

Editorial: Notes on the (Im)Possibility of Articulating Continental African Identity

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Esu, do not undo me,
Do not falsify the words of my mouth,
Do not misguide the movements of my feet,
You who translates yesterday's words
Into novel utterances,
Do not undo me,
I bear you sacrifice.

(Traditional *Oriki Esu*, quoted in Gates, 1988, p. 3)

It is both a daunting and potentially frustrating task to attempt to discuss African identity. It is daunting because African identity is an expansive and nebulous category that can be contextualized in and approached from a bewildering array of ideological and disciplinary positions. As the field of African studies generally and a collection such as Robert Bates et al.'s (1993) *Africa and the disciplines* more specifically indicate, the contributions the study of Africa and Africans have made to the disciplines and in turn the contributions the disciplines have made to our understanding of Africa and Africans is systematic and detailed yet dauntingly multiple and comprehensive. It is frustrating first because Africa has long been relegated to the margins of global considerations of culture, economics and geopolitics and second because African identity is a category that is always already overdetermined and spectacularly overgeneralised and homogenised. Historically, many in the West have exhibited an unapologetic and spectacular ignorance about Africa and Africans - an attitude that continues today and has been exacerbated by the Fourthworldisation of the continent. Thus, for example, many in the West fully expect what for the African and Africanist academic is a frustratingly comprehensive amount of background notes and explications to accompany any work on the continent and its peoples. On the other hand, Africa has a long history of being both romanticised in various Pan-Africanist discourses and vilified in racist and colonialist discourses.

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Ironically, 'African identity' is a category that is of little significance to the average African (for whom more localized communal and ethnic identity are more immediate and readily employed) while it is claimed as area of expertise by the average, often non-African, Africanist.

Can the African Speak? Four (Somewhat Frustrated) Strategies for Articulating African Identity

To answer a version of Spivak's (1988) famous question (can the subaltern speak?), I would assert that in my view, the African is always already misrecognised, and against the glare and the glare of outer-continental identifications, the contemporary African cannot speak. Even when Africans have articulated African cultural identities in creative works from the plays of Wole Soyinka, Ama Ata Aidoo, and John Pepper Clark to the novels Chinua Achebe, Florence Nwapa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nawal El Sadawi and the films of Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo, their voices have been appropriated in the West, filtered through and evaluated by Western literary and creative values and standards in a process Wole Soyinka (1976) has described as an attempt to "bring the direction of African writing under a fiat of instant-assimilation poetics" (p. 63) and which Ayi Kwei Armah (1977, 1985) has even more bluntly called 'Larsony' (a reference to and play on the name of a white English critic named Larson whose criticism of African literature Armah thinks only amounts to perfunctory, uninformed and patronizing) and 'the lazy school of literary criticism.' The African cannot speak.

This simultaneous marginalisation and appropriation leads to a silencing of Africans that is perpetrated not only in literary criticism but in the academic disciplines in general and indeed in the cultures of universities and colleges. It is interesting to note for example that the editors of *Africa and the disciplines* quite rightly make the point that in the current climate of budget cuts and programme prioritisation in academic institutions in the West, there is a need to make a case to administrators at departmental and university levels for the importance of studying Africa. Even more interesting to me, however, is the fact that the editors of this otherwise positive and much needed text put together a collection that indicates the contributions the study of Africa has made to each discipline but neglect to substantially address the corollary, namely the contributions *Africans* themselves have made to the disciplines. This omission of Africans as constructors of knowledge in a text about Africa(ns) is reflected also in the underrepresentation of Africans as editors and contributing authors of the

text. This representation of Africa with minimal representation of Africans, is an illustration of the larger problem that, rendered subaltern in the context of hegemonic Western knowledge production masquerading as global knowledge production, the African cannot speak.

If the African cannot speak as a creative writer nor as an academic, let alone as an African version of that dubious subject, the person on the street, how then is one to articulate and explore African identity? Various African discourses and strategies of articulation, while seldom explicitly conceptualised or articulated as such, can be identified and considered as strategies for moving African voices and perspectives "from [global] margin to center" (hooks, 1984). Even as I identify these strategies of articulation, I cannot help but note the ways in which each has been somewhat frustrated.

