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African Modernity through an African Lens—Agency and a Progressive Youth

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The efficacy of policy is reliant on being context appropriate. Getting this right in postcolonial Africa has proven difficult. In postcolonial discourse, Africa is often presented through images depicting its traditional heritage and prevailing hardship. These depictions accompany a narrative that policy efforts should be sympathetic to Africa's idiosyncratic contexts; in particular, that Africa is predominantly traditional, unlike the modern West. That, however, is a partial truth. Africans' version of Africa, particularly through the lens of the continent's scholars and large youth cohort, is significantly more nuanced. While unaccepting of an African identity of victimhood and infantilisation, it recognises the damaging legacies of colonialisation and slavery. Culturally proud, it claims ownership of postcolonial Africa's problems; this version of Africa acknowledges the deleterious effects of post-independence governance and progressively insists on agency to steer its future.

After World War II, the strand of development literature referred to as modernisation theories[1] suggested that post-colonial Africa was struggling because it failed to modernise like the liberal, prosperous West did. Following the Western example would accelerate Africa's convergence with the rich and free world. There was rightfully pushback against such prescriptions; it was particularly jarring given the damaging legacies of slavery and colonialism. Also, as both dependency theorists[2] and world-systems protagonists[3] later pointed out, powerful global trade systems continued to buy Africa's resources cheaply while selling goods back to them much more dearly. Awareness of these exploitative legacies and context sensitivity have since become the norm among scholars, along with the orthodoxy that prescripts resembling modernisation are eurocentric and should be rejected as efforts to Westernise or recolonise Africa. Understandably, postcolonial Africa would not stand for further Western inroads on a proud cultural identity with a rich precolonial history. The world however keeps changing as it advances towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). This is also a world coming to terms with the aftermath of a global pandemic and recent

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[1] See Walt Rostow, 1959, "The Stages of Economic Growth", *The Economic History Review*, New Series 12(1), 1-16 and Talcott Parsons, 1964, *Essays in sociological theory*, Free Press of Glencoe, New York.
[2] See Hans Singer, 1950, "U.S. Foreign Investment in Underdeveloped Areas: The Distribution of Gains Between Investing and Borrowing Countries," *American Economic Review,* 40, 473-485; Raúl Prebisch, 1950, "The Economic Development of Latin America and its Principal Problems" reprinted in *Economic Bulletin for Latin America,* 7(1), 1962, 1-22 and André Gunder Frank, 1981, *Reflections on the World Economic Crisis,* Monthly Review Press, New York.
[3] See Immanuel Wallerstein, 2004, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

democratic backsliding—not just in Russia, Belarus, Hong Kong, Turkey and Afghanistan, but also in the US, the long-considered hegemon of liberal democracy. Then there is China's escalating potency to challenge and disrupt the world order, the Russian invasion in the Ukraine and its impact on food and fuel prices, not to mention the looming spectre of a nuclearised standoff, while millions on the post-covid African continent face rising food insecurity.

Since the age of dependency-theory objections against modernisation, East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and of course China, have modernised, ending poverty for their citizens. They remain culturally heterogenous and did not trade their cultural identities to escape poverty suggesting that Western modernity has no claim on universality; multiple modernities have proven possible. East-Asian modernity differs from the western-led world order we know; an Asian-led hegemony—should it materialise—may shift the meaning of modernity significantly. Global solidarity might for instance become valued over competition and attenuate the present proliferation of the inequalities of Western, neo-liberal hegemony. Alternatively, less benign vertical forms of collectivism and reduced emphasis on human rights may attain global dominance in step with global democratic recession. Whether this is likely or not, the underlying point is that modernity is not uniquely western; in fact, contrary to Fukuyama's predictions, the dominance of western hegemony may be tenuous.[4]

Africa too is much changed since the wave of independence during the sixties and seventies. It is a vast and complex continent; it is also the continent with the youngest population — the median age on the continent is 19.7 years.[5] Approximately 60 per cent of Africa's population is younger than 25 and has no first-hand experience of colonialism or the continent's liberation struggles; they are the so-called born-frees. By 2030, 42 per cent of the global youth is forecast to be African; by 2050, it is expected to be 80 per cent. Their voice will matter with increasing importance. The African Youth Survey of 2022 (AYS22)[6] suggests that the African youth are, in a word, modern. Conducted in 2019 and again in 2021 among 10 000 of the continent's 18- to 24-year-olds in 15 countries, the survey reports that "(t)he

