism, the chance that it will have a positive impact on regional integration and cooperation is promising. It has the potential to change our conversations on identity as a vessel of integration. Complementary lessons from the post-functional school equally enrich its theoretical efficacy when it concerns intra-regional conflicts or migration. Where the AU and other regional bodies like ECOWAS and SADC are confronted with security challenges and mass migration, the post-functionalist theory highlights the implications for identity migration, especially where it concerns the debate about the ‘intermixing of culturally dissimilar populations’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2018, p. 11). As Börzel and Risse explain, ‘Debates about migrants and refugees are dominated by cultural frames focusing on the ‘self/other’ or ‘ingroup/outgroup’ distinction. Discourses about migrants are primarily about who ‘we are’ and ‘who belongs to us,’ i.e., the borders of the EU’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2018, p. 11). The post-functionalist view thus shows us that security issues are identity issues. Even though identities may have been formed differently (when compared to Europe or Western societies in general) in Africa, exclusionist, essentialist and contradictory identities exist as well. As long as they influence security policy they will interfere with effective regional cooperation and integration. Afropolitanism, by making space for multilayered identities again provides a more fruitful starting point for policy debate and creation on a regional and continental scale. Furthermore, Afropolitanism has the potential to fill the political voids that have developed among these regional blocs and that have in some instances been filled by proto-nationalist movements like Boko Haram.

Culturally, Afropolitanism is a theory that represents indigenous attempts to ‘recover alternative narratives of African identity in search of hermeneutic redemption ... a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being an African in the world’ that is grounded in specific geographies and yet is transcendental; local but cosmopolitan; unique yet inclusive (Gikandi, 2010, p. 9). As Gikandi (2010, 9) proposes, ‘cultural hybridity’ characterizes the substantive content of this Afropolitan outlook, that is, the capability ‘to be of African and of other worlds at the same time’ (Gikandi, 2010, p. 9). Instead of cultural hybridity, however, we propose that there is a confluence of cultures that gives space for internal regeneration and autonomous growth. This is our basis for a new understanding of collective African identity that is based on subjective equality, a discursive space of unity that is sensitive as Appiah (1992, p. 286) puts it, to the ‘problems of the present and the hopes of the future’. The Igbo expression, *Igwebuiké* (unity is strength) captures this imagination on the necessity for a discursive collective African identity grounded on the subjective convergence of our multiple identities. That is all!

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