The first strategy has involved an abrogation of Western discourses. The discourse of Negritude, for example, has involved an assertion of African identity that is articulated in direct opposition to dominant Eurocentric discourses. Negritude variously represents a prescience of the 1960s black affirmative declarations, 'say it loud, I'm black and proud' and 'to be young, gifted and black.' It is a rejection of Western literary aesthetics in the articulation of oppositional African aesthetics of orature, and an unabashed romanticisation of Africa in the face of assimilationist European imperialism. A more specific and closely related discourse is what Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ichechukwu Maduburkie (1983) describe in *Toward the decolonization of African literature as 'bolakaja'* criticism. Bolakaja literally means 'come down and fight' and bolakaja criticism is therefore an oppositional African aesthetics based criticism that issues a challenge to Western aesthetics. What these discourses that employ a strategy of abrogation foster, is African-centredness and empowerment. The constant danger is that they can end up romanticising Africa and Africans (especially women who are put on a pedestal and depicted as symbolic representations of the continent), arrest African cultures in static, essentialised and idealistic depictions, deny the evidence of galloping modernisation and refuse to interrogate let alone facilitate change in the problematic aspects of traditional culture.

Another strategy has been to leave Africa behind and become completely westernised in order to accomplish what Frantz Fanon (1967) would insist is the impossible (for the presumed black African), namely become white and hence 'civilized'. As Fanon (1967) puts it in *Black skin, white masks*, "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (p. 18). Fanon's portrait in

Black skin, white masks of the Antilles 'negro' returned from France is familiar in all the post-colonies of Europe; from Sierra Leone, where such returnees are known as 'jes kam' (Krio for 'recently returned') to India, where they are called 'foreign returned.' The character Lakunle in Wole Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, is an example of a homegrown version of the African as anglophile. By situating the anglophile in a small village deeply rooted in traditional ways, Soyinka goes against Fanon's portrait of the returnee as a demigod to depict the anglophile as ludicrously out of place caricature. What the strategy of identification with the (former?) coloniser supposedly enables is not only escape from a dehumanised identity but ascendance to an identity/position from which one can take voice and agency for granted, and speak in 'the master's voice,' a 'universal' voice. However, blackness (as opposed to culture) as a marker of difference ensures the impossibility of achieving this dream. In Fanon's (1967) blunt words "The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man is his blackness" (p.19).

A third strategy has been to acknowledge a continental version of what W.E.B. du Bois (1903/1994) famously conceptualised and referred to as "double consciousness" and speak to and write for both Africans and the West, simultaneously contributing to the evolution of African discourses and entering the fray of Western hegemonic discourse in the name of contributing to the evolution of a truly global dialogue. The declaration of that we are all currently part of the postmodern condition (with its suspicion of Western grand narratives) has made it not only possible but indeed necessary for the West's other to be heard at the centre. However, we should remember Spivak's (1990) crucial caveat that it is naïve and overly simplistic to believe that the margins have simply asserted themselves at an in relation to the centre and come to voice. She reminds us that, in fact, the margins are being heard at the centre primarily because the margins have been called upon to speak by the centre.

A fourth strategy has involved speaking of and from the specificity of distinct locales or ethnic groups. Because it is the signs 'Africa' and 'African' rather than specific African cultures that are overdetermined in meaning, it is therefore possible to articulate say Yoruba, Twi or Zulu cultural identity without that articulation necessarily being readily overwhelmed, (mis)recognised and appropriated in the same way African cultural identity would be. This strategy of articulating specificity is not one that is usually carried out in a sustained manner. For example, in *Myth, literature and the African world*, Wole Soyinka draws principally on Yoruba worldview and aesthetics yet describes these in both specific terms as Yoruba and rather

generic terms as 'African'. While it is possible that this constant slipping between the specificity of Yoruba cosmology and the use of the Yoruba as representative of Africa might be a strategy Soyinka consciously employs, I believe it is also indicative of the difficulty of avoiding generalisation, extrapolation and limiting one's discussion only to the specific object at hand.

Five Strategies for Attempting to Break Out of the Mundane and a Word or Two About This Themed Issue.

