Article

'I Am an African'

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Abstract: The question, who is an African? in the context of understanding African identity has biological, historical, cultural, religious, political, racial, linguistic, social, philosophical, and even geographical colourations. Scholars as well as commentators have continued to grapple with it as it has assumed a syncretistic or intersectional characterisation. The same applies to, "what is Africa?" because of the defined Western construct of its geography. This foray of concepts appears to be captured in 'I am an African', a treatise that exudes the *telos* of African past, present and the unwavering hope that the future of Africans and Africa is great in spite of the cynicism and loss of faith that the present seems to have foisted on the minds of many an African. Through a critical analysis, it is argued that African religion has a value that is capable of resolving the contentious identity crisis of an African.

Keywords: identity; African religion; African diaspora; colonialism; Christianity; Islam

1. Introduction

Attempts to answer the question "who is an African"? are difficult, not because there are no Africans, but that there are competing nuances. This question, indeed, borders on identity. Issues of identity have always been contentious, and when they are related to religion they are even more tendentious. Many works have largely concentrated on individual identity rather than communal identity. From sociological, psychological, philosophical, cultural to religious approaches, identity studies have continued to garner vibrant interest. These approaches are predisposed towards social or personal identity, and concentrate on utilitarian, circumstantial, evaluative or normative clauses. While these are legitimate on their own, they further raise the question of power because identity is constructed from particular prisms for a teleological end. However, in answering the question "who is an African?" I am poised to have recourse to the African religious resource; community or communalism. This is because African religion, as Mbiti (1969) and Idowu (1996) have lucidly argued, plays critical roles in African life. African religion embodies almost all aspects of human endeavour, and even those who may argue against it may further have to interrogate the flourishing of other world religions in Africa (Platvoet and Rinsum 2003; Oyekan 2021). The assumption is that religion provides grounds for identity and also sacralises it at both personal and communal levels. The thesis here, therefore, is that African religion, as expressed in community, has a critical role to play in addressing the question of African identity that is at once within and authentic. In this paper, I analyse the assertion "I am an African" from three different assertions among others that it has resonated among personalities that compete for African-ness. The last part will briefly hint on how this relates to African religion.

I argue that despite the multiple identities an African could possess, the unique experience of African community in its fullness, defines the African. This argument is predicated on the fact that most discursive, political and cultural definitions of Africans and Africa do not countenance the locale of African community as underscored here as perhaps the most resilient value that wrests with those contentious notions of Africa and being an African.

2. Conceptualising 'I am an African'

Thabo Mbeki's (1996) "I am an African" is poetic, inspiring and provocative. It encapsulates what he believes defines a true African in the mosaic and contestation of identities. But he is now not alone in the averment. Wayne Visser (2011) and Frederick De Klerk (2015) came with their versions of "I am an African". These averments highlight different textures and complicate identities of the African. Thus, the question Mbeki wanted to answer has further been interrogated and, as such, demands extensive engagement in trying to define an/the African. This paper seeks to engage the three personae who have averred what can now be regarded as an important refrain, "I am an African." It is, therefore, pertinent to recite some of these stanzas and verses as a way of introducing their thoughts of being an African. I start with Mbeki's.

> So, let me begin.
> I am an African.
> I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land.
> At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.
> A human presence among all these, a feature on the face of our native land thus defined, I know that none dare challenge me when I say—I am an African! (Mbeki 1996)

I turn to Visser's "I am an African":

> I am an African
> Not because I was born there
> But because my heart beats with Africa's
> I am an African
> Not because my skin is black
> But because my mind is engaged by Africa
> I am an African
> Not because I live on its soil
> But because my soul is at home in Africa . . .
> I am an African
> Because she is the cradle of our birth
> And nurtures an ancient wisdom
> I am an African
> Because she is the land of tomorrow
> And I recognise her gifts as sacred. (Visser 2011)

And finally, De Klerk says:

> My ancestors were Huguenots from France who came to South Africa via Holland in 1688.
> My culture like the cultures of so many peoples throughout the world, is suffused with the unparalleled literature, arts and music of Europe.
> And yet, I am an African. (De Klerk 2015)

From the three quotations above, many questions such as: who is an African? and what is Africa? are seriously confronted. This is because no easy and straightforward answers are readily available to earnest seekers. Even within Africa, Africans themselves may find it difficult to define who the African is. One reason for this, among others, borders on the diverse nature of the continent and the diverse peoples that have in the course of time come to be identified with it through trade, migration, colonialism, conquest, mission, tourism, and so on. Another is the fact of 'otherisation', which Mudimbe (1988, 1994) has eloquently posited. Mudimbe argued that 'black' or 'African' is a creation/invention of the

West; it is not meant to confer status on Africa but essentially to dislocate and inferiorise it. These descriptions carved by external, colonial and imperial forces are a label rather than an attempt to understand Africa and Africans. And because they are ideological, Mudimbe vigorously pursued epistemic decolonisation. What is critically important in Mudimbe's otherisation is that the namer has enormous power over the named. Edozie (2012) shares similar view when she argues that there is an unequal measure of power and dialectic between the namer and the named. The question is whether the names create objects or vice versa. In fact, Banguara (2016, p. 131) argues that "naming is a process that can give the 'namer' great power." He further avers that "to call a thing by its precise name is the beginning of understanding, because it is the key to the procedure that allows the mind to grasp reality and its many relationships" (Banguara 2016, p. 131).

