Forward, Upward, Onward?

Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Katja Hericks and Mandisa Mbali (eds.)

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Introduction: Narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts

Eva Ulrike Pirker, Katja Hericks, Mandisa M. Mbali[1][2]

Introduction

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the 'achievement principle' was intensely researched and theorised within a frame of Western rationalisation and of Western-driven notions of global progress especially in economics and the social sciences. In the first decades of this century, achievement orientation and meritocratic thinking have begun to attract research once more, this time across a wider disciplinary spectrum, but again, with an implicit focus on the global north-west.[3] Achievement-orientation, however, and its manifestation in meritocratic principles is a powerful aspect in cultural narratives across the globe that impacts on social and individual lives in multiple ways. It is present in African societies and in communities across the African diaspora. This collection of short essays seeks to initiate a conversation that can help generate a better understanding of the ways in which achievement and merit are defined, negotiated, represented and embedded, and of the connotations they carry in African contexts, among African social groups and strata, and in communities across the African diaspora, especially in Europe. The collection thus aims to draw attention to the existence of a diversity of concepts of achievement prevalent in these contexts and to embark on explorations into the question of their relations.

That Africa and Europe are not only neighbouring and geographically connected continents, but have a long history of exchange, entanglements and transculturation deserves to be remembered in times in which colonial legacies of 'othering,' postcolonial divisions and new dichotomic projections are re-shifting the focus on essential differences. These relatively recent developments have affected European views of Africa, and African views of Europe sustainably with the result of not only blurring a history of connectedness – a literal continental connectedness when considered in terms of deep time – but also of

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2 Some of the papers in the ensuing chapters have been presented at a workshop conference that took place in Fall 2018 in Stellenbosch and Cape Town as well as a conference panel in Tampere. The workshop conference was generously funded by the German Research Council (DFG) via the programme Point Sud. For his support in setting up and carrying out the workshop we would like to thank Marko Scholze. The editorial process has been supported by Thorsten Lemanski and Agnes Lucas at Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf. For her invaluable help in reading and correcting all contributions from manuscript to proof stage, we are indebted to Miriam Hinz.

3 Studies on educational contexts abound (cf., for instance Lampert 2012, Hadjar and Becker 2016, and Markowits's 2019 polemic take) cultural studies (e.g. the contributions in Dench 2006, and most recently Littler 2017).

impeding serious comparative discussions of values and the questions of what it means to lead a good life, to succeed, to 'make it' – to move forward, to move on or to move up in life, individually, communally or as an organisation. The lack of explorations – of the kind that would require a longstanding dialogue and commitment to cross-cultural exchange and collaboration – is especially striking when the (omni)present force of neoliberalist narratives of achievement is considered: These narratives come with universal claims (Littler), but have been formed in specific contexts and situations, they affect, but are also affected by, both Western/European and African individuals, communities and concepts.

The aim of the debate that this essay collection hopes to spur and participate in is to contribute – through initial (re)considerations of philosophical and theoretical approaches on the one hand and case studies of narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts on the other – to a reframing of global notions of achievement and thus to a corrective to the prevailing Western/Eurocentric framework. Ultimately, it will also help us reconsider and interrogate Western ideas. Our leading question will be: How is achievement envisioned, narrated and scripted in African and Afroeuropean cultural representations, in institutional and organisational contexts? While the essays are the result of an exchange and collaboration on achievement concepts across disciplines, including scholars from Africa, Europe and beyond, each of them nevertheless opens a new door, probing into a special field. Together, they open up a wide panorama of 'meritocratic' narratives and scripts and show that narratives from what (at least in a Western perspective) is still wrongly seen as the 'global periphery' have a greatly underestimated bearing on transcultural social realities and ultimately challenge the notion of 'global' ideas.

We have grouped the essays in three sections. The papers in Section I: "Universal agendas – particular practices" engage centrally with core values and notions of success, achievement and performance in organisational bodies, but also in concrete local contexts and practices. Section II: "Science, politics and the public: Metrics of success" explores the metrics of achievement in a selection of national scientific, educational and political entities with a particular focus on South Africa and some Western European nations with different political and educational cultures respectively. Section III: "Narratives of formation" investigates literary and artistic negotiations of concepts of value and success from both African and Afroeuropean contexts.

I Universal agendas – particular practices

The debates leading to the essays in this section tackle two interrelated ideas: firstly, that narratives of achievement are not and were not solely western discourses, but have emerged independently in different global regions; and secondly, that at the same time, narratives of achievement are, especially when considered in the academic community, in world politics and economics, dominated by hegemonic Western discourses.

In 1961, Harvard psychology professor David McClelland published his book *The Achieving Society*. Although, it was heavily criticised for its invalid methodology and circular argumentation (e.g. Weisskopf 1962), it was generally celebrated in the Western scientific community, including even those who voiced criticism (e.g. Davis 1962, Rubin 1963). One major argument of the book is that economic wealth could be attributed to an intrinsic motivation for achievement, implanted in boys by their mothers (McClelland 1976, especially chapter 9). Thus, in his assessment of the varied economic performance of nations, he effectively replaced the biological racism – widespread since the 19th century – with a psychological explanation, without questioning the contingency of his concept of achievement.[4] In the heat of decolonizing movements and women's movements, he implicitly and in many passages explicitly put both, colonised regions and women in what he, along with conservative politics and dominant social theories of that era, considered to be their place: motherhood for the latter and a perpetual state of having to learn from the West for the former.

The argument, and impact, of McClelland's book is only one prominent example – among many others – of how achievement and ambition were Westernised and thereby used to obliquely legitimise notions of Western supremacy, imperialism and the diverse 'civilizing missions' both in hindsight and for the postwar present. To put it more precisely: If these Westernised notions of achievement did not directly *legitimise* relations between the so-called global North and global South, they have certainly contributed to the construction of social realities by informing specific models, standards and development programmes, e.g. by advocating support for some political systems rather than others etc. Ultimately, these Westernised notions of achievement have helped cement the prevailing (Western) narrative of an achieving global North and an underachieving global South, and this narrative has fed back into staging Western notions of success as universal norms.

To understand how this hegemonic narrative of a Western 'origin' of achievement operates, and to challenge it, is one aspect this section of papers addresses. In this process, it is inevitable to return to the question: What does "universal" and "particular" imply? What does it mean in and for each contingent context? Secondly, these papers explore the relation between agenda and practice. Narratives and discourses are not identical with practice. Rather, they are interpreted for, and translated into, practice, and practice can shape, and indeed change, a narrative in turn. Hence, addressing the relation between agenda and practice also allows us to understand how narratives of achievement are challenged by the very practice that is guided by the narratives. This reciprocal process occurs continuously on different scales ranging from an individual's agenda to the

4 The way in which McClelland juxtaposes the data he references and draws on has been recognised as problematic. Even more problematically, his understanding of achievement remains under-defined and is by implication informed by Western thought. Most problematically, this implicit understanding has fed into a widespread, yet unfounded, distinction between achieving and under-achieving nations.

global. An awareness of how situated practices inform situated narratives necessitates a reformulation of our initial thought: Not only do different social contexts and situations *frame* narratives of achievement, they form such narratives in specific ways. The papers in this section pay tribute to the wide-ranging scale of these contexts, their historical and geographical locations by considering narratives of achievement in municipal environments, in regional and in global agenda settings.

These three interrelated aspects – how situated practice creates narratives, how narratives are translated into practice, and how to understand universality and particularity and their relation – recur not only in this section but throughout the collection.

Mpho Tshivhase sets out by challenging the perception of Western accounts as global representations. Western accounts focus on the individual aspects of achievement only, whereas Tshivhase, drawing on the works of Dismas Masolo and Ifeanyi Menkiti, shows how individual drive and communal acknowledgement fashion achievement collaboratively. She argues that the African idea of communally formed personhood thereby advances a different concept of achievement. **Jo Littler**, by contrast, presents and critically interrogates the (Western) ideology of meritocracy and the metaphor of the ladder. She argues that this ideology functions as a hegemonic discourse which suggests fairness while it perpetuates and simultaneously covers inequality. Unlike the meritocratic model of social stratification, where economic wealth brings social recognition in itself, **Steve Tonah** shows that in Mamprusi society the idea of chieftaincy and traditional titles is at the core of narratives of achievement and the key to social recognition. Towards this end, such achievements as economic wealth and power are only means, while titles associate success closer with both the identity of the person and their social embeddedness.

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong's contribution investigates how achievement is framed and narrated in Ghanaian obituary posters. Obituary posters are analysed as a popular cultural practice across Ghanaian cultures, which remediate narratives about achievement situated within traditional frameworks of what it means to lead a 'good life.' So do other cultural practices, e.g. folktales. **Tasun Tidorchibe**'s contribution zooms into the folktales of the Konkomba in Northern Ghana to tease out elementary concepts of value and normative orders which have shaped the attitudes and lifeworlds of the community for generations and have a direct economic aspect: Among Konkomba, social recognition revolves not only around procreation, but also around achievements in farming. Farming, selling produce and the practical challenges imposing themselves in this process are addressed by **Issa Fofana**, who elaborates on the basis of an empirical study how changed practices lead to measurable achievements by exploring the impact of mobile telephony on the cereal trade market in Mali. Thereby he shows how particular practices mobilise (both in a litteral and a figurative sense) achievements for the upward mobility of a previously rather dependent social group. **Katja Hericks** discusses the idea of productivity as a famous narrative of achievement within the International Labour Organisation. She illustrates how the ILO's interpretation of productivity has changed in the context of its African activities.

Manuela Boatcă's contribution, which closes this section of papers, takes the debate back to the level of African-European relations. Focusing on the historically evolved European supremacy discourse that has been foundational for the European exploitation of the African continent, she reminds us that racist and colonialist ideas of achievement impact contemporary (supranational) European politics to this day.

II Science, politics and the public: Metrics of success

A second over-arching thread in our debates relates to the measurement and understandings of achievement in (higher) education, scientific and political institutions within different national contexts. Within societal organisations, nationally and internationally, academic institutions enjoy a high degree of prestige. Key notions of value and success propagated and perpetuated in these environments tend to be an example of, and influence for, other societal organisations and sites of discourse and learning. Typically, it is within these contexts that "scientisation" occurs. Science is self-constructed by scientists as producing a universal set of falsifiable, objectively verifiable facts about the natural and social world. Science can, in this sense, be understood as having a universal agenda. It is of particular relevance to our theme to note that science also involves social hierarchies, with some scientists/academics having more authority than others. Furthermore, science is created in tandem with narratives of formation as people become scientists. Given our focus on achievement in *African and Afroeuropean* contexts, we are particularly concerned with the analysis of regional and culturally-specific aspects of the production of science and scientists in these domains.

Some readers may wonder why we have adopted such a seemingly loose understanding of the scientific enterprise: why have we brought together papers dealing with students in university residences, academics, medical doctors and biomedical scientists? We want to provocatively draw on, and read, the broad German concept of *wissenschaft* (i.e. systematic research and scholarly inquiry in any discipline) in African and Afroeuropean contexts. When we understand science and scientists as produced by, and taught in, societies, we can further map the tensions between, and enmeshments of, individual and communal African and Afroeuropean models of achievement. At crucial moments, African notions of achievement have also partly been reactions to international organisations' technocratic notions of African societies as underdeveloped and to apartheid stereotyping of Africans as inherently unsuccessful. Here, the papers grouped under this theme also emphasise African agency in asserting models of success founded on fostering greater social justice. The case studies draw our attention to the agency of Africans and Afroeuropeans in disrupting both dominant models of African failure and offering up their own, diverse approaches to accomplishing individual, and social, progress.

Three of the contributions in this section point to the fact that Black and African people have complex – and at times divergent – notions of achievement both in

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and occupations. These papers address achievement in various country-contexts and among different 'racial' groups.[5] Hence, while **Charlotte Williams** discusses Black academics' or "blacademics'" ideas of achievement, **Abdoulaye Gueye** describes those of Black French people in relation to their entry into occupations and **Florian Elliker** sketches out dominant models of success in historically White South African universities' student residences. **Charlotte Williams** contends that Black British people have their own scripts of success and achievement in institutions in which they are racially marginalised. Here we can see that Black academics (or scientists/researchers) are not merely acted upon by oppressive institutions, but that they have formed their own framings/narratives of meritocracy and success. Similarly, **Abdoulaye Gueye** discusses the specific characteristics of Black French citizens' understandings of success. He highlights the fact that Black French people have a specific notion of upward mobility as related to occupational prestige and notions of Whiteness as a "*master criterion* [his emphasis] of qualification." African narratives of achievement are far from homogenous or static: racial, ethnic and class inequalities are still reproduced at South African universities. In particular, **Florian Elliker**'s article discusses the ways in which residences at Historically White Afrikaans Universities (HAUs) confront students with a problematic model of "universal" achievement on campus, but outside the classroom.

If Black and African notions, and experiences, of achievement are not always – adequately – represented in conventional institutions of learning, this does not mean that they automatically fare better in alternative models of education, e.g. Democratic Education (DE): While introducing Democratic Schools' conceptualisations of achievement that challenge conventional meritocratic approaches, **Lena Kraus** comments on of these schools as often lacking in diversity criticism. Individual achievement must be understood in relation to ideas of society-wide economic advancement, which must be historically contextualised. As **Mina Godarzani-Bakhtiari** shows, universalised, Western/Euro-centric economic narratives of achievement have constructed Africa, and the global South in general, as "undeveloped" after the Second World War, when newly decolonised countries came to be seen as "closed autonomous national economies."

One field in which dominant (Western) narratives of African performance have had particularly detrimental effects and which deserves additional reappraisal is the context of medicine and health. In Western contexts, the valorisation of medicine as a healing art, and the promotion of public health can be framed as akin to a universal morality

5 Capitalizing the terms "Blackness" or "Whiteness" signals that they are concepts – albeit concepts that impact the social realities and lived experiences of individuals and groups across the globe in various ways – that have emerged in the context of a racist history of thought. We are aware that terms denoting affiliation with a specific 'racially' categorised group differ, and that there are significant discrepancies in the historically contingent contexts of South Africa, Britain and other European nations as regards terminological traditions. We have therefore chosen to refrain from a standardisation of terminology when editing the individual contributions.

(Metzl and Kirkland 2010). It must be recognised that while individual African doctors and health activists have received acclaim for their own achievements, they have also, at times, highlighted the structural causes of ill-health and its converse, the need for collective societal health solutions. These issues are explored in two of the papers which deal with South Africa. **Vanessa Noble** shows that in an apartheid context, individual Black medical students' and doctors' achievements acted as a riposte to dominant racist notions of their inherent propensity towards "under-achievement." However, some of them came to develop a more collective sense of achievement in challenging apartheid. Similarly, **Mandisa Mbali** questions dominant framings of individual Africans' scientific and activist achievements in ending AIDS by calling for a greater focus on structural drivers of new infections.

III Narratives of form/ation

The boundaries between art and culture are blurry. The papers grouped in this section engage with literary texts and artworks that 'perform' as such and that are not immediately bound up (at least in the first degree) with a social, communal or generally cultural function, as for instance the Konkomba folktales discussed in **Tasun Tidorchibe**'s contribution or the mediatised narratives of achievement discussed in **Joseph Oduro-Frimpong**'s exploration of Ghanaian obituary posters. The discourse about art's alterity has so far been understood as highly situated, i.e. as a legacy of Western (modernist) culture (Casanova 2004, 46). However, this understanding is beginning to be challenged, and new insights into the ways in which the Western paradigm has travelled are manifold: Indeed, the notion of art as 'other' to society has been claimed by artists and writers in the former colonial spheres who have assumed it, written back to it or used it as a site of performance that is translatable to the global (and yet Western dominated) literary marketplace and the art sphere. But then, art and literature are also social practices, embedded in cultural narratives and enmeshed with these, and thus not free from hegemonic structures. In fact, the fields of art and literature are social fields that produce hegemonic structures of their own.

The complexities of achievement narratives in the art scene are illuminated by the recent openings of two major art museums on the African continent: the *Musée des Civilisations Noirs* (MCN) in Dakar and the *Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art* (MOCAA) in Cape Town. Both embrace a Pan-Africanist mission in their collections of cultural artefacts and contemporary art that is inclusive of the diaspora and of what may be termed Afropolitan perspectives (Mbembe 2005). Both institutions which collect, display and celebrate African art (the MCN with a culturalist perspective, the MOCAA with a fine arts approach) have been criticised for their dependence on non-African funding. While the MOCAA responds to accusations that it may be subject to what Littler terms the "hegemonic whiteness of the cultural industries" (Littler 2017, 161), copying Western mu-

seums and promoting a "white concept" of Africa, among other things (Blackman 2015), by emphasising institutional awareness of the problem,[6] the MCN's Chinese funding was openly celebrated as a symbol of solidarity between China and Africa pitted against Western hegemonic expectations.[7] What the criticism directed at both institutions highlights, however, is that African institutions that attempt to make an impact on a global scale are observed with particular scrutiny and expectations regarding their performance.

Racialised expectations of performance (or non-performance/failure) also continue to impact on the range of possibilities at the disposal of individual African and Afrodescendant artists, curators and other practitioners in the global/Western creative industries, as the experience of the late Okwui Enwezor in his position as director of Munich Haus der Kunst suggests (cf. Enwezor in Knöfel 2018). The trope of Black exceptionalism outlined in **Charlotte Williams**'s contribution to the present collection fares prominently in the narratives surrounding Enwezor's rise as curator of important and thought-provoking international art shows (among them the documenta and the Venice Biennial). However, a counter narrative ("you construct a picture, a picture of failure, of my failure" [*ibid*.]) followed promptly as soon as the museum's long-standing financial and structural problems surfaced. That organisational problems are individualised for the benefit of the organisation but to the detriment of the individual who is made to bear the full weight of responsibility can be observed in many contexts: A school failing one of its students will much rather personalise the matter as that individual student's shortcomings; an enterprise that does not perform will get rather rid of a CEO; a failing football club will rather exchange its manager than look into possibilities of organisational improvement that will enable a diversity of individuals to move forward and onward. This way, myths of achieving, functional, performing organisations or environments are maintained – in Enwezor's case the myth of Haus der Kunst as high-profile art institution – whereas perceptible narratives of failure are almost always sketched as the failure of individuals. In a racist or strongly class-ridden climate, they quickly become the collective failure of particular, essentialised groups: Thus Enwezor, to stay with the example, became 'the African,' or 'the Black curator,' who has always carried a burden of representation on top of the challenges of the managerial-curatorial work.

Socialist and Panafricanist visions of the early and mid-twentieth century had challenged such essentialising structures of domination (McEachrane 2020). Like the

6 Our visit to MOCAA in November 2018 was framed by correspondence and introductory statements that reflected the MOCAA's awareness of its institutional responsibility vis-à-vis its positioning.
7 The funding through China has been a recurring subject in reports surrounding the construction and the opening of the MCN in 2016. Writing in *Le Monde*, for instance, Azimi (2016) cites an "informed Senegalese observer" who expressed fears that the Chinese might 'vampirize' the museum and treat it as an 'antechamber'" (e.g. Azimi 2016). The opening press release of 6 December 2018 frames the museum's construction as part of the "cultural cooperation" between the People's Republic of China and Senegal under Macky Sall's presidency (MCN 2018).

visions of a socialist and social-democratic type of meritocracy described by Littler (2017, 32-35), these visions were swallowed by the rise and eventual domination of a neoliberal approach to the world in which the invocation of merit functions as a mask of desire. Pitted against, and amidst, these concepts are individual and collective attempts at making sense of, or even projecting alternatives to, the conflicts arising from these seemingly fair, and yet violently competitive contemporary environments. Art and literature offer particularly sharp foci of insight in this respect. **Ruby Magosvongwe**'s paper, for instance, investigates alternative concepts to the norms imposed on African post-independence societies by highlighting the stigmatizing and simultaneously productive multitude of notions of madness across African contexts by drawing on diverse Anglophone African texts, but with a particular focus on the Zimbabwean writer Mashingaidze Gomo's long narrative poem *A Fine Madness* (2010). Gomo's work offers a transcultural engagement with concepts of valorisation emerging as legacies of colonial violence and vested interests in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Whereas Gomo's text is an individual writer's attempt at creating a vociferous and multivocal debate, the Ghanaian writer and poet Nana Awere Damoah engaged in a virtual 'community enterprise' when putting together *My Book of #GHCoats* (2013). The result is an extended piece of conceptual poetry derived from Damoah's (and his Facebook community's) fabricated quotations of wisdoms attributed to a variety of celebrities. In his contribution on *My Book of #CHCoats*, **Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang** explores a mesh of proliferations of Ghanaian and globally translatable narratives of achievement and the ironic treatment they receive in Damoah's work.

Eva Ulrike Pirker explores Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's engagement with narratives of achievement in oppressive normative frameworks that formulate universal claims in her reading of *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which as a novel of formation/*Bildungsroman* also situates itself in a metafictional discourse about achieving literary genres. Like Adichie, the British novelist Zadie Smith is a writer whose work has been imbued with valorisation on the world literary scale. Whereas the very concept of 'world literature' is a contested one, its definition through the attribution of global economic or cultural capital works very well in the case of these two authors (Casanova 2004, 178-79). **Suzanne Scafe**'s reading of Smith's novels *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016) traces Smith's explorations of individual progress, especially the progress of her Black British protagonists, over the millennial and post-millennial years, which were marked not only by a new 'muscular' neoliberalism, but also by the accompanying social divide. Like Scafe's, **Joseph McLaren**'s contribution on Diran Adebayo's novel *Some Kind of Black* (1996) presents an Afroeuropean context by centring on the ambivalent progress of a young, Yoruba-descended man in the UK, where he is always 'some kind of black.' The progress of women across academic environments is scrutinised by the Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi in her autobiographical works *Dreams of Trespass* (1994) and *Scheherazade Goes West* (2001). **Tina Steiner** explores two aspects of these works, their tracing of female agency in both North African and Western academic contexts, and their tracing – across cultures – of this agency in the

(subversive) act of Scheherazade's storytelling in *The Thousand and One Nights*. The sense that orality can challenge the realm of written culture, that women's particular practices can challenge a realm of 'universalised' male domination is also embraced in Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu's works that, like Mernissi's texts, transgress medial and generic boundaries. **Cezara Nicola**'s discussion of a selection of Wangechi Mutu's artworks (e.g. "The Forbidden Fruitpicker" and "You Are My Sunshine," both 2015) shows how Mutu projects, through her use of Afrofuturist tropes, an imaginary that allows for a critical discussion of gendered and culturally charged notions of achievement as well as a critical discussion of achieving forms in a neoliberal-meritocratic artworld.

To be continued

The most basic, and yet the most crucial, aspect linking the individual papers in this collection is that the narratives of achievement they engage with are contingent. Although the situations and contexts from which they emerge are often subjected to and entangled in cross-culturally operating hegemonic frameworks, these narratives and the forms they take are nevertheless situated within and informed by local and regional conditions. This leads to the insight that the assumption of a universal narrative of achievement is not only incomplete or erratic, but in fact presents a violent epistemic imposition of a normative order to the detriment of the recognition of complex situations that require a serious cross-disciplinary and transculturally informed research ethics – an ethics that commands the inclusion and accommodation of local knowledge wherever possible and the recognition of an incompleteness of records wherever necessary. Furthermore, the contingency of the narratives investigated in the different contributions leads to the insight that the debate they engage in has to be widened and continued across contexts and disciplines. The papers in this collection open doors to a variety of fields for exploration, but also – necessarily – draw attention to the limits of their respective scope of investigation. There are, indeed, countless other doors to connected areas of relevance. We invite readers to see this collection as a prompt to open some of them and contribute to what we have come to believe is a crucial debate in a world shaped by ever new formations of contingent narratives, by moving bodies and travelling concepts.

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I. Universal agendas - particular practices

Considering the communal aspect of narrating achievement

Mpho Tshivhase[1]

Introduction

Achievements are generally positively received and tend to invoke a sense of pride in the achiever and those around him/her. The narration of an achievement is often contextualized. A narration, understood in part as a process that involves the hermeneutic process of interpretation, unavoidably comprises of different perspectives. The varying perspectives, while they may share the same point of reference, i.e. an achievement, do not always share the same interpretation and meaning. What it means for the achiever to accomplish something is not always identical to the second person's perspective.

I am interested in the relational elements of one's personhood and their implications for the narration of a person's achievement. African scholars, such as Dismas Masolo and Ifeanyi Menkiti, insist that a person is marked by the way s/he embraces his/her relationality with others. Given the relational nature of a person, at least as understood from the African perspective, is it possible for an achievement and the narration thereof to be communal? I plan to explore the African value of relationality and its possible role in the narration of an achievement. I hope to defend the view that an achievement and the narration thereof should not necessarily maintain an individualistic tone because, while one's talent may arguably be an individualistic matter, the exploration and development of that talent, which is a necessary condition of achievement, is generally a matter that involves many others in the community – hence my consideration of the communal aspects of narrating achievement.

What it means to be a person

What it means to be a person on the African communitarian view is a matter of how one relates to other people. According to Ifeanyi Menkiti, being a person is a mode of being that is acquired. Herein, one is not born a person, but rather develops into a person. He argues that individuals develop personhood through seven life stages that are governed mainly by biological factors. Herein, he makes a distinction between the processual nature of personhood and the human being. The processual stages of personhood are childhood, adolescence, adulthood, parenthood, elder-hood, ancestor-hood, and finally the nameless dead phase (Menkiti 2004, 326-27). The main point is that human beings are mainly a

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biological species while persons are moral entities.