Acutely aware of this daunting and frustrating backdrop, I have elected to approach this topic from a personal perspective (utilising the personal as a way for the African to speak). This is not to signal that I intend to utilise 'my experience' of being African as blueprint for or even authoritative text of the articulation of African identity. It should also not be read as my succumbing to that curious American obsession with the individual and individualism that leads to a dangerous romanticisation of supposedly individual perspective and experience. Rather it is to signal that I intend to start from the approaches to exploring identity that currently excite me but do not originate with me, are (re)articulated here by me as an individual but represent pointers to alternative ways of speaking to collective identity. I am interested in utilising more recent approaches that are pushing me to trouble what I and perhaps many others have come to identify as relatively settled, even taken for granted ways of conceptualising African identity. For example, I am not so much interested in dispassionate, narrow, single discipline constructions of African identity, any of which is necessarily limited to and by the boundaries of the individual discipline and the disguised and potentially insidious bias of supposed academic 'neutrality' and scientism. On the other hand, I am currently not particularly interested in the overly positive, romanticised constructions of African identity or even constructions based on black/African *recuillment* and the anti/post-colonialist notion of speaking/writing back to the centre (Ashcroft et al., 1989), whether through Marcus Garvey's Garveyism and the repatriation movement (Jacques-Garvey, 1992); Kwame Nkrumah (1955, 1963, 1970) and Nkrumahism as a form of Pan-Africanism; Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas' Negritude (Vaillant, 1990, Jack, 1996), or Molefi Asante's (1987, 1989, 1990) Afrocentrism.

Rather, I am currently more interested in deconstructions (employed in wary and limited doses) of these more sure footed constructions; in new, questioning, less assured, and multiple formulations of African identities, in

fresh discourses and theoretical frameworks (e.g. poststructuralism) that will allow us to see Africa(ns), not in the glaring static white light of certainty but (re)discovered in various, more exciting, fractured and shifting, procedural, muted, multicolored lights. What this means more specifically and in practical terms is that I have adopted five strategies to explore the topic that do not take established approaches for granted but rather (re)considers them as part of a problematic and, furthermore, open up multiple ways of articulating African identity.

First, rather than write a single authored treatise on the topic, I elected to enjoin others in putting forward their ideas about what constitutes African identity in a multi-stage project. What this has meant is that a number of voices and perspectives are joined with mine in this publication to produce what is at once various individual texts/takes on African identity and, taken together, constitutive of a version of a single, multi-authored text on the topic. The first stage of this work involved two panels I organised on the topics of 'Continental Africans and the Question of Identity' and 'Diasporic Africans and the Question of Identity' at the third Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference, held at the University of Birmingham, England, June/July 2000. The second stage of this project involves the publication of this multivoiced text on the topic in two consecutive themed issues of *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural and Media Studies*. Part of my rationale for approaching *Critical Arts* with this project was because it afforded the opportunity for this work to be a contribution to a discussion on African identity that the journal had already initiated (vol. 14, Nos. 1 & 2 are themed issues on African ethnicity and identity edited by Oosthuysen & Tomaselli (2000) respectively). The third stage of this project will involve bringing all the pieces together in a book collection on continental and diasporic African identity. This issue of *Critical Arts*, devoted to the topic of 'Continental Africans and the Question of Identity' is the first of the two themed issues. With the exception of Duncan Brown's 'Environment and Identity: Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* (which was submitted independently and which I have included because it fits so well with the present project), the papers in this issue are updated versions of presentations the authors made at the Crossroads conference. They include Suren Pillay's 'Problematizing the Making of Good and Evil: Gangs and Pagad,' Ibrahim Abdullah's 'Youth Culture and Rebellion: Understanding Sierra Leone's Wasted Decade,' Sheila Cameron's 'Endogenous and Exogenous Influences in Cultural Production in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe After Independence.' My hope is that when the various essays are considered together (in both this themed issue and in the final book project), what emerges is a multivoiced/multi-authored text in

which there are various angles and perspectives juxtaposed and the essays corroborate, contradict, speak to and past each other in ways that produce a rich and complex picture of what constitutes African identity. In turn, this text can be considered as part of the larger conversation about African identity that is taking place through and in the context of *Critical Arts* and various other publications.