Outside the continent we have the African Diaspora, many of whom are yearning for reintegration, at least emotionally with their ancestry in the African homestead, while others may seem to have been disconnected altogether (Wade and Newman 2002; Igboin 2011). In all of these cases, the questions still resonate: who is an African?

Ray (2000) simply defines Africans "as the darker skinned, black peoples who live south of the Sahara Desert and have been assumed to possess the 'same' culture." The assumption of same culture has elicited many reactions as mini states have begun to be studied revealing multiple cultures. That is why Thomas and Alanamu (2019, p. 1) disagree with the idea of uniformity in African cultures in favour of similarities. For Louw (2019, p. 121), Africa is a pluralistic continent that accommodates peoples of different "ancestral origins" or "mixed ethnic ancestry." Holter (1998, p. 1) asks the questions: "What do we mean by 'African' when we talk about African... scholarship? Is it just a geographical term, expressing no more than the country or continent which the scholar is trained and works, or does it also reflect some of the thematic and methodological preferences that characterise the different scholarly (and geographical!) traditions?" He argues that there are no simple answers to these questions because of many factors that are at play. But Adamo argues that the answers to the questions are not as complex as Holter seems to envisage. For Adamo (2004), there are criteria and conditions that qualify anyone to talk about scholarship, methodologies and theoretical frameworks when African scholarship or scholarship in Africa with reference to biblicism is concerned. The most important and relevant to this conversation of the five criteria is that such a person must be an African and experience in all ramifications the life of/in Africa. He says: "the would be interpreter must either be an African or live and experience all aspects of African life in Africa" (Adamo 2004, p. 11). There are two major objections to this condition. One, it is very restrictive and ousts non-Africans who, though have not having lived and experienced all aspects of African life in Africa, have nevertheless shown some high level of genuine throbbing and interest in the cause of Africans and Africa. Two, the African Diasporas who have always felt nostalgic even though they have never stepped their feet in Africa and experienced African life in the same way that the Africans in Africa do, are inadvertently ousted or disqualified from interpreting African life and existence, and also being identified as Africans.

Almost in response to Holter, Oosthuizen (1998, p. 14) discountenances the ubiquitous conception of Africanity. He argues that it will be more manageable to talk about a South African, for example, instead of an omnibus concept like Africa. For him, everything that scholars try to force into the term 'African' may be incongruous with what the term may realistically accommodate. Thus, the concept of 'African' "is too vague". Oosthuizen talks about being a South African as more apt in discussing who is an African as though the identity or identities of a South African can easily be constructed and deciphered (Hewitt and Kaunda 2018). Ali Mazrui's (2007, p. 17) description of South Africa is a demonstration of a complex identity. According to him, South Africa is "Africa's first universal nation". In other words, while South Africa has "fewer 'tribes' than Nigeria", it has more "distinct 'races' than virtually any other African nations" (Mazrui 2007, p. 17). There are people of Malay, Dutch, Indian, Chinese origins in South Africa. In fact, all major world religions

are practised in South Africa. South Africa is very linguistically and culturally distinct and tolerant in that it recognises eleven official languages of African and European origins even though some think that she should have added one from Malay origin. South Africa's "linguistic ecumenicalism" is one colour in the rainbow (Mazrui 2007, p. 30). The point being made is to draw attention to the 'rainbow' or mosaic identities that South Africa represents, which means carving a monolithic identity may be as difficult in South Africa as in the whole of Africa.

Uduma (2014, p. 128) re-echoes the question: who is an African? "Is it someone who is born of African parents?; those blacks in the Diaspora?, or someone who is an African in 'heart'?" In trying to elucidate further, he argues that the word African can mean "in the style of" or "within the geographical area of". It can also mean "a person of". In this third sense, one can act "in the style of" and "within the geographical area of" Africa whether or not the actor is an African or not. Some could hold the position that it is more important to insist on "the person of" rather than "within the geographical area of", while others could believe that "within the geographical area of" could be more important than "the person of." The third strand of argument could hinge on the opinion that both "the person of" and "within the geographical area of" can give insight into who and what the African is. The latter also insists that "in the style of" should be emphasised because it is a demonstration of the uniqueness of who an African is or ought to be rather than "within the geographical of," Uduma (2014, p. 140) further argues.

Closely connected with this is the equivocation of the geographical connotation of the word "African" with its racial connotation. Unfortunately, even though the geographical and racial connotations of the adjective African have the same *referent*, they do not have the same *sense/meaning*. As an adjective, "African" geographically connotes someone that is strictly speaking, a citizen of a given country within a given continent known as Africa. Racially, the adjective "African" connotes a group of individuals that are indigenes of any country in a continent known as Africa and are believed to have certain characters and qualities. The geographical sense of African cannot be used to describe whoever behaves, thinks, or looks like what has been portrayed as the general racial traits of Africans.

