

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'.

– Florence Gauthier, *Triomphe et mort du droit naturel en Révolution*

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.

– Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*

**W**hat 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 and 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 idea 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 chapter, drawing in particular on the ideas of the Guinea-Bissau revolutionary, Amílcar 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 ‘uncivilised’ under colonialism, and then ‘underdeveloped’ 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 last long: in the neocolonial 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 the 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 fundamental contributions to the universal human condition – experiences that, as Cabral (1979: 80) put it, ‘belong to the whole world’.

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 the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo) in Mozambique and the 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 in 1974. 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 (Manji and Fletcher 2013). Along with Frantz Fanon, Cabral should be considered one of the leading African thinkers on emancipation and freedom.

My starting point here is the following excerpt from an important speech Cabral made to party members of the 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 chapter. First, how did a section of humanity come to be viewed as ‘African’? Second, 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 interests 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, Anta Diop 1987; Parris 2015; Pithouse 2016; Rodney 1972). 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. The continent was home to many of the world's great civilisations, such as Kush, Aksum, Ghana, Mali and Great Zimbabwe. Peoples of the continent were the source of major scientific ideas well before they became adopted by Europe, including the concept of the Earth being spherical and the adoption of Arabic numerals and the concept of zero (adapted from India and the Middle East) to simplify mathematical calculations. The southern regions of Europe were conquered by North African (so-called 'Moorish') civilisations in the eighth century that lasted some 700 years. The establishment of the state of Cordoba brought to Europe many of the developments in medicine, chemistry, astronomy, mathematics and philosophy that originated from Africa and were translated from Arabic scripts. Societies from Africa sent ships across the Atlantic as early as 500 BCE, and indeed the first European sailings to Africa were guided by pilots and navigators from Africa (Adi 2008; Robinson 1983; Rodney 1972).

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, refers 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 the region that is roughly Tunisia today. 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 that the concept African came 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 that 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 Losurdo 2014; Parris 2015; wa Thiong'o 1986).

In essence, if we were to search for a word that, in the period of the emergence of 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 subhumans. 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 the 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, subhuman, biological 'race'.

Enslavement and chattel slavery played a critical role for the accumulation of capital that gave birth to capitalism in Europe (Du Bois 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 Domenico 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 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 2014: 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 colonised 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 (Stokely 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.'

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2013: 356) states: '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.' Cabral knew, Táíwò (359) 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.'

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, and 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 its 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 1884–1885 by competing 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 groundbreaking 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 to what today is Syria on one side, and as far west to what today is Libya – which, incidentally, would make Palestinians African. Today, imperialism and its institutions (aid agencies, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, international NGOs, as well as the mainstream media) 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 south of the Sahara are arbitrarily defined as ‘sub-Saharan’. Of course the problematic essentialisation involved in the definition of ‘African’ as an ontological concept (Brown 2004) is not confined to the institutions of capitalist development or to the media: it is also manifested in the growing school of Afro-pessimism (Bassil 2011; Louw and De B’beri 2011), which has been influential in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall mobilisations in South Africa. And it also formed the basis for the development of the politics of Negritude (on which I will comment later).

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 subhuman, 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 breakthrough in asserting the universalist humanity of Africans occurred on 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 the 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 2004: 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 that 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 comprise 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.

– Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*

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? As I have argued, the concept of African had been appropriated from the original definition imposed by Europe as being a synonym for the dehumanised 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 placed entirely at imperialism's door. As Cabral points 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"" (1979: 160).

Despite coming to power on the tide of the anti-colonial 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 centralising and controlling role in the political realm (Manji 1998: 15). The idea of modernising 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 US saw as a threat to its growing hegemony. Whereas the movements for independence were characterised 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 that 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 'underdeveloped'. Social and economic improvements would come,

the nationalist leaders said, with patience and as a result of combined national efforts 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 characterised 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 neocolonial regimes that emerged after independence, it is nevertheless important to recognise 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 recorded 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 10 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 marginalised 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 was not 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 (1969: 65) 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.'

He argues 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 neocolonial 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 improvement for the population, such as health care, education and access to water.

