

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Emancipation, Freedom or Taxonomy? What Does It Mean to be African?**

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*In France, immediately after Thermidor, anyone who resisted  
the turn intended to re-establish if not slavery,  
then the regime of white supremacy in the colonies,  
was branded 'African'.*

(Gauthier 1992 cited in Losurdo 1994: 465-6)

*We talk a lot about Africa,  
but we in our Party must remember that before being Africans  
we are men, human beings, who belong to the whole world.*

(Cabral 1979: 80)

What does it mean to be 'African'? The apartheid state, like colonialism, long used the term 'African' to classify those with particular skin colour, curly hair, certain facial features, based on assumptions about biological differences that supposedly separate the human species into 'races'. Others use the term to refer to those who live in, or whose origin is from, any part of the continental land mass referred to as 'Africa'. Still others use the term to refer to those in or from the continent but exclude the Arabic-speaking people of the northern parts of the continent. Some exclude even those who may have migrated to the continent centuries ago because their facial and hair features are not consistent with an essentialised ideas of the African. Are all those

who are citizens of African countries (and its associated islands) to be considered African? Just what is meant by the term? It is surprising how widely the term ‘African’ is used despite there being so many interpretations on what it means to be African.

In this essay, drawing in particular on the ideas of the Guinea-Bissau revolutionary, Amilcar Cabral, I discuss how the term ‘African’ became a synonym for the non-human or lesser human being, that justified enslavement, slavery, colonialism and exploitation, and how the meaning of the word evolved subsequently to consider the African as ‘uncivilized’ under colonialism, and then ‘under-developed’ in the post-independence period. I discuss how the term ‘African’ was appropriated by those engaged in the struggles against enslavement, slavery, exploitation and colonialism and came to represent the assertion and affirmation by Africans of their humanity, and as human beings, both makers of history and contributors to the history of human emancipation. That proud assertion did not to last long: for in the neo-colonial period, and especially in the neoliberal period post 1980, the term ‘African’ became disarticulated from, any connection with the struggle for emancipation, freedom, justice, dignity, and a universal humanity. Being African thus became merely a taxonomic term that has become indistinguishable from the individualistic identity politics that is so prevalent today, to which even current fad for ‘intersectionality’ falls victim. I will argue that it is not possible to understand, or even recognise, African people’s humanity without taking into account their long history of struggles for emancipation. That is only possible, I suggest, if the politics of African histories are understood and transcended to reveal their essential contributions to the universal human condition, experiences that, as Cabral put it, ‘belong to the whole world.’

Amilcar Cabral was the founder and leader of the Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde liberation movement, *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde* (PAIGC) and

one of the founders of *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FREMILO) in Mozambique and *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola – Partido do Trabalho* (MPLA) in Angola. He was a revolutionary, humanist, poet, military strategist and agronomist. The struggles that he led against Portuguese domination in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde contributed to the collapse not only of Portugal's African empire, but also to the downfall of the dictatorship of the fascist regime in Portugal and to the development of the Portuguese revolution of 1974/5. Sadly, that victory was not witnessed by Cabral: he was assassinated on 20 January 1973 by some of his own comrades with, it is said, the support of the Portuguese secret police. Cabral was not merely a guerrilla strategist. He was prolific in his writings on revolutionary theory, on culture and liberation; many texts of his writing, transcriptions and recordings of speeches that he made to the people, to party members, to Africans in the diaspora, and at international conferences, remain untranslated. Along with Fanon, Cabral should be considered as one the leading African thinkers on emancipation and freedom (Manji and Fletcher 2013).

My starting point here is the following excerpt from an important speech Cabral made to party members of PAIGC:

We talk a lot about Africa, but we in our Party must remember that before being Africans we are men, human beings, who belong to the whole world. We cannot therefore allow any interest of our people to be restricted or thwarted because of our condition as Africans. We must put the interests of our people higher, in the context of the interests of mankind in general, and then we can put them in the context of the interests of Africa in general (Cabral 1979: 80).

There are three elements in this statement around which I will structure this essay. First, how did a section of humanity come to be viewed as 'African'? Secondly, how might the

‘condition as Africans’ restrict or thwart the interests of the people? And finally, what is meant by putting ‘the interests of our people higher’ in the context of the interest of humankind in general, a people who ‘belong to the whole world’?

### **How did humans become Africans?**

It has long been established how the peoples who lived on the continent of Africa formed a diverse range of social formations that paralleled, and in some instances, were in advance of those that emerged in other parts of the world (see, for example, the works of Walter Rodney [1972]; Cheikh Anta Diop [1978,1987], Parris [2015] and Pithouse [2016]). While these societies occurred on the vast geographic landmass that today we refer to as Africa, the inhabitants of these societies would not have considered themselves at the time as being ‘African’, even if today we might refer to them as ‘African’ societies.