Second, I have decided to employ the interdisciplinary and rather novel anti/inter/post-disciplinary field of African cultural studies (Wright, 1995, 1996, 1998; Tomaselli, 1988, 1998) as the framework for contextualising these essays. *Critical Arts* is an African based journal that regularly publishes work on African cultural studies and on cultural studies in Africa (e.g. the themed volume 13 on cultural studies in Africa (Tomaselli, 1999a, 1999b)) and this is another part of my rationale for choosing *Critical Arts* for this project. Each essay in this themed issue is contextualised largely in one discipline or another: Abdullah's essay for example is as strongly historical as Brown's is firmly based on literary/English studies while Pillay's draws considerably on political science. On the other hand, all the essays are interdisciplinary, with Cameron's being most decidedly so, based as it is on the interdisciplinary field of media studies. Although Brown's essay deals with the poetic works of a single author, Douglas Livingstone, its subject matter itself is interesting in terms of disciplinarity as Livingstone's poetry alternatively juxtaposes, mingles and holds in tension elements of the poetic and literary on the one hand and marine biology and the scientific on the other. Clearly no single discipline would serve as an apt and sufficiently expansive framework to contextualise these essays. While it would be tempting to frame them using the discourse of African studies, my preference is to employ cultural studies because it is distinctly interdisciplinary and furthermore takes the popular seriously. As a Sierra Leonean, my own work in cultural studies tends to concentrate on so-called 'Anglophone' West African culture. However, South Africa is indisputably the location in Africa where cultural studies is most well established and developed (in terms of the number of programs and centres and figures working in the field) and it is perhaps fitting, therefore, that South Africa features so prominently in this cultural studies inflected set of essays on African identity.

Third, I have decided to make the inclusion of popular culture forms and the obfuscation of high/low culture (both characteristics of cultural studies discourse) a principal criterion in selecting papers for the project. This is reflected in this collection in the juxtaposition of an essay like Brown's that is based on literary criticism, a discourse traditionally identified as high culture and other essays that draw considerably on or address the popular.

In contrast to the traditional disciplines which take the popular and subcultures based on the popular as either marginal or evidence of deviance, cultural studies takes up the popular as central to identity and cultural formation (Frith, 1992; Storey, 1993). This approach is reflected in serious examination of African popular culture and the role it plays in the construction of African cultures (Barber, 1997). I have made the inclusion and serious examination of popular culture as an integral, constitutive component in identity formation a principal criterion in selecting papers for the present project. In the case of Cameron's essay, traditional music and musicians and their role in constructing and performing identity in a specific region of Zimbabwe is the focus and substance of the essay. While music is an important aspect of Abdullah's discussion of youth culture in Sierra Leone, the scope of popular culture forms he discusses is much broader (including slang, drug culture, secret societies and carnival and fashion). Finally, instead of music it is the mix of religion in the form of Islam, images of violence as portrayed in American movies at local cinema houses and on television and American urban fashion appropriated by South African youth that make up the popular culture contributions to Pillay's discussion of PAGAD identity in South Africa.

As the work of Dick Hebdige (1979) makes clear, cultural studies can go further than asserting and illustrating the important role that the popular plays in cultural formation: it can juxtapose high and popular culture, obfuscating the traditional western divide between them in progressive and productive ways in undertaking the exploration of cultural formations. Thus in Pillay's essay, religion and Islamic identity are considered in necessary juxtaposition with appropriated American popular culture forms in the exploration of gang identity and the South African phenomenon of PAGAD. Similarly, in Abdullah's essay, he describes a political era of horrific violence in Sierra Leone, a "grotesque appropriation of what constitutes a revolutionary project [that] produce[d] grotesque results." In explicating the historical and contemporary social circumstances that produced the identities of the alienated underclass youth, 'rarray boys' who were instrumental in producing this horrific decade, he considers the juxtaposition and mixing of influences (consumption, appropriation, performance) of Jamaican reggae and EuroAmerican pop music, western fashion, localised versions of Nigerian traditional *odelay* societies and sacred texts, western military terminology, nascent intellectualism in the form of pan-Africanist and socialist thought, and a strong capitalist yearning for the so-called 'good life' of conspicuous consumption. It is only when we consider the full picture of the intermingling of all these elements: high and popular culture, traditional left/right politics and the politics of style, for instance, that we can begin to understand not

only 'raray boy' identity but how that identity contributed to what Abdullah refers to as "Sierra Leone's wasted decade."