Masolo approaches personhood by analyzing some African languages or rather certain words in them. In doing so, he hopes, in part, to make better sense of the relation between personhood and society in characteristic African cultures. His opinion is that people have an awareness of their status as human beings, but for them to cultivate their awareness into that of personhood they must be part of a community, as personhood is a socially developed way of being. This point of view relies on the perspective that we are born humans who can develop to become persons, where that process of becoming a person is always incomplete and includes the possibility of one failing at it (Menkiti 2004, 326; Masolo 2010, 139-43, 155-60).

African conceptions of personhood cite group solidarity as a central feature of a traditional society (Menkiti 2004, 324). Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye, central figures in the African debate on personhood, argue differently about the extent of the community's authority in the definition of a person. Menkiti argues that the community wholly defines personhood (1984, 171). Menkiti's view is characterized by John Mbiti's "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am," which Menkiti accepts as the "cardinal point in understanding the African view of man" (Mbiti 1969, 108-09).

Gyekye criticizes Menkiti for giving in to the "temptation of exaggerating the normative status and power of the cultural community in relation to those of the person and thus obfuscating our understanding of the real nature of the person" (1992, 106). With the aim to collapse the tension between the self and community, Gyekye develops a more flexible view, the moderate or restricted communitarian view, which accommodates communal and autonomous individual values and practices as part of one's personhood (1992, 106-13, 115-16, 120-21). African communitarian thought presents different conceptions of personhood, but most theorists are in agreement that personhood is largely, if not exclusively, a communal matter (Kaphagawani 2006, 332, 337-38).

Personhood and achievement

There is an underlying idea of personhood as a matter of achievement – moral achievement. Herein, persons are also products of their community, which is relevant to the communal nature of narratives of achievement. There is a sense in which the relationship between the individual and the community becomes inextricably bound so that it becomes difficult to make sense of an achievement through the isolation of the achiever from the community.

Achievement is an event that occurs within a particular social context and so there are often many aspects involved. The point I want to make here is that narration is always contextualized where such context necessitates relationality. An achievement does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in the midst of interpersonal relationships that either nurture or hinder one's goal. Often it is the first person's perspective that should matter in

the narration of an achievement. However, given the societies within which we often find ourselves, the first person's perspective is often drowned in other social and/or political agendas that tend to take priority. In this way, one's achievement becomes a beacon of hope for others.

These social and political elements are evident in the achievements of women, especially black women who, for instance, become the 'first black female CEO' of this and that organization. Herein, it is evident that the achievement of becoming an executive in an organization symbolizes a break in the racial and patriarchal barrier that prevented (black) women to compete on equal terms with men. Understood in this way, excellence ceases to be a privilege that is limited to a few, and the achiever is thus celebrated for, in part, being daring enough to break that glass ceiling, as it were.

Moreover, while one's achievement is not primarily aimed at contributing to the moral enhancement of the community, it does ultimately benefit the community. The schools that one went to, the church in which one was christened, the siblings relatives and friends that one has, all share the pride of one's achievement so that one's achievement is, almost at once, their achievement too. Herein the phrase '*you have made us proud'* is indeed the expression of the communal aspect of achievement wherein 'us' refers to the community where you may have grown up as well as the larger global context within which your achievement occurs.

While the effort that is invested – in terms of having a dream, doing the work, showing up and so forth – is all individually driven, the achievement itself and the narration of that achievement are often a communal matter mainly because of the context within which one's achievement occurs. In much the same way that the development of one's personhood is a communal matter, so is achievement.

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Neoliberal meritocracy, racialization and transnationalism

Jo Littler[1]

The ideology of meritocracy

'Meritocracy' today is generally taken to mean a 'fair' social system in which people can progress to the top of the social pile if they are sufficiently savvy and put in enough effort to activate their talent. It is persuasive because it speaks firstly to people's desires to progress, develop and self-actualize; and secondly to a sense of fairness, in that it is pitted against the idea of unfairly inherited privilege. However, as I argue in my book *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility,* 'meritocracy' does not work as a social system and is tautological in structure (Littler 2018). The word 'meritocracy' has never been applied outside the framework of vastly unequal economic rewards, which means that the 'level playing field' it gestures towards simply does not exist, as those who achieve overwhelmingly tend to pass their wealth on to their children. As an ideology its main function has been to extend inequality: to be used by elite plutocrats to shore up and extend their power. Today, meritocratic discourse promotes a highly individualistic, competitive version of success in which people are encouraged to disavow their inter-dependencies; be flattered into lonely forms of empowerment, or blame themselves for 'failing' to make it; and to accept the idea that savage inequality should be a justified social norm. Indeed, in many ways it functions as the core legitimating ideological principle for the inequalities of contemporary capitalism. The supple, shape-shifting meaning of meritocracy has changed considerably over the years, according to time and place.

However we can track its genealogies and shifting movements, including its imbrications with Western imperialism, colonialism and racialization. The historical emergence of meritocracy can be understood in relation to the development in the Global North of what the political theorist C.B. MacPherson termed 'possessive individualism' and its concomitant imperial projects. The development of the sense of a bounded, individualized self, one which is not dependent upon or interconnected with others but is above all imagined as an ultra-independent being emerged during capitalist modernity. One graphic illustration of this development is provided by the evolution of the board game *Snakes and Ladders*. The earliest versions known of this game are nineteenth-century Hindu and Jain versions from India, where they were religious instruction games depicting a cycle of birth and rebirth influenced by the effects of good and bad deeds and attitudes, and in which the goal was to move past the many snakes to a zone of collective liberation. How-

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ever, in later versions, British imperial activity in India translated it into a game of Christian-capitalist moral instruction. Now the journey involved lessons on deportment and material wealth (e.g. punctuality leading to opulence, robbery leading to a beating) and the goal transmuted into reaching 'the scroll of fame,' a list of people well-known for their wealth, hard work, genius and virtue. In later, twentieth century iterations of the game, the goal was merely individual wealth.

Criticism of meritocracy

Such developments illustrate how a western capitalist emphasis on the bounded subject, in search of success through social veneration and economic profit, functioned by pushing aside more co-operative systems of thought and behaviour. Climbing the ladder has been a core motif of meritocracy, one lambasted by critical theorist Raymond Williams in the 1950s because it 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' by offering growth through merit rather than money or birth. Hierarchies of 'losers' as well as 'winners' are integral to the structure of meritocracy, unlike a system based around co-operative egalitarianism. Indeed, such inequality was the reason why, when the word was first used in English, it was used to refer *not* to an optimum system that should be striven for, but rather to slate what was taken as an only too obvious and glaring example of unfairness. For industrial sociologist Alan Fox, the social polymath Michael Young and the philosopher Hannah Arendt, meritocracy was obviously a terrible idea, as it contradicted fairness by supporting far greater resources being given to a few. Why should the already prodigiously gifted have endless rewards heaped upon them? said Fox, incredulously (Fox 1956, 12-13).

This emergence of the critique of meritocracy was also bound up with a critique of the greater stratification of education, particularly in the UK. The grammar school system, then being popularised, ostensibly rewarded 'intrinsic merit' via testing at the age of 11 which segregated children into radically different types of school. It therefore offered greater life chances, combined with social alienation, for a few working class children, who were disproportionately white; and the castigation of numerous others into an educational zone marked 'second class.' Such a 'level playing field test' overlooked the amount of resources wealthy parents put into tutoring their offspring for the test and gaming the system. This competitive, marketised segmentation can be seen in how wealthy US parents deploy their power to in effect buy places for their children at Ivy League universities. And extremely hierarchical competitive societies overwhelmingly work to endorse the already-powerful with all their attendant pre-existing racialised and gendered forms of stratification. Natasha Warikoo and Lani Gunier have both written about the racialised effects of 'meritocracy' in the US educational system and present powerful stories about how it embeds discrimination (cf. Warikoo 2015; Gunier 2015).

Neoliberal meritocracy

Over the past few decades, what I term 'neoliberal meritocracy' has been characterised by some distinctive features. These include the extension of its logic of competition into the nooks and crannies of everyday life, and the full-scale adoption of the term as not only unproblematically positive, but as the natural and desirable structuring principle of society. Neoliberal meritocracy often brought with it a gloss of social liberalism. Anyone can make it! it was proclaimed across media texts, workplace narratives and political speeches. It doesn't matter what color your skin, your gender, your sexual orientation, your age: all have potential to climb the social ladder. In the process, neoliberal meritocracy was extracting and mobilizing elements of democratic struggles, including anti-racism and anti-sexism, and fusing them with corporate, capitalist arguments. The enfranchisement of a more diverse few at the top was to go in tandem with the disenfranchisement of the many.

Neoliberal meritocracy as 'common sense' was gradually and symbiotically developed by social theorists, cultural practitioners and policy makers, drawing on and adapting older currents of social thought. By the 1980s, for example meritocracy was being used by right-wing think tanks in order to promote not only segregation but also marketisation and privatisation in UK education. By the early 1990s in South Africa, the founder of 'the Merit Party,' Sol Schklone, was positioning meritocracy as a liberal third way, against the democratic demands of the black masses for affirmative action on the one hand and white apartheid on the other (Schklone 1991). Whether via 'third way' or other 'liberal' terms, these narratives of meritocracy were part of the discursive arsenal used to roll out neoliberalism-in-practice, with its mantras of competition, free enterprise and economic growth, crushing nationalised, not-for-profit public services across countries from Chile to the UK, South Africa to Russia, and having, as David Harvey and Naomi Klein have both documented, devastating effects on both inequality and environmental sustainability (cf. Harvey 2005; Klein 2008). The transnational nature of neoliberal meritocracy means there are striking local differences as well as striking commonalities in its usage. And still, across and between so many national contexts, the fact that the level playing field is not level, that many people start life several rungs ahead on the ladder, that the boundaries of 'merit' are set by the privileged, and continue to be profoundly racialised, classed and gendered, remain features that are minimised, downplayed and ignored by neoliberal meritocracy, and for an important reason: because it is an ideology which is itself being used to entrench and perpetuate the advantages of the already-privileged.

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“Becoming a chief is more important than anything else in life.” Interrogating the notions of success and fulfilment among Mamprusi royals in Northern Ghana

Steve Tonah[1]

Introduction

Although they are barred from participating actively in politics and do not hold any formal political positions at the local and national levels beyond the few statutory roles assigned to them in the Constitution and Acts, traditional leaders in Ghana (that is, chiefs, earth priests, queen mothers, etc.) are still prominent in the Ghanaian society and are very active in the social and political life of the country. The Ghanaian print and electronic media is replete with the activities of traditional leaders. Traditional leaders are still a strong pillar around which entire communities are mobilized on a regular basis and play prominent roles in the social, cultural and religious activities of their groups. With the clamouring of sections of the business and educated elite as well as many professionals for high traditional titles, the prestige and status accorded traditional leaders, which have been on the ascendancy in Ghana in the last decades, have been further boasted.

This paper examines the importance of the chieftaincy institution among the Mamprusi of Northern Ghana, their obsession with acquiring traditional titles, and explains why many residents often mobilize their economic, social, political and spiritual capital to compete for traditional chieftaincy titles, sometimes to the detriment of the welfare of their households and relatives. It also examines the unique notion of success and fulfilment in life among Mamprusi royals and non-royals. For most Mamprusi, acquiring a chieftaincy title is the ultimate desire in life. Although living in an increasingly materialistic society, many Mamprusi royals do not understand why individuals and households, particularly the urban, Western-educated residents, would continue to accumulate material and financial possessions beyond what is required for the subsistence of their households, especially when they do not intend to use their wealth and finances to obtain chieftaincy positions and titles.

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The Mamprusi society

The Mamprusi, with an estimated population of about 350,000 inhabitants, reside mainly in the savanna area of north-eastern Ghana where they were able to establish a traditional kingdom (Mamprugu) in the 14th century after defeating the autochthone groups (Drucker Brown 1975). The traditional Mamprusi state consists of the province of Nalerigu and five other provinces. The society is highly hierarchical with a centralized political system with several levels of traditional office holders at the provincial, sub-provincial and village levels. The Mamprusi society makes a distinction among the royals (*nabiisi*), the elders (*kpamba*) and the commoners (Schlottner 2000, 54-56). Today, they are still largely rural residents with a few urban towns. Most residents are subsistence farmers, though trading, transport and other services are available in the towns. Public and civil servants are mainly found in the towns (Tonah 2004).

Competing notions of success and fulfilment

Just as elsewhere in Ghana, Mamprusi society has always had to contend with several competing notions of success, and indeed many residents do acknowledge the importance of these in their lives. First, there is an increasing importance of wealth in their society as a result of the monetization of life and their integration into the national economy. In the past (that is, the pre-independence days), wealthy individuals included persons who had large farms, or rather, large food barns and livestock herds. In recent times, persons with access to agricultural machinery and equipment, vehicles, commercial buildings and stores are considered to be wealthy. Indeed, many of the wealthy farmers among the Mamprusi have moved to the towns and invested in the housing, trading and transport sectors.

Another group of persons who command respect in the Mamprusi society are the educated elite, particularly those who have influence in national political life and are able to link their communities with regional and national political leaders, donors and international development agencies which bring access to funds and material resources of various kinds. These include professionals, politicians, military and police officers, high ranking officers in the public and private sectors. However, most of the educated elite and business men reside in the cities and only visit their extended family members and relatives occasionally.

Despite the increasing importance of education and material wealth in the lives of the Mamprusi, the most sought after life-goal of most Mamprusi residents (royals and non-royal members) is to be made a titled person or a chief, particularly one involving a high traditional office. There is a strong devotion to traditional rule among the population. Royals and non-royals seek chieftaincy titles not just for reasons of prestige but also because of the widespread belief that at a certain stage of their life adults should acquire titles to reflect not only their status within their community but also to become part of the

group of respected elders in the community. Besides, it is generally believed that to command respect, mature adults should not be called by their names but rather by a title, conferred on them by a chief. This explains why royals and commoners would also accept the so-called 'dry chieftaincy titles,' that is, titles without any material benefit whatsoever or even titles of settlements which have been deserted or those without inhabitants. Indeed, some educated persons and business men resident in the cities believe they can raise their level of recognition in the Mamprusi society by acquiring traditional titles. Others who feel they do not receive the level of respect, acknowledgement and recognition abroad do come home and compete for or use their wealth and networks to 'buy' chieftaincy titles.

The result of this craving for traditional titles is that most royals and non-royals would commence the search for a chieftaincy title at a very early age. As they advance in age, most royals seek to move from less known to prestigious titles that they believe reflect their growing influence and status within the society. Royals, therefore, tend to progress from acquiring less-valued titles of small settlements to highly-valued titles at the provincial and divisional levels. The ultimate goal of every royal, of course, is to become the paramount chief or king.

The competition for chieftaincy titles

The Mamprusi are very proud of their traditional political system and their commitment and loyalty to their chiefs and royals are unequalled. Becoming a chief is the most cherished aspiration of all royals and non-royals. The competition for chieftaincy positions at all levels is, therefore, often fierce and royals would mobilize all human, spiritual and material resources at their disposal towards attaining this goal.

Chiefs at the various levels of the political hierarchy have to regularly organize contests to fill positions that become vacant after the death of the incumbent. This invariably means that there are hundreds of titles at various levels of the political hierarchy to be contested for in each of the five provinces and the central province of Nalerigu, and yearly, dozens of titles are conferred on residents. The large number of chieftaincy positions that are available to royals and non-royals within a province often means that competition for chieftaincy titles is a permanent feature of the political landscape. Candidates for a particular title would, typically, lobby the appointing chief for the title/position. Thus royals at the sub-divisional level would lobby the sub-divisional chief for titles that become vacant while those at the divisional levels lobby the paramount chief for such titles. Similarly, royals contesting for the paramount chiefship position have to lobby the *Nayiri*, the overlord of the Mamprusi, for the position. Invariably, the competition includes having to lobby the chief's wives and children, his elders, diviners, relatives, friends and all persons considered influential in the traditional area. Royals would typically begin their political career by competing for less prestigious titles usually located in the small and rural settlements and then hope to ascend to more prestigious and lucrative titles located

in the towns in a circulating and ascending fashion (cf. Ibrahim 2004; Staniland 1975). Because chieftaincy titles are preferably given to elderly persons who tend to rule for only a few years, competition for chieftaincy titles has remained a permanent feature of the Mamprugu political landscape (cf. Awedoba 2006, 411-17; Tonah 2010).

Mobilizing resources for the contest

The bulk of the resources used in campaigning for chiefship positions comes from the household's grain, livestock and cash reserves. Contestants also mobilize resources from family members, relatives and friends. Wealthy individuals and households typically accumulate large herds of cattle, sheep, goats and poultry that are then used in financing the cost of contesting for chiefship. Indeed, for most Mamprusi, the essence of accumulating wealth in livestock is to be able to contest for a chiefship position in future (Tonah 2010). This explains why most Mamprusi find it awkward for non-royals (*tarima*) to be accumulating wealth when they cannot compete for a chiefship position or title. The dispensation of ones resources, mainly the livestock herd, is often at the heart of the competition for chiefship positions. Contestants contribute livestock towards the celebration of the late chief's funeral. They also give various gifts to the appointing chief's delegation during the funeral as well as provide their diviners and soothsayers with livestock that are used in performing rituals to protect the contestants from their rivals and enhance their chances of winning the contest. Furthermore, household livestock are often sold and the proceeds used in purchasing grain to feed the contestants' supporters and campaign team members. Several items are also distributed to relatives of the appointing chiefs as gifts and these typically include towels, slippers, cloths and buckets.

Conclusion

Today, most Mamprusi residents in the traditional area still prefer being successful in their traditional localities than in the modern, urban areas. In contrast to the educated elite and other city residents for whom becoming wealthy is a noble value in itself, many Mamprusi residents only require wealth to the extent that it may facilitate their acquisition of a chieftaincy title or position. Wealth accumulation, per se, is not a cherished goal of the ordinary Mamprusi. The most important achievement in life is to become a titled person or chief. Royals and non-royals abhor being called or referred to by their names. They prefer to be called by a chieftaincy title. They will therefore seek chieftaincy titles of any kind within their society. At the lower level of traditional governance, such titles bring the individual a notion of self-fulfillment and prestige, a sense of having achieved a meaningful life in their society, while higher level titles may, in addition, bring power, wealth and access to labour in the society.

Finally, the paper has sought to show that Mamprusi notions of achievement

and (self-)fulfillment contrast sharply with those of the majority urban, educated residents most of whom define success largely in terms of monetary/financial achievement, level of wealth, occupational status and extent of influence in the formal, neo-liberal economy (Ayelazuno 2014; Obeng-Odoom 2012).

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“What a shock!”: On mediated narratives of achievement in popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong[1]

Introduction

‘What a Shock’ is one of the varied titles on some of the public death-announcement posters that one encounters within contemporary Ghana’s visual landscape. In interviews with family members, associated with deceased persons, in relation to the choice of this phrase for such posters (unlike Celebration of Life, Home Call, Honoring His Life[2]), I learned that the term expresses the deceased’s family utter disbelief of their relation’s unexpected passing. I appropriate this phrase in this paper’s title to signal my surprise about how part of this popular media genre ‘silently’ remediates and materializes unique Ghanaian cultural narratives about achievement situated within traditional views about marriage, having children and taking responsible care of them. Here, I take the totality of this Ghanaian popular cultural practice of visual death announcement as co-constituted material artifact that simultaneously makes visible and tangible certain aspects of Ghanaian cultural beliefs not explicitly referenced in the posters.

‘w’abo bra’

In this essay I explore a facet of the posters which narrate achievement situated within a traditional Akan cultural worldview and captured in the expression *‘w’abo bra’* [to have lived a meaningful life] and essentially means ‘to have fulfilled certain key cultural expectations.’ In doing so, the key question that drives this piece’s inquiry into the posters is: how does the process of constructing narratives of achievement become concretely mediated through the popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters?

In what follows, first I briefly outline the analytical framework that underpins my interest in the posters: a material approach to culture. Second, due to how I take that aspect of the death-announcement posters which showcases ‘achievement narrative’ as an imaginative constructed work “render[ing] visible” (Meyer 2015, 23) an intangible cultural ideal (as encapsulated in ‘having lived a meaningful life’), I take the posters as manifesting

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[2] See Appendix I, II, and III

a “material dimension of the [Ghanaian cultural] imagination” (Meyer 2008, 83). In positioning the posters as material manifestation of a cultural imaginary, I subscribe to the view that “the imagination [is] not limited to processes within the mind but is fed by and materializes through concrete [popular]cultural forms to which people relate with their senses, and which people employ to make sense” (Meyer 2015, 163). This lens thus allows us to conceptualize the posters “not in opposition to ‘abstract’ [cultural] ideas, norms, and values but as their indispensable carriers” (4). I follow this discussion with an explication of the Akan concept of *‘w’abo bra’* and then show how this achievement narrative ideal is indirectly visualized in the posters.

Obituary posters as constitutive for social relations and concepts

In terms of the material approach to culture, this framework simultaneously investigates the inter-relationships between humans and artifacts or the “material constitution of social relations” (“Editorial,” 1996, 13). An underlying assumption of this perspective is the idea that “without material expression, social relations have little substantive reality, as there is nothing through which these relations can be mediated” (Sofaer 2007, 1). Flowing from this idea is the belief that it is simply naive “humanism which views persons outside the context and constraints of their material culture and thereby establishes a dichotomy between persons and objects” (“Editorial” 1996, 11). The material approach to interrogate the posters calls for a concrete exploration of the manner through which “cultural construction of everyday life happens” (Morgan 2008, 228). This perspective to investigate posters emphasizes a practice-oriented approach to (popular) media research due to the key role of the social milieu that factors into the constitution of images (Morgan 2005, 2008). In the next section, I discuss a facet of the posters that ‘speaks’ to the expression of achievement around marriage and having children.

On virtually all of the posters, one finds the ‘listing’ of one’s marital status or lack thereof. In those cases where I have enquired as to the absence of the name of a partner on the posters, I was informed that when a person is not officially married either through the traditional route and/or church wedding, the deceased lineage does not officially recognize such unions. This non-acknowledgement is visually marked on the posters through the absence of a partner’s name. Here, one becomes aware of a ‘broader’ traditional Ghanaian societal expectation where responsible adults are expected to marry. According to Gyekye (1998), this charge to marry is deemed as “an obligation every man and woman must fulfil” (76). This ‘traditional’ expectation to get married is tied to the idea that marriage is core to the perpetuation of the lineage as well as to “the development and enlargement of kinship ties” (76). Implicit here is the expectation that all marriages should end in procreation. So important are children in marriage that the Akan (and most Ghanaian social groups) believe that childlessness disbars one to the coveted position of becoming an ancestor within the lineage (Opoku 1978). Thus, as I learned through my

interviews on the posters, the name-list of children (and [great] grand-children as the case may be) aims at portraying to the wider public how the deceased is the society's exemplar of having lived to achieve that societal standard of marriage and procreation. Admittedly, one can argue that contemporary Ghanaian trends associated Pentecostal religion, urbanization and unemployment does not allow the full realization of these traditional ideas to hold true, especially in urban centers. In granting this argument, I also argue that in spite of these factors, these beliefs still persist as evidenced in the posters.

This achievement of the deceased to have married and procreate, as I was informed, conveys one of the cultural virtue of *'bo bra pa'* 'to live/lead a worthy life.' Embedded in this concept of 'having lived a worthy life,' is the notion of having been responsible enough to have taken care of one's children in such a way that they may become independent and responsible citizens. A successful execution of this responsibility is generally believed to manifest itself in one's children achieved status in life. Thus, in some of the posters, beside the name-list of the deceased person's children are their current social positions in life.[3] Sometimes, even the names of the locations where they reside are included, especially if those areas are considered prestigious. Such a public display of the deceased's children's social status on the posters thus confers further prestige on the deceased.

Conclusion and outlook

In conclusion, in this essay, I have chosen an approach that considers imagination and cultural narratives as entangled (Andrews 2014), and that, as a material approach to culture, can be used to examine a facet of the popular Ghanaian death-announcement posters. I have shown how a side of the material/visual medium of the posters remediates narratives of achievement that are in consonance with aspects of Ghanaian (Akan) 'traditional' notions of accomplishment related to marriage, having children and ensuring that such children become responsible adults in society. In all, the analysis here, just like my previous works on other Ghanaian popular media genres like popular video movies and political cartoons (Oduro-Frimpong 2014, 2018) contribute to ongoing efforts of the newly established Centre for African Popular at Ashesi University. Specifically, the goal is to spotlight the intellectual significance of African popular media formats as equally competent arenas to 'think with' understand contemporary sociopolitical and cultural issues in Ghana and Africa.

