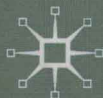


# The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa



MICHAEL ONYEBUCHI EZE

With a Preface by Frank Ankersmit



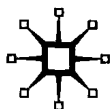
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THE POLITICS OF HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

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# The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa

... for all wisdom, knowledge, and understanding are of God ...  
This work is dedicated to my greatest heroes: Mum, Dad, and Chileen.  
*And to Matthias and Anke Schlensak—for friendship, support, and  
love – without which this book  
would have remained a stillborn. Thank you very much.*

## Preface

This is both an angry and a brilliant book. It's an angry book since it not only eloquently and cogently exposes the horrors and crimes of the colonial regimes in Africa that were set up after the Berlin Conference in 1885, but condemns no less mercilessly the depraved and corrupt contemporary African regimes that continued Africa's dismal predicament down to the present day. What one might call "the black man's burden" (to vary Kipling's well-known phrase) did, unfortunately, not cease with the end of colonialism and imperialism, but was continued when Africa took its fate into its own hands. Next, it is a brilliant book by showing why and in what way Africa's colonial past was like a curse from which the continent has the greatest difficulty of exonerating itself. Indeed, it is too easy to assert—as President Sarkozy did in his notorious speech in Dakar in July 2007—that independence should have enabled Africa to dispel the memories of its terrible past in the turn of a hand, and to become a relaxed and self-confident player in our contemporary global society. Sometimes the past may oppress us like a nightmare from which we find it difficult, perhaps even impossible to awaken—as probably also is the case with Israel—and then all well-intentioned exhortations to be open to contemporary realities will only reveal their own futility, helplessness, and lack of understanding.

Large part of the book is devoted to the double bind in which African culture (or African intellectual history, as Onyebuchi Eze prefers to call it) permanently finds itself when trying to define itself and its identity. As Eze puts it: "[U]sually caught between vagaries of conflicting identities, the African is in a simulated process of identity negotiation" (69). Self-evidently, because of its age-old contacts with Europe, Europe will figure prominently in these "vagaries of conflicting identities." It follows that the rapport to Europe must be the main source of these workings of the double bind in all of Africa's attempts at self-definition. (By the way, the reverse is true as well. Recall Freud's archaeology of the human mind and Philip Rieff's comment on it: "[F]or the very reason that Hegel thought Africa not a proper subject for the historian, Freud would consider it most proper." Africa gave us our psychology and our minds. No small matter!)

The best-known example of the double bind is that of the mother saying to her child: "Be more spontaneous." Then the child has two options: (1) it can simply disobey its mother's exhortation and thus fail in being spontaneous or (2) it may try to do as its mother wishes—but then it will also fail, since imposed spontaneity is not spontaneity. Spontaneity can only come "spontaneously." So the child can impossibly satisfy its mother's wishes. Or think of someone saying in English (or in French): "We must not speak English (or French)." Then something similar occurs: the requirement not to speak English (or French) is *contradicted by its being formulated in English or French*. In all these cases there is an incompatibility between a goal and the means for achieving it. With the result that the goal can never be realized.

Eze most convincingly shows that this is the predicament in which African culture finds itself when attempting to define itself vis-à-vis Europa, and hence, the former colonizing powers. The double bind then is that each definition of Africa's identity as Europe's "other" will necessarily implicate Europe in that identity as well, thus irrevocably corrupting any such definition. What Africa is, its identity, will then always be tainted by European culture and thought. A most striking example is how Senghor defines Négritude:

Thus, the Negro-African sympathizes, abandons his personality to become identified with the other. He does not assimilate, he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other, he lives in a symbiosis. (...) "I think, therefore I am," Descartes writes. The Negro-African could say "I feel, I dance the other, I am." (...) At any rate Negro-African speech does not mould the object into rigid categories and concepts without touching it; it polishes things and restores their original color, with their texture, sound and perfume; its innate humidity—it would be more accurate to speak of sub-reality. European reasoning is analytical, discursive by utilization; Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation. (115–116)

And now listen to Wole Soyinka when identifying the double bind in Senghor's inspired celebration of Négritude:

The vision of Négritude should never be underestimated or belittled (...). In attempting to achieve this laudable goal, however, negritude proceeded along the route of oversimplification. Its re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into the African system of values. It extolled the apparent. Its reference points took far too much coloring from European ideas. Négritude adopted the Manichean tradition of European thought and inflicted it on a culture which is most radically un-Manichean. (150)

So Soyinka criticizes Senghor (1) of defining Africa in terms of its contrasts with Europe (and what will necessarily result in blindness to those aspects of

African culture not invoked by the contrast and (2) of doing this by making use of a typically European category—Manichaeism—which from a more formal point of view can only obfuscate our conceptions of African culture because of being alien to it. In sum, Senghor attempted to define what is peculiar and unique of African culture by relying on un-African concepts and contrasts. It is as if you were asked to depict a blue sky with red paint. The result can only be deceptive.