Fourth, I am attracted to Achille Mbembe's (2001) refreshingly innovative construction of the geography and geo-politics of Africa, a (re)construction that troubles both taken for granted notion of states and more or less fixed state borders and the rejection of those borders as a necessarily haphazard and problematic European and imperialist imposition on Africa(ns). The phenomenon that has recently been named globalisation (which has existed from ancient times but has been named in contemporary times and is therefore often mis-conceptualised as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon) is having a strong effect on and has serious negative and positive implications for Africa and Africans (Cheru, 2002). It is significant that while the authors in this collection work with the taken for granted concept of the nation and state-based national boundaries, they all engage to some extent (whether stated or not) with the notion of glocality (the intersection and mutual influences between the local and the global). Thus in each essay there is a complex situation involving the local, the national and the global. In Cameron's essay the focus is very strongly on a specific region. What she takes up is the focus is how local music and identity are both shaped by and in reaction to national cultural policy. However, the global is present tangentially in the references to the links between local unions making links with the international labour movement and also in the form of participation in international seminars through UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In two of the other three essays, Abdullah's and Pillay's, what is significant is the appropriation/integration of western popular forms by and in the local or national scene.

Though the authors in this collection are pushing us in the right direction (i.e. away from taken for granted discussions limited to an insular and self contained local), I am interested in going further, beyond the interaction between the local and the global, to a reconceptualisation of the very notion of 'the local,' which remains conceptualised as place. Following Mbembe (2001), my recommendation is that we (re)conceptualise Africa as a territory or number of territories rather than as a place or number of places. The difference, Mbembe asserts, is that while 'place' emphasises landscape and suggests fixed positions of location and persons and stability, a territory places emphasis on people and suggests movement and the political within rather temporarily given spaces. As he puts it in his explanation of territory: "As for a territory, it is fundamentally an intersection of moving bodies. It is defined essentially by the set of movements that take place within it" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 24). Regions of Africa are best (re)conceptualised,

then, not as fixed places with well marked boundaries but rather as more vibrant, more active, shifting, transitory and ever evolving geo-political territories. The emphasis in this reconception shifts from the places/spaces and fixed borders to people, movement and the historical and contemporary effects of changes in global politics and economics. The result is vibrant politics and economics based categories such 'pillaged territories' and 'regions rich in mineral ores and petroleum.' As Philippe Rekacewicz (2001) points out in his discussion of Mbembe's new geography of Africa, "the complexity of Mbembe's schema did not...allow for comprehensive visual representation...Yet, the map would then have represented Africa as a dynamic continent opening out onto the rest of the world" (p. 53).

Fifth, I am interested in the application of contemporary European theoretical frameworks (sometimes collectively referred to as 'the posts'), (post-)Lacanian psychoanalytic, postmodernist and, especially, poststructuralist theory, to our understanding of African identity. For example, identity (including African identity) is best thought of not as singular, whole and given but rather in Lacanian influenced psychoanalytic theory terms, as a series of identifications come to life (Butler, 1990, 1993; Fuss, 1995). Thus, if we think of identity as whole and singular, it would appear that given the many popular and high culture, leftist and capitalist, western and African elements it supposedly contains, 'rarray boy' identity as Abdullah articulates it, is both unlikely and untenable in its complexity and multiple self contradictions. However, 'rarray boy' identity becomes both viable and comprehensible when we consider identity as a series of identifications come to life and, even more specifically, Fuss's (1995) assertion that "identification travels a double current, allowing for the possibility of multiple and contradictory identifications coexisting in the subject at the same time" (p. 34).

