The Re-invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Edward W. Said and V. Y. Mudimbe are both whistleblowers against ideologies of Otherness, which Mudimbe calls “alterity” and Said has made famous as “Orientalism.” Said traces “the invention of the Orient” back to the Western quest for “the Other” while Mudimbe traces “the invention of Africa” back to similar Western explorations. In reality Africa has been re-invented in different stages. The first stage saw North Africa as part of the classical Mediterranean world; the second concerned Africa’s interaction with Semitic peoples; the third was stimulated by the birth of Islam and its expansion both north and south of the Sahara; the fourth came with the impact of European capitalist penetration and subsequent colonization; and the final phase was its globalization. In the final analysis, the essay reaffirms that Edward W. Said and V. Y. Mudimbe are bulwarks against the exotic “Orientalization of Africa.” They have sought to contain the forces of “Otherization” in North-South relations.

Edward W. Said has been described as one of the founders of postcolonial studies. But the claim that Said is a postcolonial innovator should not be interpreted to mean that his work does not examine European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. On the contrary, much of the locus in both Orientalism (1979) and Culture and Imperialism (1993) is on the classical era of European imperialism, and about literary interpretations of the colonized peoples, going back to Joseph Conrad and long before him.

V. Y. Mudimbe is, in certain aspects, a thinker in the same tradition as Edward Said. Both of them illustrate that the best time for interpreting colonialism is in the postcolonial era. After all, one can best evaluate the preceding day after the sun has set. In Hegel’s immortal words, “The owl of Minerva spreads out its wings only with
the falling of the dusk” (Philosophy of Right, 1812). Postcolonial studies include such an assessment of the preceding era of colonialism.

Another characteristic that Edward Said and V. Y. Mudimbe share is that they are both whistle-blowers against ideologies of Otherness—which Mudimbe sometimes calls “alterity” and Said made famous as “Orientalism.” Both writers address the phenomenon of “the Other” in Western consciousness and Western empire. The Orient in this sense is perceived as exotic, intellectually retarded, emotionally sensual, governmentally despotic, culturally passive, and politically penetrable. Male chauvinists have sometimes regarded Asian and African societies as “feminine” in their conquerability, docility, malleability, and fundamental inferiority. Sexism, as well as racism, has often informed the Orientalist mind. Both Said and Mudimbe are exceptionally steeped in Western thought and Western literature in both English and French. Their work on “Otherness” seems calculated to expose “an unholy alliance between the Enlightenment and colonialism.” Critics have drawn attention to the apparent self-contradiction of “deploying a humanistic discourse to attack the high cultural traditions of Western humanism” (see Ruthven).

It is possible to accuse both Said and Mudimbe of reverse Otherness—of stereotyping the West. And just as Negritude has been defended as “antiracist racism,” Said and Mudimbe can be defended as examples of “anti-alterity Otherness” or “anti-Other Otherness.” Edward Said’s central thesis in Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism is about the invention of the Orient. V. Y. Mudimbe’s central thesis in The Invention of Africa and The Idea of Africa is about the invention of Africa. But while Said insists that the Orient does not exist and has never existed outside the imagination of the West, Mudimbe is prepared to accept that the invention of Africa is a prophecy in the process of self-fulfillment. This author accepts the challenge of both Mudimbe and Said to interpret our history ourselves and seek to re-invent Africa in our own terms. In the words of Edward Said himself:

[It is no longer possible to ignore the work of Anta Diop, Paulin Houtondji, V. Y. Mudimbe, Ali Mazrui in even the most cursory survey of African history, politics and philosophy. (Culture and Imperialism 239)]

How Africa is defined has been a product of its interaction with other civilizations. It began with the very name Africa. Some have traced the name to Berber origins, others have traced it to a Greco-Roman ancestry. The ancient Romans referred to their colonial province in present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria as “Africa,” possibly because the name came from a Latin or Greek word for that region or its people, or perhaps because it came from one of the local languages of that region—either Berber or Phoenician. Here are the origins of the invention of Africa. Did the Romans call the continent after the Latin word Aprica (meaning “sunny”)? Or were the Romans and the Greeks using the Greek word Aphrīke (meaning “without cold”)? Or did the name come from the Semites (Phoenicians) referring to the productivity of what is today Tunisia—a term that means “Ears of Corn”? Later the Arab immigrants Arabized the name into Ifraqiya.

If the name Africa comes from a Berber language, it is completely indigenous in origin, for the Berbers are indigenous to the continent. If the name “Africa” comes from Greek-Roman lexicons (like the name “Egypt”), then it is part of a historic dialogue between the continent and its European neighbors. If the name comes from
the Semites (first Phoenicians and later the Arabs), the name is a product of an even
tmore complex interaction between the peoples of the continent and the cultures of
the Semitic peoples.

