



# Introduction: From the idea of Africa to the African idea of Africa

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This special issue is part of the collaborative research project initiated by the Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South with Emphasis on Africa, based at the University of Bayreuth in Germany, and the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS), based at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. The collaborative project is entitled “The Changing African Idea of Africa and the Future of African Studies.” At the University of Bayreuth, the research project is also part of *The African Multiple Cluster of Excellence* supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

(grant number EX 20521-390713894). The overarching agenda of *The African Multiple Cluster of Excellence* is that of reconfiguring African Studies, and at the centre of this is the imperative of doing African Studies with Africans while also privileging African voices and intellectual/academic productions.

The project commenced in April 2022 with a series of keynote seminar series and the commissioning of this special issue themed “The African Idea of Africa.” Africa as an idea, concept, space, home and other iterations, continues to elicit contestations

and animated debates in both scholarly circles, as well as in political discourses of governance and development. Consequently, to write about Africa has not been an easy task for both Africanists and African scholars. This is why Binyavanga Wainaina (2022) posited the question of how to write about Africa. Perhaps, it was these contestations that provoked the Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen in his famous poem “Heritage” (1924) to posit in poetic terms the soul-searching question: “What is Africa to me?” John Henrik Clarke (1991: xiii) expanded the question to “What is Africa to Africans, and what is Africa to the world?”

It perhaps these same concerns that prompted the Congolese scholar Valentine Y. Mudimbe to write *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994). In these two widely celebrated works, Mudimbe delves deeper into the complex politics of knowledge, representation(s), and indeed invention and reinventions of Africa. He explained in detail how missionaries, explorers, anthropologists and other literate observers of Africa propagated an exotic idea of Africa. To make sense of the politics of knowledge and representation, Mudimbe coined the term “the colonial library” as an epistemic framing of a particular idea of Africa, which still remains a challenge in African Studies. At the centre of the idea of Africa are complex and tormenting issues of subject, subjection, subjectivation, and subjectivity, which Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 101) described as “the ticklish subject,” borrowing a concept from Slavoj Žižek.

Reflecting on Mudimbe’s concept of “the invention of Africa,” Lewis R. Gordon (2008: 204) elaborated on Mudimbe’s idea and posited that Africa was invented in a double-sense: “It was invented by the system of knowledge constituted by the process of conquest and colonization, which always erupted with discovery, on the one hand, and it was also constituted by the processes of resistance borne out of those events the consequence of which is an effect of both on each other.” As far back as 1963, Ali A. Mazrui published “On the Concept of ‘We Are All Africans,’” where he delved into the politics of resistance to colonialism and rise of pan-African ideas. Pan-Africanism was propagated by such figures as Kwame Nkrumah who made it clear that Africa was born in him and Julius Nyerere who articulated the concept of the “African sentiment”

(Mazrui 1963: 24-26). This thinking created the African idea of Africa (internal, African-centred view of themselves), as a shift from the Mudimbean idea of Africa (external representation). Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009: 72) expressed this shift in this way:

V. Y. Mudimbe describes the idea of Africa as a product of the West’s system of self-representation, which included creation of an otherness conceived and conveyed through conflicting systems of knowledge. But I prefer to think of the idea of Africa—or, more appropriately, the ‘African idea,’ as African self-representation. To distinguish it from the Mudimbeist formula according to which Europe is finding itself through its invention of Africa, I see the African idea as that which was forged in the diaspora and travelled back to the continent.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009: 35) introduced the concept of “re-membering Africa” as a central leitmotif of the African idea of Africa. Re-membering is the opposite of dismemberment. It entails the recovery of fragments. It means the picking up of pieces. It is a reconstitution and restitution process after centuries of de-constitution and destitution. Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2009: 35) depicted it as the “quest for wholeness, a question that has underlain African struggles since the Atlantic slave trade.” Therefore, such initiatives as Ethiopianism, Garveyism, Negritude, Pan-Africanism,

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the Black consciousness movements, African socialism(s), the African renaissance, and many others are constitutive of “re-membering.” These initiatives were and are also part of what Adom Getachew (2019) depicted as “worldmaking after empire.”