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[4] In 1992, Francis Fukuyama predicted in *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press) that mankind's ideological evolution has largely ended when the Cold War did, culminating in the universal acceptance of Western liberal democracy as the ideal (if not flawless) form of government and human existence. David Runciman, however, in *How democracy ends* (2018, Basic Books, New York), suggests that democracy may in fact fail in the 21st century, but rather than repeating historic episodes of authoritarian rule, failure may take a shape that we are unfamiliar with. Democracies may simply wither, eroded from within by institutional dismantling (described as executive aggrandisement in the literature), social polarisation and the unstoppable power of technological progress, all processes that we do not understand and cannot control. This democratic failure—or "backsliding"—may be better described as failing forward, hurtling into an unknown future.
[5] In comparison, the median age in the EU exceeds 44 years. It is 39.4 years in East Asia, 38.5 years in the US and older than 40 years in every Scandinavian country.
[6] https://biz-file.com/f/2206/AfricanYouthSurvey2022_Final_08June2022.pdf.

youth aren't prepared to wait for handouts, they want to be in charge of their own destinies. They will start their own businesses and they will move to where they believe the greatest opportunities lie. They will leave their homelands for the chance of a better life".[7] The respondents' non-African destinations of choice are first Europe, followed by the United Sates. Almost 70 per cent perceive their countries to be headed in the wrong direction and express profound dissatisfaction with their national leaders and politics.

In what appears to be a departure from pan-Africanism, the majority view the influence of foreign powers as positive. An unexpected result is the respondents' view that the impact of former colonial powers is nett-positive in several spheres of their societies, including education, trade and trade relations, culture and identity, access to natural resources, and politics and leadership. They however overwhelmingly agree that foreign companies have exploited their countries' resources and hence favour local ownership of resources.

The African youth view wi-fi connectivity as a fundamental human right, are technologically astute and media savvy. They are also entrepreneurial—78 per cent plan to start a business within the next five years—and want to do things differently from their parents: marry later, have fewer children and have them later. They also have modern ideas about climate change . They find a variety of ways to work towards environmental causes and reducing their carbon footprint. Nearly 70 per cent believe that poaching of wild animals leads to extinction, and they would like to see the products derived from poaching banned.

The African youth favour progressive politics. They prefer democracy over all alternative forms of government but voice a preference for African-style democracy over Western prescripts. Their democratic preferences prioritise equality before the law, freedom of speech, and free and fair elections. In terms of property rights, they view private ownership of land as essential for financial wellbeing. Their human-rights ideas are also modern; they overwhelmingly express concern over minority-right protection, women's rights and gender-based violence. In fact, "young Africans and young Americans may face different challenges, but still seem very much to see eye-to-eye on the kind of future to which they aspire".[8]

Young Africans express clear aspirations for individual agency and embrace bold action to pursue personal ideals. They seem eager to forge a future not limited by the failures of their own countries' politics and on an equal footing with their global peers. They do not appear to identify with Africa as infantilised vis-á-vis the West, or as victims of the West for that matter, as is implied by orthodoxies that would re-traditionalise Africa in tension with scores

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[7] African Youth Survey 2022, 5.
[8] African Youth Survey 2022 (AYS22), 75.

of young Africans managing to modernise on their terms. It is likely that widespread internet access and social media have accelerated a transformation among the post-colonial youth that faltering state-led education could not accomplish.

The African youth are not alone when they express progressive views on agency and a modernity shaped by Africans; these are also recurrent themes in the work by African scholars long working to own the postcolonial narrative on Africa. George Ayittey[9] drives two arguments strongly. The first is that "the blueprint for Africa's future lies in Africa", reiterating his renowned notion of "African solutions to African problems" coined in the early nineties in response to the Somalian crisis. The second is his objection to a paradigm that affords the West centre stage in every African problem; he is emphatic about the obsolescence of

> "the prevailing, deep-seated tendency—largely orchestrated by African despots to conceal their own failures—(to) blame Africa's problems on external factors: colonial legacies, the lingering effects of the slave trade, Western neocolonialism, imperialism, and the World Bank, among others. This externalist orthodoxy, which held sway for more than forty years after independence, portrays Africa as a 'victim' and suggests that the solutions to Africa's problems must come from external sources. This orthodoxy has lost its relevance and validity. It is kaput."[10]

Ayittey speaks of the born-free "cheetahs", whose views largely mirror the AYS22 sentiments prioritising equal power relationships with erstwhile colonialists over victimhood as the preventative strategy against future exploitation. Similarly, as they claim autonomy and agency, they assume ownership of both Africa's problems and the solutions. Ayittey contrasts the cheetahs' assertive forward-looking approach with that of the older "hippos" that frame contemporary Africa as Western-made. Ayittey is particularly scathing about postcolonial governance as cause of Africans' modern-day misery. While recognising the depth of the disruptive colonial legacy, he rejects the notion that it absolves contemporary African leaders from responsibility and accountability. Essentially, he insists on agency, defined as the power and capability to act purposely to in one's own advantage and manage one's affairs according to one's own best interest.