One of the paradoxes of history is that it took Africa's contact with the Arab
world to make the Black people of Africa realize that they were black in description,
but not necessarily in status. The term “Sudan,” meaning “the Black ones,” carries
no pejorative implications. That is why Africa's largest country in territory (capital
Khartoum) still proudly calls itself “Sudan.” In a European language one cannot
imagine an African country calling itself today “Black Land,” let alone “Negrostan,”
as the name of a modern state.

On the other hand, it took European conceptualization and cartography to
turn Africa into a continent. To Europeans “black” was not merely descriptive; it was
also judgmental. Arabs alerted the people of sub-Saharan Africa that they were black.
Europe tried to convince Black people that they were inferior. But, on the positive
side, it was Europe that continentalized the African identity. Mudimbe starts with
Frobenius's expression ‘African genesis” (1937). I propose different five steps in the
invention and re-invention of Africa.

The history of the external conceptualization of Africa has had five phases. The
first phase regarded North Africa as an extension of Europe, while the rest of Africa
was regarded as an empire of barbarism and darkness. “When European map-makers
were at a loss to identify African towns or cities, they drew pictures of elephants or
lions”—as the saying goes. This was an era when the boundaries of continents were yet
to be demarcated. The phase was particularly fertile for the Orientalist imagination.

The second phase of the historic conceptualization of Africa concerned the
interaction with the Semitic peoples and with classical Greece and Rome. In North
Africa this encompassed the Phoenicians and the Hebrews. In the Horn of Africa this
included Black Semites like the Amhara and the Tigre peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea.
There still remain such debates as whether the Queen of Sheba was Ethiopian or from
South Arabia, or whether Cleopatra was ethnically Egyptian or Greek (Macedonian).
Christianity as a Semitic religion spread across North Africa for a while from the first
century of the Christian era. Christianity also spread into Ethiopia from the fourth
century.

The third phase of the historic conceptualization of Africa involved the birth of
Islam on the Arabian Peninsula and its expansion on the African continent. The earli-
est Muslims, persecuted in Mecca, fled for asylum across the Red Sea into Ethiopia.
These earliest Muslim religio-political refugees included Uthman bin Affan, who later
became the third Caliph of Islam (644–656 CE). Although he himself was a Christian,
Said's work is often a protest against subsequent Western distortions of Islam.

This third phase of the historical conceptualization of Africa initiated the
continentalization of Africa—an expansion that was later consolidated by the impact
of Europe. But this Islamic phase of identity-formation was, in reality, the Sudaniza-
tion of sub-Saharan Africa, awakening the people to Black consciousness. The fact
that Islamization in Africa awakened Black consciousness without promoting Black
inferiority can best be illustrated by the fortunes of classical Timbuktu, which was
recognized as Black and still saluted as a civilized achievement. We shall return to
Timbuktu shortly. Mudimbe draws our attention to Edward Blyden's enthusiasm for
the role of Islam historically in West Africa.
The fourth historic phase of the conceptualization of Africa is the recognition that Africa is a product of a dialogue of three civilizations—Africanity, Islam, and the impact of the West. This historic phase has been given different triadic and synthesizing names. Kwame Nkrumah called this phase “Consciencism.” Others have called the convergence of Africanity, Islam, and Western values as “the triple heritage.” Edward Blyden did call his book *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1888).

The fifth phase of the historic conceptualization of Africa is the realization that the continent is the ancestry of the human species. Africa thus becomes the Garden of Eden and a major stream in world civilization. A transition occurs from Africa’s triple heritage to the paradigm of Afrocentricity—and from the Dark Continent to the Garden of Eden. This final paradigm globalizes Africa itself.

For several centuries before European colonization, much of West Africa was a product of two civilizations—indigenous African culture and the impact of Islam. This duality included the great Mali Empire, which flourished at its height from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries. It is an aspect of Orientalism to call Islam “Mohammedanism.” Mudimbe does not protect himself enough from this kind of lapse. The dual legacy of Africanity and Islam also included the Songhai Empire, which flourished from 1325 until the Moroccan invasion of 1588–1591. Geographically, Songhai once extended from today’s Republic of Mali to today’s Nigeria. Songhai’s history overlapped with the history of the Mali Empire. The Sudanization of West Africa linked Islam and Blackness.

The most historically significant city produced by these two empires was the city of Timbuktu, which over the centuries has commanded more fascination among historians than almost any other intellectual center in the history of Black Africa. Timbuktu became the best positive celebration in the Black world of that old triumvirate of “God, gold and glory.” This triumvirate was in subsequent centuries to be usurped by European imperial colonization, but from the fourteenth century to the 1590s, *God, gold, and cultural glory* converged onto the destiny of Timbuktu. The foundations of the culture were the dual legacy of Blackness and Islam. The exotic name of the city entered the core of Orientalism. Yet Africa was being re-invented.

We define the classical period of Timbuktu as the era when Timbuktu flourished under the aegis of the Songhai Empire (1325 to 1591) and the Mali Empire (1100 to 1700)—two overlapping imperial periods. But the legacy of scholarship in Timbuktu continued in subsequent centuries as well. This was a fusion of Blackness and Islamicity.