[3] See Appendix IV

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Appendix I

Photo by author

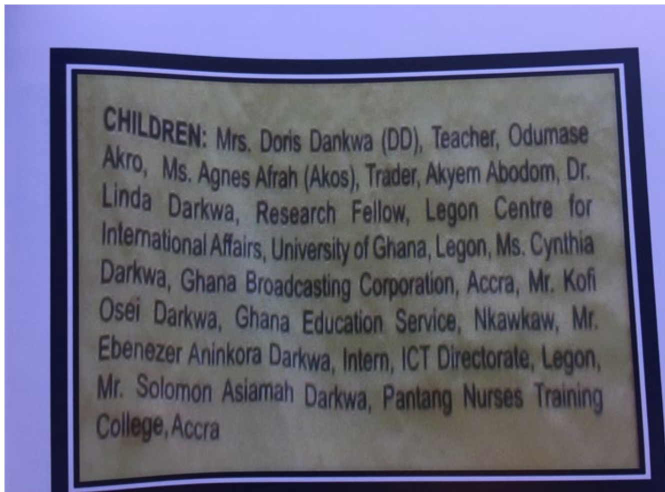
Appendix II

Photo by author

Appendix III

Photo by author

Appendix IV



CHILDREN: Mrs. Doris Dankwa (DD), Teacher, Odumase Akro, Ms. Agnes Afrah (Akos), Trader, Akyem Abodom, Dr. Linda Darkwa, Research Fellow, Legon Centre for International Affairs, University of Ghana, Legon, Ms. Cynthia Darkwa, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, Accra, Mr. Kofi Osei Darkwa, Ghana Education Service, Nkawkaw, Mr. Ebenezer Aninkora Darkwa, Intern, ICT Directorate, Legon, Mr. Solomon Asiamah Darkwa, Pantang Nurses Training College, Accra

Photo by author

Concepts of achievement among Konkombas: Representations in their folktales

Tasun Tidorchibe[1]

Introduction

Achievement is a culturalized construct imbedded in a people's social, economic, and political structures. In *Commodities and Capabilities*, Amartya Sen defines achievement as "what [a person] manages to do or to be" (1985, 25). Admittedly, an attempt to explore narratives of achievement would reveal that cultures regard achievement differently. This article explores how achievement is perceived among the Konkomba people of Northern Ghana and how this achievement culture manifests in their folktales.

The Konkomba people are largely located in the eastern corridor of the northern region of Ghana. They largely inhabit the Saboba, Chereponi, Yendi, Nanumba, Salaga, and Kpandai districts, with others scattered across the northern parts of the Volta region, Brong Ahafo region, and neighboring Togo (Tait 1961, 1, 8). They are predominantly agrarian and African traditional religion adherents, with only about 5% of Christian converts (Ryan 1996, 313). It is important to note that traditionally the Konkomba are not a socially stratified people as such: There are no privileged classes such as royals or the nobility, upper, middle, or lower classes who are born into wealth and power. Theirs is a liberal society that affords everyone the opportunity to rise to greatness.

Among the Konkomba, achievement is highly celebrated while failure is abhorred and derided with labels such as "masor" or "kinifang" (a failure), which can even result in self-exile from one's community due to stigma. Their achievement culture largely revolves around one's success in agriculture, specifically the size of one's farm, the size of one's crop barns, and/or the size of one's herd – mostly cattle, goats, or sheep. The larger a man's farm is, the more respect he commands. As a result, every traditional Konkomba man's chief aspiration is to be a successful farmer – not primarily for commercial reasons but for prestige. It is interesting to note that boys are often encouraged to cultivate small farms and tend them to yield good harvests as a way of apprenticeship to instill in them hard work and give them a head start on success in farming. Even though one may occasionally seek communal help or labor (known as "nkpawiin") to cultivate a large farm, the Konkomba society imposes on the individual the ultimate responsibility of working hard to excel in his farming career.

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Folktales as catalysts for social concepts

The centrality of success in agriculture in Konkomba achievement culture manifests in their folktales. Their tales often have pastoral settings, subject matter and plots that are woven around farming activities, and characters—human beings, animals, or inanimate objects like talking stones—who may often be engaged in farming activities or other actions around pastoral settings.[2] A close examination of these farm-related stories reveals that they often explore the theme of achievement in agriculture and showcase how a character's hard work or ingenuity culminates in his success in farming. For instance, in a tale titled "Why God Created Everyone," the narrative presents a farming contest between the sons of a farmer to ascertain which of them is the best farmer (Brew-Hammond 1991, 44-46). What is important here is not the details of this story but the fact that this contest lends credence to the fact that success in farming is perceived as an achievement among Konkombas. In another story titled "The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes" the narrative presents a rabbit (the wisest animal character in Konkomba folktales) who employs ingenuity and hard work to cultivate large tracts of farmland through "nkpawiin" (50-51). One would realize that these two tales have plots that are built around farming, have pastoral settings, and feature characters who are farmers. Essentially, in the first tale the narrator does not only present the father of the competing young men as a successful crop farmer but also as the owner of a large herd: "Their father had many cows, and a cowboy looked after them" (45). All these encapsulate the centrality of a successful career in agriculture in Konkomba achievement culture.

Another achievement indicator among Konkombas is the size of one's household. Family is highly valued by Konkombas; and the larger a man's family is, the more respect he commands. This value for family explains the origin of names such as Unibonmor (transliterated as "a human being is fun"—figuratively suggesting that companionship is priceless). As a result, a successful Konkomba man, socially, is one with a large household—which he is expected to maintain all year round even in the lean season (known as "likpasiil") when food is scarce. A man's ability to do this is perceived as a great achievement among Konkombas. In most Konkomba folktales, one may hear narrations such as "Once upon a time, there was a man who had fifteen sons, eight daughters, five wives and several grandchildren" or simply "Once upon a time there was a man who had six sons" (Brew-Hammond 1991, 44). In the second example, even though the narrator fails to mention the number of wives, daughters and grandchildren the man had, due to shared communal values and perceptions his audience understand that the man equally had daughters and that his sons also had wives and children who all constituted his household.

2 See Brew-Hammond 1991, 44-53 for sample stories. More of these Konkomba folktales would soon be available in a planned publication of a collection of Konkomba folktales translated into English and German.

In another tale titled "The Disobedient Girl and the Python," the narrator (the son of the chief of N-nalog community in the Saboba district) begins thus: "Do you know why it's important that children listen to their parents? There was a man who had several sons and nine beautiful daughters from different mothers" (Ilimoan Yamba, Phone interview with author, March 10, 2019). As the narrative takes shape, one realizes that the girl is the last of the nine daughters and that she refuses to marry all suitors her father picks for her and ends up marrying a stranger who turns out to be a python with shape-shifting abilities. Implicitly, the above tale's opening lines and the plot reveal that the man's household is a large one consisting of sons and daughters who are married and have children of their own, except the last daughter. Also implied is the fact that this last daughter's predicament consequently renders her a failure in the eyes of her community as she is saddled with an unsuccessful marriage, childlessness, and possibly self-exile due to the stigma attached to failure among Konkombas.

Pertinently, the acquisition of titles is a contemporary development in Konkomba achievement culture. Prior to contacts with their Muslim neighbors and Western culture, Konkomba achievement culture did not include aspiration for titles, especially chieftaincy titles. Typical Konkomba communities were headed by clan leaders who were usually the most elderly in the communities (Tait 1961, 1, 4). Today it is common to find some Konkomba communities referring to such leaders as chiefs. Some communities even have both clan elders and chiefs. In the latter case, the clan elder assumes all spiritual and culture-related responsibilities while the chief handles political or administrative affairs. These chieftaincy titles are gradually becoming a source of disputes because of the prestige and material gains such as money, lands, and free labor they come with. In "The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes" tale mentioned earlier, the rabbit and the chief both appealed for "nkpawiin" on the same day. On the said day, all the animals went to the chief's farm and ignored the rabbit even though the rabbit first asked for communal help (Brew-Hammond 1991, 50-51). Here one would notice that the chief's position brought him respect and economic benefit in the form of his people responding to his call for free labor and ignoring the rabbit's appeal.

Contemporary Konkombas actively seek political titles such as assemblyman or woman, district chief executive, member of parliament, and minister of state among others. In addition, Konkombas now strive for laurels in education, resulting in a steady rise in the number of educated Konkombas with various academic credentials. Perceived as higher achievements among Konkombas today, such achievements receive greater recognition and praise and come with both prestige and economic gains. In effect, then, the concept of achievement among Konkombas has evolved over time and may continue to do so in response to changing trends.

As evidenced from discussions above, achievement culture among Konkombas is gender defined. While about 99% of the above achievement indicators apply to Konkomba men, females' achievement culture, according to Roger Mayen (a Saboba-based native

Catechist and Likpakpaaln[3] translator), centers on "a female's ability to marry, give birth and maintain her home" (Roger Mayen, Phone interview with author, March 14, 2019). Females who fail to accomplish these are branded "nbanjawul" (promiscuous women) for the unmarried or divorced and "bignoob" for the barren. That obviously explains why in most Konkomba folktales female characters are confined to domestic and childbearing roles. From "The Disobedient Girl and the Python" tale, one would realize that the theme of marriage (betrothal or arranged marriage) stands tall; and the outcome of events in the plot reveals that a successful marriage and childbirth are considered as female achievements among Konkombas. In recent times, although some Konkomba women have ventured into public service and attained academic laurels, these are not considered as real achievements until these females fulfil the socially imposed benchmarks of achievement–marriage and childbearing. This explains why the narrator of "The Disobedient Girl and the Python" tale adopts a rather disapproving tone by labeling the girl as "disobedient."

Conclusion

To sum up, it is important to reiterate that achievement is highly valued and pursued by almost every Konkomba. Hard work and diligence are inculcated in the Konkomba right from childhood for this purpose as failure is not tolerated and can even result in self-exile due to derision or name-calling. From the discussions above, it is clear that Konkomba achievement culture revolves around success in agriculture, family, marriage, and title acquisition; and the motivations for the pursuit of these achievements are prestige and economic benefits. But above all, Konkomba achievement culture is gender defined and evolving in nature.

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Mobile telephony and cereal trade in Mali: More than a narrative of achievement

Issa Fofana[1]

Introduction

> Trade rests on two pillars, two pillars only, there are not three. The first pillar is trust, the second is information. That's all. Money does not count, these are the two pillars. A trader who has the information is the first on all trading activities. (A. Traoré, interview with author, October 23, 2012 in Bamako)

This quote, taken from an interview conducted in the course of an empirical study (Fofana 2015), contextualizes trade in Africa. This requires taking into account the subjective and objective aspects of cereal trade in Africa in general and in Mali in particular. West Africa has been experiencing a rapid change in the communications media for several decades, which has brought about changes in many areas. These changes affect urban sites and the countryside too. They have occurred thanks to the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Among these ICTs, the mobile phone has been particularly important in disseminating information in developing countries. It has marked African countries during the last two decades. The commercial interaction is concerned. How does mobile telephony contribute to the achievement of grain transactions for small farmers in Mali?

Cereal markets have undergone changes since the 1960s. These changes concern their structure as well as their functioning. They occur at the supply and demand levels (cereal imports pass through the market), communication methods and policies. Producers who sell their surplus in the market are few, about 20% (Soulé 2011, 31). Since the 1980s with the structural adjustment program, the grain market has entered the era of economic liberalism and must now prove its competitiveness. Technology contributes to market performance and welfare of small farmers (Jensen 2007). Small producers are among the poorest people in rural areas because they are sometimes forced to sell their products on the market just to satisfy the problem of food, debt repayment, health, etc. In the past, they did not have the real value of their goods on the market for lack of information. Success in this market does not only depend on production capacity but also on network capacity and access to information on the market (e.g. on the status, availability,

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quantity, best market, time to sell products, etc.). Their source of income is primarily the sale of their productions. Success means benefiting more in grain sales for economic and social advancement. So taking care of their family and getting into the wealthier producers' position is more challenging for them in this situation.

The cereal market in Mali

Cereals occupy a central place in the Malian economy. More than 50% of the diet consists of cereals, which are grown in general by small producers who are not well placed in the market. Producers are sometimes uncertain about anticipating grain prices. It is an enclave economy, and due to the geographical situation of the country, characterized by difficult access, the cost of communication prior to the development of mobile telephony was high. For example in Mali in 2012, the norm of consumption was estimated at 214 kilograms (kg) per inhabitant per year (81,61 kg for rice, 9,86 kg for wheat and 122,53 kg for dry cereals such as millet, sorghum, corn respectively), according to a report published by the newspaper *L'Essor* (*L'Essor* 2013). This changed slightly in 2017, the annual per capita consumption (the country has 18.1 million inhabitants) is estimated at 266 kg, i.e. 14 kg of wheat, 83 kg of rice and 168 kg of other cereals. This shows that the standard of consumption continues to increase year by year as well as the demand. Today, cereal markets are based on demand and supply.

Farmers sometimes do not know how the sector is organized, but today anybody involved in the cereal trade understands the issues related to information. This is the reason why they organize themselves and get information at each level of the chain. In addition to other programs contributing to their organization such as the Rice Initiative in 2008, corn and wheat in 2009, farmers have gotten organized to face the cereal market. After this organization of producers, there a surge in grain prices occurred. The producers thus have the power to negotiate directly with merchants via the mobile phone.

The following section discusses the mobile phone's contribution to the sale of grain to producers. The second pillar of the grain trade is access to information. Grain market players used to have vertical access. The trader was better informed than the producer. With the use of the mobile phone, access to information has become horizontal, which reinforces the bargaining power of the producer. Horizontal access to information influences price formation. "The mobile phone is helping to raise the price of cereals" according to producer Diallo (interview with author, December 21, 2012 in Diabali). It allows producers to better negotiate the market with the information they obtain through its use. The use of the mobile phone is thus a positive aspect because it allows knowing and understanding the marketing mechanism. Diallo (producer in Diabali) believes that the mobile phone benefits producers rather than traders. Being well informed about the reality of the market, the producers stagger the sale of products in order to benefit from the rise of prices.

Negotiation, access to information and competition for cereal trade's achievement

The information system initiated in the context of ICT progress will enable better marketing of Malian agricultural products by providing donors and rural actors with reliable information on agricultural sectors. The marketing of cereals relies on means of access to information through radio, telephone booths, mobile phone and the internet. According to A. Traoré, "the producers do not even know them, often when they come on the market before the transactions, they go on the radio to ask the price. For them it is the radio that gives the prices. It becomes a bargaining base for them" (A. Traoré, interview with author, October 23, 2012 in Bamako). The mobile telephony in Mali in the late 1990s adopted business models explicitly designed to reach the poorest (and largest) section of the population, with low-priced mobile phones and small-denomination prepaid cards. The mobile telephony is now integrated into the daily activities of business and household lives.

Producers who could not compete with others because of the problem of access to the right information, are now armed with mobile phones. They can negotiate with Malian and foreign traders easily, which was not the case two decades ago. The actors (State, Producers, Consumers, Financial Institutions, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Transformers, and Traders) in the cereal market are positioning themselves in relation to the purchase and sale of cereals. The market is a competitive space. When seeking to maximize the benefits, the access to information is an important element in all decision-making processes (Svensson and Yanagizawa 2009; Fofana 2016).

The use of mobile telephony (Short Message Service (SMS), platforms like Sɛnɛkunnafoniso, Sènèkèla of Orange - Mali and social media) has allowed market players to create several commercial networks inside as well as outside the country. Trade on a certain scale and in this competitive environment is an activity in which a mobile phone is a crucial factor. Access to market information allows for good integration, thus promoting competition. Two factors make the grain market competitive, namely the integration of the national and the regional market (Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Niger) and access to information. Producers face price instability that increases the risk of investments in the grain sector. Producers remain little involved in the marketing circuits of their products, and value their cereals insufficiently. Each actor intervenes according to their knowledge to improve efficiency. Hence, an information asymmetry between the actors is bound to create an asymmetry of market power. Producers used to be poorly paid for their rice with traders in a dominant position in the market. The use of the mobile phone allows an economic freedom that counters the asymmetry of information and becomes part of a narrative of improvement. Thus, small producers are free in their commercial movement. The decisions are inspired by the state of the growing cultures, the information received on the situation of the cultures in other zones of the country (circle,

regional, national level) through the telephone.

The mobile phone has developed new services and modes of behaviour in Mali that can be explained by activities related to its development. It is seen as a means of raising and dissemination information and thus assumes great significance. It offers quick feedback from investigators. Its use has revolutionized market interaction by facilitating the successful cereal transactions: "Not only the information systems use it but also traders do the same. Its use reduces the time of the transactions. It makes available business opportunities as quickly as possible. It created some trust between the operators. The cellular (mobile phone) is not a very complicated equipment. The user can move around everywhere and at any time he can call either inside or outside to get the information," according to P. Traoré (interview with author, October 17, 2012). Although the focus of the present paper has been on the benefits, it should be mentioned that there are critical views, as well: Molony (2006 and 2008), for instance, in his work on the telephone and the agricultural market offers a critical perspective on information disseminated via the mobile phone in the context of the competitiveness and performance of agricultural markets, especially when perishable agricultural products are concerned. He interviewed a number of entrepreneurs who said they did not trust information received from the mobile phone (Molony 2006, 76).

Conclusion

ICT in the Malian context allows communication and interactions that promote the integration of markets and intra-regional trade. They also sustain the growth in intra-Africa trade. The use of the mobile phone has greatly improved the fluidity of the exchanges. A trader or a producer can give a price that is not real. The mobile phone offers the possibility of a cross check through an alternative source and helps producers to make informed decisions. Farmers need reliable information for their successful self-promotion. The use of the mobile phone allows the actors to better organize themselves and better negotiate with the producers. It has allowed them to increase their profit margin and to be able to sell their products while expanding their trading networks both inside and outside the country. Producers sell their grain to any buyer, not just to traders or consumers, deviating from the rules of trust and routine. In this case, the market is based on the games of the actors. The profits made in the sale of cereals are invested in working oxen, equipment (plows for better production), houses, education, health, motorcycles as a means of transportation, etc. Increasing a producer's income is synonymous with their social and economic promotion. Hence, the impact of the mobile phone on the prices, the incomes and the performance of small farmers is important, too, in terms of changing their social status.

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Inventing Africa: From narratives of achievement to E.U. development discourse

Manuela Boatcă[1]

Occidentalist constructions: state of the art

Social scientific discourses that connect global inequalities of income, education, life expectancy and democratic rights to cultural values and attitudes of civilizations and ethnic groups have been commonplace in development studies as well as in civilizational analysis until very recently. The latter literature, in particular, has famously pitted Puritan thrift and hard work, viewed as largely European values, against an allegedly African "distaste for work" and "suppression of individual initiative" or against a perceived Islamic fatalism and suppression of enterprise. One prominent example at the start of the 21st century were the articles collected in Samuel Huntington's co-edited volume *Culture Matters*, which claimed that "England especially offered a lesson in self-development" (Harrison and Huntington 2000, 8). They therefore rejected colonialism, dependency and racism as valid explanations for the economic situation and living conditions in most non-Western countries except the East Asian NICs.

Such discourses have for a long time been questioned by dependency theorists and are increasingly countered by postcolonial and critical race studies today. Walter Rodney's early answer to the claim of England's self-development was to point to the entanglements between development and underdevelopment paths between Europe and Africa by asking "What would have been Britain's level of development had millions of them been put to work as slaves outside of their homeland over a period of four centuries?" Had that been the case, its nearest neighbours would have been removed from the ambit of fruitful trade with Britain. After all, trade between the British Isles and places like the Baltic and the Mediterranean is unanimously considered by scholars to have been the earliest stimulus to the English economy in the late feudal and early capitalist period, even before the era of overseas expansion (Rodney 1973, 98). Such thought experiments are useful for re-inscribing the momentous transformation that was the European trade in enslaved people into the history of *both* African and European economies and societal patterns for several centuries. As a consequence, the long-standing Western imaginary that posits Europe and Africa at opposite ends on a scale of achievement, development and civilization can be traced back to an Occidentalist construction of Western uniqueness premised on

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the invention of otherness at least since the European colonial expansion in the sixteenth century and the beginning of the European trade in enslaved Africans in the Americas. The discursive construction of a singular notion of Europe in turn depends upon the silencing of the historical role of its member states and their predecessors in creating the main structures of global political and economic inequality. As Böröcz and Sarkar point out, the member states of the European Union before its "Eastern enlargement" in 2004 were "the same states that had exercised imperial rule over nearly half of the inhabitable surface of the globe outside Europe" (Böröcz and Sarkar 2005, 162) and whose colonial possessions covered almost half of the inhabited surface of the non-European world. Not only were the overseas empires of today's EU states such as Britain, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, Spain and Portugal many times larger than the current size of their territories, but the political impetus behind the emergence of the European Union has been closely linked to the loss of colonial empires after World War II.

After decolonization

The mid-20th century political and economic discourse after the administrative decolonization of many parts of Africa and Asia illustrated this Occidentalist construction particularly well. The development of the African continent played a crucial part in upholding and reconfiguring Europe's role in a postwar context. As Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson have recently revealed, the emergence of the European Economic Community as the EU's predecessor went hand in hand with an intellectual, political and institutional discourse that presupposed the transformation of the strictly national colonial projects into a joint European colonization of Africa under the telling name of "Eurafrica" (Hansen and Jonsson 2011). Upon its founding in 1957, the European Economic Community included not just Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany, but also their colonial possessions, officially referred to as "overseas countries and territories," the same label used today for the remaining colonial possessions: "they included, most importantly, Belgian Congo and French West and Equatorial Africa, whereas Algeria, which in this time was an integral part of metropolitan France, was formally integrated into the EEC yet excluded from certain provisions of the Treaty" (Hansen and Jonsson 2014, 7). Justified as a way of improving the social and economic development of the colonies and allowing Europe to posit its presence and interests in Africa as a new relationship of "interdependence," the project in fact made clear the dependence of Europe on African resources for European economic development. As stated in the 1950 Schuman declaration: "'With increased resources Europe will be able to pursue the achievement of one of its essential tasks, namely, the development of the African continent'" (as cited in Hansen and Jonsson 2014, 123).

Outlook

The full version of this paper traces the continuities of achievement and development discourses to an Occidentalist construction of Western uniqueness premised on the invention of otherness since the European colonial expansion, and zooms in on a particular moment of this construction, the mid-20th century political and economic discourse after decolonization. It aims to show how the emergence of the European Economic Community as the EU's predecessor went hand in hand with an intellectual, political and institutional discourse that presupposed the transformation of the strictly national colonial projects into a joint European colonization of Africa, and, thus, how inventing Africa in a Western European lens shaped notions of achievement and development imbued with colonial racist tropes.

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Myths of productivity in international labour standard trainings by the ILO

Katja Hericks[1]

Measuring economic growth

This paper assesses how the category of productivity is used in the context of development in Sub-Sahara Africa by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The ILO was founded in 1919. In light of very recent bloody revolutions, improving working conditions was seen as the major factor for social peace. The ILO based labour standards on the latest economic knowledge, which grew by that time in volume and importance (Speich 2011; Godarzani-Bakhtiari 2019), and implemented labour statistics as models for international comparison. In the 1940s, the ILO changed the paradigm for measuring economic growth from production to productivity (ILO 1951). Until today, labour productivity is one of the ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market. It is expressed in the simple formula "output : labour input = productivity." One advantage of the new paradigm was that it included working time and thus allowed for a different idea of the standard of living, as it now focused more on the benefits for the individual worker than on the broader national economy.

Although they also advanced to measuring productivity of sectors, branches or plants, they did not compare different branches or sectors. What appears taken for granted today was absurd back then: 'of course,' e.g. agriculture and industries were incomparable.

Widening the scope: from measurement to programmes

In the 1980s, the ILO expanded the use of the category of productivity. While until then, productivity had only been used as a category of measurement and comparison, it now became a practical claim. The ILO launched projects, programmes and trainings on raising productivity especially in micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In the ILO publications, this is ascribed to a neoliberal change, in which former allegedly autonomous national economies now were measured against their ability for global competition (Mwamadzingo 2015a; Wignaraja 2002). Also, sectors & branches now were compared and regarded as competitors in order to argue for industrialization (Luebker 2014).

In light of the ILOs mission of "promoting social justice and internationally

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recognized human and labour rights,"[2] it is not self-evident, why productivity should be of any concern for the ILO. However, when we take a look at the training programmes directed at raising productivity such as "WISE - Higher productivity and a better place to work"[3] (1988), "People and productivity" in the SEED-programme[4] (2000), "Productivity improvement and the role of trade unions" (2015), to name but a few examples, productivity is far more than – and sometimes anything but – a measurement unit or a practical claim. Instead, productivity appears as a rationalized myth. The term rationalized myth here refers to a narrative that encapsulates and discloses a "transcendental concept" (Meyer et al. 1987) such as justice, progress or equality in a digestible and understandable form. A myth appears as a description of who we are and where we stand, while simultaneously it calls to action.

In the training programmes starting with a pilot project in the Philippines, we can see how the myth has developed over time. In the 1988 WISE manual, the concept of productivity is hardly introduced, yet consistently applied to structuring the workshop and the workday. Through every step of the manual, suggestions meet both targets, the increase of productivity and labour standards. In the SEED programme, productivity is thoroughly introduced and differentiated into a 'good' long term productivity raise that is in accordance with labour standards on the one hand, and exploitative modes which are characterized as poor short term raises on the other. Thus in the SEED programme it becomes evident how labour standards and productivity are beginning to merge.

The SEED programme has a second explicit target: improving access to the market. Here productivity is seen as only one aspect of a bigger goal: "Sales generation and work-floor productivity can be treated as two parts of a large concept called 'competitiveness' or 'business performance'" (Vandenberg 2004, 16). While Vandenberg subsumes productivity and market access under a third concept, a different interpretation of productivity sets in, according to which productivity includes the relation to the market:

> Whereas traditionally, productivity is viewed mainly as an efficiency concept (...), productivity is now viewed increasingly as an efficiency and effectiveness concept, effectiveness being how the enterprise meets the dynamic needs and expectations of customers. (Tolentino 2002, iii)

The scope of productivity has been further widened over the years. In the 2015 manual for African trade unions a close connection between productivity and inclusion and sustainability is drawn (Mwamadzingo, Chinguwo 2015, 42). Productivity is here even introduced along with a new transcendental concept: "Freedom and productivity become the twin objectives of human development marked by progressive liberation of people"

2 http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/lang--en/index.htm
3 WISE stands for Work Improvements in Small Enterprises
4 SEED stands for Sustainable Employment and Economic Development.