Acquisition of citizenship, which Uduma emphasises in a limited sense, goes beyond one's place of birth. Global mobility can no longer afford us to accept Uduma's narrow geographical conceptualisation of Africanity. "Being African has at best a geographical meaning, which in our time of global mobility is reduced even further in its relevance as a factor" (Melber 2014). Furthermore, Oguejiofor elaborates the concept and use of African in the following submission:

> A frequent tendency is to limit the term to the continent that has for many centuries been designated by the name 'Africa'. On this account 'African' is a purely geographical expression. Though the least problematic of the various possible meanings, the geographic interpretation is by no means the only one since the adjective 'African' can also be used to designate cultural, historical, political, ideological and social realities. (cited in Surakat 2015, p. 66)

Tongoi (2005, p. 6) suggests that the fundamental problems of the Africans can only be solved when there is "a vital worldview change". Tongoi does not explain what he means by 'worldview' or whose worldview requires a vital change to make Africa what it ought to be, where worldview means "the embodiment of people's cultural beingness and identity" (Baloyi and Mkobe-Rabothata 2014, p. 234). Tongoi recognises the fact that slave trade, colonialism and globalisation have negatively impacted on Africa in addition to Africa's internal wrangling. However, he seems to proffer a Christian solution to the social and political problems that are bedevilling Africa. This calls to question whether foreign missionary religions do not impact on African 'worldview' and identity in ways that have complicated the ontological and existential questions associated with being an African. The Ghanaian philosopher, Abraham (2015, p. 165) observes that "disintegration has come with Christian religion . . . The Christian religion, with its emphasis on accountability of the individual conscience to God, has had a disruptive effective" on the communal

and communitarian spirit that guided Africa before the advent of Christianity, Islam or colonialism. Despite this, Miller (2005, p. 7) observes that Africa is drenched in more than half-negative news that breaks out in the global tabloids. As such, one can easily see faces of despair, hopelessness, hunger, diseases such as HIV and AIDS, and so on. Starkly, he argues that the question whether or not Africa and Africans are cursed is answered depending "on your worldview". For Christians, there is hope for Africa despite the litany of challenges it faces and the contradiction in terms of its natural resources and physical strength and the quandary that characterise its governments. The Christian message of hope for Africa and Africans, as remedial as it is, cannot be divorced from the historical truth of how the same theology was used to define or redefine them.

Keim (2014, p. 3) also attempts to provide some insights into who an African could be. For him, most Americans view the African as less human at best, or an abstract being at worst. According to him, "Africa and its people are simply a marginal part of American consciousness". But in reality, Keim observes that Africa and its people are steeped in the American subconsciousness. This being so, there is hardly any news item about Africa that do not stimulate some kind of interest in America. "Whereas in the past the myth of racial inferiority of Africans was the major justification for Western control of Africans, now cultural inferiority is more likely reason". Such stereotypes as "African native", "native African" or "rural African," and so on, are used freely to describe Africans. More specifically, Keim suggests that all Africans as presently constituted cannot be described in such stereotypes. The sub-Saharan Africans are mostly referred to as Africans because from the South, we can easily decipher multicultural Africans; from the North, we can see Arabicised Africans, but that again does not wish away the problem of the European Africans in South Africa, Zimbabwe or Kenya who are eligible to be called Africans in their own right.

For Diallo (2004), the sense of being an African is profound for humanity at large if we accept as an indubitable fact that humanity originated from/in Africa. Given this, all human beings can lay claim to being African. However, the reality of race, politics, economy, geography and so on raises the question more pungently whether all human beings recognise or feel they are Africans. Certainly not all human beings believe or accept being an African. As a result of this, Diallo opines that feeling is important in determining who is an African despite such anthropological claim. Whether or not the feeling is positive, true Africans feel it in their being that they are Africans. He plainly explains:

> Those who feel it know it. Being born or having one's roots in the mother continent is not sufficient to make one an African. One has to feel African. For the good or the bad, true Africans have no problem feeling African. Wherever they go, they are reminded and treated as such by the sheer colour of their black skin. They can always see this at every move they make. The presently dominant western political, economic, cultural and social structures do single out, marginalize, exclude and discriminate against Africans. This happens inside Africa and everywhere else. (Diallo 2004, p.14)

Diallo further maintains that feeling/bonding African enables all true Africans, regardless of their ethnicity or colour, to interact and humanise as one. Space or territory does not negatively affect the feeling of being an African for the true African. Rather, being far away from 'home' makes the true African more nostalgic and thus finds ways to re-connect with the root. Social and political status does not make the true African deny her/his root. Africans feel more glued to their ontology even when existential circumstances may want to compel them to feel otherwise. He further elucidates:

> One of the core aspects of being African is to be territorial. No matter how far Africans go and how long they stay away, psychologically they never leave Africa or abandon their African family, friends and age group. They will always keep in mind going back; they will send money . . . to their mothers and other relatives. In fact the more Africans stay away, the more African they become. (Diallo 2004, pp. 15–16)

According to Nehusi (2004), being an African is beyond feeling; it involves critical thinking of the feeling and the being. Agreeing with Kwame Nkrumah and Peter Tosh that any one born black anywhere in the world is an African, Nehusi adds that it is imperative to examine the basis of such assumption in light of contemporary reality. Without such critical examination, a true and sustainable African identity cannot be carved. The African identity stimulates tension that only those who are conscious of it can meaningfully define in the mosaic of identities that confront Africa. A starting point for a conscious creation of an African identity is not possible unless it takes its root from the land, which in turn produces what is referred to as African cultures. He submits:

> A proper definition of any people must relate them to their ancestral land, their culture and their history. These are the central factors in the formation of identity. It is the interaction of people with their environment, especially an interaction with their land, which produces culture. At the very basis of culture are commonly held values that historically arose from the interaction between people and their ancestral land. These values are in turn reflected in the patterned behaviour they determine. Such patterned behaviour therefore also arises out of that interaction and is encoded by tradition in rituals and ceremonies as well as a worldview that are all distinctive to each culture. A people's history is their story, the record of what they did and how they did what they did. The combination of all of these factors produces identity, which is the primary marker of origin, belonging and distinctiveness and the major factor in the proper orientation of a people in the world. (Nehusi 2004, pp. 19–20)

Unless one incorporates Diallo's universal origin of humanity in Africa into Nehusi's criteria for being an African, it is clear that those who do not share the same cultural and ritual/spiritual affinity with true Africans cannot be Africans. In other words, any people who do not trace their origin to the ontological, cosmological and cosmogonic source/orientation of Africa cannot be regarded as Africans. If this analysis is pushed further, it would mean, for instance, that Christians and Muslims, and any other persons who deny the autochthonous religion of Africa, have also denied their African identity, given that cosmological and spiritual link is imperative to identity formation. The experience of history and culture is cardinal to human identity and, in the case of Africa, Africans are those who share these common characteristics. Nehusi further elucidates this point when he says:

> An Afrikan is therefore a person who shares with others a common geographical origin and ownership of, and spiritual attachment to their ancestral land known as the continent of Afrika, certain physical characteristics, a common history, a common set of cultural values and consequently a common worldview, a common heritage and common economic, political and social interests. These core characteristics, which amount to a specific identity, set Afrikans apart from other peoples, and ought to determine the interests they pursue. (Nehusi 2004, pp. 18–19)

Steven Friedman (2004) puts the multicultural reality of Africa into task in an attempt to define who an African could be. He argues that the essentialist characterisation of African identity would naturally exclude those who, though are pan-African in thought and action, yet unfortunately are not ethnically African. Citing the example of South Africa, Friedman calls attention to the incongruity that defines a person being a citizen of a country in a continent and yet not being related to that continent. For instance, are white South Africans African in the same way autochthonous black South Africans are African? Of course, they are citizens of South Africa even though they may not all be ontologically South Africans in the way Friedman conceives it. Acquisition of citizenship in modern society goes beyond ontological foundation: it is either by birth (through *jus sanguinis*, that is, by blood bond or *jus solis*, that is, by birthplace) or naturalisation. Despite the commercial and other essentialist use of the concept of "white Africanness" in South

Africa, it is also true that there is no single cultural feature that defines all Africans. In the Maghreb, Arab culture has come to now define African identity to such an extent that one wonders whether that region could be part of 'ontological Africa'. Given this, Friedman argues that excluding the white South Africans (especially those who are inclined to Africa) from being African could not be justified. "Excluding whites from an African identity because we are 'only using it for convenience' is, therefore, a slippery slope, enabling some to decide who is African and who is not. Certainly, it is important to encourage whites to feel rooted in this continent, to feel that their future is bound up in Africa's. But it does not necessarily follow that this should determine whether people are allowed an African identity" (Friedman 2004, p. 32).

The point Friedman tries to make is forcefully brought home by Frederick De Klerk the former and last Apartheid president of South Africa. At the 12th Europe Lecture in The Hague, De Klerk made the following impressive statement: "My ancestors were Huguenots from France who came to South Africa via Holland in 1688. My culture like the cultures of so many peoples throughout the world, is suffused with the unparalleled literature, arts and music of Europe. And yet, I am an African. I strive to promote its interests in its relationship with other parts of the world, and I support its sports teams when they are playing teams from other continents" (De Klerk 2015). The point is, can one honestly and legitimately deny De Klerk Africanness or is his "I am an African" less in essence than Mbeki's "I am an African" or Visser's "I am an African"? Perhaps one can insist that De Klerk still traces his ontological root to France, whereas Mbeki traces his to the African soil. According to Mbeki, "I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land". This realisation could have inspired the challenge he throws and the fear he expresses: "I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito."