The interaction between Africanity and Islam was greatly facilitated by the continuing links between West African Empires and the Maghreb in North Africa, especially with Morocco. The links were often intellectually precious, but the links also included such moments of hostility and greed as the Moroccan invasion of 1588–1591. Let us now put Timbuktu in a wider setting of interaction between Islamic scholarship and Black intellectual foundations. The most famous classical centers of Islamic learning in Africa were three—Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the collective scholarly academy in Timbuktu, and the oldest Qarawiyin University in Morocco in Fez. Al-Azhar University and the Qarawiyin mosque and University were older than Timbuktu, but they were also older than any Western university in existence. Today Al-Azhar is more than a thousand years old—which makes it older than almost any existing Western center of learning. Edward Said went to secondary
school in the shadow of Al-Azhar University, but his father wanted him to have a
British and American education subsequently.

The triumvirate cities of Islamic learning—Cairo, Timbuktu, and Fez—were, in
medieval times, interdependent. There were scholars from Timbuktu who taught at
Al-Azhar and in Fez—and vice-versa. New forms of scholarly interdependence were
emerging in these academic exchanges of the ancient world. These were the years
when Blackness was recognized as compatible with excellence.

There were centuries when Timbuktu was indeed a celebration of “God, gold
and glory.” God was represented by two religious traditions—Indigenous African
and Islamic. The gold featured in the trans-Saharan trade that was Timbuktu’s first
exposure to international trade. The glory was for centuries partly scholarly. As a
French author once observed:

The scholars of Timbuktu yielded nothing to the sojourns [and academics] in the
foreign universities of Fez, Tunis and Cairo. The Blacks astounded the learned men
of Islam in their erudition. That these Negroes [Blacks] were on a level with the
Arabian savants [scholars] is proved by the fact that they were installed as profes-
sors in Morocco and Egypt, in contrast to this we find that Arabs were not always
equal to the requirements of Sankore [in Timbuktu]. (DuBois)

Timbuktu became part of the Mali Empire. The Mali Empire produced one pilgrimage
which was itself a symbol of “God, gold and glory.” Mali Emperor Mansa Moussa
decided to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca in a huge caravan of “God, gold, and glory.”
The trip to Mecca was overland through Cairo. Mansa Moussa is reported to have
arrived in Cairo with an entourage of 60,000 people, and 80 camels carrying over two
tons of gold for distribution to the poor and the pious. Mansa Moussa was so lavish
in his generosity in Egypt that the price for gold almost collapsed on the Egyptian
gold market.

When in our own times the second millennium was coming to an end in the
year 1999, Life magazine included Mansa Moussa’s pilgrimage to Mecca in the
fourteenth century among the great events of the whole millennium—a remarkable
celebration indeed of “God, gold, and glory.”

Mansa Moussa’s pilgrimage was a matter of recorded history. But there is an
element about the Mali Empire that is a matter more of historical speculation than of
historical confirmation. Did Abubakari II of Mali (Emperor Bakari II) launch a fleet
to cross the Atlantic generations before Christopher Columbus traversed the ocean
blue in 1492? Did the Empire that produced the glories of Timbuktu also produce
the glories of a Black trans-Atlantic crossing long before Christopher Columbus?
This latter claim is more hotly debated than Mansa Moussa’s trans-Saharan odyssey.
But both have entered the grand legends of the Black Experience, and the recurrent
re-inventions of Africa.

There is a third huge topic that touches upon the historical interaction between
the people of the southern margins of the Sahara like Mali and Niger and those of
northern Sahara like Moroccans, Tunisians, and Egyptians. Are we to trace the
origins of the name “Africa” to the historic interaction between so-called Berber
people of northern Sahara and the trans-Saharan Tuareg all the way to Mali? What
is clear is that the name “Africa” was first applied only to North Africa and the term,
“Blacklands” (Arabic “Sudan”) was first applied to Mali. Timbuktu’s interaction with
Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt might gradually have helped to create the name of our continent, “Africa.” Mali was part of Western Sudan.

Another major connection we need to associate with Timbuktu is the link between religion and science. In the African context, the scholars of ancient Timbuktu were among the first to synthesize the twin studies of religion and science. A similar trend was occurring in the West at the same time. Timbuktu gave the image of Africa a place in the history of science. It was a partial protection from the marginalizing aspects of Orientalism. There are two methods for a religious school to go beyond being purely religious—one is through a strategy of secularization and the other is through a strategy of dualization. Secularization is the route that Harvard and Oxford took as the subject-matter, the methods of study, and the qualifications for entry, and graduation became more and more religion-neutral. Dualization is the strategy that Timbuktu and Al-Azhar University took as each evolved into a dual university—one part still religious and basically sacred and the other part of Timbuktu and Al-Azhar as secular and modern.