(Mwamadzingo 2015b, 34). The quotation from a speech by an African ILO official shows clearly that the understanding that Labour Productivity enhancement would lead to overall progress is successfully established: “Improving productivity is not an end in itself, but a means to improving workers’ lives, enterprises’ sustainability, social cohesion and economic development. Continued improvement of productivity is also a condition for competitiveness and economic growth” (Chuma-Mkandawire 2014, 1).

The widened scope of the concept can be clearly seen in the manual for “WISE-R” which is an enhanced and updated version of the WISE-training that began in 2009 and focused especially on Sub-Sahara Africa. Unlike in WISE, a whole module now introduces the category of productivity, pursuing the question of how to measure and enhance it (in the ‘good’ way). At the same time, labour standards are only very loosely coupled to productivity in WISE-R or even decoupled from them: Labour standards and productivity are dealt with in different sections, yet it suggests they go hand in hand. It is thus through this myth that the trainings can convey a different message above and beyond competition and fitness to the market. By including productivity into labour standards, and labour standards into productivity, the myth changes the narratives of achievement, economy and progress to a morally and rationally legitimated discourse. Ideas such as the ‘invisible hand’ (self-regulation of the market), exploitation of cheap labour or the incompatibility of family duties with employment are pushed back and substituted through a proclaimed win-win-situation, e.g. in announcing “(t)he advantages of breast-feeding for your business” (Wise-R 2009). The new mythical narrative thereby offers new definitions for business success, entrepreneurial achievements and thus for the question who is and will be a successful entrepreneur.

Conclusion

The myth of productivity as a depiction of progress has become an unquestioned assumption in the ILO over a few decades, and it is instructive that it should be so powerfully repeated especially for African contexts. In this myth, productivity works as a specific narrative that connects economic growth with labour standards and thereby depicts and produces a particular meaning of development, i.e. it suggests that economic growth and social progress are not only compatible, but even identical.

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II. Science, politics and the public: Metrics of success

Measuring the global South against the principle of ‘achieving societies’

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This paper aims to offer some insights into the following question: Why are some countries perceived as ‘achieving’ societies and others as ‘failing’? The common understanding would answer the previous question as exposing a simplistic causal link, that is, the interconnection between economic growth and development. In this sense, McClelland already defined achieving societies as societies showing a rapid economic growth (1961, 63). Even though he also mentioned other modes of achievement, such as military, political and artistic, his main interest is on the economic perspective and its consequences, which is still today a very pressing debate. In other words, as Zukin and DiMaggio have very convincingly diagnosed, since the Great Depression the interest in the economic phenome moved to the forefront of social analysis (1990, 1).

Building on the perspective of the ‘World Polity Theory,’ this paper understands modern societies as highly structured by institutionalized rules. Those rules appear in the form of cultural theories, ideologies or prescriptions about how society should work in order to reach a collective purpose, such as justice and progress (Meyer et al. 2009, 67). The economic paradigm can be seen as one of these rules, as it offers a logical explanation to grasp social progress as a broad phenome. Though, it should not be forgotten that economic abstractions not only analyze, but also play a determinant role in constructing and categorizing social reality, which has non-negligible further consequences.

Therefore, this paper aims to give some insight about how the economic and development paradigms linked together in the 1950’s, as well as shutting some light on the consequences of this mutual dynamic. The works of historian Daniel Speich are very helpful in this sense. According to Speich, three intervened phenomena, all dating back to the interwar period, must be taken into account in analyses of the emergent narrative of achievement at the time: the rise of economic knowledge, a new understanding of the colonies and the establishment of international organizations (2014, 27).

The rise of economics and its interdependency with the development paradigm in the 1950’s

Starting in the late 19th century and gaining momentum during the 1930s, a significant growth of economic knowledge can be observed. Initially, the instrument of national income statistics was designed as a tool to render the structure of wealth in a given economy visible. It quickly became clear that shifts in the economic organization could

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lead to changes of wealth in a country (Speich 2011, 11-12). This assessment and the global economic crisis in 1929 made the pursuit of economic knowledge about stability and development urgent. In this context, the quest for a new theory became pressing. The practice of transforming the discipline of economics into a normative device for politics, and consequently of advancing a general framework for governmental action became widespread. John Maynard Keynes' academic work is a leading example of a theory that satisfied such demands (Speich Chassé 2014, 29).

During the Second World War and in its aftermath, governments of industrialized states were driven by the idea of a relationship between economy and the state and therefore put considerable effort and resources into macroeconomic statistics (22). After experimenting with statistical measuring, the US as well as many European countries turned national income accounting into a general basis for economic policy (Speich 2011, 23). Meanwhile, during the dawn of late colonialism, a new concept of colonies gained currency in the West. While the discourse of the civilizing missions had been the dominant logic of legitimizing the colonial rule before, colonized territories were now no longer seen as vast and unknown; instead, they were perceived in light of their considerable potential for economic growth. Thus, colonies began to be seen as territories in need of development, and development became one of the keywords of late colonialism (Speich Chassé 2014, 28).

Motivated by this new conceptual approach to colonies in the late 1930s, first attempts were made to transfer Western national models for measuring production and economic growth to non-industrialized countries, i.e. the colonies. If before those economies were mostly evaluated as objects of the field of Ethnology, now for the first time, they were analyzed with tools from Economics (Speich Chassé 2015, 599). However, it quickly became clear that the use of economic knowledge that had been exclusively produced by, for and in industrialized economies, was not easily adaptable on a global scale. Categories such as the household and units of measure such as money, were not universally applicable or comparable. While economists discussed and mostly rejected the idea of using economic models for global comparison, they were also confronted with a strong engagement of international organizations and therefore the complete loss of definitional authority in the field (Speich 2011, 13-18).

International organizations first appeared after the First World War as a new possible 'solution,' a means of 'civilizing' international conflicts. Even though these international organizations have not been successful in guaranteeing social peace, the implementation of an organizational structure, which started to be shaped around that time, has made considerable impact on international policy ever since. In the interest of building a platform for international cooperation, specified organs were formed, and more and more experts were integrated. Mostly, the experience of the Second World War determined the very structure of those organizations. International Organizations, essentially pushed by the Allies, used the internationalization of economic policy to optimize the

allocation of resources internationally. This was initially realized as a way to cope with the expenses of the war (Lend-Lease Act of 1941), and subsequently as a way to organize the postwar reconstructions, both organized by the allies (Speich Chassé 2014, 30-31).

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the Second World War, reconstruction was not the only concern of the international community. Instead, the prevention of global military conflicts had been the primary agenda of international organizations. The UN (as well as the International Labor Organization) regarded global economic inequality as the major possible cause for future military conflicts. Therefore, the new understanding that wealth and growth could be regulated by economic policies was very much welcomed within international organizations, because it promised a whole new field of action (Speich 2011, 23). Furthermore, supplying technical know-how for economic governance to countries of the global South promised a relatively low-cost solution to the challenges of global inequalities (21).

Consequences of the use of economic models in non-Western contexts

However, the alignment between international organizations and economic models produced an ambivalent situation: on the one hand, despite its assumed universalism, the macroeconomic perspective did not push the Western 'community' to reconsider the colonial logic of domination in fundamental terms. Instead, the Western hegemony was reproduced in the statistically-based language of economic strength and thus, legitimated with a new rationalized framework (Speich 2011, 21). Eurocentric models were imposed in contexts that were very distinct in their economic, social and cultural structures. Thus, these models, designed in and for the West, failed to properly represent realities stemming from outside of its context of origin. This can be seen in such underlying assumptions as the bread-winner model that features a housewife, a functional division of labor, remuneration systems etc. Yet, those measurements, which derive from a highly specific (Western) cultural framework, became the yardstick against which those newly compared countries were measured – and thus the latter could only fail, no matter how effective their own economic systems may have been.

On the other hand, this comparative economic model produced emancipatory effects for newly decolonized nation states. As the model regarded the nation state as the basic unit, newly formed nations were now seen as equals to already established Western states, in their autonomy and basic economic ability (Speich 2011, 24-25). The essentialist idea of *different economic abilities* – based on the assumption of different natures between so-called 'races' – was incompatible with the new universalistic models (21). Thus, decolonized countries were for the first time recognized as closed autonomous national economies in statistical abstractions.

In sum, the perception according to which global problems could be solved with the help of 'rational' solutions, a universalized idea imported from industrialized countries,

became crucial for international policy in the aftermath of the Second World War. It carried the understanding that global inequalities could be overcome with the use of apolitical and rather technical instruments, pushed forward by international cooperation. This new development paradigm allowed the international community to manage the complex heritage of colonialism under the reduced formula of economics as well as to build a course of action for global policy (Speich Chassé 2014, 37). However, while a colonialist-racist legitimation was rejected by the new economic model, it remained latent through the stabilization of the Western hegemony in the newly rationalized framework.

As I hope to have shown, the economic narrative of achievement must be seen as Western concept that is both socially and historically contingent. Designed in and for the Western context, it constructed, once it was universalized, an inferior and undeveloped Global South.

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‘Against the odds’: A reflection on institutional and black doctors’ narratives of achievement at the University of Natal’s Medical School

Vanessa Noble[1]

Introduction

In 1951, just two and a half years after the apartheid government came into power, a medical school opened in Durban in the province of Natal. Unlike other medical schools in operation in South Africa at the time, Durban’s medical school, which was funded mostly by the apartheid government, was established as a black faculty built on a racially segregated campus and administered by the historically white University of Natal (UN) (Brookes 1996). The creation of this institution was an important development. Certainly, before it was created, earlier efforts to train black students in the medical field in a racially segregated context had meant channeling women into nursing and men into shortened, sub-standard, medical aid training schemes, except for a token few who were trained at the Universities of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Cape Town (UCT) during the Second World War (Shapiro 1987; Marks 1994). The opening of the University of Natal Medical School (UNMS) thus offered a larger number of black (i.e. so-called “African,” “Indian” and “Coloured”) students the opportunity to train as fully qualified medical doctors on a segregated basis (Noble 2013).

During the apartheid period, medical school employees and students had to contend with a negative master narrative, created by white South Africans in all spheres of life, which portrayed black South Africans as culturally and intellectually inferior, deficient or limited (Dubow 1995). Indeed, this “deficit” discourse had for decades promoted a perspective of under-achievement and failure for black communities (Harper 2009). And, it was this narrative that came to influence the experiences of those who worked at the medical school, as well as those who studied there. Yet, this narrative did not go unquestioned or unchallenged. Using written sources, such as university brochures, staff and student publications and newsletters from the 1950s to 1990s, I argued in my paper that staff and students, during this period, worked to construct narratives of achievement as counter-narratives to the deficit narratives in widespread circulation at the time.

1 noblev1@ukzn.ac.za I would like to thank the organisers of the Point Sud conference “Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts,” which took place in Stellenbosch and Cape Town from 31 October to 1 November 2018 for inviting me to participate in this workshop. It allowed me the opportunity to reflect on old research data in new ways.

Staff narratives of achievement

My paper analysed several examples of written accounts produced by various deans and teaching staff (most of whom were white during the period under study), which promoted high standards-focused achievement narratives about their medical school (University of KwaZulu-Natal Archive; Gale 1976; Reid 1976). It then went on to consider why these narratives were promoted by these people. I argued that many of those employed at the medical school during the apartheid years would have been sensitive to the deficit discourse that linked black medical education with inferiority and under-achievement. This not only reflected negatively on the institution they worked for, but also on their personal reputations. Although they would have come to work at the school for various reasons, most of the staff would have bought into, and indeed, energetically promoted an image of their school as a place of high standards and positive achievement to show that they had not settled in their decisions to work at a black institution in an apartheid context.

Students' narratives of achievement

An analysis of several student publications produced during the apartheid period also highlights the construction of narratives that stressed high standards, and students' ability to achieve such standards despite their many difficulties, including racism by some staff, poor student accommodation, and sub-standard clinical training facilities (Mlisana 1995, 11-12; Mokoena 2001). For example, in 1976 an unnamed student wrote:

> We congratulate the graduates on their splendid performance, and we commend them for their courage in coming ... to a segregated medical school. To start with, there were murmurs of disapproval from many angles. But it was not long before a determined staff [and student body] convinced the world that the doctors produced here would be inferior to none [...] and the standards acquired compare with those of any doctor in the country. (University of KwaZulu-Natal Archive 1958, 6)

Similar to the school's staff, its students were aware of the societal deficit discourse in circulation about black-only educational facilities, and such statements suggest a keenness by students to undermine this negativity by creating counter-narratives that placed their school and qualifications in a positive light.

However, while some students produced counter-narratives, which placed them in alignment with the staff, others did not. Although the staff promoted narratives of achievement based on attainment of high medical educational standards, in reality, black students studied in an environment where they continued to experience racial inequalities and discrimination. This led to a high failure rate, and indeed, underachievement for many. Frustration and anger led to the development, in the late 1960s and through the 1970s of a different kind of counter-narrative that worked to undermine the deficit

narrative, but in a different way. Indeed, a Black Consciousness (BC) discourse, promoted by activists in the South African Students Organisation (SASO), which had its founding headquarters at the Durban medical students' residence in the late 1960s, worked to inspire black South Africans to develop a more positive mindset and to stand up to their oppressors in all areas of life (Noble 2013). Analyses of SASO documents from the time highlight narratives that stressed pride in one's blackness and the quest to challenge, what SASO activist, Steve Biko called white-created "false negatives," which led to the denigration of black South African identities, value systems, cultural traditions, accomplishments and histories in apartheid South Africa (Biko n/d, 1; Biko 1970/1971, 5). Over time, the BC movement's positive identity affirming, confidence boosting, cultural empowering narratives helped to conscientise many people and gave more people, including Durban medical students, the confidence to question and challenge inequalities and discriminations which negatively affected them, and which, over time, slowly led to improvements in their lives (Noble 2013).

Conclusion

This paper considered how similar high standards-focused meritocratic narratives could be produced by people who occupied different positions (i.e. student or teacher) in a particular medical educational historical context. They produced counter-narratives which were directed towards the wider deficit discourses in circulation about black students and segregated education at the time. However, further analysis also demonstrates that while staff and some students' narratives could and did align, others did not. Analysis of BC discourses produced by politically active students highlight that some students questioned the façade of high standards-linked achievement narratives in a context where inequalities produced underachievement for many. Instead, they promoted a different kind of counter-narrative that encouraged black students to question standards as well as excellence framed in "white" or "western" terms, to define achievement in their own terms, and to strive to overthrow the system that oppressed black South Africans. Indeed, black student activists promoted this latter point as their future achievement goal, which sometimes came at the expense of their educational aspirations.

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‘Universality’ and ‘particularity’ in student residences at Historically White Afrikaans Universities in South Africa. On the challenges of crafting inclusive diversity in organisational transformation

Florian Elliker[1]

Introduction

Taking the theme “narratives of achievement in African and Afroeuropean contexts” as starting point, this essay briefly presents one of the everyday life contexts that play a role in shaping narratives of achievement in South Africa: undergraduate student residences at universities. Since the transition to a democratic dispensation, the diversity of the student body of South African universities has increased considerably. This also concerns student residences, as students and university administrations alike have started to renegotiate the traditional residence cultures in the process of increasing the diversity in the residences. Not only did and does the aim consist in increasing ‘diversity,’ but in producing ‘inclusive diversity’ that enables students from all walks of life to successfully work towards what they aim to achieve. In the process, particularly students at Historically White Afrikaans Universities (HAU) face the challenge to reconsider what they regard as ‘universal’ and ‘particular.’ The essay sketches in a tentative manner how notions of the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ are intertwined with ‘narratives of achievements’ in student residences, and how both are related to the notion of ‘meritocracy.’

Considering student residences

Residences not only shape the everyday life conditions under which students pursue their studies and (partially) achieve what they aim for academically. As social worlds of their own, they constitute “tiny publics” (Fine and Harrington 2004) in which students practice how to live in (small) communities and how to negotiate political, cultural, and symbolic participation (Fine 2012). Life in these residences additionally offers the individual student ‘achievements’ in other domains than academic studies. Using this ‘opportunity,’ however, is often not a choice but is enforced, as older students actively demand incoming

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students to participate in residence-related activities. Many of the residences at HAU form sharply bounded groups with their own idiocultural infrastructure and emotionally underpinned micro-hierarchies, the latter based on the identifications *first year (student)* and *senior (student)*. Engaged in sports and cultural competitions with other residences, it is particularly the *first years* who are asked to practice for and win these competitions. *Seniors* usually restrict the *first years'* interaction and participation rights and only recognise them as full members at the beginning of their second year in residence (Elliker 2015). In terms of emotional experiences as well as time and energy investments, the first-year experience is in many ways characterised as a sacrifice for the residence, a sacrifice that students only fully 'benefit' from in their second year at the residence. The first year in a residence is bound up with working towards achievements of the *residence* – achievements that will internally reflect positively on those students who have successfully competed. As the investments of the first year students are intertwined with the residence reputation, the first year students become typically more reluctant to change the residence culture as the move into a senior status, particularly with regard to changes that concern those practices which they see as generating status for the residence and status for themselves within the residence. This renders the local idiocultures of the residences relatively resilient and thus difficult to change (Elliker 2015).

Post-apartheid transformations

The residences' social organisation and the change thereof are bound up with inequalities: historically formed in a white environment, it is not only race and ethnicity, but a variety of other aspects of the students' backgrounds (such as class, gender, sexual orientations, political orientation, and rural/urban origin) that all intersect in making the residence a better fit for some and a worse for other students. They are, in other words, places in which the relationship between inequality and difference is (re)produced (Brubaker 2015, 10–47), shaped by processes of boundary-making, although not exclusively along ethnic or racial lines (Wimmer 2013). The established cultural practices and identifications enable some (better) and prevent others (partially) to achieve what they aim for during their studies academically, but also what they are likely to achieve with regard to residence-related activities. Students disagree, however, about the value of participating in residence activities and regarding its outcomes as achievements: while some identify with these practices and with what they learn in the process, others aim to focus on their academic studies and do not want to invest their resources in residence-related activities.

Efforts to change the residences are often geared towards creating 'inclusive diversity.' This entails the transformation of residences into spaces in which a broad range of practices and identities are accepted. This reimagination of the residences' idiocultures is confronted with a contradiction that needs to be resolved over and over again: There is a certain practical 'working consensus' needed on 'how things are done' in the residence

that allows the students to live together over an extended period of time in a relatively intimate setting. Yet 'inclusive diversity' warrants as little inequality-generating 'normativity' as possible. In other words: a critical reflection on the temporary consensus entails asking how (and what type of) students are marginalised, silenced, or excluded from a range of formal and informal situations and practices because some of their practices and self-understandings are regarded as non-normative and are thus prevented from being displayed and enacted in the residence. This is particularly relevant in residences that are historically organised in ways that demand students to participate in residence-related activities and in which the internal micro-hierarchies bestow status and privileges upon those who are considered to participate frequently and 'successfully.'

In the transformation process, the *students' everyday notions* and *perceptions* of the 'universal' and 'particular' are likely to be unsettled, whereby 'universal' refers to actions and ideas that are *perceived* as widely accepted to such an extent that they seem 'fit for everybody' or just as 'it should be' (see Perry 2007). The 'particular,' in contrast, refers to practices *perceived* as typical only for a specific (sub)set of individuals.[2] Often, the students frame those practices and understandings that they see as particular as being typical for gender-, race-, ethnicity-, or nationality-related categories of identification. Students not only vary with regard to how strongly their perceptions are structured by notions of the universal and particular, but also how 'strictly' they see some phenomena as universal and particular. Conflicts arise when 'the working consensus' of the residence-internal organisation and practices is seen by some to 'fit everybody' or 'most,' while others see this consensus as something (rather) particular.

Residences in HAU have been modelled after 'Western' (in this case mainly British) traditions of student colleges, and the university organisation, the type of scholarship practiced, and research conducted have been (and remain) embedded in a largely 'Western' framework of science (thematised and criticised by students' protests in recent years). Historically, i.e. when admission to these universities was restricted to White students, HAU and their residences were environments in which all those who were identified as faculty members and students (i.e., all *academic staff*) were White. Black Africans working at the university were employed in other, non-academic domains. Thus, while the universities were working environments to which individuals of all racial categories contributed, White students and academic staff could consider the *academic* setting paradoxically as a White setting *and* as a 'universal' setting in the sense that its 'Whiteness' was rendered partially invisible: When engaged with individuals in academic roles, all of these roles were filled with (Afrikaans-speaking) White persons. The racial boundary had been drawn 'before' these daily interactions in academia, i.e. via external closure during the

2 'Universal' and 'particular' are not employed as analytical concepts but are understood as heuristic concepts that refer to what (some of) the students have *empirically* described as 'universal' and 'particular.'

admission process that prevented access to the tertiary education at these universities for all those not categorised as White. Identifying mainly in terms of professional academic roles in everyday activities at the university rendered the 'White,' i.e. particular Western or European character of the setting partially transparent or invisible – paradoxically so in a historic situation in which universities were part of reproducing White (Afrikaans) ethnicity in the context of a race formation in which Black Africans constituted the (disprivileged) majority and in which the *external, race-based closure* of many settings was widely institutionalised. In addition, this academic environment was and still is to some extent infused with universalistic perspectives that create an additional plausibility structure in the context of which even everyday practices that are not directly related to scholarship – e.g., life in student residences – could more easily be construed as part of a 'universal' way of doing things – albeit with local ethnic differences, as HAU and its residences were geared towards reproducing *Afrikaner* ethnicity (in contrast to the everyday culture of the English-speaking White population segment).

The transformation process that started with the admission of Black African students interrupted the established ways of identifying others: students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds were and are now reciprocally related to each other as members of the same relevant formal categories – in their academic roles as *students* and as *residence members* with the same rights and obligations. What could be rendered as non-problematic, taken-for-granted and thus partially transparent background in a culturally relatively homogenous setting is now (partially) framed as ethnoculturally or racially specific. This perception did and continues to have an unsettling effect in many ways. Inter alia, it questions the routine ways of how things are done in the residences. White students are perceived as profiting from the ethnocultural specificity of the residence practices as the knowledge they have acquired by being socialised in a White environment constitutes a biographical background for which the residences' cultures are a better fit than for students having grown up in other ethnocultural settings. In other words: the reciprocally related perspectives of students from ethnoculturally different backgrounds frame some of the practices as instances of 'transparent ethnicity' – as ethnically particular, but as an ethnic specificity that is unacknowledged or not perceived as such by many of those who engage in these practices.

Again paradoxically, the cultural specificity of these practices is not evident to all students and often only partially evident. Throughout the conflictual history of the transformation process, students at some universities initially refused to share residences with those whom they regarded as ethnoculturally and racially others – a conflict that was also fought in terms of reserving a specific ethnocultural space for themselves. Yet, students of the subsequent generations who have not been part of these conflicts often adopt a 'universalist' stance, despite being aware of the history of Apartheid segregation, the contemporary, still largely separated ways of life (as a result of this history), and the wide-spread common-sense assumptions about ethnic and cultural differences. It is,

however, only a fraction of White students that adopt universalising perspectives; many are aware of the ethnically specific character of (parts of) the residence cultures, partially being sensitised to this by the negotiations in the residences. Part of the faction that does initially adopt a partially universalising perspective does so unwittingly – partially due to, as mentioned above, being socialised in mono-ethnic communities and a largely Western education system, and partially due to the Western academic framework that implicitly provides plausibility to the assumption that the cultural references that are intertwined with dominant residence culture are a good fit for what is regarded as a scientific education that generates 'universal' knowledge. Others employ a universalist perspective tactically to preserve some of the practices the cherish, aiming to portray the residence culture as 'fit for everybody.'

A discourse framed by (Western) meritocratic thinking

It comes as no surprise that the scholarly discussion and everyday discourse in the field of education revolve around the notion of meritocracy and related concepts – in either critical or affirmative ways – since the major institutions in the field of education in South Africa have been modelled after typical Western and European ideals of education, meritocracy being a framework and belief system that has historically become firmly intertwined not only with the education system but with many societal domains (Young 1958). Despite masking the manifold inequalities that continue to structure everyday realities in education and work life and thus being more of a myth than a reality (McNamee 2018; Littler 2017), it continues to shape perspectives of 'achievement' and 'ascription' – both in the wider community as well as amongst students (Warikoo 2016). The concept can thus serve as an *empirical* concept to better understand how *the perspectives* of the students are (partially) organised. Within this framework, education is regarded as preparatory stage for the competition in adult life. The outcomes of this competition will be unequal but are regarded as morally deserving if they are based on performance, ability, and effort and not based on ascribed characteristics such as class, ethnicity, or gender. In other words, meritocracy is "a system in which rewards are based on supposedly fair measures of merit" (Warikoo 2016, 230).

Thus, students often talk about success in residence-related activities and their studies in ways that are framed by a meritocratic framework, attributing success and failure to the individual student's abilities and efforts. This meritocratic perspective is furthermore fostered by many student activities being organised in competitive form. Particularly sports practices are not only regarded as a leisurely, relaxing activity, but – in the context of the residences – as competitive practices that serve to generate 'achievements' for the residence and the participating individuals. While this meritocratic perspective seems to find resonance within the wider community, not all students share this, as it is evident at least to a faction of them – both from privileged and historically disadvantaged back-

grounds – that having grown up in historically privileged families brings along ascribed advantages. This awareness is also fostered by the fact that efforts to address these historically constituted disadvantages are partially based on ascriptive criteria in the context of affirmative action measures.