There are many hypotheses about the etymology of the term African: The Latin term *Afri* refers to the people in the region south of the Mediterranean, which it is believed refer to a society around Carthage. There are hypotheses that the term has a Phoenician origin from the word ‘Afar’, meaning dust; still others claim that its origins come from the word *Ifriqya*, the Arabic name for what the region that roughly today is Tunisia. There are in fact many theories about the origin of the term. Whatever its origin, it is clear that prior to the fifteenth century the term referred only to limited areas of the continental land mass. The term ‘African’ was not a self-proclaimed identity of the people inhabiting that part of the world. Rather, it was a term used by *others* to refer to those that lived in a limited part of a region south of the Mediterranean Sea (Mazrui 2005; Mudimbe 1994).

It was not until the fifteenth century did the concept of ‘African’ come to be applied as the nomenclature of all the peoples who lived on the continent, a derogatory word that was even

subsequently applied to those people in France who opposed white supremacy (Gauthier 1992) . It was a term conceived by Europe which came to prominence in the period of the establishment of enslavement, the Atlantic slave trade, and the condemnation of large sections of humanity to chattel slavery. While Europe was aware that there was a great diversity of societies and cultures of the people across the continent (which were exploited to facilitate the capture and enslavement of Africans), they assigned the category ‘African’ to all those who in their minds belonged to the ‘dark continent’.

To be able to subject millions of humans to the barbarism of enslavement and slavery required defining them as non-humans, and to do so required their *dehumanisation*. The process required a systematic and institutionalised attempt at the destruction of existing cultures, languages, histories and capacities to produce, organise, tell stories, invent, love, make music, sing songs, make poetry, produce art, philosophise, and to formulate in their minds that which they imagine before giving it concrete form, all things that make a people human. This attempt to destroy the culture of Africans turned out to be a signal failure. For while they destroyed the institutions on the continent, the memories of their culture, institutions, art forms, music and all that which is associated with being human remained both on the continent and in the diaspora where the enslaved Africans found themselves. The enslavers, the slave owners, and all those who profited from these horrors, including the emerging capitalist classes of Europe, engaged in a systematic re-casting of human beings as non-humans or lesser-beings, a process in which the Christian church and the European intelligentsia were deeply involved (see wa Thiong’o 1986, Parris 2015, Losurdo 2014).

In essence, if we were to search for a word that, in the period of the emergence of the enslavement, the Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, encapsulated the outcome of this

dehumanisation process, it is the word ‘African’, a word that represented the transformation of humans from a particular geography into non-humans or sub-humans. Africans were to be considered as a people without a history, without culture, without any contribution to make to human history, a view perpetuated by philosophers of Enlightenment (see Losurdo 2014). To be defined as ‘African’ was to be considered non-human, to have all aspects of being human eliminated, denied and suppressed. As slaves, they were mere chattel, that is, property or ‘things’ that can be owned, disposed of and treated in any way that the ‘owner’ thought fit.

Anthropologists, scientists, philosophers and a whole industry developed to ‘prove’ that these people were not human, that they constituted a different sub-human, biological ‘race’.

Enslavement and chattel slavery played a critical role for the accumulation of capital that gave birth to capitalism in Europe (Dubois 1962; James 1963; Williams 1966). These were the cornerstones of capital accumulation, as were the concurrent genocides of the indigenous populations of the Americas and beyond (Dunbar-Ortiz 2015; see also Dunbar-Ortiz in this volume). The systematic dehumanisation of sections of humanity by virtue of their supposed race or origin as enslaved or as colonial subjects – that is *racism* – was intimately intertwined with the birth and growth of capitalism, and continues to play a role in the survival of capital today.

Racism was a fundamental feature of nascent capitalism and later a fundamental feature of the emergence of capitalism and the subsequent period of colonisation that subjugated vast sections of humanity across the globe to its voracious need for increasing the rate of accumulation of capital. As such we cannot talk of capitalism, and its evolution as a colonising power, as imperialism, and in the form of modern day ‘globalisation’ as something independent of racism—the process by which vast sections of humanity are defined as being less than human. As Losurdo points out, liberalism and racial slavery had a twin birth and have remained forever

intertwined since. The history of liberalism has been one of contestation between the cultures of what Losurdo refers to as the sacred and profane spaces. The democracy of the sacred space the Enlightenment gave birth to in the New World was, writes Losurdo, a ‘*Herrenvolk* democracy’, a democracy of the white master-race, a democracy that refused to allow blacks, let alone indigenous peoples, or indeed even white women, to be considered citizens (Losurdo 2004: 181). They were considered part of the profane space occupied by the less-than-human. The ideology of a master-race democracy was reproduced as capital colonized vast sections of the globe.

It is important here to make a distinction between the term *racism* as a systemic feature of capital, and *racialism*, which refers to subjective views or prejudices with which it is often associated. As Kwame Ture (Stokley Carmichael) is said to have stated: ‘If a white man wants to lynch me, that’s his problem. If he’s got the power to lynch me, that’s my problem. Racism is not a question of attitude; it’s a question of power. Racism gets its power from capitalism.’

‘When colonialism and its operators and ideologists denied that Africans are human, they were proceeding from a metaphysical standpoint defined by radical Otherness. Africans are radically different from human beings, and if they may be considered human, their humanity was of such a different temper that they may be treated as inferior beings’ (Táíwò 2013: 356). Cabral knew, Táíwò continues, ‘that separating Africa and Africans from the general flow of common human experience could only lead to the retardation of social processes on the continent’ (Táíwò 2013: 359).