Have African universities also experienced the dialectic of sacred science? In Arab Africa, universities go further back than not only universities in the United States but those in Europe. Al-Azhar University in Cairo is, as indicated, over a thousand years old—older than any existing university in the Western world. Morocco can boast a comparable ancient institution of higher learning still in existence today in Fez (Qarawiyyin). The history of Islamic civilization as a whole was indeed once a fusion of religious vision and scientific advancement. Timbuktu was part of this vanguard. We must not forget that words like algebra, zero, tariff are of Arabic derivation. And the numerals we use are still called Arabic numerals—though they are partly also Indian. Religion and science were also once linked in the academy in Timbuktu in ancient times. Timbuktu was using the Arabic numerals long before this hemisphere knew how to write down the numerals 1492 or 1776. The scholarly foundations of classical Timbuktu continued to be the dual legacy of Africanity and Islam.

We have mentioned Timbuktu’s relationship with North Africa. One of Africa’s greatest travelers was Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), who testified to the scholarship of Timbuktu. North Africa had earlier contributed to Christian thought through the scholar St. Augustine of Hippo. St. Augustine was one of the most brilliant theologians in the history of Christianity. These were the days when the images of North Africa and of Islam were not yet drastically “Orientalized.” North Africa has also contributed to global scholarship the Tunisian Ibn Khaldun, after whom a number of Chairs in the United States have been named. Ibn Khaldun was stimulated by Timbuktu. American University in Washington, DC, currently has an Ibn Khaldun Chair.

In December 1999 the BBC Programme asked me to choose the two greatest Africans of the Millennium. For the man of the pen I chose Ibn Khaldun; for the man of action I chose Shaka Zulu. A North African name of compelling intellectual relevance is Ibn Khaldun, who was born in Tunis in 1332. From 1375 he spent four years writing Al-Muqaddimah, his philosophy of history. Arnold Toynbee, the distinguished Western macrohistorian, described Ibn Khaldun’s work as “a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place” (486). Robert Flint, another historian of thought, described Ibn Khaldun as follows: “As a theorist of history he had no equal in any age or country until Vico appeared, more than three hundred years later. Plato,
Aristotle and Augustine were not his peers [. . . ]” (87). A partial translation of the Al-Muqaddimah was translated into Turkish in the eighteenth century. But it was not until a complete French translation of Al-Muqaddimah appeared in the 1860s that Ibn Khaldun would claim world audience and recognition of his remarkable genius. But it took a while longer before he was recognized as an African.

The interaction between North Africa and Western Sudan stimulated not just awareness of God and the pursuit of gold. It also stimulated the glories of the mind. These were not just moments in history. They were advances for all time. Timbuktu is part of this grand panorama of human achievement. The dual legacy of Africanity and Islam turned classical Timbuktu into a remarkable triumph of cultural synthesis, a meeting point of civilizations. It entered the lore of Orientalism, but in a positive way at that stage.

It was the poet diplomat of Sierra Leone, Davidson Nicol, who once wrote:

You are not a country, Africa,
You are a concept
Fashioned in our minds, each to each,
To hide our separate fears,
To dream our separate dreams. (Herskovits, The Human Factor v)

Davidson Nicol is alluding to Africa's own self-invention. Africa is indeed at once more than a country—and less than one. More than fifty territorial entities with artificial boundaries call themselves "nations." All of them except the old apartheid of South Africa and the old Namibia joined an international body called the Organization of African Unity which later became the African Union. Yes, Africa is a concept, pregnant with the dreams of millions of people.

It is one of the great ironies of modern African history that it took European colonialism to inform Africans that they were Africans. This is the positive version of "the Invention of Africa." Europe's greatest service to the people of Africa was not Western civilization, which is under siege, or even Christianity, which is on the defensive. Europe's supreme gift was the gift of African identity, bequeathed without grace or design—but a reality all the same. Islam and the Arabs awakened Africa's Black consciousness, but a continental identity was still dormant.

The pioneer American Africanist, Melville Herskovits, used to argue that Africa was a geographical fiction: "It is thought of as a separate entity and regarded as a unit to the degree that the map is invested with an authority imposed on it by the mapmakers" ("Does Africa Exist?" 15). In part, the argument here is that climatically the range in Africa is from arid deserts to tropical rain forest; ethnically from the Khoisan to the Semites; linguistically from Yoruba to Kidigo. Herskovits referred to that old description of Africa by the Geographer Royal of France in 1656—that Africa was "a peninsula so large that it comprises the third part, and this the most southerly, of our [European] continent" (15). And a case can certainly be made for the thesis that North Africa is not only a Western extension of the Arabian Peninsula and a northern extension of sub-Saharan Africa; North Africa is also a southern extension of Europe.