This is not to say that Eze should have no sympathy at all for the concept of *Négritude*, nor for similar notions like Nyerere's *ujamaa*, Nkrumah's *consciencism*, Kaunda's *humanism*, South Africa's *ubuntu*, or Guinea's *communaucratie*. On the contrary, he agrees that all these concepts were born from the correct insight that Africa should, above all, find access to its soul, to its identity in order to discover the source of how it relates to itself and to the rest of the world. However, at the same time, there was in his view insufficient awareness that the focus on the colonial experience and its aftermath stood in the way of this (re-)discovery of the "African self," if I may term it this way. Moreover, Eze's respect for the theorists of *Négritude* is also amply testified by his many quotes from the often deeply moving poetry that was inspired by *Négritude* and similar concepts. Indeed, there can be no doubt that these concepts reflect and express a deep truth about Africa.

Nevertheless, as Eze correctly insists, these concepts are always simplifications since they do insufficient justice to the varieties in the African historical experience and to how these varieties have determined each area of the continent to have its own rapport to its past and present. None of these concepts can un-problematically be applied to all of Africa from South Africa up to the Sahara.

This may also explain why Eze looks at the nation with a certain ambivalence. It is true that the nation and a nationalist ideology can, in principle, be more open to these varieties in the African experience of its past. And Eze even goes so far as to say that nationalism and a nationalist ideology are conditional for the constitution of the nation-state. In this context Eze lengthily discusses one of contemporary Africa's main problems, namely, the rivalry between the tribe and the nation. Where the nation disintegrates, or where it has lost all legitimacy with the population because of despotism, corruption, or misrule, people are often simply compelled to fall back on the tribal tradition. And part of the horrors of recent African history have been the spin-off of the resulting conflict between the nation and the tribe. On the other hand, Eze is well aware that the tribe is no real option; this is not where we should look for Africa's future. As Eze puts it: "[F]or the nation to live, the tribe must die" (67). So, for better or for worse, the instrument of the nation cannot be



discarded, even though the nation has until now achieved in Africa little to make itself into a beacon of hope for the continent's future.

For most of its inhabitants life in Africa is a constant nightmare—and there seems to be no way of awakening from it. Such is the message from Dr. Eze's book. Nevertheless, though Eze has no sympathy with idle dreams and is well aware of how well-intentioned naiveties have actually hurt rather than helped Africa and its inhabitants, he does have a word of hope for this tortured and maltreated continent. He finds it in the prospect of an African renaissance: "The longing for an African renaissance, in this sense becomes a prophetic symbol for a future generation of Africa. We may have challenged the historical authenticity of a genuine pristine past, but lack of such authenticity need not cloud the impact of a desired historical past on emergent generations" (189). It is a most ingenious approach to Africa's problems, for the notion of a renaissance suggests the entry into a new era in history, but one that has its roots in the past. Furthermore, the notion does not divide, but unite, while at the same time making everyone aware of his or her specific responsibilities. It is, in one word, the banner under which, in principle, all Africans can gather. And Eze then courageously ends his book by saying:

Consequently, if we are to draw a resource from Africa's identities, we need first acknowledge that race, a shared glorious past or a metaphysical unity cannot be a source of that identity. Our identity must be derived from the vagaries of our present circumstances; "we can choose, within broad limits set by ecological, political and economic realities, what it will mean to be African in the coming years." (193)

Indeed, these are very courageous words: it is not the past, nor a utopian future, but "the vagaries of our present circumstances" in which one should look for Africa's identity and in which one may hope to find the way out of present miseries. Identity is not something like a monument we have inherited from the past; it is not like a fate sent to us from either heaven or hell, nor like a trait of character that we can impossibly alter. No, identity is something we make ourselves and that continuously varies with what we do or do not do. Our identity is in our own hands. This is the message that Eze wishes to convey to us in his magisterial and profoundly thought-provoking book. Admittedly, this does not make things easier; for it is only all too human to be afraid of one's own freedom and of the obligations and responsibilities that freedom always confronts us with. Yet we know—and this is a truth as old and as universal as humanity—that all obstacles in the world can be overcome if we have the courage to take our freedom in our own hands.

FRANK ANKERSMIT  
Groningen University

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

We know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it.