The ascriptive character of the privileged background is thematised differently and partially paradoxically: Concerning the relationship between Black students and White students – who constitute the majority of comparatively privileged students – the ascribed character is thematised in terms of ethnic particularity and the fit with regard to the residence culture. The differences amongst Black students and amongst White students – i.e., inequalities and differences *within* ethnic or racial categories – however, are often not perceived as constituting unfair advantages both by Black and White students alike (with the exception of those students who have visited elite colleges and who are perceived as having developed their own culture that sets them apart from the 'average' students). Amongst many White and Black students, these *intra*categorical differences are partially rendered transparent through a focus on ethnic identification that emphasises *inter*categorical difference and downplays *inter*categorical similarity, focussing more on *intra*categorical similarity than *intra*categorical difference. Thus, in the case of White students, the different *outcomes* of the many competitive activities they engage in *compared to other White students* – outcomes that are de facto also shaped by ascriptive characteristics – appear to many as being based on a 'meritocratic' competition, as the ethnic focus of identification renders differences of class and milieux (amongst other ascriptive criteria) at least partially transparent.

Conclusion

Residences act not only as contexts in which students pursue their academic goals. They constitute contexts in which students participate in cultural activities that are a better fit for some and less so for others, bestowing – amongst peers – more or less status and reputation on the individual student depending on the outcome of the participation.
The increase in ethnic and racial diversity produces several, partially paradoxical effects: Black students perceive and problematise aspects of everyday life that (some) White students have regarded as 'universal'; i.e. practices are perceived as being shaped by an ethnic 'particularity' that remained transparent to those engaging in these practices. In a context that many students think should be a 'meritocratic' competition, this constitutes an ascribed characteristic – an unfair advantage as it privileges those who have been socialised into the corresponding ethnically specific practices. Yet, the focus on ethnic identification tends to render other, *intra*categorical differences transparent, thus masking to some extent how the participation in the residence culture is shaped by class, milieu, or gender. Those involved in the transformation process and its associated negotiations thus not only face the challenge of how to build communities that enable the creation of

a common ground between students and a type of inclusive diversity that allows students to live in ways that will contribute to their personal narratives of achievement. As shown, the perceptual intersection of 'ethnicity' and 'meritocracy' produces ambivalent effects, partially masking the many inequalities (e.g., along ethnic and other lines) that shape how successful students participate in the residences. The challenge thus also consists in how to conceive of achievement and how to create contexts that enable achievement in an environment that continues to be structured by persistent intercategorical and growing intracategorical inequalities.

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Alternative narratives of achievement and Democratic Education – a model for a few?

Lena Kraus[1]

A lack of diversity

One of the criticisms Democratic Schools often face is that they are exclusive, and therefore, there is a lack of diversity in their student bodies. At first glance, this assumption seems correct, and the fees parents have to pay to send their child to a Democratic School make for an easy explanation: Democratic Schools are mostly private (fee-paying) schools. The monetary aspect certainly is a hurdle, yet, asking staff of Democratic Schools, it quickly becomes apparent that most, if not all of them, have taken measures to encourage parents who are unable to afford the fees to apply anyway, and have systems in place to make attendance affordable for all children, like bursaries or solidarity structures. Diversity and equality are central values within Democratic Education contexts. Thus, while money remains a significant barrier, I argue that it is not sufficient as the only explanation for a rather homogenous student population at Democratic Schools. Looking into concepts of achievement might yield important results with regard to additional, less obvious reasons.

Self-validation and external validation

Therefore, I conducted an explorative study to find out more about concepts of achievement in people with a clear affinity to Democratic Education. At the annual EUDEC (European Democratic Education Community) Conference, I asked 20 participants to "tell me about a situation where [they had been] very proud, and explain why." I analysed the transcripts using a QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) software. The feeling of pride proved to have different reference points and two main categories could be established: *Self-Validation* and *Validation by Others*. When the individual is the only one to validate their action(s) as being worthy of pride, they themselves, their self-concept and values are the point of reference. When they are proud because somebody else praised or recognised their action(s), the point of reference is externalised (*Validation by Others*).

The biggest main category by far was *Self-Validation*, which, considering how much autonomy is given to children through the principles of Democratic Education, might not be surprising. However, with regard to the sub-categories, both *Community* and

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Autonomy featured equally, and they were usually mentioned within the same interviews. It was not a case of people being either community-focussed or striving for autonomy, but individuals successfully incorporating both aspects into their daily lives and identities and evaluating that as an achievement. Given how community and autonomy are often discussed as mutually exclusive opposites, this is remarkable (Mayer 2016, 1460). Democratic schools seem to be communities where the individual's sense of belonging (and achievement) does not depend on conformity, meaning that students can freely express their individuality and still feel part of their community (Au 2010, 1).

Within the main category of *Self-Validation*, the biggest sub-category was *Personal Growth*. There were more mentions of this sub-category than of the other main category. This indicates that a high value is placed on learning itself within Democratic Education contexts. Equally, both the act of making a decision and the act of taking responsibility were seen as achievements within themselves.

The second main category, *External Validation*, was nevertheless well worth looking at. What this category amounts to is feeling proud because of positive feedback. Contrary to what one might expect, there was not a single mention of validation by somebody on a higher hierarchical level, be it at work or in educational settings. On the contrary, what featured most prominently was feedback given by people the interviewee had responsibility for (which usually indicates that they have the same or a lower hierarchical status than the interviewee).

Diversity, access and educational choices

What is probably most interesting with regard to the question of diversity and equal representation is that in both main categories, there were no mentions of traditional markers of achievement, such as degrees, grades, certificates, (monetary) rewards etc, which usually feature highly as objects of pride (Mueller 2016, 2; Baldridge 2014, 446).

In the following paragraphs, the connection between this and the lack of diversity at Democratic Schools will be explored. Traditional markers of achievement, such as money and material goods, rewards and grades, degrees and certificates as markers of education are easy to recognise and nearly universally accepted (Mueller 2016, 2). They serve to create capital: economic capital and social capital (Bourdieu 1997, 53).

It is easier to ignore those markers or feel less of a need to acquire (more of) them if they are already present or freely available and accessible. This could mean having enough economic capital to be able to compensate for failure, or having enough social capital for the economic capital to be less relevant (when connections have become more important than academic achievement, most often the case for the upper classes) (Bourdieu 1997, 53). If enough cultural capital (education) has been accumulated, the fact that learning takes place at school (illustrated by getting good grades) is taken for granted and thus not worth mentioning. This would apply primarily to the educated upper

middle classes, as illustrated by Deppe's study on milieu-related educational beliefs (2013, 236). The middle classes also report feeling a sense of belonging in educational contexts, making them more likely to be experimental than working class people, who reportedly feel out of place in educational settings (Hill 2016, 1288). Deppe also mentions that for the working classes and the lower middle class, education is the most important opportunity for improving one's position within the social system. Therefore, parents from said socio-economic milieus were found to attach a lot more importance (and display more controlling behaviour with regard) to their children's grades as predictive of their children's future opportunities (Deppe 2013, 236).

Individual concepts of achievement play an important role in life and educational choices: people will make those choices based on what they personally consider achievements, and make life and educational choices for themselves and people they have responsibility for (e.g. their children) depending on which path will allow them to achieve most (according to their own concept of achievement). Thus, if the narrative of achievement put forward by a certain educational model does not match the concepts of achievement of (some) members of their desired target group, it will not attract these people to the model, even if other aspects of their respective concepts of achievement are exceptionally well matched. Unintentionally, part of the target group is excluded through the narrative, even if the aspects of achievement which are omitted in the narrative are taken into account within the reality of the educational model. Because traditional markers of achievement are not seen as central or worth mentioning, they are disregarded, making it seem like they are non-existent or not catered for at Democratic Schools. Changing this and creating a more holistic narrative of achievement within Democratic Education could potentially ensure a higher degree of diversity in Democratic Education settings.

A problem of communication?

If Democratic Schools give no space to degrees and career opportunities in their narratives of achievement, they inadvertently exclude people who focus on them, for example people striving for a better position within the social system through their education. This will often apply to people from minority backgrounds, as they are disproportionally more likely to belong to those groups, for example because they are often disadvantaged in the hiring process and other interview situations (Sandhu 2018, 1; MAR 2006; Office for National Statistics 2014). For example, according to the 2011 Census, employment rates were a lot lower in people born outside the EU (59%, compared to 69% for those born in the UK) (Office for National Statistics 2014). In other words: if traditional denominators of achievement are ignored in the narratives of achievement put forward in Democratic Education contexts, these narratives can only speak to those who can afford to ignore them. The problem of the apparent exclusivity is further exacerbated by issues of rep-

resentation.[2]

Without noticing or intending to do so, Democratic Education might be excluding part of its target group, purely by how the model is presented. If Democratic Education wants to be truly inclusive, good intentions are not enough. More research will be needed to identify and eliminate those factors that make the model exclusive where it should not be. This does not mean changing educational practices, but the way they are communicated.

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2 A school known for its visible lack of diversity will be less likely to attract students from visible minority or societally less privileged groups, because they might not feel that it is a space for them. And if they do, they run the risk of carrying the burden of exceptionality (cf. Williams). Pursuing this aspect would lead beyond the scope of this essay, but research in this field is clearly needed.

Blacademics, blacademia and the representation imperative

Charlotte Williams[1]

Introduction

Debates about the representation of Black academics/professionals in the higher education workforce in the UK have emerged forcefully in recent times attracting some considerable media debate (e.g. Adams 2017, Amos 2018), in particular following work done by Bhopal (2014, 2015) and the publication of Gabriel and Tate's *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017). In the UK, the Equality Challenge Unit conducted research in 2009, 2011 and 2012 aimed at capturing the experiences and career progression of black and minority academics, returning to the field in 2015 to reveal what they called 'academic flight' and considering what needed to be done to retain black and minority academics within the UK higher, education system. The HESA statistics for 2016/17 indicated just 115 of the 19,000 professors in the UK were Black and only 25 of these women (Adams 2018). For senior leadership the figures were even more startling with the HESA data confirming that no Black academics have worked in senior management (as managers, directors and senior officials) in any British university for the three preceding years (Adams 2017). The figures indicate that universities employ more black staff as cleaners, porters and receptionists than they do as lecturers or professors.

This phenomenon has international parallels. Much attention has been given to the barriers to achievement for blacademics (my term, Williams 2014) and the knock-on effect this has in terms of promoting diversity in student populations and pedagogically, in terms of impact on the content of the curriculum and on learning experiences (e.g.: Why isn't my professor black movement). A considerable academic literature exists internationally attesting to the quantitative and qualitative issues associated with being black in academic space (inter alia Puwar 2004, Mirza 2006 for the UK, Ospina and Su 2009 for the USA, Ramohai 2014 for South Africa, Lander and Santoro 2017 for Australia). The headline evidence of the experiences of those within HEIs suggests that minority ethnic leaders and faculty feel under greater scrutiny, have to work harder to prove themselves, feel less likely to be able to exploit productive networks and are less often encouraged to go forward for or be successful in promotion applications and have doubts in relation to equality in pay
(Bhopal and Jackson 2014). At the same time, they experience a greater sense of responsibility in relation to support of black and ethnic minority students and undertake often

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unacknowledged work in relation to advancing equality and social justice issues within their institutions.

Blacademic achievement in a neo-liberal framework

The representation issue, trends and rates of appointment and other equality statistics carry significant political import and particularly so in the neo-liberal framing of the issue as 'lack of diversity.' This framing presents an all too conspicuous challenge to notions of meritocracy, to the social justice rhetoric and to the anomaly of meritocratic showcasing. The perpetuation of known barriers to advancement calls into question the liberal values underpinning an assumed meritocracy (Littler, 2017) and imply an interrogation of the notion of merit itself. Accordingly, this positivist measure of the neo-liberal ideal speaks to black success and black achievement in terms of 'climbing the rungs of the academic ladder' in against the odds discourses and deploys the tools of affirmative action as redress – i.e., deploying strategies "designed by others to promote their purposes not ours," as Delgado points out (Delgado 2009, 111). This double whammy framing provides the organising principle for blacademic achievement, manifest in such discourses/narratives as (a) "we are from a disadvantaged group and surviving against the odds," or (b) "our success stories are circumscribed by the context of politicisation of affirmative action. Accordingly, we are proffered a no-win escape from 'cultural deficit'." Cuadraz uses the concept of the 'politics of exceptionality' to describe the ways in which minority group achievement is not considered to be the norm but treated as 'exception' not only to the presumed meritocracy but also to the expectations of their own racial group. Her argument is that narratives of achievement "are subject to an array of political interests" and service the dominant paradigm of cultural deficit theory by which achievements of minority groups are understood (Cuadraz 2006, 87).

Racial representation in the academic workforce itself is no good measure of transformatory change. For example, Ramohai in the South African context argues that despite progress in terms of black representation in academic life – beyond access there is the culture of white led HEI's that produces what she calls "marginalised access" for black academics based on equity quotas (Ramohai 2014, 2979). She argues that excluding cultures in HEIs thwarts "upward mobility" as blacademics, particularly women, struggle to "climb the ladder" without support, know how, capacity to navigate (2980); are denied epistemic validation of the knowledges they bring to the institution, and are too frequently challenged on their 'content knowledge,' not being seen as competent or having the confidence to defend their academic capabilities and research focus. The qualitative and experiential dimensions of this phenomenon are well summarised by the accounts in Tate's *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017).

Meritocracy has always been raced. From the bell curve, Cyril Burt's 11+ to the Oxbridge applications scandal there exists an ongoing critique of the "unbearable white-

ness of merit" (Littler 2017, 147). It is particularly egregious in the coupling of race and gender. The evidence suggests that merit and its tools (positive action/equal opportunity) don't work in redressing discrimination, disadvantage and the poor experiences of blacademics as all too frequently the goal posts change and mutate. As Johns and Jordan succinctly put it: "If we accept that diversity brings certain merits in its train, then it seems equally acceptable to train merit in a different way" (2006, 280). That is, having systems and processes that valorise other types of contribution and accepting that traditional equal opportunities policies have failed to accommodate the known fact that "different people bring different experiences, cultural influences and perspectives to their work" (1280).

"Blacademics": Work in progress

In the full version of this paper (cf. Williams 2018), I utilise as my 'case study' the contemporary narratives of 10 black female academics as presented in the text *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017). I utilise these autoethnographic accounts to demonstrate how such narratives are vulnerable to political reading, locating them in the milieu of competing constructions of meritocracy that can be seen as both progressive and regressive, contributive and counter-narrative to the neo-liberal moment. In doing so I seek to demonstrate some of the often-overlooked complexities apparent in the scripting of narratives of achievement, some of the gaps and omissions and considerations that they throw up. In advancing of ideas of meritocracy, I argue for the need to move beyond the 'post-colonial selfie' of the illustrative storying of distress to grapple with issues of context, complexity and change and assert political advocacy. Arguably such 'overcoming the odds' parables reveals how minority members both internalise and perpetuate inherent inequalities. Their intervention paradoxically services the meritocratic ideology in reinforcing the politics of exceptionality.

In addition, they may be contributing to a quite static and homogenised picture of the academy, somewhat decontextualized from socio, legal, politico environment. Scripts are political acts, but they are also read politically and reflect particular 'moments of racial time' (Lewis 2000). Thus, we require a critical and ethical framework for locating the scripts to take us beyond the pitfall of a homogenised black positionality and beyond static portrayals of the academy. Our storying must grapple with the complex changing relational politics of the institution and beyond, must accommodate both success and failures, structure and agency, steps up, across and down the matrices of achievement and be able to present an achievement ideology that is patterned with reference to multiple accountabilities – in my view, a mesh not the ladder. Where are the spaces of possibility? How do they work? How can they be made to work? For example, Konyali (2014, 109) refers to institutional settings as 'social construction sites.' His study of elite narratives amongst minority actors in the corporate sector considers the ways in which his narrators turn 'disadvantage into advantage' (118) in a neo-liberal context that commodifies diversi-

ty and how they implicate themselves as a 'meaningful and valued social entity' (110) to a global economy.

Standing betwixt and between conceptualisation of achievement as mutuality/ collectivism or individualism (hero/failure scripts) lies creative space in which we might demonstrate how 'mutuality' works, project and legitimate alternative and compelling status and accounts of our power and authority, formulate our agency as "Catalysers" (Williams 2014) 'loose canons' (Gates Junior 1993) – as key actors in the scrabble for critical and alternative thinking, foregrounding new ways of doing, other knowledges, advancing alternatives and other ways of being. The term 'blacademic,' I suggest, signals our integration and transformation of the conventions of the academy.

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The idea of upward mobility within Black French citizenry

Abdoulaye Gueye[1]

Introduction

In his 2011 book, a Harvard law professor, Randall Kennedy, rightfully states:

> In the hearts and minds of most Americans – indeed, the overwhelming mass of African Americans – Barack Obama is the most admired person in the canon of black celebrity and accomplishment, surpassing Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and even Martin Luther King, Jr. This is so not because of Obama's policies or anything in particular that he has said or written. It is primarily because Obama climbed to the top of American electoral politics, besting along the way scores of people who were seemingly better positioned than he to win the presidency. Blacks, too, are powerfully attracted to success. (2011, 29-30)

The United States is certainly not France, and the feat of Barack Obama is still not matched by that of any black citizen in postcolonial French history. Thus far, the black French figure whose political ascent has come closest to Obama's in the past thirty years is that of Christiane Taubira. The Guyanese-born Member of French Parliament has become the very first black nominee of an established French political party – the Parti Radical de Gauche – to run for the presidential elections. She unarguably failed in her bid with only 2.32% of the electorate who voted for her (Résultats de l'élection présidentielles 2002, n.p.). Taubira has also been the first black citizen appointed to the highly coveted position of Minister of Justice, one of the most powerful ministries in the fifth Republic.

However, beyond the stark differences between the United States and France, there is still, at least, one major reason to draw a parallel between the conditions of the people of African descent in the two countries. This reason, which the quote from Randall Kennedy's book brings home is a shared aspiration of contemporary blacks from the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean: upward mobility, as a manifestation of success. Upward mobility is certainly not the monopolistic aspiration of people of African-descent. But, as shown by my ongoing research within the current generation of blacks,[2] this attraction translates in such specific terms that it sets this group of citizens apart, at least by comparison to their white counterparts.

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2 This ongoing research is about the formation of a black identity group in postcolonial France.

Conceptualizing upward mobility from a race relations perspective

Upward mobility is actually not conceived here as an intra-individual or intra-group dynamic, which accounts for the evolution of an individual from a given professional position (and its economic translation in terms of income) to a higher position within a given time frame. Sociological research including that of Claudine Attias-Donfut and François-Charles Wolff (2009) has sufficiently documented this approach of upward mobility as an intra-group dynamic by highlighting immigrant parents' anxiety to see their progeny attain a socially better valued professional position than their own. However, they fail to account for effects of generation, of "raising expectations"[3] and of the sociopolitical transformation of a group itself on its conception of upward mobility.

In the contemporary demographic segment that I have studied, composed of Afro-descendant activists born and raised for most of them in France, or established in this country since their late teenage years, upward mobility has endorsed a novel meaning. It has become the thermometer of the purported color-blindness of postcolonial France, and therefore is defined from a race relations perspective. More precisely, the advancement of people of African-descent in the professional sector serves as the yardstick of blacks' ascension to "occupational prestige," to borrow from Coxon and Jones (1978). In these authors' view, "occupational prestige" consists in a heterogenous set of positions and occupations that stand out because of the social power they contain and the high visibility they have gained in society. To a large extent, the series of occupations which Charles Wright Mills listed in his *The Power Elite* (1959) serve as signifiers of occupational prestige.

Notwithstanding the inspirational value of the Coxon and Jones' definition of "occupational prestige," a close examination of black French's discourses about their upward mobility shed light on the racial dimension of "occupational prestige," in racially diverse society. Indeed, while naming the list of occupations they strive to open up to French citizens of African descent, black activists infer quite clearly the equation of whiteness and "occupational prestige." The social standing of an occupation results from its monopoly by people of white ancestry – and *mutatis mutandis* the exclusion of blacks (and other racial minorities) from it. An occupation is deemed prestigious as long as phenotypical characteristics thwart the significance of talent and professional credentials and therefore

3 On the effects of "rising expectations" on upward mobility, see William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, p.108. This African American scholar argues that within approximatively three generations blacks have developed a negative attitude towards menial jobs: "To some extent, this change in attitude is related to a revolution of rising expectations, not only for the black poor, but for all citizens of America – expectations generated by economic progress and by the democratic welfare state's official recognition of human suffering. Moreover, many of the black poor have internalized the values emanating from the civil rights and black protest movements, values which promote black pride, and explicitly reject the view that disadvantaged minorities should content with a system of unequal rewards."

turns white skin color as the *master criterion* of qualification.[4] By this, I mean, along the lines of argument posed by Everett Cherrington Hughes who used the concept of "master status-determining trait" (1945, 357), that along many other objective criteria of evaluation of qualification, whiteness is singled as the most reliable index within a context of interracial competition.

Worthy professions are those monopolized by whites

The discourses of black activists in the past twenty years are rife with demands of which the most consensual among organizations of African-descendants are the appointment of black primetime TV anchors, black ambassadors, and black prefects – the prefect is the highest representative of the central administration in a region or a department – and the selection of black actors to play the roles of a physician or police chief detective in movies. The commonality of these characters is certainly not the level of power supposedly inherent to their functions. Whereas the prefect has power upon citizens, the journalist and the film actor could claim at best only some influence on the viewers. These characters' common attribute is rather their embodiment of professions that are undoubtedly coveted with social prestige but more importantly mostly monopolized by whites. In the archival record of postcolonial France, until the inception of the black activism, these occupations were filled by whites, and consequently almost black-free. Their attractivity and consideration as yardstick of upward mobility reside therefore in this racial exclusiveness.

For instance, this analytical intuition is all the more groundbreaking that one parallels black activists' investment in the appointment of black newscasters and their disinterest in occupation of high social visibility and sometimes equal influence as that of a football player:

> I have nothing against football players, said one of the most prominent black activists I interviewed. But we should resist the desire of our children to become football players. We want them to get the same good jobs as those white kids, to play great characters in good movies, to present the news on TV. That's it.

As indicated by the composition of the 2018 French national football team characterized by a disproportionate presence of black players in the light of the estimate of the popula-

4 The subjective subordination of professional prestige to criteria totally independent from professional qualification extends beyond the realm of race. It is also observed in the realm of gender. In a controversial interview, Columbia University professor of literature, Antoine Compagnon,stated that the high inclusion of women in the teaching profession has ended up downgrading this profession ["La feminisation massive de ce métier [l'enseignement] a achevé de le déclasser." One may argue with the wording of the statement, nevertheless quantities of theoretical studies and empirical facts seem to sustain it validity, among these studies the works by Margarita Torre (2018), Pierre Bourdieu (2010) and Ruth Milkman (1987). To this extent, the virulent reaction against the content of his article seems unfathomable. See Antoine Compagnon interviewed by Marie-Estelle Pech, "Professeur, un métier sans évolution," in *Le Figaro*, 6 January 2014.

tion of black adults which amounts to approximately 5% of the French population[5] (CRAN 2007, n.p.), one may infer from this excerpt that football player is not a coveted profession because it is already an integrated sector. Yet two analytical elements are worth taking into consideration in order to better assess this excerpt. On the one hand, given the high visibility of professional football players featured on television screens at least on average once a week; and the high income earned by these professionals, football player should still remain a well-coveted profession for the black citizenry by black activists. On the other hand, despite their undeniable monopolization of occupations such as CEO of large public and private firms, or newscasters, or movie actors, white French are still striving to keep these occupations open for their progeny or for themselves. What therefore could explain black activists' rejection of their progeny's aspiration to the occupation of football player – parallel to white French's endeavor to retain their presence in the aforementioned occupations – is not simply the social visibility and the prestige (measured in terms of economic gain or public influence) associated with these professions. Ultimately the synonymy of an occupation with whiteness determines the choice of blacks. The presence in whatever occupation whites covet is evidence of social success and mobility in the worldview of black activists.

Summary

For the black French citizenry, upward mobility is not reflected primarily in the increasing financial return or the social influence that a profession guarantees. It is measured by blacks' access to professions monopolized by whites. White exclusiveness, therefore, determines the value of a profession, and has generated consequently the conflation of professional prestige and whiteness in the worldview of black French.

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5 For more analysis of the survey results, see Abdoulaye Gueye, "Breaking the Silence: The Emergence of a Black Collective Voice in France," *DuBois Review* 7(1), 2010.

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African achievers, structural barriers and 'The End of AIDS'

Mandisa M. Mbali[1]

Introduction

This paper explores three interrelated phenomena in relation to achievement in "ending" AIDS.[2] Firstly, it must be acknowledged that AIDS has, without doubt, been one of the worst health catastrophes ever to face the African continent as a whole. It has, however, also enabled some Africans to obtain global political recognition, to realise professional ambitions, to obtain upward mobility and to promote the future of science on the continent. Secondly, AIDS leadership, ambition and achievement are hegemonically viewed through the lens of 'ending' AIDS through technofixes and patient/community anti-retroviral (ARV) adherence. Thirdly, it makes the case that in a neoliberal context, it must be recognised that there are structural realities limiting the advancement of AIDS-related science and the capabilities of people living with, and affected by, HIV to end the pandemic. It is in this context that the socio-economic injustice which perpetuates the continued spread of HIV and ongoing AIDS-related death is occluded by heroic individualised narratives of the successful African scientist and the responsible, self-governing, resilient AIDS activist-leader.