It bears pointing out that my interest is not in merely imposing poststructuralism on Africa as a fully formed, hermetically sealed western theoretical discourse. Even as I turn to poststructuralism, I am guided by Soyinka's admonishment that Africans not simply embrace western ideologies and theoretical frameworks so fully and enthusiastically that we not even stop to consider whether the messages of such ideologies might already be present in African gnosis and worldviews. As he put it, "Like his religious counterpart, the new [African] ideologue has never stopped to consider whether or not the universal verities of his new doctrine are already contained in, or can be elicited from the world-view and social structures of his own people" (Soyinka, 1976, p. xii). Taking Soyinka's admonishment seriously and combining it with my present preference for ambivalence, I

believe it is useful to hold poststructuralism influenced ambivalence not only about established constructions of and approaches to African identity but even about taken for granted constructions of poststructuralism itself. Thus, rather than merely imposing a purely EuroAmerican conception of poststructuralism on African identity, I have identified ways in which the nature and function of the Yoruba deity Esu-Elegbara, can be considered poststructuralist since it already contains many elements and characteristics of what has come to be labelled in European theory as poststructuralist thought.

Esu is both an aspect of and a pointer to the politics of theory and theorisation (especially the link between language, meaning and theory). According to Henry Louis Gates (1988) the Fon of Benin refer to Legba as "the divine linguist', he who speaks all languages, he who interprets the alphabet of Mawu to man and to the gods" (p. 7). Gates goes further in asserting that "Esu is the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic" (p. 9). I go further still in (re)conceptualizing Esu as 'the original poststructuralist' because Esu is the epitome and embodiment of indeterminacy and multiplicity of meaning. Esu is represented sometimes as a male figure, sometimes as a female figure, sometimes as a paired figure (male and female) and sometimes as an androgynous figure. S/he walks with a limp because s/he has one foot in the world of the gods and the other on earth. In appearance, therefore, Esu draws attention to yet obfuscates and transcends gender and (dis)ability. Esu's odus (sacred verses) are the manifestation of Derrida's notion of *differance* (Derrida, 1976, 1986; Harvey, 1986), not in writing but in speech. With Esu meaning is constantly differing and ultimate meaning is perpetually deferred.

Esu makes the will of the gods known to humans by communicating it through the oracle of Ifa in a series of fixed, formal versed texts. As Gates (1988) points out, the meaning of these texts are "lushly metaphorical, ambiguous, and enigmatic, function[ing] as riddles which the propiarte must decipher and apply as appropriate to his or her own quandary" (p. 10). In other words, then, Esu deals with formal language, metaphoric language, language in which meaning is always expressed in riddles to which there are never fixed, correct solutions. There is never a fixed ultimate meaning to Esu's poems, only specific attempts made by specific individuals to pin meaning contingently and fleetingly. And even then, meaning is fixed only as it relates to specific proprietors and their specific situations. The oracle Ifa is a metaphor for text and Esu is a metaphor for the interpretation of texts (or more accurately, the impossibility of single, final interpretation of texts). Esu's signs are the antithesis of closure: s/he gives us a fixed signifier

and watches us postpone meaning as we scramble to select from an endless number of signifieds that one meaning that has relevance for us and our specific situation.

It can be inferred, even from the very brief explication above, that the appropriation of Esu as poststructuralist theoretical category has considerable potential for exploring and articulating African identity. At the same time, such an appropriation undertakes what I consider a very necessary aspect of work on poststructuralism, namely the challenge of poststructuralism itself. It is rather ironic that while 'the posts' have contributed greatly to exposing the limitations and indeed dangers of Western thought, grand narratives and essentialist concepts and categories (Fuss, 1989; Spivak, 1990, 1993), they appear to have passed from being incisive tools of deconstruction and critique that (among other things) welcome the input of the West's others to becoming new EuroAmerican grand narratives themselves.

African Identity: Wole Soyinka and a Performative Example.

In this section I put forward a few notes on the nature of continental African identity and I do so operating on two strongly held premises: first, that identity (especially group identity) does not have a singular point or moment of origin but is always already being constructed and second, that identity is not given and fixed but rather is constantly (re)produced in and as performance. In making my few notes about African identity, therefore, I have resisted trying to establish a starting point. Instead I have tried to identify a way of entering what I consider an always already ongoing discussion about the nature of African identity. Similarly, I have tried to speak of African identity from the premise of performance rather than static and given characteristics. The following passage brings together and meets both these criteria.