If the Arabs could "Sudanize" (make black) sub-Saharan people, how did Europe Africanize Africa? In what way is the sense of identity that Africans have as Africans an outgrowth of their historic interaction with Europeans? In fact, a number of interrelated processes were at work. First and foremost was the triumph of European
cartography and mapmaking in the scientific and intellectual history of the world. If Africa invented *man* in places like Olduvai Gorge, and the Semites invented *God* in Jerusalem, Mt. Sinai, and Mecca, Europe invented the *world*, at the Greenwich Meridian. It was Europeans who named all the great continents of the world, all the great oceans, many of the great rivers and lakes and most of the countries. Europe *positioned* the world so that we think of Europe as being above Africa rather than below in the cosmos. Europe *timed* the world so that the Greenwich meridian chimed the universal hour. Mudimbe quotes Ricoeur about “the fruit of Occidental science itself” (Mudimbe 19–20).

What is more, it was Europeans who usually decided where one continent ended and another began. For Africa Europeans decided that our continent ended at the Red Sea rather than on the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Europeans may not have invented the name “Africa,” but they did play a decisive role in applying it to the continental landmass that we recognize today. V. Y. Mudimbe should have included this in his chapter entitled “The Geography of Discourse” (1988).

The second process through which Europe Africanized Africa was the process of racism in history. This was particularly marked in the treatment of the Black populations of the continent. The humiliation and degradation of Black Africans across the centuries contributed to their mutual recognition of each other as “fellow Africans.” Andrew Young, when United States Ambassador to the United Nations, once accused the British of having invented racism. Edward Said would have regarded the statement as at once “stimulating and hyperbolic.” The Anglo-Saxons played a major role in capturing Africans and converting them into commodities for sale on the world market. The maritime and nautical revolution in Europe and the “discovery” of the “New World” did irreparable damage to Black Africa since it coincided with a new wave of racism. Today one out of every five people of African ancestry lives in the Americas—mostly descended from ex-slaves.

In Africa itself European racism convinced at least sub-Saharan Africans that one of the most relevant criteria of their Africanity was their skin color. Until the coming of the Arabs and the Europeans into the sub-Saharan region, Blackness was taken relatively for granted. Fairer-skinned Arabs sometimes penetrated the interior of Black Africa, but the Arabs were less segregationist than Europeans and were ready to intermarry with local populations. The primary differentiation between Arab and non-Arab was not skin color but language and culture. It was Europeans who raised the barrier of pigmentation higher in Africa. A new version of Orientalism gathered momentum.

Related to racism were imperialism and colonization. These generated a sufficient sense of shared African identity for the movement of Pan-Africanism to be born. In the words of Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania:

> Africans all over the continent, without a word being spoken either from one individual to another or from one African country to another, looked at the European, looked at one another, and knew that in relation to the European they were one. (Laremont and Senghatolishani 39)

Black consciousness south of the Sahara is an aspect of the African identity—but Black consciousness was itself born as a response to Arab differentiation and later to European racial arrogance. But if blackness is such an important aspect of Africanity,
how real is the Africanness of the Arabs north of the Sahara? In what sense, if any, is Africa truly one continent?

It is worth remembering that the cultural links between North Africa and Africa south of the Sahara did not begin with the Arab conquest of North Africa in the seventh century of the Christian era. For example, Semitic languages in Africa are not limited to Arabic and Hebrew. Amharic, the dominant language of Ethiopia, is Semitic. The language is a custodian of one of Africa’s oldest civilizations. Hausa, the most widespread language in West Africa, is also Semitic-related structurally, as well as being a borrower of a large vocabulary from Arabic. Swahili (or Kiswahili), the most widespread language in Eastern Africa, is not Semitic. But it has borrowed as much from Arabic as the English language has from Latin and Norman French.

Then there is, of course, the role of Arabic, not only as the dominant tongue of Northern Africa but also as the central language of Islamic worship both north and south of the Sahara. On the other hand, Edward Said—an Arab Christian—would argue that Arabic was the language of Arab Christians and Arab Jews long before it was a language of most Muslims.

At the global level the most successful Semitic language is indeed Arabic. But the most important Semitic religion in the world is Christianity, and the most successful Semitic people worldwide are the Jews. The success of Arabic is measured by its spread; the success of Christianity is gauged by the size of its population; the success of the Jews is tested against Jewish performance in skills and global impact. Within Africa, on the other hand, the most successful Semitic people continentally are the Arabs—and their tongue is the most successful Semitic language. What remains to be seen is whether the most successful Semitic religion in Africa will be Islam rather than Christianity.

In the battle for the soul of North Africa Islam has already won. In the seventh century CE, Egypt was conquered from Christendom by the Arabs. Apart from the Coptic Church, Christianity has almost disappeared from North Africa today. In the continent as a whole Africa already has a plurality of Muslims. Is Africa about to tip the scale and have a Muslim majority? Will Africa be the first continent to have a preponderance of Muslims? South of the Sahara the rivalry between Christianity and Islam has gathered momentum. There are already more Muslims in Nigeria than there are Muslims in any Arab country—including Egypt. In all, the Black Muslim population of Africa is over 300 million. This is quite apart from Arab Africa, which is overwhelmingly Muslim.