This process of dehumanisation was to continue from its origins in the European enslavement of people from Africa to the expansion of Europe’s colonial ventures into the continent. The representation of Africans as inferior and subhuman justified—or perhaps required—the slaughter, genocides, imprisonments, torture, forcible removal from their lands,

widespread land-grabbing, forced labour, destruction of societies and culture, violent suppression of expressions of discontent, restrictions on movement, establishment of ‘tribal’ reserves or ‘bantustans’. But central to that process was the attempt to destroy or remould the culture of the peoples of the continent since culture at heart is a form of resistance (Manji 2017a). It justified the dividing up of the land mass and its peoples into territories at the Berlin Conference in 1884-5 by competing European-imperial powers reflecting the relative power of each.

When imperialism arrived in Guinea it made us leave our history —our history ... the moment imperialism and colonialism arrived, it made us leave our history and enter another history. ... After the slave trade, armed conquest and colonial wars, there came the complete destruction of the economic and social structure of African society. The next phase was European occupation and ever-increasing European immigration into these territories. The lands and possessions of the Africans were looted. The Portuguese ‘sovereignty tax’ was imposed, and so were compulsory crops for agricultural produce, forced labour, the export of African workers, and the total control of the collective and individual life of Africans, either by persuasion or violence (Cabral 1979: 17-18).

While originally the term ‘African’ was employed by empire to refer to all the peoples of the continent, there have been shifts over time in what the West believes constitutes ‘African’. A distinction has subsequently been made between ‘Black Africa’ and the people of the northern part of the continent, a reflection of a long-held belief that Ancient Egypt was not part of the civilisations of Africa, a perspective that was thoroughly countered by Cheikh Anta Diop’s ground-breaking work which has shown that the Egyptian empire was one of the greatest empires of Africa, a civilisation that contributed to the emergence of European civilisation and



science (Anta Diop 1987). But the Egyptian empire, at its apogee, stretched as far north as what today is Syria on one side, and as far as to the west of what is today Libya—which, incidentally, would make Palestinians African. Today, imperialism and its institutions (the aid agencies, IMF, World Bank, international NGOs etc.) divide, somewhat arbitrarily, the continent into ‘North Africa’ and ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’, seeking to drive a wedge into the emancipatory histories of the peoples of what are described as ‘Arab’ and those who are ‘Black Africans’. ‘It divides Africa according to white ideas of race, making North Africans white enough to be considered for their glories, but not really white enough ... [It] is a way of saying “Black Africa” and talking about black Africans without sounding overtly racist’ (Mashanda 2016). A greater part of those countries that are west and north of the Sahara are arbitrarily defined as ‘Sub-Saharan’.

Whatever these debates today about who ought to be considered African, the term was an invention of Europe, a shorthand for describing those it considered to be non-human or lesser beings.

### **Reclaiming humanity: redefining African in emancipatory terms**

If being cast as African was to be defined as being dehumanised, the resounding claim of every movement in opposition to enslavement, every slave revolt, every opposition to European colonisation, every challenge to the institutions of white supremacy, every resistance to racism constituted an assertion of their identity as humans. Where the European considered Africans sub-human, the response was to claim the identity of ‘African’ as a positive, liberating definition of a people, a people who are part of humanity (Manji 2017a). As in the struggles of the oppressed throughout history, a transition occurs over time in which derogatory terms used by the oppressors to ‘other’ people are eventually appropriated by the oppressed and turned into terms of dignity and assertions of humanity. ‘A reconversion of minds—of mental set—is thus

indispensable to the true integration of people into the liberation movement’ wrote Cabral. ‘Such reconversion—re-Africanization, in our case—may take place before the struggle, but it is complete only during the course of the struggle, through daily contact with the popular masses in the communion of sacrifice required by the struggle’ (Cabral 1973: 45).

The most important break-through in asserting the universalist humanity of Africans occurred in an island in the Caribbean. The San Domingue revolution, which began with the uprising of slaves in 1791, ended with the establishment of the independent state of Haiti in 1804, the first successful revolution led by African slaves (most of whom were originally enslaved from what is today the northern regions of Angola and the southern regions of Congo). This was to shake the Western world because of its truly emancipatory nature. ‘Few transformations in world history have been more momentous, few required more sacrifice or promised more hope’ (Hallward 2014: 2). It resulted not merely in the freeing of African slaves: as Toussaint Louverture put it: ‘It is not a circumstantial freedom given as a concession to us alone which we require, but the adoption of the absolute principle that any man born red, black or white cannot be the property of his fellow man’ (Louverture cited and translated by Neocosmos 2016: 69). ‘Toussaint Louverture, the first leader of the rebellion, drew on an explicit commitment to a universal humanism to denounce slavery. Colonialism defined race as permanent biological destiny. The revolutionaries in Haiti defined it politically. Polish and German mercenaries who had gone over to the side of the slave armies were granted citizenship, as black subjects, in a free and independent Haiti’ (Pithouse 2016). Being Haitian was defined, thus, not by colour, but *politically* in terms of the role played in the struggle for emancipation.