3. The Challenges of Identity Construction

Mbeki's "I am an African" takes into consideration the fact that South Africa is a multiracial country or "two nations" (De Grunchy 2002, p. 184). Although there are those who are black Africans, the autochthons, the rainbow-colours that define its present reality cannot be wished away. This thought is well illustrated in the ingenious crafting of South Africa as Rainbow Nation by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. For him, sunlight is the source of the rainbow; sunlight contains all colours, hence all races in South Africa should be a manifestation of the spirit of a new, post-Apartheid South Africa. This reminds one of the Nigerian old National Anthem, which partly reflects the gamut of ethnicity that defines the country but held together in unity: "Nigeria, we hail thee; our own dear native land, though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand" (Falola and Dauda 2017, p. 238). This, again, does not immediately obliterate the oppressive relationship that existed in Apartheid South Africa where the Blacks were treated with utmost indignity and inhumanity by the Whites. Recalling the suffering and pain the Blacks went through forms part of defining an authentic and true African in the context of fashioning and developing a new relationship and identity. This is important because to simply forget the past without understanding and teasing out its contents would mean resetting and denying posterity the history that lays behind them. It is also a subtle reminder that the spirit of resistance that eventually led to independence can still be revived and imparted on the younger generations. In this regard, Mbeki (1996) says:

> I am born of a people who would not tolerate oppression. I am of a nation that would not allow that fear of death, torture, imprisonment, exile or persecution should result in the perpetuation of injustice. The great masses who are our mother and father will not permit that the behaviour of the few results in the description of our country and people as barbaric. Patient because history is on their side, these masses do not despair because today the weather is bad.

Nor do they turn triumphalist when, tomorrow, the sun shines. Whatever the circumstances they have lived through and because of that experience, they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be. We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African.

However, Mbeki's insistence on the past has been heavily criticised because it makes healing difficult, if not impossible. This has a way of bracketing out new possibilities for the future. Apart from this, Mbeki's definitions of who an African is are ambiguous. Although he sees himself as an authentic African because of his birthplace, others who are not Black can also lay claim to being an African because of being born on African soil, though with different experiences. In addition, Mbeki's "territorial principle" ousts the African Diasporas, who though were not born on African soil yet trace their root to Africa and identify as such. Many in diaspora work in solidarity with Africans: "Africans on both sides of the Atlantic, interrogate contemporary debates, controversies, achievements, challenges, and future prospects of African development and democratisation from multidisciplinary and diverse theoretical perspectives" (Bekele and Oyebade 2019, pp. vii–viii).

There are some who do not identify with Africa. Mbeki himself quotes an African American as saying:

I am an American, but a black man, a descendant of slaves brought from Africa . . . If things had been different, I might have been one of them (the Africans)–or might have met some . . . anonymous fate in one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor survived that voyage (to slavery) . . . Talk to me about Africa and my black roots and my kinship with my African brothers and I'll throw it back into your face, and then I'll rub your nose in the images of the rotting flesh (of the victims of the genocide of the Tutsis or Rwanda) . . . . Sorry, but I've been there . . . . Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now, I am not one of them'. (Mbeki 1998)

This African American does not ontologically deny Africa, though he was not born in Africa. The conditions of Africa in comparison with his new home in diaspora define his loathsomeness for Africa. Specifically, he detests the social and political realities that have made Africa a laughing stock, such as wars, poverty, underdevelopment, corruption, and so on. These inexcusable, but real, experiences are indeed unacceptable to any reasonable Africans also in the homestead. On the contrary, Hefny (2019) who, though lives in America and desires to be recognised and addressed an African from Nubia, is faced with an avalanche of troubles in the US. Hefny argues that his African identity (despite his colour now being used to classify him as a 'White') is satisfying to him because of the ontological relationship it confers on him. This, for Mbeki, is the heart of being African: true Africans are those who are conscious of being African and refuse to be defined from outside, and circumstances within and outside Africa. Mbeki maintains that outsiders can never understand Africans enough to be able to adequately define them, a position Adamo (2004) also maintains. Unfortunately, most definitions of African and Africa that have endured are given by those who are not Africans. The toga they have thrust on Africans has refused to be removed (Salcedo 2004). The painful reality pushed Mbeki to insist on the revival of the African Renaissance project. Such a project is not exclusively an African affair. It has to involve others who may not be ontologically considered to be Africans. Mbeki realises this when he argues that in South Africa, even though the past hurts so deeply, there is the urgent need for all people to work together in order to construct a new and all-inclusive (South) Africa. In this case it will be difficult to insist on strict African epistemology, history and geography in the construction of an African Renaissance in the 21st century, even though Mbeki seeks to understand Africa Renaissance as a project of self-definition without external influence. Mbeki's interest of Africa's development in a globalised world calls for collaboration with those who are not African. As such, Africa like any other part of the world, will continue to be influenced both within and outside.