But the forces of Westernization are still powerful and expansionist. If Timbuktu at its height was part of a dual legacy in Africa (Africanity and Islam), the twentieth century witnessed the full flowering of Africa’s triple heritage (Africanity, Islam, and Westernization). This has developed into a major new paradigm for interpreting Africa—for viewing the continent as a convergence of three civilizations. Leading African thinkers who have belonged to this paradigm include Edward Wilmot Blyden of Sierra Leone and Liberia (1832–1912), who wrote in the nineteenth century the influential book Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race. Later in the twentieth century, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (1909–1972) published his book Consciencism, which envisioned Africa as a gradual synthesis of African values, Islam, and what he called “Euro-Christianity.” By the 1980s Ali A. Mazrui of Kenya (1933—) had turned Africa’s three civilizations into a nine-hour television documentary entitled The Africans: A Triple Heritage (BBC and PBS, 1986).
A rival paradigm of interpreting Africa has come to be known as Afrocentricity. This focuses on the authenticity of what is indigenous to Africa. The school profoundly distrusts such “alien forces” as Islam and Westernization. Champions of Afrocentricity are often among the most Westernized of themselves. Especially influential is the African-American Pan-Africanist, Molefi Kete Asante, who has written extensively on the subject, including *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (1990). A Muslim thinker who does not use the term “Afrocentricity,” but is widely revered by Afrocentrists is the late Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal. He was more of a Nilocentrist (romanticizing the Nile Valley) rather than an Afrocentrist (idealizing the whole of Africa). But most cultural Afrocentrists make no distinction between Nilocentrism and Afrocentrism.

European imperialism in Africa played havoc with the African memory—initiating new forms of amnesia, nostalgia, and false memories. Defending themselves against European arrogance, one school of African thought emphasized that Africa before the Europeans’ arrival had its own complex civilizations of the kind that Europeans regarded as valid and important—civilizations that produced great kings, impressive empires, and elaborate technological skills. This form of cultural nostalgia might be called *romantic gloriana*.

On the other hand, *romantic primitivism* celebrates what is simple about Africa. It salutes the cattle-herder rather than the castle-builder. Both Said and Mudimbe treat Negritude seriously. The late President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, joined Aimé Césaire as romantic primitivists. In the words of Aimé Césaire:

> Hooray for those who never invented anything
> Hooray for those who never discovered anything
> Hooray for joy! Hooray for love!
> Hooray for the pain of incarnate tears. (*Return to My Native Land*)

> My negritude [My blackness] is no tower and no cathedral,
> It delves into the deep red flesh of the soil.

In contrast, *romantic gloriana* celebrates Africa’s more complex achievements. It salutes the pyramids of Egypt, the towering structures of Aksum, the sunken churches of Lalibela, the brooding majesty of Great Zimbabwe, the castles of Gonder. Romantic gloriana is a tribute to Africa’s empires and kingdoms, Africa’s inventors and discoverers, great Shaka Zulu rather than the unknown peasant. Both forms of Pan-African cultural nationalism are partially correct. Idealized paradigms combine mythology with real facts. They are partial re-inventions of Africa.

To return to Afrocentricity as a perspective on African studies. This is another phase in the re-invention of Africa. Afrocentricity is not just a method of looking at the history of Africa, but it is a method of looking at the history of the world. Afrocentricity moves the African experience to the middle stage. There is first the concern with the *evolutionary genesis*, the origins of our species. Because on present evidence our human species begins in the African continent, the entire human race becomes a massive global African Diaspora. Every human being becomes a descendant of Africa. It is in that evolutionary sense that the rest of the world is a massive African Diaspora.

Then there is the *cultural genesis*. Mudimbe pays considerable attention to the concepts of both genesis (origins) and gnosis (cognition). If from present evidence
our species began in Africa, then our basic institutions also began in Africa—human language, human family. In the BBC/PBS television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986), the Kenyan narrator, Ali Mazrui, makes a startling claim: “WE invented the family.” By that Mazrui precisely meant that if the species began in Africa, then Africans must have begun the kinship institutions which crystallized into the human family.

When he was filming the TV series *The Africans*, Mazrui wanted to do something about the First Supper. The filming team went around looking for evidence of the First Supper. Mazrui and the BBC crew were concerned not with the religious doctrine of Christianity of the Last Supper, but with the origins of socialized meals. When was the first time the satisfaction of a biological need was converted into a social routine called a meal? When did human beings begin to socialize on the basis of the satisfaction of biological needs? The filming team went to Tanzania to places where some of the earliest remains of our species were discovered. They were not looking for the remains of the first meal, but they did find places which did look like some of the earliest “dining tables.” They took pictures and Mazrui did address the camera about these ideas, about African origins of some of these institutions. Television being what it is, the pictures were not strong enough for the story of the First Supper.