It was this same cry to assert that Africans are humans that informed the movements for national liberation in the post Second World War period, and indeed informed the emerging

revolution in South Africa from the mid-1980s until 1994. It was the mass mobilisations of those seeking to overthrow the oppressive yoke of colonialism that formed the basis upon which the nationalist movements were thrown into power. The struggle for independence in Africa was informed, at the base, by the experience of struggles against oppression and brutal exploitation experienced in everyday life. '[N]ational liberation is the phenomenon in which a socio-economic whole rejects the denial of its historical process. In other words, the national liberation of a people is the regaining of the historical personality of that people, it is their return to history through the destruction of the imperialist domination to which they were subject' (Cabral 1966: 130).

In the struggles for national liberation, the term African had become intimately associated with the concept of freedom and emancipation. The very definition of African came to be viewed in *political*, not racial or ethnic terms. Cabral went so far as to draw a distinction between those whom he defined as 'the people' and those whom he classed as 'the population' based on their political stance against colonialism: The definition of people depends, he insisted, on the historical moment which the land is experiencing.

Population means everyone, but the people have to be seen in the light of their own history. It must be clearly defined who are the people at every moment of the life of a population. In Guiné and Cape Verde today the people of Guiné or the people of Cape Verde mean for us those who want to chase the Portuguese colonialists out of our land. They are the people, the rest are not of our land even if they were born there. They are not the people of our land; they are the population but not the people. This is what defines the people today. The people of our land are all those born in the land, in Guiné or Cape Verde, who want what

corresponds to the fundamental necessity of the history of our land. It is the following: to put an end to foreign domination in our land (Cabral 1979: 89).

In other words, the people or the nation comprises those who fight consistently against colonialism and the domination of colonialism, a political definition.

**‘Rice only cooks inside the pot’: Delinking *African* from emancipatory freedoms**

*We cannot therefore allow any interest of our people to be restricted or thwarted because of our condition as Africans* (Cabral 1979: 80).

What happens when the concept of ‘African’ becomes delinked from the idea of the struggle for emancipation, freedom, or sovereignty? What then is left of the meaning of the term African? The concept of African had, as I have argued, been appropriated from the original definition imposed by Europe as being a synonym for the dehumanized subject to being politically defined as representing those who sought to fight for freedom, emancipation, justice and dignity.

But the outcome of the national liberation struggles did not always result in the achievement of emancipation. The rise of neocolonial regimes in the post-independence period, many of which arose out of the defeat or grinding down of the mass movements, gradually resulted in the demise of the struggles for emancipatory freedoms in Africa, and consequently had the result of delinking the concept of African from an emancipatory goal.

The blame for what happened after independence cannot be entirely placed at imperialism’s door. As Cabral pointed out: ‘True, imperialism is cruel and unscrupulous, but we must not lay all the blame on its broad back. For, as the African people say: ‘Rice only cooks inside the pot’ (Cabral 1979: 116).

Despite coming to power on the tide of the anticolonial mass upsurges, once in power, the nationalist leadership (composed usually of representatives of the newly emerging middle class) saw its task as one of preventing ‘centrifugal forces’ from competing for political power or seeking greater autonomy from the newly formed ‘nation’. Having grasped political self-determination from colonial authority, it was reluctant to accord the same rights to its own citizens. The new controllers of the state machinery saw their role as the ‘sole developer’ and ‘sole unifier’ of society. The state defined for itself an interventionist role in ‘modernisation’ and a centralizing and controlling role in the political realm (Manji 1998: 15). The idea of modernizing was reduced to developing only the infrastructure of capitalism in the peripheries that would allow more efficient integration of the former colonies into the world capitalist economy. The term ‘development’ provided an implicit allusion to progress of some kind, and acted as a counterweight to the attraction of socialism that the USA saw as a threat to its growing hegemony. Whereas the movements for independence were characterized by mass actions in which the people *presented* themselves on their own terms and defined their ambitions and aspirations on their own terms, the nationalists assumed that they could *represent* the masses in terms defined by the elites, not by the people (for discussions on the politics of presentation and representation, see Neocosmos 2017).

Born out of a struggle for the legitimacy of pluralism against a hegemonic colonial state, social pluralism began to be frowned upon. The popular associations which had projected the nationalist leadership into power gradually began to be seen as an obstacle to the new god of ‘development’. No longer was there a need, it was argued, for popular participation in determining the future. The new government would bring development to the people. The new government, they claimed, represented the nation and everyone in it. Now that political

independence had been achieved, the priority was ‘development’ because, implicitly, the new rulers concurred with evolving imperialism that its people were ‘under-developed’. Social and economic improvements would come, the nationalist leaders said, with patience and as a result of combined national effort involving everyone. In this early period after independence, civil and political rights soon came to be seen as a ‘luxury’, to be enjoyed at some unspecified time in the future when ‘development’ had been achieved. For the present, said many African presidents, ‘our people are not ready’ — echoing, ironically, the arguments used by the former colonial rulers against the nationalists’ cries for independence a few years earlier (Manji 1998: 15).