The current calls for a new understanding of Africa are inspired by what Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018; 2020; 2021) has depicted as the “resurgent and insurgent decolonization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” This resurgent and insurgent decolonial politics is characterised by what Geo Maher (2022) depicted as “the second sight of the colonized” drawing from W. E. B. Du Bois. At the centre of this decolonial politics is not only the re-opening of basic epistemological questions, but also the exploration of heteropatriarchal sexism, the afterlives of racial enslavement, racial capitalism, colonialities, as well as the recovery and articulation of knowledges and ideas that have been marginalised.

It is within this context that the contributions to this special issue are largely informed by the decolonial and anticolonial spirit of revisiting, recovering and articulating African ideas of liberation and the imaginings of a liberated Africa. The essays are unique in that they recover and affirm, subject to the ideas of critical analysis, what remains useful for the unfinished struggle for liberation. Consequently, the very African struggles for liberation are opened to new critiques and new affirmations informed by empathetic readings and keen revisions of the past.

The first essay by Bongani Ngqulunga is focused on genealogies of African nationalism and how national imaginaries articulated the idea of Africa, where what is explored are individual thinkers and ideas. What is underscored are the complexities of ideas and the avoidance of easy dismissals of some of the imaginings and ideas. The second essay is by Tlhabane Mokhine Dan Motaung and, like Ngqulunga, he focuses on the African nationalist idea of Africa. African nationalist thought dominated the twentieth century and animated the anticolonial struggles, as well as decolonial imaginaries of liberation. The degeneration of a once coherent African national self-consciousness into detestable forms of ethnic conflicts, genocides, nativisms and xenophobia is opened to analysis in this article. The expansive work of Mahmood Mamdani is mobilised

and deployed to understand both colonial and postcolonial realities of Africa.

The contributors to this special issue also turn their analytical lens to specific political figures like Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe and Thabo Mbeki in their critical explorations of the African ideas of Africa. Some of these figures dominated the political landscape of Africa and they invariably contributed to specific ideas of Africa. William Mpfu’s essay is focused on Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, who became a leading voice of the “African Renaissance” and actively participated in reworlding Africa from Africa, including its institution-building. Prolific Maturuse’s essay is focused on distinctive “African philosopher” leader Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania and his ideas of African socialism.

Blazio Manobo’s essay centers on Robert Gabriel Mugabe of Zimbabwe, a controversial leader who is both adored and loathed in equal measure. Mugabe’s delivery of land to his people, in the face of all sorts of criticism, made him a hero among Africans. Like Kwame Nkrumah, perhaps Mugabe became a great leader outside of Zimbabwe and a dictator within Zimbabwe. Such a figure could not escape attracting the attention of scholars as he is a polarising figure - Mugabe is caught up in what one can term “Mugabephilia” (love for Mugabe) on the one hand, and “Mugabephobia” (hatred for Mugabe) on the other hand.

The glaring lacuna in these essays is a lack of focus on women leaders who were also actively involved in the liberation struggles and imaginings of a liberated Africa. This lacuna is reflective of the operations of patriarchy in knowledge production and in imaginings of Africa. Ifi Amadiume (1997) in her advancement of women in reinventing Africa, underscored the realities of matriarchal thinking in pre-colonial Africa and how women commanded a powerful voice as leaders. Oyeronke Oyewumi (2016: 220) highlighted the significance of what she termed “maternal ideologies” because it is “enabling, ennobling, and inclusive”---it is “community oriented, all-inclusive, life giving, life sustaining, and life preserving.” Therefore, the decolonization of knowledge has to entail depatriarchization of knowledge too.

In the last set of essays, there is a shift from individuals, to ideas and intellectual productions. Kelvin Acheampong's essay highlights the contributions of novelists in his analysis of the literary turn in African Studies. Zama Mthombeni's essay focuses on values (ubuntu) and ethics in the context of an exploration of the problem of xenophobia in South Africa and how to transcend it. The last essay by Kudzai Vanyoro analyses the topical issues of sexuality and homophobia, as these issues cannot be ignored in any reflections on the African idea of Africa. Taken together, these essays demonstrate the complexities, multiplicities, ambiguities, ambivalences and even contradictions with African ideas of Africa.

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