Thirdly, there is the *civilizational genesis*, which is not exactly the same as the cultural genesis. Civilizationally, much of Africana studies has focused especially on the role of ancient Egypt as a grand civilization which shaped not only other parts of Africa, but had a considerable impact on civilizations in the rest of the Mediterranean. Most recently discussion has emphasized its impact on ancient Greece. Martin Bernal’s book *Black Athena* has generated a new examination of that debate. Bernal’s approach to the subject is telling us that these distortions were not made by ancient Greeks. It was not the Greeks who did not acknowledge their debt to ancient Egyptians. It has been modern Europeans who have changed classical history. This massive macroplagiarism of lifting a whole civilization without footnotes was done not by the ancients but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with revisionist European historians of the classics. It was a new stage in the unfolding of Orientalism.

Bernal’s thesis is that modern Europeans, entering a new era of racism and anti-Semitism, could not make themselves bear the thought that what they regarded as the pristine origins of their civilization should have had much to do with either Africans or such Semitic peoples as the Phoenicians. Modern Europeans, therefore, promptly understressed, if not “obliterated,” Egypt’s contribution to Athens. Martin Bernal is not, of course, a Pan-African Black nationalist. He is a white Irish Jew, a very different phenomenon from Edmond Keller, Maulana Karenga, and Ali Mazrui, who have their own Pan-African axes to grind. Bernal has since issued another volume of *Black Athena*, a very detailed work with a lot of linguistic as well as archival evidence. A very impressive work. Bernal was previously a fellow at a Cambridge College in England, and he is currently based at Cornell University. His work has certainly strengthened Africa’s civilizational genesis. This Western Jew has contributed to a positive re-invention of Africa, in the teeth of opposition from Orientalists.

Fourthly, there is the *geographical centrality* of Africa. It is almost as if the Almighty in His infinite wisdom had cut Africa into two equal parts. Africa is certainly the only continent that is thus cut almost in half by the equator. Africa is also the only continent that is traversed by both the tropic of Cancer and the tropic of Capricorn. In many ways, therefore, Africa is also the most tropical of all continents.
by its centrality. The geographical centrality of Africa is, therefore, clear. The cultural marginalization by Orientalism is up against the physical centrality of Africa. It is true that Europeans played games with the size of Africa, in its representation on the map, but there were certain things even European mapmakers could not tamper with. Once they started drawing lines called latitudes, and identified the equator, there was nothing they could do but reveal Africa as geographically the most central of all continents. And yet the Mercator projection does unjustly cut Africa down to size!

Fifthly, there is the monotheistic genesis, the debate as to whether monotheism began in Africa. There is disagreement among African scholars whether the Pharaoh Ikhanatan was in fact the first thoroughgoing monotheist in history or not. His years were 1379 to 1362 BC in Egypt. There is the related debate as to whether the Semites, who helped universalize monotheism, were originally African or not, because their distribution has since been on both sides of what is now the Red Sea. After all, the Red Sea itself was created by one massive earthquake which also created the Rift Valley. Indeed, was Moses an African? Was he an Egyptian? If he was indeed an Egyptian, did that therefore make him an African? All this is part of the monotheistic debate concerning the origins of Africa in that regard. It is in this sense that Afrocentricity has to be considered in many fundamental ways as a perspective on world history. The forces of world history often have their origins in Africa. Is this the ultimate repudiation of Orientalism?

Great debates of Africa’s global impact include the questions: Was ancient Egypt of the Pharaohs an African civilization? Was it a black civilization? Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal led the way, long before Martin Bernal. In fact, Martin Bernal’s first volume, Black Athena, refers to Cheikh Anta Diop only on one page. And yet this Senegalese man had been working on that theme for several decades before Martin Bernal. Ancient Egypt’s Africanity is, therefore, one of the great Afrocentric themes. The Afrocentrists are at war with the Orientalists.

There has also been the debate about the Columbus Phenomenon. This has had two areas. One is the chronological debate, as to whether Christopher Columbus was really the first to cross the Atlantic. Had there been, in fact, others who did it before? And did those others include Africans? There are those huge discoveries in Mexico of sculptured faces that bear so-called “Negroid” features. The stone heads weigh tons. Nobody disputes that they are about 2,000 years old. They are pre-Christ, let alone pre-Columbus. There is no scientific disagreement about their age. The question is: Why do they look so African? People are arguing about the likeliest explanation as to why they look so African, but the most straightforward explanation would be that they look African because Mexico had been exposed to Africans before Christ, when those facial features were carved out.