The post-independence period was an era of ‘developmentalism’. Camouflaged in the rhetoric of independence, the prevailing narrative treated the problems faced by the majority — deprivation and impoverishment and its associated dehumanisation — not as consequences of colonial domination and an imperialist system that continued to extract super-profits, but rather as the supposedly ‘natural’ conditions of Africa. The solution to poverty was seen as a technical one, with the provision of ‘aid’ from the very colonial powers who had enriched themselves at the expense of the mass of African people whom they had systematically dehumanised to maintain their control over the continent. Developmentalism was characterized by a growing commonality of the interests of the African elites with those of imperial powers.

Despite some of the shortcomings of the nature of many of the neo-colonial regimes that emerged after independence, it is nevertheless important to recognize here that in a very short period of time, essentially from the mid-1950s to the beginning of the 1990s, there were remarkable social achievements. This was the case across the decolonised world. The gains made in the post-independence period internationally have been well documented by Surendra Patel (1995) for a UN/WIDER report. He documented the achievements of the Third World in

sustaining average annual growth of over five per cent over a period of 40 years from 1950-1990 by a population ten-times larger than that of the developed world. Significant economic transformation included increasing urbanisation and a declining share of agriculture in GDP; increasing industrialisation and share of manufacturing in exports; an increase in the rates of savings and investment; and an unprecedented expansion of capital formation, including health and education, both public and private. 'While the development gap in terms of GDP per capita was large and continued to increase, the social gap was significantly reduced: life expectancy increased from around 35 to 60-70 years; infant mortality rates declined from about 250 to 70 per thousand; literacy rates rose to 50 per cent in Africa and 80 per cent in Latin America; and while there were 10 times more students enrolled in higher education in the North than in the South at the start of the post-war era, 40 years later the numbers were approximately equal.' (Polanyi Levitt, 2016).

Such achievements notwithstanding, there were few examples of fundamental transformations of the economic system of production or in the relationship with imperialism (save that the US became increasingly dominant in the economic, political, military, and cultural fields). The former colonial state, which had been established, together with its armed forces, military and police, to serve the interests of colonialism and international capital, was in most cases not transformed, but rather occupied by the newly emerging elites. In exceptional cases, such as in Burkina Faso where attempts were made to transform the colonial state machinery from within, assassination and coups were used to ensure the continuity of a state that protected the interests of capital. Indeed, the repressive arms of the state remained largely unchanged. Freedom fighters of the liberation movements were, if not entirely marginalized in the post-

independence period, incorporated, integrated, and placed under the command of the existing colonial military structures.

It was against this tendency that Cabral was adamantly opposed. He did not think that independence movements could take over the colonial state apparatus and use it for their own purposes. It wasn't the colour of the administrator that was the issue, he argued, but the fact that there was an administrator (Cabral 1979: 60).

We don't accept any institution of the Portuguese colonialists. We are not interested in the preservation of any of the structures of the colonial state. It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country in order to make everything possible for our people' (Cabral 1973: 83).

Cabral argues further:

We are fighting so that insults may no longer rule our countries, martyred and scorned for centuries, so that our peoples may never more be exploited by imperialists not only by people with white skin, because we do not confuse exploitation or exploiters with the colour of men's skins; we do not want any exploitation in our countries, not even by Black people (Cabral 1969: 65).

He argued that the failure of the national liberation movements in Africa was their dismissal of theory and of ideology:

The ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology, on the part of the national liberation movements – which is basically explained by the ignorance of the historical reality which these movements aspire to transform – constitutes one of the



greatest weaknesses, if not the greatest weakness, of our struggle against imperialism (Cabral, 1979: xii).

For Cabral, theory is an essential weapon in the struggle against imperialism and for the emancipation of humankind. ‘It is true that a revolution can fail,’ he argued, ‘even though it be nurtured on perfectly conceived theories, [but] nobody has yet successfully practiced revolution without a revolutionary theory’ (Cabral 1966).

As I have argued elsewhere (Manji 2017b), emancipatory freedoms require and express the collective power of peoples to determine their own destiny. They are an expression of what Lewis Gordon (2008: 51) characterises as a historical aspiration, one that continues to exist and transcends the constraints that might have been wrung in any given historical period.

Emancipatory freedom implies, therefore, an assertion of dignity, of self-worth, a commitment to a project that transcends frequently even the threat or possibility of death, a proclamation and assertion of, and an insistence upon, a claim to be part of humanity. By definition, emancipatory freedoms require a conception of the ‘long arc of history’, an ability to think and act in terms of historical eras. But that very understanding of the need to continue the struggle for emancipatory freedoms gradually became lost in the growing hegemony of the idea of ‘development’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘globalisation’.

Whereas the mass movements for liberation were informed by the need for emancipatory freedoms, the neo-colonial states that emerged substituted the struggle for emancipation with aspirations only for concessionary freedoms, that is, freedoms whose parameters are set by constraints imposed by others than those who seek their own freedom. Those seeking concessionary freedoms accept the authority of those who set its limits. The focus of the newly independent governments was on seeking concessions from imperialism and its institutions. In

the early period, there were concessions that permitted some degree of 'modernisation' that would improve the ability of capital to extract profits from the former colonies while permitting some degree of social improvements for the population such as healthcare, education and access to water..