Again, I reiterate the fact that Mbeki did not make a normative judgement on the past relationship and experiences of the South African, such as the near total extermination of the San and Khoi people. He "may also have failed to state how colonialism had failed the people of South Africa through the imposition of European religion and cultures, and privileged Christianity above all other forms of religious expressions, including African traditional religions and eastern religions. Even more, the Statement did not seek to determine how this new inclusive South Africa formed out of these diverse cultures and traditions was to be forged afresh and re-created" (Pityana 2006, p. 3). Christianity and Islam have shaped the African identity so much that to forget them in the construction of a new Africa will mean to compromise the tenacity of the project of African Renaissance. Yet we must admit that the identities these religions have forged in Africa cannot be erased so easily, assuming it is even possible. They, like colonialism and globalisation, have continued to define or redefine relationships and identities within and outside Africa. Pityana (2006, p. 2) espouses that Mbeki's "*I am an African*" was an elegiac poem, extolling the cultural, religious, historical, and linguistic diversities of South Africa. It is a poem in praise of all that has come to make up the new South Africa, almost suggesting that South Africa can no longer be itself without the affirmation of its various formations with all their histories and origins. In doing so, the Deputy President was reminding South Africans of their origins and how we have become who we are". All of these make Mbeki's "I am an African" multifaceted though relevant in stimulating the African spirit.

4. Analysis of the Context of Being an African

Finally, I ask: who is an African? This question does not stop at Mbeki's "I am an African", De Klerk's or Visser's versions. They all represent different contexts of being an African, thus adding to the beauty and ambiguity of defining an African. Like Visser, Peter (2019) also formulates paradoxical nuances of being a Nigerian. Peter affirms that he is a Nigerian: "I am a Nigerian/I am a born Nigerian . . . . Yes . . . I am a foreign Nigerian". The passion with which Peter speaks of being a Nigerian can easily overshadow the complexity and tension of internal wrangling among the over 400 ethnic groups that struggle to be Nigerian in their various understandings of nationhood. Kivel (1998) opines that contexts and situations affect acceptance or rejection of identity. According to him, when racism is being discussed, many white people deny being white because of shame or complicity associated with it. The Italian rejects being white because he does not want to be associated with racism; the Jew also rejects his whiteness because of the same reason. Kivel adds that those who have not been privileged to enjoy what others enjoy also deny being white. Being a Jew is not a straightforward definition and identity of a people that has been so simply assumed. The Jews of colour are the largest population of the global Jewish people, yet they are not accepted as Jews in Israel or in Europe. This raises the question of who is (white) a Jew, just as, who is an African?

Mbeki is an African because he was born in Africa. Visser is an African because he empathises with the African reality, and sees Africa as the hope of the world. Visser argues he is an African because Africa is the cradle of humanity, and as such possesses sacred wisdom that does not exist elsewhere. For him, though he lives outside the shores of Africa, he feels for Africa and shares every moment and memory of Africa. To be an African, therefore, does not have to depend on being born an African or live in its shores. De Klerk is an African because he finds himself in Africa through the stream of his ancestors. These claims to African-ness or African-hood seem elitist. Does Mbeki mean that he is an African in the context of the continent or in a South African context? This question is imperative because of the reality on the ground. Two critical examples will help to engage this question and to forge a pragmatic Pan Africanism that Mbeki dreams of. One, between 2008 and 2015, many people black non-South Africans were killed by Black South Africans in what has been termed xenophobia. The slogan: "kill the *kwerekwere*" means so much in the construction of Africanity. Black South Africans pejoratively refer to fellow Africans, Black non-South Africans, as *amakwerekwere*, which means: "a person who speaks

an unintelligible language" (Agbiji and Etukumana 2015, p. 209). If non-South African Africans, though black, are described as barbarians, those whose language is unintelligible and uncultured, in what sense, then, can one assert confidently that one is an African? According to Agbiji and Etukumana (2015, p. 210), "African foreigners are always seen as a threat to the social and economic well-being of South Africa. Xenophobic stereotypes and attacks are fuelled by high profile South African political leaders, traditional rulers, public servants, and the media, who profile non-South African blacks in bad light. Whenever there have been violent attacks on foreigners, many politicians and government officials have tended to downplay the significance of xenophobia, preferring to label such attacks as opportunistic crime and 'conflicts over resources'." This affirms the denial of African brotherhood and communalism.

Two, the visa administration in many African states is a clear demonstration of the fact that those who claim to be Africans may, after all, have to reconsider their relationship with one another. A pathetic story was narrated about how African states treat Africans and non-Africans differently in securing a visa. A professor, a non-African and the PhD supervisor of two African students from different countries, was to attend a conference in one African state. The professor had written a letter of introduction for the two African students, which they took to the embassy. Sadly, the professor did not need a visa to enter the African country where the conference held, but his two African students were denied visas and could not attend the conference. The question resonates more pungently: who is an African? The professor, not an African yet not needing a visa, or the students who are Africans ontologically but need visas to enter an African state and were denied?