(Walter Bagehot 1887: 20–21)

### *Africa: A Mother's Lament (Sentire cum Africa)*<sup>1</sup>

I was born a beauty, I loved without guilt.  
In my glory, I was a window for many.  
In my fall, I was a widow by myself.  
Forty million offspring ripped from my womb  
In earth's greatest holocaust!  
When my children were deprived of my milk,  
And were crammed into vessels of death,  
They brought a prize  
Never seen by my eyes,  
And on those middle coasts so many became ghosts.  
I stepped forth to reset my feast,  
I managed to stand; I tried to build up  
But Europe gave me a wooden horse  
And I was made burden's beast.  
My house was taken over, my stronghold invaded.  
Time came when I longed to be freed,  
To drum my own creed:  
Proud, I was, of Azikiwes and Nyereres,  
Mandelas and Kenyattas,  
Garveys and Cabrals.  
Nkrumahs and Lumumbas.  
But my joy was not lasting,  
A field, I was, twixt East and West,  
Betrayed by my own in a greedy quest:  
Idi Amins and Bokassas,

Mobutus and Abachas.  
 My fifty-three children lose no love between them.  
 Thus am I fertile yet barren,  
 My cup overflowing yet empty.  
 My loved ones:  
 Angola and Algeria—yet blinking and shrinking,  
 Liberia and Congo—weeping and creeping.  
 Nigeria sadly wending,  
 The Sudan itself rending.  
 For too many others, I dream only dreams.  
 Yet have I hope, silver and gold can claim:  
 Riches beyond telling, peoples and cultures upwelling,  
 Listen now: the drumming, throats thrumming,  
 Hear them singing, see them springing  
 Fresh as from birth  
 All red with my blood and my earth . . .

This poem offers a résumé of the sociopolitical volatility that has been the character of overall African historiography. To make sense of the sociopolitical imagination in contemporary Africa is to locate it within history. But the geopolitical world called Africa is a product of different historical imaginations, and these imaginations are products of discourses. Therefore, a study of Africa's political history enables interrogation and comprehension of the context of the body of knowledge in which contemporary African discourse is located. The politics of history in Africa would, therefore, also read as an excursion into Africa's intellectual history. Accordingly, a historical systematization of African thought systems is simultaneously an attempt to free our discourses of a certain dogmatism and polemical violence that has pervaded the overall intellectual history of Africa. The enabling method to achieve this "freedom" is to historicize and locate these discourses within context: *Who said what about us (imperial history)? Why did he say it (motive)? What did he say (logic of coloniality)? When did he say it (colonialism)? What was the consequence (exploitation)?* And from Africa, the voice of history will echo: *Who has a right to say something about us (revolt)? What should he (rather) say (independence)? How should he say it (reparation)? Why would he (or not) say it (decolonization)?* The polemics embedded in these historical pronouncements enable us to see the entrenched relationship between discourse and political praxis. The actual signification of a political imagination is interwoven with the discourse that enabled it. The sociopolitical imagination of Africa is well understood in this topography.

The "idea" of *Africa* in this work will have to be qualified according to two epochs. In antiquity, my reference is the entire continent as we have today,

from Cape to Cairo and from Zanzibar to Senegal, including Madagascar. Where references to Africa are made outside the antiquity, I will exclude the geographical zone controversially referred to as “white” Africa. These countries—Egypt, Mauritania, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, northern Sudan, and Morocco—located between the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea belong to Africa on inducement of political necessity. Socioculturally, their allegiance lies with the Arab League. In matters of international politics, the power differentials also suggest alliance with Middle Eastern countries or the Muslim world. Alliance with sub-Saharan Africa, in my view, is a matter of academic association, without any binding sociopolitical or cultural signification. Outside the antiquity, my reference to Africa is strictly to sub-Saharan Africa, that is, from Zanzibar to Senegal, and from Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Eritrea, through the Somali Lands and Nubian Desert to the Cape, including Madagascar. I do not lay any claim to being the mouthpiece of sub-Saharan Africa; my intention is to articulate and understand the modes of experiences as interpolated with Africa’s history and politics. I learned and gained from the teaching and inspiration of my academic mentors and elders: J. Rüsen, P. Hountondji, K. Wiredu, K. Appiah, V. Mudimbe, M. Mamdani, A. Irele, B. Davidson, A. Mbembe, and M. Ramose, among others.

### The search for historical identity

The political imagination of Africa is an enduring problematic in any attempt to evolve a viable democratic polity for Africa. The contemporary notion of Africa and its nation-states is also linked to the idea of nationalism it has inherited. The challenges faced by these nation-states were heightened by the demand for a national core that was absent at the time of independence. Nationalism imbibes pre-national quintessential narratives as basic prerequisites in the formation of a national core. It embodies a utopian prefiguration that binds a nation. The political world of the nation becomes signified through such utopian address. To understand the crises of the nation-state in Africa is to articulate the underlying variance in the making of nationhood—any national imaginary. This variance facilitates the national core as the foundation of all “creative cultural energy” and the socioeconomic and political perquisite of its members (Kohn 2005: 16).