Although Edward W. Said was more of a political activist than V. Y. Mudimbe has been, they were both engaged in combating what Said called “Orientalism” and what Mudimbe called “Otherness.” What is more, both scholars reached out in solidarity to those who were similarly in quest of authenticity. When Ali Mazrui’s television series was first shown in the United States almost twenty years ago, The New York Times ran a number of articles attacking The Africans: A Triple Heritage (PBS and BBC, 1986). Edward Said regarded this as another attempt by Orientalists to monopolize the discourse on non-Western societies and perpetuate their own paradigms of “the Other.” Sometimes Said talked about this almost as if it was a legal case—“The New York Times versus Ali Mazrui” or “Orientalism versus The Triple Heritage.” Said
subsequently included this passion in his book *Culture and Imperialism*. Referring to Mazrui’s television series, Said said:

> [F]or the first time in a history dominated by Western representations of Africa [. . .] an African was representing himself and Africa before a Western audience, precisely that audience whose societies for several hundred years had pillaged, colonized, enslaved Africa . . . Here at last was an African on prime-time television, in the West, daring to accuse the West of what it had done, thus reopening a file considered closed. (*Culture and Imperialism* 38–39)

Said regarded Mazrui’s television series as a kind of antidote to Orientalism—an antidote which needed to be repeated time and again.

In a similar quest for authenticity, V. Y. Mudimbe addresses Mazrui’s written work rather than his television series. Mudimbe was intrigued by Mazrui’s concept of “retraditionalization.” Mudimbe quotes the following from Ali Mazrui and Michael Tidy’s book:

> Another obstacle to cultural liberation has been the confusion of the concept of modernization with Westernization. In fact, retraditionalization of African culture can take modernizing forms, especially if it becomes an aspect of decolonization. Retraditionalization does not mean returning Africa to what it was before Europeans came [. . .] But a move towards renewed respect for indigenous ways and the conquest of cultural self-contempt may be the minimal conditions for cultural decolonization. (Mudimbe 169)

These quotations illustrate that Edward Said and V. Y. Mudimbe were not only warriors themselves against the forces of Otherness and Orientalism. They also helped to promote alternative paradigms which were similarly in quest of authenticity.

With regard to Africa itself, “retraditionalization” would be one more version of Africa re-inventing itself. Partly stimulated by Edward Said and V. Y. Mudimbe, and partly educated by the march of Africa’s own history, this paper has already identified five major phases of conceptualizing Africa. The first was before the boundaries of the different continents had been demarcated and finalized by mapmakers. So little was known about Africa in the West that the Orientalist imagination went wild. In this phase the concept of Mediterranean civilizations was more real than the concept of either Europe or Africa as geographical units. As mentioned earlier, North Africa was once conceived as an extension of Southern Europe. Mudimbe’s concept of alterity was still fluid in those centuries.

The second phase of conceptualization developed as African peoples interacted more deeply with the Semites and with classical Greece and Rome. This includes the impact of Phoenicians in North Africa, and the subsequent spread of Semitic Christianity across North Africa, up the Nile Valley into Ethiopia. The third phase of the conceptualization of Africa was the arrival of Islam and its expansion in North, East and Western Africa. Islam helped to inaugurate the era of the dual legacy in empires like that of Songhai and Mali. The mutual stimulation between Africanity and Islam produced such miracles of medieval civilization as Timbuktu as a center of learning.

Paradoxically, Islam and the Arabs stimulated color consciousness without necessarily stimulating racism. The concept of "Sudan" signified the land of the Blacks
without implying inferiority of status. Timbuktu was saluted as a center of civilization by the Arabs, while they recognized its location in what came to be known as “Western Sudan.” It is in that sense that the Arabs “Sudanized” the whole of sub-Saharan Africa without creating the elaborate racist structures of Western imperialism. The arrival of European colonization tilted the balance from a dual legacy (Africanity and Islam) to a triple heritage (Africanity, Islam, and Westernization). Sulayman Nyang of the Gambia as well as Nkrumah of Ghana and Edward Blyden of Sierra Leone and Liberia addressed in their books the convergence of African values, Islam and Western culture. But each paradigmatic thesis provoked its own antithesis. Both Eurocentrism and the concept of a triple heritage provoked the counterthesis of Afrocentricity. Scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal and Molafe Asante of the United States became eloquent voices of Africa’s romantic gloriana. On the other hand, Léopold Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique responded with the rhythms of romantic primitivism.

The fifth phase of the conceptualization of Africa has been the globalization of Africa. The continent has been identified as the Garden of Eden that produced the human species. Africa is now celebrated as one of the central fountains of the whole of human civilization. This globalist re-invention of Africa is the ultimate repudiation of Orientalism.

It is partly in that sense that the history of Africa does not end on Africa’s shores. Even when dealing with the slave trade, one has to raise the question as to when the captives ceased to be African. Was it when they left Cape Coast in Ghana? Was it midway across the Atlantic? Did they cease to be Africans on arrival in the Western hemisphere or as enslaved workers on plantations? When was the cut-off point of their Africanity? Edward Said and V. Y. Mudimbe would approve if I concluded by Africanizing a stanza from English poetry:

> Winds of the world give answer,
> They are whimpering to and fro,
> Who would know of Africa,
> Who only Africa know? (Kipling 252)

### NOTES

2. Mudimbe was quoting from Mazrui and Tidy.

### WORKS CITED


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