Certainly, Mbeki has spurred us to think about the African complex identity. It is a clarion call to all those who feel, think and believe in Africa to forge alliance in the realisation of the humanity of Africans despite the ills they have been subjected to. It is recourse towards African humanity lived in its communalism; the "we-spirit" that bonds all in the universal brotherhood of all people. It is also a prompting to eternal vigilance against the possibility of a re-enactment of those external forces that have partly brought Africa to its present socio-political status, some of which are already remobilising and garnering compradors to recolonise Africa through the back door. It is a call to the Africans within and outside the shores of the African continent to revive the spirit of Pan Africanism from the debris of the past and the internal oppression executed by its own people against its own people. Bangura (2014, p. 49) sums it up thus:

> Although compassion, warmth, understanding, caring, sharing, humanness, etc. are underscored by all the major world orientations, African-centered thought serves as a *distinctly African rationale* for these ways of relating to others. African-centeredness gives a distinctly African meaning to, and a reason or motivation for, a positive attitude towards the other. In light of the calls for an African Renaissance, African-centeredness urges Africans to be true to their promotion of good governance, democracy, peaceful relations and conflict resolution, educational and other developmental aspirations.

Bangura insists that these virtues are by no means easy; they require hard work and concerted efforts: "We ought never to falsify the cultural reality (life, art, literature) which is the goal of African-centeredness. Thus, we would have to oppose all sorts of simplified or supposedly simplified approaches and stress instead the methods which will achieve the best possible access to real life, language and philosophy" (Bangura 2014, p. 49). These values are the irreducible minimum requirements that can instil the pride of being an African. With them, one can say: "I am an African"! I believe that this might have partly informed what gave birth to the African Studies Association Africa in the University of Ghana in 2013. While many universities outside Africa have institutes of African studies, and African studies associations, and organise annual conferences where Africans are 'scarcely' present but roundly discussed, non-Africans define and project the study and discourses about Africa from their own perspectives about Africa and Africans. The domestication of African studies is part of the definition of being an African. After all,

"unless the lion learns how to write, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (Jonathan 2018, p. 2). It is only hoped that the ideals that carve out this new Association from others will be sustained as it continues to define Africa and Africans.

In addition, in what Katongole (2017, p. xi) calls the "metaphysics of reconciliation," De Grunchy (2002, p. 189) argues that there is the need to accept responsibility for past evils committed against one another, and failure of past regimes that have made Africanity complex and difficult to accept, and to define. To deny them is to perpetually scathe the wound and the pain of past experiences. This will continue to raise suspicion and intensify the identity crises that those who claim to be African will face within and outside the African shores.

5. Lenses of Being an African

What, therefore, do Africans do? It has been argued that the question, who is an African? is a complex one. It is not just the socio-political, cultural existential and ontological experiences that an African went through that would determine how an African could be constructed; the contemporary forces of globalisation and migration have to be imputed into the construct, on the one hand. In fact, "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-Gathseni 2013, p. 100). On the other, the real zest for the question of who is an African should rest on how best to wrest with the experiences themselves. How Africans can utilise the experiences to their advantage in their construction of new reality and identity must engage their attention. The truth is that the mosaic reality of Africa both culturally and religiously seems difficult to practically obliterate: the traditional African religious beliefs and practices resonate in every day African endeavour despite affirmation of missionary religions, Christianity and Islam, which have continued to be impacted by the resilience of African culture (Biney 2019). Mazrui's (1983, 1986) 'triple heritage' comes to the fore here. Mazrui argued that African ancestors are crying for reconnection with their progenies who have abandoned them for missionary religions. He would argue that colonialism has a more negative impact on African structure than African cultures. No matter the "supermarket of ideas" (Ndlovu-Gathseni 2014, p. 14) that Mazrui must have left behind in his disquisition of African identity, Mazrui was also accused of superimposing Arab identity and cultures on African heritage. He did not think that Islamic heritage and Western ideologies in Africa have both cultural and religious implications that have continued to adversely impact on African religioscape (Soyinka 1991). Thus, Soyinka (2012) argues that African autochthon must be kept in focus if authentic identity must be carved. Bediako (1999) argues that African identity is an indispensable key to understanding Christian theology in Africa; Thomas and Alanamu (2019) point out that Africans play critical roles in the formulation of Christian theology generally. In fact, as a result of the profound African influence on Judaism's formative period, Thomas and Alanamu (2019, p. 3) asserts that "one could technically consider Judaism as a traditional African belief system". Zeleza (2011) suggests an integrationist model, while Edozie (2012) suggests a conversationist model for African identity construction because of the diversities that have defined it and its studies. Maluleke's (2020) reimagining of the African identity tilts towards a 'negotiationist' paradigm because of the reality of the motley religious presence in Africa. In this sense, both Christian and African indigenous values can be had by all. However, is it sufficient to carve the African identity?

6. Conclusion: Drawing Strength from African Communalism

What is missing from the foregoing is the nonrecognition of African religion (the use of African religion is more convenient) whose thrust, in its anthropocentric form, is communalism. This is what Said (1968, p. 27) refers to as "traditional communalism," which is the formidable social system African countries ought to have been built at independence.