## 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, in a depoliticisation that renders people 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. W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Angela Davis, the Black Power Movement, Malcolm X and even Martin Luther King Jnr 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 the US (and indeed in Europe as well), following the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, came the emptying of political identity into a form of taxonomy – African American, black, brown, Asian, Latino, in the US; 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 among 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 terrorising 'black Africans'. In doing so, they perpetuate the colonial mythology of the existence of 'races' among human beings, which has its origins in Europe, and ironically, adopt the spurious racial categorisation of people of the 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, Rose and Kamin 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 among 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 Táíwò (2013: 299) 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) puts 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 colonised’s response was immediately continental in scope . . . Following the unconditional affirmation of European culture came the unconditional affirmation of African culture’ (Fanon 1961: 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 Anta Diop – it also contributed to depoliticising 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).

Depoliticising the nature of African identity through delinking it with an emancipatory agenda meant that what constituted being African increasingly resorted to colonial tropes of tribe. Those considered by colonial powers to be ‘indigenous’ to the colony were described as tribal and rendered under the command of the ‘native authority’ of chiefs backed by the state, a status that was in many cases a continuity of colonial methods of rule, while those considered non-indigenous were considered to be races (Mamdani 1996), people whose legitimacy as citizens were frequently contested. And from considering tribes as cultural, not political, identities, there was an almost inevitable transition to essentialise the idea of the tribe, assigning to each its supposed unique characteristic. The nation, forged in the cauldron of the liberation struggle, lost its meaning, and became defined as a collection of tribes, whose definition in many cases were forged or adapted by colonialism. And those who still held on to the ‘old-fashioned’ notions of liberation, emancipation and freedom, were denounced as trouble-makers, standing against the national interests, and more recently simply as ‘terrorists’. As Robert Sweeny (2009: 36) puts it, ‘Ethnically determined history is almost always racialized history’, based on

certain characteristics being considered as part of the essential character of the so-called tribe. He continues, '... essentialism always dehumanizes, because it denies that people are making choices.' Such tendencies became accelerated in the 1980s with the establishment of the hegemony of neoliberalism.

## THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

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 and 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 1998; Manji and O'Coill 2002) as well as by human rights organisations (Mutua 2001). While 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).

It was hardly surprising that Africa increasingly became presented as the 'basket case', in Tony Blair's infamous characterisation of the continent. The New Partnership for Africa's Development, (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* (3 December 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 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 grains. Africa is one of the richest continents: it has 10 per cent of the world's reserves of oil, 40 per cent of its gold, and 80 to 90 per cent of its 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 oil and gas exporters (Algeria, Angola, Chad, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Libya [at least, before the NATO invasion] and Nigeria), which had the highest GDP on the continent but are also the least diversified economies. It is hardly surprising that, according to a McKinsey report, '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 (Leke et al., 2010). As Carlos Lopes (2013), then executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa puts 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 points 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 least developed countries 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 et al. 2014: 5)

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

While there are doubts as to the extent to which Africa Rising constituted a reflection of real economic developments, the opening decades of the twenty-first century did represent a rise in protests, uprisings and the opening of a new phase in the history of the African revolution. In Tunisia and Egypt, millions rose up to redefine what it meant to be Tunisian or Egyptian as a people seeking their own emancipation. These were followed by protests, strikes and other actions in Western Sahara, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Gabon, Sudan, Mauritania, Morocco, Madagascar, Mozambique, Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Djibouti, Côte d'Ivoire, Botswana, Namibia, Kenya, Swaziland, South Africa and Uganda (Manji and Ekine 2012). In Burkina Faso, the uprising led to the removal of Blaise Compaoré, the assassin of revolutionary leader, Thomas Sankara, while in Senegal, attempts to change the constitution to enable Abdoulaye Wade to establish his dynasty were prevented through mass mobilisations. Each of these uprisings and protests have been a challenge to neoliberalism in which governments had become more accountable to the transnational corporations, banks and financial institutions than to the citizens that elected them.

## TOWARDS A UNIVERSAL HUMANISM

Cabral's (1979: 80) 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' 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 are 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 redefinition 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender 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 the potentials and possibilities are 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 organised, how education could be transformed, how health services could be provided, and how people could exercise democratic control. 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 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) puts 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 500 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 it 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 'underdeveloped' in the post-independence period. The struggles against enslavement, slavery, exploitation and national liberation represented the reassertion 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'.

## NOTE

- 1 K. Polanyi Levitt, Personal communication, from incomplete manuscript on development economics, 2016.

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