PRAISE SINGER: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel;
there is only one home to the life of a tortoise;
there is only one shell to the soul of man;
there is only one world to the spirit of our race.
If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great
void,
whose world will give us shelter?
ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.

The exchange quoted above between the Praise Singer and Elesin Oba is

from Wole Soyinka's (1975) play, *Death and the King's Horseman* and represents, I believe, a productive way of entering a discussion about African identity as performance and in *medas ria*. In Soyinka's play, the Yoruba king had recently passed away and as his horseman (a chief in his own right and one of the king's favourite sub-rulers and official keeper of the king's horses), Elesin is required by custom to commit suicide or more accurately, will himself to slip into a trance and make a permanent transition from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors while performing the ritual dance of death. It is essential that he accomplish this feat as the king's own transition depends on the horseman joining and accompanying him (together with the king's favourite horse, which is to be slain so he can ride it into the afterlife). The exchange above occurs as Elesin prepares (apparently happily, with confidence, eagerness and wit) to undertake this crucial task. Apart from Elesin's reputation and legacy, what is at stake is the very future of the Yoruba cosmos (which depends on the king's smooth transition to the world of the ancestors). If the king fails to make this transition because he is left in the void waiting for a horseman who never turns up, the links between the three worlds of the Yoruba cosmos (the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the world of the ancestors) will be broken, perhaps irreparably, with unknown but probably quite tragic consequences for all three worlds. What is certain is that if the king does not make the transition to the world of the ancestors there will be no one to act as intermediary between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, to represent the will of each world to the other, to keep the divinity of kings alive and in smooth transition from one king to the next. What this means, essentially, is the death of the Yoruba as a people (in the world of the living) and, possibly, even the implosion of the entire Yoruba cosmos.

What is particularly important for our consideration in the exchange is the notion of African identity contained in the Praise Singer's speech. If we undertake the barely forgivable task of reducing this poetic speech to nonetheless useful pointers to African identity, we will be rewarded with the discovery of elements that are significant for conceptualising and discussing African identity. First the Praise Singer speaks of the Yoruba as a race. The issue of race and a taken-for granted notion that blackness is constitutive of Africanity is one of the central issues one has to face in discussing African identity. Second, he speaks not only of a Yoruba world but also of a Yoruba cosmos and cosmology. The idea of an African worldview, one inextricably linked with myth and religion is epitomised here in the notion of a Yoruba cosmos. Third, he speaks of the Yoruba world (and indeed cosmos) as exclusive, self-contained, and self-sufficient.

The idea of the specificity and exclusivity of African identity (limited, say to the continent or in some cases to Black Africa or Africa south of the Sahara) or the possibility of a more expansive conceptualisation of African identity (to include an African diaspora and racial and other forms of difference within Africa) is yet another issue one faces in attempting to delineate and discuss African identity. Fourth he speaks of the idea of the Yoruba being lost without their world and their cosmos and suggests it would be virtually impossible for the Yoruba to inhabit an alien cosmos. At the level of the world of the living, this speaks to the idea of bioterritorialism: the idea that a people have a natural, virtually biological homeland, a God given region to which they naturally belong and are inextricably tied. Outside this homeland is alien, unknown and probably hostile or, at the very least, life altering territory. To take a people away from their homeland is to strip them not only of their homeland but indeed of their identity. Fifth, although Elesin is to take action as an individual, his performance is required of him by the entire community and his actions are intricately tied and have consequences for the entire community. He readily and apparently happily prepares to take on a task that means sacrificing his life for the community. This speaks to the African idea that one's identity is intricately linked to one's community and what is best for the community is what is best for the individual. Sixth, Elesin assures the Praise Singer that all will be well by pointing out that the unspeakable disasters the Praise Singer fears did not happen when Elesin's ancestors (previous king's horsemen) were around and certainly would not happen when it was Elesin's turn to undertake the dance of death. This speaks to ancestral memory and the individual and community's links with the past and the ancestors as principal aspects of identity. It also speaks to identity being tied to inherited role and occupation in the community.