But by the 1980s, with the rise of structural adjustment policies, the agenda became that of creating extreme privatisation aimed at opening up new avenues for capital expansion. The state was declared 'inefficient' (despite its considerable achievements in the short period since independence), and public services were first run down before being sold off to the oligopolies for a song. The state was prohibited from investing in social infrastructure, from subsidising agricultural production, with prohibitions on capital investment in health, education, transport and telecommunications, until eventually public goods were taken over by the 'private' (read oligopoly) sector. Tariff barriers to goods from the advanced capitalist countries were removed; access to natural resources opened up for pillaging; tax regimes relaxed; and 'export processing zones' established to enable raw exploitation of labour without any regulations from the state or trade unions. Over time, privatisation was extended to agriculture, land, food production. Repression was increasingly used against any opposition to the effect of these policies. Governments became increasingly more accountable to the transnational corporations, international financial institutions and to the so-called 'aid' agencies who set the parameters for all social and economic policies.

Whereas in the colonial period it was the missionaries who played a central role in depoliticising the processes that led to the impoverishment of millions, today a similar role is played by development NGOs (Manji and O'Coill 2002; Manji 1998) as well as by human rights organisations (Mutua 2001). Whereas in the colonial period Africans were cast as primitive and

in need of being civilised, in the post-colonial period African people are defined as ‘underdeveloped’. Today, African people are considered chaotic not ordered, traditional not modern, tribal not democratic, corrupt not honest, underdeveloped not developed, irrational not rational, lacking in all of those things the West presumes itself to be. White Westerners are still today represented as the bearers of ‘civilisation’, the brokers and arbiters of development, while black, post-colonial ‘others’ are still seen as uncivilised and unenlightened, destined to be development’s exclusive objects (Manji and O’Coill 2002). As a consequence, a vast industry of ‘development’ evolved to satisfy the white saviour complex, a complex that needs victims to survive and propagate itself. And the process of othering people in order to present them as victims – that is, a process of victimisation – was one that continued, albeit in new forms, the process of dehumanisation of Africans, rendering them apparently incapable of agency (Manji 2015).

### **Africa rising?**

It was hardly surprising that Africa increasingly became presented as the ‘basket case’, in Tony Blair’s infamous characterisation of the continent. NEPAD, developed and promoted by President Thabo Mbeki, was a response to this characterisation, seeking to assert on the basis of a proclaimed ‘African Renaissance’, that the continent could develop economically. But in essence, the set of policies amounted to little more than a self-managed implementation of liberalisation, remaining essentially in the realms of concessionary freedoms.

It is true that in the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the phenomenon of ‘Africa Rising’ was to become the new slogan for Africa’s development. As the *Economist* (Dec 3, 2011) put it in an editorial describing Africa as the hopeful continent and with the headline *Africa Rising*: ‘After decades of slow growth, Africa has a real chance to follow in

the footsteps of Asia.’ For the *Economist*, however, this meant: ‘Africa still needs deep reform. Governments should make it easier to start businesses and cut some taxes and collect honestly the ones they impose. Land needs to be taken out of communal ownership and title handed over to individual farmers so that they can get credit and expand. And, most of all, politicians need to keep their noses out of the trough and to leave power when their voters tell them to.’

But despite the propaganda, there was little actual evidence that Africa was indeed entering a new period that would benefit its citizens. As I have argued elsewhere (Manji 2014): The claim of Africa Rising was based on claims of GDP growth rates of five to six per cent. But much of this is due to the soaring primary commodity prices, especially in the extractive industries. Oil for example, rose from US\$20 a barrel in 1999 to US\$145 in 2008. Although the price has fallen since, it remains way above the levels prevailing in the 1990s. There have been significant increases in prices of other minerals and grain. Africa is one of the richest continents: it has ten per cent of the world’s reserves of oil, 40 per cent of its gold, and 80 to 90 per cent of the chromium and platinum. Natural resource extraction and associated state expenditure account for more than 30 per cent of Africa’s GDP growth since 2000. The primary contributors to the growth in GDP have been a small number of the oil and gas exporters (Algeria, Angola, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Libya (at least, before the NATO invasion), and Nigeria) who had the highest GDP on the continent but are also the least diversified economies. It is hardly surprising that, according to a McKinsey report<sup>1</sup> stated, ‘The annual flow of foreign direct investment into Africa increased from US\$9 billion in 2000 to US\$62 billion in 2008—relative to GDP, almost as large as the flow into China’, most of it into the extractive industries. As Carlos Lopes (2013), then executive secretary of UNECA, put it: ‘Average net profits for the top 40 mining companies grew by 156% in 2010 whereas the take for governments grew by only

60%, most of which was accounted for by Australia and Canada.’ He pointed out that the profit made by the same set of mining companies in 2010 was US\$110 billion, which was equivalent to the merchandise exports of all African LDCs in the same year.

So, while profiteering from Africa was apparently rising, it was rising principally for the extractive transnational corporations. In reality, the most significant rise has been the growing unemployment or never-employment, landlessness, dispossessions, environmental destruction, and growing contributions to climate change.