The "End of AIDS" narrative and the ongoing pandemic

It has become common for intergovernmental organisations and scientists to refer to an 'end of AIDS' (*The Economist* 2014; Lancet HIV 2015; UNAIDS 2014). There is, however, a real risk that an accomplishment which is admirable and a conceivable future goal could be seen by important actors to be closer than it actually is.

To examine some recent statistics, according to UNAIDS, in 2017 globally, there were 36.9 million people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA); only 21.7 million of whom were on anti-retrovirals (ARVs); and, around the world 940 000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses (UNAIDS 2018).[3] In 2017, in eastern and southern Africa, there were 19.6 million PLWHA (the majority of those living with the disease globally); only 12.9 mil of PLWHA in the region were on treatment; 380 000 people in the region died from AIDS-re-

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2 By putting the "End of AIDS" in inverted commas, I am not expressing scepticism about it being medically possible, but rather concern about certain dominant – socially constructed – narratives about how to go about it.

3 The 2018 report contains this data from 2017.

lated illnesses; and, an estimated 800 000 people became HIV-positive (UNAIDS 2018).[4]

The persistence of the AIDS epidemic must be understood as a product of historical and contemporary social injustices. In southern Africa, social drivers of HIV incidence include phenomena such as: the migrant labour system; high female unemployment and sexism, which are linked to multiple, concurrent sexual relationships, many of which are transactional in nature; and, homo- and trans-phobia.

There are now an array of HIV prevention technologies which can be deployed to end new HIV infections. One of these is Truvada, which can be used for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). For PrEP to work, a person must take Truvada daily in order to radically reduce their chances of acquiring HIV. PrEP has been hailed as an important advance in terms of HIV prevention, especially as regards "key populations" (including MSM and transgender people). In order for it to be effective, people who wish to take it should, ideally, also be tested for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in addition to regular HIV testing, and this means that health facilities providing the intervention must be "safe spaces" for those who wish to use this prevention method to discuss their sexual health. Unfortunately, universal access to PrEP has not been realised, as African LGBTIQ NGOs have pointed out (AVAC 2016). In Africa, a key barrier to LGBTIQ people being able to access ARVs for PrEP is the ongoing criminalisation of same-sex sexuality.

There are social and structural barriers to people taking ARVs such as the high prices of drugs and underfunding of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS TB and Malaria (GFATM). In such a neoliberal climate, there are artificial constraints on funding for AIDS programmes in Africa. This provides the grounds for the unethical rationing for health resources to become the norm. To be more precise, in such a context, healthy people who desire to take PrEP (to prevent HIV acquisition) are potentially competing against PLWHA for access to the drugs, which they need to stay alive.

AIDS leadership and achievement

Global recognition of African activists' and scientists' leadership in "ending" AIDS has been refracted through the prism of transnational media, corporations, international scientific organisations and multilateral institutions. One can state this while not bringing into question *both* the importance of the work of scientists aiming to develop a vaccine or functional cure *and* the principled and brave work of African AIDS activists who have pressed for universal access to HIV treatment.

Instead, we must critically examine the modalities of media production, corporate marketing (Nike [RED], which is discussed below) and branding and political messaging (by the UN and donors) around the end of AIDS in an African context. As we shall see,

[4] This report is also referred to in note 3 and it contains this data from 2017.

the dominant hero-driven, "techno-fix" framing of the "end of AIDS" obscures the ways in which socio-economic injustice drives new HIV infections and AIDS deaths.

The idea of "ending" AIDS is, essentially, premised on the universal adoption of a range of biomedical interventions and the African scientist-doctors who have been most widely recognised in Western media have been those promoting these approaches. For instance, in an article published by *The Economist* on the 2014 Melbourne International AIDS Conference entitled "Is the End in Sight?," it was relayed that that Salim Abdool Karim had outlined a range of methods which could be used to substantially reduce new HIV infections, including: counselling and consistent and correct use of condoms; voluntary male medical circumcision; and "treatment as prevention" (*The Economist* 2014). Unsurprisingly, the article failed to mention the challenges facing physicians, nurses, community health workers and those affected by, and living with, HIV in implementing these measures. In particular, we must note here its silences around the reasons for the high price of Truvada (long inflexible patents) or the ways in which HIV services are severely impaired by health systems crises in African countries (such as shortages of health care workers and the imposition of user fees).

Abdool Karim is undoubtably an admirable, highly accomplished scientist, who agrees with the need to address the structural barriers to ending AIDS. He is, indeed, a major scientific leader in Africa and the worlds of medicine and public health globally. A study authored by Quarraisha Abdool Karim and himself along with other collaborators entitled the CAPRISA 004 study showed that Tenofovir gel applied vaginally before and after sex could reduce HIV incidence by 39% (Abdool Karim et al. 2010). When Quarraisha Abdool Karim presented the results of the study she received a rare standing ovation at the 18th International AIDS Conference, which is organised by the International AIDS Society (IAS) in 2010 (NAM AIDS Map 2010). Salim Abdool Karim is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards including one from The World Academy of Science (TWAS 2018).

However, the structural barriers to scientific AIDS innovations being implemented on the ground is indicated by another trial called VOICE where women were to either use the Tenofovir gel or an ARV tablet (tenofovir or Truvada) daily faltered as most of the participants could not adhere to taking either the gel, or the drug, daily (Marrazzo et al. 2015). This is an example of the ways in which there are socio-economic barriers to health care interventions being rolled-out on the ground: these include the various reasons why patients don't take drugs even when they are rendered readily available. Doctors, nurses, and community health workers at the 'coalface' of providing ARVs need to also be provided with a platform to highlight their work and the socio-economic and health systems reasons hindering it.

The celebrity or 'captured' AIDS activist

We must situate our critique of narratives of the heroic, individual AIDS activist in a context where global media coverage of AIDS is disproportionately dominated by celebrity humanitarianism and corporate "compassionate" brands (Richey and Ponte 2011). For instance, Harry, the Duke of Sussex (a British royal family member), receives far more international media coverage for the work of his AIDS NGO Sentebale than the more 'mundane' work of NGOs like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). It is certainly for this reason that the International AIDS Society heavily promotes celebrity humanitarians' participation in their international AIDS conferences (IAS 2018).

In the case of corporate "compassionate" branding/marketing, Kenworthy et al. have critiqued the (NIKE) RED "Write the Future," which provides a vision of the End of AIDS which avoids a discussion of the structural injustices underpinning new HIV infections and AIDS deaths (2017). By way of description, in the advertisement, school children are taught a lesson on the end of AIDS as driven by patients dutifully taking ARVs, sports stars (including Ivorian football player Didier Drogba) tweeting about "ending AIDS" and, of course, people buying their sports shoes. Kenworthy et al. have argued that dominant "end of AIDS" discursive frames "have material and financial consequences [...] [including] a general avoidance of discussions about long-term financial commitments by donors and governments to comprehensive treatment, health systems building, and patient-centred health modalities" (2017).

An interesting point to make here is that through such initiatives, AIDS has become a site of brand-building, the collection of moral legitimacy and legacy-building for *African* celebrities (such as Drogba). So, we cannot resort to easy dichotomies of "Great white saviour/celebrity" and passive African recipient: African celebrities also use the "end of AIDS" narrative to build their own brands. When one examines "the AIDS world" in the context of dominant corporate brandings and framings of the issue, it becomes clear that there is social contestation over who, in fact, is an AIDS activist. The malleability of the term enables people with a wide range of agendas to receive social recognition.

Few Africans feature among those recognised by powerful media outlets based in the global North as "leading" activists. For instance, a 2016 article in *Esquire* magazine which highlighted "13 Faces of AIDS Activism" focusing on "some of the most prominent people, living and dead, with the most impact in the history of AIDS" only mentioned Zackie Achmat alongside 10 Americans (such as Liz Taylor and Magic Johnson), one Irishman (Bono) and one British person (Elton John) (Firger 2016). Mentioning the media celebration of Achmat's achievements does not imply a critique of the man himself, merely the representation of him as the *sole* important African AIDS activist in the history of the pandemic. Achmat was an important founder, spokesperson and leader of the TAC in its first decade. The TAC was, in turn, vital in pushing for a drastic expansion in ARVs

provision in both South Africa and developing countries around the world.

Recently, as activists (many of whom have worked with Achmat) have considered barriers to the "end of AIDS," they have also described what might be termed as the end of radical and high-impact AIDS activism. An interesting recent phenomenon which has emerged is activists' critiques of those deemed to have been 'captured' by the desire to accumulate wealth through developing networks of patronage in the "AIDS world." The idea of their being an "AIDS world" made up of UNAIDS, international donors, researchers, and NGOs is nothing new.[5] What is more recent is the idea of a reduction in the radicalism of transnational AIDS activism.

Veteran AIDS activists such as Vuyiseka Dubula and Sipho Mthathi (both formerly of the TAC) have critiqued some activists as having become self-serving and comfortable in their donor-funded jobs (Spotlight 2018).[6] Here we see a critique of AIDS activism being used as a site of accumulation and the obtainment of a middle-class social status. In sum, it has been argued that

> Some say that the civil society AIDS response is 'captured' by donor money and agendas, in other words the new 'activists' are those who fly business class to New York, Geneva and Moscow, speak sweetly at roundtables, shout a few Amandlas and board their flights back home to their donor funded jobs. (Spotlight 2018, 1)[7]

Unsurprisingly, given the relatively small number of AIDS activists, they do not name exactly who is the object of their critique, however, advocacy as a site of individual "success" is clearly a site of reflection and tension. One element of this debate is generational in nature, so, for example, it has involved older AIDS activists reflecting on their own legacies and how to guide younger activists.

The structural realities behind the continuation of AIDS

While leading AIDS doctors/scientists and AIDS activists are often treated as celebrities, less international media attention has focused on the reasons why some people living with HIV cannot take their drugs consistently or effectively. Mark Heywood, a prominent South African AIDS and social justice activist has argued that UNAIDS had yet to discover that there was "elephantine truth hiding in the room next door": the reality that without dealing with social injustices and inequalities and the "real social determinants of HIV and AIDS," progress in arresting the epidemic will, eventually, stall (2016).

An example proffered by Heywood in this article is that of the link between

5 The idea emerged from key informant interviews I conducted with AIDS activists who were actively campaigning on the epidemic in the 1990s and early 2000s (Mbali 2013).
6 They are quoted in this article, which is a collection of excerpts from interviews with key activists.
7 This quote is derived from the introductory paragraph of same article referred to in note 6 above.

unequal access to quality education and the incidence of HIV and teenage pregnancy in young women in secondary schools in South Africa. Per capita expenditure in Limpopo, a province wracked by poverty and corruption, is R1 117 per annum (less than 80 USD) whereas that spend in one private school in Johannesburg is in the region of R200 000 (or 14 285 USD per annum). In poor schools, HIV and teenage pregnancy exist at high levels; by contrast, in rich schools, both are practically non-existent.

A further instance of this type of critique is that levelled by MSF doctor-activist Eric Goemaere. He has argued that the much more effective roll-outs of ARVs have had the consequence of reducing death rates, however, those who continue to die are mostly those who develop drug resistance or interrupt their treatment (Spotlight 2018, 2-3). Goemaere has gone on to highlight the fact that these "defaulters" face a new kind of AIDS-related stigma, whereby they are blamed for their own AIDS-related deaths (Spotlight 2018, 3). There are a myriad reasons why people interrupt their HIV treatment: there are frequently drug stockouts in South Africa; it is expensive to afford public transport to attend clinics and hospitals; some patients move unexpectedly; some have mental health issues (including drug dependence) or major social problems such as homelessness or gender-based violence against women; and, some face trans- and homophobia.

Measuring whether AIDS is "ending" requires PLWHA to be counted. They are counted through testing, but not all of them want, or are able, to be tested for HIV. For instance, in eastern and southern Africa, 19% of PLWHA do not know their HIV status (UNAIDS 2018, 27). Are those who do not want to be tested for HIV passively refusing to "end AIDS"? In the "AIDS world" there is a danger that they could be presented as the exact symbolic opposite of the brave AIDS activist living with HIV who successfully adheres to treatment. Without careful reflection on the risks of further stigmatising PLWHA, there is a real risk that some of them could be described as those who stand in the way of reaching the UNAIDS 90-90-90 target by 2020 (UNAIDS 2014).[8]

Conclusion

Individual African activists and scientists have played a critical role in reversing the tide of the AIDS epidemic on the continent. In collaboration with their colleagues from the global North, African scientists have shown that from a technical, scientific stand-point "ending AIDS" is feasible. The plaudits received by scientists such as Salim Abdool Karim and activists such as Zackie Achmat are richly deserved. Dominant understandings of AIDS leadership are, however, filtered through the prism of the transnational media, corporations, international scientific organisations such as the IAS and multilateral institutions such

8 The 90-90-90 UNAIDS target is for 90% of PLWHA to be tested (diagnosed), 90% of those placed on ARVs, and 90% of those on ARVs to be virally suppressed.

as UNAIDS. Seasoned AIDS activists with a focus on Africa have recently expressed a concern that the radical content of advocacy on the pandemic may be being hollowed-out and being replaced with donor-driven and accumulation-focused "activism." Similarly, they have drawn our attention to the structural realities behind the ongoing pandemic, including socio-economic injustices. Doctor-activists on the ground who advocate for their patients' right to access to health care have also cautioned us against the further stigmatisation of those PLWHA who have interrupted their ARV treatment for socio-economic reasons. Ending new HIV infections and AIDS deaths is a collective, global undertaking. In the "AIDS world" it must be emphasized that leadership in ending the pandemic must go beyond the work of influential individuals: in each affected country, it will require society-wide leadership, including social movement strengthening, fundamental health systems restructuring and serious efforts to address socio-economic inequality.

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III. Narratives of form/ation: Achievement in literature and the arts

Recognition and the satirization of achievement in African conceptual poetry: The case of Nana Awere Damoah's *My Book of #GHCoats*

Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang[1]

Introduction

Nana Awere Damoah is a Ghanaian writer and poet with a large following on Facebook, where he operates an active account. As by 2013 he had attained the 5,000 friends limit allowed on Facebook and had more than 1,400 followers. In November 2013, he posted on Facebook: "'Never introduce your child to the delights of the tilapia head until he or she is old enough to buy for himself or herself. ~ Abraham Lincoln" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 10).[2] The disjunction between the modification of a Ghanaian proverb and its attribution to an American president triggered attention among Damoah's Facebook crowd; other users subsequently joined in to either make comments under his post or make similar standalone posts. These fictional quotes went viral among Ghanaian Facebook users, with posts such as "'Fermented sobolo never got anyone drunk. ~ A young Angela Merkel at the 1972 Oktoberfest," (*#GHCoats* 2013, 12) and "He who eats jollof with stew has trust issues. ~ Confucius" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 15). Eventually, Damoah compiled the quotes into *My Book of #GHCoats*, which due to its nature, is an example of conceptual poetry.[3]

Conceptual poetry

Conceptual poetry is typically called an act of "uncreative writing," as practitioners aim for fidelity to their source material to the detriment of innovation.[4] While this strategy elicits questions related to intent, plagiarism, originality, and ownership, there can also be focus on the nature of the constituent information.[5] In a case like *#GHCoats*, the mere act of using well-known names as sources for the quotes means that recognition and familiarity

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2 All material quoted from the text are unedited to preserve their original form.

3 In a larger piece forthcoming in *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, I explain into detail the context that informed the evolution of *My Book of #GHCoats* from Facebook phenomenon into e-book.

4 For introductory material to conceptual poetry, see the introductions to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith.

5 As Jacquelyn Ardam notes, scholarship on conceptual poetry is "more focused on the means of the production of conceptual writing – on writers' intentions and techniques – than on its formal properties or reception by readers" (2014, 134). While Ardham attempts to prove the possibility of a lexical analysis, this paper focuses on content analysis.

inform choice, which leads to an immortalization of the personalities involved. And yet, this form of achievement is not necessarily desirable because of the way in which these personalities are associated with the types of quotes in the text.

Satire and achievement in *#GHCoats*

Due to the heavy reliance on humor, sarcasm, mockery, and wit – all of which are traits of satire – I argue that *#GHCoats* involves a satirization of achievement that is done to overturn power structures that are established through the choice of attribution. In other words, by choosing these well-known names on the one hand, there seems to be acknowledgement of the importance of the personalities; however, by mocking them on the other hand, *#GHCoats* suggests that the creators of the quotes are displacing and dismantling the power structures by reducing these public personalities to ridicule, a major component of satire.[6]

In accepting Juvenal's classic interpretation of satire as open to "whatever men do," the critic Dustin Griffin processes satire as "unruly, various," and materializing in "many different forms" (1994, 4). He links the nebulous nature of satire to the fact that it is not a "genre"; instead it functions as a "mode" or "procedure" (4). The absence of a static definition in favor of a process, while precluding a comprehensive and unified theory, does not prohibit the ability to offer a set of critical perspectives. Griffin is therefore able to examine different types of satire in diverse contexts. For the purposes of this paper, satire is also understood as multifarious; however, when restricted to the realm of the social and political, satire works within parameters where elements of mockery, irony, ridicule, and humor intersect to lower the agency of powerful figures. These connections are highlighted in *#GHCoats* through a close reading of social and political commentary in the quotes, especially when enhanced through an explanation of context, allowing for a traversal of thematic, stylistic, and structural concerns.

Commentary on social matters such as marriage is immediately apparent in "A real trap is when a wife offers the last meat in the soup she is saving to the husband. ~ Pope John Paul II… [well, I guess that's why he became a priest instead]" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 8). On one level, there is the obvious attempt at humor in justifying the choice of the Pope to remain celibate and head the Catholic church, rather than fall victim to possible marriage shenanigans; on another level, the quote also considers the agency that a wife is traditionally expected to possess in the Ghanaian domestic space. While the convention of placing a woman in the kitchen implies that her position in the public sphere is tenuous,

6 It must be noted in any case that not all of the quotes are attributions to well-known personalities. The constituent quotes fall under the following categorizations: fictional quotes misattributed to famous people; real/modified quotes misattributed to a well-known person; proverbs misattributed to a famous person; and common Ghanaian parlance misattributed to famous names.

on the other hand she can utilize the power relations within the private sphere to her advantage.[7] Attaching the quote to the Pope not only ironically subsumes the powerful religious figure under the institution of marriage; it also questions the motive behind the early decisions that eventually made him a powerful world figure.

Beyond the domestic space, marriage and romantic relationships are satirized in a political context through quotes like: "Bortos watching and admiring whilst your wife or girlfriend is around you is not for the faint at heart— Sarkozy 2009, to Obama at G8 summit)" (*#GHCoats* 2013, 23). "Bortos" is Ghanaian slang for "buttocks," and phonetically gestures to the lack of consonant endings in certain varieties of Ghanaian English. More to the point, the quote on a thematic level mocks the tendency of men to leer at (and thence sexualize) women's bodies while creating a binary between the woman whose body is looked at and the woman whose husband does the watching; on a contextual level the quote directly alludes to a viral picture of the American president Barak Obama appearing to ogle Mayara Tavarez, a 17 year old Brazilian girl, in the presence of his French counterpart Nicholas Sarkozy. Again, then, two powerful world leaders are positioned as lacking agency due to the fear of being surveilled while surveilling. Subsuming the male gaze under the female gaze thus questions the gendered power relations. These two examples were just a couple among many of which achieved similar effects.

Even though in an interview Damoah pointed out that the contributions were essentially meant for fun purposes, these quotes also function as a post-colonial rewriting of the agency and wisdom of primarily Western authors and other such figures of authority.[8] Especially because these authors include powerful individuals like leaders of worldwide religious bodies and world leaders, satire is effective as it displaces their agency through mockery and unfamiliarity. As mentioned previously, the major source of humor was intended to be the ironical juxtaposition of familiar names with quotes that they were not typically associated with. Similar to their local counterparts, such rewriting speaks to re-imaginations of authority on the one hand, and familiarity on the other hand. The use of these authors thus serves as a theoretical bridge of access in terms of power relations, which are dispersed and spectral especially since the contributors to the volume were 51 in total.

Transposing these quotes to the e-book from Facebook subverts norms and expectations by taking the quotes away from its original environment – which (like typical social media platforms) invites people to self-style by reflecting a norm of being in the

7 In Ghana, the woman of a household is typically expected to cook – multiple proverbs, songs, and folktales from different ethnic groups all over the country buttress this gendered expectation; this quote questions the supposed resultant weakness, as the woman's control over the preparation of food in the house provides her leverage over her husband and deepens male anxiety.

8 There were many Ghanaian figures of authority such as heads of state, mayors, and local politicians who experienced similar treatment as the ones chosen for this paper.

world through the perception of exercising agency over their social media profiles. This ontological construction of achievement is displaced, as the users' names are uprooted from the quotes to a prefatory page, leaving the quotes in the main body of the work. These users are thus no longer at par with the personalities whose voices they appropriate. Recognition is, as a result, focused more on the personalities associated with the quotes than with the contributors.

Conclusion: Facebook and the power of creative expression

With social media gaining popularity across the continent, portals such as Facebook have become crucial to understanding the potential spread of new forms of creative expression. Facebook usage in Ghana for instance has grown exponentially since its creation in 2007, off the back of an increase in internet access across the African continent (Africa Internet Users, 2019 Population and Facebook Statistics 2019).[9] As a result, various demographics can utilize the space to various ends, and there are examples of Africans such as Egyptians, South Africans, Ghanaians, Kenyans, and Nigerians using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as spaces for poetic expression (Adenekan 2014; Santana 2018; Hosny 2018; Arenberg 2016). While these examples tend to follow conventional or traditionally African poetic forms, *#GHCoats* breaks new ground via its use of conceptual poetry, which is not common across the continent.[10]

Through the lifting of Facebook quotes into *#GHCoats*, Damoah pushes the personalities in unfamiliar settings and contexts to question what it means to be recognized in a satirical environment. Due to this action, achievement in *#GHCoats* is connected to vulnerability, as the visibility of these public personalities makes them liable to be treated in ways that appears to give these African social media users agency by appropriating voice. Social media thus becomes a vehicle that gives an impression of the democratization of power relations, even though social media is not a neutral ground – Facebook as a portal is a site of contested and commercialized mores with political undertones that reflect and sometimes magnify the inequality in the "real world."

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9 According to Internet World Stats, internet usage grew in Kenya (from 0.7% in 2000 to 83.0% in 2019); in Nigeria (from 0.1% in 2000 to 55.5% in 2019); in Ghana (from 0.2% in 2000 to 33.6% in 2019); Botswana (from 0.3% in 2000 to 38.9% in 2019); and in South Africa (from 5.5% in 2000 to 53.7% in 2019). The same website pegs Ghana's Facebook users at 4.9 million by December 2017.
10 *#GHCoats* is arguably the first example of conceptual poetry in Africa.

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Against triumphalism: Mashingaidze Gomo's Pan-Africanist concept of madness

Ruby Magosvongwe[1]

Introduction

The term madness is used in multiple ways in diverse cultural contexts. One striking continuum, however, is that across these contexts it is typically used as the opposite of achievement. Achievement relies on a set of norms within which one's success can be measured. A focus on madness is a focus on a form that challenges norms and normative orders. In what follows, I want to explore Shona ideas of madness and Mashingaidze Gomo's engagement with madness as counter discourses to imposed colonial systems of order and valorisation. I will argue that Mashingaidze Gomo appropriates the double-barrelled 'fine madness' of literary creativity that his text *A Fine Madness* is, exposing triumphalism embedded in the agency of self-narration and self-definition. His philosophically-charged and metaphoric narrative rides on ethnographically inherited canons regarding what 'madness' means and entails in the African-Shona worldview. He engages the multiple indigenous metaphoric and ethnographic interpretations of 'madness' to excavate distilled experiential knowledge and thus extrapolate meaning from the foreign-induced bombardments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and privation of her Black progeny. Using the DRC experiences, Gomo's depictions project a problem-stricken Africa embroiled in violence. Afrofuturism and Afrotriumphalism prisms buttress auto-ethnographic readings that expose the contradictions, inconsistences and achievements in Gomo's text. To his credit, Gomo's radicalism, manifest in his concept of 'madness,' offers an "antithesis of European reason" (Newell 2008, 483) that other 'madness' scholars evade when they engage in colonial and post-colonial discourses on Africa.

Madness as a theme and trope in Zimbabwean literature

Madness is not a new theme in Zimbabwean Literature. In *Mapenzi(*Madmen), Ignatius Mabasa explores lack of judgement, foolishness and amnesia among the bursting township populace, wooing unwarranted social discord. Shimmer Chinodya's *Chairman of Fools* ethnographically explores the 'logic of madness' using an African family setting, partially demystifying 'madness.' On Marechera's alleged 'madness,' or more precisely schizophre-

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nia, Veit-Wild argues that "the question of whether Marechera was clinically 'mad' or not is not important for understanding his work [...] but should be regarded instead as possessing extraordinary powers of insight and imagination" (2006, 60). On Black Nationalism and land, Chennells (2005) concurs with Lessing that the black Southern Rhodesian population cannot all be mad. British colonial psychiatry characterises Gikuyu and Mau Mau resistance to land dispossession as "mania" (Mahone 2006: 246) and "psychotic delusions" (Mahone 2006, 249).