In a world enmeshed in unequal competition, Said argued that African identity constructed on the basis of communalism is imperative to navigate the threshold. Of all the features in African religion, community stands out as the unsurpassable identifying characteristic no serious individual wants to undermine. Oduyoye reminds us that "the identity crisis in Africa, especially among the urbanized, the Western educated, and the Christians [and Muslims], may be attributed to the dynamic perspective on life, which comes from knowing and living one's religio-cultural history" (cited in Mudimbe 1988, p. 72). Before I discuss the salience and resilience of African community, I shall pause to briefly enunciate the belief in African religion.

African religion is that religion that was not imported to Africa; it is the religion, as generally believed, every African, at least, in the homestead, is born into before converting to the missionary religions, and to which many surreptitiously return in times of vicissitudes of life their faith in the missionary religions is unable to (re)solve. African religion has the concept of God, the creator, divinities, ancestors, spirits, and human agency. The Supreme Being has indigenous names and attributes in different African communities. He is the absolute being who gives and controls human destiny. His omnipresence or ubiquity makes it possible for all members of the community to believe and know him. The divinities, both primordial and apotheosised, are closest to God, and carry out functions in line with their portfolios. The ancestors seem to be the most active beings that relate immediately with the human community; because they just left the communities via death, they are believed to be more abreast with the activities of the communities. The spirits, both good and malignant ones, also play roles in the human community depending on their nature. The human agents, such as priests and medicine men/women, also enjoy a pride of place in the communities as persons who communicate with the spirits. What is most imperative in African pantheon is the fact that they focus almost entirely on the health and otherwise of the human community (Igboin 2014, 2019, 2021a). Biney (2019, p. 128) sums up the belief system in the African cosmology as follows: belief in and strong reverence for God, deities, ancestors and other spirits; uncompromising commitment to the promotion and preservation of the community and communal life; recognition and affirmation of dignity and sacrality of life; and respect for other biotic and abiotic organisms.

The African community is composite; this means that the present world is the drama-scene of all beings. The living and the living dead, that is, the ancestors, divinities, spirits and the yet-to-be-born are full members of the African community. While the living presently physically occupy the community, the dead are in constant motion and striving to rejoin the community through reincarnation or be present in invisible ways to guide and guard the community, which in turn warrants the pouring of libation and offering of sacrifices. The unborn are also in continuous movement towards becoming members of the physical, visible community through birth. The lubrication of relationship with both the ancestors and the unborn through sacrifices ensures that there is human flourishing for individuals and the community at large. In fact, there is hardly any religion that has conceptualised community in this peculiar and comprehensive manner African religion has done (Igboin 2020). This sense of community is aptly encapsulated thus:

The community as a whole, from time to time, seeks to revive the connections it has with its ancestors and its yet unborn members as well. And above all, the community strives for the renewal of its sense of community with the Supreme Being. In traditional African societies, such a renewal can be found in the ecstatic dances of healers and sorcerers in which they try to become possessed by goddesses who were seen to be part of the greater community (Weidtmann 2019, p. 109).

In addition, the community also encompasses abiotic organisms. The sacrality of the community rests on the belief that if any part of it is injured, the whole is injured. Such injury diminishes vitality. Anything, or any act that does not generate or increase life, is in itself bad and condemnable. Respecting life in all its ramifications in the community as so defined confers humanity and personhood on an individual. Bangura (2018, pp. 43–44) eloquently captures this when he articulates that "all life to the African is total; all human

activities are closely related. This has as its underlying principle the sanctity of the person, in his/her spirituality and essentiality." The study of African religion has thus shown that anyone who self-identifies as African, and hopes to enjoy a healthy and vital life, must regard what the progenitors have laid down as rules. In extrapolating the significance of this relationship, Clark (2012) argues that being human in the community entails relational harmony and sanctity with one and all. He adds that the ancestors, who are really not conceived as dead, are critical to ensuring compliance with rules and security of the entire community. As a result, we can argue that personhood and identity have strong bases in African religion and spirituality; they are realised in the community. The person that is now, was once an unborn being whose life was sacred, respected and protected, and may become an ancestor if he does and dies well, to be reborn or venerated. The person is thus a part of the community, not the whole community. It is within this prism that sympathy, solidarity, and belongingness come into play because a person realises that his personhood is realisable in the community and comity of others. The most intriguing thing is that Christians and Muslims in Africa recognise this sense of community but tend to define or redefine it within their religioscapes. For instance, we now hear of Christian Ubuntu (Shutte 2019) and proposal for Islamic Ubuntu (Igboin 2021b), even though the former conceives of community in the sense of called out people, a separatist and individual commitment to God, and the latter secures only its *ummah*, a community of fellow believers. But African religion, the sea from which Christian and Muslim missionaries fish men and women, sees them as members of a bonding community.

No matter the criticisms against the conception of African community, contemporary global reality has unpretentiously demonstrated that there is the urgent need of a reconceptualisation and reconstitution of humanity; not in isolation of others or voracious consumption of the ecosystem, but a respect for both. The African, through this religious realisation and experience, can begin to construct a communal and communitarian basis for an "African identity" (Maqoma 2020, p. 2) that is at once within and authentic.

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