It is important also to bear in mind, however:

The reality is that Africa is being drained of resources by the rest of the world. It is losing far more each year than it is receiving. While \$134 billion flows into the continent each year, predominantly in the form of loans, foreign investment and aid; \$192 billion is taken out, mainly in profits made by foreign companies, tax dodging and the costs of adapting to climate change. The result is that Africa suffers a net loss of \$58 billion a year. As such, the idea that we are aiding Africa is flawed; it is Africa that is aiding the rest of the world (Health Poverty Action, Jubilee Debt Campaign et al. 2004: 5).

The supposed growth rates have also been challenged as ‘dubious’ by Southall and Melber (2009) who argue that there are parallels to be drawn between the nineteenth century scramble for African and the current pillage of the continent’s resources by transnational corporations.

### **The depoliticisation of identity**

Once the struggles for independence became delinked from the historical emancipatory struggles for reclaiming humanity that were embodied in the movements for African liberation, then all

that was left in the meaning of being ‘African’ was a taxonomic identity, and seemingly apolitical, definition of a people. The delinking of the concept of African from its connection with the search for freedom results, in effect, with a depoliticisation that renders people becoming merely objects rather than determinants of history. The concept becomes associated with the delinking of Africans as humans who, being human, seek constantly to emancipate themselves, to becoming instead at best mere ‘citizens’ of African countries, at worst the ‘beneficiaries’ of development.

The meaning of being ‘Black’ has not been immune from a similar phenomenon. WEB Dubois, CLR James, Angela Davis, the Black Power Movement, Malcolm X, and even Martin Luther King Jr, all connected the identity of being black as a liberating identity intimately bound up with the reaching for emancipatory freedoms. With the defeat of the black liberation movement in USA (and indeed in Europe as well), following the rise of Reagan and Thatcher, the emptying of the political identity into a form of taxonomy — African American, Black, Brown, Asian, Latino, in USA, and Asian, African, Caribbean, Indian etc. The recent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement has perhaps begun to shift the identity of Black back towards an association with freedom as a political, not a ‘racial’, identity.

In mainstream media today and, sadly, even amongst sections of the left, it is not uncommon to hear people write about different ‘races’ in Africa. The concept has been widely used as the basis for explaining, for example the Darfur conflict, where, we are told, ‘Arabs’ have been terrorizing ‘black Africans’. In doing so, they perpetuate the colonial mythology of the existence of ‘races’ amongst human beings which has its origins in Europe, and ironically, adopt the spurious racial categorisation of people of Sudan developed by the British (Mamdani 2009).

There is, in fact, no biological basis for claims for the existence of race in humans. For the human species, race is a social, not a biological category (Lewontin et al 1984).

‘And it is all too true that the major responsibility for this racialization of thought, or at least the way it is applied, lies with the Europeans who have never stopped placing white culture in opposition to the other noncultures’ (Fanon 1961: 151). Nevertheless, it is surprising that even amongst post-apartheid South African intellectuals there appears to be a resurgence of the idea of race, especially ironic given how clearly the concept of ‘race’ was a political construct under apartheid. The official categorisation of people according to ‘race’ as established by apartheid has hardly changed. Race is a term that needs to be avoided. It sidesteps or masks the real issue – *racism*—which is an instrument of capitalism and of white supremacy. And struggles *against racism* reassert a meaning to being black or African as something that is connected with an emancipatory goal, a reclamation, if not an invention, of humanity.

If being human (or for that matter, being African) is devoid or emptied of an association with the aspiration for freedom, then in effect the resultant identity as taxonomy remains a form of dehumanisation, no better an identity than the one perpetuated by white supremacy in dividing humanity into so-called ‘races’, a social construct with no biological basis. As Olúfẹmi Táíwò (2013: 193) puts it:

As bad as this racism-infected denial of our humanity is, it is worse that, in negating it, we have, in the main, adopted its dubious starting point and made it our own. That is, many African scholars have embraced the metaphysics of difference, and it now informs a large part of scholarship by both African and Africanist scholars. There is a high degree of essentialisation that characterises discussions of African phenomena from the criteria of what it is to be African—in

its many forms and manifestations—to how one ought to conduct oneself, one's social relations, or with whom one may have relations and in what depth. From reacting to the ravages of difference-denominated denial of our humanity, we have become earnest apostles of the metaphysics of difference and censorious guardians against its transgressors. In our earnestness to affirm African difference, we have forgotten or chosen to ignore the racist provenance of this ahistorical, false metric.

Cabral's assertion in the excerpt referred to earlier that the interest of his people could potentially be restricted or thwarted because of 'our condition as Africans,' holds true, I have argued, so long as that identity remains unlinked with aspirations for emancipatory freedoms. The taxonomic concept of 'African' renders the definition essentially a racial one, locking people out of having a commonality with humanity or an ability to determine their own future.

The ideology of 'Negritude' that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in Paris was to become associated with the writings of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Its philosophy was based on essentialising Africa and Africans, claiming that Africans have a core quality that is inherent, eternal and unalterable, and which is distinct from the rest of humanity.