Mahone and Newell confirm the mismatch of agendas on defining 'madness,' anchoring what Gomo examines. Misinformation used by colonial psychiatry to dismiss African struggles to recover lost lands and attendant heritage compounds 'madness' scholarship on Africa. Gomo ethno-anthropologically interrogates multidimensional angles of privation and exclusions underpinning madness and irrationality that see Africans as a shadow of their real worth. Therefore, an Afrofuturist and Afrotriumphalist prism appears apt for an examination of Gomo's depictions of 'distilled African madness.' The admission that 'madness' in Africa signals "an individual's privileged access to an intangible, non-human logic [...] can be seen as a positive instability" (Newell 2008, 484). Nevertheless, psycho-socially, 'madness' has a delinquent stigma, making it exclusionary and undesirable, generally tied up with the schizoid. Yet, among the Shona, 'madness' as a trope is richly varied. Meaning can only be achieved and gleaned from the undergirding ethnographic context. Philosophically, madness[2] does not give one the liberty to be extravagant with words, but to be pithy and concise, explicating with precision the distilled knowledge required to bridge gaps in reading and interrogating psycho-intellectual and socio-material experiences.

Gomo's achievements lay in the distilled philosophical elements that other 'madness' scholars could have overlooked. His philosophy represents an "antithesis of European reason" (Newell 2008, 483). He interrogates high-sounding liberal discourses of human rights championing dignity, enlightenment and empowerment in a sea of poverty while outrightly disregarding the genesis of the 'irrationality' associated with the widespread privation: a form of 'madness' in itself, if ethnographically viewed. Thus, colonialism and its racist exclusionary policies full of treachery and trickery is madness. *A Fine Madness* is the only creative narrative on the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) of the early 1990s, pitying the Congo rebels against a coalition of the government forces aided by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia. Gomo's manuscript, like Tsitsi Dangarembga's internationally acclaimed *Nervous Conditions*, was published by Ayebia Clarke overseas. *A Fine Madness*, a literary case study, is inspired by lived personal experiences, crystallised by the historical exigences of the DRC war, replicating the general plight of the African continent. The experiences rendered in Gomo's narrative poem threaten to be paradigmatic for the

2 *Upenzi or kupenga* in Shona.

African Continent's collective experiences. DRC metonymically symbolises a confluence of minds, conflicts, instability, tangential interests of myriad characters, a blighted African metropolis alleged to be half the size of Europe, hence the tropes of 'madness' and psychosis abound. But whose 'madness' is it exactly? And what kind of 'madness' is it?

Diverse concepts of madness in Shona

'Mania,' 'madness,' 'neurosis,' 'mental instability,' 'mental disorder,' 'insanity,' 'lunacy,' 'psychotic delusions,' 'delirium,' 'hysteria,' 'perversion,' 'nervous breakdown,' whatever terms and their causes, like disability, have been and remain universally undesirable as they deviate from the socially-constructed norms and values. The condition in its multiple forms solicits stigma, in addition to posing certain challenges and dangers to incumbents and their respective communities and societies. Further, whatever nomenclature or terminology distinguishes the condition, the incumbents are seen to have gone off the rails of a desirable 'normal' social life, normalcy here being culturally determined. In the indigenous Zimbabwean Shona context, 'madness'/*kupenga* is a paradoxical oxymoron, depicting either foolishness in the sense of imbecility or distinction, with the latter carrying either positivity or negativity. The terms *Kupenga, Upenzi* or madness are used in a playful way as cultural banter or could be outright derogatory, and do therefore not automatically signify psychosis, schizophrenia or any other de facto psychic derangement.

Ethno-anthropologically among Zimbabwean indigenous Shonas, 'madness' also symptomatically evinces metaphysical transgression, desiring metaphysical solutions for stability to be restored and regained, but using material resources for psycho-spiritual appeasement. Avenging spirits or *ngozi* and *kutanda botso*[3] for example, depict spiritual retributions that manifest themselves through delirium, lunacy or imbecility, and other untoward conduct. The differences in management resonate with social, intellectual and psycho-spiritual tools at the incumbents' disposal, and these are widely culturally-based.

Apart from mental psychosis or dementia, 'madness' can also be ethnographically and metaphorically understood as symptomatic of social deviance, delinquency and cultural alienation, including rigid impenetrable minds leading to ungovernable behaviour, among other undesirable social, intellectual and spiritual dispositions. In a positive light, 'madness'/*kupenga* in the Shona language could also mean 'excellence/distinction/unparalleled expertise,' antithetical to 'lunacy/imbecility/schizophrenia.' It is not uncommon hearing people admit: "*Akapenga*," meaning a guru; "*Anopenga,*" meaning schizoid;

3 A traditional rite performed by an individual as punishment for transgressing against one's parents. Usually the incumbent wears sack cloth or rags and moves barefoot in the village begging for grain. He is mocked and shunned for the wrong-doing, generally believed to be part of the retribution that eventually cleanses and restores the individual. The rite is usually performed as acceptance of guilt and remorse for untoward conduct.

or "*Akazvipengera,*" meaning distinguished. The incumbent is *benzi* or madman. *Kupenga* or madness therefore ethnographically solicits context(s) for apt appreciation. Extreme tripartite privation also attracts labels of 'madness.' Depending on the prism at use, 'madness' can ricochet at those claiming authority to name and label others who are deemed psycho-intellectually inferior. Thus, madness cannot be fully appreciated outside socio-cultural contexts. It is value-laden.

A fine madness?

Gomo ironically appropriates diverse denotations of 'madness' metaphorically to interrogate evident psycho-social, economic and political disorders in Africa, including their underlying causes. *A Fine Madness* attempts to appreciate the "pathologization of the African subject" (Mahone 2006, 242) by so-called champions of democratic governance and human rights ambassadors, civilisation bearers, and crusaders of sustainable development in violence-torn and underdeveloped countries, especially Africa. Encapsulated as 'a fine madness,' the attempt is a recognisable achievement.

Like Vambe's *An Ill-fated People*, and Swift's Lilliputians, Gomo subtly juxtaposes black powerlessness and destitution in divinely-ordained homelands vis-à-vis power and privilege earned and anchored by virulent military brutality of Western dehumanising capitalistic domination. *A Fine Madness* satirises why 'madness' could be 'distilled' and positive. Ordinarily, 'madness' could never be appropriated and deciphered as 'fine,' neither can it be regarded as 'achievement.' Yet, here we are, celebrating 'madness' as a trope in understanding underprivileged sections of humanity. Africa's cause and plight rolled into one, remains vicious "intellectual warfare" (Carruthers 1999), aspects that Gomo examines. Afrofuturism and Afrotriumphalism prisms aesthetically project Africa's flowering and genuine renewal. Other western-designed prisms metonymically classify Africa as largely "collective psychological instability" (Mahone 2006, 243).

Gomo's 'metaphoric madness' could be deciphered 'protest literature,' presuming it presumptuous and unbalanced in its unearthing erased and silenced histories. Dichotomous models and discourses adeptly convey worldview divergences. Far from being apologetic about alleged failed leadership, under-development and rampant corruption in the post-independence African state, Gomo exposes the dehumanising trauma, including the masked colonial maladies that continue ravaging Africa. "[T]he significance of the label[s] is that [they] attach the problem very neatly to individuals presumed to be troubled or 'unbalanced' in some way and denied the existence of other sources of social, [psychological, spiritual and political] tension" (Mahone 2006, 244). If you are going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to know where you've come from (Chivaura 2016; Onyebuchi 2018): a literary trope that is double-barrelled, 'a fine madness.'

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Afrofuturism and women's merit: Wangechi Mutu's artwork

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Women's bodies are particularly vulnerable to the whims of changing movements, governments, and social norms. They're the sensitive charts that indicate how a society feels about itself. It's also disturbing how women attack themselves in search of a perfect image, and to assuage the imperfections that surround them. – Wangechi Mutu

Introduction

Although clearly an activist for women's rights and sexual equality, Wangechi Mutu is better known for her daring visual works involving a variety of media such as collage, video, performance and sculpture. Her artwork features cyborg bodies and technological environments dominated by movement and inspired by machinery. References to achievement discourses particularly on what concerns gender in African communities are present in these works, as the artist favours a feminist, Afrofuturist angle in the examination of women's cultural status in this part of the world. Mutu employs Afrofuturist imagery in order to challenge the idea of technological achievement as being reserved to the Western world. Moreover, she uses a feminist lens in order to point out a possible achievement gap *within* an Afrofuturist canon that until recently used to associate black male bodies with the idea of technological prowess.

Afrofuturism's narratives of achievement

As defined by Mark Dery in a 1993 interview of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Afrofuturism suggests alternative narratives for the experience of the black diaspora in Western society (180). Initially popularized by speculative fiction and later spread to other artistic fields, these re-worked colonial time-lines focus on the role and worth of black communities in the emergence of a common, global future. Moreover, they do away with stereotypical convictions concerning the interaction of black communities with the techno-culture of the 20th century (Anderson 2016, 230). According to such views, a digital divide affects blacks across the American and the African continents, their only hope being the attempt to "assimilate into the white western technology elite" (Chandler 2002).

Afrofuturist artefacts aim to change the image of black individuals as subordinate to white communities in terms of access to technology by coupling renderings of

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the slave with those of the cyborg. The machine is constructed from elements regarded as stemming from outside the human body. In a similar manner, the slave occupies in the colonial vision a place outside the allegedly 'more deserving' human communities (Eshun 1998). Wangechi Mutu draws attention to this analogy in paintings that hint at aesthetic primitivism while overlapping fragments of machines through collage techniques. "Forbidden Fruit Picker" (2015), for instance, portrays a biblical Eve in the act of picking the apple from the tree of knowledge, but does not feature any of the humble demeanour of characters from classical art. Instead, the work emphasizes elements such as female sensuality though technological imagery that fragments the body. The cyborg traits allow a mixture of the machine, animal and human to co-exist in the female silhouette. Rather than alienating these foreign features, it gathers them in its claim of a comprehensive depiction of the female nature.

Gendered scripts

Beyond the conceptual level of Afrofuturism as pointing out an unjust framework for making distinctions between those of African descent and Westerners, a secondary level also exists in Mutu's artwork. The artist's depictions of women look inward to the African continent, namely to the achievement gap between women and men. The works tackle the ways in which pre-colonial and colonial gender patterns affect women by either idealizing or demonizing ideas of womanhood e.g. in the figure of the struggling household leader, the prostitute, the unruly woman and the Victorian model mother (Lovett 1989; Allman 1994). Colonial rule seems to have generated gendered relationships where women's roles in African communities were minimized while men distinguished themselves in areas such as social mobility, political power and access to technological means.

Considering this historical background, Afrofuturism allows Mutu to criticize such simplistic representations of women, linking the idea of technological mastery to that of the female body and thus reversing colonial meritocratic stereotypes. The artist portrays women in dominant, either performing or defiant poses, almost always at the centre of the image. Although it is clear that the themes of her works resonate with Western concepts, e.g. the objectification of women, feminist discourses and achievement principles such as performance and mastery, the artist emphasizes the fact that she does not come from a Western understanding of such notions (Willis 2014). Mutu highlights this sense of double consciousness by allowing African women to simultaneously occupy the position of cyborg, prostitute and queen, for instance in the collage works "You Are My Sunshine" (2015) and "A Shady Promise" (2008).

Different routes

While Mutu's artwork points out achievement gaps occurring both within African commu-

nities and outside them, it also underlines a potential flaw in the development of 20th century Afrofuturism. In order to identify possible reasons for the historical classification of human beings based on race and gender, the artist examines the techniques and imagery associated with Afrofuturism itself. She thus criticizes futurist and Afrofuturist artistic accounts which allow the male body to be aligned with the notion of technological prowess.

Artistic futurist accounts generally articulate two main strands of argument. One concerns the reconceptualization of the relationship between technology and less privileged communities worldwide. The other posits that "present-day futurisms are not triumphalist" and therefore should not be regarded as entirely optimistic or utopian (Teixeira Pinto 2017, 167). The paradox within Afrofuturist imagery lies, more specifically, in the representation of a superbody that is connected to a certain notion of prowess as masculinity rather than femininity. From this angle, Afrofuturist accounts of black male superbodies continuously revert to a notion of "an indestructible, hyper-muscular body that was already in existence in the colonial imaginary" (167).

Refusing to perpetuate this notion, Mutu's works display women at the centre of a conceptual image that implies the same need for the future to be reclaimed as it did in the 20th century. However, her works also argue for the inclusion of the female body in the aforementioned Afrofuturist universe. As the artist herself remarks: "Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body" (quoted in Kerr 2004). Undoubtedly, Afrofuturist representations are able to respond critically to discourses of achievement pertaining to both white and black communities across the Atlantic. Wangechi Mutu favors Afrofuturist tropes in her works in order to develop a critical language that can interrogate achievement both on the societal level as well as on the level of canonized artistic and cultural movements.

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Scheherazade's achievement(s): Storytelling and agency in Fatima Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* and *Scheherazade Goes West*

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Introduction

The narrative of merit and success is ubiquitous and powerfully scripts people's lives. It downplays and sometimes even blatantly denies structural inequalities by insisting that effort, skill, and hard work guarantee upward mobility (Littler 2018). Ideas of success shape everyday life from early childhood onwards and underpin both internal desires and dreams and fashion external expectations of fulfilment. Yet meritocratic scripts are staggeringly narrow in their definition of what the 'success' of a human life means. Meritocracy "facilitat[es] the atomization of individuals" by "extending competition and entrepreneurial behaviour" into the most ordinary practices of everyday life (Rottenberg 2018, 997). How then, do Western narratives of achievement shift and get challenged when they travel into African contexts? This is the question that this paper seeks to answer by considering two texts by the Moroccan feminist sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015).

Mernissi is best known for her pioneering work on gender equality in Islam. In this paper however, I wish to focus on her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, published in 1994 and her reflections on its Eurocentric reception, which culminated in the publication of *Scheherazade Goes West. Different Cultures, Different Harems* in 2001. Both texts deal with the way in which women's agency is circumscribed by particular horizons of constraint determined by their social contexts and thus the texts contrast local, particular forms of constraint with more diffuse forms of oppression that characterise Western modernity. I offer a (very brief) reading of her harem childhood to trace some of the alternative modes of enacting small freedoms that the memoir documents. As becomes apparent in Mernissi's reflections on the memoir's reception, these achievements seem to be largely illegible within a Western feminist paradigm in particular and a meritocratic rationality of development in general. In contrast, Mernissi asserts that such modes of communal sociality – storytelling, performance, artistic production, and care of self and other mark direct, albeit subtle, forms of resistance to the constraining cir-

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cumstances even if they are not necessarily recognised as such. The paper examines how the figure of Scheherazade emerges in the two texts as a role model of the kind of knowledge that allows women insight into their social context in order to carve out pockets of resistance.

Growing up in an urban harem

Mernissi's memoir *Dreams of Trespass. Tales of a Harem Girlhood* begins with the words:

> I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometres west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometres south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problem with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the hudud, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born in the midst of chaos, since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers. Right on our threshold, you could see the women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as the foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city. (Mernissi 1994, 1)

For readers, this beginning raises expectations of national liberation from colonial oppression alongside women breaking free of the restrictions of confinement, demanding to be able to cross the threshold of the front door. It is that too, but much more subtly, Mernissi uses the real physical boundaries she experienced growing up in this house in Fez, to launch a nuanced interrogation of invisible boundaries, that keep structuring women's lives, even when they are supposedly completely free to move – or achieve – as they please. The strictures of physical confinement inherent in urban harem life become the grounds for honing skills of dissent that the women teach each other – largely through storytelling, performance, artistic production like embroidery, and by activating an ethics of care (for both self and other) which result in a kind of psychological acumen.

How do we need to imagine the domestic harem in this household? At the centre of it all lies a communal living arrangement, though in Mernissi's immediate family the men each only have one wife: Mernissi tells us that her own and her uncle's families live in the house, under the sharp eyes of the paternal grandmother (one of the staunch upholders of tradition and one of the women who actively upholds patriarchal structures). Mernissi's own family comprises only five members, her parents and two siblings. Her uncle's family numbered nine, the parents and seven children. The four ground-floor salons around the central courtyard of the house are occupied by Lala Mani, the grandmother, the two families, with the fourth one reserved as the dining room for the men. This is also the salon where the radio was kept (a secret key finds its way to the women who dance to the radio tunes when the men are out). The house has two more storeys, as well as rooftop terraces. Many female relatives who have fallen on hard times or were divorced and in need of shelter, have their living quarters on the higher floors. Men hardly ventured up

there and the terraces were largely the domain of the women and children where they told stories, staged elaborate performances, tended to their emotional needs, and administered beauty treatments. It is in the validation of these mundane activities that the narrative radically redefines notions of skills and achievements. I cannot do justice to all of these here, so I just want to focus on the achievement of storytelling.

Scheherazade's achievements

> I was amazed to realize that for many Westerners, Scheherazade was considered a lovely, but simple-minded entertainer, someone who narrates innocuous tales and dresses fabulously. In our part of the world, Scheherazade is perceived as a courageous heroine and is one of our rare female mythical figures. Scheherazade is a strategist and a powerful thinker, who uses her psychological knowledge of human beings [to entirely shift the fate of the kingdom]. (Mernissi 1994, 15)

The figure of Scheherazade in *Alf layla wa Layla* also known as *The Thousand and One Nights* or *The Arabian Nights* was the courageous role model of a clandestine feminist rebellion in the Mernissi household. Movement and travelling became possible primarily through the practices of storytelling by activating the imagination of the listeners. Despite being confined to the harem space, the women travelled in their imagination "spellbound by the strange words being tossed out at the audience by Chama and Aunt Habiba, the high priestesses of imagination" (Mernissi 1994, 113). What Mernissi suggests here is that what could be perceived as an idle whiling away of time, actually becomes a space in which women hone their intellectual, psychological and imaginative skills that serve them in all sorts of tangible ways to navigate their daily lives. In storytelling, constraint and travelling are not oppositional but they coexist.

The genesis of the text of the *Nights* is itself constituted by travel, tracing "old and new maps and histories of people and [stories] in transit" (Clifford 1997, 2). It has no one author and no one source, its title a symbol of infinity – 1001 – "its stories are Indian, Persian, and Arabic, and were told in many forms many centuries before they were written down" (Byatt 2009, xiiv). Marina Warner points out that Egypt, India, and Persia supplied the "principle streams" flowing into the cycle of stories that took shape in Arabic, mixing it with other sources: "[they] contain traces of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, and of Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Latin, Russian and Turkish myths floating in the ocean of the streams of story" (Warner 2012, 7-8). Like a stack of Chinese boxes or nested matryoshka dolls, "a character in a story invokes a character who tells a story about a character who has a story to tell . . . Everything proliferates" (Byatt 2009, xiiv-xv). And Scheherazade is the frame character who holds all the threads of the multiple stories-within-stories in her capable and caring hands – this is the skill that keeps her alive and makes her into a powerful symbol of liberation.

In the frame story of the *Nights* King Shahryar is full of grief and hatred for women after the discovery of his wife's infidelity. In his mind, all women are to blame and he marries a succession of virgins only to execute them in the morning. Eventually the kingdom runs out of eligible virgins and it is then that Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, offers herself as the next bride. Mernissi explains that

> She, unlike her father, was convinced that she had exceptional power and could stop the killing. She would cure the troubled King's soul simply by talking to him about things that happened to others. She would take him to faraway lands to observe foreign ways, so he could get close to the strangeness within himself. She would help him see his prison, his obsessive hatred of women. (Mernissi 1994, 15)

So, on the night of their marriage, she begins a tale and ends it at a moment of great suspense and, curious to hear how the story ends, Shahryar postpones her execution by a day. On the next night, when she finishes her story, she begins a new one and 1001 nights and three children later, the king declares that he is a changed man, who no longer wishes to execute his wife. The *Nights*, a story about storytelling, suggests that storytelling is not an idle occupation but a strategy of survival and deeply political. According to Mernissi, Scheherazade's intellectual achievement as a storyteller powerfully challenges male authority: "[s]he saves not only herself but also an entire kingdom" by changing the mind, the beliefs, and motivations of the king (Mernissi 2001, 49). Mernissi wonders why this crucial aspect has been rendered harmless in the Western reception of the *Nights*. This question underpins *Scheherazade Goes West* where Mernissi offers a sustained critique of androcentric Western philosophical and artistic traditions, which confine women to passivity and their appeal to sexual obsequiousness (and where brainy women's femininity becomes questionable). In this way, Mernissi highlights two very different scripts of women's achievement.

Conclusion

> With words alone, [Aunt Habiba] could put us onto a large ship sailing from Aden to the Maldives, or to take us to an island where the birds spoke like human beings. Riding on her words, we travelled past Sind and Hind (India), leaving Muslim territories behind, living dangerously, and making friends with Christians and Jews, who shared their bizarre food with us and watched us do our prayers, while we watched them do theirs. Her tales made me long to become an adult and an expert storyteller myself. I wanted to learn how to talk in the night. (Mernissi 1994, 19)

This cursory reading of Mernissi's narratives suggests that "while women inhabited and in some ways supported certain [patriarchal] structures that oppressed them, this did not

cancel the fact that they were simultaneously engaged in processes of resisting them" (Motsemme 2004, 919). Such enabling forms of power, even if they do not translate into the kind of success that is legible in particular meritocratic scripts, nevertheless carve out pockets of freedom and agency. I have shown how storytelling is such a space of asserting freedom and how Scheherazade represents a role model in this regard: "the story appears to be a story against women at first . . . [but] the woman ends up completely taking over" (Mernissi 2001, 49). This is why Aunt Habiba's storytelling sessions on Friday nights become the highlight of the week, eagerly anticipated by the children of the harem in Fez, including the young Mernissi. I don't think it is too far-fetched to assert that Mernissi's later academic career with its immense positive influence on a younger generation of Moroccan feminists (Sadiqi and Ouguir 2018) was fundamentally shaped during those childhood nights of storytelling.

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"God [...] expects perfection." Norms, forms and performance in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Introduction

Intellectuals of the independence and decolonial movements such as Frantz Fanon have unmasked "European achievements, European techniques and the European style" within African contexts as damaging narratives that "ought no longer to tempt us and to throw us off our balance" (Fanon 1963, 312). Yet in the twenty-first century, the legacies of an informal colonialism of values and norms as well as of patterns and forms of conduct and expression continue to linger. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), performance and achievement are explored on several levels and within a number of norm-generating societal frameworks. In this short paper, which is part of an ongoing comparative investigation of literary engagements with meritocratic narratives, I want to shed light on some aspects of Adichie's literary engagement with oppressive normative orders. The most noticeable among them, and yet the one least discussed in the abundant body of research on the novel is Catholicism, whose universal claim is challenged by the contingency of Catholic practice *in situ* – here a space which has been subjected to colonialist violence and its postcolonial legacy and is embodied by the figure of an uncontrolled and controlling father. And yet, Adichie's novel opens our eyes to the insistent presence of an alternative world of 'organic growth' that resists and challenges the impact of limiting, imposed narratives of achievement which manifest themselves in multiple normatively structured systems – including the world of literature.

Particular norms within a 'church for all'

Purple Hibiscus presents the story of fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike, who has grown up in a wealthy household in the city of Enugu in the 1980s, receiving a strict 'Catholic' education. Catholicism in the novel is only one of several regulative structures, but it comes as one with a particularly strong universal claim.[2] While the self-proclaimed 'church for all' offers orientation and guidance for some, it is imposed in oppressive situations on others. Kambili's familial life is one such 'situation.' Her father Eugene, whose mind has been

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2 "Catholos" literally means "the entire world"; there are different strands of Catholicism as well as other Christian denominations in the novel, and also Igbo systems of valorisation.

'colonised' by the imported framework of belief and an accompanying ethics of hard work and prayer, inflicts terror on his wife and two children in that he acts as the controlling executor of a "God" who "expects perfection" (Adichie 2013, 47) under all circumstances – be it with regard to Kambili and her older brother Jaja's performance at school or his wife's fulfilment of her societal obligations – and punishes the slightest weakness severely and beyond all proportions. Kambili has internalised her father's standards and is devastated when she comes second in her class, because she wanted "to do as well as he had done":

> Nobody had spent money on his own schooling, especially not his Godless father, our Papa-Nnukwu, yet he had always come first. I wanted to make Papa proud [...] I needed him to [...] say that to whom much is given, much is also expected. [...] But I had come second. I was stained by failure. (Adichie 2013, 39)

This quote may suggest Eugene's indebtedness to a particular strand of Catholicism also invoked in the authoritative figure of "Father Benedict," the priest of St. Agnes,[3] which Eugene's money has turned into the most beautiful church in the diocese (28, 136) and which figures as yet another trophy in his exceptional life: best student, market-leading producer of sweets, owner of the "*Standard*," the only newspaper that writes "the truth" (136, 201) and has "the best" editor (5, 25).[4] The Benedictine principle of humility and absolute obedience is perverted in the novel's (post-)colonial context in the establishment of a set of sins and corresponding punishments, and hence an extreme case of normative orders. Eugene not only aspires to observing the highest standards himself, he outdoes himself to ensure that his family do the same – and in the process loses sight of his self-righteous behaviour that in the intimate circle of his family gets out of hand. After 'punishing' his wife so violently that she has yet another miscarriage he forces her and their children to "recite sixteen different novenas" for her "forgiveness" in the presence of Father Benedict (35). Only in hindsight does it occur to Kambili, who has become a successful 'product' of her father's concept, that "I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for" (36).

Purple Hibiscus is not simply a critical, postcolonial interrogation of the validity of Christian norms imposed on African contexts. It is, among other things, an exploration of Catholicism's contradictions and complexities, which also present themselves in the Enugu context described, but which are hardly limited to that context. The novel engages

3 The suggestion of the Benedictine credo of obedience and perseverance should not be mistaken for a direct reference to the relatively small and recent presence of the Benedictine mission in Enugu. Rather, that credo is perfectly translatable to the lingering colonialist agenda described in the novel. It also presents a reversal – not a suspension – of the Protestant Prosperity Gospel.