In sum, the exchange speaks to the essence of a taken-for-granted and unabashedly essentialist conceptualisation of African identity. For Elesin and the Praise Singer, Yoruba identity is myth based and poetic yet utilitarian, it is whole, given and immutable rather than being composed of several, distinct elements we have so prosaically itemised above. But Soyinka is no neo-Tarzanist: to pull back from this specific exchange to the context of the play in its entirety is to encounter a rather more complex picture. A combination of Elesin's frailties and self interest (overconfidence and a literally fatal weakness for beautiful women) and the misguided intervention of the colonial District Officer to 'save his life' combine to ensure the Horseman fails to make the crucial transition, with tragic consequences for him, his family and his community. Thus individualism interferes with the

ubuntuesque task of self-sacrifice and the alien world interferes in Yoruba customs and cosmology. Also, the play includes Yoruba who have had to leave their homeland (Elesin's son is studying in England) and a homeland into which aliens and the worldview, language and ideas of aliens have penetrated (there is the presence of the English District Officer and his wife, some locals are employed by the colonial government, and children of the village attend school and are fluent in both Yoruba and English).

In his literary and cultural criticism, Soyinka (1976, 1993) is a strong advocate of turning to and utilising 'traditional' African worldviews, cosmology, and forms. However, it is also clear that he is uneasy about the romanticised, fixed notions of Africa produced in discourses such as Negritude and bolakaja criticism. He has asserted repeatedly through his creative work and criticism that traditional African culture is in fact pliant and adaptable, open to new influences and change. Thus, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin had the option of opting out of the dance of death (amended tradition allowed that he could simply whisper into the ear of the severed head of the king's favourite horse his apologies for being unable to make the journey, and the king would have made the transition alone). Soyinka makes observations about the pliancy of traditional African cultures generally and their readiness and ability to absorb the foreign and the modern in his discussion of elements of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. He observes that:

This book [*The Palm-Wine Drinkard* ... is the earliest instance of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experiences under, if you like, the two cultures, and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole.... This theme is not for Tutuola, but the legacy, the imaginative duality is. The deistic approach of the Yoruba is to absorb every new experience, departmentalise it and carry on with life. Thus Sango (Dispenser of Lightning) now chairmans the Electricity Corporation, Ogun (God of Iron) is the primal motor-mechanic. Those who consider the modern imagery of Amos Tutuola a sign of impurity represent the diminishing minority of the African primevalists. (Soyinka, 1993, p. 9)

Conclusion: Summarizing the Prospects and Strategies for Articulating African Identity

In this editorial, I have not concentrated on making a substantial direct contribution to the theme of this special issue of *Critical Arts*, which is 'Continental Africans and the Question of Identity.' This is a task undertaken by the authors of the four essays that constitute the substance of the themed

issue. What I have concentrated on addressing here is the articulation (in both senses of the term) of African identity; or, as I think of it, the (im)possibility of articulating African identity. In other words, I discuss the difficulty of both speaking of African identity and of putting African identity together from various elements. I describe this task as both daunting and frustrating and outline what I have identified as four strategies that Africans have used to articulate African identity. I describe these as “somewhat frustrated” in the face of outer-continental articulations which have rendered African identity overdetermined and homogenised. I then put forward five strategies which have occurred to me as having potential for moving us beyond the taken-for-granted ways of articulating African identity; strategies which I believe have the prospect of moving beyond notions of African identity which are fixed, sure-footed, clearly defined to new, less assured, multiple and even contradictory. Taking up identity as performance and as a category always already in formation, I put forward and discuss a snippet from a play by Wole Soyinka in my own very brief contribution to the general theme of discussing African identity.

In keeping with the agenda of exploring the articulation of African identity, I discuss the four essays in the collection not so much in terms of their overall content but rather in terms of the ways in which the strategies I am putting forward are reflected in their content, theoretical framework or approach. In the process, however, the reader will hopefully get some indication of what each essay addresses. In keeping with one of the strategies I put forward, my suggestion is that the essays be read in two senses. First, each essay is to be considered an individual statement on African identity, which concentrates on a specific and clearly identified group of Africans. Second, the themed issue is to be considered a single, multiauthored text in which the voices of the various authors and myself put forward a complex, multiple and sometimes contradictory articulation of African identity.

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