There is general agreement that the release of human potential seeds wellbeing and progress.[11] In Amartya Sen's capability approach to development for instance, agency and

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[9] George B. N. Ayittey, 2005, *Africa Unchained. The Blueprint for Africa's Future*, Palgrave Macmillan.
[10] Ayittey, 2005, 27.
[11] See for instance Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, 2010, "Agency, Values, and Well-Being: A Human Development Model", *Soc Indic Res* 97:43–63, where the authors argue that "agency is anchored in the human motivational system in that greater feelings of agency yield higher life satisfaction".

freedom are inseparable and essential for both individual wellbeing and the greater good: "Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves, and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development."[12] Pettit[13] also conceptualises freedom in terms closely resembling agency, describing un-freedom as a position of no-agency, of domination and being demeaned by one's vulnerability: "Being unfree consists rather in being subject to arbitrary sway: being subject to the potentially capricious will or the potentially idiosyncratic judgement of another. Freedom involves emancipation from any such subordination, liberation from any such dependency."

Ibrahim and Alkire[14] report that the absence of agency is a core theme in the poor's *own* perception of their illbeing. The tight connection that agency has with freedom is also shared with empowerment as the agency-acquiring process, and these concepts are in turn all linked with a range of wellness-related terms in the literature, notably autonomy, self-direction, self-determination, participation, mobilisation, liberation and self-confidence. Much as this literature elevates individual agency as important for both individual *and* collective wellbeing, agency is often framed as constituent of an *individualistic* rather than a collective cultural orientation.

It may be time to challenge postcolonial orthodoxies like the one that has modernity as eurocentric and Western. It would be unfortunate if ideological persistence, in its denial of evolutionary universals, in fact *resists* development in contexts where it is most needed and the most basic human needs remain unmet. High-performing and undeniably modern yet collective East Asian countries like Taiwan, for instance, score more highly on the World Values Survey's[15] rational-secular cultural dimension than the US, which is narrowly associated with Western individualism. High scores on this dimension imply a value orientation prioritising the independent thinking associated with individual agency over deference to traditional sources of authority—a trait conventionally associated with individualist, modern and Western rather than collectivist societies. This finding seems in tension with an orthodoxy that pairs individual agency with Western modernity.

Although not African, Bhabha[16] is credited for work on postcolonial cultural hybridity, explaining that there *is* no post-colonial, that colonisation reconstitutes both the coloniser and colonised. Harmful as these histories are, they cannot be unmade; in Bhabha's words, "the

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[12] Amartya Sen, 1999, *Development as Freedom*, 152.
[13] Philip Pettit, 2000, *Republicanism. A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 5.
[14] Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire, 2007, "Agency and Empowerment", *OPHI Working Paper Series*, 6.
[15] Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2014.
[16] Homi K. Bhabha, 2004, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1-2.

'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past". The resistance of the colonised is in occupying a "third space" rather than culturally becoming or mimicking the coloniser; these in-between spaces "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation...".[17]

Cabral[18] expressed something similar when he said that "it is important to be conscious of the value of African cultures (and) to compare this value with that of other cultures to... determine... what contribution African culture has made and can make and what are the contributions it can or must receive from elsewhere." To be culturally free, Cabral[19] said, includes "not underestimating the importance of positive accretions from the oppressor and other cultures".

One may ask whether postcolonial scholarship prioritises esoteric orthodoxies when the complex African realities militate for different questions. Having "skin in the game" directs the lens through which problems are viewed, producing both urgency and *locus standi* to ask probing questions. In his 1965 manifesto *Tell no lies, claim no easy victories,* Cabral declares "that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children."

Policy makers work in contexts where ideas have consequences, where empirics challenge ideology and orthodoxy; the point of policy is to effect change. Accurate diagnostics matter. Anti-eurocentrism may, in the real-world context of Africa, be defective in much the same way as the modernisation prescripts: the West still speaks for Africa. Rather than being unmodern, Africa's modernity is being shaped by its own relationship with its precolonial history and colonial scars, and by its youth's progressive dynamic. It is fluid, complex and personal; it is also the version that matters.

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[17] Bhabha, 2004, 2.
[18] Amilcar Cabral, 1973, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches by Amilcar Cabral*. Monthly Review Press, 43.
[19] Cabral, 1973, 52.