4 The editor, Ade Coker, becomes a martyr when he is assassinated by the government for his coverage of the murder of Nwankiti Ogechi (199-200, 206-07). Both Coker's and Ogechi's fates show analogies to that of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

centrally with Eugene's perverted religiousness which goes hand in hand with his colonised mind, but it also presents a significant variety of beliefs and a plurality of Catholic practices and attitudes. It does not, ultimately, revoke the ideal of a universal church that *can* accommodate difference and controversy. Adichie has written elsewhere about the transformations she herself has undergone vis-à-vis Catholicism, developing from "a dedicated Catholic apologist" to a disenchanted observer of "the gaudy melodrama the majesties of Catholic rituals could be" and a critic of the church's quickness "to ostracize and humiliate," without, however, opting entirely out (Adichie 2015). The ambiguity of the church, which comes with an appealing universal claim but inadequate particular practices, is worked through at length in *Purple Hibiscus*, and has implications far beyond the (post)colonial context it is set in. The novel negotiates the shared human desire to be embedded in a meaningful, spiritual-communal scheme and the challenge of accommodating, as a society, the variety of forms that this desire has produced. That the principles of the "church for all" and other Christian denominations are not only received and consumed, but indeed "brewed in African pots" in processes of inculturation (Orobator 2008) and indeed transculturation is a recurring subject in *Purple Hibiscus*.[5] Practices and norms are created here and then carried into the world, as Father Amadi's impending mission in Germany exemplifies (Adichie 2013, 172, 267).

Contingent norms: System 'Eugene'

The diversity of approaches to spirituality and community in Enugu is only gradually revealed in the novel. The titles of three of its four parts spiral around Palm Sunday – i.e., the triumphant celebrations prior to the fall, martyrdom and resurrection which holds the promise of revelation. Already the novel's opening phrase "Things started to fall apart at home" (Adichie 2013, 3) references not only a web of world literary texts that engage with the painful coming apart of established orders, but takes this recurring process right into a particular, miniature and private context.[6] In Kambili's home, where Eugene's ideals have become dogmata, the behaviour of the family members is apprehended in relation to the established standard, and deviant behaviour is sanctioned – all for the sake, this becomes very clear in the opening pages, of affirming and universalising a standard that is highly contingent.

Eugene's 'system' of perfection has its foundations in his own experience of having to excel against the odds within a structure that has offered him a ladder. In order

5 That affiliations with different denominations are accommodated within close families without posing practical problems is touched on in other works by Adichie, e.g. in her third novel *Americanah*. In *Purple Hibiscus*, theological debates take are more central stage in diverse settings.
6 Most notably, it references Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, which in turn references a line in William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming."

to climb it, he has decided to reject the first system of values and practices he has been passed on by his family. His Christian name, Eugene, which literally means "well-born" becomes part of his narrative of himself as exemplary, responsible representative and up-holder of standards. The synonymity between the character of Eugene and the oppressive standards governing the Achike family has given rise to a number of feminist readings.[7] Beyond this, it is a powerful comment on the impact, and the simultaneous randomness, of social norms that are taken for granted: That they are in place and are being observed does not imply that they are intrinsically meaningful, beneficial or good, although they provide individuals with a sense of orientation. The process of emancipation from the 'system Eugene' is indeed not an unequivocal success, either, but ambivalent, even after his death. Jaja and Kambili, who have become acquainted with alternative systems of communality and valorisation at their aunt's home in Nsukka, are gradually feeling their way out of the "silence"[8] in which they had endured their father's 'love.' Their mother Beatrice, principal recipient and apologist of Eugene's violence, who eventually turns into his murderer, is literally falling apart: After his death she is described as dishevelled, her clothes ill-fitting and falling from her body (Adichie 2013, 295-6, 306). Beatrice's subversive act of liberation has freed her and her children from their tormentor and effectively enables them to live; it has not served to liberate her from the (at times conflicting) normative orders that hold her in perpetual check: the imperative of motherhood (imposed here via local, Ibo, tradition), the societal obligations as the wife of a public man (imposed by Eugene), the contrastive example of female intellectuals (represented here by Ifeoma), are only some of the narratives, which cast her as perpetually deficient. Her attempts at performing according to the scripts imposed by others, and her attempts at polishing Eugene's image, as she is polishing the figurines of her collection of porcelain ballet dancers, ultimately break her.

Eugene's violent imposition of rules, which Adichie paints in stark colours – the 'purple' in the novel's title has been read as a reference to Alice Walker's classic 1982 novel *The Color Purple* (Nwokocha 2019, 376)[9] –, blurs the fragile sense of control he retains over his own life lived in an imperfect space, i.e. the new Nigeria in the violent decades following independence, a clear case of an 'underachieving nation' in McClelland's problematic assessment (cf. Pirker, Hericks and Mbali, 3). Through a complex mirroring of societal processes within the presented family sphere (cf., e.g. Toivanen 2013, 104-

7 Sandra Nwokocha offers a good summary of approaches (2019, 368-69) and reads *Purple Hibiscus* as radical feminist text.
8 "Silence" and "speaking" are recurring terms in Adichie's exploration of the possibility of agency (e.g. in the title of the fourth section of *Purple Hibiscus*, "A Different Silence: The Present" [Adichie 2013, 293]).
9 Nwokocha argues that the reference has given rise to readings of *Purple Hibiscus* as womanist text. Rather than highlighting the common theme of interfamilial violence and inherited pressure, she uses the reference to draw attention to the figure of Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's sister and the associative web of images of resistance liked to her.

05) Adichie displays the discrepancy between ideals and the challenging practice (and pressure) of abiding by them or aspiring to them, and draws attention to the contingency of any ideal. Just as the young nation state – a concept fixed in the tradition of European enlightenment thought as the gold standard achieved through the victory of ratio over tyranny – is ill at ease in *Purple Hibiscus*, afflicted by coup after coup so that it needs to be "prayed for" and protected (cf. Adichie 2013, 11, 43), Eugene, celebrated as a "man of integrity" (42), is described as afflicted throughout the novel, the face "swollen [...], with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch" (6). The trope of bodily affliction (252, 258) and physical imperfection here functions as allegory of the comparatively imperfect state of Nigerian politics. Eugene's success against all odds, like the running of the country, comes at the cost of his moral corruption and a blindness for his own entanglement in a system that is ill-functioning because it has been violently imposed rather than organically evolved.

Resisting organisms: Spread / growth against the progress paradigm

Organic growth is multifaceted and given significant space in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is staged as counterpoint against the imposition of norms and the (respectively contingent) concept of a singular path to achievement (or salvation). The celebration of multitude is not only embodied in Auntie Ifeoma's pragmatic integration of different practices and forms of belief in her day-to-day familial life. It recurs in the novel's treatment of living organisms and their interaction, ranging from the human body to plant life. The hibiscuses in the novel, for instance, remain gloriously unaffected by normative orders: they flourish. That they metaphorically mirror situations in the plot through their colours, which signal their environment's degree of subjection to normative terror, allows for a reading of them as symbols for oppression and liberation respectively (cf. Adichie 2013, 16). Understanding *Purple Hibiscus* within an activist, and particularly feminist, tradition, however, is a controversial enterprise because such traditions, too, have generated exclusive narratives of achievement (cf. Dosekun) that Adichie's novel interrogates. As Chielozona Eze argues, its female figures neither seek to "dethrone man nor to enthrone woman," but to create a society where "human beings flourish" (Eze 2008, 115). What is more, in *Purple Hibiscus* the very notion of progress and the vertical rise in a Christian-capitalist understanding is disturbed by organisms that flourish and by a nature that challenges man's delusional narrative of the ladder (cf. Littler 2020, 17-9) both horizontally and from below: The "dust-laden winds of harmattan" yanking "the needlelike leaves from the whistling pines, covering everything in a film of brown" (Adichie 2013, 53) and the winding earthworm, whose "purplish-brown body contrasted with the whiteness of the tub" from which it emerges in Auntie Ifeoma's bathroom (232), are intruders in humanly-designed spaces, oblivious to human control and following other directions.

Ifeoma's garden,[10] significantly, does not need watering "because the sky did it. Anthills had risen in the newly softened red soil [...] like miniature castles," and Kambili "savor[s] the smell of green leaves washed clean by rain [...]. The allamanda bushes [...] bloomed heavily with cylindrical flowers" (225). Spreading rather than growing one-directionally, nature and organisms have ways of imposing themselves – regardless of, beyond, and at times against, human ratio. This includes the human body, which is torn between its own organic 'logic' and the norms and rational (i.e. religious) narratives imposed on it, epitomised in the porcelain figurines of ballet dancers Beatrice polishes after each endurance of Eugene's 'punishments.' The rebelling body not only becomes apparent in Eugene's afflictions (which he plays down as "nothing serious" [252]). A bodily reaction to the communion wafer triggers Jaja's rebellion (6). Kambili's experience of her revolting body becomes overwhelming: Whereas her mind does not question the imposed norms and the accompanying violence, her body does. Swallowing the luxurious food at her home becomes a torture (cf. 12, 14, 15), studying becomes almost impossible as the letters on the page turn to blood, "flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes" (35, 37). Beyond providing a graphic example of an organism which literally rebels against a violent 'ratio,' the bloody letters can be read as a strong image of the violence of the de facto not-so-informal colonialism of values, norms and "style" that Fanon exposed as psychologically damaging (Fanon 1963, 312).

Bloody letters: *Purple Hibiscus* and the world of literature

The medial form Adichie uses, the novel, is an achieving genre in European history and worldwide, whose emergence and development as literary form coincided with the parallel emergence and development of European enlightenment thought *and* European colonialism. Like Western religious practices, this highly successful literary genre has been imposed, written back to, claimed and transformed in various ways on the African continent. By referencing and evoking Achebe's trilogy, but also other works from the continent, e.g. Tsitsi Dangarembga's highly successful *Nervous Conditions*, Adichie inscribes herself in a decolonial literary tradition.[11] In these novels of decolonisation, the presence of the past manifests itself inter alia in the presence of their form. Like Dangarembga's, Adichie's novel can be described as a *bildungsroman*, the paradigmatic form for literary engagements

10 The garden is the foundational image of achievement in colonialist discourse. Ifeoma's garden can thus be regarded as an (albeit temporarily) reclaimed space and moment of empowerment. The space rented by Ifeoma and her children is ridiculously cramped, especially when compared to the luxurious space owned by Eugene, but it is a space of growth, also beyond the literal sense.

11 *Nervous Conditions* is an obvious foil and a paradigmatic novel of formation. Its title, too, references another decolonial text, Jean Paul Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The web of texts that Adichie's novel invokes and participated suggests yet another kind of non-linear, multidirectional spread and presence.

with individual development, but she disrupts the form in significant ways, not only by pitting the one-directional principle of the genre against the spread and multitude of nature and the cyclical principle of the church year, which serves as one structuring element; in her novel, it is not the individual whose flaws and immaturity have to be 'evened out' in order to become compatible with norms, but the normative orders are flawed, are quite literally "nervous conditions." When things fall apart, the protagonists in *Purple Hibiscus* cannot rely on norms and forms passed down from a previous generation, but have to invent viable structures for themselves that can accommodate all generations. There are indeed no certainties at the end of Adichie's novel to which her protagonists can return – except the prospect of "new rains."

Adichie could build on a tradition and a web of Anglophone Nigerian and African literary works when writing *Purple Hibiscus*, but she could not build on the reputation she enjoys today. In hindsight, Adichie's first novel has often been read with more recent debates about Afropolitanism, a narrative of achievement in its own right (cf. Selasi 2013; Eze 2014), in mind. *Purple Hibiscus*, however, is hardly a self-assertive Afropolitan articulation, but a counternarrative infused with the presence of the past and the uncertainty of the future. It is a searching – and form-searching – account of the multifaceted pressure to perform in an African context that in the twenty-first century continues to be heavily marked by normative orders whose principal violence inheres in their universal claim. By having her protagonists gradually interrogate the ways things were done, Adichie's novel emphasises the need for a conviviality that accommodates difference – which may be the highest achievement any society can aspire to.

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Achieving Blackness and social mobility in Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black*

Joseph McLaren[1]

Introduction

Diran Adebayo, author of *Some Kind of Black* (1997), nominated for the Man Booker Prize, and *My Once Upon a Time* (2001), demonstrates an innovative literary style and the achievement of blackness as it relates to identity and larger racial contexts that impact the possibilities of social mobility. Also, Adebayo, as a critical writer, co-edited *New Writing 12* (2004), which helped to codify Black British writing in the new millennium. Brother of Dotun Adebayo, who established *X Press*, Diran was familiar with the challenges of publication and marketing of Black British writers.

The notoriety of *Some Kind of Black* in the last century, the fact that it earned numerous recognitions, including the Writers' Guild of Great Britain's New Writer of the Year Award, the Author's Club First Novel Award, the 1996 Saga Prize, the Betty Trask Award, and was serialized on British radio, is reason enough for it to be called a Virago Modern Classic. The novel exemplifies remarks in *Black British Writing* (2004), where the editors, R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, suggested that "[t]here is a considerable amount of 'reconfiguring' and 're-inventing' going on in Britain at the moment" (Arana and Ramey 2004, 4). Adebayo's contemporary relevance is shown by his involvement in Speaking Volumes Live Literature Productions, organized by Sharmilla Beezmohun, Sarah Sanders, and Nicholas Chapman. Speaking Volumes defined its writers as "people whose backgrounds may be black British born and bred, Caribbean, African, African American, mixed race" (Beezmohun, Sanders, and Chapman 2015, 5).

Social mobility and identity: defining Blackness

Some Kind of Black can be viewed as a retrospective commentary on a certain era but also as an exploration of the complexity of racial demarcations and identity formation. Of Yoruba-Nigerian descent, Adebayo represents what is sometimes called Black British writing but more precisely an Afro-British perspective. His initial novel, which mines the autobiographical self, shows the origins of his language usage, the creation of narrative styles and dialogue that are not based on conventional vernacular, but on the author's own

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imaginative word stylings. The main character, Dele, and his sister are in pursuit of social mobility. Although their actions could result in certain achievements, police authority hinders their mobility and the assumed benefits of an allegedly meritocractic system.

Because Black British perspectives of the mid-twentieth century have traditionally been linked to Caribbean cultural and historical realities, the work of Adebayo is informative because it shows the unique elements of African, especially Nigerian, ancestry in its association with British social conditions in the 1990s. These lines of demarcation within a larger area of Black British categorization have been addressed by Ulrike Pirker, who observes, "black history and culture in Britain were treated mainly as an extension of Caribbean and African cultural expressions" (Pirker 2011, 5). Added to these vectors is the African American element, the Atlantic crossings extending through the Black Arts Movement and sixties Black Power infusions.

Although these broader characterizations were societal frameworks, they complicated the marketing of novelists such as Adebayo, who recognized the pitfalls of publishing categorizations. In a 2007 comment in *Bookseller,* he remarked that BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) categories were "'commercially damaging'" to authors who could be of broader interest and "'encourage[ed] a certain banal representation and a group identity that I don't think readers want'" (Rushton 2007). Adebayo also commented extensively on race in an *Observer* article (Adebayo 2001).

Some Kind of Black received scant mention in 1996, but the remarks by Emma Lindsey in the *Observer* point to the underlying attributes of the novel's stylistics and main character dilemmas, "[b]eing Nigerian, with West Indian peers and a guilt-ridden liking for white women" (Lindsey 1996, 17). Other commentaries were presented by Adina Campu, who focused on the identity question (Campu 2010, 58), and Bruce King, who recognized certain urban black issues (King 2002, 165). Overall, the novel was considered in the *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* "as 'a major step in black British literature' (Sesay), especially in its use of language and characterisation" (Stein 2002, 3).

In *Some Kind of Black,* the main character's relationship to his parents and especially the expectations of his father push him toward achieving status through the pursuit of higher education. In this regard, the assumptions of social ascendancy are also intra-racial, where distinctions between Caribbean and African descended groups are sometimes reinforced by characters within these cultural demarcations. For the main character, achieving within the context of Eurocentric expectations could require a decentering of racial identity and defining oneself within the parameters of blackness.

In a personal interview, Adebayo commented on the relationship between his biographical particularities and his first novel.

> I was a minority within larger Britain. I was also a minority within Black Britain in the sense that most Black people then were of Caribbean descent in Britain whereas I was of direct African descent. So, I have this sense of being part of a

> lot of different homes without being completely a straightforward fit in any of them. A lot of my first book looks at cultural identity [...] [and] subcultures, the black subculture scene in London in the 1990s, things like drum & bass, jungle, and hip-hop music-based scenes. My novel explores what happens when you feel you have to choose between your different homes. (in McLaren 2015)

In his novel, Dele's parental home mandates the pursuit of university education, assumed to be the mode that will merit entrance into British social hierarchies. However, this pursuit becomes secondary to addressing the immediate necessitates engendered by violent police actions. The novel shows the added layers of complexity because of black racial or ethnic affiliation, but also represents certain ironies as in the possibility of maintaining interracial romantic relationships in an era marked by racial divisions. Most important, the reversal of expectations of violence against black youth, the assumption of white perpetrators inverted, creates ironies that subvert the binary white-black opposition.

The problem of identity expressed in the novel's title, implying varieties or approaches to blackness, can be related to certain of Paul Gilroy's perspectives.

> Whether these people were of African, Caribbean, or Asian descent, their commonality was often defined by its reference to the central, irreducible sign of their common racial subordination—the colour black. (Gilroy 1993, 86)

In the novel, interracial relationships between the main character and white girlfriend Andria are in some way the source of critical identity issues, when during a moment in their relationship, the narrator says of Dele, "[h]e couldn't square the circle. He had always been some kind of black. But now was a new stage, and he was finding out what demands this latest leg would place on him, and which needs he had to satisfy" (Adebayo 1996, 190).

Conclusion

In a time when police authority was assumed to be racially white, the brutalization of black communities could be understood in an evolving critical manner, where class, race, and gender were not always elements of the paradigm. *Some Kind of Black* questions whether the ethnic notes of Caribbean and African cultural roots can resolve into a monolithic or uniform conception of blackness, whether individual and group identities are in continual reformation and reharmonization. The assumption of a meritocratic system and the mobility engendered by higher education in a Eurocentric environment are undermined by cultural and social forces.

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Interrogating the ‘achievement principle’ in Afroeuropean contexts: Zadie Smith’s *NW* and *Swing Time*

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Zadie Smith has said, referring both to herself and to the subjects of her fiction, that she is always thinking of the ‘what if’: “‘What if I’d had this friend? [...] What if I’d failed my exams instead of passed them?’” (92 Street Y 2017, 00:27:11-18). What if she herself had been, *not* a Cambridge graduate and celebrated writer, but one of her classmates or friends on the same low income housing estate, who had ended up either in prison, or in poorly paid, unreliable employment? What made her different, and is that difference something that can be examined and traced to her success? The questions Smith asks haunt the work of contemporary black British writers, and connect that work to previous decades of African and Caribbean semi-autobiographical fiction in the anti-colonial and immediate post-independent period. This work focuses on the figure of the ambivalent achiever, conflicted but poised to rise socially through well-harnessed ability. Their achievement, I argue, is a form of *passing*, from an African-centred culture of the ‘folk’ to a world defined by white, European colonial values. In order to pass unnoticed the subject, these novels suggest, has to have discarded the often rurally situated cultural practices and performances of their past.

As is also evident in African American fiction focusing on racial passing, such as Nella Larson’s novel *Passing*, or Langston Hughes’s short story of the same name, the subject bears a psychic cost for that transition. In the Caribbean literary contexts, in works such as Merle Hodge’s *Crick-Crack Monkey*, the moment of transition from one culture to another is marked by the protagonist’s experience of traumatic symptoms: a loss of voice, and immobility. Furthermore, the incommensurability and lack of resolution of that trauma is evidenced in the repetition and return to this theme in the body of writing of this pre- or immediately post-independence period, itself suggesting a lack of closure.

In *No Longer at Ease*, another example among many, the narrative’s description of Obi’s flat in the European enclave of Ikoyi expresses the cultural context of his character’s achievement spatially and racially. He writes that the demarcation of Lagos, “always reminded him of twin kernels separated by a thin wall in a palm-nut shell. Sometimes one kernel was shiny-black and alive, the other powdery white and dead” (Achebe 1960, 16). Success would require Obi to cross into that dead, white space, itself a kind of death; and failure is the inability to make that transition.

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Zadie Smith: *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016)

Zadie Smith's fictions return to this problematic of achievement, and in the context of contemporary Britain her work, in the words of Achebe's narrator, looks words like "'education' and 'promise' squarely in the face" (Achebe 1960, 2). The immediate post-independent moment can be compared to the contemporary period in Britain. The postcolonial subject living in the UK experiences a moment of transition from immigrant to what Michel Laguerre calls "identitarian citizenship," (Hassenteufel quoted in Laguerre 2017, 3) where the second or third generation postcolonial "immigrant" (Laguerre 2017, 2) not only acquires full citizenship rights but identifies with Britain as a place of belonging. Like Achebe's Obi Okonkwo or Hodge's Tee, they achieve success as part of a generation that newly belongs to what critics like John McLeod define as a postcolonial Britain (McLeod 2000). In place of the political optimism of the anti-colonial and immediate post-independence period, however, "belonging" in the contemporary Britain of these texts is experienced within a developing ethic of a high-achieving, self-activating subjectivity, itself reflective of a changing political climate, one that has encouraged us to turn our attention *away* from the structural and ideological contexts that situate individuals, that enable success, or make failure more likely.

NW

Mary Eagleton situates novels such as Zadie Smith's *NW* in the context of a Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite neo-liberal politics in Britain, the US and Europe that privileges individualism and personal choice. As Eagleton argues, this neo-liberal politics

> tells us that the world is full of choices; that everyone has the right to choose and, indeed has the capacity to choose; that by choosing you make yourself and your future; and that if you do not succeed then it is your fault – the result of a lack of effort and/or the making of bad choices. (Eagleton 2018, 147)

The narrator in *NW* describes Keisha's journey towards success as a series of stepping stones, beneath which lies treacherous, turbulent water. At University and the bar, Keisha/Natalie sees those treacherous waters and understands the significance of class as it intersects and supersedes race. She experiences herself to be included on merit, to be no longer an "accidental guest at the table" (Smith 2012, 217) but at the same time, like Hodge's Tee, she is silenced by and excluded from the shared cultural knowledge and experiences of those dinner-table guests.

As the title *NW* – referring to North West London postcodes – suggests, and as Eva Ulrike Pirker has argued, in Smith's fiction, place and space are used as markers of success or economic failure (Pirker 2016, 70); "who is able to move; where is one's legitimate space; who owns the desirable spaces" (Eagleton 2018, 138). One of only six black bar pupils, none of whom share her working-class or lower middle-class background, her

feelings of black outsider-ness are intensified, paradoxically, because of a sense of entitlement. Smith's subjects are acutely attuned to an incomplete experience of belonging to which they feel entitled. They are, however, both resentful of and ill-equipped for the experience of themselves as out of place or, as Nirmal Puwar writes, as trespassers: "social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy ... Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers" (Puwar 2004, 7-8). The expectation is that an ambitious and driven figure such as Keisha/Natalie will succeed on the terms set by these British institutions – on merit, as she says – *and* as a black woman. That is, without having to compromise her blackness but, as Angela Robbie points out – echoing here, as I read it, the concept of passing – there are codes of acceptability which constrain the aspiring subject: "The pleasingly lively, capable and becoming young woman, black white or Asian, is now an attractive harbinger of social change [...] she is the ideal late modern subject" (quoted in Eagleton 2018, 145). She is ideal, however, only in so far as she maintains cultural invisibility. Natalie encounters head on the failures of her school friends, most of whom had been in fact, in one way or another, exceptional. She speaks of tracking the progress of one of the girls at her school and registers that despite having been a "maths prodigy" (Smith 2012, 212) and having attended an elite university, she becomes a casualty of that promised success: "She had been asked to pass the entirety of herself through a hole that would only accept a part" (212).

Swing Time

Zadie Smith's latest novel *Swing Time* explores in more detail this difference between the "success" as experienced by first generation colonial or ex-colonial "immigrants" and second and third generation black British citizens. Events in the novel suggest that those who, like the unnamed mother in *Swing Time*, migrated in the late fifties and sixties, experienced themselves as definitively on the outside of British society and thus they incorporated into their success an ideologically defined resistance to their exclusion (Scafe 2019). Sitting in the garden of her lover's apartment in Hampstead, an upper middle-class suburb of North London, the mother remarks lightly: "Imagine two island kids like us, two barefoot kids from nothing ending up here" (Smith 2016, 310). In contrast, her daughter, a second-generation black British subject refuses those politics and her refusal is described in a section entitled "My Middle Passage":

> And then there were all the outrageous historical cases I heard of at my mother's knee, tales of the furiously talented women ... who might have run faster than a speeding train, if they had been free to do so .... I didn't feel like travelling on their train, wrote a few words here and there, ignored the pages of maths and science, flagrantly failed. (Smith 2016, 212)

Here we see that the daughter's flagrant failure is her attempt to resist the entanglements

of history, though in fact her refusal to see success as a kind of bond or duty to the past, is itself historically situated in what McRobbie calls the "late modern" period (in Eagleton 2018).

Conclusion

The work I've referred to in this paper asks us to think about how achievement is valued and by whom; we're reminded that every success is ideologically positioned and that this positioning deserves to be interrogated particularly as we begin to think about participation, entitlement, and citizenship for a second, third and fourth generation of black and postcolonial British subjects, and the renewed requirement to pass, invisibly, into social spaces still marked as white.

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