The story of each imaginary is different: the experiences are divergent, and the narratives are unique for it is within this peculiar, imaginary socio-cultural milieu that an individual’s subjective formation begins—his or her first intersubjective experience. It is these *differences* or *divergences* that

make them stand out from other “nations.” Within the nation is a shared contemporaneity that is peculiar and particular to its members, precisely why they are a *people*. Nationalism therefore is concerned with the emergence of a national character as pressured by a people with a shared history. The features are “products of the living forces of history” and distinct territory, inculcating “the will of forming, or belonging to, a nationality.” In this *becoming*, every nation is like a book—within its pages you find the story of its people, its land, its heroes and villains. But much more, every nation *tells* a story, a story of its heritage and uniqueness, for it is within such *space* that a nation’s uniqueness and difference embody an elemental or a metaphysical significance. In the antiquities, we find one example in the Jewish stories of the exilic era. Israel has been in captivity in Babylon for generations. The worst of the Jewish experiences was the constant taunts and jeers from their captors to tell a Jewish story. Where story is tied to national subjectivity, the Jews are a lost people for they have no such national story. They would look back to Zion and cry out:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept at the memory of Zion  
 On the poplars there we had hung up our harps  
 For their our gaolers had asked us to sing them a song,  
 Our captors to make merry “Sing us one of the Songs of Zion”  
 How could we sing a song of Yahweh on alien Soil?  
 If I forget you, Jerusalem may my right hand wither!

(Psalm 137)

As for the Jews, they remained defiant to the end, refusing to tell their story in a strange land lest their national subjective would be obliterated. Telling their story in a strange land was to lose a sense of who they were, for such stories would become eviscerated, dovetailing further erosion of their metaphysical subjective.

The idea of nationalism is necessarily conceptualized in relation to popular sovereignty as a janus-faced canon. On the one hand, the character of a sovereign nation is to sustain and restore the constitutive relationship of its members, that is, the nation-subject or state-citizen relationship. On the other hand, it nurtures and mediates the terms of this relationship to an external “other.” That is to say, as a “sovereign,” the nation-state mediates the corporate will of its citizens to other sovereign nation-states. The nation is sustained by these features of “a living and active corporate will,” or what Renan (1990[1882]: 19) would call “daily plebiscite.” A daily plebiscite infers the idea of the nation, nationality, or nationalism as a continuous process of active corporate engagement.

Nationalism is an abstract feeling of togetherness, of a shared homogeneous empty time in which we identify with the lives, goals, and aspirations of



countless millions we shall never know, of a “territory which we shall never visit in entirety” (Kohn 2005: 9, see also Anderson 2001: 6). But, nationalism, the drive for a national core usually precedes the emergence of sovereign nation-state as in the aforementioned Jewish example. In this case, appeal is made to the past, and anticipation is made of the future, factors that motivate future drive and desire for nation-statehood and nationality. Furthermore, this drive for national core is further enhanced by identification through *otherness* and *sameness*. While *otherness* refers to the point of *difference* from an “other,” from whence the “national” begins to assume an identity, identity by *sameness* is modulated by shared imaginaries.

### The postcolonial “other”

In postcolonial<sup>2</sup> studies, the discourse of invention generally concentrates on the “fictitious-fabrication” of the “other” or on the *masking* of narratives within a broad reflective equilibrium that *springs* up as discourses (Said 1978, Bhabha 1994). In both cases, “invention” is a discourse of an imposed hegemonic truth without historical veracity or *actual* verification. This understanding will represent the conceptual usage of “invention” in my analysis. It is also a view at the core of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>3</sup> Said argues that the agenda of colonial discourse is to promote strategies of inventing an exotic “other,” which, according to Homi Bhabha (1994: 71), “resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth that is structurally similar to realism.” The dialectical effusion of this invention is spelled by Said (1978: 72–73) as the premise of his *Orientalism*:

Philosophically, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism; anyone employing Orientalism, which is the habit for dealing with questions, objects, qualities, and regions deemed Oriental, will designate, name, point to, fix what he is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality. Rhetorically speaking, Orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of thing Oriental into manageable parts. Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge. These are a few of the results, I think of imaginative geography and of the dramatic boundaries it draws.

Said is arguing that the logic of colonialism was perpetuated out of conjectures and assumptions made of the colonized, and these assumptions