However, as Michael Neocosmos (2016: 530) points out, if Africa 'historically was a creation of liberalism's sacred space which claimed a monopoly over history, culture and civilisation, then as a way of resisting, Africans have understandably tended to emphasize and idealize their own distinctive identity, history, culture and civilization'. And as Fanon (1989: 47) put it: 'It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates negritude.' Furthermore, 'Colonialism did not think it worth its while denying one national culture after the other. Consequently the colonized's response was immediately continental in scope. ...



Following the unconditional affirmation of European culture came the unconditional affirmation of African culture' (Fanon 1963: 151).

While the ideas of Negritude had positive impacts on the way in which the colonised viewed themselves, and helped to inspire the flourishing of poetry, art and literature, and of research about the pre-colonial civilisations in Africa – such as the exceptional work of Cheikh Anta Diop – it also contributed to depoliticizing the meaning of African and of culture that was once powerfully associated with freedom.

This resulted in eschewing the idea of human universality, preventing African people's 'return to history through the destruction of the imperialist domination to which they were subject' (Cabral 1966).

### **Towards a universal humanism**

Cabral's statement that 'We must put the interests of our people higher, in the context of the interests of mankind in general, and then we can put them in the context of the interests of Africa in general' (Cabral 1979: 80) reminds us that the struggles to reinvent ourselves as humans is relevant not just for those in the location in which such processes take place. They are of universal importance and have value for the struggles to claim and express humanity everywhere. His statement is also a challenge to the Eurocentrism of the many who assume that only the Western experience and its associated revolutions in France and America is of universal significance. The silence about the importance of the San Domingue revolution in much of left literature is shameful. It is a failure to recognise that the experiences and struggles of African people to assert and invent their humanity belong to the whole of humankind.

Those who have, for centuries, experienced dehumanisation inevitably and constantly struggle to reclaim their humanity, to assert that they are human beings. The process of

reclamation is not, however, a harking back to some supposed glorious past when everyone was human, but rather a present and continuing process of constant invention, constant re-invention, and re-definition of what it means to be human.

For example, those who have suffered over millennia from the dehumanisation processes that are associated with patriarchy have an experience that helps define what being human really means: the gains of the women's and LGBTI movements over recent years have provided glimpses into the potential being that humans could become, countering the narrow-minded, tradition-focused, and often violent constructs that patriarchy portrays. In the perpetuation of patriarchy, men have themselves become dehumanised, unable to map out what being human is about, and it is only through the emancipatory struggles of those oppressed and exploited by patriarchy that insights into the possibility and potentials of what it means to be human can be found.

Similarly, those who have experienced and struggled against the horrors of enslavement, chattel slavery, colonisation and imperial domination, have insights that emerge from their struggles into what it means to be human and what are the potentials and possibilities that can be released in becoming human. One can see in the struggles against oppression and exploitation the release of invention, creativity, different ways of organising and of making decisions, in each struggle that takes place, as in the revolutionary uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The anti-colonial struggles that Cabral led in Guinea-Bissau, for example, released a torrent of creativity in the way in which society could be organized, how education could be transformed, how health services could be provided, how people could exercise democratic control etc. In every revolution or uprising that is informed by desires for emancipation there are examples of such creativity and drive to invent what humans, as social beings, are and can become.

One final point that has important implications for those in Africa seeking their own emancipation. The process of dehumanising others has an effect not only on the victims but also on the perpetrators. As Chinua Achebe (2010) put it: ‘We cannot trample upon the humanity of others without devaluing our own. The Igbo, always practical, put it concretely in their proverb *Onye ji onye n'ani ji onwe ya*: “He who will hold another down in the mud must stay in the mud to keep him down”.’ The five hundred or so years of dehumanising Africans (and indeed of peoples of the global South) has resulted in the profound dehumanisation of large sections of the populations of the North over whom capital has exercised its hegemony. The historical task that is faced by those engaged in the struggle for freedom and the universality of humanity is therefore not only the achievement of their own emancipation and freedom but also providing the way forward for the reclamation of the humanity of the peoples of the North. For it is the ‘post-apocalyptic’ societies that survived genocide, mass killings, enslavement, colonisation and dispossession who can point the way forward for humankind as to what is really means to be human.

## **Conclusions**

The condition of being ‘African’ was a creation of the European, a synonym for the non-human or lesser human being, that justified enslavement, slavery, colonialism and exploitation. The specific terminology evolved subsequently to consider the African as ‘uncivilised’ under colonialism, and then ‘under-developed’ in the post-independence period. The struggles against enslavement, slavery, exploitation and national liberation represented the re-assertion by Africans of their humanity, and as human beings, as makers of history, as contributors to the history of human emancipation. When the term ‘African’ becomes devoid of, or disarticulated from any connection with the struggle for emancipation and freedom, as it did in the aftermath of

independence, it becomes indistinguishable from the taxonomy of race and of identity politics created by the European that identifies ‘Africa’, rather than its continued exploitation of its people and resources, as the ‘problem’. So long as the experiences arising from emancipatory struggles are perceived as merely ‘African’ it is not possible to understand their contribution to universal humanity. That is only possible if the politics of African experiences are transcended and considered as part of the human condition that ‘belong to the whole world’.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/economic\\_studies/whats\\_driving\\_africas\\_growth](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/economic_studies/whats_driving_africas_growth)

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